

“Fleshing Out Her Ghosts”:  
A Hauntological Analysis of *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*)

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## Abstract

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This thesis examines Quỳên Nguyễn-Lê’s experimental short film *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) (2016) to explore how traces of U.S. militarism still haunt the Vietnamese refugee diaspora, specifically as ghosts that linger in everyday life and visual culture. The short film—drawing its title from the Vietnamese word *nước*, meaning both “water” and “homeland” (or “country” and “nation”)—depicts the everyday silences of a Vietnamese American refugee family as they struggle to navigate the losses that have formed from the processes of forced displacement and resettlement. These losses, from a homeland, family history, and shared language, among other registers of grief and melancholia, sustain intergenerational gaps in which incomplete stories and stereotypical images about the Vietnamese come to stand in their place. This thesis draws from sociologist Grace Cho’s notion of “fleshing out the ghost,” an analytic approach that aims to expose the fictional details of what is oftentimes misconstrued as sociological fact, to expose the invisible hand of U.S. militarism since the Vietnam War refugee exodus. Vietnamese refugees, often depicted as passive objects of humanitarian rescue, have been used to refashion the (inter)national image of the U.S. from an aggressor to a caregiver in the postwar era. Through a hauntological analysis of American visual culture, the following fleshes out the ghosts of the Vietnamese “model minority” in photography, “sex worker” in cinema, and “boat people” in the archives to critique how these stereotypical figures have been produced by the violent contradictions of so-called U.S. freedom, protection, and inclusion. Despite the official conclusion of the Vietnam War, this thesis ultimately argues that *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) depicts how the ghosts of the Vietnamese refugee diaspora can expose the concealed presence and the ongoing effects of U.S. militarism in everyday life.

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## Introduction

This thesis examines Quynh Nguyễn-Lê's short film *Nước (Water/Homeland)* (*Nước* hereafter) (2016) to explore how traces of U.S. militarism continue to haunt the Vietnamese refugee diaspora, specifically as ghosts that linger in everyday life and visual culture. *Nước* depicts a Vietnamese American refugee family as they struggle to understand each other through the intergenerational silences, gaps, and losses that have been partially formed from the mother's displacement and resettlement as a Vietnam War refugee. These losses, from a homeland, family history, and shared language, sustain intergenerational gaps in which incomplete stories and stereotypical images about the Vietnamese come to stand in their place. Early U.S. academic scholarship treated these losses as a "Vietnamese problem," not rooted in the "violent legacy of decades of war and social upheaval, but within the bodies and minds of the Vietnamese people."<sup>1</sup> However, this treatment of the refugee condition as pathological also concealed the role of U.S. militarism in the production of the Vietnam War refugee exodus and refugee subject. Thus, to trace the militaristic dimensions of the refugee condition, *Nước* is reframed as a small portrait of ordinary life that encapsulates how three ghosts—or stereotypical figures that circulate in the American popular imaginary—have been produced by the violent contradictions of so-called U.S. freedom, protection, and inclusion. Through a hauntological analysis of American visual culture, the following fleshes out the ghosts of the Vietnamese "model minority" in photography, "sex worker" in cinema, and "boat people" in the archives to critique the militaristic underside of U.S. humanitarian efforts in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. Despite the official conclusion of the Vietnam War, this thesis argues that *Nước (Water/Homeland)* depicts how the ghosts of the Vietnamese refugee diaspora can expose the concealed traces of U.S. imperialism, militarism, and state violence that linger in everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> Yên Lê Espiritu. "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in U.S. Scholarship." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1.1-2 (February/August 2006): 410.

*Nước* (*Water/Homeland*)—drawing its title from the double meaning of the Vietnamese word *nước*, referring to both “water” and “homeland” (or “country” and “nation”)—has perhaps been overlooked in the fields of American and Asian American visual culture. *Nước* can serve as an important site to critique the role of U.S. militarism in the production of the Vietnam War refugee exodus and the refugee subject from a second-generation perspective. In comparison, first- and 1.5-generation artworks, films, and texts, such as by Trinh T. Minh-ha, Dinh Q. Lê, and Danh Võ, among others, often draw from the creators’ direct experiences or fragmented memories of the Vietnam War and/or resettlement.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s documentary films, Dinh Q. Lê’s photo-weaving installations, and Danh Võ’s conceptual works have garnered international and scholarly attention for contributing to Vietnamese diasporic art and filmmaking.

