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# Of Land and Water: Performing Ecologies of Statelessness in the Aftermath of the Vietnam/American War

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## Abstract

"Of Land and Water: Performing Ecologies of Statelessness in the Aftermath of the Vietnam/American War" focuses on land and water as epistemological and ontological grammars to examine cultural productions of Vietnamese refugee narratives. Specifically, I analyze how Vietnamese/American oral history narrators, filmmakers, visual artists, and performance artists narrate refugee subjectivity in the aftermath of U.S. imperial war and Vietnamese communist revolution in Vietnam and its diaspora. I define ecologies of statelessness as the indeterminate zones of states of exception, which allow contesting sovereign powers to manage populations through the very materiality of the site of dispossession. I locate ecologies of statelessness in the body of the refugee and the material terrain of the sea, along with re-education camps and refugee camps to explore biopolitical conditions of refugee population management and corporeal manifestations of resilience. My work expands on critical refugee studies and transnational feminist studies by shifting inanimate land-based analysis of U.S. foreign and domestic policies on war and refugee resettlement to the very animate materiality of the ocean, islands of refuge, former U.S. military bases, and re-education camps—ambiguous juridical spaces of dispossession. I argue that land and water are critical performative spaces of transgression as geopolitical borders, aesthetic material, and ecological sites both in and around the body to remap histories of forced migration and Cold War history at the crux of Vietnamese communist revolution and U.S. imperial war. Ultimately, my dissertation theorizes ecologies of statelessness as transgressive sites for radical possibilities located in the body of the refugee, dispossessed peasant population, and the geopolitical spaces of forced migration.

This dissertation is organized into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter traces how ecologies of statelessness is performatively narrated through *đất nước* in oral histories of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans who have faced extreme dispossession from/on water and land during moments of regime transition as the Communist Party of Vietnam sought to solidify itself as a nation and its progress towards national development. In Chapter One, I focus on water through the work of Vietnamese/American performance artists to theorize the ocean as a contested geopolitical site for humanitarian aid rescue efforts and Vietnamese refugee subject formation. In Chapter Two, I center on land in re-education camps in the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Vietnamese refugees. I examine land as fundamental material for communist revolutionary discipline and justice, and land embedded with ecological remnants of U.S. militarization. Lastly, in Chapter Three, I focus on a mother-daughter protest to discuss the current neoliberal period in Vietnam and government land seizures (1986-present). Specifically, I focus on land and water as geopolitical and aesthetic material sites to theorize how ecologies of statelessness are constituted and subverted in the aftermath of war, subject formation, humanitarian aid, and nation building.

## List of Abbreviations

ARVN- Army of the Republic of Vietnam
SRV- Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UNHCR- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
U.S.- United States

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents.

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## Introduction

"It's important to reveal these histories, it's important that you share these stories. So people know what happened to us. So people know the horrors of war."

– Tâm Văn Nguyễn, *my father*

The opening quote is from my father, Tâm Văn Nguyễn: a survivor of multiple wars in Vietnam, former re-education camp prisoner, political exile, and currently a leader in the Vietnamese American community in Chicago. My father shares these words with me after we watch a film about the violence of land reform in Vietnam from 1954-1956, a significant moment after the Vietnamese communist party defeated the French. The Geneva Accords divided the country at the 17th parallel and a surge of U.S. military presence in Vietnam began to increase. As my father and mother prepare to leave my apartment after the film *Chung Toi Muon Song! (We Want To Live/Survive!)* ends, he looks at me before he exits, leans in, points at me, and utters those words. His eyes are filled with determination, pain, and hope. His words continue to haunt me as I write this dissertation, a haunting that is both a blessing and a burden. A haunting that guides and at times shakes me to my core as to whether I can do justice to these stories that are handed down to me as a daughter of refugees inheriting memories and traumas of war, spoken and unspoken, and at times just deeply felt and embodied.[1]

The history of Vietnam's communist revolution has stood in the global imaginary in two diametrically opposed ways, specifically in discourses of anti-colonial liberation in Vietnamese national history or anti-communism in U.S. foreign policies—either as the heroes of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism or as the enemy of free market capitalism and Western

[1] Grounded in an ethical commitment to confidentiality and a trauma-informed approach to research my mother's

democracy. Moreover, literature on contemporary Vietnam typically focuses on the period of the Vietnam/American War or Vietnam's current economic "boom," as the country has shifted from a highly regulated socialist economy to a socialist-oriented market economy.[2] This dissertation connects these disparate historical periods from the 1970s to 2010s from the Vietnamese diaspora to Vietnam through the story of land and water to theorize, critique, and reimagine sites of forced migration and dispossession into generative possibilities from the Vietnamese diaspora back to Vietnam. Specifically, I examine multimedia installation, performance art, oral histories, political protest, and films of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans to foreground land and water as critical sites and materials to theorize nation-building, neoliberal development, and technologies of power and transgression. I analyze narratives about refugee boat exodus, re-education camps, and government land seizures in Vietnam.

*Đất nước* is vital to conceptualizing Vietnam as a nation and how subjectivity is thus remembered and remade in a retelling of Cold War history troubling both ideals of U.S. imperial war and Vietnamese communist revolution. Broken down in its component words, *đất* means land and *nước* means water, together *đất nước*, meaning country/nation/homeland. I contend that *đất nước*—land and water—reveals the very site and material central to the oral histories, political protests, and cultural productions of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans to theorize subjectivity, nation building, and critique Vietnam's state policies resulting in dispossession and state violence. My dissertation, "Of Land and Water: Performing Ecologies of Statelessness in the Aftermath of the Vietnam/American War" proposes a theory of ecologies of statelessness. I

[2] There is a slash between Vie*tnam/American War* to distinguish how the Cold War fought between the U.S. and Vietnam is referred to differently in Vietnam and the U.S. Vietnam refers to the war with the U.S. as the "American War" due to narratives of imperial aggression. The U.S. refers to the war as the "Vietnam War" to denote the region where war took place along with naming an "enemy" and site of salvation for U.S. democracy.

define ecologies of statelessness as the indeterminate zones of states of exception, which allow contesting sovereign powers to manage populations through the very materiality of the site of dispossession. I locate ecologies of statelessness in the body of the refugee and the material terrain of the sea, along with re-education camps and refugee camps to explore biopolitical conditions of refugee population management and corporeal manifestations of resilience. My work expands on critical refugee studies and transnational feminist studies by shifting inanimate land-based analysis of U.S. foreign and domestic policies on war and refugee resettlement to the very animate materiality of the ocean, former U.S. military bases, re-education camps, and sites of neoliberal development—ambiguous juridical spaces of dispossession. I argue that land and water are critical performative spaces of transgression as geopolitical borders, aesthetic material, and ecological sites both in and around the body to remap histories of forced migration and Cold War history at the crux of Vietnamese communist revolution and U.S. imperial war. Ultimately, my dissertation theorizes ecologies of statelessness as transgressive sites for radical possibilities located in the body of the refugee, dispossessed peasant population, and the geopolitical spaces of forced migration.

This dissertation is at the forefront of theorizing *ecologies of statelessness* through *đất nước* as a critical intervention to literature and dominant cultural productions on Vietnam's contemporary history of communist revolution by foregrounding the materiality of land *and* water through a performance studies approach. Dominant discourses on Vietnamese history elide a critical engagement with Vietnamese communist revolutionary history and its state policies that have created conditions of state violence and dispossession in mass numbers. This study looks at three specific periods after the Vietnam/American War; the first is the period following "Reunification" on April 30th, 1975, resulting in about 2.5 million incarcerated in re-education

camps (trại học tập cải tạo) and two million as boat refugees. The second is the forced removal of Vietnamese farmers through government land seizures that have left thousands of Vietnamese displaced from their ancestral lands and the lands distributed to them during the land reform policies of the 1950s.

I analyze how *đất nước* is remembered in oral histories with Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, whose narratives focus on the Communist Party of Vietnam's policies of land reform, re-education camps, and neoliberal development in Vietnam and the United States. Through a transnational feminist lens bringing together theoretical modes of analysis in Critical Ethnic Studies and Critical Asian Studies, I locate memory of *đất nước* in the act of narrating oral histories and in the narrative itself. I analyze how the narrator, protester, and cultural producer remember their embodied relationship and dispossession from/on land and water to understand how Vietnam is gestured to and referenced. I focus on land and water as the materiality of the concept of *đất nước*. It is through movement on, across, and with the materiality of these animate sites that the narrator's subjectivity and relationship to Vietnam and the nation itself is conceptualized.

This dissertation is grounded at the intersection of Performance Studies, Ethnic Studies, Critical Refugee Studies, and Transnational Feminist Studies by integrating an embodied theoretical and methodological approach, which analyzes dispossession and state violence. This dissertation follows performance studies scholars who have written about history, memory, and human rights as radical performance (Conquergood 2013, Eisner 2012, Klima 2002, Larasati 2014, and Madison 2005). By centering oral histories and methods in performance as research, this study explores the production of history as a performative process and one in which memory and subjectivity is revisited, contested, and remade. Performance as research is a methodology to

construct, generate, explore, and develop research questions through practice-based methods and various performance practices, such as theatre and performance art. Literature in Ethnic Studies and Critical Refugee Studies typically focuses on Vietnamese Americans in the U.S. in a critique of U.S. empire and war, whereas Vietnam Studies geographically concentrates its studies on Vietnam in an examination on the failures or violence of communism or contemporary Vietnam as a postcolonial developing country (Espiritu 2002, Hoang 2015, Turner 1975, and Zinoman 2001). This project is one of the first to bring these geographically and theoretically isolated fields together by conducting extensive fieldwork, examining oral histories, political protests, performance art, multi-media installation, and film with Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans located on opposing sides of the war. In this dissertation, performance also offers vital theoretical and methodological frameworks that foregrounds the senses and the bodies' relationship to the material conditions faced during forced migration that looks at land and the sea not only as backdrops to the stories told, but as fundamental sites to nation building and subject formation.

This research contributes to scholarship on Vietnam's political history. This project seeks to: 1) offer *ecologies of statelessness* as a theoretical concept to analyze the intersection of the materiality of land, water, and the body to states of exceptions, borders, forced migration, and generative imaginaries*;* 2) trace performative narrations of *đất nước* and thereby excavate a politics of subjectivity in terms of embodied historical production; and 3) complicate Vietnam's communist revolutionary history using a performance studies lens. The concept of *đất nước* is at the heart of exploring how Vietnam formed itself as a nation during and after the Cold War. Oral histories are critical to creating an archive about a history of war in Vietnam that does not exist due to censorship and state surveillance. It is in the oral histories of Vietnamese and Vietnamese

Americans who have been directly affected by national policies of state violence that this dissertation offers a more complex narrative on Vietnamese history to intervene in the historical amnesia of violent dispossession in the process of nation-building.

*Đất nước* is an indigenous concept in Vietnam that signifies the country, homeland, and the nation. Vietnam's geography is integral to the etymology of *đất nước*, with a coastline of over 3,260 km, making water critical to land in its conception. The history of the term *đất nước* is derived from the fundamental belief that rice agriculture was central to the nourishment and development of Vietnam, as both soil and water are vital elements to the growth and cultivation of Vietnam's rice industry.[3] Nevertheless, *nước* became a shorthand way to signify Vietnam, which people use in their colloquial speech and in cultural productions to discuss the nation, its political state, and its significance to the people living in Vietnam and the diaspora. As a result, land, or *đất*, has been left out in reference to Vietnam because of the entire term being truncated to *nước* to represent the country in the Vietnamese diaspora and in Vietnamese disaporic cultural productions.

Dominant discourses on Vietnamese history elide a critical engagement with Vietnamese communist revolutionary history and its state policies that have created conditions of state violence and dispossession in mass numbers. Specifically, the period of land reform from 1953-1956, which resulted in over 100,000 executed landowners and over one million migrating to south Vietnam. "Reunification" after April 30th, 1975, resulting in about 2.5 million incarcerated in re-education camps (trại học tập cải tạo) and two million as boat refugees. Lastly, from 1995

[3] This definition of *đất nước* is derived from a series of interviews I conducted from August 2010 to August 2015 with Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, who consistently cite the origins of the word as deriving from rice agriculture in Vietnam. No formal academic literature has been written on the meaning of the word until this dissertation.

to the present, neoliberal development projects that have left thousands of Vietnamese displaced from their ancestral lands.

I examine how *đất nước* is performatively remembered in oral histories with Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, whose narratives focus on the Communist Party of Vietnam's policies of "Re-unification" and neoliberal development in a U.S. urban revitalization and development project. I locate performative memory of *đất nước* in the act of narrating oral histories and in the narrative itself in terms of how the narrator remembers their embodied relationship and dispossession from/on land and water and how Vietnam itself is gestured to and referenced in diaspora. I focus on land and water as material embodiments of the concept of *đất nước*. It is through movement on, across, and with the materiality of these animate sites that a subject's subjectivity and relationship to Vietnam and the nation itself is conceptualized.

Drawing upon Della Pollock's work on performance and history, I locate sites of agency and contestation over the production of history through what Pollock terms as "embodied agency," which is created in the making of history through language and oral narration. In addition to taking up theories in performance and history, I use methods in performance as research to further explore the materiality of land and water as critical elements to theorizing the body's relationship to memory and subjectivity. I follow the work of D. Soyini Madison to analyze subject formation and its relationship to felt-sensing embodiment that is located in the poetics of oral histories. Madison describes felt-sensing embodiment as, "[the] matrix of materiality, memory, subjectivity, performance, imagination, and experience that memory culminates in oral history performance, a culmination of layers that are all mutually formed by each other" (Madison, 35). Felt-sensing embodiment highlights how oral histories are fundamental to theorizing the intersection of material embodiment to subjectivity and nation

formation. Moreover, I draw from sociologist, Avery Gordon's concept of "complex personhood" to think through how the materiality of *đất nước* adds complexity and texture to how subjects can be narrated as more than just "victims or…superhuman agents," but as subjects with a deep relationship to the land and water as critical sites of home and displacement Gordon, 4). Nevertheless, it is by building upon Pollock's and Madison's theory of "history as performance," and the larger constructions of these ideological contestations over how Vietnam's communist revolutionary history is framed in official national and international discourses that I am able to use a performance studies lens to analyze and stage oral histories as a site of performative of possibility for reconstructing subjectivity by rethinking the nation and the production of history.

**Vietnam Studies & Critical Refugee Studies**

Literature on Vietnam especially regarding its narration in the postwar period after French colonization and the Vietnam/American War have based its sources primarily in official government documents, personal memoirs, and sociological-based interviews, all of which leave a focused analysis on memory and the body's relationship to nation building absent from the framework of constructing Vietnamese history (Pelley 2002, Tai 2001, and Thai 2008). Rivka Syd Eisner, a Performance Studies scholar, however, has done research with women who are part of the Former Women Political Prisoner Performance Group in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Her research troubles a history the women have in their commitment to communist revolution and the current political context in which they live, facing postwar trauma and state censorship. Eisner's work offers an important starting point for this research project and informs my contextual analysis of the current postwar period of the late 1990s to 2010s. However, the critical

intervention my dissertation project makes is by centering a performance studies lens to analyze disparate historical periods in Vietnam's communist revolutionary history to theorize ecologies of statelessness by focusing on the intersection of memory, the body, and dispossession in an analysis of how *đất nước* is performatively narrated alongside nation building.

My research addresses the gap between Vietnam Studies and Critical Refugee Studies to tell a hidden history of communist revolution in Vietnam and the failures of U.S. liberal war. Vietnam Studies emerged out of Area Studies as a discipline informing U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, while Critical Refugee Studies emerged from Ethnic Studies trained scholars as a response to Vietnam Studies with attention to a critique of U.S. imperialism in their scholarship. Traditional and contemporary scholarship in Vietnam Studies focuses on isolated historical periods, such as the Vietnam War or Vietnam's current neoliberal period (Fall 1967, Turner 1975, and Zinoman 2001). By comparison, the majority of the scholarship in Critical Refugee Studies begins with the Vietnam War and continues through a contemporary analysis of Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants in the United States (Espiritu 2006, Ngô, 2011, and Nguyễn 2012).

My dissertation is positioned at the intersection of these theoretically and geographically polarized fields to offer another way to narrate Vietnam's contemporary history, within the nation and diaspora to engage with the aftermath of communist revolution and nation building in Vietnam and United States. I analyze how dispossession is a condition of nation-building for racialized and gendered refugees. Most literature on contemporary Vietnamese society focuses on Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans, and how their relationship to Vietnam is centered on modes of consumption through sex, marriage or sending remittances (Hoang 2015, Nguyễn -Vo

2008, Small 2012, Thai 2008, and Valverde 2013). This current scholarship pays particular attention to a direct relationship to Vietnam, while my research opens up another way of theorizing Vietnamese subjectivity that does not require mobility to the country.

Moreover, research in Critical Refugee Studies has posited the critique of U.S. empire at the crux of its analysis on war and refugees (Espiritu 2014). Mimi Thi Nguyễn writes about the connection between the *gift of freedom* and U.S. liberal war.[4] Wherein, for Vietnam, the U.S. empire's *gift of freedom* is derived from war fought on behalf of democracy and then buttressed with refugee resettlement policies in the U.S. Embedded in this *gift* is a debt to U.S. empire—a type of political allegiance to the new 'savior' nation.[5] From Nguyễn's conception of the *gift of freedom*, I extend this theorization to analyze the dialectic between the *gift of freedom* promised by U.S. empire and that promised by Soviet and Chinese methods of communist revolution in Vietnam.

To understand this *gift of* freedom and what its after effects look like when Vietnam's communist revolution becomes a nation, I turn to theories of subjectivity articulated by Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo and Joshua Chambers-Letson. Saldaña-Portillo's *theory of subjectivity* is critical to analyzing notions of subjectivity and its shift from different epochs of regime transition specifically in the context of competing global discourses of modernity and the particular trajectory of progress that is forwarded by revolutionary discourses of national independence. Saldaña-Portillo argues that the *theory of subjectivity* is based on a dialectic

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[4] Nguyen defines the gift of freedom as "compl*exly w*rought through asymmetry and calculation…Derrida argues that the gift…incriminates an economy of exchange and obligation between giver and recipient, and Michel Foucault…suggests t*hat libe*ral government proposes to manufacture freedom, and in turn that freedom is never anything more than a 'relations between governors and governed'" (Nguyen 6).

[5] The term "savior" refers to Nguyen's discussion of the gift of freedom and the U.S. not being able to deliver it through liberal war, but its continuation through refugee resettlement policies that allowed the U.S. to remain the heroes of war against communism in their "rescue" of Vietnamese refugees to the U.S.

between revolutionary and development discourses, which "depend on colonial legacies of race and gender in their theoretical elaborations of subjectivity, agency, consciousness and change" (Saldaña-Portillo 6-7). This *theory of subjectivity* allows me not only to analyze subjectivity based on concepts of state violence and nation building, but also as a dialectic with Cold War and communist revolutionary discourses during each of the three historical moments I examine in Vietnam. For example, in Vietnam the proper subject and the dispossessed subject are defined and treated differently during periods of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and neoliberal development.[6] In addition, Chambers-Letson theorizes Asian American subjectivity at the intersection of law and performance where the Asian American body is both excluded from and included within the national body politic (Chambers-Letson 2013). As I frame each of my chapters with Vietnamese communist state policies to think through how state violence is given legitimacy through national policies, Chambers-Letson's theory allows me to analyze how the Vietnamese body at different historical junctures is thus excluded and included in the national body, through state policies that necessitates labor and/or removal from/on land and water itself, or *đất nước*. Particularly, I am interested in how state policies defined people's relationship to the country through class, ethnic, political and at times arbitrary classifications in the name of revolution, nation building, and national development both in Vietnam and the United States.

History, memory, and state terror operate through subject formation and nation building, as subjects are made and remade in the process of creating a nation after revolution. Oral histories, political protests, and cultural productions are fundamental to the production of history,

[6] For the purposes of this diss*ertation, a*nti-colonialism is used to refer to the period of war against French colonization in Vietnam and anti-imperialism is used to refer to the Cold War period of war between the U.S. and Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and China.

specifically for populations who are dispossessed from their homelands and experience high levels of state censorship, which have resulted in burned archives and national silences.

**Methods & Ethics of Witnessing**

This dissertation follows performance studies scholars who have written about history, memory, and human rights as radical performance (Conquergood 2013, Eisner 2012, Klima 2002, Larasati 2014, and Madison 2005). Specifically, this dissertation looks at multimedia installation, performance art, oral histories, political protests, and film of and by Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans who have been directly affected by Vietnamese communist state policies and U.S. urban development projects from the late 1970s to 2010s, to analyze how *đất nước* is performatively narrated since Vietnam's communist revolution. The larger implications for this dissertation research is to better understand the histories of violence embedded in the processes of nation building, while putting into tension projects of communist revolution and U.S. liberal war through a focused analysis on the lives of Vietnamese refugees. This study uses an interdisciplinary approach in archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and oral history to address historical gaps in the written archive on Vietnam's history due to issues of state censorship, burned archives, and silences in Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora. The ethics of witnessing is key to this project as a trauma-informed method of researching the aftermath of the Vietnam/American War with survivors of war and refugees.

This research locates itself at the ethical juncture of an activist stance, which D. Soyini Madison defines as where "the ethnographer takes a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalized locations

while offering alternatives" (*Critical Ethnography* 7). By analyzing oral histories, political protests, and cultural productions through the concept of *đất nước,* this study hopes to reveal the violence of dispossession through state policies as told through the voices of those affected by the Communist Party of Vietnam's recent government land seizures from 2000s-2010s. The "alternatives" to intervene on hegemonic practices is offered in this study by connecting disparate histories in Vietnam through the Vietnamese concept of *đất nước* in order to analyze the embodied effects of dispossession, memory, and nation building.

Oral histories offer insight into the dialectic relationship between subjects and the material world. Richard Bauman distinguishes oral histories as both "*narrated event* (the particular historical moment being told) and the *narrative event* (the embodied or immediate telling)" to theorize how to frame oral histories as performances of memory and of the embodied reality of storytelling (Madison 34). This project positions oral histories as critical to understanding how *đất nước* is performed because of "how that moment in history is remembered through a particular subjectivity" with the country (Madison 35). I am interested in how *đất nước* is performatively deployed to recall and speak about Vietnam in terms of how the narrator uses the term itself to refer to the country/nation and how the narrator tells the story of their embodied relationship to the materiality of land and water. As Madison writes, "The emphasis here is a felt-sensing account of history as well as its particular materiality" (36). In this dissertation, oral histories, political protests, and cultural productions lays the groundwork to tease out performances of *đất nước* through memory and embodied narration to analyze how Vietnamese communist state policies resulted in mass migration and dispossession under the auspiciousness of nation building and national development.

I conducted extensive fieldwork in Vietnam from 2010 to 2015 with local artists, political dissidents, human rights lawyers, farmers, and fishermen about the aftermath of the war, political climate in Vietnam, and government land seizures. In addition, I conducted oral histories interviews with those directly affected by the land reform campaigns, re-education camps, oceanic boat exodus, and government land seizures. I used a snowball method of collecting interviews based on references by those who I have interviewed. The snowball method is most useful because of issues of trust and rapport in the Vietnamese community[7]. Based on preliminary fieldwork from August 2010 to August 2015 issues of state surveillance and censorship made it difficult to collect oral histories with those affected directly by the government land seizures, however through established relationships with local communities and artists in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, I was able to conduct oral histories on people's daily lives in relationship to current Communist state policies. Additionally, I did archival research at the Anne Frank Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California at Irvine (UCI) as a fellow, reviewing newspaper articles, humanitarian aid documents, personal testimonies, artwork, and poetry about the refugee boat exodus and re-education camps. I also worked with the UCI Vietnamese American Oral History Project's archive, which mainly focuses on the period during and after the Vietnam War, resettlement, and second-generation issues in the U.S. This study extends beyond these time periods to encompass the period before the Vietnam War to the current state of Vietnam. Archival research, ethnographic fieldwork, and conducting oral histories both in the U.S. and Vietnam allow for a nuanced analysis of stories that are told inside and outside of Vietnam.

[7] For Vietnamese and Vietnamese diaspora communities this is especially in regards to postwar traumas and political affiliations.

While conducting fieldwork even after 35 to 40 years since the end of the Vietnam/American War I was cautioned by my interlocutors to be careful of talking about Vietnamese boat refugees, re-education camps, and government land seizures directly, which are considered anti-government. For example, during the first iteration of *salt | water,* a performance art piece I created about Vietnamese boat refugees in 2014 at Nha San Collective, an experimental performance art space, my artist talk and performance was not publicly advertised and instead framed as a "family gathering" for local artists. By framing it as a "family gathering" Nha San Collective was able to bypass official approval by the censorship bureau and minimize the possibility for state surveillance of the event. Artistic productions and art galleries have been an important means and mediator by which Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans have been able to explore a history of boat refugees, both in the diaspora and Vietnam while bypassing government censors.

Moreover, during my fieldwork in Vietnam, local and international human rights lawyers and researchers encouraged me to let go of my research about re-education camps. They told me it would be very difficult for me to find records of the re-education camps and that it would be in my best interest to research a different topic. The main concerns were intensified government surveillance of my activity in the country, how my research would be construed at "anti-government," and that association would incriminate them. The only people who would talk to me about re-education camps in Vietnam were former political dissidents and prisoners in the camps; our conversations were highly monitored and there would be several undercover police officers surrounding their homes and inside of the cafes and restaurants we met in. The political dissidents themselves pointed out the undercover officers to me. Oral histories are an important

element of narrating history to show this coercion and manipulation that occurred, which does not show up in legal documents or the SRV's archive of the camps.

Furthermore, while interviewing landowners, farmers, and fishermen about government land seizures, the contamination of waterways from Agent Orange, and toxic chemical dumping by foreign companies, all my interlocutors were concerned about being tape-recorded and looked around as though they were already being surveilled by the state in their interview. I had to reassure my interlocutors that their recordings would be destroyed immediately after being uploaded to a secure location. Traveling from the interview back to my hotel room to upload the interview became its own performance of subversion and resistance as I tucked away the SD cards from the video camera and tape and/or tape recorder into my bra, sock, and or small pouch sewed into my pants. In my experience working on politically sensitive topics, the threat of having electronics stolen for information was part of my training as a Fulbright Fellow in the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi, Vietnam and while working for Pacific Links, an anti-human trafficking organization in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. As a result, it was an ethical commitment and critical part of my methodology to keep the information as close to my body as possible to protect the identities of those interviews and then delete all traces of the interviews on any electronic devices I had. There have been several cases reported by other Vietnam Studies scholars who have had their laptops stolen from their hotel and/or rented apartments because of the political sensitivity of their research project.

**Chapter Outline**

This dissertation is organized into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. Each chapter traces how ecologies of statelessness is performatively narrated through *đất nước* in oral

histories of Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans who have faced extreme dispossession from/on water and land during moments of regime transition as the Communist Party of Vietnam sought to solidify itself as a nation and its progress towards national development. In Chapter One, I focus on water through the work of Vietnamese/American performance artists to theorize the ocean as a contested geopolitical site for humanitarian aid rescue efforts and Vietnamese refugee subject formation. In Chapter Two, I center on land in re-education camps in the oral histories of formerly incarcerated Vietnamese refugees. I examine land as fundamental material for communist revolutionary discipline and justice, and land embedded with ecological remnants of U.S. militarization. Lastly, in Chapter Three, I focus on a mother-daughter protest to discuss the current neoliberal period in Vietnam and government land seizures (1986-present). Specifically, I focus on land and water as geopolitical and aesthetic material sites to theorize how ecologies of statelessness are constituted and subverted in the aftermath of war, subject formation, humanitarian aid, and nation building.

The first two chapters focus on the period after 1975 when the Communist Party of Vietnam rose to power, ruling the newly unified country. This resulted in the largest mass incarceration of civilians in Vietnam's history with estimates of up to 2.5 million people detained in re-education camps. Moreover, during this period, the largest exodus of Vietnamese, estimated at 2 million, escaped the country from 1975 to 1995. Each chapter focuses separately on the dispossession of Vietnamese from/on land and then water that occurred during this period.

In the first chapter, "Of Water: Refugee Exodus," *đất nước* is analyzed as both water and country through the mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees after the Vietnam War. I focus on water through the work of Vietnamese/American performance artists to theorize the ocean as a contested geopolitical site for humanitarian aid rescue efforts and Vietnamese refugee subject

formation. In addition, I analyze the oral histories of Vietnamese refugees, to discuss how *đất nước* or the country is not only a site of forced migration, but also to analyze the tensions that arise through a reading of *nước*. *Nước* is used as a shorthand colloquial term for referring to the nation and water itself to examine the meaning of what dispossessed bodies of Vietnamese refugees over water signifies. First, I consider the tensions of *nước* meaning both water and country and conditions of Vietnamese refugees as temporarily living on water while being exiled from their home country through a multimedia installation piece by Ly Hoang Ly. Second, I discuss the precarious tension between life and death by focusing on the composition of water itself alongside the narration of *nước* in salt | water, a performance art piece I created to theorize the space of the ocean as an extraterritorial state of exception. I argue that conceptualizing *nước* both as water and country in this moment of regime transition, (as Vietnam officially establishes itself as a socialist nation), reveals how imperative the materiality of water and double meaning of *nước* is to understanding subjectivity, dispossession, state violence, and nation building.

The second chapter, "Of Land: Re-education Camps," land is the embodiment of the concept of *đất nước* insofar as it constitutes the agentive material and site upon which subjectivity and anti-imperial sovereignty is configured on the body of the Vietnamese inmate in the re-education camp. I center on land in re-education camps in the oral histories of Vietnamese refugees who were incarcerated, specifically along the Cambodia-Vietnam border during the Khmer Rouge to examine the centrality of land as material for communist revolutionary discipline and justice, ecological remnants of U.S. militarization, and potential sites for refugee transgression. National sovereignty[8] during this time period is conceived of as communism's victory against U.S. imperial forces, particularly the U.S. and the Southern Republic of

[8] Based on the Communist Party of Vietnam's perspective based on their discourses on war.

Vietnam's government, which was affiliated with the U.S. As a result, those associated with the U.S. or Southern Republic of Vietnam were marked as war criminals[9] and incarcerated in re-education camps. Intensive labor on the land became a central mode of reform and justice in the re-education camps; inmates were made to perform physical labor including digging tunnels, building camp facilities, and clearing thick forests for farming. In this chapter, I focus on my father Tâm Văn Nguyễn's oral history to theorize the body's relationship to the country to conceptualize ecology of statelessness through the use of weaponized land and fugitive subjectivity.

The third chapter, "Of Country/Nation/Homeland: Government Land Seizures, returns to land issues in Vietnam and land as the embodiment and site of contestation of *đất nước* as the country. This chapter examines a mother-daughter protest by Phạm Thi Lai, 52 years old, and Ho Nguyễn Thuy, 33 years old, against government land seizures and how their performance of perversity enacts a feminist critique recalling the country's former relationship to the land that harken back to an earlier conception of *đất nước* citing the 1950s land reform. I contest that Vietnam's adoption of neoliberal policies have dramatically shifted notions of national development, inevitably re-appropriating land to create dispossessed subjects out of Vietnamese peasants who were central figures in the initial communist revolution. As a 20-year land grant expired in Vietnam last year, peasants are being evicted as the government is confiscating land for foreign investment projects. The urgency of land rights and farmer's livelihoods are at the forefront of Vietnam's shifting political economy and thus is the focus of this chapter. This chapter ends with questions about the stakes of neoliberal policies in Vietnam with the actual materiality of *đất nước* at the center of its national policy implementation.

[9] Amnesty International Report on Mission to Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1979.

The concluding chapter, "Of Land & Water: Performances of Return**,"** returns to land and water through Vietnamese creation mythology and reflections on the aftermath of communist revolution through Trinh Minh Ha's experimental film, *Forgetting Vietnam,* produced in 2015 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Vietnam/American War. I reflect on this project through the lens of performances of return and forward a method of *cartography of care t*o further conceptualize subjectivity within/through/beyond ecologies of statelessness as places of possibilities.

I return to my father's desire for history to be told, to his story of a search for freedom within these structures of confinement. It is here that I conclude both with a critique of nation formation after communist revolution and the potentiality that arises in a return to the land and water. My research positions focuses on how Vietnamese cultural production allows us to theorize the figure of the refugee and dispossessed peasant in relationship to the environmental terrain of dispossession to examine how technologies of war and nation-building are deployed on natural environments and the body to create violent conditions of forced migration and imminent death. This work is committed to centering the voices, cultural productions, and futuristic imaginings of refugees and dispossessed subjects to conceptualize ecologies of statelessness within histories of violence, forced migration, and nation-building.

# Chapter 1
# Of Water: Refugee Exodus

*"Con trở về nước chưa?"*

*"Daughter/young one/child have you returned to the water yet?"*

*"Daughter/young one/child have you come back to the homeland/country/nation yet?"*

How do you witness and retell stories of violence and dispossession in the aftermath of war, in exile, and in the context of U.S. empire? The opening quotes are questions I often heard growing up in the Vietnamese community in Chicago, Illinois. *Nước* meaning both water and homeland/nation/country in Vietnamese carries deeply embodied historical, cultural, cosmological, and political significance. I return to this question to meditate on *nước* as the central site and materiality of Vietnamese refugee passages.

The end of the Vietnam/American War lead to one of the largest exoduses of the latter part of the 20th century: more than 3 million people escaped from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos over the course of two decades starting in 1975, many by boat and an estimated 1 million died at sea (UNHCR, 79). During the postwar period, Vietnam faced extreme poverty, large-scale unemployment, a limited food supply, and rampant corruption. In addition, one to two million military and civilian personnel who were associated with the former Republic of Vietnam and the United States were prosecuted as war criminals and imprisoned in re-education camps. Additionally, an estimated 400,000 to one million people were forcibly relocated to "new economic zones" (UNHCR, 82; Desbarats, 52). Ethnic Chinese or Hoa were also strategically pushed out of the country through the government's unofficial support of clandestine boat departures.

*I return to water*. *Nước* as a lens of analysis intervenes in critical refugee studies that focus only on land-based geographies to theorize refugee subject formation and forced migration. *Nước* offers another approach to transnational feminist theories on Cold War formations, feminist critique of empire and humanitarian aid. This chapter looks at Vietnamese refugee passages after the Vietnam/American War through a focused analysis of water and how it is taken up as aesthetic material to theorize Vietnamese refugee subjectivity in *Project 0395A.DC*. and *salt | water*. I argue that water is a critical aesthetic object used by Vietnamese/American artists to reconceptualize where refugee archives are located, challenge ethics of witnessing, and center the sea as a critical geopolitical site of analysis. Oral histories from Vietnamese American refugees are embedded in *Project 0395A.DC*., a multi-media installation by Vietnamese artist Ly Hoàng Ly and *salt | water*, a performance art piece I created and performed in conversation with Ly's work. The chapter is divided into two sections with water as the framing and central aesthetic material. The first section focuses on the interiority of refugee subjectivity and how *Project 0395A.DC*. disrupts a linear and voyeuristic portrayal of Trương's oral history of forced migration after war. The second section examines the exteriority of refugee subjectivity through *salt | water* and offers a geopolitical (re)mapping and performance of statelessness at sea to examine the costs of international humanitarian aid.