Considerably less, however, has been written about the second generation who are further removed from the source of their families’ displacement. Currently, only Lan Duong and Ly Thuý Nguyễn have analyzed *Nước* in a scholarly context, exploring how the film uses the Vietnamese notion of water to metaphorically amend and attend to intergenerational loss, silence, and conflict.<sup>3</sup> The artworks, films, and texts by the earlier generation have offered a helpful place to begin to situate this analysis. The following extends their work by exploring how the ghosts of Vietnamese refugees can linger across multiple generations, functioning to both uphold and unsettle the images of U.S. freedom, protection, and inclusion. Therefore, rather than relocating the refugee condition in the “bodies and minds of the Vietnamese,” *Nước* unsettles the image of U.S. humanitarianism by depicting how the silenced histories and pasts of Vietnam War refugees remain in the present.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I do not spell all Vietnamese names in full diacritics, such as scholars Mimi Thi Nguyen and Vinh Nguyen, to follow how individuals present their own names. Alexandra Kurmann and Tess Do. “Children on the Boat: The Recuperative Work of Postmemory in Short Fiction of the Vietnamese Diaspora.” *Comparative Literature* 70.2 (2018).

<sup>3</sup> At the time of this thesis, to my knowledge, these are the two articles that discuss *Nước*. Ly Thuý Nguyễn. “Queer Dis/inheritance and Refugee Futures.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 48.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2020): 226 – 230; Lan Duong. “Archives of Memory: Vietnamese American Films, Past and Present.” *Film quarterly* 73.3 (2020): 56 -58.

<sup>4</sup> Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 410.

Unfolding over the next few decades after the conclusion of the Vietnam War on April 30, 1975, there was a mass exodus of more than three million refugee migrants fleeing from mainland Southeast Asia—Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos—to escape the series of Cold War conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Lasting until the early 2000s, the refugee exodus is often demarcated into three “waves” that are defined by different historical circumstances and by refugees of diverse ethnic, social, and political backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> The first wave comprised about 130,000 South Vietnamese allies from the educated and urban upper class, such as political figures, military personnel, and skilled professionals, with a minority of rural fishermen and farmers, who were airlifted to the U.S. in organized evacuations on the days surrounding the Fall of Saigon.<sup>7</sup> The second wave began around the late 1970s with the plight of the “boat people” refugees, mainly from the rural regions and the lower class, who fled persecution from the revolutionary forces on overcrowded boats, freighters, and vessels to nearby countries.<sup>8</sup> With the involvement of the U.S. and UNHCR from the late 1980s, through the implementation of legal acts and orderly departure programs, the third wave was generally marked by the resettlement and reunification (or repatriation) of separated family members, re-education camp survivors, and Amerasian children from South Vietnam, as well as economic migrants.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The terms “Indochina” and “Indochinese” were more commonly used during this period. These terms often referred to the former French colonies of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and their people (French Indochina) or the region located between India (to the east) and China (to the south). Instead, I will use “mainland Southeast Asia,” “Southeast Asian,” and/or the specific countries, nationalities, and ethnicities where appropriate. “Flight from Indochina.” In *The State of the World’s Refugees 2000: Fifty years of Humanitarian Aid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 79.

<sup>6</sup> The demarcation of these “waves,” however, is not meant to be definitive as the dates and circumstances may vary slightly depending on the source and scholar. Subarno Chattarji. “‘The New Americans’: The Creation of a Typology of Vietnamese-American Identity in Children’s Literature.” *Journal of American Studies* 44.2 (2010): 410; Bram Steenhuisen. “Last Vietnamese Boat Refugees Leave Malaysia.” UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency Website. August 30, 2005, accessed September 17, 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/43141e9d4.html>

<sup>7</sup> The Fall of Saigon marks the official conclusion of the Vietnam War on April 30, 1975, with the capture of Saigon by the North Vietnamese-Communist forces. Ruben G. Rambaut. “Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans.” In *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues, Second Edition*, ed. Pyong Gap Min. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications Incorporated, 2005), 268 – 270.

<sup>8</sup> Though some refugees left overland, the majority left on overcrowded boats and shipping cargos to flee persecution. For example, many ethnic Chinese minorities (or Hoa) left as “boat people” refugees due to the rising tensions between Vietnam and China as a result of the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979. UNHCR, “Flight from Indochina,” 82 – 83.