**Why Water?**

Why does water serve as aesthetic material to theorize Vietnamese refugee subject formation at sea? *Nước as water, embodying waterways of passage across and through oceans, seas, and rivers*. *Nước as water, a central element to the human body, which is released, excreted, and expelled as tears, sweat, and blood*. *Nước as country/homeland/nation, as in*

*Vietnam. Nước as country/nation, as foreign states acting upon, against, and with the body of water that is the body of the Vietnamese refugee and the body of the nation. The body of water referred to flows and slips as both the body of the Vietnamese refugee, the body of the nation, Vietnam, and the body of foreign and domestic state powers.*

Water is also a fundamental metaphor for Vietnamese subjectivity. The word for water in Vietnamese, nước, also means the homeland, country, and nation. Thus, in Vietnamese, the word for water historically and culturally signifies not only the materiality of water itself but its metaphoric and affective significance to one's identity in relationship to home, citizenship, national belonging, and ancestral lands. In "Live by water, die for water," Vietnamese scholar Huỳnh Sanh Thông poetically portrays nước in its deeply material and metaphoric connection to Vietnamese people:

> *Nước* has come to designate "the homeland, the country, the nation".... [W]ater, as the most precious resource of the homeland for growing crops (in particular, rice) has come to stand for the homeland itself… The nation's fateful course, marked by ups and downs, is figuratively rendered as a "tide of water" (*vận nước*) with its ebb and flow. The highest virtue demanded of a Vietnamese is that he or she "love the *nước*" (*yêu nước*). The worst opprobrium that can attach to any individual is that he or she has "sold out the nước" (*bán nước*). To say in English that a man has "lost his country" is not the same as to say in Vietnamese that he has "lost the *nước*" (*mất nước*). If the English phrase sounds almost abstract, the Vietnamese expression evokes an ordeal by thirst, the despair of fish out of water (Huỳnh, vi-vii).

Phrases such as "tide of water" (*vận nước*), "love the nước" (*yêu nước*), and "sold out the nước" (*bán nước*) relate to a sense of self deeply connecting water to one's relationship to homeland. The phrase "*mất nước*," or to lose one's country and water, as represented by the "thirst … of a fish out of water," reflects how critical the concept of nước is to Vietnamese subjectivity. The phrase not only represents a metaphor for a lost country, but also an embodied response to being physically removed from a place (*nước*/water) of sustenance. Thus, a removal from water, evoking metaphors of loss, deprivation, or separation, is equated with displacement from one's homeland or the very source of life. Water is central in the oral histories of Vietnamese boat people because of its historical and cultural meanings and because it defines those material conditions faced at sea, including typhoons, drowning, pirates, and tidal waves. Moreover, to be surrounded by water and simultaneously "lose the water" (*mất nước*) presents a painfully embodied paradox.

What happens when there is excess, an overflow of water that surrounds the body of a Vietnamese subject that is forced to migrate by boat? Water is not only the site where the national imaginary is embodied in the diaspora, but also the site of its very rupture. Excess or overflow is at the crux of the oral histories of Vietnamese boat refugees, wherein the possibilities of life and death at sea are overdetermined by an excess of water. In my father's narrative, for example, he recalls:

> There was a typhoon. Our boat rocked so intensely, you could hear the ricketiness of the wooden panels on the boat creaking as the boat rocked back and forth with water banging against all sides of the boat. It was terrifying. We didn't know if the boat would just crack open and drown us all. (Nguyễn 2012)

His words reveal the power of water in the form of a typhoon to not only capsize, but literally rip

apart a small cargo ship and drown everyone on board. The strength of water to carry refugees across the ocean is matched by the dangerous conditions of the sea. The boats were typically packed with up to a few thousand people depending on the size and type of the boat. The boat exodus was not only brimming with the overflow of water, but the overflow of bodies packed on top of one another. Nguyễn recounts his memories of being underneath a small cargo ship:

> "We all laid next to each other, hundreds of people underneath the boat, right next to each other, the boat's movement in the ocean, gliding up and down, and up and down, made so many people sick, you see people vomiting next to you. The smell was so foul, but you got used to it after days at sea…. We only came out at night when the moon disappeared, or else the Vietnamese coast guards could catch us and kill us at any moment" (Nguyễn 2013).

During this period, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) "estimate[s] that around 10 per cent of the boat people were lost at sea, fell victims to pirate attacks, drowned, or died of dehydration" (UNHCR, 86).

Water offers a conceptual elusiveness that complicates how refugee subjectivity is conceptualized and contradicts claims to sovereignty and security between nation-states and refugees at sea. It is through such instability that, as refugee studies scholar Liisa Malkki writes, refugees problematize "the sociopolitical construction of space and place," particularly the "national order" of things (Malkki, 25). I extend Malkki's conceptualization refugee as figures that destabilize the national order of things to take up water as the very aesthetic material used to trouble and offer other configurations of Vietnamese refugee subjectivity and the stakes of dispossession at sea. Moreover, Malkki calls for a destabilizing of a notion of rootedness that assumes the primacy of land-based territorialization. I take up Malkki's call to remap the

"multiplicity of attachment that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them" beyond the model of land as referent to centralize water itself (Malkki, 38).

Water and refugees do not fit into the logics of nation-states. The world is made up of 71% of water, and the majority of these waters are contested by sovereignties competing for natural resources and claims to trade routes. However, as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, beyond the 12 nautical miles range off their coast no one country has claim to the water itself. Ownership of the sea is ambiguous and contested. Hugo Grotius's 1609 treatise on *The Free Sea*, which claims that the sea is open to all for free trade, introduces the idea of the "sea as the road to empire" (Grotius, 33). The sea at once becomes a place where competing sovereignties lay claim to capital accumulation and an unclaimed space for refugees unless there is an international mandate by the UNHCR. Refugees call into question systems of citizenship, rights, recognition, and visibility, especially those caught in the ocean, the largest space between national borders.

***Mapping Temporality and Cartographies of Freedom***

"Freedom or death," the ethos of Boat People S.O.S., often framed the Vietnamese refugee passage across water. With promises of reunification belied by poverty and political prosecution behind them, what lay ahead for Vietnamese boat refugees was the choice between freedom and death. However, the dichotomy between freedom and death reveals a demarcation of the conditions for livelihood in the homeland as witnessed during and in the aftermath of war through bombs, re-education camps, execution, land-mines, extreme poverty and the possibilities that the imaginary of freedom offers in the unknown at sea. Death is encapsulated by the

possibilities of death in the aftermath of war in Vietnam and the chances of death at sea.[10] I build upon Boat People S.O.S.'s conception of death and fold in Achille Mbembe's discussion of *death-worlds* to map the sea as an overwhelming space of death on the passage to freedom. In other worlds, death is folded into the journey to freedom. Competing freedoms include those promised by U.S. imperial war, Vietnamese socialist revolution, and international humanitarian aid. These freedoms wash over the body of the refugee at sea, already marking the possibilities for life in the trails of bloodshed after war and revolution. Here the charge for freedom in "Freedom or death" is a call from the refugee to transgress these conditions of *death-worlds* to believe that another world is possible despite everything that they have encountered and the unknown that lies ahead.

Displacement for Vietnamese boat refugees marks a historically specific shift in the meaning of water in relationship to Vietnamese refugee subject formation. Although thirst is encapsulated by Huỳnh's imagery of "the despair of fish out of water," an excess of water marks the Vietnamese boat refugee exodus, as the body is overwhelmingly consumed by undrinkable water. The story of migration over water for Vietnamese boat refugees has been narrated through the frame of escape and rescue, escape from the terrors of communism, escape to freedom (Espiritu 2014; Nguyễn 2012). To map the narratives of escape and rescue is then to situate them within what critical refugee scholar Mimi Thi Nguyễn theorizes as the *gift of freedom*, which was bestowed by the U.S. first through its liberal war and then through refugee humanitarian attention and action. For Nguyễn, "Liberalism…[is] wrought through temporal concepts of

[10] Mbembe discusses death-worlds in his article on "Necropolitcs" as the sovereign's power to kill and "exercise control over morality to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (Mbembe, 12). The ocean becomes the main site of contestation in terms of humanitarian aid and refugee rights, where the UNHCR, countries of asylum and resettlement determine which subjects are deemed worthy of saving, rights, and/or subject to death at sea.

historicism and teleology that comprehend history as the actualization of an ideal presence, which here goes by the name of *human freedom*…[that] presumes to knowingly realize and manufacture this present and presence, through the *gift of freedom* as its rational dissemination across the globe for human progress and historical and political transformation" (Nguyễn 2012, 42-43). As a result of the aftermath of the war in Vietnam, in order to continue the narrative of gifting freedom to the Vietnamese people the site of freedom was reoriented toward escape from the homeland, in what the UNHCR has declared as a "commitment of Western states to resettle refugees fleeing communism" (UNHCR, 79). This movement across the ocean not only symbolized a pathway towards freedom but also necessitated a narrative of arrested development mapped on the body of the refugee. "The refugee is therefore suspended in space and time, a figure of humanity on the outside" only to be rescued by the *gift of freedom (*Nguyễn, 58). As a result, the ocean simultaneously functions as a site where the refugee is suspended in time while refugee movement across the ocean is temporally mapped as progress and modernity towards a promise of U.S. liberal freedom.

The asymmetry of U.S. and Vietnamese powers are important to highlight in the differing valences of the promises of freedom.[11] Vietnam's history of French colonization resulted in the northern Vietnamese led movement for communist revolution beginning in 1925, which was led by Ho Chi Minh. As part of the larger Third World liberation movement and political project to abolish imperialism, Vietnam's socialist revolution offered a route to freedom through

[11] To theorize the trajectory of revolutionary development, I return to Maria Saldana Portillo work on *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* and her discussion on theories of subjectivity and development to conceptualize the discursive parallels between promises of socialist revolution articulated by Third World nations and U.S. imperial war and humanitarian aid. Saldana Portillo discusses Lenin's call for independence from colonial and imperial forces through the "condition of sovereignty" achieved through communist revolution towards national independence. Although, I am discussing the parallels between the revolutionary discourse and the discourse on U.S. imperial war, there are distinct genealogies and power struggles of the movements for freedom. Third World nations faced genocide, the exploitation of land and labor, and the governmental subjugation by colonial forces.

communist revolution. The Vietnamese Communist Party's founding was directly informed by Communist Internationale's "instructions to solve the revolutionary problem," to fight France's exploitation of people, labor, land, and resources (Turner, 310). The Communist Internationale, was led by Vladimir Lenin and began during World War I, it advocated for global communism through the processes of gaining national independence and sovereignty from colonial and imperial forces through communist revolution. Whereas, the U.S. offered a route to freedom through imperial war, which was situated during the Cold War through the fear of communism spreading and the impetus for U.S. global hegemony.[12] These promises of freedom collapsed on the Vietnamese refugee whose life after war was marked as disposable by the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam and already disposable by the U.S. during war and only salvageable in service of a revamped promise of freedom after the loss of war in Vietnam.

***Water and Refugee Archives***

What do you carry with you when you escape from home? What would you take with you on your journey to freedom? Freedom here is always already fraught and caught between the U.S. imperial war and Vietnamese communist revolution, it is laden with promises of freedom that leave dispossessed subjects at sea. I offer water to expand upon where refugee archives can be located, beyond and including hegemonic "official" archives from interstate and state entities. Interstate is defined by international entities such as international humanitarian aid organizations

[12] President Dwight D. Eisenhower coined the term "domino theory" in 1954 weeks before the Viet Minh nationalists-communists defeated the French at Điện Biên Phủ. As the French was losing their colonial powers in Vietnam, President Eisenhower, used the domino theory to articulate the fear of communism spreading in Southeast Asia and each country as the subsequent dominoes that would fall to communism and thus a justification for U.S. military intervention.

and the United Nations. Refugee archives are located in the bodies of refugees, children of refugees, oral histories, everyday objects, and the materiality of land and water.

Vietnamese refugee history is embedded in the everyday objects that are present and not present. During and after the Vietnam/American War visual evidence in the form of material belongings such as photographs, military accouterments, and official documents revealing affiliation or connection to the Republic of Vietnam government and the U.S. were burned, shredded, torn, and/or buried, and sometimes burned and then buried to protect individuals and families. The process of eviscerating all evidence of a former life protected one's self and family under a new regime. The evidence could be used to persecute people into re-education camps, which could lead to execution and/or hard labor resulting in a slow death. The absence of objects reveals just as much as their presence in what was able to salvaged or taken in the journey on the boat. Everyday objects that could be carried uncover other fragments of what people thought was needed for survival and memory of home. "I carried only the clothes on my back," are the words that echo from so many Vietnamese refugees who escaped in the middle of the night when their boat was rushed and unexpectedly left before or after schedule, all dependent on the weather at sea and the political climate on land. Sometimes people were able to quickly grab their identification documents, gold, a photograph, and/or farming tools. It is in the everyday that the archives of war, forced migration, home, nation, and identity emerge and in its erasure that histories of state violence are revealed.

National and local police strictly monitors any mention of the Vietnamese refugee boat exodus or re-education camps in Vietnam. For many residents living in the country re-education camps are viewed as fictional and counter to the national narrative of communist revolution and victory over U.S. imperialism. Based on my fieldwork in Vietnam from 2010 to 2016

interviewing artists, political dissidents, former Vietnamese diplomats for the communist government, lawyers, educators, farmers, and fishermen the narrative of the boat exodus is a conversation that takes place behind closed doors, privately, and many times through whispers. Discussions of re-education camps are completely shut down by non-governmental organizations, governmental officials, and local residents. The only people willing to discuss re-education camps are political dissidents who either have formerly been incarcerated or are currently being followed by national police. To understand where refugee archives are located it is important to shift the methodological approach to locate refugee archives in the everyday. Refugee archives live between the doors, in the silences and whispers, in the water, the body, and the everyday objects left behind in Vietnam and scattered in the diaspora. As a result, it is critical to examine forms of quotidian and aesthetic cultural production that access these refugee archives, particularly in *Project 0395A.DC*. and *salt | water*, which enliven and offer more complicated narratives to hegemonic narratives of Vietnamese refugees and the geopolitical conditions of forced migration.

Water as an archive is activated through performance art in *Project 0395A.DC*. and *salt | water*. *Project 0395A.DC* and *salt | water* are grounded in the oral histories of Vietnamese American boat refugees. I examine performance art as medium of analysis because of its focus on the body, poetic gestures, and use of material. In terms of the body, my research studies how the performer acts as both a figure and social actor to intervene, trouble, and theorize Vietnamese refugee subjectivity and the ocean. Critical refugee studies draws from two main fields, humanities and social sciences. Although critical refugee studies scholars share a theoretical commitment to "conceptualize 'the refugee' not as an object of investigation but rather as a paradigm 'whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problem,'" there

are divergent methods used to analyze the refugee (Espiritu, 10). Scholars in the humanities such as Nguyễn have examined figuration of the refugee to unravel its discursive construction. Sociologist, Espiritu, one of the founders of critical refugee studies, articulates that although it is important to analyze the "refugee" as a critical idea, we must remember to center on the refugee as a social actor. Both are critical approaches to analyzing refugees and its discursive formation within hegemonic U.S. imperial thought and refugees as social actors. It is through performance art that I locate performance studies methods to critical refugees studies that allows for an analysis of refugee figuration and the refugee as a social actor through a simultaneous on focus on the body of the performer as figure and as the labor of performance through the body as social actor.

The poetic gestures and materiality of water conjured and articulated in *Project 0395A.DC*. and *salt | water* are illuminated in the oral histories of Vietnamese American boat refugees who experienced the violent heartbreak and dispossession of losing the water, losing their country/homeland/nation, *mất nước*. Performance art further theorizes with the oral histories through an embodied translation of the story into gesture and materiality. Quotidian actions are amplified through performance with water such as cooking, drinking, laying, and dragging. Through performance art, these performative gestures evoke a visceral and affective connection in the body of the performer to the bodies of the narrators and thus to the audience witnessing.

***Performing [with/in/against] Water***

"[We] must begin by engaging in the spirituality of water. They must begin by loving water."

- D. Soyini Madison, *Acts of Activism*: *Human Rights as Radical Performance*

What does it mean to love the water? Where do stories begin? How are narratives of war framed? For over 2 million Vietnamese boat refugees, passage over water embodies a break in time, a before and after of war, of life and death, of memories and amnesia, of beginnings and endings. What does it mean then to return to the very materiality of the ocean where forced migration, the threat of death, and futurity washes over and glides with the body of the refugee? Water holding the potential to be both a force for life and death. Water offering possibilities for freedom. Water capturing the elements of history and memory as passed down in the water we drink, the water in our bodies, and the water in our blood. Water also representing country/homeland/nation and the very substance that left the refugee afloat estranged and dispossessed carrying only memories, stories, and belongings as pieces of the homeland. Performance Studies scholar, D. Soyini Madison writes that embedded in oral histories, "is a felt-sensing account of history as well as its particular materiality" (Madison, 36). Performances of Vietnamese refugee passages thus must begin with water, as the analytical frame and aesthetic material to meditate on the precarity of life and death at the crux of U.S. imperial war and Vietnamese socialist revolution. I analyze performing [with/in/against/out] water through an examination of the presence and absence of water in *Project 0395A.D.C.* and *salt | water* to offer a theorization on Vietnamese refugee subjectivity and the stakes of statelessness at sea.

*Project 0395A.DC.* and *salt | water* takes up water as the core aesthetic material and very substance where the *small story* is located. In my conceptualization and performance as research based methods with/or water, I learn from Madison and her work on "Water rite/rights" in Ghana, to "value the small story", which are the "everyday stories we tell of our lives" to "realize that water relates to the macro processes of nation states and global flows" (Madison,

114). I return to water as the central element of analysis to theorize about the spaces and subjectivities it alludes to and carries. Water as it lives in the rivers, seas, and oceans where bodies of refugees traversed across and decomposed. Human blood is 92% blood and 8% blood plasma protein. The water that flows through our bodies holds an archive of memories, passed down from generations of inherited trauma and ancestral knowledge for survival. Archives of history are thus embedded in water. It runs through the waterways that flows through our bodies and the bodies of water that we drink from, bathe from, and travel across. So what does it mean to begin by loving water? It is to love your body, to love the homeland/country/nation, it is to love the earth as the materiality of where history is archived. In an interview with my father, Tâm Văn Nguyễn, he earnestly shared that, "No matter which side of the war you were on, one thing I know was that both sides loved our country and fought for their beliefs in what freedom could be" (Nguyễn 2012).

**PART I:** ***Project 0395A.DC.***

*The Gulf of Thailand*

*The pirate ship rammed to break our boat.*

*Then the pirates jumped on to our boat.*

*They carried machetes, hammers*

*And other weapons to rob us right there.*

*At that moment our boat began to sink.*

*The pirates forced all my people to board their ship.*

*They forced…then body searched everyone.*

*[…]*

*then they threw us back in our boat.*

*We didn't know where to go now.*

*The boat was filling with ocean water*

-excerpt from Kiệt Trương's oral history, *home | boat* transcribed by Ly Hoàng Ly

The opening excerpt is from a translation and *poetic transcription* of Kiệt Trương's oral history conducted by Ly Hoàng Ly.[13] Trương's narrative of escape takes place after him and his family escape for a second time off the coast of Hà Tiên Bay in southern Vietnam. Trương's family makes it to the Gulf of Thailand and is met with Thai pirates, one of the main dangers of escape at sea alongside typhoons, drowning, capsizing, and running out of food/drinking water. Pirate attacks were flagged by Vietnamese refugees seeking escape of potential dangers at sea and by the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). According a UNHCR report in 1981, "349 boats had been attacked an average of three times each; 578 women had been raped; 228 women had been abducted; and 881 people were dead or missing" (UNHCR, 87). These statistics are based off reports from refugees who made it to refugee camps, countless number of attacks and deaths are unreported for the people and boats that did not make it to shore or landed elsewhere. Surrounded by impending death through pirates attacks, a cracked boat, and the overwhelming seepage of water, Trương's story reveals the precarity of escape at sea, the overwhelming *death-world* refugees face in the unknown of the water.

*Project 0395A.DC* was exhibited at the School of the Art Institute Masters of Fine Arts Show in May 2013. *Project 0395A.DC* takes its name from a photograph artist, Ly found online

[13] In "'That Was My Occupation': Oral Narrative, Performance, and Black Feminist Thought," D. Soyini Madison defines *poetic transcription* as a method of transcribing spoken text wherein the pauses, emphasis on words, and ellipses are written down to "resemble the rhythm of the human voice and the speaker as a social-historical being" (Madison, 217).

while searching for pictures of Vietnamese refugees during the boat exodus as part of her research for the art installation (Figure 1.1). Series of numbers and letters marked the endless cargo ships and fishermen boats that carried Vietnamese boat refugees. The randomness of the series of numbers and letters represents the arbitrariness of those who were able to escape, of the probability of life and death at sea, of assigned numbers to refugees who made it to shore and were identified through U.N. paperwork as "rescued" subjects, of the boats and people who did not make it to shore.

In Part I, I argue that disorientation as a performative experience and method theorize Vietnamese refugee subject formation at sea. Specifically, I examine how Ly creates a performative installation and performs with/in and against water as the core aesthetic material used to framed, dialogue, and re-narrate a story of Vietnamese refugee subjectivity. To discuss the installation, I introduce the concept of *makeshift* architecture as a structure and method to choreographing disorientation of the audiences' body in a metaphoric scene of suspension in water in *Project 0395A.DC*. I discuss how disorientation as not only a method used to call into question the audience's relationship to witnessing, but a performative experience that theorizes Vietnamese refugee subjectivity at sea. Moreover, I examine how stillness is used as a performance technique to haptically experience the nuance of disorientation. Lastly, I discuss how Ly performs a critique of Vietnamese state violence through her performance of "I drink my country." *Project 0395A. DC.* is a mapping of an interior of the wreckage of escape, an entry point through the cracks of the boat in a search to piece together the story of Vietnamese refugee passages through the oral history of Trương, everyday belongings, and objects of imagined and felt memory from the artist's body in performance.

**Disorientation**

"Disorienting," "unorganized," "difficult to walk through," and "dizzying" are some of the critiques of *Project 0395A.DC*. according to Ly. Disorient is defined as to "make (someone) lose their sense of direction" and "make (someone) feel confused." While other definitions of disorient mean "to cause to lose bearings: displace from normal position or relationship" and "to cause to lose the sense of time, place, or identity." *Project 0395A.DC*. suspends and blurs time and space at the metaphorical site of the sea, obscuring the lines between the present and past with found objects from Vietnam carried in the journey across the ocean and objects accumulated in the country of resettlement. I contend that disorientation performs an act of refusal to break voyeuristic modes of consuming histories of violence and reorients the body to another theory of Vietnamese refugee subjectivity, one that that is not dependent on a desire for the wholeness of a subject. Furthermore, disorientation performs the very dizzying, difficult, and treacherous act of Vietnamese refugee subject formation. It is at the site of dispossession at sea, where Vietnamese refugees are escaping their homeland, that subject formation emerges through the very process of disorientation.

*Project 0395A.DC*. choreographs the audience's body to another way of witnessing, performing a disorienting experience where the audience must maneuver through remains of home and traces of colonial imprints. The audience must traverse through a narrow opening, across broken oxtail bones (Figure 1.2). The bones are remnants from a performance piece Ly filmed entitled "perpetual ephemera," where she documents herself cooking phở, a dish created by Vietnamese servants from leftovers during French colonization in Vietnam. The bones represent the continued presence and impact of colonialism in Vietnamese refugee subject formation. After the French were defeated at Điện Biên Phủ by the Vietnamese Communist

Party, representatives from France, Vietnam, China, and the U.S. met in 1954 to sign the Geneva Accords. There were two main sections to the agreement: the first stating that the French and Vietnamese would agree to a ceasefire and divide the country at the 17th parallel. The second, agreed that neither the North or the South would join outside alliances and there would be a general elections in 1956. The U.S. did not agree to second section and created it's own government in the South of Vietnam, appointing Ngô Đình Diễm as President. The title of Ly's video captures the lingering residues of French colonialism impacting how Vietnamese refugee subject formation unfolded as U.S. military intervention gave way to an intensified war, making Vietnam a proxy war by the U.S. to prevent the spread the communism in Southeast Asia.

Forced displacement and dispossession was a constant condition for Vietnamese, throughout Vietnam's history, which can be traced in the modern period with French colonialism, Japanese occupation, U.S. militarization, communist revolution and socialist nation-building. Trương's oral history reveals this very condition of being at sea, wherein even the structure of the boat itself as a temporary site of refugee is not guaranteed and subject to external forces. The structure of *Project 0395A.DC*. creates an environment where disorientation is experienced by the audience as it simultaneously performs how to reorient ourselves to refugee archives. In other words, disorientation is a key performative experience in *Project 0395A.DC*. and embodied in Ly's use of *makeshift* architecture and the sonic and visual dissonance of Trương's oral history.

The *makeshift* is a historical practice with embedded notions of time and space implemented by Ly to create the conditions of disorientation in *Project 0395A.DC.,* which choreographs how the body moves through the installation to disrupt direct access to Trương's oral history and offer fragmentation as a process of Vietnamese refugee ontology and

epistemology. The concept of *makeshift* was developed in a conversation with Vietnam-based performance and visual artist, Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn, about the temporary construction of home spaces in Vietnam in the context of French colonization and U.S. military intervention wherein Vietnamese subjects are ready to move at any moment due to poverty, war, and forced removal by military and/or government forces. The resulting process is a makeshift structure built through a gathering of available building material that can be portable, discarded, or relatively easy to construct and disassemble to build temporary refuge.

*Wooden boards, a bench, a broken hammock, scattered bones, dispersed video projections, Transformers bag, cassette tapes, a spiral notebook, a Learn English textbook, a fishing line, a fishing hook, a "How Dinosaurs Went Extinct" book, a portable wood burning stove, a photograph of a young girl, a microscope, and chunks of salt* (Figure 1.3). Throughout *Project 0395A.DC*. is a continuous list of seemingly unrelated found objects are assembled with performance art videos using a *makeshift* technique. *Makeshift* as both an architectural structure and improvisational techniques emerges as a process Vietnamese subjects practice to adapt, repurpose, rearrange, re-maneuver through space on the land and then on the sea as embedded in the process of being and becoming.

Ly plays with choreographing the body's relationship to witnessing and with sight and sound to trouble the very ethics of witnessing and subject formation. *There is a tight opening on the right side of the installation. It is about 6 feet high and 3 feet wide at the base. At this point, the audience can choose whether to enter the opening or not. The cue for some is seeing other people enter. The only clue for what may lie inside the installation could lie in the audience's curiosity to whether the projection of* Trương*'s face was inside the installation*. Once the audience enters inside the opening, the audience must duck their head, contract their body

towards their torso while hunching their back, and slowly step inside the body of the boat/installation. The audience's movement can disrupt and shift the formation of the installation at any moment. As the audience enters they have to walk around or over a ripped beige hammock and are met with a scattering of ox tail bones.

As the audience moves further inside the hold of the boat/installation, Trương's face is projected on the wall with a set of headphones next to his image where the audience can hear the audio from his interview with Ly. Dispersed throughout the installation is Trương's body, face, Vietnamese voice, and English translation text of his interview with the overwhelming sounds of waves crashing against the shore of Lake Michigan playing overhead. The audience cannot easily locate Trương's story, they must navigate fragments of Trương body and voice through the objects scattered in the installation and disconnected video, audio, and languages of his interview (English as translated text on the projection and Vietnamese in the sound recording). *Project 0395A.DC*. meditates on subject formation through cultural production, playing with narrative visually and sonically as the *makeshift* structure choreographs the audience's corporeal relationship to the story and the subject- troubling visibility to disorient the audience and perform another mode of theorizing subjectivity.

Visibility is deployed as a means wherein nation-states and the U.N. have granted conditional subjecthood to refugees. One of the main objects of analysis and basis for empirical facts in Trauma Studies is a reliance on the visible concrete, fact-based forms of representation in written and spoken words. For Vietnamese refugees, their ability to be seen on the ocean or as boat refugees impacted their subjecthood as the U.N. and states either chose to recognize them as refugees, which impacted their ability to receive refugee rights and humanitarian aid. Building upon historian and critical refugee studies scholar, Fiona Ngô's work in "Sense and

Subjectivity," Ngô writes, "visibility as the foundation for being recognized as having personhood must be challenged, and invisibility needs to be reevaluated against those long histories of imagining these conditions as narrowly circumscribed through their negativity, their negation of subjectivity" (Ngô, 199). *Project 0395A.DC*. refuses linear access and visibility of Trương's oral history and pushes back against an easy to consume representation of his/story reclaiming subjectivity through disorientation.

The makeshift structure of the installation reorients the body of the audience to contort, duck, and sidestep, forcing the audience to constantly be aware of their surroundings. The *makeshift* construction of *Project 0395A.DC.,* including the wooden panels, bones, S-shaped hook, and hammock refuses "direct-witness testimonies" to bear witness beyond state controlled narratives of refugees and makes the audience physically reorient their bodies, keeping alert of the pieces of the installation as they make their way inside the installation to gather the pieces of Trương's story. The audience's body contracts to fit within the space allotted for entry, in tension with the physical limitations of one's own body, the obstacles set up within the installation determine how the body can expand and contract inside the cavity of the installation. For example, The red S-shaped hook is attached to a clear fishing wire from the ceiling in the middle cavity of the installation. The hook itself is about two inches long and one inch wide. It is raised up about 4 feet from the floor and if goes unnoticed, it taps the audience's body. It is in these acts of refusal to disorient the viewer that *Project 0395A.DC*. performs a theorization of Vietnamese refugee subject formation and the impossibility of fully capturing the story of another.

The conditions at sea were unpredictable for refugees, at any moment their future could hinge on whether they missed a typhoon, were recognized by a ship that would take them to a

refugee camp, surreptitiously sailed past a pirate ship, and/or ended up uncovered and caught by Vietnamese coast guards. In 1979, after equipping his boat with food, medicine, and navigation tools along with bribing local police, a practice many organizers of boat escapes exercised in preparation for their journey, Trương was stopped by police chasing the boats to shore with gunshots in Rạch Gía, southern Vietnam and had to find another route to escape. In Trương's words, "my people were uncovered by the police." What does this uncovering do? How do we understand the relationship between surveillance, subjecthood, and the ethics of witnessing? What happens when you do not see the refugee? Or you only see parts of the refugee? Or the refugee is in sight and you choose not to see them? Visibility on the seas could mean the difference between life and death for refugees. Water is an important site where visibility sonically and visually is destabilized. As the nature of water is amorphous, *Project 0395A.DC*. challenges the audience to experience a disorientation of the story that evokes a symbolic experience of distress and precarity at sea.

***stillness***

Stillness is a method upon which Ly meditates on disorientation. Stillness is performed not as an performative opposition to disorientation and chaos, but as a meditative performance that opens up an embodied experience of deep listening.[14] Here I discuss Ly's opening performance of "I make myself a rock to experience geopolitical issues" as a performance of stillness offers a method into disorientation.

[14] In *Critical Performance Ethnography,* D. Soyini Madison cites performance studies scholar, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones to define deep listening, under the ethics of a jazz aesthetic, as "requiring a simultaneous connection to one's own breathe and to the sensory stimuli in the external environment" (Madison, 116).

At the opening of *Project 0395A.DC*. is a bench located in front of two wooden panels that are installed in a *makeshift* form, they collapse onto each other to represent a shipwreck or the collision of boats on water and/or land (Figure 1.4). On the left wooden panel located on the lower right side is performance art video of Ly entitled, "I make myself a rock to experience geopolitical issues" in a fetal position on the banks of Lake Michigan. Ly is wearing a dark red velvet áo dài, a traditional Vietnamese dress. She lays in a fetal position on the banks of Lake Michigan, the closest body of water to Trương, who is resettled in Chicago. The video plays on a loop as waters of Lake Michigan crash onto her body and seep into her dress through her flesh. Ly continues to lay there in silence. The audio surrounding and framing the exhibition is taken from this video. Overhead is the sound of a continuous rush of water crashing and releasing against the banks of the shore. On the right wooden panel located on the upper left is Trương's interview, with no audio, and only captions. In Trương's video, the audience can read translations of the interview. The space above the text, where Trương's face is, is replaced with a jagged hole, where a piece of the wooden panel has been torn out.

Women have been figured as a symbol of the nation, during the war as the warrior, farmer, and mother and after the war as the symbol of the country's futurity in her ability to reproduce and give birth to and cultivate a new independent nation. In "I make myself a rock to experience geopolitical issues," Ly uses her body to bear witness to what the water is telling her. Red symbolizes both luck and communism in Vietnam. The red áo dài marks both these meanings donned on Ly, marking her body as a gendered and racialized subject of the nation and war. As a Vietnamese woman who was born in 1975, the same year the Vietnam/American War ended, Ly's positionality in relationship to the diaspora and postwar subjectivity is important. I mention Ly's relationship to the war to think through what it means to create this piece, and what

it means to witness from the other side of war. How does this work reveal what cannot be fully captured - the failures, the ellipses, the, refusal, and imagination in an effort to piece together a painful and divisive archive. Ly's position in relationship to the work is about the act of witnessing and the burden of memory. What does it mean to witness a story from the other side of war, what can you know and what can you never know? It begins with stillness.

Ly as a Vietnamese woman, born in Vietnam right after the war, performs as both a figure of Vietnam as a nation and social actor intervening on the divide between the opposing sides of the Vietnam/American War through stillness and a meditation with water. Here the water is the archive upon which Ly lays witness to, feeling the thrashing of water against her body, feeling the heaviness of the water as it collects onto the velvet fabric of her dress, and allowing it to soak into her skin until she feels its coldness in her bones. "I make myself a rock to experience geopolitical issues," reflects on the positionality of the artist through the gendered labor of memory and nationhood. Her body marks her as both a native because of birth in Vietnam, but other in the Vietnamese diaspora. It is through stillness with the water that Ly pays deep attention to the water that inside of her, the inherited trauma of colonialism war, and socialist nation building. She listens with her body to the water, to the waves that crash against her collecting water on her velvet dress, seeping through her flesh, and sinking into her bones. She listens.

***overconsumption***

After the Vietnam War, the new Vietnamese Communist government made it illegal for Vietnamese citizens to escape by boat, jailing the people they caught[15]. However, during the late 1970s the government began to sponsor boats to leave the country, exercising their authority to dispose of those the deemed as excess bodies in the country that did not serve their new regime. Millions of Southern Vietnamese citizens became disposable, their lives were marked as such in the mass exodus and incarceration of Southern Vietnamese and marked as already disposable in the U.S. imperial framework of war and its aftermath. Their lives were gambled on the seas, and only when the Vietnamese refugees were internationally and legally recognized as refugees did they become a critical population in service of the *gift of freedom*, now redirected from war to rescue and resettlement. I contend that Ly's "I drink my country" performs a critique of Vietnamese state violence, a critique that is often missed in critical ethnic studies of the Vietnam/American War, and the reasons for the mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees escaping by sea.

Water sonically encases the *Project 0395A.DC*. The installation performs a suspension in time and space of the wreckage of a refugee boat. Inside the installation on the left is a titled shelf. Ly's "I drink my country" performance is located on the top shelf. As the viewer leans down and inwards to view Ly's "I drink my country," they are met with a scattering of bones (Figure 1.5). The piling of bones on the second shelf along with its dispersion on the floor, demands of the viewer to face the colonial residues of the forces of death that reside in the journey of escape across the ocean. What does it mean to walk through the bones to see the

[15] In *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response,* Robinson quotes and interview with Kieu Van Cuong, a boat refugee, "intensive patrolling and public announcements on punishment of boat leaders, owners and organizers' but he also said there were rumours spreading in Saigon that those who have paid will be allowed to leave from now on" (Robinson, 62).

video, to have the remnants of French colonialism become physical obstacles to the viewer's line of sight? For the viewer to maneuver their body through the exhibition to see the video, they are forced to twist their body to perform another mode of witnessing, of looking, of understanding visibility.

In "I drink my country" Ly is wearing a dark red silk áo dài, the same dress she wears in on the video projected on the outer layer of the boat. In Hoàng's original performance, she drinks cup after cup of water in a clear glass until the audience intervenes and drinks the water for her or asks her to physically stop (Figure 1.6). Ly recalls being sick after drinking the water, "feeling my stomach, lungs, body, and cells fill up to the point of exploding."[16] The overconsumption of water can lead to water poisoning, otherwise known as dilutional hyponatremia, where water becomes toxic after consuming high quantities in a short period of time. The water Ly drinks symbolizes being overwhelmed and poisoned by her country, while illustrating the performance of drinking water as the consumption of space- both as a landmass that represents country and as a body of water. Being propelled beyond the limits of the country in tandem with the overconsumption of water, pushing the limits of what a human can physically absorb before facing death. "I drink my country" critiques Vietnamese state violence and the toxicity that arises in the process of nation building as the country's subjects, who were located on the other side of the war, are marked as disposable by the state, drowning out the body of the refugee with an excess of water. The excess of the water ingested illustrates the forces of death that looms in the expulsion of refugees from their home to expulsion- encompassed in the massive body of water bodies are propelled into. In "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections," disability scholar, Mel Y. Chen writes "toxin threatens, but" it also gestures, directs, and allures the animate subject that

[16] Interview with Ly Hoàng Ly on December 20, 2013.

absorbs it and though it is not alive, a toxin "enlivens morbidity and fear of death" (Chen, 265). Overconsumption of a nourishing element can become lethal. Ly's performance of drinking water progresses into an act of drinking toxins, revealing how the Vietnamese state through the process of nation building begins to kill its own body.

**PART II:** ***salt / water***

> *Refugee doors closed at Malaysia. We only had enough food for one more day on the voyage with no land in sight. For days, we were at sea. The waves rocked the boat so much it made me sick. I remember being surrounded by water but we couldn't drink any of it, I was so thirsty. Thai pirates came to steal with machetes in their hands. They took one of the women off my ship and luckily didn't kill any of us (Tạ 2012).*

My mother recounts her journey at sea; her voice is matter of fact. She sits quietly looking into the distance, occasionally glancing at me with a smile and a shrug. She tells me she didn't think this story was important. "It was just what I needed to do to survive," she says. However, she does tell me that she was lucky, that the Thai pirates were kind to her boat, because she heard stories of far greater violence, where there was rape, torture, and killing.[17] For over 30 years, she remained silent about her boat exodus. Her story is an important one, not only because it allows me to understand what my mother had to endure in her journey to the United States, but also because it allows us to rethink the circumstances under which refugees seek

[17] *The State of the World's Refugees 2000* reported that "349 boats had been attacked an average of three times each; 578 women had been raped; 228 women had been abducted; and 881 people were dead or missing" (UNHCR 2000, 86). These numbers are of reported cases; the actual number of lives impacted by piracy is unknown. In addition, for women and young girls, there was a larger threat of sexual violence during the boat exodus by Thai pirates.

asylum and the violence of statelessness at sea.

The opening quote is an excerpt from my mother's narrative of her journey as a Vietnamese boat refugee in 1979. My mother was stranded at sea for three days; others were stranded upwards of two weeks to a few months. When my mother's boat left the coast of Vietnam, Malaysia closed their borders and banned incoming refugees from reaching their shores. "They weren't accepting any more people," my mother recounted. "We were left to drift at sea for days fearful for what was ahead." According to the UNHCR's *The State of the World's Refugees 2000* report, "Malaysia and Thailand frequently resorted to pushing boats away from their coastlines. When Vietnamese boat arrivals escalated dramatically in 1979, with more than 54,000 arrivals in June alone, boat 'pushbacks' became routine and thousands of Vietnamese may have perished at sea as a result" (UNHCR, 83). Closed borders and pushbacks meant refugees were vulnerable to violent conditions at sea.

At the beginning of this massive exodus in 1975 the UHNCR reports "not a single country in the region acceded to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol" (UHNCR, 83). In other words, countries accepting Vietnamese boat people did not grant permanent residency or temporary refuge. As the numbers of refugees grew and the boats arrive with more and more people seeking refuge, 1979 also marked the year when countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, declared that they had reached their capacity and would not accept any more refugees. To mitigate the refugee crisis and impending closures of borders, the UN Secretary-General convened a conference in July 1979 in Geneva, where a three-way settlement was agreed upon between Vietnam, countries of first arrival, and countries of resettlement. ASEAN countries pledged to offer temporary asylum if Vietnam stopped illegal

migration and abided by the Orderly Departure Program.

As those refugees who were left to drift at sea might testify, the promises of the nation-state as the arbiter of welfare and asylum falters. It is at the site of the ocean that refugees confront life and death. Central to my mother's story alongside so many other Vietnamese boat refugees is the ocean. The ocean plays a fundamental role as both the geopolitical site of forced migration and material for population management after war. Refugee lives are managed by the precarious conditions of the sea and competing claims between nation-states and interstates entities who determine which lives are granted asylum.

*salt | water* is a performance art piece I developed and performed. I was inspired by Ly Hoàng Ly's exhibition, especially as I meditated on the significance of rock salt scattered throughout the crevices of Ly's installation. Salt, much like water can be a healing and nourishing property, but the excess of becomes toxic to the body. The effects of saltwater on the body can lead to severe dehydration, blood in the stool, vomiting, loss of appetite, and unconsciousness. Here sea salt symbolizes embedded properties of death that surrounds the refugee, in terms of the extreme physical conditions the body must go through to cross the seas, facing the scarcity of drinkable water in an endless ocean of water. Trương's interview recalls how parched he felt and how thirsty everyone on the boat was yet they were all surrounded by an endless body of water. The sea salt scattered around the boat and in the crevices of the wooden panels of the boat are a subtle part of the installation, yet embodies the very precarious conditions for life entering the ocean, where the overabundance of water and the promise of freedom is met with the scarcity of fresh water that allow life to survive.

What does it mean to be surrounded by water and not be able to drink any of it? What are the chances of survival? How are the chances of survival interceded by the materiality and force

of the ocean itself, competing nation-states, and pirates at sea? The immersion of my body in performance in saltwater conjures a meditation on the material conditions of dispossession at sea for refugees already marked as outside of the boundaries of the nation-state.

In part two, I analyze how *salt | water* suspends the senses in the space of forced migration and statelessness at sea, reorienting the audience by placing water at the center of the performance and theorization of Vietnamese refugee subject formation. *salt | water* is about the political stakes of witnessing the memory of statelessness at sea by rupturing U.S. imperial narratives of progress regarding refugee passages across the ocean. I discuss how water is a critical geopolitical site and material of analysis to challenge land-based logics of Vietnamese refugee subject formation and textual readings of oral histories and archives of the Vietnamese boat exodus to center the body's relationship to dispossession at sea. I contend that water is a core archival material used in performance to theorize across borders of space and time to re-narrate the story of Vietnamese refugee passages across the ocean.

***salt | water: performance as method of enacting analysis***

*salt | water* was performed for the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam/American War in April 2015 in conjunction with the Association for Asian American Studies Conference on "The Trans/national Imaginary: Global Cities & Racial Borderlands." *salt | water* seeks neither to confer a wholeness to the refugee nor to recuperate the fragmentation of subjectivity and home on the course of exile and exodus. To create this performance I draw on women of color feminists, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzuldúa's concept of "theories of the flesh" and Madison's discussion of oral histories as a "felt-sensing accounts of history [and] its particular materiality" (Anzuldúa and Moraga, 23; Madison, 36). "Theories of the flesh" reflect what it

means to live in our skin marked by race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability and the collective knowledges transferred through communities to theorize conditions of oppression and animate possibilities for transgression. "There was water all around us, but we couldn't drink any of it," the words from interviews with Vietnamese refugees and the Boat People S.O.S. visual archive, continued to haunt my being as I researched the boat exoduses. I return to a quote from Fred Moten to make sense of the bodily sensation these voices. Moten writes, "And all these people, they're in my head and they're in my body, you know, they're sort of animating my flesh, disrupting the body I guess I thought was mine." As a daughter of Vietnamese refugees, inheriting the trauma of forced migration and legacies of war, my embodied response to histories of forced migration was a deep bodily compulsion to resurrect these stories as they crept underneath my skin, these oral histories and embodied memories as elusive archives that refuse to be buried.

Madison's discussion of the "felt-sensing" nature of oral history centers the importance of the haptic and materiality of historically, culturally, and bodily specific objects—in this case, water and salt. Salt and water are thus critical to the performance, symbolically representing the contents of the ocean and the tears and sweat of the people who traversed it. In this work, I ask how performance, as an object and analytic using salt and water, fundamental elements to the ocean and the human body, can reveal the precarity and porousness of the refugee journey across the ocean. Performance is used here to cross geographic, temporal, and political borders in two main ways: first, to embody memory work as gendered labor and a tool of resistance against historical amnesia in the aftermath of war and the violence of forced migration by sea, and second, to focus on the materiality of water and the body as sites of dispossession and possibility at sea, which marks racialized, gendered, and classed alterity.

To conjure memories of the dangerous voyage across the ocean in search of freedom, *salt | water* integrates the oral histories of my parents, reports from the UNHCR, and visual imagery from the media archive of Boat People S.O.S. into embodied gestures rendering the materiality of salt and water key elements that can expose the precarity of statelessness at sea. It is through performance that these memories of dispossession refuse to be captured and suspended in text. It demands to live and be exerted through the body and materiality of water and an element of its content in the ocean, salt.

In thinking about what performance can offer as a method of theorizing Vietnamese refugee subject formation at sea, I turn to performance studies scholar Andrew Brown's proposal for a shift from analyzing embodied performance as a discursive object to a method of enacting analysis (Brown, 153). Thus I consider the collection of oral histories from my parents, the media archives of Boat People S.O.S., and reports from the UNHCR as an embodied act of listening, where the body of the researcher and the narrator are present in the same space and the imagined presence of bodies is visualized, allowing affect from histories of war and forced migration to be transmitted from speaker to listener in both verbal and non-verbal acts of storytelling. As a visual archive, videos from Boat People S.O.S. captured moving images of rescue by already resettled Vietnamese refugees, framing the Vietnamese boat exodus and the urgency of rescue at sea, as multiple countries refused to support life at sea.

To develop this performance, I also draw on scholars in critical performance studies, theatre studies, and critical refugee studies to conceptualize the ethical dimensions of performance and/as political action and sites of theorization. Michelle Fine discusses the activist stance in research as "tak[ing] a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalized locations while offering

alternatives" (Fine, 17). In the act of translating oral histories into a performance piece it is critical to structure the conceptualization in terms of its intervention in hegemonic discourses of refugees. My performance, however, does not offer a clear alternative, rather I move in another direction to incite the audience to enact alternatives, drawing on Bertolt Brecht's call for theatre that does not end in catharsis as a method to move people towards political action. Brecht argues that catharsis is a bourgeois form of theatre and that the pleasure derived from catharsis forecloses political action (Brecht, 57). In addition, in enacting performance as a method of analysis and ethical intervention, I take up what critical refugee scholar Fiona Ngô describes as "an ethical stance that refuses to cover over the violence that brought us to the present" wherein "[f]ailure need not be overcome, rehabilitation need not be desired, subjectivity need not be recovered" (Ngô, 101). It is at this juncture intervening in hegemonic discourses to expose violences enacted by state and humanitarian aid actors and refusing catharsis in the form of overcoming, rehabilitation, or recovery of subjectivity that *salt | water* positions itself as a performance to theorize refugee subject formation via memories evoked through water.

**Performance Gestures as Acts of Translation**

Performance art allows me to center the body in the embodied act of listening and translation because "it is impossible to think about cultural memory and identity as disembodied" (Taylor, 86). It is through performance that I am able to further animate "theories of the flesh" and the haptic materiality of "felt-sensing" oral histories and historical archives of forced migration by boat. I use three main performance gestures: *mark-* demarcates and theorizes the geopolitical boundaries of the ocean; *throw-* focus on the materiality of the ocean itself and the precarity of escape at sea; and *drift-* reveal the biopolitics of refugee population management.

These gestures are translations of the oral histories of my parents, reports from the UNHCR, and visual archives of Boat People S.O.S., which are performance-based methods critical to theorizing Vietnamese refugee subjectivity and the geopolitics of the ocean as a call for justice.

***mark***

*"Remember you are water. Of course you leave salt trails."*

- adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*

Mark is defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary as a indicating a boundary land; a conspicuous object serving as a guide for travelers: something (such as a line, notch, or fixed object) designed to record position; a written or printed symbol; and to make a lasting or strong impression. Mark is used as a performance gesture in *salt / water* in three main ways: to mark space, to mark the body, and to mark the audience. I begin from the body as a site to theorize from invoking *theories of the flesh*, especially in terms of conceptualizing how the body is marked as a racialized and gendered subject of war and humanitarian aid and the body's ability as a social actor to mark.

In *salt / water*, I take up my body as a daughter of Vietnamese refugees to map geopolitical boundaries of statelessness at sea and humanitarian aid. As a daughter of Vietnamese refugees, I theorize from the body that is marked as it marks the space through the labor of remembering through the body to critique the conditions of forced migration and continued histories of violence. Returning to adrienne maree brown's quote, I conceptualize the body as water and conduit: the body as water, the body as bearer of memory, the body as inheritor of trauma and thus use salt to materialize the salt trails left behind from blood, sweat,

tears, and the ocean. The body as a racialized and gendered subject of war and humanitarian aid: my body moves contextualized within a history of U.S. imperial war and Vietnamese communist revolution. I use the performative gesture of marking to move from a place of being marked through the act of marking the space myself, remapping the geographical site of forced migration centering the figure of the refugee. I position my body in performance to conceptualize refugee figuration and perform using my body as a social actor. As a social actor in performance, I am able to theorize the site of the ocean by marking and remapping the place of forced migration while implicating the audience in the act of witnessing.

> *The space is set: there is a steel metal bucket filled halfway with water in the middle of the stage. There are two spotlights set on the bucket that cast shadows along the floor and the wall, representing the haunting presence of those who have disappeared and died along the passage. I begin my performance dragging a 40-pound bag of granulated salt crystals. My body is pulled between the tension of the weight of the bag and my movement forward. The heaviness of the bag evokes the burden and labor of remembering. I drag the bag across the space, leaving traces of salt behind me, to create a ritualized space of witnessing* (Figure 1.7).

I begin my performance using salt to mark a ritualized space of performance, distinguishing the audience from the performer to localize the space of witnessing. The traces of salt carve a place of witnessing outside the circle and the place of an ocean inside – oversaturated by bodies disposed of, undrinkable water, and excess of bodies left to drift at sea. Moreover, the salt marks the absence and presence of water within and outside the circle. The demarcation of the place of water both inside and outside the bucket encircled by salt creates a snapshot of suspended time and space which puts into question the temporality and cartography of freedom

in the movement across the ocean for refugees. The 40-pound bag of salt symbolize the anniversary of the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam/American War in 1975.

Water takes a central role in its presence and absence in this performance. In its absence, it lays metaphorically within a marked ritualized circle created with traces of salt and the labor of memory performed by dragging the 40-pound bag of salt. In its presence, it sits in the bucket in the middle of the stage, still and calm until my body glides into the gentle ripples of the water one-third of the way into the performance. The water in the bucket begins to mark the floor as I thrust my body in the "throws" of recalling the violence refugees are subjected to at sea. I will discuss the performance gesture of throw in more detail in the next section. Here, it is important to note that the water in the bucket begins to mark the floor as my body slips into the bucket in an embodied metaphor for the number of refugees who escape into the ocean- those who are consumed by the forces of the water and those who could not make it shore and lay to rest on the sea floor. As a result, the imaginary water inside of the ritualized circle of witnessing represents the state of suspension for Vietnamese refugees wherein chances of life and death are managed by the precarious conditions of the ocean, competing claims between nation-states and inter-states entities.

***Refugees and the Sea as a State of Exception***

The hypervisibility of Vietnamese refugees at sea frames the water as a space of migration and extreme vulnerability, but neglects an analysis of the presence of water itself as the geopolitical material conditions that create the refugee as a managed population outside of the boundaries of nation-states. How can we conceptualize the space of the ocean and thus the figure of the refugee at sea? It is critical to work with the figuration of the refugee to understand

the refugee as, "a historical event, a legal classification, an existential condition of suspension or surrender" (Nguyễn, 25). Marking the performance space as a metaphorical site of the ocean allows me to suspend the place where refugees are reconfigured at sea to test and reveal the limits of the relationship between human rights and nation-states.

Political philosopher, Giorgio Agamben takes up Hannah Arendt's discussion of the refugee as a "nothing less than a limit concept" to discuss how "human rights and nation-states are bound together such that the decline and crisis of one implies the end of the other" (Agamben, 134). Agamben argues that the camp is where the sovereign enacts its juridical and biopolitical power *on bare life*, suspending it between a state of life and death (Agamben 1998). Agamben writes, "The camp is a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order, but it is nevertheless not simply an external space" (168). Although the state of exception is marked as an exemption to the laws of the sovereign, it is critical to constituting sovereign power—the power to manage expendability or subjects deemed as disposable. Although international waters are demarcated as distinctly external to the jurisdiction of a nation-state it is a necessary part of declaring their sovereign power in terms of borders patrol and defining subjects as refugees viable for rescue. I take a critical refugee studies approach to reconceptualizing the ocean as a state of exception- centering the figure of the refugee to unravel the logics of the nation-state, refugee asylum, and sovereign power. Shifting from land based discussions of the state of exception, I locate the sovereign's power from the camp to the ocean where national boundaries become blurred and competing regimes meet and create the conditions wherein refugees are *bare life* at sea. I argue that the ocean marks a space where the declaration of human rights for refugees constitutes the nation-state's sovereign power as a state of exception.

Charles T. Lee, political theorist, takes up Agamben's concept of *bare life* to define it as

"human subjects reduced to a naked depoliticized state without official status and juridical rights" (Lee, 57). This definition of the refugee as bare life doesn't account for the processes of racialization that occurs during war before the refugee is legally recognized as such by the UNHCR and subsequent nation-states. Agamben's definition of *bare life* forecloses the refugee as a social actor within conditions of the camp. As a result, it is through performance in *salt | water* that the figure of the refugee is remapped on the ocean through the moving body of the performer as theorist to re-examine the site of the ocean itself as the state of exception. This performance challenges hegemonic constructions and dichotomy of narrator and narrated to re-center the voices, bodies, and materials for storytelling grounded in refugee aesthetics that seeks to unravel the refugee as "not an object of investigation but rather as a paradigm 'whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems' beginning with "the premise that the refugee, who inhabits a condition of statelessness, radically calls into question the established principles of the nation-state and the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it" (Espiritu, 10-11).

Furthermore, while critical legal and migration scholars such as Charles Lee, Prem Jumar Rajaram, and Carl Grundy-Warr have drawn the connection between Agamben's conception of *bare life* to refugees and the camp as an interstitial space "materializ[ed]…at state borders and refugee detention centers," I conceive of the ocean as the state of exception through *salt | water* as a performance object and analytic (Lee 2010; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004; and Salter 2008). Refugee populations are managed by competing sovereignties in the space of the ocean that chose either to reject refugees or claim natural resources and trade routes for economic gains. It is at the site of the ocean, filled with water, a space between nation-states, that we find the intersections of claims to the seas as economic capital and routes for natural resources, trade,

travel, and expansion for competing sovereignties. Functioning both as a stateless place where refugee bodies are left to drift at sea and as an extraterritorial multi-state space where the UNHCR and United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas govern legal agreements between nation-states, water is a critical site of analysis for refugee passages.

Asylum rests on a state's willingness to accede to the UNHCR's 1951 Refugee Convention treaty and provide the proper assistance needed by those seeking refuge; otherwise the law is only a performance of shared agreement. Because the ocean is beyond the reach of national sovereignty, it becomes a state of exception in which competing and overlapping sovereignties have the power to determine who lives and who dies, as exemplified in the initial neglect of nations to accede to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention treaty. Here I find Achille Mbembe's discussion of the shift from late modern colonial occupation to a movement of global mobility particularly important. Mbembe argues that "the claim to ultimate or final authority in a particular space is not easily made. Instead, a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights to rule emerges, inextricably superimposed and tangled, in which different de facto juridical instances are geographically interwoven and plural allegiances, asymmetrical suzerainties, and enclaves abound" (Mbembe, 31). In other words, boundaries become blurred as contesting and unequal sovereign powers are enmeshed within multiple converging and diverging legal orders, political loyalties, and territories. The dissolution of clear demarcations of boundaries and political power is thus embodied in the spatiality of the ocean, where it is difficult for any one sovereign power to lay claim to the water, resulting in lives left adrift at sea. These cracks between sovereignties create a situation where a technology of power arises, where those that a nation deems to be threats are abandoned at sea.

For Vietnamese refugees, as mentioned earlier, in the "commitment" to rescue those

escaping from communism, state-granted asylum was a necessary act of bestowing freedom for Vietnamese refugees amidst the Cold War. Nevertheless, the decision of countries belonging to ASEAN to close their borders demonstrate how nation-states have the power to deny entry and create dangerous conditions for asylum where refugees are subjected to death by waiting at sea. This salt trails marks a critical geopolitical site, water- the ocean, as the scene of dispossession for refugees already marked as outside of the boundaries of the nation-state.

My body as the performer exists as both a figuration of the refugee and a social actor performing memory work to theorize forced migration and statelessness at sea. To stage this call I continue the performance with the mixture of salt and water, rubbing it against my skin to mark my flesh and inhaling it marking my nasal passages, throat, and lungs. The body marked by racialization during and after U.S. imperial war and by humanitarian aid through the rhetoric of the refugee crises. As I mark my skin with the salt as metaphorical traces of memories of escape from Vietnam and scrapping my skin to underscore my flesh as a racialized and gendered subject of rescue, I continue to the gesture of being thrown to emphasize the violence of statelessness and the very materiality of the water itself in the ocean as key in refugee population management at sea.

**throw**

"Throw" is a verb, which has multiple meanings, three of which are important definitions that describe performance gestures in *salt | water*. *1. Throw: to put into a particular position or condition*. Vietnamese refugees are positioned as dispossessed subjects at in the crossfires between U.S. imperial war and Vietnamese communist revolution. The state of becoming a refugee is produced in the aftermath of war as 3 million escaped facing violent

persecution in re-education camps, forced displacements in new economic zones, extreme poverty, and ethnic cleansing as Chinese descendants. *2. Throw: to drive or impel violently*. Faced with political, economic, and ethnic persecution, violence, and death in Vietnam, Vietnamese refugees were literally thrown into the ocean to escape by boat after the Vietnam/American War, into the conditions of a life and death at sea. *3. Throw: to lose intentionally*. The vastness of the ocean, the materiality of saltwater, high chances for tidal waves, and threats of pirate attacks allows for biopolitical management of refugee populations at sea.

> *Then we had to begin to fight against the elements, the typhoons, the hurricanes, the huge storms, the enormous sky-reaching waves, that were terrifying. The most terrifying image, I've never seen in life was this enormous tall wave 10s meters high and the night sky was dark like ink. Around me we couldn't see anything, because when you escape, you have to go during a night when there was no moon, so if you go during a night when the moon was out, they would see you. So out in the ocean, the sky was extremely dark, it was horrifying, terrifying, filled with fear. But at that point, we had no choice, we just had to endure it. But we were terrified, extremely scared, but when we were atop and afraid of the wave crashing against us and we would just fall into the ocean* (Nguyễn 2013).

The ratio of my body to the bucket to the water represents the overflow of bodies dispossessed by boats at sea. It is in this immersion of my body in performance as a conduit of memory of Vietnamese refugee stories that these biopolitical forces of waves crashing on boats and bodies becomes visible and that the toxicity of an excess of water becomes palpable. The performance thus serves as a tangible critique of the conditions of being stateless at sea.

*I hold onto my body tightly, until I begin to clutch the sides of the bucket and violently rock it, shaking it, feeling the cold metal against my wet hands as my overflowing body pushes against the bucket. Water splashes out onto the concrete around me. In this moment, I do not know if the bucket will fall over and whether my body will smash against the soaked hard concrete* (Figure 1.8).

*I begin to drown myself in the water, submerging my head inside the bucket, inhaling and swallowing gulps of saltwater, lifting my head up as I gasp for air and dunking my head in the water, while my lungs fill with a burning sensation as though my insides are going to rupture from the pangs of salty water ingested. Gasping for air my eyes, nose, and scalp are burning from the irritation of the salt in every crevice of my body. My lungs inhaling the salty residue of water dripping down from my forehead, onto my face, into my mouth* (Figure 1.9).

I performatively simulate drowning to conjure memories and affect of the threat of being thrown overboard, pirate attacks, countries denying refuge, and being caught in dangerous tidal waves. As Trinh Minh Ha writes in "Grandma's Story," stories are "transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination, the speech [is] seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched" (Trinh, 121). The effects of saltwater on the body can lead to severe dehydration, blood in the stool, vomiting, loss of appetite, and unconsciousness. The saltwater burning inside my chest and scraping against my skin, the murkiness of the water, and the smell of sweat from the labor of performing the violence of thrusting my body in a metal bucket against a concrete floor conjures memories of dispossession at sea.

Water offers material to work with the "felt-sensing" embodiment of the oral histories gathered to reveal the visceral paradox of dispossession from water as nước and homeland while being surrounded by water in excess (Madison, 36). The materiality of water as a fluid, liquid, translucent property, capable of dissolving particles, seeping into cracks, while having the potential to destroy whole communities via tsunamis and hurricanes induces critical sensations in the body. In addition, water's quotidian uses as a source of nourishment for the body and agriculture, rituals of cleansing, and its ability to drown or poison vital organs when taken in excess, makes water a crucial site for evoking memory on and through the body of the oral history narrator and performer.

**drift**

> *The MH-3012 drifted for four days, during which ten people died of dehydration. On 31 March another Malaysian Navy boat, the Renchong encountered the Vietnamese boat and tried to tow it south again. 'When the Vietnamese refused to tie the rope to their boat...naval officers fired shots and one Vietnamese'…The crew of Rechong began towing the Vietnamese craft at high speed 'in a zig zag manner. As the navy towed it, the boat started taking on water and capsized. Women and children were screaming as their boat was pulled to pieces.' The Rechong reportedly circled the wreckage for half an hour taking photographs before it began picking up survivors who, by that time, numbered only 124.*
>
> - W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response*

In *The Terms of Refuge: Indochinese Exodus and the International Response,* W. Courtland Robinson cites a UNHCR report that discusses how rescue boats intentionally left boats to drift at sea resulting in death by dehydration and the destruction of boats at sea reducing the number of those who could have been saved. The number of refugees who survived the experience described above dropped dramatically because they were left to drift at sea with little to no viable drinking water for survival. "Drift" is defined by Merriam Webster as "the motion or action of drifting especially spatially and usually under external influence such as an aimless course: a forgoing of any attempt at direction or control." I perform the gesture of drifting, inter-spliced with the violent imagery of drowning, capsizing, and the toxic undrinkable water signified in the overabundance of salt, water, and movement of my body with the bucket. Performing drifting emphasizes the figuration of the refugee in conditions of precariousness at the crux of being stateless at sea. Drifting as a performative gesture necessitates the imagery of a vast ocean of water to call upon a memory recorded and unrecorded, in the spoken and the unspoken, in the felt and sensed narratives of Vietnamese boat refugees. I dedicate this performance to those who could not make it across the ocean through the stories of those who were able to make it to shore, to urgently ask us to think critically about the role that memory and performance offer in current discussions of the refugee crisis.

> *After gasping intensively for air, recovering from submerging my head into the water, I shift to stillness. I look into the blinding spotlight positioned in front, doing nothing else but looking ahead. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting, until the lights go out* (Figure 1.10).

The performance ends with no closure, no finality, only an intensity built up to a painful silence with the performative gesture of drifting. It is on the boat where refugees are left drifting, with bodies stacked upon one another caught on the brink of drowning and floating across the

ocean. What possibilities and biopolitical forces are enacted on and through the body of the refugee in this moment of drifting? The concept of drifting demands of us to refocus our attention to the lives at stake in policy debates of resettlement and granting asylum, of the biopower of nation-states that necessitates the "excluded in order to maintain the inside," resulting in the ocean as an extraterritorial state of exception, wherein refugees are excluded as *bare life* at sea to sustain the national order of countries with closed borders (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 36).

The act of witnessing through performance "entails reckoning with the impossibility of ever fully recognizing the extent of others' absences and losses. However, it is still critical to witness the impossible-to-witness, to reckon with what you realize you do not fully comprehend, recognizing at best that one can never encompass the extent of even one person's loss" (Eisner, 341-342). As I mark the space with salt separating my body as the performer with the space of witnessing for the audience, the performance seeks to mark the audience through a visceral memory of the performance, to connect to the body in pain, the body left drifting, the body of the refugees still to die at sea. *salt | water* theorizes the geopolitics of the ocean through the materiality of water and my body as a racialized and gendered subject. Critical to this process of theorizing through performance is the audience and the ethics of witnessing. What do we do after we witness violence? Do we comply? Do we question our conditions? Do we take action? The impetus of this performance is not to offer catharsis, but to stir the audience to question how they view images of suffering and connect viscerally to the body in pain, not as a site of consumption but to enact a radical empathy that calls the audience into action.

*salt | water* does not seek to capture the entirety of a Vietnamese refugee experience at sea; rather, the performance gestures to the very violence of waiting and dispossession of people

at the forefront of discussions of refugee crises. My body as a performer and daughter of Vietnamese refugees traverses across, between, and through performative geographic and historical borders of Vietnamese refugee memories to stage a call for justice for those caught in the violence of statelessness at sea.

**Conclusion**

*"And it draws its corporeal fluidity from images of water- a water from the source, a deep, subterranean water that trickles in the womb, a meandering river, a flow of life, of words running over or slowly dripping down the pages."*

- Trinh Minh Ha, *Woman, Native, Other*

In Vietnamese, "love the nước" (*yêu nước*), also means to love the country, the nation, the homeland. Central to theorizing Vietnamese refugee subjectivity is a return to water. The first section focuses on *Project 0395A.DC*. to theorize Vietnamese refugee subjectivity through disorientation at sea as both a performative experience and method. The second section focuses on *salt | water* to meditate on water itself as the very site and material which manages refugee populations and opens up possibilities of freedom in a death world. Performance allows for the redrawing of boundaries and figuration of bodies as social actors to trouble, disrupt, and intervene in hegemonic discourses constructing and framing Vietnamese refugees as solely victims of war who are pathologized by trauma.

Water becomes the site of sensationalizing refugee exodus. The images that capture our popular imagination in the U.S. news media include Elian Gonzalez floating on a raft from Cuba, a young Syrian boy whose lifeless body was left ashore on the banks of Greece, and boats filled

with refugees feeling the northern coast of Africa capsizing in the Mediterranean. These images, each with their own racialized and gendered dynamics of individualized and collectivized bodies, create a shift in understanding from the sea as a place where refugees have escaped from extreme conditions of danger to the dangers of the sea itself. The sea has been a recurring scene upon which refugees are sensationalized as being in a place of precariousness, a site that is distinct from land-based borders. The ocean is rendered as a place between multiple nations, and the fate of the refugee is configured both by the extraterritorial policies of the UNHCR and enforced when nation-states are willing to grant asylum. Water as both site and material of the sea thus offers a theoretically and methodologically layered and elusive framework to discuss Vietnamese subjectivity and subjection at sea.

The stakes of focusing on water in this contemporary moment are critical as waves of refugees continue to escape by sea due to increased security at land-based borders. For many Syrian refugees, barbed wire fences in Greece, Bulgaria, Austria, and Hungary, to name a few, increase risks for refugees as they continue to search for alternative routes leading to dangerous escape by sea. The UNHCR has reported that over one million refugees arrived by boat to the coasts of Europe in 2015 (UNHCR, 7). Moreover, thousands of Rohingya refugees from Burma were left to drift in the Andaman Sea for months in 2015, as the mechanisms for search-and-rescue missions in Southeast Asia do not exist as they do under the Triton program in Europe. The constant contestation of legal responsibility for refugees in international waters alongside increased land-based border patrols continue to leave millions seeking refuge via the sea. Meditating on water elicits discussions of the material and political economic conditions refugees face, unfolding the sea as both the site of the possibility for freedom and a death world wherein refugee lives are always already marked as disposable.

## Chapter 2
## Of Land: Re-education Camps

*The war ended on April 30, 1975. A few days after we were all rounded up in abandoned schools. Basically…we registered ourselves, to go to re-education camp. I was taken to Ta Be, a famous Catholic high school. They catered the most delicious food for us everyday. When the Communists came, and we could eat restaurant food, we thought we had it made. No one thought they would do anything, we just all thought we would be living like this for the next ten days. Then on the third day, the last day, they continued to let us eat well. But at midnight, it was pitch black and they began to wake us up. WAKE UP! And then there were these large trucks. Each truck had two Communist soldiers each with AK47s. They dragged us to the trucks, screaming "GET ON, GET ON!" They didn't restrain our hands, but they forced us to get on. Once we were on, they pulled down the truck cover and drove away. Each group had to get in one truck after another. When you got in, you couldn't see anything, it was dark like ink. THAT was when we realized we were going to jail... That was when we realized we were in jail.*

– Tâm Văn Nguyễn, *my father*

"To listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn,

for understanding means creating."

- Trinh Minh Ha, *Woman, Native Other, 121*

My father, Tâm Văn Nguyễn, is a survivor of multiple wars in Vietnam, former re-education camp prisoner, political exile, and currently a leader in the Vietnamese American community in Chicago. Growing up I listened to my father's stories of war, re-education camps, and escape during car rides to school. My first history lessons took place in the car; where I began to learn about the history of war, state violence, U.S. imperialism, communist revolution, and freedom. For this chapter, I return to my father's stories to conduct a series of oral histories. In the opening quote he discusses the first days after the end of the Vietnam/American War when he was lured into incarceration into re-education camps. His story and experience of the re-education camps is the focus of this chapter. After what many Vietnamese Americans and American soldiers call the "Fall of Saigon" or as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) calls it, the day of national "Reunification," an estimated 1-2.5 million people were imprisoned in "re-education camps" or *trại học tập cải tạo* with no formal charges or trials and 165,000 people were estimated to have died in the camps either from malnourishment, disease, or execution. The prisoners were men and women who were affiliated with the former Republic of Vietnam ranging from military officers to political officials.