<sup>9</sup> The wave(s) from the late 1980s and onwards were marked by an increasing suspicion from the Western governments that offered asylum for political refugees, particularly with the influx of Southeast Asian economic migrants leaving

The results of the Vietnam War and the refugee exodus displaced Vietnamese refugees to military bases and refugee camps throughout the Asia-Pacific region and the U.S.—such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, Guam, and California, among others. These sites proved to be fertile ground to study Vietnamese refugees as they became an “overdocumented” migrant group in U.S. academic scholarship.<sup>10</sup> “Studies of refugee camps,” as sociologist YẾN Lê Espiritu writes, “constitute the bulk of early scholarship on Vietnamese refugees” that often constructed refugees as “passive, immobilized, and pathetic” and the U.S. as a “benevolent rescuer.”<sup>11</sup> From the mid-1970s, the U.S. federal government supported social scientists to study the “fragile” psyches and psychosomatic states of Vietnamese refugees who experienced the recent traumas of war and their economic and sociocultural adjustments after resettlement.<sup>12</sup> For example, in his 1979 case study, sociologist Barry Stein used the “straight-line” assimilation model, which focuses on economic adaptation as a means toward sociocultural integration, in order to argue that employment restored the refugee’s sense of dignity.<sup>13</sup> This early overdocumentation of Vietnamese refugees often touted cultural, economic, and national assimilation as a method to resolve the refugee condition. This approach, however, also functioned to bolster the image of the U.S. as a benevolent nation (and future host society and employer) and Vietnamese refugees as passive recipients of its generosity.<sup>14</sup>

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the unstable (wartime) economies of their countries in search of opportunities. These plans included: The UNHCR’s Orderly Departure Program (1979), Comprehensive Plan of Action (1989), the U.S.’s Amerasian Homecoming Act (1989), and others. Priscilla Koh. “You Can Come Home Again: Narratives of Home and Belonging Among Second-Generation *Việt Kiều* in Vietnam.” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 30.1 (March 2015): 176 – 179.

<sup>10</sup> For example, from April 1975, the 130,000 refugees from the first wave were airlifted to U.S. military bases and refugee camps, such as Clark Air Force Base on Luzon Island, Philippines, Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, where they were processed before being resettled and dispersed to other U.S. states. Ruben G. Rambaut, “Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans,” 267 – 270; Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 410.

<sup>11</sup> YẾN Lê Espiritu. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 50; Thomas A. Dubois. “Constructions Construed: The Representation of Southeast Asian Refugees in Academic, Popular, and Adolescent Discourse.” *Amerasia Journal* 19.3 (1993): 5.

<sup>12</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 50 – 51; Dubois, “Constructions Construed,” 5.

<sup>13</sup> Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 412 – 413; Barry Stein. “Occupational Adjustment of Refugees: The Vietnamese in the United States.” *International Migration Reviews* 13.1 (1979): 26 – 27.

<sup>14</sup> Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 412.

The “benevolent” role of the U.S. in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees is tied to the international community and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The UNHCR is an institution that oversees, implements, and provides legal advice on the protocols of the UNHCR 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol.<sup>15</sup> The 1951 Convention defines a refugee as an individual who harbors a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion [...],” and their unwillingness or incapability to return to their country of origin.<sup>16</sup> Put differently, political scientist Alexander Betts reframes the UNHCR and 1951 Convention as the main components of the “refugee regime,” or the “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures,” that seeks to ensure refugees retain their human rights.<sup>17</sup> The regime ensures these rights through: (1) “asylum,” the (normative and legally reinforced) obligations of states to protect refugees who arrive in their *own* territories, and (2) “burden-sharing,” the (ambiguous and less legally reinforced) obligations of states to contribute to the protection of refugees who arrive in the territories of *other* states.<sup>18</sup> For the latter, Betts argues that international cooperation on protection is often less about the protection of refugees and more about the protection of wider interests, “notably immigration, security, and trade.”<sup>19</sup> This thesis examines *Nước* to extend this argument that the U.S. protected Vietnamese refugees to purge its own violent (inter)national image, memory, and psyche from the ghosts of the Vietnam War. As Espiritu argues, the production of the refugee exodus and the refugee subject has “transformed the United States from violent aggressor in Vietnam to benevolent rescuer,” concealing the role of U.S. militarism in the displacement, resettlement, and assimilation of the Vietnamese people.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Betts, *Protection by Persuasion: International Cooperation in the Refugee Regime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1 – 3.

<sup>16</sup> Vinh Nguyen, Thy Phu, et al. trace the “slipperiness or pliability of political definitions and categories,” such as immigrants, migrants, economic migrants, and (political) refugees. The 1951 Convention “also became a tool to refuse migrants who did not fit its narrow definition of refugeehood.” This thesis includes economic and other migrants in their context to question and expand this definition of refuge(e). UNHCR, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 14; Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu, eds. *Refugee States: Critical Studies in Canada* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 7; 83.