I struggle with how to honor my father's story centering his voice, co-theorizing it with him, and deeply reflecting upon his experiences of incarceration and escape alongside the history of nation formation and state violence. Trinh Minh Ha's quote opens up a space for me to move beyond just capturing every single detail of my father's narrative to a space of enlivening creation as a place of deep understanding. After decades of listening to my father's story and feeling the responsibility as a daughter and child of refugees to retell the story, I begin to enter the story different this time around. I realize that central to my father's narrative is land itself as a critical animate material. Land not only embodies the paradox of dispossession, as đất also

meaning nation/homeland/country is the very site he is incarcerated on, but its very materiality becomes a site of punishment against him through forced hard labor and site upon which he enacts a fugitive subjectivity that ultimately leads to his escape. The SRV marked prisoners who were incarcerated into re-education camps as "war criminals" because of their affiliation with the U.S. during the Vietnam/American War as military officers and/or civilian personnel. Prisoners were deemed as fugitives to the state, without due process or a trial for conviction under the new regime, they were lured into voluntary incarceration in the city centers where they were located and shipped off into a series of re-education camps to perform hard labor across Vietnam. As a result, I define fugitive subjectivity as a performance to subvert surveillance by the state and its enactments of violence to weaponize the land to kill the body of the inmate. *Fugitive subjectivity* is grounded in an analysis of the land as a geopolitical and material site of subjection by the state and thus a critical site of transgression by re-education camp inmates.

In this chapter, I focus on land to discuss the construction of power, state formation, and fugitive subjectivity through the re-education camps and the centrality of land to reposition the body as a site of discipline and transgression. I argue that my father's oral history reveals how land is central to an analysis of nation formation and state violence by the SRV. I discuss how land, particularly where former U.S. and Army of the Republic of Vietnam and borderlands, were used was a state of exception. Furthermore, I contend that land offers an embodied analysis of the materiality of state violence through a discussion on weaponized land and how knowledge of the land allowed my father to enact a fugitive subjectivity to transgress the surveillance and violence of the state towards his escape.

**Why Land?**

The land is like an open wound. It is in returning to the land as a vital geopolitical, aesthetic, and embodied material that we are able understand the wounds the earth endured by the bodies that were forced across the land, escaped across the land, found refuge in the land, died on the land, were buried on the land, and disappeared on the land. The surface of the earth is to the flesh of the body. I return to the land with its waterways as the bloodlines that run through the flesh of the body, the body of the earth. Land is central to Vietnamese ontology as the word for nation/homeland/country or đất nước, đất meaning land is the first word in the compound and the site this chapter revisits. Land is central to the theorization of state formation, especially as Vietnam stages itself as an independent sovereign nation-state defeating both French colonization and U.S. imperialism. In the 1930s, during French colonialism, over 80% of the population in Vietnam lived in rural areas and depended on agriculture for their livelihoods. By 1940, 7 to 8 million people in the country were landless as Vietnam was considered one of the five worst areas in the world for the pervasiveness for landlessness. As a result, in Ho Chi Minh's *Appeal on the Occasion of the Founding of the Indochinese Communist Party*, the second paragraph centers the importance of land as site of contestation against anti-colonial struggles against the exploitation of land and labor. "They have plundered the peasants' land to establish plantations and drive them to destitution." Through campaign for land reform from 1954-1956 after the Vietnamese defeated the French, the reclamation of land became a strategy to: 1) mark the land as a place of colonial exploitation thus site for revolutionary justice; 2) stage a "people's court" wherein former landowners were put on trial for execution; and 3) amass a peasant population against colonial order for a national revolutionary war after north and south Vietnam

were divided at the 17th parallel. The centrality of land is fundamental in understanding Vietnamese communist revolution and how it played out in the aftermath of the war.[18]

The SRV returned to the land, however instead of the land being a staged "people's court," the end of the war already marked those who were lured into their incarceration "war criminals" to be disciplined and reformed through re-education camps. Therefore, land transformed into a detention center were prisoners who put on trial every day, through forced confessions, hard labor, food rations/deprivation, and daily interactions with the prison guards. Land is vital to the formation of the state as fundamental to the founding of communist revolution from Vladimir Lenin's *Decree on Land* on Land in 1917 to the founding of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1930. Land is where "justice" took place against colonialism forces after the Vietnamese defeated the French and land is where "justice" takes place once again after the U.S. is defeated and south of Vietnam is taken over.

***Land as the State of Exception***

How does Vietnam, torn between two internally opposing governments, re-unify in the aftermath of post-communist revolution and begin to form as a nation? What bodies are needed to tell this story as markers of the past and present regime? To unify the new nation, the SRV had to mark those who would be rewarded as part of the citizenry and those who would be punished as enemies during the Vietnam/American War. The SRV created re-education camps as a program wherein the government made announcements to the public through newspapers and radio broadcasts that the program would last no more then three days or ten days depending on

[18] Ho Chi Minh's anticolonial thought was deeply influenced by Vladimir Lenin. Specifically, Lenin wrote a *Decree on Land* in 1917, which was passed by the Second Congress of Soviet Workers, Soldiers, and Peasant Deputies wherein he called for the abolition of private property and redistribution of land among the peasantry.

person's rank and level of military involvement with the U.S. and ARVN and those who admitted themselves would soon return and be reintegrated into the new society. However, the re-education camps lasted more than the promised three to ten days and instead resulted in an average of four to eight years of imprisonment for camp inmates. The re-education camp thus became a state of exception, wherein the land (which were former U.S. and ARVN military bases and border areas) used for incarceration where delineated as spaces where the new sovereign power could enact its power to exclude those they deemed as threats to the nation.

Land is central to nation formation in Vietnam, especially in the history of communist revolution as land continues to be the stage upon which justice is performed. The use of land as a place of enacting justice transforms into the re-education camps after war, however instead of becoming a staged court where put prisoners are allowed a trial. The re-education camps thus becomes the very space where the new sovereign perform its power to create law, suspend it, and then justify its suspension as part of the law. In this moment there are multiple state and interstate actors including Vietnam and international humanitarian aid organizations including Amnesty International and the Aurora Foundation, which have explicitly addressed human rights abuses of the re-education camps to the SRV. Amnesty International wrote a report to the SRV about the human rights violations in the camps, specifically on the detainment of "tens of thousands of former members of the armed forced s and administration of the Republic of Vietnam…without charge or trial for 're-education.' Amnesty International became increasingly worried in 1977 and 1978 when it became clear that the thousands of people in the 're-education' camps would still in them after three years had elapsed" (Amnesty International, i).

The sovereign can determine the laws both "outside and inside the juridical order" determining its limitations while existing and operating beyond these boundaries (Agamben, 15).

As Agamben writes about the state of exception, he states, "The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule" (18). Therefore, in a response letter the SRV wrote to Amnesty International it defined national treason and justice in the context of Vietnamese communist revolutionary history, justifying the re-education camps a more humanitarian response to the violations of "counter revolutionary crimes" (which were not previously defined as such under the Republic of Vietnam):

> National Treason is a crime condemned and punished by moral codes in all countries and at all time. Experiences gathered in both zones of Vietnam – North and South – led to the definition….punishing counter-revolutionary crimes, of that crime as one consisting in – "opposing the homeland, undermining the cause of anti-US patriotic resistance to defend the North, liberate the South and achieve national reunification" (40).

As a result, those who were incarcerated in the re-education camps, due to their affiliation with the former Republic of Vietnam which collaborated with U.S. military forces were marked as traitors to the country, committing acts of national treason in their corroboration with the U.S. government, which resisted the Communist Party's efforts to reunify the country during the Vietnam/American War. As the reigning regime, the SRV asserted its sovereignty to Amnesty International to justify its use of re-education as a method to "rehabilitate" those accused of committing war crimes and reform them into subject more aligned with the political ideology of the new regime. "The Vietnamese Government wishes to patiently reeducate those who had committed serious crimes against the people the countries. It is confident that national feelings and the national cause will succeed in awakening them and helping them soon realize the fact that their own happiness should go hand in hand with national independence" (21). How does

Vietnam stage its sovereign power for its subjects in this new historical moment as a sovereign country, as it has historically defined itself in resistance to foreign powers such as French colonialism and U.S. imperial forces? Thus, the land upon which the re-education camps are created, which are former U.S. and ARVN military bases and borderlands, become a state of exception within the country wherein the state exerts its sovereign power to define the law and those who are outside of the boundaries of the law.

***About Re-education Camps***

There were approximately 150 camps, sub-camps, and prisons throughout Vietnam. Conditions in each camp varied based on the geographic region they were in and the inmate's affiliation and ranking with ARVN army and/or the U.S. government. Based on different accounts from Amnesty International, Aurora Foundation, and testimonies from survivors there were three main types of camps: 1) Three-day Thought Reform Classes (some camps released people after a few days, but the majority of ARVN officers and high-ranking civil servants were trapped into extended imprisonment); 2) Camps for Forced Labor and Indefinite Detention (inmates were held at gunpoint from the first camp); 3) Camps for Former Senior Officers and Members of Intelligence Services (these camps were located north of Hanoi where weather conditions were more severe).

The re-education camps for the second and third category consisted of forced confessions, political indoctrination, and hard labor. Forced confessions in the re-education camps were another form of performative force in the act of establishing the Communist Party's power and state legitimacy with its subject as the SRV asserted its sovereign power through legal justifications for its actions with Amnesty International. Rituals of forced confessions are an

element of performances by the SRV to justify re-education by inciting prisoners to purge their crimes of "national treason" by coercing prisoners to continuously write their autobiography. I contend that in order for re-education to be validated as a function of the state, forced confessions were a necessary part of inciting accused Vietnamese inmates to incriminate themselves to justify their incarceration and inevitably change their "thoughts and feelings" about the communist regime, to ultimately "forge a national political consciousness …[to] help ensure the stability of the new socialist state" or a "one-ness with the new nation" (Young, 521).

Political indoctrination classes, which included lectures on "American Imperialism," the glory of labor, victory of Vietnamese communists, and Marxism/Leninism were part of the re-education program. These lectures took place during the first few weeks of re-education camps and were performed in a room that mimicked the staging of a classroom with the lecturer in the front of the room and rows for prisoners to sit with prison guards standing on either side of the door openings. These lectures did not stand out as a prominent aspect of camp life in testimonies from survivors of their time in the re-education camps as hard labor became the main focus of re-education.

My father was transferred to five different re-education camps over the course of four years. The strategy behind switching up the camps was to ensure inmates where consistently shuffled up as to prevent any potential uprising against the camp guards. My father was first transferred to a former U.S. military base in Trang Lon, which became infamous for deadly landmines explosions and subsequently to camps located on the border of Vietnam and Cambodia, where there were increased tensions and ensuing war with the Khmer Rouge.[19] The

[19] The Khmer Rouge also known as followers of the Communist Party of Kampuchea came to power on April 17th, 1975 and started one of the most extreme genocides in the world, executing a massive population of artists, intellectuals, landowners, and peasants throughout the country. According to Cambodian American scholar,

very lands upon which prisoners were reeducated on through hard labor, carried in its materiality unpredictable and explosive inheritance of war through the constant threat of death.

***Architecture of Encampment, Materiality, and The Body***

There are two main architectures of encampment in the re-education camps located in the south of Vietnam, specifically in Tay Ninh. The first is the architecture of encampment of former U.S. and ARVN military bases wherein there was one main gate into the base with razor wires surrounding the perimeter of the base. In addition, around the perimeter of the base as mentioned previously are at least three rows layered with landmines. Surrounding the landmines were local villagers whose allegiance were to the communist party. The second is of the architecture of encampment deep in the jungle, where there were no landmines or razor wires enclosing the perimeter of the re-education campsite. However, the camps closest to the jungle were also the ones closest to the border during the Khmer Rouge and the constant threat of death either through hard labor, landmines, arbitrary executions, and/or an ensuring war endangered the lives of inmates everyday. In my father's oral history he recalls the re-education camps deep in the jungle did not have barbed wire fences. Both types of architectures of encampment were buttressed by a surrounding communist village that viewed the inmates as war criminals to be condemned. Communist soldiers often reminded inmates, "'you guys can't escape, all the people here our ours/belong to us. If you leave, they'll catch you immediately.' But in reality, if we

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Khatharya Um, an estimated one-forth of the populated died from hard labor, disease, starvation and executions. War between Cambodia and Vietnam started in May 1975 in a series of classes at the southwestern border, right after Vietnamese communist forces took over Saigon to declare the end of the Vietnam/American War. The Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese communists worked closely together during the Vietnam/American War. However, as the Khmer Rouge rose to power they were concerned about the territorial dominance of Vietnam in the regime and began to attack the border. Vietnam's involvement during the Khmer Rouge regime was to protect the nation's border and also to push out Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia.

went out there were terrified, they would report us immediately." This structure flips the structure of Foucault's concept of panoption and surveillance, instead of a central structure wherein inmates felt as though they are constantly being watched, whether anyone was actually in the guard structure became complicated in the re-education camps (216). Not only was there the deployment of guard posts to watch prisoners at various campsites located on the four corners of a square encampment, there would be a population of unknown people who would keep the order and containment of the camp. The surrounding structure of the "people" as an apparatus of power creates a different structure of control, one that is rhetorically and physically reinforced by an imagined larger public, which embodies the new regime, wherein those who are marked as war criminals are literally ostracized and disciplined from within. This disciplinary practice also draws on a history "people's courts" during land reform in the north of Vietnam from 1954-156, where persecuted landowners were surrounded by a lynching mass as a spectacle to purge the land of "exploiters" and those worked with the French. This method draws on a historical lineage a land based archive of the practice of persecution and threat of impending death to those who were marked as not only counterrevolutionaries but also traitors to the nation because of their class standing and/or affiliation with the French or U.S.

Embedded within my father's oral histories of re-education camps is the materiality of land itself as he narrates experience of hard labor and navigating the jungle. As performance studies scholar, D. Soyini Madison eloquently writes, "it is at this matrix of materiality, memory, subjectivity, performance, imagination, and experience that memory culminates in oral history performance, a culmination of layers that are all mutually formed by each other" (Madison, 35). Every time I hear my father's story, a new detail or a new insight emerges, and for the first time by focusing on land for this chapter, I hear my father's story completely differently. For the first

time in over two decades of sharing his story of re-education camps and escape, he brings out paper to draw maps to spatialize the architecture of encampment to talk about the materiality of the land and how bodies of prisoners were stacked, divided, grouped, and isolated in the camps and for hard labor in the field. In the latter sections of the chapter I discuss how land was mobilized to inflict violence during re-education camps and how knowledge of the land offered opportunities to enact fugitive subjectivity amidst violent surveillance and hard labor.

Land is not only a site wherein the re-education inmates are detained, but the land is used as a geopolitical site marking a critical regime transition as many of the re-education camps were located on former U.S. and ARVN military bases and the very materiality of the land was used to discipline the prisoners through hard labor and food deprivation. Building upon Walter Benjamin's argument that violence is a necessary part of state formation and embedded in law making and/or law preserving practices, I forward that for the new regime to establish a new sovereign order land used as a vital material to law making practices to re-educate prisoners through the "Policy of Labor" and "Policy of Food." My father discusses how the inmates were reminded of the Policy of Labor and the Policy of Food almost daily. My father recites the policies as though by rote memorization:

> *We collectively have a Policy of Labor, for all of you to have autonomy because this is not prison, this is not a destination where we cuff your hands, you have the freedom to move, eat as you please, eating is based on what you grow, if you grow a little you eat a little.*
>
> *We collectively have a humane Policy of Food so all of you can live properly* (Nguyễn 2018).

The Policy of Labor and Policy of Food necessitates working on the land and moving across its dangerous terrain. The Policy of Labor would entail a range of duties including cutting huge trees, locating landmines, digging tunnels by the border to prevent attacks between the Vietnamese army and Khmer Rouge. The Policy of Food required planting all day in the sweltering heat and sun, digging highly packed dirt on old military bases, and planting vegetation where there are undetected landmines. The threat of immediate death through explosions or gunshots from landmines and/or crossfire during the war between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam posed or a gradual death through over exhaustion of the body and depletion of nutrients through hard labor. It is through both the Policy of Labor and Policy of Food that the body is simultaneously subject to immediate and gradual death which I conceptualize as weaponized land. I draw on architectural scholar, Leopold Lambert's discussion of weaponized architecture wherein he defines it as a method of analyzing "infrastructure [as] always (deliberate or not) serving political projects at a territorial scale" (12). In this case, I expand upon the location of analysis from built infrastructure to add the ecology of the land itself as vital to the political project of nation-formation by establishing a carceral system those affiliated with the former ARVN. As my father says, " [they tricked us, it was their way of trying to act like they were humanitarian, instead of killing us, they would let our bodies wear out and die on its own]" (Nguyễn 2013). As Vietnam establishes a new "sovereign" order after the Vietnam/American War in the era of shifting regimes during the post-war period in Vietnam, the re-education camp became the stage upon which the new SRV performed its sovereign power by strategically weaponizing land to legitimize its violence through the persecution of camp detainees as "war criminals."

Nevertheless, there were cracks in the architecture of encampment, where there are opportunities for inmates to evade the surveillance of camp guards. These fissures, cracks, sites of slippages are porous borders, where inmates steal joy in small moments. These small moments exists as tastes of freedom, openings to hope for another life, and gastronomic secrets that pilfers opportunities to live for another day. Through porous borders in the architecture of encampment my father was able to enact moments of fugitive subjectivity through the openings between the camp and the jungle where inmates were forced to perform hard labor to find food, medicine, and plan a route of escape on the land.

**Intergenerational Storytelling and Performing as Understanding**

I analyze my father's oral history about re-education camps in Vietnam alongside humanitarian aid reports from Amnesty International to theorize land as an animated material site of Vietnamese communist re-education and space for fugitive subjectivity. My research is deeply shaped by a tradition of black feminist and woman of color feminist theory, which is grounded in the "personal as political" and offers a methodological shift that necessitates personal narratives and autobiography to enact what Saidiya Hartman writes as, "to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction" (Hartman, 7). The violence of abstraction is embedded within the discursive overgeneralizations through the violent of erasure of details about the aftermath of war in Vietnam and re-education camps. The violence of abstraction lies in the massive accounts of lives lost by excessive and violent force by the Vietnamese communist party through accounts by international aid organizations including Amnesty International and Aurora Foundation, re-inscribing a narrative of the evils of communism through only a report-based discussion of the violence inflicted divorced from an

analysis of the legacies of French colonialism and U.S. imperialism as embedded in the apparatuses and sites used for torture and discipline. The violence of erasure was revealed during my three years of field work in Vietnam, in the national archives, amongst local residents, international human rights lawyers, and political dissidents, even mention of the re-education camps were quickly hushed and the topic immediately changed. The only archive that exists of re-education camps live in the memories of those who could and could not escape, research, memoirs, and testimonies in the diaspora, and international humanitarian aid reports.

My father is the main interlocutor shaping and informing how I theorize this chapter to center the personal as political. It is a conversation, a history lesson, and a negotiation of power, gender, linguistic, and educational differences that intergenerational storytelling become a performance of reparative justice.[20] Performance operates on several levels, as both the narrated event and the narrative event, as Richard Bauman distinguishes as "the particular historical moment being told…and…the embodied or immediate telling" (1977). Building upon Bauman's definition of performance in oral history interviews, I would add that another layer of performance emerges as my father's story lives beyond his performance of it into a written meditation and critical analysis by and with his daughter. I bring together Trinh Minh Ha's discussion of "understanding means creating" and D. Soyini Madison's discussion of performances of possibilities to methodologically approach this chapter to both honor my father's story and delve into a critical engagement with the historical context and materiality of his story (Trinh, 121). I draw on Madison's discussion of performances of possibilities to frame the conversation with my father as such, where "the possible suggests a movement culminating

[20] Here I differentiate between reparations as a legal performance of law, financial compensation, and/or public government sanctioned apologies. Rather, I use reparative as an active act of healing, repair, and mend that requires the process of scabbing, peeling, and unraveling new layers of skin through storytelling as an active performance of connecting the past to present towards futurity.

in creation and change. It is the active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life, of merging the text with the world, of critically traversing the margin and the center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces" (191). I experimented with different forms of how to tell this story and realize his voice must be centered because I am in direct conversation with him, to offer his oral history narratives only as a subject of analysis doesn't offer a fullness of engaging with him as a theorist himself, as a thinker generously engaging with this medium of writing in the English language through and with his daughter to critically engage with histories of violence after war, incarceration, surveillance, nation formation, U.S. imperialism, and communist revolution. Moreover, it is in the act of creating with and from the stories my father passed down to me, hearing it with a commitment to understanding, that I animate land as vital to his story to reveal the violence of nation formation in the aftermath of war.

**Chapter Breakdown**

This chapter is divided into three sections. Section one focuses how the staging of re-education camps as the state of exception through performative naming of the camps and the use of food to lure inmates into voluntary incarceration. Section two analyzes weaponized land as vital to the process of confinement and discipline as a both a geopolitical site as former U.S. and ARVN military bases and conflict zone during the Khmer Rouge and the materiality of the land itself as a weapon of hard labor, torture, imminent death. Section three explores porous borders and fugitive subjectivity in the re-education camps to examine possibilities for transgression through an understanding of the land for nutrition, medicine, and possible escape. Each section theorizes with and alongside my father and oral histories of re-education camps and how a new

communist regime in Vietnam established nation-state sovereignty by literally carving out land with the bodies of those persecuted as war criminals for prison camps as states of exception. My father's story seeks justice in its telling and retelling, as a survivor of the re-education camps and as someone who escaped, his desire to share his story enacts a symbolic performance of reparative justice in remapping his own memory of Vietnam while intervening in Vietnam's current national narrative.

**Section One: Staging Land As The State Of Exception**

Land is a critical stage upon which the state of exception is created in Vietnam. The use of land is central to communist revolution and thus becomes a vital stage to amass a large population of prisoners. In the two weeks following the aftermath of the Vietnam/American War my father is seduced into imprisonment through performative naming and the use of food to coral hundreds upon thousands of former Republic of Vietnam in an imminent mass self-incarceration process. I examine the performative naming of re-education camps and the enclosure of registered prisoners with catered food. I assert that for re-education to take place on such a massive scale it necessitated deception by tapping into desires for non-violent transitions and bodily needs for nourishment after war.

***Performative Naming***

*"The war ended on April 30, 1975. A few days after we were all rounded up in abandoned schools. Basically…we registered ourselves, to go to re-education camp."*

– Tâm Văn Nguyễn

A few days later was May 3rd, 1975 when two communiqués were released, one from the communist Military Management Section (which had taken over the former Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and another one from the Saigon Gia Dinh City Military Management committee, entitled *Order No. 1*, both called for all former South Vietnamese military officers and civilian personnel who were served or were employed by the ARVN to register at designated sites. In addition, "all ARVN documents, equipment, and weapons" were to be turned in during registration (C. Nguyễn, 189). Throughout May there were tiers for registration with specified dates based on military rank and affiliation with the ARVN. For instance, generals were to report from May 8th to 9th, colonels from May 8th to 11th, other officers from May 8th to 14th, and former officers had to register by the end of May (C. Nguyễn, 190). The staggering of dates for registration is important, especially as those who were in the highest positions of military power, particularly generals, had a shorter window of time to register themselves. Based on communiqué from the Saigon Military Management Committee it would later be revealed that it was part of a process of incarceration and enactment of postwar reform.

The performative act of naming the camp as trại học tập cải tạo or "re-education" allows the SRV to show a system of voluntarily admission and thus its benevolence in its desire to reform those who the new regime deemed as war criminals. In a communiqué from the Saigon Military Management Committee, the re-education camps were framed as a program to "reform…and cleanse their wrongs in order to quickly become honest citizens, loving the fatherland and peace, and return to the nation." Subsequently, the order for registration simply called for "Those people gathering for education shall bring along enough paper, pens, clothes, mosquito nets, food or money for use in 10 days beginning from the day of gathering" (C. Nguyễn, 10). In my father, Tâm Văn Nguyễn's oral histories, alongside hundreds of testimonies

from survivors of the re-education camps from interviews conducted with humanitarian aid organizations including the Aurora Foundation and collected by Vietnamese American scholars Huynh Sang Thong, Nguyễn Văn Canh, and Vo M. Nghia highlight the deceptive language used to frame the re-education camp and its supposed 10-day program to corral a massive population of former ARVN military officers and personnel into incarceration. Here is where discourse and the performative naming of the camp creates the conditions for the seductive violence of re-education, wherein the language of re-education as a program to "return to the nation" tapped into the desire from the former regime for a non-violent transition, where former military officers and personnel would not be persecuted and could have passageway to be folded into the new regime simply by complying to the orders. As captured in my father's sentiments that echoes alongside the narratives of so many other survivors,

> *All the officers from the ARVN whether you served or not had to report to the 're-education camps,' that was the wording they used. They just told us we would be gone for 10 days. So we volunteered ourselves. My family and I just prepared enough for me to be gone for 10 days and then we could just throw it away after and then I would return home and build/live a new life in a new society. That was my innocent hope.*

> *Once we registered, they brought us to live temporarily in these schools. They even made it a point to tell us that this is just a temporary living situation for a few days. This place was very nice and clean. There was absolutely no feeling that we were in jail. They cultivated that feeling for us... We just couldn't leave the school. So we agreed that if we were going to learn, we would live in the school* (Nguyễn 2013).

Even in my father's recollection of the re-education camps, he questions it's performative naming as he states, "that was the wording they used." The discursive construction of the camp through its performative naming allowed it to articulate its scope as only a non-threatening 10-day learning event as it also tapped into the desires of those who lost the war to be reintegrated into the new regime. The repetition of the word "return" in my father's narrative is also significant, as "return" or "tro ve" also translates into "return/go back home" in Vietnamese. As my father continues, "I am someone who didn't do anything criminal, nothing they could really hate me for, so they could incorporate me into the country." It was in the performative renaming of the camp as "re-education", which ended up seducing inmates into a violent process of voluntary incarceration as the name did not indicate any form of violence or notion of imprisonment. As performance studies scholar Joshua Chambers-Letson writes,

> "performative shuffling of terms and names proved effective methods for controlling public perception of the camps…By renaming the concentration camps "relocation centers," or redefining the forced military evacuation as voluntary, these official speech acts were what J.L. Austin might call perlocutionary acts: "what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading" (Chambers-Letson, 101).

These discursive moves to performatively name what would become a hard labor and death camp as a "re-education camp," illustrates the stagecraft of statecraft and the importance of the initial naming of the camp that resulted in deceptive conditions of consent to amass a large population of prisoners. As my father discusses in his interview, "I thought they were just Vietnamese and we would just change from one regime to another" (Nguyễn 2013). By tapping into the desires of those who fought on the side of the war that lost, many of whom were

affiliated with the U.S. simply because of their geographic location in the South of Vietnam and thus drafted into the ARVN, was a hope to "return to the nation" as promised in the initial "re-education camp" order. For many who were incarcerated, it was a naïve hope that the transition would not be violent and they could somehow return to living in the country they were born in. Nevertheless, for a new nation-state to assert its sovereign power it must define who belongs and who does not, who are deemed remnants of an old regime, and who can be granted citizenship and rights by the state. The call for re-education camp as a passageway to "return to the nation," was a public lie that resulted in a physical enclosure of those who were deemed outside of the new regime, remnants of an imperial allegiance into isolated encampments as states of exception within the body of the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Even throughout the duration of my father's time in re-education camps, he recounts that the SRV never once called it a jail or prison, re-education camps were used consistently throughout the country to continue to assert moral authority as justification for the camps.

The performative act of naming the camps "re-education camps" was buttressed by framing the re-education camp as only a 10-day affair for former ARVN military officers and personnel targeted to voluntarily admit themselves into the camps. As my father's oral history reveals those who were forced into self-incarceration truly believed the program would last for 10 days, when the majority of cases resulted in incarceration for an average of four to eight years.[21]

The stage upon which Vietnamese civilians were seduced into their own incarceration is embodied in my father's story. The lack of explicit violence in the initial stage of preparing detainees for re-education camps demonstrates that the process of sending people to the camps

[21] According to an interview conducted for a report by the Aurora Foundation on human rights abuses in re-education camps in 1989.

was not simply an act to persecute those deemed as war criminals, but as a method to exert seductive coercion or performative force over the bodies of people they marked as subjects outside of the new established law, subjects of the old regime who in their former political affiliations inherently violate the new sovereign state.

***Gastronomy of Seductive Violence of Re-education & Acts of Enclosure***

How does a new regime amass 250,000 to 1 million inmates into re-education camps? These desires for a life after war were further solidified through the seduction of food during the re-education camps to lure bodies into confinement. In addition to the performative naming of the camp as a re-education camp, where the guise was a learning program that would only take 10 days, catered food allowed for the encroaching enclosure and persecution of inmates.

> *"During this time [for] lunch and dinner, they asked the big restaurants in Saigon to cater food to the school for us to eat. From the most well renown restaurants in Saigon. We were eating so well, how could we be in jail?"* (Nguyễn 2013).

My father, Tâm, recounts how hundreds of thousands were initially tricked into their own incarceration, he recalls the catered food brought into the school during the registration period and the how it came from the most famous restaurants in town everyday when he was incarcerated in Ta Be Catholic School in Saigon. His account reveals a theory of political violence through food. Inevitably inmates from the camp would be forced into hard labor camps where starvation and hunger were used as methods of bodily subjection; my father's story unveils the centrality of food both in its abundance and scarcity as forms of political violence used to deceive inmates into their own incarceration and stage an act of benevolence by the new regime. In this section I discuss how food was used as seductive violence to lure inmates by

feeding the body and to distract from the act of enclosure. Furthermore, I discuss how the act of feeding the body with a selection of decadent food tapped into a desire for non-violence and self-preservation and how food was used as a sensorial diversion from the actual confinement of inmates by the state.

Here I am theorizing how food can be used as a political weapon, not only in its scarcity and withholding through hunger as a technique of torture, control, and population management by the state, but as a form of lure and capture by tapping into the desire for "survival" and "cravings for freedom" for Vietnamese inmates of re-education camp, capturing a familiar taste of "home" to enclose them into a site of detention. The Vietnam/American War was in many ways a proxy war between the U.S., Soviet Union, and China, a war for national independence through communist revolution, and a civil war between the northern and southern Vietnamese. Estimates of over 2 million Vietnamese civilians on both sides of the war died and over 3.7 million were forced to relocate to "new economic zones" inevitably facing extreme poverty and starvation. The causalities of the war has resulted in devastation in terms of the massive death tolls and the destruction of the land itself through the use of chemical defoliant or Agent Orange, B-52 bombs, and M16 landmines used during the war. "How do we describe the sweetness that reclines in the hunger for survival?" especially after war? My father's desire alongside so many others to believe that re-education camps would only last for 10 days and there was nothing to be suspicious about when they catered food every day during that first week, pulled on that desire after war to survive especially under an unknown new regime in the south of Vietnam. This investment in the belief drew from a deep place of a hope to be able to survive after war amidst all the death, the voluntary registration and the joyous consumption of the catered food indulged a bodily craving to live.

Commissioned by the SRV, food arrived every day to the schools in Saigon spread out with dozens of options to choose from steamed rice to stir-fry vegetables to deep fried fish to caramelized pork, as my father repeats throughout his description, the options were plenty. In the schools, the food was served twice a day, lunch and dinner by the restaurant staff. My father reflects, "[The restaurants were forced to open [during this period]….First of all, so the people who owned the restaurant wouldn't escape, to let them believe they [the new government] were benevolent. The second reason was to allow them to provide food for us for those days." Business as usual in many ways was the operation of transition during this period. As restaurants stayed open and millions of people volunteered to incarcerate themselves without the force of a gun, rather with the lure of food and the promise of return. The subtle shifts alongside tapping into the sensorial familiarity of sustenance through food, allowed for the seductive violence of re-education to gently corral people into enclosed corridors of a veiled detention center.

> *There was this one instance that is important to share. In the week that I lived in that school, there were people that were addicted to cigarettes; there weren't any cigarettes [in the school] to smoke. The school had a second level, where there was a window, when you looked out you can see people walking below. Children. So we said, "Here here! Buy some cigarettes for us!" At the time, we still had money, so we threw money down for the kids to buy it…the kids were trustworthy, they bought back cigarettes.*
>
> *You know what the kids said? The little kids said, "Uncles! You all are in prison and you don't even know it!" They knew! But we didn't know…* (Nguyễn 2013).

My father remembers to tell this story before we end the interview, making a point to emphasize how the children knew and couldn't be fooled by the state. My father continues to

explain that even if he knew there was no way out once they had been registered inside the school. Furthermore, the capture of inmates were sustained by pleasant conversations with the communist soldiers and an illusion of freedom within the confined space of the school.

> They basically gave us the freedom to move about as we wanted. We just couldn't go beyond the school grounds. So we agreed that if we were going to learn, we would live in the school. They never yelled at us or reprimanded us, the whole time they were very nice. They were nice like that because then it would allow for more people to continue registering.

The open and non-threatening environment at the school allowed for the continued accumulation of inmates in the camps and for communist soldiers to build trust with inmates who would begin to share their stories of war that became ammunition for the persecution of the prisoners as war criminals. The performative naming of the camp as re-education and the exciting offering of catered food every day distracted the inmates from their own confinement as their living conditions and pleasant exchanges with communist soldiers during their time at school presented itself like an enjoyable and relaxing school environment where there were no indications of violence to come.

> *But here, we were being deceived. Then after those 10 days, right at midnight, I was sleeping. Then they rang the alarm, "WAKE UP! WAKE UP!" There were trucks, covered, they were called Molotova. It was like a truck, but it was all covered. There was no one inside the truck you could see out….There were two soldiers holding AK47s, (like the communist rifles), so we couldn't get out. From there, they drove. We were in the car we didn't see where we were going. Then in the morning, that's when we arrived to the camp where they would jail us* (Nguyễn 2013).

My father is seduced with luxurious food and communal accommodations and then physically forced by rifle in the middle of the night to be transported to a re-education camp. By creating an extremely welcoming and luxurious environment where detainees could be rounded up before they were ultimately shipped off, the SRV exerted their ability to amass a population they deemed as "the enemy," dispossessing them from their homes and inevitably relocating them to re-education camps. The significance of the retelling of my father's recollection of the moment he was quickly forced by gunpoint in the middle of the night into re-educations by the border of Vietnam and Cambodia were the specificities of the military technology used for the incarceration, the Molotova trucks and AK47s, which were shipped from the Soviet Union during the Vietnam/American War as military aid to the Vietnamese communist party. My father alongside hundreds of thousands of people in Saigon are physically being shipped across the land, 100 km southwest from Saigon in and by Soviet Union military machinery. My father's body contained and shipped across a country he was born and raised, into a Soviet and Vietnamese archive of communist revolutionary war only to arrive at a former U.S. military base. Here, the legacies of war live embedded in the technology of capture and architecture of encampment.

**Section Two: Weaponized Land**

My father brings a pen and blank letter size piece of paper to our follow-up oral history interview. As his narrative shifts to arriving at the re-education camp in Tay Ninh, 100 kilometers from Saigon next to the Cambodian border, he begins to draw a map (Figure 2.1).

*T-r-a-i*

*G-i-a B-i-n-h* (My father takes his pen to strike an underline underneath these words.)

*Or my English translation, "Military Family Housing"*

*So at that time, after April 30th, all of this was vacant. This was military family housing…Basically they put us in the camp. They didn't have enough room, so they used the facilities that were former military bases so they could confine us because there were too many of us, there wasn't enough room in our prisons, there was an overload, and so they needed to use these facilities to hold all these people. First, they used these facilities to imprison us. Second, they used the people they imprisoned to clean up these bases. Thirdly, [to] expand the land and develop the camp for them* (Nguyễn 2018).

My father arrived to Trai Gia Binh in the town of Trang Lon located in Tay Ninh Province early in the morning after being driven around for 6 to 7 hours throughout the night in a covered Molotova truck held at gunpoint from Saigon. Every time my father tells me about his experiences in re-education camps, the specifics become clearer, this time he decides to draw a series of maps as I share with him how I am organizing the chapter to focus on land as a way to theorize country/homeland/nation and re-education camps. The act of drawing maps is critical to the unveiling the history of re-education camps, which is under extreme censorship and state surveillance in Vietnam. It is very difficult to find official records or even mention the existence of re-education camps in Vietnam. As a result, renderings of the layout of the camps and its location are drawn and collected from the memory of former inmates who became refugees.

These maps are located in humanitarian aid reports from the Aurora Foundation, memoirs and research reports from former prisoners, and collected by the U.S. Department of Defense in refugee camps and stored in the Library of Congress. Nevertheless, my father, Tâm's drawings offer a different theory on the architecture of encampment one that centers the relationship between land and labor as punishment and methods of re-education to reveal histories remnants of U.S. militarization and the ensuing war along the border with the Khmer Rouge. Embedded within my father's maps is a history of the land as archive and how the communist tenant of "labor as glory" became was a method of biopower and gradual death. Furthermore, holding the history of hand drawn maps was this powerful intergenerational exchange between my father as storyteller, historian, and survivor and his daughter as storyteller, researcher, and witness.

***Weaponized Land and Hard Labor***

Where was the problem of United States imperialism and its remnants to be located? It is to be located on the body of those marked as subjects with military and personal affiliations with the former Republic of South Vietnam's regime and the United States. I take up Achille Mbembe's question in "Necropolitics," "What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?" in order to center the prisoner's body and its taxing and dangerous relationship to land through hard labor (Mbembe, 12). Hard labor is a primary disciplinary technique of control in terms of the prisoner's body to the land and how the SRV legitimized its practices and thus sovereign power through the Giai Phong Newspaper and Hoang the SRV's spokesperson. Prisoners' bodies were subjected to intensive labor playing a central role in "reforming" the subject to align with communist ideologies of the proletariat to create "productive labor" through work such as

digging tunnels, clearing minefields, building facilities, and farming (Hoang, 97). I also contest that by performing the "good reeducated subject" Nguyễn is rewarded as team leader and inevitably transgresses his imprisonment and is able to escape from the re-education camps. The "good reeducated subject" in this section refers to the subject that adheres to the coercion of forced labor without any explicitly visible spoken or embodied resistance.

Before I begin my decision about how hard labor was used, I posit the SRV's justification for its use of hard labor. According to Hoang, the goal of the re-education camps were to cultivate "productive labor," which he describes as,

> "Absolutely necessary" for re-education because "under the former regime," they (the prisoners) represented the upper strata of society and got rich under US patronage. They could but scorn the working people. Now the former social order has been turned upside down, and after they have finished their stay in camps they have to earn their living by their own labour and live in a society where work is held in honor (97).

In other words, the SRV collapsed capitalist ideologies and economic wealth to the prisoners' affiliated with the U.S. government and conflated political association with class standing and value systems. As a result, in order to transform these subjects into productive citizens respectful of the working class/proletariat and thus the new regime and social order, labor was used as the central disciplinary technique to "transform" the prisoners to understanding socialist values. As the Giai Phong Newspaper claimed, "labor enabled the outcasts to cleanse their past misdeeds and attain the standards expected of Vietnamese citizens" (Young, 523). The solution to this problem was thus mapped onto the body of those who are associated with U.S. imperialism as indicated by the SRV's use of "national treason" regarding those accused of their service to U.S. military aggression. To create a new proper subject for the new regime, the body

of those who are deemed "war criminals" and "counter-revolutionaries" are to be disciplined into communist doctrines through study and labor (Amnesty International, 41). Thus, as Foucault writes, "the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault, 26).

To become a "good reeducated subject" and be recognized by the nation as a citizen, performing oneself as an obedient hard laborer was fundamental. It is important to discuss the imminent violence of this obedience in terms of what prisoners were subject to with taxing labor of working the land in the tropical heat, threat of buried landmines exploding, and amidst continued warfare between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam. The intensive labor performed by those incarcerated in the re-education camps became forms of torture, as hard labor was demanded of the inmates alongside food deprivation. According to "CAMP Z30-D: The Survivors" the type of work demanded of the prisoners included building their own camp facilities, planting crops, tending animals, clearing minefields, digging canals with little to no equipment in up to 100 degree Fahrenheit heat for upwards of 8-10 hours a day six days a week.

> *…Under the former regime [the prisoners] represented the upper strata of society and got rich under U.S. patronage. They could but scorn the working people. Now the former social order has been turned upside down, and after they have finished their stay in the camps, they have to earn their living by their own labor and live in a society where work is held in honor* (Nguyễn 2013).

This section focus on two main types of camps, the first focuses on a former U.S. and ARVN military base and the second shifts to examine Dong Ban next to the Cambodia-Vietnam border during the Khmer Rouge battle with Vietnam. Throughout the discussion of the two camps I theorize the architecture of encampment in its very materiality and geopolitical location

and use as a state of exception to enact violence and define sovereign power by the SRV. My father's drawings of the architecture of the camp is important to understand the spatial configuration of surveillance that is enliven through oral history narration and to understand how hard labor enforced on the inmates were embedded into the very geography of the camp and the materiality of the land.

***Trang Lon, Former U.S. and ARVN Military Camp & Landmines***

As my father repeats in his interview, "Never once did they say we were in jail, they kept repeating we were being treated benevolently for serious war crimes against the revolution. They said our lives were being spared through re-education" (Nguyen 2013). This performative speech-act was repeated over and over throughout the camps, international correspondence with humanitarian aid agencies, and in the official resolutions by the SRV. Although the SRV's narrative of the re-education camps was one of justice and humanitarian efforts towards war criminals, I draw on Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the ban to conceptualize actual subjection re-education camp detainees faced under these "humanitarian efforts of reform." Giorgio Agamben writes, "the ban is the fundamental structure of law, which expresses its sovereign character, its power to include by excluding" (Agamben, 162). In the act of creating a space of suspension where prisoners in the re-education camps live in temporal and spatial liminality, they are no longer a part of the former regime that fell and not fully allowed to participate as citizens in the new regime. In the act of excluding, the new sovereign power defines who new subjects are in terms of their loyalty to the new state by creating the parameters under which people from the "defeated" regime are juridically defined as in violation of the current regime's law. Agamben's discussion of camps neglects an analysis of the embodiment and the materiality

of the site of the camp itself. Therefore, my father's drawing of the architecture of encampment reveals both how surveillance by the state was configured and how the land in and around the former military bases was used for torture, land expansion, and sustaining the camp.

Thus, the architecture of encampment utilized abandoned U.S. and ARVN military bases as sites of re-education camps doubling the state of exception as a place within the homeland that was formerly used in service for U.S. imperial forces and is then taken up again as space to incarcerate those deemed as threats and external to the nation-states. This section examines location and labor of land expansion from the military base through the act of clearing landmines and planting where the land was cleared.

> *So basically they put us in the camp, all of us they put in here, here is where the door is to go out. (Draws rectangular doorway.) So around here, is empty land covering. (Draws a circle around square representing the military base.) Here is the camp, for example, here is where the military camps are located. There was an area for a kitchen, toilet, beds, all of that was in here, activity, all inside. Here is where there are razor wires/barbed wire fences all around the camp. There was only one door out… Around this land, they put landmines. Back then, we put landmines because we were afraid that the Viet Cong would attack the base, so if there were these mines they would be blocked* (Nguyen 2018). (Figure 2.2)

Based on my father's oral history and drawing of the map of the camp my father reveals how the camp was surrounded by landmines formerly installed by the U.S. military and ARVN to protect itself against the infiltration of communist forces and subjected to attacks.

> *At the camps, was very difficult. Every morning everyone had to leave, no could stay in the camp, we had to leave the camp to go to work. At the time, those, they were very tall,*

> *tall like this, we had to cut it and bring it back, so people could make roofs for the camp…So we had to cut that wild grass, but cutting it was very dangerous, because you could accidentally hit a minefield…In the past the Republic of Vietnam had to have mines so the Communists couldn't come. [They said] "Back then if you put them there, then now it's your turn to remove them.*
>
> *When it would explode, it would blow off people's legs, arms, so it was very dangerous and frightening. Every time they mandated us to go out to the fields, we were all afraid, afraid. There were moments that were very painful- the month before, the wife would come to visit her husband and he would be whole, but then the next month when she would come to visit, he lost his leg. Lots of those images were so heartbreaking to witness. Then they switched me over to a new camp* (Nguyen 2013).

The threat of death faced the prisoners everyday, as they were subject to landmines exploding at anytime with no equipment to detect the mines. Inmates did not have tools such as metal detectors to search for landmines, they had to squat on the land and use a wooden stick to search for the planted landmines. The proximity of the prisoner's body to the land with bombs embedded into the land gave way for gruesome deaths and amputations of limbs from prisoners. Clearing the landmines around the military base served as punishment through labor that could potentially lead to death and/or extreme physical disability. In addition, clearing the landmines also allowed the camp to expand in size and offer soil to plant vegetation that would sustain the inmates. Planting became a dangerous act as undetonated landmines could go off at any moment, in addition to the lands surrounding the landmines were damaged and compact due to the weight

of military vehicles and equipment driving over it, making it more strenuous on the prisoners to plant, forcing inmates to over exert their bodies during the hours they were forced to plant.

Although most executions in the camp resulted from outright resistance to camp orders, the camp created conditions through hard labor with the dangers of the land, staged what Mbembe would call a *death-world*, where "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of the living dead" (40). Outright resistance would lead to death; silence had the possibility of reward while maintaining the subject in a state of the living dead. Even until today, undiscovered landmines in Vietnam continue to result in unexpected deaths throughout the country, the costs of war continues decades after the war has the passed. From 1975 and 2007, about 105,000 civilians deaths were caused by bombs and mines in Vietnam.[22] The re-education camps were not removed from the continued threat of death either by the legacies of war embedded in the landmines buried under the earth or of the continued violence of war between Cambodia and Vietnam as a result of U.S. intervention and Chinese instigation of war for dominance of Southeast Asia. The very lands upon which prisoners were reeducated on and had to perform hard labor on, carried in its materiality unpredictable and explosive inheritance of war through the constant threat of death.

***Khmer Rouge | Digging Tunnels | Beneath the Surface of the Land***

> *Yes, so at one camp it was right by the border to the Khmer/Cambodia. So during that time, we heard news that the Khmer Red was going to invade Vietnam and fight over the border. If they did fight across the border, they would fight in the camp I was in. Because*

[22] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/18/vietnam-unexploded-landmines-bombs

*my camp was very close, just about 1 kilometer and you're there… The tunnel was for the people who lived in the camp. But [the prison guards] didn't live here, they lived from far away and came [into the camp].*

- Tâm Văn Nguyễn

My father was then transferred to a new camp, Dong Ban located in Tay Ninh province, about one kilometer away from the Cambodia-Vietnam in 1978 border, when tensions escalated between the SRV and Democratic Kampuchea. At the border, there was continued fighting after U.S. militarization in Southeast Asia between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam. According to reports from Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge led a brutal attack in Tay Ninh on September 24th, 1977, where 1,000 people were massacred. Then on February 25th, 1978, the same year my father was abruptly transferred to Dong Ban, the Khmer Rouge sent 30,000 troops for a brutal attack in Tay Ninh. The lands upon which the re-education camps where built set the stage for hard labor in terms of the subjection the prisoners' bodies had to face with the land itself and its proximity to continued warfare. The re-education camps along the borders including Dong Ban, Cay Cay, and Xa Mat in Tay Ninh were located just 1 to 1.5 kilometers from the border where there was intensified fighting from Cambodia and Vietnam. Inmates were the first people subject to the line of fire as the border was located next to a jungle where the prisoners were forced to cut trees and cultivate vegetation. Moreover, next to the jungle were the inmates' sleeping quarters and far into Vietnam, more than 1.5 kilometers away were the homes, headquarters, and stations of the guards and soldiers who would rotate in and out of the camp to supervise the prisoners. The very architecture of encampment allowed the SRV to manage a population of prisoners, to "make live and let die" the population forced into conditions of violent chance where prisoners' bodies were

subject to death attacks at the border between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese military, hard labor in the jungle or digging tunnels, and/or arbitrary indictments and executions.

> *In the day they would force us to dig tunnels. (Drawing around the perimeter of the camp). We dug them, so that in the evening if the Khmer Red attacked we could run to the tunnels and hide underneath. If we laid above land we would get hit with bullets. So they forced us to dig tunnels to cover the perimeter of the camp. If we stayed above ground then we would die. If both sides were shooting each other then we would die. Here is the battlefield and we were not soldiers and we didn't have guns so the only thing we could do was hide. So if we hide in the tunnels and both sides fought each other then we wouldn't die* (Nguyen 2018). (Figure 2.3)

What does it mean for the body to be embedded in the land in this way? To dig beneath the surface of the earth for one's own survival in the midst of the threat of death between the Khmer Rouge, crossfire of warfare, or the exhaustion of the body through hard labor? What are prisoners subjected to as their bodies emerge above the land in a state of indefinite detention? As my father retells his story of his time in re-education camps, he begins to draw another map. He begins by drawing the border across the page diagonally and goes over the line several times with his pen tapping on the line he's drawn to emphasize the location of the border in relationship to the camp he is going to draw.

> *Here is the border. My camp is here and here is Cambodia (draws), where the Khmer Rouge is. On this side is Vietnam, so my camp was located close to the border* (Nguyen 2018). (Figure 2.4)

He draws two bases where the camp was located next to a jungle, which was the only barrier between the camp, and the border. Around the perimeter of the camp base, my father

draws an outline where the tunnels were dug. His drawing is important, as the only available documentation of the camp's architecture, proximity to the Khmer Rouge, and how bodies and space was configured for control by the state is through memory and drawings from former prisoners who were able to escape and share their renderings in personal memoirs, reports to humanitarian aid organizations including the Aurora Foundation, and to the U.S. Department of Defense in refugee camps where there were former U.S. military bases. The drawings are significant and a vital part of archiving a history of violence through oral history and memory. Nevertheless, the act of drawing the map allows him to narrate his embodied experience navigating the terrain.

As I witness my father discuss share his memories of life in prison, I am grappling with the complexity of listening to this story first as his daughter and feeling the weight of history and second as a researcher co-theorizing the aftermath of war and memory work in the diaspora. We engage in a form of reparative justice. I see in my father's eyes and visual documentation of his memory a determination to share this story, to tell it with as much accuracy as he can after almost 40 years since his escape. Every detail in his voice, every detail on the page told and retold for emphasis. My father draws stick figures to represent the bodies of inmates in relationship to their confinement. He continues with a story I have heard several times before, a story that has never left his memory about a mental health, hard labor, and exhaustion of the body, arbitrary execution, and the spectacle of discipline.

> *There was one tragedy that was devastating and horrendous, which I'll always remember. There was this one person, a friend, this person who was also at the camp with me, who was also digging tunnels, but that man was a little mentally unstable, because a lot of people who entered the camp were traumatized- depressed, worried...so*

> *their mental health was destroyed. That man was a little off. There was one day when we were digging, he was so tired he went to sit down to relax. Then a communist soldier came over and asked, "Why are you resting? Other people are working, why aren't you?" He said, "I'm tired, so I'm going to rest. Once I feel well then I'll return to my work." He responded like that. Then the soldier said, "You're being smart with me?" "I'm not being smart/short with you, I'm just saying I'm tired so I'm going to rest." So the communist soldier went back into the camp, got a gun and came back to shoot him. He died instantly, right where he was. That image was horrible* (Nguyen 2013).

My father's narrative reveals a lethal collision of mental health disorders due to the intensified trauma and shock inmates endured, the body's exhaustion from strenuous labor, and arbitrary executions as a performance of power. The lieutenant's enactment of violence demarcated what it means to perform as a "bad re-educated subject," defined as someone who speaks back to authority and asserting their desire for rest. The execution of my father's friend also highlighted the cost of being a "bad re-educated subject" was death.

> *When he died, in the evening they did a lecture. Usually in the camps, they had a meeting room for all the people in the camp to gather together. So the lieutenant who killed him led the seminar, "So yesterday I just shot and killed someone because they were reactionary. They pushed back against the regime. They opposed the revolution. So he had to die." One of the main reasons they did this was so the people who were remaining didn't cause problems, they were trying to be pre-emptive. They were clear and claimed what happened immediately, they didn't hide it, "Yesterday, I shot this man. He was a*

> *reactionary. You must not be like him." They went to meeting in front of everyone in the camp, they weren't trying to deny or hide anything. They were not afraid* (Nguyen 2013).

The crime was being "reactionary," which meant not obeying and bowing down to authority when asked a question. Demands for rest are overstepping one's position as prisoner and articulated as a threat against the state. Inherent in both Benjamin and Derrida's arguments on law and justice is the necessity for laws to be enforced through violence or the threat of violence, "whether this force be direct or indirect, physical or symbolic, exterior or interior, brutal or subtly discursive and hermeneutic, coercive or regulative" (Derrida, 927). Land became a constant stage for trials against the state. The act of digging tunnels was supposed to protect inmates couldn't when bodies of inmates break down as the arbitrariness of death was justified under law. The law here defined as upholding the order of the new nation-state under notions of communist revolution as interpreted and administered by prison guards and lieutenants. Moreover, this interpretation of the law was further buttressed in the staging of the lieutenant within a classroom to perform both a warning to discipline the inmates into submission with the threat of death and justification of murder in the name of protecting the new regime and revolution.

Nevertheless, the land offered small slivers of opening where the land seeped between the cracks of the camp and body of the prisoners has chances to survive between the surveillance of the state.

**Section Three: Porous Borders & Fugitive Subjectivity**

The last section focuses on the "Policy of Food" during the re-education camps and the porous borders that are embedded in the architecture of encampment created cracks in the structure for fugitive gastronomy, which inevitability opened up a pathway for my father's escape. Inmates were not only forced to dig up landmines to expand the land of camps due to overcrowding, but they were forced to plant vegetation that they were not allowed to fully consume and excess and profits of which benefited the prison guards. Malnutrition throughout the camps resulted in higher susceptibility to chronic diseases including malaria, beriberi, dysentery and tuberculosis and organ failure (in some cases permanent stomach damage was due to limestone leakages in water system). As a result, cultivating food, stealing food, and navigating the porous terrain of the food economy in re-education camps was a critical practice of fugitivity gastronomy.

Fugitive gastronomy is the will of the body to survive; the will of the body to sustain itself and offer sustenance in communion with one other, to offer small moments of living under conditions of confinement, exhaustion, and deprivation. Stolen moments after dark where food was shared between inmates and the evidence buried beneath the land. To live was to be fugitive, to eat was to live. The state necessitated the death of "the Vietnamese that collaborated with the enemy" and the demise of their will to live through the dual policies of hard labor and food. To deplete the body of vital nutrients as it simultaneously wears away at what is left. Fugitive gastronomy exists in the trespassing of the routine of hard labor, regulated starvation, and the physical boundaries of the camp.

In this section, I discuss fugitive gastronomy as directly connected to the land through my father's oral histories in four acts: Hidden Fruits of Labor, Stolen Protein, Medicine, Escape.

"Hidden Fruits of Labor" reflects on an act of camp inmates stealing back the literal *fruits of their labor* embodied in bunches of banana taken from the camp revealing a moment of transgression against the architecture of encampment through instances of communal care and consumption as rebellion. "Embezzled Protein" focuses on two anecdotes of killing, eating, and preserving a pig and wild boar meat to measure the value of life, time, and sustenance, on the land. "Medicine" examines a story of found herbs as medicine under conditions of nutritional deprivation and unsanitary conditions that led to critical medical conditions, chronic illness, and death. Lastly, "Escape," reveals the porous borders of the architecture of encampment and how my father inevitably escaped through an economy of food markets during the latter years of re-education camps.

***Act One: Hidden Fruits of Labor***

> *At the camp I was at, there were banana trees on both sides, when we first arrived to the camps, the bananas were really amazing. Each bunch had about 15-20 bananas, so when we first arrived we were afraid, we didn't dare to steal, we just left them there. Then these guys were so upset they said, "We put in our hard work and labor to plant, but we don't get to eat it, and then they sell it and make money off of us. That is ridiculous!"*
>
> *Later a few guys thought about it and schemed, "We have to eat before them!"*
>
> - Tâm Văn Nguyễn

Under the "Policy of Hard Labor" inmates in the camps in Tay Ninh were forced to plant banana trees during their time in re-education camps, a small portion of the bananas grown

would be for the inmates and the majority would be sold to local markets. My father recalled how the prison guards were exact about counting number of bananas bunches collected from each tree planted, "So if there were 500 trees, they would count 500 bunches to sell, then we would only be left with 100 or 200 bunches." The contradiction of hours of hard labor and the food yielded was not only upsetting to the camp inmates, but revealed the economy of food in the re-education camps wherein their labor was exploitation for capital gain under a new communist regime. Although camp inmates were initially concerned with being caught, they eventually found ways to sneak through the architecture of encampment to steal back the literal fruits of their labor. The act of eating before the prison guards and stealing away their potential profits taken from the inmates labor were small performances of rebellion in the camp, moments where inmates stole back their chances to survive through food and owning the cost of their labor for their own ability to live.

> *"How come we would plant so many banana trees for them and they would barely give us any?" Luckily, the banana trees were literally right in front of where we slept, we didn't have to go far. They didn't see us because it was dark, we would steal glances and go out to chop it. It would fall, but we couldn't bring it into the camp, because they searched our sleeping quarters daily. So we dug a hole to hide the bunch, buried it and covered it with banana leaves.*
>
> *We would time it, in three days it would ripen. Then on the day we knew it was ripe, at night we would run out, bring it in and then divide it up to eat. We brought it into the camp at night, it was dark so they couldn't see us. We would bury the banana peels in the*

*trash piles. They couldn't find any evidence so they didn't do anything [to us], but we ate it and it was delicious. That was a way we stole* (Nguyen 2018).

Inmates would often be transferred to multiple camps the strategy of the re-education camps was to continuously break up groups to make sure they did not create plans or bonds with one another that would result in a large uprising in the camps. My father's anecdote about stealing the banana bunches reveals three main points. The first is trespassing through the architecture of encampment, where inmates subverted the boundary of the camp and wilderness (as the trees were located right next to the perimeter of the sleeping quarters). They also trespassed the boundary of property and labor, as the land belonged to the new regime, the banana trees planted in that very soil where also the ownership of the re-education camps even though it was cultivated by inmates' labor. Inmates' labor were under the control of the new regime's reform system, this method of hard labor was veiled as a method to reform those who corroborated with the enemy (U.S.), but in practice it was a method to slowly kill the body through exhaustion, where the ratio of work to nutrients retained by the body through food was extremely imbalanced and the body of the inmate would begin to wear away. Therefore, to steal food was then to steal back a sliver of one's subjectivity as enacted through labor to plant the trees and property as embodied in the fruit. The food was hidden beneath the surface of the land, the womb of the earth, taken back to hide from what could be see above the surface. The land was critical to the act of hiding stolen labor and sustenance, the earth that offered the soil to grow the banana trees for both the new regime and the inmates, became the very place where the inmates could stow away their labor and food reserve to live and rebel through hidden nourishment. To hide the food was then to stow away the fruits of own one's labor and the

ingestion of the food was to reclaim one's labor, personhood, and right to live under conditions of extraction, exhaustion, and exploitation guised as reform.

Second, consuming the food is also an important part of taking back one's labor, literally ingesting the nutrients of one's hard work to feed the body to survive another day as the body is slowly being worn away daily. Each banana bunch weighed about 30-50 kilograms (about half to the full weight of an inmate) and each bunch with several tiers yielding from dozens to hundreds of bananas. Bananas provide 12 different types of vitamins and minerals including calories, which are fundamental for someone doing hard labor as fuel to burn. Potassium found in bananas supports muscle contraction and nerve cell response, including heart beat regulation. These health benefits are vital to inmates whose bodies were put under strenuous labor, which resulted in deteriorated muscles, muscle fatigue, and increased heart rate. As a result, to consume the fruit of their labor was to build the nutrients needed to support their muscles and heart, building the body in small ways to steal back time for life, steal back one's labor through the act of eating.

Lastly, my father story reveals the importance of acts of communion and care in the night, when food was stolen, hidden, and shared. It is in the moments deep in the night when the prison guards are no longer surveilling the camp that the inmates are able to build with one another not knowing if the next day who will be transferred from the unit. In the dark of the night, inmates find in each other a space to scheme and steal back their labor, share food, and keep one another's secret of survival, sharing resources in the bleakest conditions. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write about fugitive planning and the space of the undercommons, it is "To enter this space…to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts…on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons" (28). In this

case enlightenment is coded not under the neoliberal university setting but under the system of re-education camps, as the enlightenment under re-education was enacted through labor and cultivating food as a method of reform. It is to steal back the right to live "eat before they eat!" by sustaining one's body in an undercommons of thievery that reclaims subjectivity through labor and food amidst policies of violence.

***Act Two: Embezzled Protein***

> *We would catch wild boar in the jungle to eat. But we couldn't bring it back to the camp. How would we keep that meat? We couldn't eat it all at once, so we would chop it up and then take old clothes and wrap it. In the jungle there were a lot of streams, small river ways, so we would tie it and place it in the water because the stream was cold. On the following day we would return, cut a piece, and bring it back. It was like a refrigerator where we would just store our food. One wild boar would allow us to eat for about 2-3 days, it wasn't until I went in there [the re-education camps, that] I learned these tricks. It was truly amazing* (Nguyen 2013).

My father recalls how he was able to embezzle wild boar meat into the camp to eat while highlighting what he *really* learned in the re-education camps. His stories of lessons he learned in the camps were filled with reflections about what the land really offered, places to beneath the surface of the earth to hide food, waterways and streams that became naturally occurring refrigerators to store meat, and plant medicine (which I discuss in the next section). In my father's narrative he would talk about how inmates barely had any meat to eat during re-education camps, they would receive usually just a bowl of spoiled rice that was molded and

rotten, stored in tunnels during the war, along with a small portion of vegetables or soup, on occasion they would have dried fish and clumps of rock salt and sugar were a decadent treat to satisfy carvings for a range of textures and tastes. As a result, my father's emphasis on finding meat in the wild as an important source of protein was so important, as he discussed how hard labor would wear away at the body and protein was a good source of energy.

The porous borders of the camps offered opportunities to evade the surveillance and control of the state, especially in the jungle where prisoners were sometimes sent on their own to plant vegetation of chop large trees. It was in these spaces of that my father reflects on feeling more mobility, where he could breathe under the sky, and where he learned lessons about how to survive. Extra food found in the jungle or on the campgrounds was not allowed for consumption by inmates unless distributed by prison guards. The small meal portions inmates were given did not give enough sustenance for the amount of labor they were required to do daily. Therefore, to bring in unauthorized food for consumption by inmates into the camp was an act of embezzlement.

The camp inmates were deprived of protein during their meals, receiving spoiled rice, rock salt, dried fish (on occasion), and mostly small portions of harvested vegetables. Wild boar is high in protein. Proteins are fundamental to the body to regenerate bones, muscles, cartilage, and blood, all the elements of the body that are worn away from hard labor through overexertion of the body, diminished nutrients, and deprivation of rest. Embezzling protein for the prisoners were an important part of sustaining the body to survive under conditions of strenuous labor, to find ways to sneak in nutrients to the body as the state sought to deprive it through exhaustion of the body, slowly wearing away at the body of the prisoner. Agamben discusses politicizing death in the figure of the homo sacer as one where "the comatose person has been defined as an

intermediary being between man and an animal," where in the case of re-education camp inmates the state of comatose if the simultaneous deprivation of the body from proper nutrients for survival and exhaustion of the body through hard labor (165). The act of embezzling pushes back against this suspended state of being and subjected by the state as political prisoners learn a different lesson during their time in re-education camps. The lesson is how to survive with resources from the land, to become an agent under limited conditions of subjection reclaim moments of fugitive subjectivity.

Nevertheless, it is through navigating the land and finding the resources that the land offers, in this case wild boar as a source of livelihood and using the hidden waterways alongside the land to hide and store the food. It was through the porous borders of the camp, where the architecture of encampment could never fully contain the body of the inmate, that my father alongside some of his fellow prisoners was able to elude surveillance and embezzle protein as performances of rebellion against the state and fugitive subjectivity to live another day.

***Act Three: Medicine***

> *Leaf vegetables were not as easily accessible in the camps, but there was rau diếp cá. In the camps, rau diếp cá was very rare to find, but itwas absolutely delicious when we did have it. One thing that was remarkable was that rau diếp cá could treat illnesses because the foods in the camps usually lacked moisture and drinking water supplies were low, so these conditions usually led to constipation and hemorrhoids. That's why rau diếp cá is the most memorable herb for me* (Nguyen 2013).

In this section, I discuss indigestion as the refusal of the body to take in what is forced into the body by the state and cured by plant medicine as the acceptance of the body to subvert state controlled movement as an act of fugitive subjectivity. Medical conditions for inmates were dire in the camps due to poor sanitation, overwork, lack of proper medical facilities and medicine. Inmates suffered from a range of intestinal issues including hemorrhoids and severe constipation due to the diet alongside psychological and physical stress. The goal of the "Policy of Hard Labor" and "Policy of Food" was to slowly wear away at the body and its ability to perform everyday functions. Therefore, my father's story about fish mint reveals how food became vital medicine during the camps. As the land was used to inflict stress on the body while people were fed with molded rice, it was in an act of trespassing beyond the boundaries of state controlled borders of encampment deep in the jungle that my father was able to forage fish mint to help with digestion issues.

Building off of critical theory scholar, Alex Weheliye's discussion on hunger, deprivation, and enfleshment to theorize political violence, my discussion seeks to expand the uses of food and sensorial cravings to reveal techniques of capture by the SRV. Weheliye poses these questions in the context of discussing C.L.R. James' imprisonment on Ellis Island by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service for deportation. As Weheliye points out, James recalls, "My chief trouble was food" (James, 135; Weheliye, 115). Weheliye goes on to emphasize the "political dimensions of James' digestive troubles" as directly linked to the expulsion of James from the "ideological borders of the United States" (Weheliye, 115). James developed digestive issues because of the inability to process the food given to him during his incarceration, which highlights the literal degradation of the body through a forced confinement. Indigestion reflects the literal inability of the body to process and break down into nutrients what

it is fed. Inmates in re-education camps were forced to eat food portioned out daily by prison guards and were forced to live under conditions of the constant threat of death either through landmines, ensuing war, or arbitrary death sentences by prison guards. To subvert state control of food finding plant medicine on unregulated land, to ingest food of one's own choosing, and to physically release muscles allowing for bowel movements, a release. The act of foraging for fish mint and eating it to help with bowel movements enacts a literal digestion and break down of nutrients into the body as an act of fugitive subjectivity against the state. My navigating across the porous borders of the camp and jungle, my father's story highlights from the body found ways to heal itself beyond the literal borders and control of the state.

***Act Four: Escape***

> *At that camp, I was lucky enough to be a team leader for a group that planted trees and vegetables, to raise the people in the camp to live. In the meantime, when there was inventory that was extra, we would go out to the markets to sell, to earn money for the communist soldiers. I was team leader, so when there was extra food I worked with a friend to go with a Communist solider to go out to the market to sell. So in the first few months, there was a Communist solider who went with us, but after that they realized they didn't really need to come with us because it seemed like we weren't going to escape. So he said, "Alright you guys can just go on your own. Go and come back. And just report to us." I saw this as a great opportunity, so I could possibly escape* (Nguyen 2013).

Growing up my father's story of escape was part of my upbringing, it was in many way the origin story of a new beginning for my father after war in Vietnam. This time my father told the story different, this time my father brought a piece of paper to draw a map of the camp he escaped from, Bau Co, former ARVN military base by the border of Vietnam and Cambodia. His drawing spatialized his escape in the context of the camp and the land he was incarcerated on. This is the final map he draws from our series of follow-up interviews, my father writes the name of the camp at the top of the page, "B A U C O" and underlines it, "this is the camp I escaped from." As he takes pen to blank paper the architecture and threats of death he encountered became enlivened itself differently. Every time my father tells his story of escape, a new detail or a new insight emerges. This time, all his details about landmines, the jungle, the markets were clearly mapped out on the piece of paper. My father a rectangular field where the camp was located with razor wire around it, three layers around the perimeter of the camp he draws a series of landmines, and then he draws one entrance way that leads straight into the street to where the markets were located, about 1 kilometer away. This was the pathway to his inevitable escape, this entrance way was a porous border between the confinement of the tightly monitored camps grounds and the rest of Vietnamese society they were connected to.

My father was rewarded for his performance as a good reeducated subject, seemingly unthreatening because of his compliance within the guidelines of restricted mobility. His routine was to head to the market, sell the extra goods, and return back to the camp with profits for the prison guards. After he earned the trust of the prison guards, he was allowed to leave the camp without supervision and saw an opportunity for escape. This narrow window of opportunity opened up a small opening, there was no other way my father would escape with the razor wire fences or landmines surrounding the camp. My father was able to encounter the world outside

the camp, inhabiting both the limited rights as a prisoner and a glimpse of being part of society with extended rights and mobility. Here in this space of no supervision, the stage was set where a fissure of possibility opened up to step outside of the bounds of encampment.

> *During that time, a lot of people had plans of escaping the camp, a lot, but no one shared it with each other. If they knew there were people who had thoughts of escape, they would shoot and kill you right away* (Nguyen 2013).

The constant threat of death even in the thought of escape resounded around the camp as the fear of execution haunted many from the attempt or resulted in their own lives taken. According to my father, the camp had dozens of armed soldiers guarding the camps from inside and hundreds of military officers surrounding the camp. The layout of the re-education camp structure set up a constant system of surveillance surrounding the camp, which had to be strategically navigated for escape to be possible.

> *I decided to escape. Then it came the time when my sister came to visit, and then I told her it's time that I have to escape. My sister was extremely scared. She said, "absolutely not, no no no, don't. Let me help you leave the camp." I said, "No, I must escape." So at the time, my sister and I started planning what needed to happen…I was able to escape easily like that, because during my whole time in the camp, the camp's name was "Trai Bo Co" it was very close the city of Tay Ninh, it wasn't deep inside the jungle anymore.*
>
> *So it was easier to escape, so at the camp I was very lucky and was able to become the leader of my group to grow plants and vegetation for the camp, and if there were any leftovers we would bring it out to the market to sell to get money for those soldiers. In the first few months there was a soldier who went with us. But after that they realized they*

*didn't need to go with us, because he saw that I wasn't trying to escape. So he said, "from here on out, you guys can just go by yourselves. Go and come back and let us know." So I saw this as a great opportunity to escape. So I began to plan with my sister, letting her know this was an opportune moment, we have to take action. We cannot wait any longer.*

*So I worked it out with my sister, where I would need to hide, how I would get out, how I would get picked up, and how the fake paperwork would be made, and then how I would get to Saigon. (Visitors were allowed every month to bring food to inmates, when my sister came to visit and the guards were not looking we were able to plan.) The itinerary was very detailed and intricate. Maybe I can't share it all here, but it was all very detailed. Then on the day I had a friend who would pick me up. My sister was sitting at a café across the street from the camp gates. During that time, the camp was very close to the market where every day people lived and worked. The person who was going to pick me up on a Honda (motorcycle) parked right in front of the camp next to the rice mill. So I went out of the campgrounds looked all around me, behind me and in front, I didn't see anybody but my friend. So I threw the basket of vegetables and I jumped on the back of my friend's Honda and then he drove me away* (Figure 2.5).