<sup>17</sup> Betts, *Protection by Persuasion*, 1 – 3.

<sup>18</sup> Betts, *Protection by Persuasion*, 1 – 3.

<sup>19</sup> Betts, *Protection by Persuasion*, 1 – 3.

<sup>20</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 35.

This brief introduction asserts that documentation and representation can reveal as much they conceal. It is important to examine the dominant representations of Vietnamese refugees in American visual culture as a way to critique the invisible hand of U.S. militarism in the aggravation and production of humanitarian crises and subjects. The following explores how the suppression of “concluded” state violence, suppressed by the dominant images and stories of U.S. humanitarian efforts, sustains the concealed presence and the ongoing effects of militarism in the everyday lives of ordinary Vietnamese American refugees. Refugee resettlement in the U.S. is often discursively and visually framed through the rubrics of capitalism, labour, and gratitude, as well as forgiveness, believing that employment can supposedly exorcise the ghosts of war from the psyches of the Vietnamese and the U.S. nation-state. However, this project builds upon the premise that cultural, economic, and national assimilation cannot easily resolve the refugee condition in everyday life.

Quyên Nguyễn-Lê’s filmography and main subject matter, including *Nước*, touch upon how “histories are deeply felt in the quotidian everyday.”<sup>21</sup> Born to Vietnamese refugee parents in San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles, Quyên Nguyễn-Lê (they/them) is a queer second-generation Vietnamese American filmmaker. Their experimental documentaries and short films often explore the lives of Vietnamese American refugee, immigrant, queer, and other communities. For example, *Hoài (Ongoing, Memory)* (2016) is a film about a queer second-generation Vietnamese American woman who experiences the heartaches of romantic and national relationships. In the documentary *In Living Memory* (2022), the director interviews their mother about her life as a former refugee after the closure of her nail salon at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, *Nước* also depicts the refugee condition which, as this thesis argues and reinterprets, sheds light on how the ghosts of war return to disrupt the present and the rhythms of everyday life.

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<sup>21</sup> Quyên Nguyễn-Lê’s other short films include *Queer Vietnameseness* (2015) and *The Morning Passing on El Cajon Boulevard* (2019), to name a few. “About.” <https://www.quyennl.com/about.html>.

### “Fleshing Out Her Ghosts”

Proposed by sociologist Grace Cho in her book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, the framework of “fleshing out the ghost” aims to explore how the unresolved trauma of a family member can linger on as a ghost—as an undisclosed or unclear secret, story, or memory—that disturbs the lives of the following generation.<sup>22</sup> Cho, a daughter of a Korean immigrant mother and an American serviceman, opens her book with how the “uncertain beginnings” of her family history have become muddled with the stereotypical rumours of Korean sex workers (*yanggongju*) employed during the Korean War.<sup>23</sup> For Cho, intergenerational trauma, in this sense, is sustained by a ghost that resides in the gaps between fact and fiction. Therefore, Cho suggests that the “method by which to flesh out a ghost is to investigate what produced it and expose the fictional elements that are often taken for granted as factual sociological knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the ghosts of war also disturb the family histories of the Vietnamese refugee diaspora. Building on recent studies of the Vietnam War, Brenda Boyle and Jeehyun Lim write that ordinary people have “created new lives from the war’s rubble, sometimes being suppressed by the laws, policies, and dominant stories of their host society and sometimes affecting change in those laws, policies, and stories.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, “fleshing out the ghost” offers a theoretical throughline to trace the hauntings of *Nước*’s refugee family history, which has been ruptured and suppressed by the fallacious stories of U.S. freedom, protection, and inclusion, as well as through visual culture.

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<sup>22</sup> Cho builds upon the psychoanalytic concept of the “transgenerational phantom” from Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. Grace M. Cho. *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 42; Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Nicholas T. Rand, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 1-13.

<sup>24</sup> Similarly, sociologist Avery Gordon argues that to analyze the ghosts of state violence that still haunt contemporary society is to also critique the conventional approaches to sociological knowledge production, which values objectivity and empiricism as legitimate modes of inquiry. Avery F. Gordon. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8; Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 1-13.

<sup>25</sup> Brenda M. Boyle and Jeehyun Lim. *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 5.