*When I left, outside of the perimeter of their surveillance, still didn't know that I had escaped from the camp, because it wasn't the time I would usually return, they thought I was still at the market.*

> *Once we arrived to the city center of Tay Ninh, in the downtown area. My friend had a house there, he said let's go inside, let's drink a little coffee, eat a little, and change clothes, because I still had on my prison clothes. I had to change clothes so when we traveled from there to Saigon, few people would know. So I agreed to this. I ate just a little bit and said "alright, I think we should go now. If we wait any longer, they will come searching for us and then they will catch us and that'll be the death of us"* (Nguyen 2013).

Porous borders also include the spaces within the camp for visitors, where family members from outside of the camp could visit their relatives and deliver food and messages. Visitors allowed the state to be viewed as benevolent to their inmates to create an illusion that they were treating their prisoners humanely and did not cut them off from the outside world. However, another reason for visitors is to provide supplementary food to prisoners to offset the costs the camp would bear. My father used this opportunity to scheme a plan of escape with his sister, when the prison guards were not monitoring his conversation. Porous borders are created both outside and within the camp, as prisoners have slivers of openings for possible escape and within the camp for the outside world embodied in the relatives who are not imprisoned to be allowed onto campgrounds. Nevertheless, my father was able to transgress the boundaries of the architecture of the re-education camp. Currently, Nguyen is blacklisted from Vietnam due to his pre-mature escape from his sentence. His narration of memory serves as a performance of reparative justice to the violence he faced during the re-education camps. Not many were as fortunate to escape the re-education camps alive, his voice stands in the company of the silences around the death and trauma of those missing, executed, and those that still remain.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is not to condemn the violence of the communist party as a way of reifying Cold War narratives of the evils of communism, rather it is to complicate and historically situate anti-imperial stories of revolutionary victory and the subjects who are seduced and violently interpolated as land is weaponized under the new communist regime to establish and perform its sovereign power nationally and internationally. Ultimately, the land, which was utilized through the "Policy of Hard Labor" and "Policy of Food" for population management to discipline and subject the body to a constant threat of death, became the very material upon which my father was able to traverse and escape. For re-education camps, ecologies of statelessness exist in the structure of the camp itself as a state of exception, which is simultaneously constituted by the state and outside of the boundaries of the legal treatment citizens within the nation-state. Ecologies of statelessness also exist in the cracks, fissures, and unsurveilled area of the re-educations that open up spaces and possibilities for transgression and a fugitive subjectivity to emerge. My father's story seeks justice in its telling and retelling, as a survivor of the re-education camps and as someone who escaped, his desire to share his story enacts a performance of justice in a remapping of a history of violence in the aftermath of communist revolution in Vietnam. I end with my father's narrative of his journey from the re-education camp to the boat, where he inevitably escaped as a Vietnamese boat refugee.

> *Luckily we got to Saigon smoothly. Once we arrived to Saigon, we went to my friend's house. All of the fake documents my sister had made for me, was already on me. So if the police were to stop me, I could just show them my fake documents, so it would be difficult for them to even know I was someone who escaped from the camp. Luckily during that*

*whole time no one asked me for my papers, because I didn't put myself in the position to be stopped. I had to find other pathways to navigate and avert. So when they went to ransack my house, I would find a way to hide. During my whole time living in refuge in Saigon, nothing happened. At that time, I lived from one place to another. Every house was a week, two to three weeks, from one friend's home to another. The time period I was traveling from house to house was about six months. During the sixth month, my sister had put money in for me to escape by boat.*

*Escaping my boat was always part of the plan. I can't just keep hiding, if you keep hiding how can you survive? So from the time I escaped from the camp, the shorter the better. I had to find a route to escape by boat to go to another country. There was no way I could have stayed, because sooner or later I would have been caught.*

*So I had to escape by boat. Escaping by boat was primary. After that my sister was able to take care of things to help me escape by boat. Right on that day, I was at my friend's office, he's a doctor. He had a doctor's office in Cho Lon. We have been close since high school. He said, "Since you don't have a place to live, you can come stay with me. I work and have money." At that time he was rich, he was a doctor. Money came in like water. He was also incarcerated in re-education camps, but at that time they needed doctors, so they just sentenced them to a shorter period so they could work in the hospitals. Because their [communist] doctors were terrible. So he was incarcerated for a very short period and then returned to work, and he made a lot of money. It was nice, we both would hang out around town. People wouldn't even know I was someone who escaped from the*

*camps, even my friend he didn't even know I had escaped from the camps. Had he known I might not have been able to stay with him, it was very dangerous.*

*Then one day my sister came to the office. Which was lucky, because we usually leave around that time after work. I was still at his office. She said, "you must get your stuff ready to escape by boat right away!" So I gathered my things to prepare to leave and told my doctor friend, "Hey! I'm going to head out for a little bit."*

*It wasn't until we had escaped onto the ocean ("vượt biên"), that my sister went to my friend to let him know. And then he goes, "Oh really?! He escaped from the camp?! He hid to escape by boat? My god! I had no idea. If I knew I would be so scared."*

*It was 5/6pm and we were waiting, at that point the organizer called to say, "Alright, we're ready. Right now you will be transferred to the boat." My sister took her motorbike and drove me down to the fisherman boat. It was docked right at the Ben Do Long Kuyen, it's approximately 7/8 km from Saigon or actually 400 meters or so. Once we arrived there, the sky was still bright.*

*The organizer of the boat escape announced, "There! That's the fisherman boat." So I stepped off the Honda, and they brought me down to that boat. My sister stayed behind, standing. Once we were down there, they brought us in. Once you arrived, people had to lie down underneath in the hold of the boat. No one could be on the top of the boat so we could avoid being captured by police or coast guards.*

*The boat was about 11 meter long, 4 meters wide. In total, there were about 80 people. We lay really tightly next to each other, with barely any space between us. We all laid down there like sardines. We were all stuffed. We just had to endure it. At that point when we were lying there it was still calm, there wasn't really anything. Eating was okay. Until everyone arrived, then the engine started to go out into the bigger part of the river. But when that happened we all just laid underneath, so we didn't know anything, absolutely nothing. The fate of our lives was handed over to that fisherman boat. Dead or alive we didn't need to know.*

*When we went out to the opening of the ocean (door of the ocean), which was Vung Tau, the captain announced ""It is done, we have made it out into the ocean." That's when the items that were atop of the boat, that made it seem like a cargo boat, not a passenger boat, they threw all of these things overboard, so the boat could lighten its load, so we could go straight into the ocean. That's when we could all surface up and take in the fresh air* (Nguyen 2013).

# Chapter 3

## Of Country/Nation/Homeland: Government Land Seizures

"her images

her labor"

– Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*

"Your body must be heard."

– Helen Cixous

"I want to ride the strong wind, tread fierce waves, kill sharks in the East Sea, clean up the frontier, drive out greedy and cruel aggressors to save people from drowning; I will not imitate the ordinary others- bowing and kneeling, serving as a concubine to anyone…"

- Trieu Thi Trinh

On May 22, 2012, Phạm Thi Lai, 52 years old, and her daughter H`ồNguyen Thuy, 33 years old, stripped naked at a construction site where the Vietnamese government seized their land to sell to the No. 8 Construction Joint Stock Company in Cai Rang, C`ần Thơ, Vietnam. Phạm and H`ồ, mother and daughter, are captured in photographs that appeared in Vietnamese newspapers standing and sitting with their bare skin pixilated to censor any clear shot of their bodies as they stand on an expansive field of wild green grass with patches of dirt, where the construction trucks had begun to clear the land. Mother and daughter stand on different parts of the land, about five feet from each other to stake claim to their right to live on the land (Figure

3.1). An accompanying photograph shows the mother being forcibly removed by the construction company's security guards with news reports headlining "Police slap fine on nude land protestor[23]" and "Cần Thơ: Mother and daughter fined $4 for being naked".[24] In the face of increasing protests against dispossession from the country through government land seizures, what can this protest performance reveal about shifting sovereignty as a result of predatory capital, the figure of the women as nation, and generational imaginaries?

In this chapter, I return to Vietnam as nation/country/homeland embodied and contested through the labor of protest and body of women. The opening quote, "her images…her labor" are lines from Trinh Minh Ha's *Forgetting Vietnam,* an experimental film produced for the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam/American War. "Her images…her labor" capture the intersection of women's images as deeply connected to labor, an embodied act of creating that extends beyond imposed narratives onto the body, it is through labor that women create their image. The image of Vietnamese women as an emblem throughout Vietnam's history has been one of warriors, heroines against Chinese colonization from 40 A.D. to revolutionary fighters against the French and U.S. to one of the maternal figure as a reproductive body for the new nation. I bring together feminist theorists, Trinh's and Helen Cios' quotes on image, labor, and the body to frame how Phạm's and Hồ's mother-daughter protest centers the body as a critical site of power, history, and subjectivity on claims to the country/nation/homeland, in other words the đất nước, the land and the water. Land and water is symbolized through the women as gendered embodiments of the nation, wherein their performance of perversity in term reveals the state of the nation through a revision of the image of Vietnamese womanhood. Land and water, or đất nước, meaning the country/nation/homeland is also located materially on the very soil the

[23] Tuoi Tre News, May 31, 2012
[24] VietNamNet Bridge, June 20, 2012

women are protesting on. The last opening quote is a Vietnamese woman writer, Trieu Thi Trinh, writing capture a fierce spirit of revolution against foreign colonizers and patriarchal forces that render women as merely sexual objects. French colonization and U.S. militarization has resulted in increased violence against women and the rise of prostitution and sex work as economically viable industries for young women. It is in Phạm and H`ồ's naked protest that they also bare their bodies to call upon a history of assault, violence, and exploitation of women in Vietnam revealing through a play on perversity what the current nation-state is subjecting its people to.

Phạm's and H`ồ's mother and daughter protest presents a conceptual challenge to understanding Vietnam as a sovereign state in the context of neoliberalism as cases of peasant land dispossession continue to rise amidst Vietnam's move towards "national development." Vietnam's foreign economic relations expanded to bilateral agreements in 2001 with the U.S., and membership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2004 and with the World Trade Organization in 2007. Although Vietnam is experiencing economic growth in industry, there has been an economic decline in agriculture, the sector where peasant farmers earn their income. I probe into the stakes of land ownership during a period when Vietnam has shifted its political economy from a closed and highly centralized socialist economy to the free market economy. The urgency of these questions in this moment is critical to the livelihood of peasants. As a 20-year land grant from the Vietnamese government recently expired in 2013, peasants are being evicted from their land, complaints of land abuses by the government are rising, and the government is confiscating land for foreign investment programs. According to the World Bank, one million hectares (2.5 million acres) of farmland was converted to non-agricultural purposes from 2001 to 2010. Moreover, compensation for these projects is well

below market value. The sentiments of the farmers reveal feelings of the government cheating the people out of their land.

According to Tuổi Trẻ News, the family made their last bargain after two offers for proper compensation, asking for "100 square meters of resettlement for every 1,000 square meters of land reclaimed[25]." The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment refused to compensate the family with minimal land grants and proper payment. The Vietnamese newspapers framed the family as being unsatisfied with the government's increasing settlement offer for their land, which was well below livable compensation for the family, as their very livelihood is based on land and agriculture. The women's protest and subsequent forced removal by security guards exposes the violence behind government contracts for land development in the era of neoliberalism and the use of sexuality as a mechanism of power by the state.

In this chapter, I argue that Phạm's and H`ồ's, mother-daughter protest of bearing their naked bodies enacts a critique of the nation-state and communist revolution by playing with notions of perversity to revise the trope of women as nation while revealing the violence of Vietnam's adoption of neoliberal policies of development. I center how Phạm and H`ôembrace their body as a site of resistance and cultural memory against the corporatization of Vietnam through predatory capital. My attempt is not to read their bodies of protest as a pornography of violence against women and thus part of a "development regime" of women in "developing countries" stricken by poverty and violence, but to reveal how Phạm's and H`ồ's protest demonstrate the intersections of gender, sexuality, nation, and the law to critique the state and neoliberal logics of economic progress (Grewal, 130). Additionally, Phạm's and H`ồ's performance as mother and daughter poses the intergenerational stakes of government land

[25] See "Mother, daughter get naked to hinder contractor" by Tuổi Trẻ News.

seizures. In the first section, I analyze how the nation is inscribed on the woman's body as the emblem of the nation and how Phạm and H`ôperform perversity to critique the trajectory of the nation in an urgent appeal for their own livelihoods. I examine the trope of Vietnamese womanhood in relationship to anti-imperial communist revolution in postcolonial Vietnam. Furthermore, I focus on legal action taken against the women by the Cái Răng District police and discuss how punishment for law violations is reversed to focus on the criminality of women's bodies as the site of perversity and obstruction of development instead of the violence perpetrated by the No. 8 Construction Joint Stock Company on the women's bodies and land. In the second section, I examine how Phạm's and H`ồ's mother-daughter protest reveal the intergenerational loss and stakes of Vietnam's adoption of neoliberal models of development. Here, I build upon Foucault's discussion of biopolitics to discuss the long-term effects of land dispossession and the importance of historical memory located in Phạm and H`ồ's protest. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the performative potential of protest, especially the use of perversity as a form of national critique on gender, political economy, sovereign power, and the law.

**Performing Perversity as National Critique, *a feminist intervention***

Before I begin my discussion about how perversity is deployed in Phạm's and H`ồ's protest, I'd like to start with a discussion about the assemblages between sexuality, the nation, and gender as critical to unpacking the use of perversity as a performative intervention to critique the nation. My analysis of protest is not a pornography of violence, but a feminist diagnostic about the conditions that make life liveable. Readable through perversity as a multidimensional protest aimed at relocating "shame" not in the exposure of their bodies but in the exposure of

their bodies but in the exposure of the violence of state and corporation. I contest that it in fact this very notion of perversity, defined as breaking habits and customs, that is embodied in the women's protest of their bare bodies, that the critique of the nation lies more in the nation abandoning its customs and stripping down its people by taking away their land.

The focus of this chapter is not to reify the discussion of women living in repressive conditions and thus resisting against their oppression. Rather, by theorizing performances of perversity I am able to analyze the figuration of women as emblems of the nation in Vietnam through an examination of discourses on sexuality controlling women's bodies. Figurations of Vietnamese women and their sexuality is intimately linked with the trajectory of the nation from war to building a new nation-state to entering the global economy. I discuss how the image of Vietnamese womanhood figures the nation onto women's bodies and how Phạm and H`ôdeploy perversity as an act of performative intervention in the context of increasing government land seizures in Vietnam. Moreover, I discuss how the women's performance further revealed the perversity of the state in its aftermath through legal action taken against the women.

***Woman as Nation Trope***

Women in Vietnam have historically been figured to stand in for the nation, through her image and her labor as warriors on the battlefield to cultivating the land to reproducing the new nation. Central to this figuration is the use of Vietnamese women's bodies as the very site where war, work, and procreation is enacted wherein women are either desexualized for their military and manual labor or hyper sexualized for their reproductive and sexual labor.[26] As anthropologist, Veena Das argues, there is "an investment of sexuality in the project of

[26] U.S. military intervention during the Vietnam/American War resulted in the increase of prostitution in Vietnam and brothels.

nationalism" that is embedded in the nation's control and deployment of images of the woman as the symbol of the nation, which results in the nation's coercive legal, social, and economic discourses and practices over women's bodies. Moreover, legal scholar, Wendy Duong discusses issues of gender issues, women's issues in Vietnam, and the figuration of Vietnamese women. Although Vietnamese women were fundamental to communist revolution, Duong writes, "women's movements in Vietnam have not stood independently from nationalism or socialism, and feminist advocacy can easily get entangled in party politics or ethnocentric emotionalism" (194). As a result, Phạm and H`ồ's performance of perversity ends up breaking these conflating associations into a more dynamic feminist critique of the very trope of woman as nation and the nation's current development policies.

Furthermore, I draw on Hannah Arendt's discussion of the human condition where she writes, "three kinds of fundamental human activities in which we engage: [are] as biological forms, as laboring beings, and as political actors" to distinguish the layers projected on the body of Vietnamese women (Ong, 22). The nation is thus inscribed on the body of the Vietnamese woman in terms of her body's ability to reproduce for the nation- serving as the biological form, her body's ability to work in the fields and industries for the nation- serving as the laboring being, and her body's ability to fight to protect the nation- serving as the political actor (all while completely clothed, of course). The dominant image of the Vietnamese woman during communist revolution collapses the biological, laboring, and political to depict a fully independent woman with a rifle in one hand, a farming tool in the other, and a baby strapped to her body in a cloth. Nevertheless, during times of peace, the image of the Vietnamese woman is portrayed wearing a traditional *ao dai,* Vietnamese dress, with long black hair represents to evoke an image of virtuosity and grace. This image of the Vietnamese woman strips the cultural

memory of labor and political agency to an solely focused on the biological form. Furthermore, this cultural memory of Vietnamese women dimensional warriors is then archived for tourist consumption through old propaganda posters and the Women's Museums in Hanoi and Saigon. Both images of the Vietnamese woman is a static notion of womanhood imposed and constructed by the state through state controlled media, newspapers, and public signage. "Vietnamese women's collective cultural identity is based on history and cultural folklores of Vietnam, including expressions of feminist idea in law and literature, and a long history of warfare and collective sufferings, wherein women have been seen as martyrs, national treasures, and laborers in war and in peace" (191). "This mass production of the Vietnamese woman as nation imposes an image and labor onto the body, which creates a caricature that, negates the complexity of subjectivity under shifting political economic conditions in Vietnam.[27]

Sexuality and the body are thus intimately connected and central to understanding the nation. The imagery of land and bodies are deeply intertwined in the aesthetic narrative of the nation. This interconnected imagery of sexuality, land, and bodies is vital to understanding how the critique the trope of women as nation becomes a larger battle cry to fight for the promises of communist revolution through a play on perversity and the uses of sexuality through the body. In their bare flesh, Phạm and H`ôreveal the perversity of the nation's adoption of neoliberal policies. Riding off the national trope of women as being the emblem of the nation. The women's performance of protest embodies a national critique of the uses of gender and sexuality to reveal how citizenship and land dispossession for peasants in the age of neoliberalism is

[27] Moreover, currently commercial sex and the use of women's sexuality as exchanges in labor deals have been central to Vietnam's economic growth and entry into the global market through tourism and business transactions with foreign investors (Nguyen-vo and Hoang). Nevertheless, the national portrays of women and the uses of their bodies in these market transactions are not made visible, instead they exist in the cities of Vietnam in bars, karaoke spots, and night clubs.

currently manifesting. It is thus in perverting the image of the nation through nudity, outside of the boundaries of state constructed images of Vietnamese women that the women were able to evoke how the nation is stripping its citizens off their land and thus their claim to "human conditions" for life. At the risk of re-inscribing the tropes of woman as nation, my analysis of this mother-daughter protest is a critique about notions of femininity and the technologies of the state that control sexuality as a form of governance as it moves towards policies of neoliberal sovereignty.

***Image: Reading Excessive Force vs. Protest Strength | Corporate Body vs. Women's Body***

Throughout Vietnamese newspapers, the image most widely distributed of the protest is of two security guards dragging the mother by her underarms as her legs scrape across the field of grass. Her face staring in the opposite direction of security guards, followed by another security guard who faces her directly, blocking her view of the land as she is being pulled away (Figure 3.2). In the photos captured by the Vietnamese media, the audience sees the violent restraint of the woman by a security guard, which stands in for the corporate body. The security guards were hired by a construction company, which also stands in for the Vietnamese government that approved the construction despite gaining proper consent from the landowners. In this case, the state has shifted its power of authority to the security guards to remove the women off the land. By contracting out to a third party entity approved by the government the security guards stands in for the multi-national corporate, the government at the same avoids direct responsibility for the violence against the women, while enacting its power to persecute them in court.

In my analysis of the photograph, I draw on dance scholar, Randy Martin's work on overreading and Claudia Castenada's work on rumor to critically engage with the political potential of reading the image of the mother and daughter protest. I contend that the mother daughter protest stages perversion by inverting the national trope of woman as nation to reveal how the government is stripping people of its land and the power dynamics that are at play in this violence. For instance, by presenting their body, Phạm and H`ồ, bare to forces of the construction company performed by security guards, their protest and removal off the land offers clear images of the use of excessive force. Nevertheless, the women's protest strength in combatting excessive force with their bodies on the land offers critique for political mobilization. Martin's work on overreading emphasizes the importance of "enlisting a recognition of the movement…to evaluate the political horizons for mobilization in society…[O]verreading treats the internal movement…as an organizing principle in the conceptual ordering of contextt… they are addressed as ever widening horizons to a work whose putatively stable interior renders it static with respect to the context" (Martin, 55). Here is where I focus on the movement of dragging as a method of excessive force, but also performative exaggeration to amplify the violence of the state by the women as their bodies scrap against the land in their active refusal of submission. Moreover, in Claudia Castenada's work she discusses rumor as a diagnostic of risk, through which she argues that speculation is a valuable method of producing knowledge about the world. Speculation in the overreading of Phạm and H`ồ's protest offers a feminist critique grounded in the cultural memory of communist revolution and a revision of the trope of woman as nation by generating a more active analysis of the women's movements, positions, gestures, and staging in protest, which is to be read against the grain of "acceptable," "docile," and "civil" behavior. The power underneath this picture is that in this particular photograph, there needs to be three

security guards to restrain just one person, which demonstrates the strength of the protester to expend the time and energy of the corporate power to divert from the construction process. However, to the same ends, the performance between the security guards and the protesting mother reveals that the corporate power to expend as many employees as necessary to gain control of the land they will be developing on.

***Bare Bodies / Bare State: Staging Overt and Subvert Relations of Power***

More than igniting a shock in the public, both Phạm and H`ồuse their bare body and the trope of perversity as a mode of national critique to highlight how the nation is inscribed on women's body and to strip naked reveals the nation as stripping itself of its logic of revolutionary development, the livelihood of its people, and notions of anti-imperial sovereignty in favor of free market-driven principles. The staging of the protesting mother and the security guards occur at multiple levels, surrounding her body, pulling her back on either side while standing directly in front her to obstruct her line of sight to the land itself. The security guard that follows the two others who are restraining the mother by her arms has no utility other than to assert himself in front of her. By obstructing her vision to her own land, his stance reveals how the new sovereign power, embodied in the security guard and his staged position in front Phạm, is politically, economically, and physically displacing her relationship to the land with his body. However, the security guards fail in this moment to fully block access, because as Phạm's body is being dragged on the land, the land becomes imprinted upon her body, the bumps and curves, the textures of the land, reminding her of the land she once lived on and continues to fight for as it scraps against her flesh. Replacing sight a method of seeing and connecting to one's land, Phạm demonstrates a form of possibility through her body as the protester. The imprint of the rough

landscapes dragging against her body exposes the urgency of peasant protests for land ownership in Vietnam. It is in this moment that the perversity of the violence of the state is exposed. The women's protest blares open the force upon which people are being removed and stripped of their lands. By physically placing their bodies on the land they own and being removed by excessive force, they highlight the new relations of power.

***Flashback: Communist Revolution and Land Reform***

During this era of regime shifts (from French colonization to Vietnamese independence), Vietnam's new political party, the Viet Minh, started a land reform policy that lasted from 1953 to 1956. French colonization in Vietnam was rooted in the exploitation of labor and land, resulting in about 7 to 8 million landless peasants throughout the country in 1940.[28] Landowners were thus marked as exploiters and were brought to trial by the leaders of the Viet Minh. The "people's court" for land reform in northern Vietnam, developed by the Communist Party, created mass spectacles and garnered mass participation to justify violent state formation under the ethos of land redistribution. The trials took place on the landowners property. A large mass of peasants encircled the "courtroom" and were forced to testify against their neighbors and family members in what was called the "people's court."

In December 1953, Ho Chi Minh as leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam declared, "The general line and policy is entirely to rely on landless and land-poor peasants, closely to unite with the middle peasants, to rally with the rich peasants, to wipe out feudal exploitation step by step and with differentiation, to develop production, and to speed up the

[28] http://countrystudies.us/vietnam/16.htm

resistance war."[29] Land reform was carried out through the ritual staging of the "people's court." Conquergood writes, "Rituals draw their drama, dynamism, and intensity from the crises they redress" (Conquergood, 267). The crisis, mobilized to garner political support amongst the peasants, was an enactment of justice against the landowners for the redistribution of land to poor peasants. The "people's court" became a mass spectacle that implicated the peasants in the process of lawmaking. As Susan Sontag writes, "The trial is preeminently a theatrical form" (126). Garnering the support of the masses was a critical step in infusing communist doctrines of "power of the peasants" and legitimizing the Viet Minh's new land reform policies. The "people's courts" were not only mass spectacles for people to witness the trial, torture, and execution of those convicted as landowners, but the masses[30] of peasants became key players in the process of making and preserving the law through these trials. Staging the "people's court" was dependent on mass participation by the peasants in the process of persecution and punishment. "A mass meeting would be held in order to properly "indict" the local landlords by denunciation…the question of guilt was predetermined" (Turner, 135).

Although 50,000 to 100,000 were reported to have been killed during land reform by execution and torture. Thousands of cases were later found to be erroneous and Ho Chi Minh ended up issuing a statement along with the Viet Minh Party's "Mistakes Correction Campaign." According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, about one million refugees

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[29] After the 1945 revolution against the French in Vietnam, the Viet Minh adopted policies for rent reduction. After reviewing the lack of implementation of these policies, according to Wilfred Burchett in North of the 17th Parallel "at the end of 1952, the Central Committee of the Lao Dong party (Worker's Party) reviewed the whole agrarian reform policy and decided it had been on the wrong track. Issuing decrees was not enough. Organization of the peasants themselves was the real thing" (Burchett, 117).

[30] In the initial stages leading up to the trial, the Viet Minh lived and worked with the peasants to gain their trust and support for the land reform campaign as a strategy to amass a crowd in support of the "people's courts." "Once the targets for land reform has been identified, the second phase began: it was time 'to mobilize them [the peasants] to overthrow landlordism, and successfully carry out…land reform" (Turner, 134). Staging a critical mass before the people's court allowed the Viet Minh to legitimize their campaign and bring in the mass of bodies needed to embody their communist objectives for political mobilization.

fled to the south of Vietnam during the era of land reform and an estimated two million more would have escaped if they had not been stopped by the Viet Minh[31]. Nevertheless, the process of land reform created a new subject to be privileged in Vietnam's communist revolution, the peasant population, who would be heralded as the truly oppressed and those who will lead the charge for revolution. Subsequently the peasant population was promised land redistribution after the war ended.

**Flash-forward to 2012: Perversity of Legal Actions**

The subject protected and heralded as the critical to communist revolution is now the subject under persecution as Vietnam further enter the global economy while adopting neoliberal development policies. Phạm and H`ôembody the nation as women, but also the peasantry who were fundamental to community revolution. By stripping their bodies of clothing reveal the perversity of Vietnam stripping its citizens of its revolutionary promises of equitable land distribution. Phạm and H`ô's protest is then taken to court where they were issues fined by the Cai Rang District police department, further unraveling the perversity of the state and how the Vietnamese government will protect its economic interests over the lives of the people it originally set out to protect. In other words, I am defining perversity of the nation in terms of the values ascribed upon the nation during communist revolution, where the peasant population, were heralded as those that will bring change to the country and will thus be protected by the Communist Party, to a nation that currently enacts policies and legal action contrary to these prior values of revolution. In "Racialized Hauntings of the Devalued Dead," Lisa Cacho writes, "Value is ascribed through explicitly or implicitly disavowing relationships to the already

[31] From Robert F. Turner's Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Developments.

devalued and disciplined categories of deviance and nonnormativity" (Cacho, 26). During the period of anti-imperial communist revolution, the value ascribed to the communist revolution was written against capitalism and U.S. empire as a deviant category of further enslavement of Vietnam as a formerly colonized country.

Political ideological values shifted in this period of neoliberal sovereignty, while the state's governance over women's bodies, sexuality, and notions of the nation remain in tact. These old notions of gender are revealed in the fines issued to Phạm and H`ồ. The perversity of Vietnam's government is revealed through its court case against Phạm and H`ồ. Although anti-imperial political ideological values of communism have been abandoned, notions of gender and sexuality remain as modes of revealing this ideological shift as the body of the woman is condemned as deviant rather than the behavior of the state.

Phạm's and H`ồ's bodies become a place of media and legal attention. Political theorist, James C. Scott asks, "Political history has, in a sense, been enacted on the field of gender. It is a field that seems fixed yet whose meaning is contested and in flux…..What is the relationship between laws about women and the power of the state?" (Scott, 48). The relationship between laws about women and the power of the state reveal that women's bodies are a site of policing the values of the nation while its actual political economic ideologies are not held to national legal evaluation and persecution. The Vietnamese headlines about Phạm's and H`ồ's protest highlight the fact that they were naked and as a result were fined for their bodies being 1) indecently exposed in the public and 2) an obstruction of development. According to Thanh Nien News, Vietnam Net, and Tuổi Trẻ News, the women were fined 80,000 VND ($3.80 USD) for "violating the country's norms" in terms of indecent exposure, or nudity. The majority of the Vietnamese newspapers stated they were fined for "breaking habits and customs." Nevertheless,

the women were fined for exposing their bodies in addition to being fined for halting corporate action, which is the largest fine of the ones the Cai Rang District police ordered against both the women and the corporation, at 1.5 million ($71.50) for "obstructing the contractor." While, according to Tuổi Trẻ News, the Western Security Service Company, which is the corporation's contracted security company, was only fined, 350,000 VND ($16.70) "for the untrained security guards' treatment of the women." It is by uncovering the who is protected by the law through the issuing of these fines that a spatialized view of justice emerges in terms who is protected and how they are protected by the state. As feminist theorist, Sherene Razack writes, "Uncovering this spatialized view of justice helps us to see how race shapes the law by informing notions of what is just and who is entitled to justice (Sherene, 155)." In this case, it is how gender and the racialized body of the peasant as persecuted under the state reveals that the corporate body, who is not even on trial, and the government contract dealers, is protected.

It is through legal action that state enacts biopower over the bodies of the peasants, clearly exposing who gets fined, for what reasons, and the financial extent of the fine and thus monetary value placed onto the corporate body versus family of peasant landowners. Here the ratio in terms of who gets fined highlights how the nation maintains its sovereign power through the law. Additionally, it is through how the fines are distributed that we see how the Vietnamese government slaps a minimal fine on the security company, which makes barely an indent on their revenue as a corporation. As opposed to the two fines the women are given, combined to equal $75, which takes a strike directly at their livelihood, with the medium income in Vietnam being 3.2 million VND ($150) a month. The court order to fine the women on the basis of nudity and obstructing construction, reveals 1) how the lives of the women are seen as inferior to the functioning of the corporate party with their fine being $71.50 versus $16.70, sustaining the

livelihood of the corporate body 2) while the fine directly impacts the family's ability to survive for the month, basically "letting [the family] die" through its state sanctioned fines. It is through these fines that the sovereign performs its power, minimally over the corporate body and at a higher yield of authority over the women's body. The law here focuses attention to the bodies of the women as perverse in their nudity and in their obstruction to the area's development.

However, it is in the unfolding of the court case and court ordered fines, that the perversity of the state is actually exposed, in terms of what bodies become closely regulated- the body of the woman, peasant, and protester- and what bodies are allowed to inflict violence as long as they are trained- the security guards, or the new intermediary sovereign. The women, whose body symbolizes the very body of citizenship that was intimately woven in how Vietnam defined its sovereignty, is now legally treated as outside the original legal protections for land, while being engulfed in the new ordering of law and territory. The peasant women, whose body represents the nation is now cast as the homo sacer, whose killing "will not be condemned for homocide" (Agamben, 71). In this case, in terms of the scale of the fines ordered in comparison to the income/revenue of the corporate body versus the recently displaced women. The state through its fines barely condemns the corporate body for its violence against the women. It is through these moments of laying bare their bodies that the women reveal the perversity of the state and the direction the state is taking with the adoption of neoliberal policies that strip the nation of its original practices of sovereignty and redefine citizenship through usurpation of land and corporate-favoring legal practices.

**Intergenerational Ruptures & Generative Imaginaries**

The first image that appears in the Vietnamese newspapers is of mother and daughter with one standing and one sitting on the land. The power of Phạm's and H`ồ's protest lies in their unity as mother and daughter. I contest that beyond the power of the women protesting with their bare bodies, it is that fact they protested as mother and daughter that their performance wields resonances calling upon the body to extend beyond to unborn bodies of generations before and generations after affected by the state and its land policies. This photo represents the unity of both the mother and daughter to stake claim to their lives on the land and the bareness that their bodies are left with as the land is being stripped from them. In this section, I put into conversation the temporal logics of neoliberalism and revolution to analyze how Phạm and H`ồ's performance of perversity critiques the trajectory of national development and poses the stakes of intergenerational loss. I build upon cultural theorist, Maria Saldana-Portillo's discussion of how the logics of development and revolution articulated similar trajectories of progress, which Saldana-Portillo writes was founded upon:

> "A normative theory of human transformation and agency, then, is at the heart of the discursive collision between revolutionary and development discourses…both discourses share an origin in imperial reason: in those Enlightenment doctrines of progress, evolution, and change that were historically articulated with the practice of European colonialism and colonial capitalism. Thus, even as post-World War II discourses of development and revolution were specifically articulated against colonial and neocolonial relations of power, both shared a theory of human perfectibility that was itself a legacy of the various raced and gendered formations animating colonialism" (Saldana-Portillo, 7).

Saldana-Portillo's articulation of this theory of human perfectibility was located to the site of land itself within the logics of revolutionary development in Vietnam's communist history. Land as the material site of both, *đất nước*, or nation/country/homeland became the space where Vietnamese communist policies from land reform, new economic zones, to large scale development projects were enacted in the movement towards progress. Nevertheless, Vietnam revolutionary discourses began to pull away from a critique of colonial and neocolonial relations of power as Vietnam adopted neoliberal policies of development beginning in 1995, when the U.S. lifted its embargo and Vietnam joined the global economy.

As a result, Phạm and H`ở's protest is critical, their bodies become a vehicle of storytelling against the historical amnesia of communist policies that sought to protect the land for the peasantry. I draw on anthropologist, Alan Klima's concept of the *neoliberal economy of history*, where he defines it as, "[that which] concerns the economics of memory and forgetting in historical consciousness and visual culture. It is ultimately an economics of storytelling, the narrative economy by which the past is left behind and exchanged for the present, and the present is left behind and exchanged for the future, where each may go its separate way, as when one economic man comes together with another for a single moment of exchange, when they relinquish their values completely, and then depart with no strings attached" (Klima, 12-13). It is in baring their naked bodies that Phạm and H`ôtell a different story by blaring open the failed promises of community revolution and the intergenerational stakes of land dispossession and neoliberal development through the trope of perversity, not only is the mother stripped of her clothing, but her daughter is as well. The hypervisibility of Phạm's and H`ở's naked bodies together as mother and daughter being physically ripped off their land tells this story about the

value of lives that could not be told otherwise in the silence of government land seizures by the Vietnamese media and justice system.