## Visual Culture

The methodological and theoretical framework of this thesis is interdisciplinary in scope, enfolding approaches from Asian American studies, critical refugee studies, and visual culture studies. The following is primarily a study of visual culture, a field that emerged in the 1980s as “information, communication, entertainment, and aesthetics” were increasingly mediated through images and screens.<sup>26</sup> One of the central aims of examining visual culture is to investigate how images, visuality, and countervisuality are not neutral but rather deeply entangled with power and politics.<sup>27</sup> As an academic discipline, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright write that visual culture intersected with the growing sentiment among many scholars who “no longer [found] viable the traditional divisions in academia through which images in different realms (such as art history, film studies, and communication) have been studied apart from other categories of the visual.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the scope of visual culture encompasses objects from art, film, and media, and their “cross-influences” and “interconnectedness.”<sup>29</sup> The “interconnectedness” of images, however, is also tied to the politics of representation, particularly through the dynamics of what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls the “complex of visuality” and “countervisuality.”<sup>30</sup> Visuality refers to the practices and processes that classify, segregate, and then aestheticize society into different groups to suppress others from “cohering as political subjects (such as the workers, the people, or the (decolonized) nation.”<sup>31</sup> In contrast, countervisuality refers to the practices that unsettle the influence of visuality, or political forms of looking and visual resistance that can be expressed through race, gender, and sexuality.

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<sup>26</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 7; Nicholas Mirzoeff. “The Right to Look.” *Critical Inquiry* 37.2 (Spring 2011): 480 – 485.

<sup>28</sup> Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 22 – 23.

<sup>31</sup> Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 22 – 23.

## Asian American Studies

This thesis draws from Asian American studies, an academic discipline that emerged in the late 1960s with the college student-activist led response to the history of anti-Asian discrimination, the Asian American Movement, and the anti-Vietnam War Movement.<sup>32</sup> To address the erasure of Asian Americans in history, politics, and education curricula, this interdisciplinary field draws from the humanities and social sciences to examine the societal contributions and complex lives of Asian Americans. As the interdisciplinary scholar Lisa Lowe writes in her book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, the term “immigrant acts” emphasizes the way that:

the life conditions, choices, and expressions of Asian Americans have been significantly determined by the U.S. state through the apparatus of immigration laws and policies, through the enfranchisement denied or extended to immigrant individuals and communities, and through the processes of naturalization and citizenship.<sup>33</sup>

Legally deemed as “aliens ineligible to citizenship,” the majority of Asian immigrants in the U.S. were denied the right to naturalization and to own property until the mid-1950s.<sup>34</sup> Asian American citizenship, as the other chapters will explore, has also been shaped by the gendered processes of racialization and sexualization through state-sanctioned forms of discrimination. Similarly, Asian American cultural expressions have been influenced by the historical and sociolegal conditions of U.S. immigration policies. This mode of analysis can support the interpretations of how early anti-Asian immigration policies linger in humanitarian policies of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement and, relatedly, how the claims to citizenship can be shaped by a countervisual aesthetics.

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<sup>32</sup> The development of Asian American studies coincided with other ethnic studies fields, such as African American studies, which resulted from the Civil Rights Movement and Third World Liberation Front strikes of 1968. The latter was led by ethnic minority college students who sought to rectify their Eurocentric education curricula. These strikes mainly took place at San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley. Y en L e Espiritu. *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 1992), 31-46.

<sup>33</sup> Lisa Lowe. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>34</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 7.

Asian American visual culture, from cultural expressions to countervisual practices, have been historically affected by markers of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. In his book *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video*, Glen Mimura traces the shared concepts and histories between Asian American studies, film studies, and media studies. Mimura argues that, for marginalized communities in the U.S., the disciplinary divisions made between media practices such as “film, video, photography, radio, digital media, and the Internet” have been “coded by racialized values and inequalities.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, due to their accessibility and affordability, independent film and video production became key methods for Asian Americans to represent themselves in “alternative” film festivals and cultural organizations to counter the racist depictions of their communities in mainstream society.<sup>36</sup> In other words, neglecting the potential significance of alternative, independent, and experimental work to maintain disciplinary divisions can thus reinforce the binary notions of “center and margin, big budget and low budget, elite and popular, dominant and subordinate.”<sup>37</sup> Instead, Mimura forms a genealogy of undervalued works by Asian American filmmakers and film scholars in order to identify a collective Asian American (film and video) aesthetics. “However imprecise these notions may be,” as Mimura writes, the language that filmmaker Renee Tajima and film scholar Peter Feng, among others, employ in their work—from “soul,” “consciousness,” “state of mind,” to “sensitivity”—tend to focus less on the differences between mediums and more on the artist’s recognition of their difference in society.<sup>38</sup> Thus, as an interdisciplinary study of Asian American visual culture, this thesis also challenges the historical, political, and racial tensions formed by traditional disciplinary boundaries.

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<sup>35</sup> Glen M. Mimura. *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), XIII.

<sup>36</sup> Founded by Asian American college student-activists, two notable Asian American media collectives include Visual Communications (1970 –) and EthnoCommunications (1996 –). Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*, XIV; 37 – 43.

<sup>37</sup> Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*, XIII.

<sup>38</sup> Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*, XIV.

### Critical Refugee Studies

Thirdly, this thesis draws from critical refugee studies to examine the relationships between Asian American immigrants and Southeast Asian American refugees, nationhood and citizenship, and humanitarianism and militarism. As Espiritu explores in her book *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, critical refugee studies is an interdisciplinary field that frames the refugee subject not only as a migrant category or object of knowledge, but also as a “site for social and political critiques.”<sup>39</sup> Espiritu demonstrates the critical significance of Vietnamese refugees and their homes through the notions of “militarized refuge(es),” which explore how militarism is often concealed in the formation of humanitarian crises, subjects, and spaces.<sup>40</sup> For example, the U.S. military bases used during the Vietnam war, particularly the Clark Air Force Base (AFB) on Luzon Island, Philippines and the Andersen AFB in Guam, were formed in the earlier period of U.S. colonial expansion in the Asia-Pacific and then used to act out the military aggression against Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> However, these military bases, which helped to produce the refugee exodus and refugee subject in the first place—by providing logistical, medical, and training support for the American forces, deploying American troops and military aircrafts, and launching bombing missions across Vietnam—were converted into refugee camps to “rescue” those fleeing the Vietnam War.<sup>42</sup> First-wave Vietnamese refugees, similarly, were displaced directly into the U.S. empire after being resettled to Camp Pendleton in California, another “military-base-turned-refugee-camp.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, reframing Vietnamese refugees through the notions of “militarized refugee(es)” can help recentre the processes that have decoupled militarism from humanitarianism, specifically in *Nước*.

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<sup>39</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Espiritu writes from “the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States had colonized islands—Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, and Guam, Eastern Samoa, Wake Island, and the Philippines in the Pacific—and transformed them into strategic sites for advancing American economic and military interests.” Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 24 – 32.

<sup>42</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 35 – 40.

<sup>43</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 33 – 35; 50.

### **Nước (Water/Homeland)**

*Nước (Water/Homeland)* is an experimental film that is set during the California drought. *Nước* follows the nameless protagonist (Rosi Vo Nghiem), a genderqueer Vietnamese American teenager, who tries to understand their mother's (My Le Nghiem) story as a Vietnamese refugee. Defined specifically as an "experimental narrative short film," the film unfolds through nonlinear flashbacks and flashforwards that are interspersed with vignettes of the protagonist's inner mind and two main dialogues: one between the protagonist and their mother as they both share a meal in their home, and another between the protagonist and their love interest (Cynthia Callejas) in a photographic dark room.<sup>44</sup> The film opens with the conversation between the protagonist and their love interest as the two are developing reproductions of iconic wartime photographs and a portrait of the protagonist's mother, until they come to have an argument about the meaning and "mistake" of the Vietnam War. The following scene transitions to the conversation between the protagonist and their mother as the two are silently eating *chao* (rice porridge) in their home, depicting how silence and the loss of a shared language impact the story of the mother's past. The short film then returns to the dark room, where three intersubjective scenes begin to unfold from the perspective of the protagonist. The first scene is a montage of the protagonist and their love interest re-enacting iconic wartime photographs, including Bernie Boston's *Flower Power* (1967) and Eddie Adams's *Saigon Execution* (1968). The second scene is of the protagonist being reborn inside of a womb with a projection of the "Da Nang Hooker," from Stanley Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), repeating the now-infamous catchphrase: "me so horny, me love you long time." Lastly, the third intersubjective scene is of the protagonist emerging from a body of water after being reborn from the womb, and then being pulled onto a stranded boat with their mother in the California desert.

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<sup>44</sup> The characters of *Nước* are not credited with names in the film. Thus, I will refer to the characters as: the protagonist, the (refugee) mother, and the love interest. Quyên Nguyễn-Lê. Website. <https://www.quyennl.com/nuoc-film.html>

The focus on *Nước* as a case study aims to circumvent what Indigenous studies scholar Eve Tuck calls “damage-centred research.”<sup>45</sup> Specifically, Tuck writes that damage-centred research “intends to document people’s pain and brokenness” that often “reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the aim is not to extract the traumatic memories of refugees and their communities to reproduce those traumas as knowledge. Instead, it frames *Nước* as a small portrait of a Vietnamese American refugee family whose semifictional images and story can expose the fictional details of so-called documentary, ethnographic, and sociological fact. It does so by also defining *Nước* as a political film through its circulation in independent film festivals, including at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival (2016), the Queer Vietnamese Film Festival (2016), and the Viet Film Fest (2018), among others.