It is the violence of forgetting the conditions upon which the communist party came to power in Vietnam that makes this performance of protest by mother and daughter significant to revealing the perversity of the state and the notions of freedom upon which it hides its violences. As Lisa Lowe writes in "The Intimacies of Four Continents," "the affirmation of the desire for freedom is so inhabited by the forgetting of its conditions of possibility, that every narrative articulation of freedom is haunted by its burial, by the violence of forgetting" (Lowe, 206). The ages of the women are critical to understanding the historical significance of their bodies in protest and how they perform a critique of the nation's shifting sovereignties. Due to the material conditions under which each woman was born, the period under which they were conceived reveal a particular period of major political economic transition in Vietnam. In the past 60 years since the Geneva Accords were signed in Vietnam, Vietnam has gone through dramatic regime transitions during the anti-colonial period (1945-1956), "Reunification" period (1975-1980s), and the current neoliberal period. Phạm, the mother, 52, born during the early 1960s, marks her birth at the height of the Vietnam war and during what many Vietnamese Communist call the period of "Reunification." During this period, the Communist Party had already established large-scale land reform campaigns in the North of Vietnam and the Communist Party was seizing lands from the South of Vietnam to "unify the country." H`ồ, 33, born in 1981, marks her birth 6 years after the end of the Vietnam War, when Vietnam was in a period of transitioning from completely closed borders to the advent of Đổi Mới policies in 1986, which sought to create a socialist oriented market economy, as Vietnam began open its markets to foreign partners. Throughout the mother and daughter's lifetimes, political and economic policies of the state

drastically shaped how the land and peasantry were valued in relationship to the nation's definition of its own sovereignty and development. Marking the age of the women is deeply integral to building upon Foucault's theory of biopolitics and grounding the protest in a larger intergenerational struggle for life.

***Protest Gestures***

How do these development policies land on the body of the woman as nation, *đất nước*? Phạm and H`ồ's embodiment of the nation as they protest in their bare bodies is used as a critique of the nation's movement forward rather than to reinscribe the woman as complicit to the needs of the nation. In her image, her labor, and her body she places demands on the nation for her family's livelihood, born and yet-to-be born.

The photograph of Phạm and H`ôbeing ripped off their land and from each other, was not released by any Vietnamese media site, instead this photograph was found on a YouTube video by an anonymous man whose pseudonym is Phan Tan Vu and posted on CNN as an unverified photograph. In this photograph, two security guards are restraining each of the women. The daughter, H`ồ, is captured jumping into the air with her head contracting into her body as two security guards grab and forcibly restrain her torso from further movement, she is elevated above the ground, clutching onto her own body to resist. Her mother, Phạm, is pictured to the back right, with her eye gaze towards H`ồ, witnessing her daughter struggling against the violent restraint of the guards, as she herself, stands, legs wide open, knees bent, with feet firmly planted on the ground, pulling at the security guards arms as they pull at her (Figure 3.3).

Phạm and H`ôdisrupt neoliberal logics of time in their protest as mother and daughter while extending an intergenerational analysis to neoliberal sovereignty. I examine a photograph

taken of the Phạm and H`ôbeing ripped from their land and from each other to focus on this very moment of shifting sovereignties, intergenerational rupture, and the urgent call for action.

I read the photograph through three sets of performative protest gestures, drag/cling, restrain/contract, and witness/expand, which are structured by a tension between the temporality of neoliberal development and the women's protest on the intergenerational stakes of the right to live.

***drag/cling***

Neoliberalism economy of history posits a very presentist and individualistic claim in market operations. I am using presentist to discuss a particular temporality that embodies a form of historical amnesia of the struggles of the past. In this case, I discuss neoliberal reasonings in terms of the neoliberal logic adopted by Vietnam on land seizures and land development, which inherently neglects a future-based, generational perspective on the repercussions of adopting these neoliberal policies of governance and national development. The temporality of neoliberalism does not account for future generations of citizens and processes of creating sustainable nations, rather neoliberal logic thinks about how to strategize based on a) " the claim that the market is better than the state at distributing resources and b) return to a primitive form of individualism: an individualism which is 'competitive,' 'possessive,' and construed often in terms of the doctrine of 'consumer sovereignty" (Ong, 11). As a result, citizen rights get reconfigured based on market needs, without regard for the generations, the lifetimes affected after.

Phạm 's and H`ồ's mother-daughter performance disrupt this presentist and individualistic logic to reveal the intergenerational impacts of government land seizures for corporate

development projects on the bodies and the lives of the people who have lived, currently live, and will live on the land. The act of dragging in the photograph enacts as performance of pulling Phạm into a direction against her will, towards the direction of neoliberal development. The security guards two-to-one literally force her in a direction her body physically is refusing as she clings onto the land with her feet planted firmly on the ground. In this moment the temporality of shifting sovereignties is revealed along with the body of security guards physically removes who does and does not belong on the land. The tension between dragging and clinging reveals a temporal inconsistency, wherein the force of Phạm's body is actively resisting the movement towards a presentist, individualistic, modality of progress that literally strips her naked of her right to life and land.

***separate/contract***

It is critical to read this mother-daughter performance of protest in terms of how their bodies are positioned together and separately in their initial and final staging and the performance of power demonstrated by the security guards in the women's isolated restraint and removal. In the photographs after the security officers try to restrain the women, they are separated, from each other. The separation of the mother and daughter from each other illustrates the individualizing nature of neoliberal logics of progress. In addition, the separation enacts the forced removal of people not only from their land, but also from their families. The tension and struggle between the bodies of the women and the bodies of the security guards reveal a drastic new order in the age of neoliberalism in Vietnam. An order that necessitates separation of families and a connection to land. Hồ's contraction of her body and flight into the air as she pulls her body inwards, tensing up her muscles to resist the restraint of the security guards pushes back

against separation. H`ô holds onto herself, defying gravity and propelling herself upward through the weight and push of her body against the security guards. The act of separation here operates in two main ways, first to separate H`ô from her mother as a form of isolation and control and second to rip her body apart to drag her away. Her act of contraction in the face on separation highlights the dynamism of protest as a feminist critique of the nation and push back against its forced separation and denial of the right to live for families. H`ở's bare body pushes against the demands of the state to separate her from herself, her mother, and their land. The bodies of the women represent multiple generations. Here through contraction and H`ô tells her own story in her image, labor, and body against separation and restraint.

***witness/expand***

By placing Phạm's and H`ở's bodies together as connected to both the past and future historical moments in which they were born and the intergenerational stakes of land dispossession, the presentness of their performance emphasizes its urgency and also offers a generative imaginary. Phạm and H`ở's bare bodies as mother and daughter enact a series of performative interventions to call attention not only to the violence of the state, but the centrality of a natal rupture from the land for generations to come. As Phạm witnesses her daughter being separated from her and pulled away from the land, she squats in a position not only clinging her feet firmly on the ground but expanding her body. In the act of both witnessing and expanding Phạm lays a claim to the land she is standing on as her body refuses to submit to the restraint and control of the security guards. The protest gestures of witnessing and expanding perform a counter narrative to neoliberal economies of history. Phạm and H`ở's performance of perversity

thus offers a generative imaginary, one that is grounded in a connection to land and body as an important site of history and potentiality to fight for.

**Conclusion**

When thinking about the figure of the woman as an emblem of the nation, it is not just a simplistic biological referent of the woman as the body to reproduce the nation, but the bodies of mother and daughter as the embodiments of generations before and after, of an extended temporality as a national critique of the trajectory of neoliberal development and its perversity. It is through this protest with a mother and daughter baring their bodies that the actions of these drastic land decisions can be seen as translated over generations. Phạm and H`ômay or may not view their protest as a performance of perversity to critique the state. I am reading into their performance of protest the figuration of Vietnamese women into the nation and how perversity was used in their performances as a mode of challenging government land seizures. It is the use of perversity as a form of national critique that the hypervisibity of the construction of gender and sexuality as mapped onto Phạm's and H`ô's bodies brought attention to the violent dispossession of land faced by peasants as Vietnam adopt neoliberal policies of development. I end with a question from Fiona Ngô in "Sense and Subjectivity,"

> "But what does it mean to recognize evidence of being a person, a citizen, with legitimacy in late capitalism, under a neoliberal state, in an era of empire? The realization of personhood is uneven and often unavailable; sometimes to become visible is to become subject to increased surveillance, and sometimes to remain invisible is to be allowed to die. Indeed, in describing the relationship between rights and citizenship,

> subjectivity and subjection, one needs to consider that once named as a citizen, one is subjected to the sovereign power of a violent state" (Ngô, 119).

If visibility and recognition under state presupposes both access to citizenship and the conditions of violence by the sovereign state, is then the question about the inherent issue of sovereignty's relationship to violence? As Vietnam struggles to define its own sovereign power through land negotiations and contracts with corporations, it exerts its legal power on Phạm's and H`ồ's bodies through court-ordered fines as a mode of establishing its power while revealing who the nation actually protects. The type of fines and amounts ordered for Phạm and H`ồversus the Western Security Service Company reveals the legal leniency enacted for the corporate body versus the criminalization and policing of the women's body. The local authority's court ordered fines inevitably do not directly impact the construction company and its development project. The embodied resonances of invisible bodies of generations before and generations after resound in this performance of protest by mother and daughter, merging development and revolutionary temporalities and trajectories of development by erasing an anti-colonial past and movement, to show the slow progression of death for subsequent generations to come, as their ability to live and thrive on the land is literally being stripped from the family- past, present, and future, but the urgency of the present evoked on the body of the women pushes back against this foreclosure of life while critiquing the very mechanisms of sovereign power. I return to the opening image of the chapter, mother and daughter are photographed makes on the land, the mother standing and the daughter sitting in a field of grass. In this image, they reveal the perversity of state violence stripping people of their land and a generative imaginary of what it means for mother and daughter to be able to exist firmly planted on their land for generations to come.

## Epilogue
## *Performances of Return*

"our legendary ancestors, the Hundred Viet, were born from the union of a Dragon King and a Fairy [Queen] or Mountain's Daughter, Au Co, who swallowed a handful of fragrant soil and lost the power to return to Heaven. Her tears formed Viet Nam's myriad rivers and the recurring floods are the land's way of remembering her."

– Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*

"To remember is to dig dirt, dust yellow bones and re-mantle them in an imagined order, a memory-image, of an ethereal body of a shattered unity, glued fragments on the pretense of coherence, the telling of a retelling of a story that is told again and again in repetitive trauma and pleasure until the story becomes myth, legend..."

- Anh Hua, "Travel and Displacement: An (Ex)Refugee and (Ex)Immigrant Woman's Tale-Tell"

How do you end a dissertation about the aftermath of war whose stories continue to unfold and remain embedded in the bodies of refugees and their children, and also seep through the country's people, water, and land this war's violence has buried? I return to a Vietnamese mythology, Au Co (Fairy Queen) and Lac Long Quan (Dragon King) about the origins of Vietnam—a creation myth—renarrated through Trinh Minh Ha's experimental film, *Forgetting Vietnam*. *Forgetting Vietnam* was created to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam/American War in 2015 and centers dat nuoc as central symbolic, aesthetic, poetic, textual, and material to reflect on what Vietnam became after communist revolution and the haunting of war that still remains. Trinh writes the story of Au Co and Lac Long Quan in blue

italicized text overlaid on top of video of a small fisherman's boat juxtaposed against one large wooden ship and a series of floating homes in Ha Long Bay (Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.2). Trinh's use of overlaying text over video disrupts the temporality of the film; superimposing a two thousand year old myth with contemporary footage of one of Vietnam's top rated tourist destinations breaks a sense of linear progression and reinserts mythology as a place of return, of knowledge production, and of remembering.

The mythology of Au Co and Lac Long Quan is one of the first texts to appear in the film, framing the narrative as an origin story connected to the land as a way to understand the geography and climate of Vietnam in terms of mourning, homage, and memory. I draw on mythology as a method of storytelling to reflect on this dissertation as a series of performances of return that live between the space of imagination and reality. Specifically, I draw on poet and literary critic, Paula Gunn Allen who writes,

> "Myth stands as an expression of human need for coherence and integration and as the mode whereby human beings might actively fill that need. Yet myth is more than a statement about how the world ought to work; its poetic and mystic dimensions indicate that it embodies a sense of reality that includes all human capacities, ideal or actual….Myth is a kind of story that allows a holistic image to pervade and shape consciousness, thus providing a coherent and empowering matrix for action and relationship" (Allen, 548-549).

Au Co and Lac Long Quan are mythical deities with titles of monarchy in their name; their power and place of birth are directly connected to the land and water. As Allen writes, mythologies tap into human capacities, albeit ideal or actual. Vietnam's terrain is narrated as embodiments of Au Co and Lac Long Quan, both godly and humanly figures, capturing

humanity's ability to recall loss through earth memory. The rivers, the waterways, the recurring floods—they are not only the lifelines that run through the country to support agriculture, transportation, and fishing but are forces of nature that call upon our very human abilities to remember and mourn. It is thus what Allen describes an "empowering matrix for action and relationship" that I reflect on writing this dissertation as a series of performances of return. As a method of storytelling, I define performances of return as tapping into this very intersection of action and relationship through the cultural production of multi-media installation, performance art, oral histories, public protest, and film as critical embodied interventions on dominant Vietnamese and U.S. national narratives of communist revolution, refugees, and global economic progress. I conjure narrative through intensive fieldwork in Vietnam for five years and Vietnamese diaspora communities for over three decades working with interlocutors who are both alive and live as specters in the everyday, ghosts of the disappeared and murdered whose stories demand to be heard and whose lives at the very least long to be mourned and remembered.

Moreover, it in embedded within ecologies of statelessness that performances of return are grounded in the body and the very materiality of sites of forced migration and histories of violence. Cultural theorist, Anh Hua discusses the act of remembering through a series of performative acts: digging, dusting, re-mantling, imagining, and re-ordering until it becomes a myth in the telling and retelling. The stories of Vietnamese boat refugees and survivors of re-education camps are told over and over through the frame of the evils of communism and the harsh aftermath of the war, and thus the stories become packaged within an arrested state of narratives of trauma and violence. On the other hand the story of mother and daughter, Phạm Thi Lai and H`ôNguyen Thuy, against government land seizures are under-told stories vehemently

censored by national media. I take up the work of performing returns to retell these stories differently, connecting them back to the land and water where stories of those marked as refugees and dispossessed subjects alongside a narrative of communist revolution began and ended sometimes over and over.

Over 1.1 million people from North Vietnam and 200,000 to 250,000 from South Vietnam died during the Vietnam/American War. The number of those who disappeared on the boat voyage across the ocean after the war range from 200,000 to 1 million. Statistics of those who disappeared or died in re-education camps is estimated around 165,000. Countless numbers who are experiencing a slow death through government land seizures are also added to this list. Statistics can be used to dehumanize the actual lives that have experienced great violence and death. I offer these numbers to expand the scale of how the stories from Chapter One, Two, and Three are contextualized and reminded. It is difficult to find exact numbers for those who lost their lives in the aftermath of the Vietnam/American War. Part of the reason for this could be the numbers of those whose lives were not counted, were not valued or literally processed bureaucratically and rendered invisible under the Viet Minh, Republic of Vietnam, or Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Possibly falling in the cracks in between are births never reported or people who lived as non-citizens between government transitions. The numbers of those affected by the aftermath of war, the death tolls, the number of those with chronic illness, and the number of people facing a slow death—their stories live as mythology in that they live in a place between imagination and memory, in terms of the countless lives that cannot be accounted for due to issues of state censorship, no reporting, or disappearances and silenced murders. It is thus what Joseph Roach, performance studies scholar, theorizes as "that mental space where imagination and memory converge" where the archive and official documents can never fully

capture the full numerical and affective toll of the aftermath of war and the work of cultural production enters to reimagine these ellipses and erasures (27).

**Haunting | Body Sensing | Earth Memory**

In the retelling of the aftermath of the Vietnam War by centering land and water through an analysis of ecologies of statelessness, the temporality of war and its presence is felt directly in the contemporary moment in Vietnam and in the body. Mythology here circles back to allow me to re-theorize the relationship to Vietnam's terrain and geography as site of knowledge production. In this section, I discuss a series of video and text in *Forgetting Vietnam* edited to be in the middle of the film.

Halfway through the film there is a series of video footage of agricultural landscapes of Vietnam shot from an aerial perspective that begins with yellow text transitions to red and then back to yellow. Red and yellow are the colors of the Vietnamese flag from both the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the former Republic of Vietnam. The sequence begins with a shot of a rice paddy, full with two pools of brownish-red water, with dark green grass cutting through about one-fourth of the way down from the top. Two figures ride on a bicycle on a road atop this dark green block of grass (Figure 4.3). The two figures could be any configuration of parent and child, sibling and sibling, kin and kin, friend and friend. Edited on top of the footage is a series of the same square video of an elderly Vietnamese woman that runs across the screen right to left as the "returning" in yellow text runs from left to right. The soundscape of this segment of the film are locomotive train sounds.

Trinh plays with the movement of text throughout the film to gesture towards movement and time. The image and the text move in opposite directions of each other starting from the left

and right side of the screen, respectively. From east to west, west to east, past to future, future to past, text and image move simultaneously in either direction to leave up to the viewer the reference point they enter seeing it with. Nevertheless, the movements are counter to each other as the activities of the woman move in a different direction than the textual gesture of "returning" on the screen allows for. Cultural studies scholar Marita Sturken writes, "memory and forgetting, are co-constitutive processes, each is essential to the other's existence" (2). Returning is an active search of/for memory, while forgetting is forced into everyday state operations of the nation. These movements—although seemingly contrasting—are as Sturken discusses, co-constitutive. Trinh edits these elements together; forgetting (represented as text, questions, and images) and returning (through text and sound) are constantly juxtaposed on the video footage throughout the film. The sounds of the train take the viewer into a series of images of the countryside of Vietnam, where there are rice paddy fields.

The first two slides are "her land" and "her country" in yellow text under a square video of women cooking in the markets overlaid on top of the rice fields (Figure 4.4 and Figure 4.5). Trinh continues to remind the reader throughout of the labor of women in memory and in building the country. She places video footage of women in communion with one another—cooking and preparing food over empty fields of rice paddies, demanding their bodies be placed next to the land to counter a narrative of the beautiful landscapes of Vietnam devoid of a feminist analysis of labor, economy, the body, and representation. Subsequently, the slides shift to only footage of the rice paddies with the following sequence of text in red and centered on the screen: "scorched," "bled red," "mined" (Figure 4.6, Figure 4.7, and Figure 4.8). These series of words in red activate a live memory of the violence, death, and exploitation faced by women and the land during war.

The subsequent texts appears in yellow: “scarred,” “sprayed,” “contaminated,” “the earth remembers” to recall the damage inflicted on the body of the earth from B-52 bombs, Agent Orange, napalm, and landmines whose ripple effects continue to affect and kill Vietnamese today (Figure 4.9, Figure 4.10, Figure 4.11, and Figure 4.12). Trinh moves through the film, gesturing to the presence of the war and its lasting impacts such as ecological disaster without ever posting photographs of the violence that took place. She does this instead of reproducing a pornography of violence about the Vietnam/American War in the images of death, bombing, birth defects, and terror. Trinh's minimal use of text and video footage of landscapes gestures to these images that are already oversaturated in the U.S. and Vietnamese public imaginary of the Vietnam/American War, while evoking a constant haunting that lingers on the land. The scenes of lush rice fields, filled with smoke in the air reveals ecologies of statelessness, wherein these sites where once contested during war between north and south Vietnam. These lands were indeterminate zones where the communist party claimed to fight for the people and the Republic of Vietnam claimed it could develop it with the support of the U.S. government.

Trinh unravels for the reader a haunting landscape that conjures memory of war to the present moment. Haunting offers a theoretical and methodological intervention in knowledge production and validation, which allows for the unseen and felt to be a way of knowing, especially in the face of racist and capitalist systems dependent on disappearances and erasure of memory in the United States and Vietnam. Sociologist, Avery Gordon, defines haunting as the affective mechanism, by which subjects are drawn, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition” (8). I further contend that it is a haunting in/on the body and the land that incites a call for return, wherein the act of return opens up possibilities for

reparation, justice, and reordering memory to construct a better future. By listening to the haunting, one follows an unordered and unseen affective pull that breaks apart linear notions of time and brings forth the past into the present as a guiding and generative force in performances of return. This affective pull is the body's way of knowing/sensing and is grounded in the very conditions of the earth itself as the materiality upon which it conjures memory and maps the cartography of sites to return to/wards.

**Cartographies of Care**

The image that stays with me throughout *Forgetting Vietnam,* is a video footage of a young girl sitting at the edge of a boat looking straight into the camera and at the same time beyond the camera (Figure 4.13). Across the screen in blue text reads "more than a war." I am reminded of Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe's work *In the Wake: Of Blackness and Being,* where she is drawn to an image of a young Black girl stamped with the word "ship" in tape across her forehead during a humanitarian aid effort after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Sharpe forwards another way with this image grounded in a practice of care, that is not conditional based on the agendas of the state, but a lateral mode of looking and being with the young girl, meditating on and with her photograph in the wake. Sharpe describes the wake as the constant presence of the terror left behind from the transatlantic slave trade and the practice of being awake and aware of how these afterlives show up in the everyday in the face of a climate of anti-blackness. Sharpe asks, "What does it look like, entail, and mean to attend to, care for, comfort and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death, life lived in the presence of death; to love this imminence and immanence as and in the 'wake'?" (Sharpe, 38). Furthermore, performance studies scholar,

Elizabeth Son writes, "performances of care, or embodied acts that materialize concern and interest by providing for the needs of or looking after what one is caring for…The roots of the word care capture a sense of loss or disappearance— and the action of providing for the needs of those who have suffered a loss or of commemorating a loss" (Son, 149). Drawing on Sharpe and Son's discussion of the practice of care, I bridge this method of being with the image and presence of a young girl in Trinh's film connected to the water she is sitting on and the story of Au Co and how her tears formed the rivers of Vietnam. A method of performances of return is the act of (re)mapping, which I forward as a cartography of care. It is not a mapping on or across the subject but alongside and with the subject, connecting the subject to their environment and history, offering space for the subject to speak back in their image and to bear witness. I position myself with the young girl staring back into the camera, in the aftermath of war in Vietnam, living among the ghosts of those who passed from the war and witnessing the slow death of those who continue to face imminent death.

I conducted fieldwork in Vietnam for over 5 years. My first two years were based in Lao Cai, Long Xuyen, and Ho Chi Minh City working with survivors of sex trafficking, street kids, and undocumented Vietnamese. The level of income disparity in Vietnam is extremely stark leaving the poor earning less than 100 USD to survive with a family of about five to six people. The image this young girl and the text across the frame haunts me. The Vietnam/American War is framed through images of the glorification of tragedy. What happens in the aftermath of war of those who stayed behind, for those who were supposed to benefit from revolution? What happens to a young girl born after war, after revolution? What are her memories? What are her aspirations and opportunities? I end with this image as a way of circling back to the arc of this dissertation project. How can I discuss the aftermath of the war, open up spaces to see again

differently—infusing this practice of care in these performances of return, these memories and the actual country itself.

More than halfway through *Forgetting Vietnam*, yellow text appears across the bottom of the screen stating, "Can survivors of war trauma disremember?" added on top of two elderly Vietnamese women in conversation. One woman with grey hair has her face towards the camera and another woman with cloth wrapped around her head is facing forward away from the camera (Figure 4.14). I see this image in relationship to the image of the young girl, the footage taken after the war, the elderly women born during the first communist revolution in Vietnam against the French and the young girl born after a new nation emerged after 1975. I would add to the question: can those who never lived through war inherit trauma and remember? This dissertation project has been one of tapping into my family's lived memories, ghostly hauntings of those who have disappeared and died, intensive archival and oral history research, and my own inherited trauma and embodied memory of war living as a child of refugees.

Performances of return demand a different methodology, one that is rooted in the earth with which the stories emerge and one that follows pathways of return through the felt, spoken, silenced, and erased archives of the aftermath of the Vietnam/American War. Performing returns to ecologies of statelessness is a performative call and reimagining of sites of forced migration and dispossession into possibilities for transgressive and creating other possible futures. It is in the act of affirming the power to look again, to excavate those buried histories, listen to the land and the water as a source of knowledge by being with history and those on the other side of the war differently. Here is where a cartography of care emerges, connecting memories with a commitment to honor the stories of people, revealing histories of violence, and offering different openings to be "a different social subject," as Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers writes

(208). It is in this subjectivity where new futures emerge in ecologies of statelessness, not only in terms of a resistance against to the state, but as an indeterminate liminal space to reimagine possibilities beyond and between the fissures of the state.

## Illustrations and Figures

### Chapter 1


**Figure 1.1**
Ly Hoang Ly, *Project 0395A.DC*

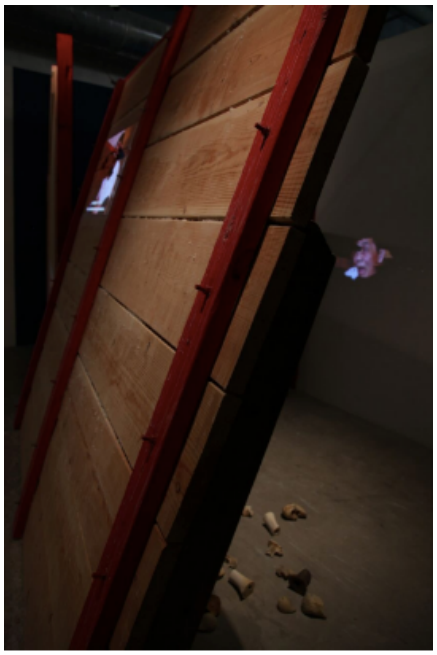

**Figure 1.2**
Ly Hoang Ly, *Project 0395A.DC*

**Figure 1.3**
Ly Hoang Ly, *Project 0395A.DC*

**Figure 1.4**
Ly Hoang Ly, *Project 0395A.DC*

**Figure 1.5**
Ly Hoang Ly, *Project 0395A.DC*

**Figure 1.6**
Ly Hoang Ly, *"I drink my country"*

**Figure 1.7**
Patricia Nguyen, *salt | water*

**Figure 1.8**
Patricia Nguyen, *salt | water*

**Figure 1.9**
Patricia Nguyen, *salt / water*

**Figure 1.10**
Patricia Nguyen, *salt / water*

**Chapter 2**

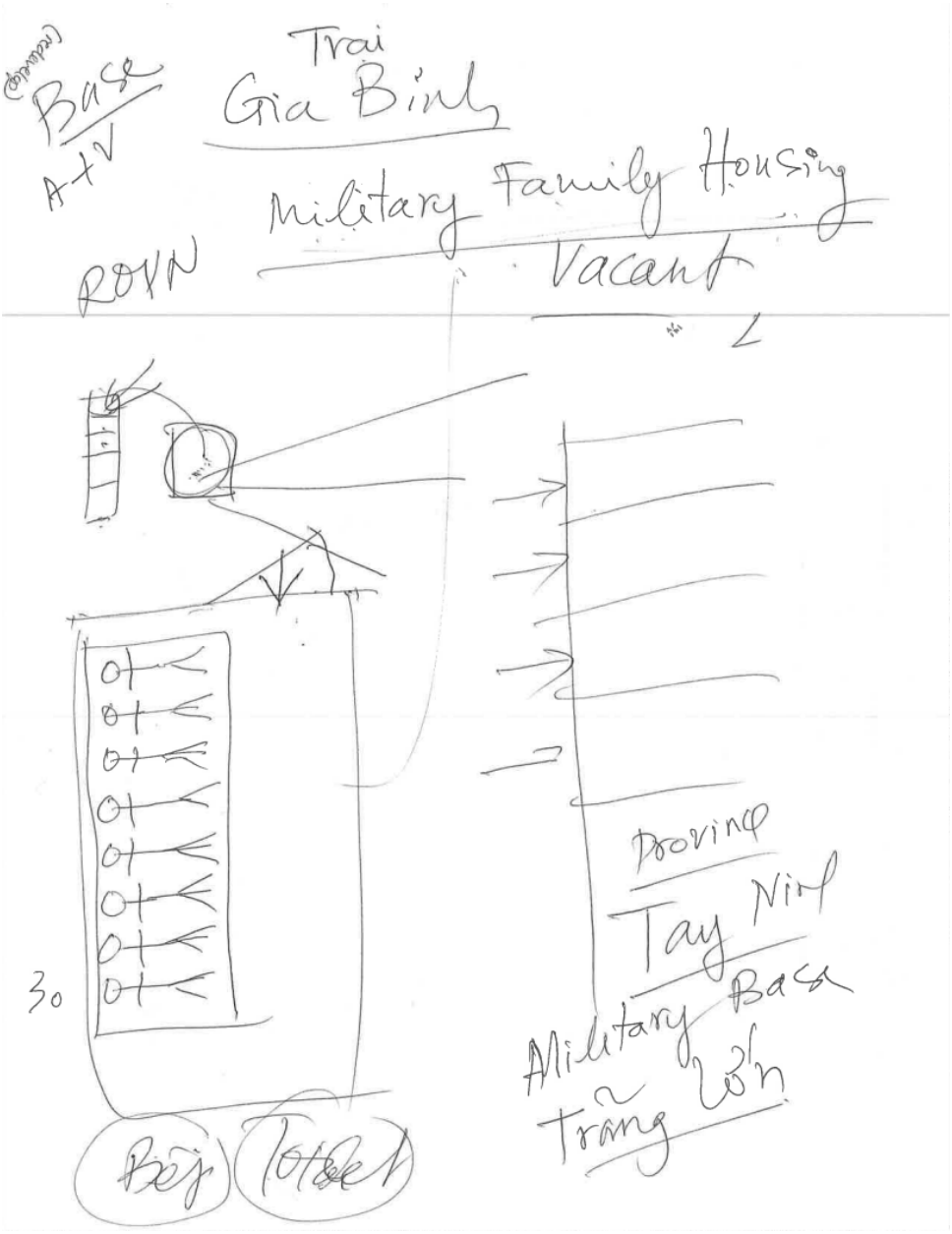


**Figure 2.1**
Tâm Văn Nguyen, *Interview Drawing*

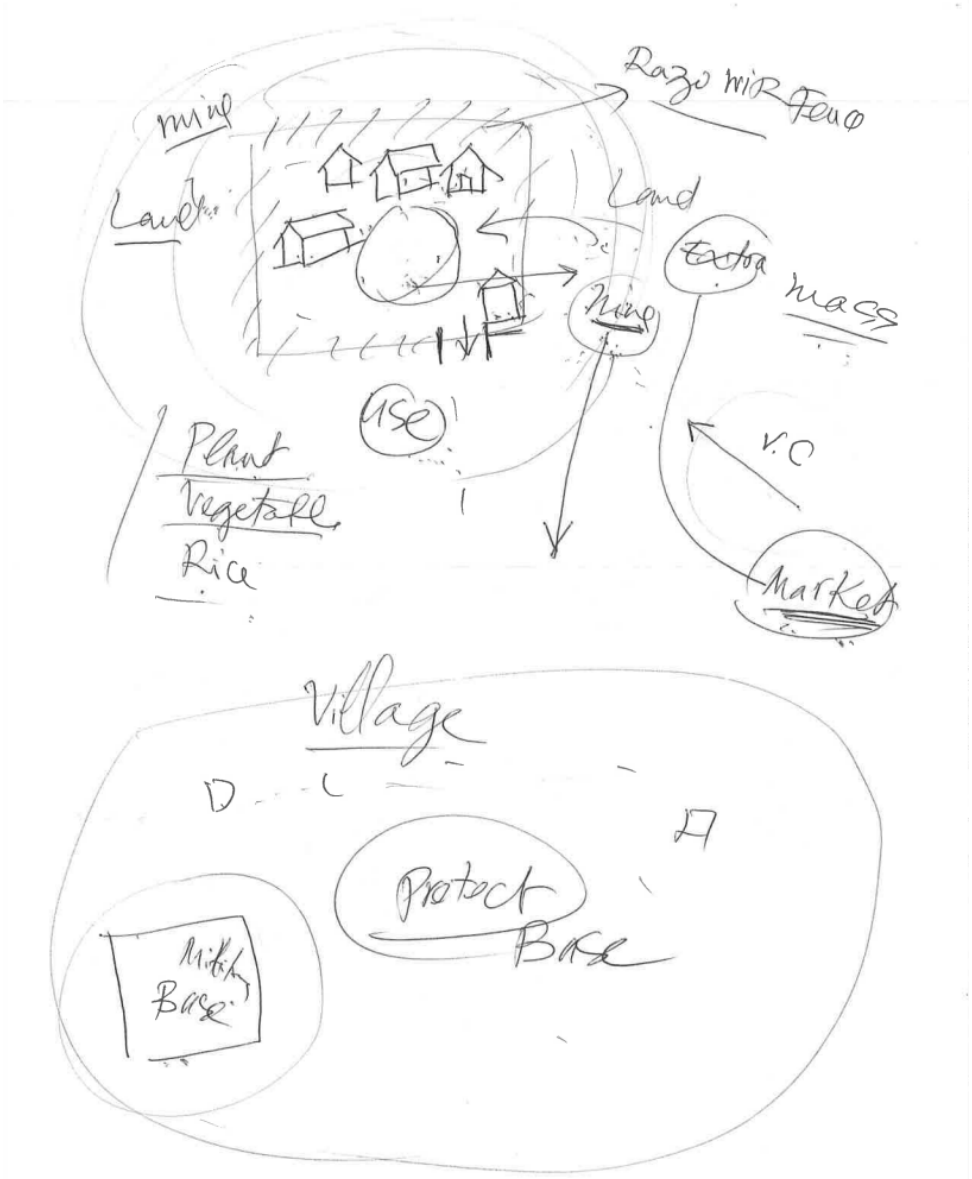


**Figure 2.2**
Tâm Văn Nguyen, *Interview Drawing*


**Figure 2.3**
Tâm Văn Nguyen, *Interview Drawing*

**Figure 2.4**
Tâm Văn Nguyen, *Interview Drawing*

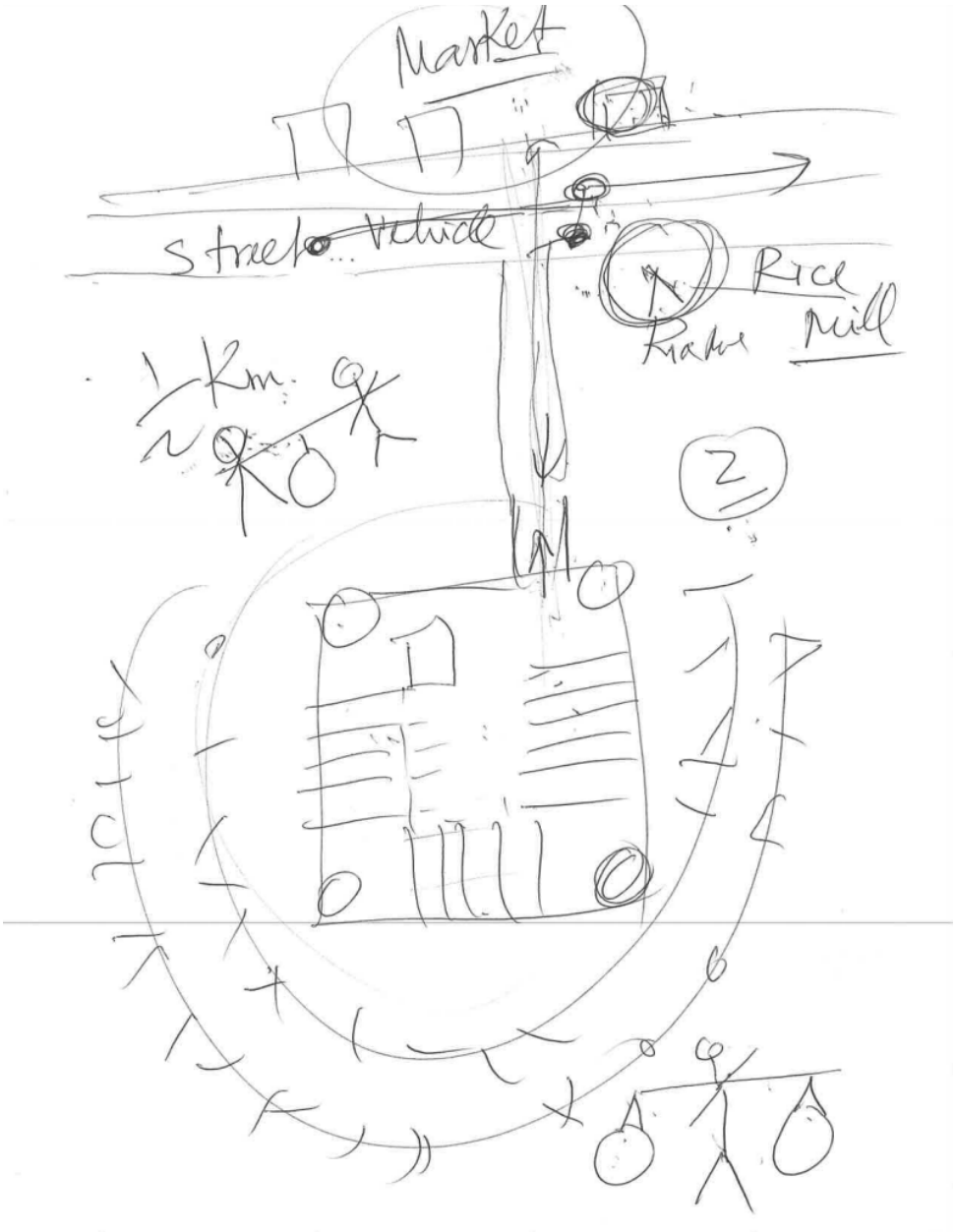


**Figure 2.5**
Tâm Văn Nguyen, Interview Drawing

## Chapter 3

**Figure 3.1**
"Cần Thơ: Mother and Daughter Fined $4 for being Naked," *Vietnamnet.vn*

**Figure 3.2**
Phan Tan Vu, *YouTube*

**Figure 3.3**
Phan Tan Vu, *YouTube*

**Epilogue**

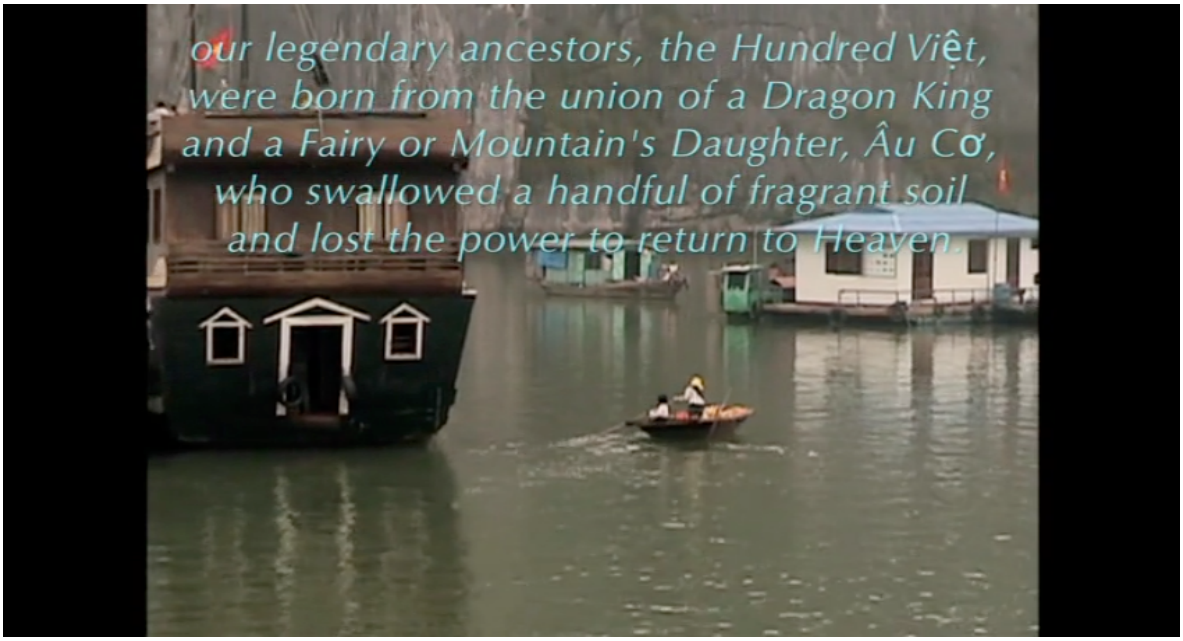


**Figure 4.1**
Trinh Minh Ha, Forgetting Vietnam


**Figure 4.2**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.3**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.4**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.5**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.6**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.7**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.8**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.9**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.10**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.11**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.12**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.13**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


**Figure 4.14**
Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*

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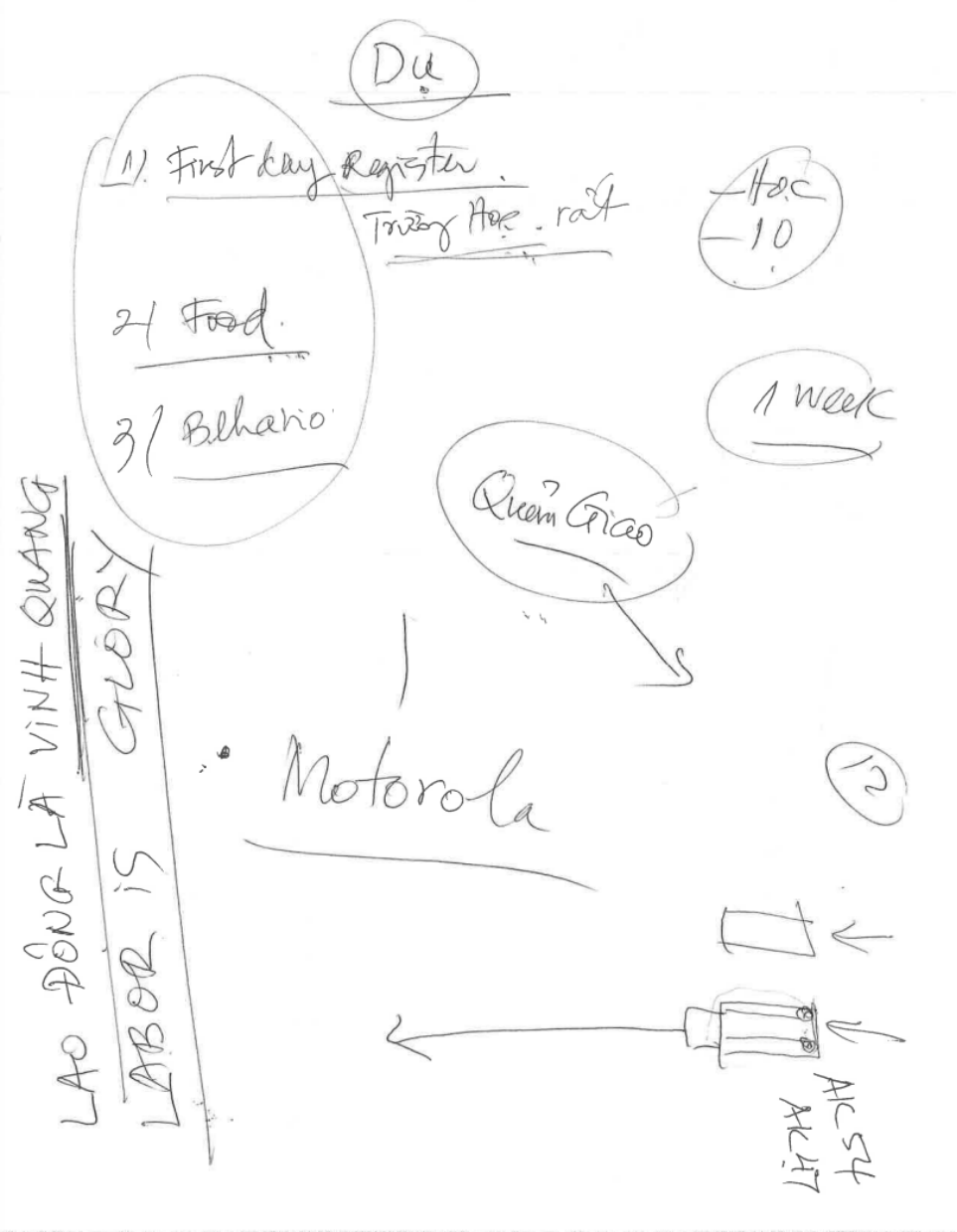
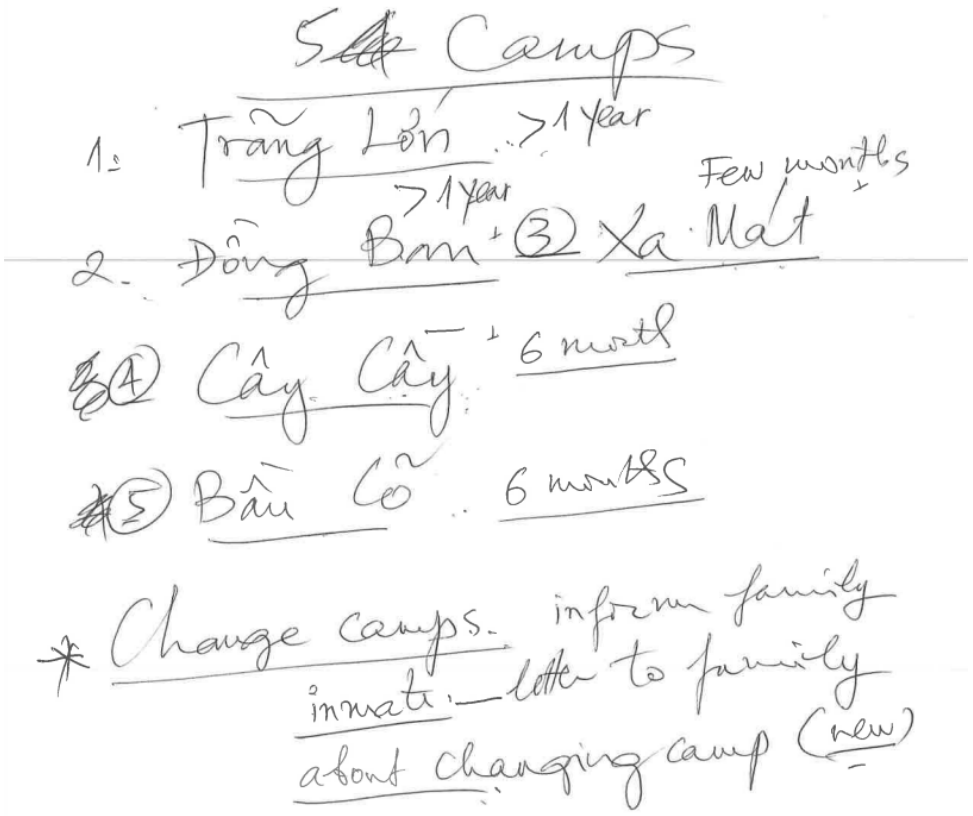
# Appendices

## Chapter 2




Tâm Văn Nguyen, *Interview Drawing & Strategies of Containment*

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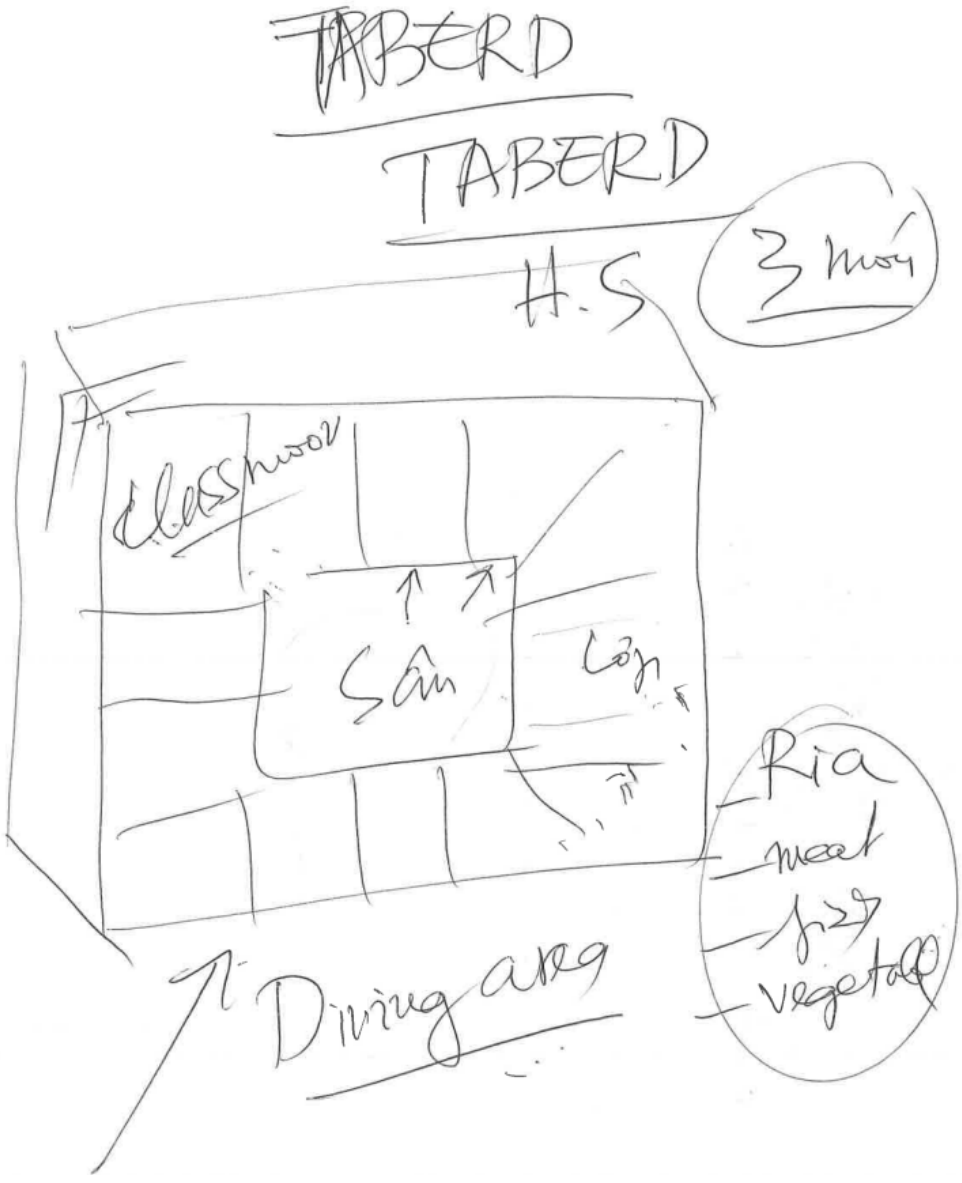
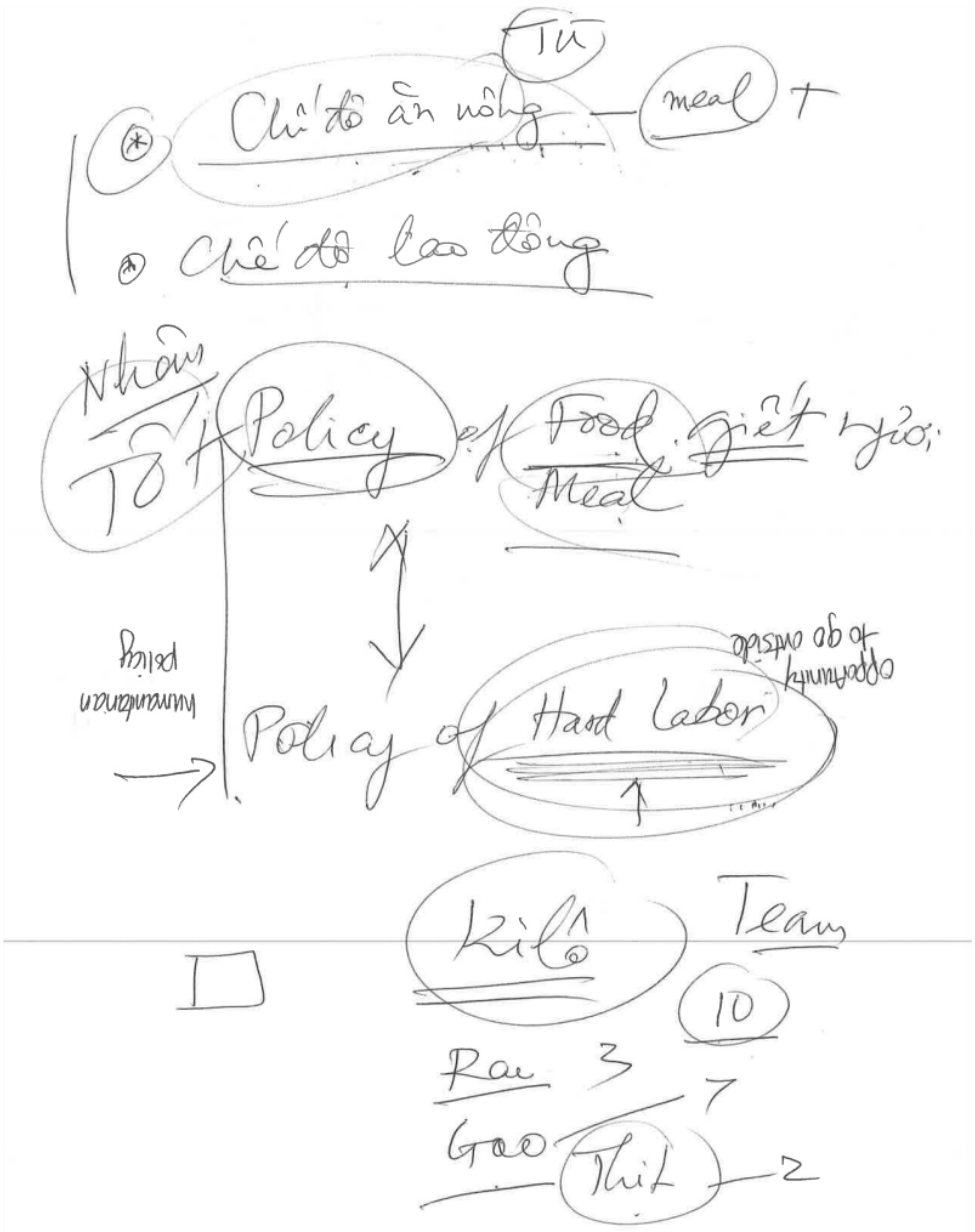



Tâm Văn Nguyen, *Interview Drawing of Taberd High School Re-education Camp*

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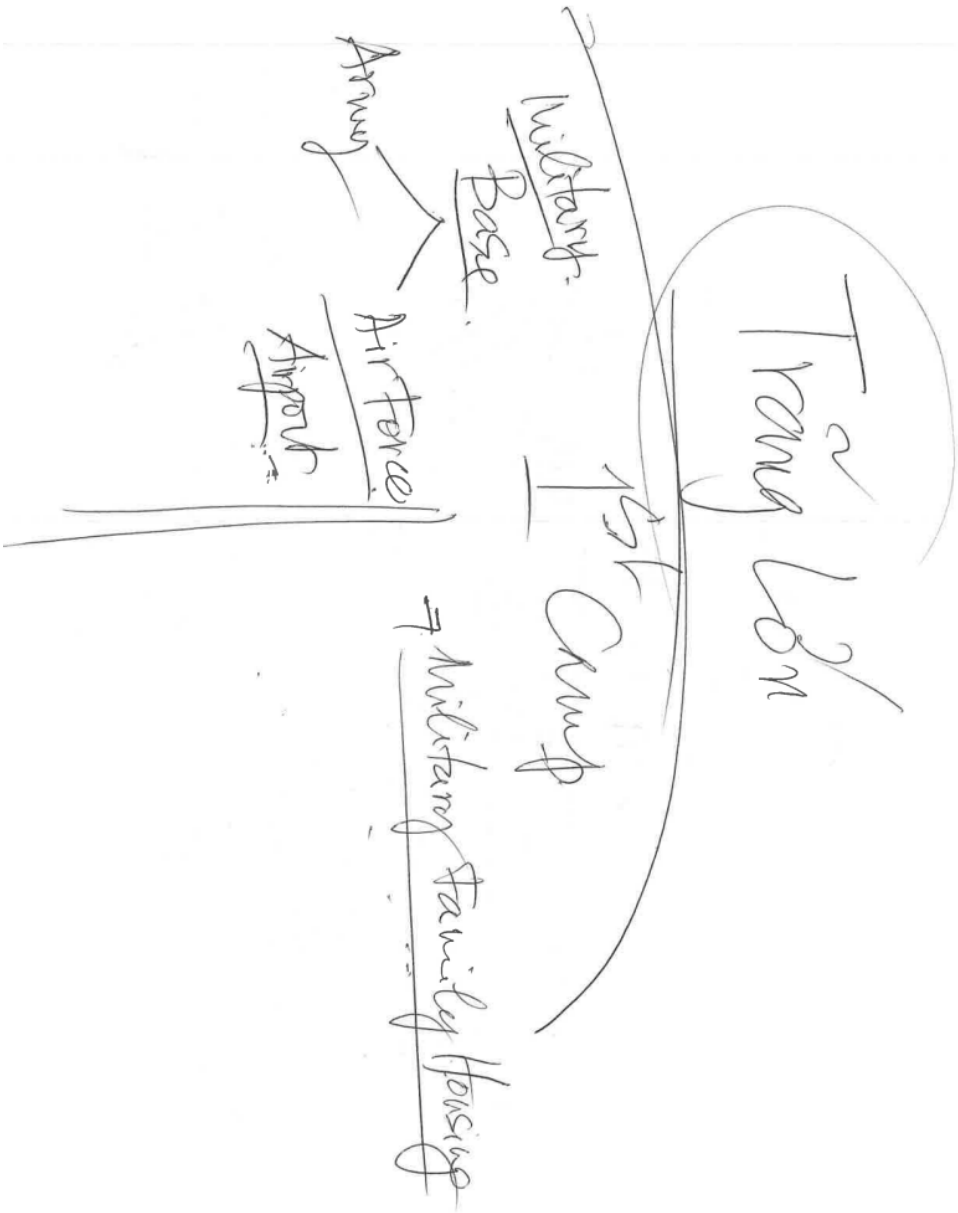


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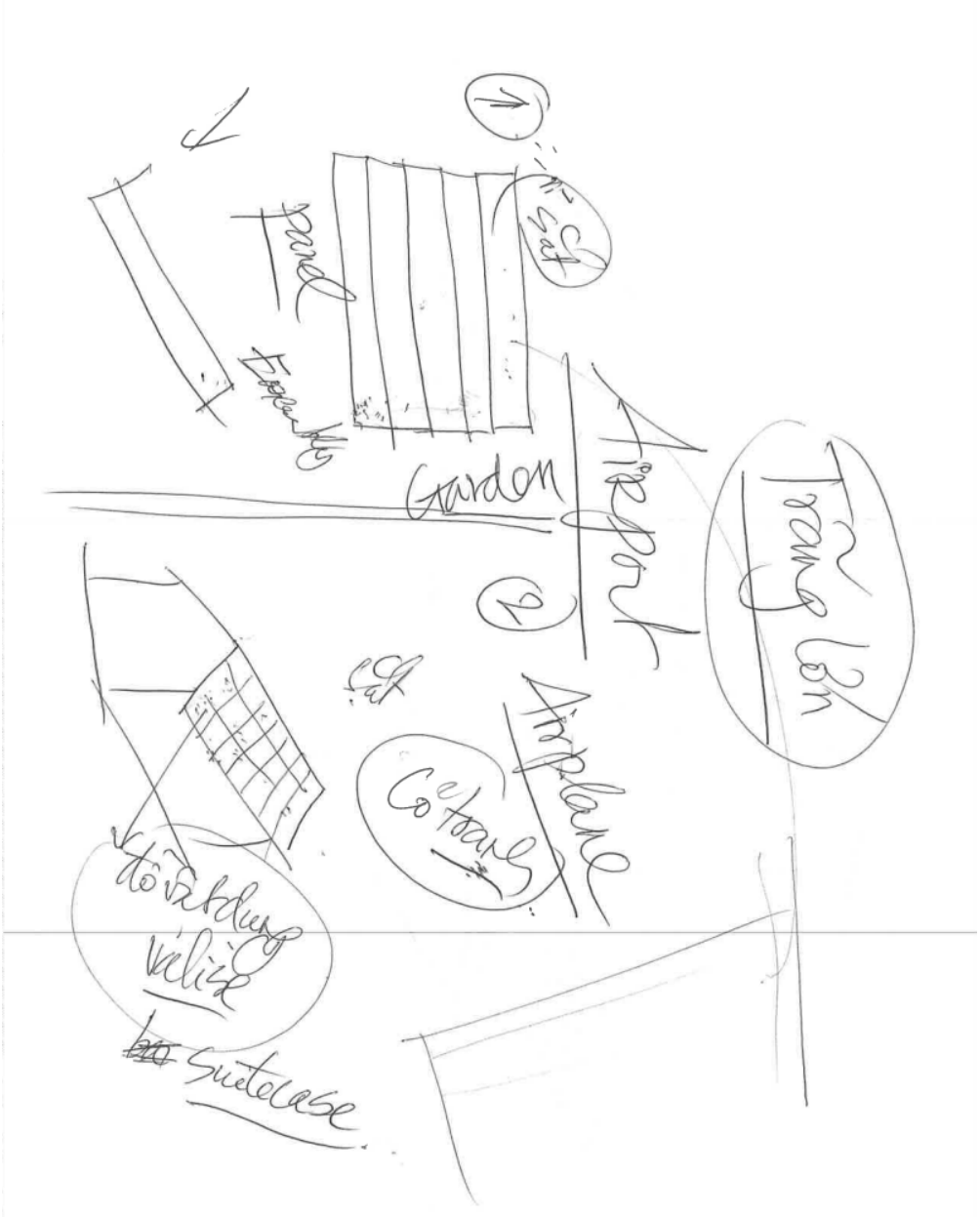


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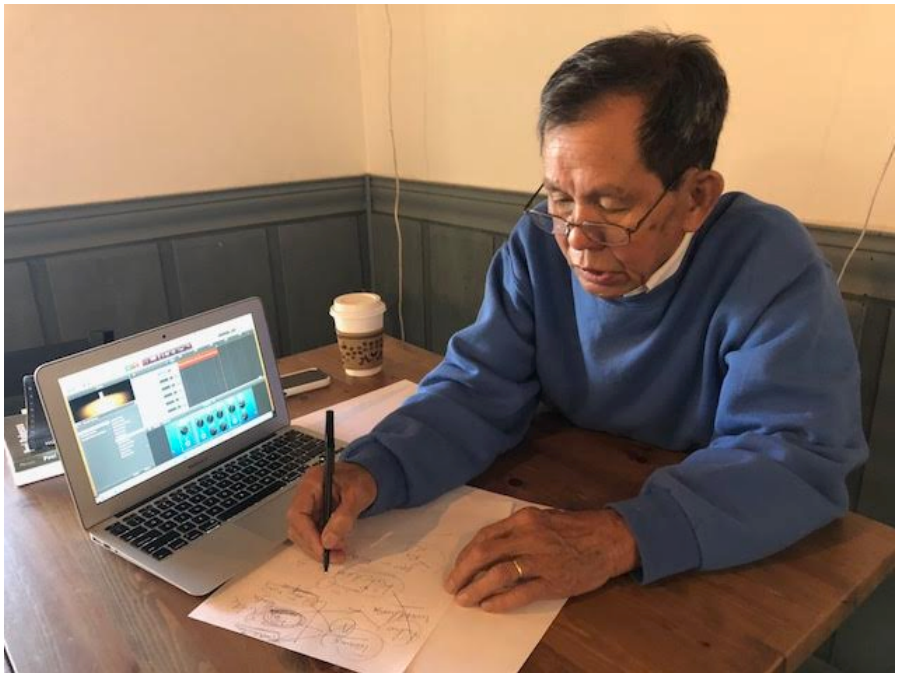

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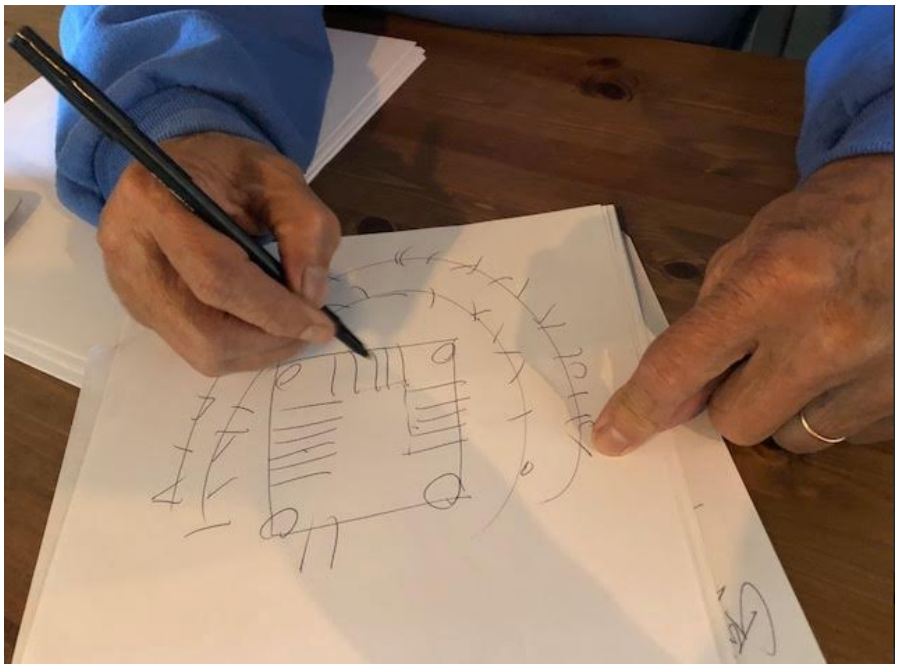

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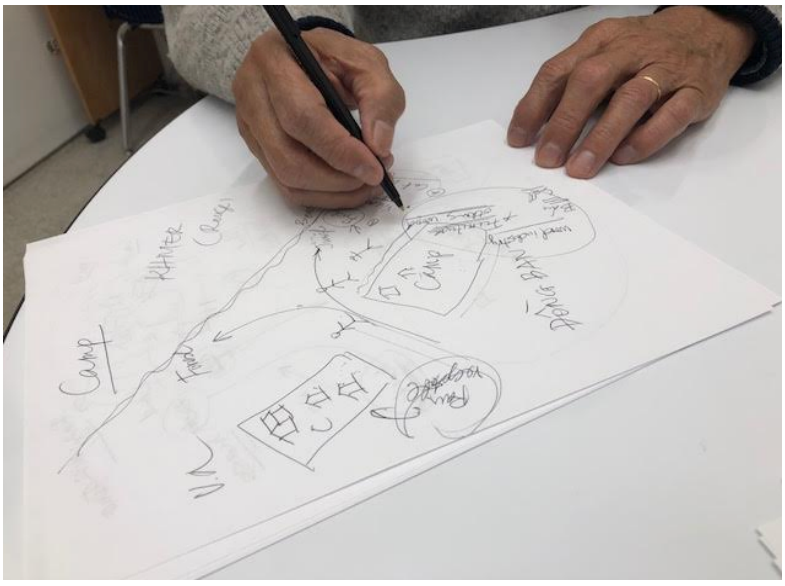
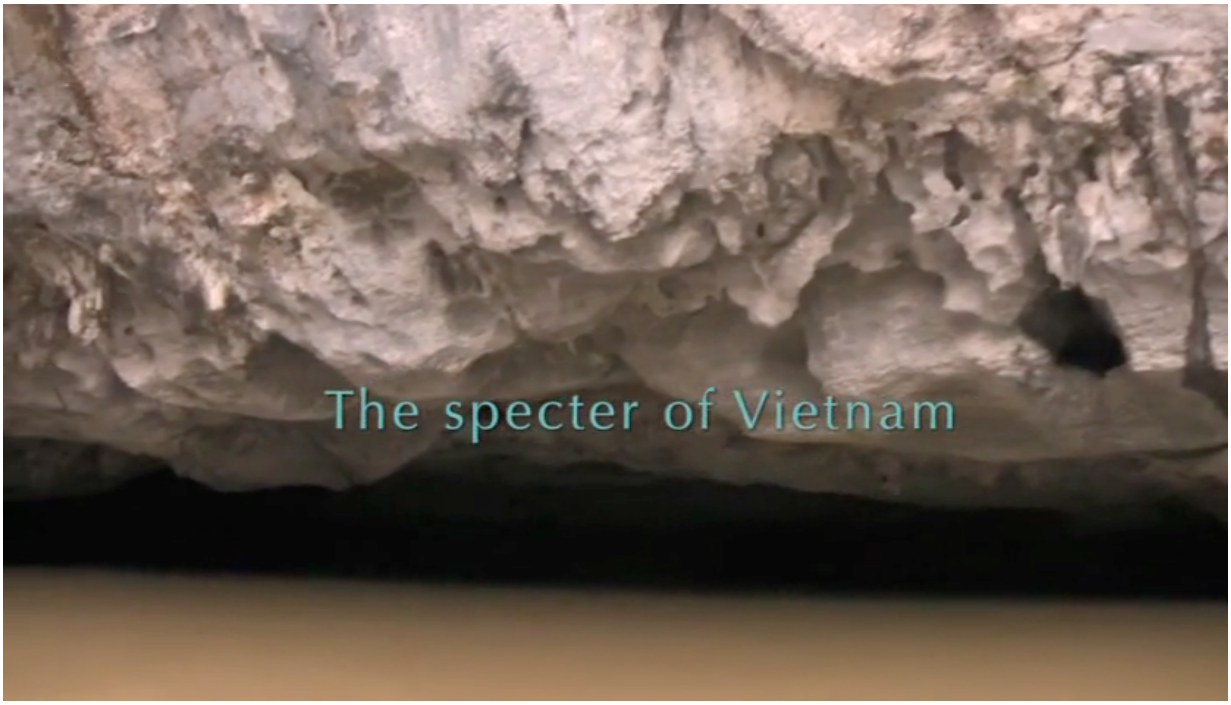


Tâm Văn Nguyen, *Interview*

**Epilogue**


Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*


Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*




Trinh Minh Ha, *Forgetting Vietnam*

## Vita

Patricia was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. She received her Ph.D. in Performance Studies from Northwestern University and is a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow for New Americans. She was a recipient of the Robert S. and Gertrude B. Breen Memorial Award and Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts Grant from Northwestern University. Nguyen has published work in *Women Studies Quarterly*, Harvard Kennedy School's *Asian American Policy Review, Women and Performance,* and *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Modern Asian Plays* edited by Siyuan Liu and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. As a performance artist, Nguyen has performed at the Nha San Collective in Vietnam, Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco, Jane Addams Hull House, Oberlin College, Northwestern University, University of Massachusetts Boston, Links Hall, Prague Quadrennial, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile. She is also the co-founder and executive director of Axis Lab, a community arts organization based in Chicago focusing on inclusive and equitable development for immigrants and refugees. Nguyen is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies at Northwestern University.