The latter, the Viet Film Fest, which will be discussed further in the third chapter, illustrates Mimura’s emphasis on the role of independent circulation networks to facilitate and foster a sense of Asian American visual resistance against their exclusions in mainstream society. As film scholar Lan Duong writes, the Viet Film Fest “is marked by a feeling of collective grief about the ‘loss’ of the war and the need to celebrate the works of the community’s own members” and which also “represents an archive of memory for a refugee community that wants to rectify how its members have been represented by U.S. and Vietnamese national cultures in film, both in the past and in the present moment.”<sup>47</sup> Additionally, although *Nước* serves as the main case study, the three chapters unfold other works of Vietnamese diasporic and refugee art, film, and literature to reorient and critique the dominant image of the Vietnam War as an American tragedy. Thus, in a similar manner to Mimura, this approach is a step towards articulating a Vietnamese refugee aesthetics.

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<sup>45</sup> Even Tuck. “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities.” *Harvard Educational Review* 79.3 (2009): 409.

<sup>46</sup> Tuck, “Suspending Damage,” 409.

<sup>47</sup> In addition to film festivals, *Nước* has been screened at art galleries, universities, and community spaces. Lan Duong. “Archives of Memory: Vietnamese American Films, Past and Present.” *Film Quarterly* 73.3 (Spring 2020): 54.

This thesis is structured into three chapters, entitled “The Ghost in the Photograph,” “The Ghost in the Projection,” and “The Ghosts in the Archive,” to explore how the ghostly figures in *Nước* emerge from the contradictions of U.S. humanitarian discourses. As Thomas Dubois argues, these “discursive models are particularly important to examine since their aggregate constitutes a shifting and ill-defined (but nonetheless recognizable) construction of *the* Southeast Asian, steeped in American social and political ideology and certainly serving particular socio-political ends.”<sup>48</sup> Chapter I examines how photographs reframed Vietnamese people from wartime icons into the new Asian American “model minorities” to uphold the image of the U.S. as a land of free economic opportunity and, therefore, a land free of discrimination. This chapter argues that *Nước* draws from the material and ghostly dimensions of family photographs to expose the concealed debts, failures, and losses that accrue upon receiving the U.S.’s “gift of freedom.”<sup>49</sup> Chapter II then examines how Hollywood cinema portrayed Vietnamese women as “sex workers” to circulate the image of the U.S. as a masculine protector of a feminized South Vietnam. This chapter argues that *Nước* uses phantasmagoric projections to expose the militaristic underside of the U.S.’s “image of protection” in supporting the wartime sex economy.<sup>50</sup> Chapter III examines how archives attempted to include South Vietnamese American “boat people” to bolster the U.S.’s national rebuilding project in the postwar era. This chapter argues that *Nước* draws from the unarchivable and haunting memories of the refugee boat passage to expose the U.S.’s exclusionary past and practices within its archives. *Nước*, through the ghosts of the “model minority,” “sex worker,” and “boat people,” depicts the violence between U.S. freedom and debt, protection and domination, and inclusion and exclusion.

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas A. Dubois. “Constructions Construed: The Representation of Southeast Asian Refugees in Academic, Popular, and Adolescent Discourse.” *Amerasia Journal* 19.3 (1993): 1 – 2.

<sup>49</sup> Ruth Y. Hsu. ““Will the Model Minority Please Identify itself?: American Ethnic Identity and Its Discontents.” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5.1 (Spring 1996): 38 – 39; Mimi Thi Nguyen. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Heather Marie Stur. *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 48 – 61.

## Chapter I. The Ghost in the Photograph

This chapter examines the significance of photography in *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*), focusing on the ghostly and material presence of the protagonist's "model minority" mother in the photograph. The introduction to this chapter delineates the model minority discourse as it relates to notions of refugee freedom, debt, and (in)gratitude, illustrating how Vietnamese refugees uphold the national ideology of the U.S. as a land of equal opportunity and, therefore, a land free of discrimination. Specifically, it explores how media reports of the model minority function to celebrate the U.S.'s "gift of freedom" while they bury the intergenerational debts, failures, and losses that have accrued in the processes of resettlement and assimilation.<sup>51</sup> As with other Asian American immigrants, the model minority myth is reinforced through the popular press, which disseminate the conventional stories of economic success and, relatedly, alleged access to freedom through capitalistic labour.

*Nước*, however, delves into the fictional dimensions of the model minority myth through photography. Beginning with the opening scene in the photographic dark room, the protagonist and their love interest are developing iconic wartime photographs of maimed Vietnamese bodies—including Eddie Adams's *Saigon Execution* (1968) and Huynh Cong "Nick" Ut's *The Terror of War* (1972), as well as a portrait of the mother working as a pedicurist—and arranging them in a chronological timeline to dry. This timeline represents the erasure of Vietnamese subjects from the canonical history of the Vietnam War, subjects persistently reduced to "icons" and thus erased of "their historical specificity, transcending the particulars of their time and place of origin" into symbols of U.S. national identity and cultural memory.<sup>52</sup> This chapter argues that the ghostly and material presence of the protagonist's mother, photographed as a refugee-turned-model minority, exposes the debts, failures, and sacrifices that have been buried under the myth of U.S. freedom.

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<sup>51</sup> Nguyen *The Gift of Freedom*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Griffin. "Media Images of War." *Media, War & Conflict* 3.1 (2010): 18.

### **Gifts and Debts of Freedom: The “Model Minority”**

In her book *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, Mimi Thi Nguyen examines the contradictory genealogy of the U.S. as an empire of liberty, where wars are waged and justified under the name of freedom. Nguyen frames the Vietnamese refugee subject as a site to unveil the properties of freedom, arguing that the resettled refugee is conditioned to perpetually bear the “gift of freedom” and the “debt that follows.”<sup>53</sup> The gift of freedom grants the refugee alleged access to economic opportunities, homeland security, civil and human rights, citizenship status, and self-determination, among other liberal concepts defined in opposition to supposedly “unfree” societies under communism or authoritarian rule.<sup>54</sup> Paradoxically, the debt that follows refers to the cost of freedom the U.S. forces upon the refugee, a debt that serves as a haunting reminder that freedom continues to accrue with the passing of time as a “gift that keeps on giving.”<sup>55</sup> However, Vietnamese American refugees repay their dues to the U.S. nation-state through public acts of gratitude and proper citizenship, often through the tropes of the “grateful refugee” and the “refugee patriot.”<sup>56</sup> An example of a refugee patriot is Assistant Attorney General Viet D. Dinh, the chief architect of The USA Patriot Act, passed in October 2001 in response to the 9/11 attacks, that expanded the power of U.S. law enforcement, surveillance, and incarceration against terrorism and “possible terrorist[s].”<sup>57</sup> Or, former refugee Nguyet Anh Duong, the “bomb lady” who designed thermobaric weapons for the Pentagon and the U.S. military.<sup>58</sup> In both of these cases, the refugee patriot serves as “liberalism’s alibi” and spectre that sustains the U.S.’s global war on terror and its self-designated role as a caregiver of former and future refugees.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 19 – 21.

<sup>56</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 141.

<sup>57</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 134.

<sup>58</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 171.

<sup>59</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 171.

Whereas the refugee patriot contributes to the U.S.'s empire of liberty by sustaining the ongoing (and future) international wars for freedom, the grateful refugee serves as a public figure of both gratitude and forgiveness.<sup>60</sup> Nguyen writes that the “gift of freedom” is the U.S.'s “system for reordering the world,” or “the manufacture of sentiments and structures of feelings within and between empire’s subjects as part of imperial statecraft, including gratefulness for the gift, and forgiveness for those trespasses that are the sometimes unfortunate ‘error’ in its giving.”<sup>61</sup> An example of the grateful refugee is “Napalm Girl” Phan Thị Kim Phúc, the “girl in the photograph” whose image was circulated globally as an icon of “America’s war in Vietnam” after her then nine-year-old, scorched body was photographed by Nick Ut in 1972.<sup>62</sup> However, this icon of “America’s war in Vietnam,” which uses a Vietnamese subject to reconfigure the war as an American tragedy, overshadows the contradictory detail that the napalm bombings were accidentally dropped by a South Vietnamese plane on suspected Viet Cong members in the village of Trang Bang rather than by an American. Thus, Kim Phúc’s public statement of forgiveness on November 11, 1996, at the National Veterans Day commemoration in Washington, D.C., where she stated, “Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace,” reveals how icons, forgiveness, and gratitude can create a “manufactured” sentiment that feeds into the U.S.’s gift of freedom.<sup>63</sup> Other lesser-known grateful and forgiving refugees appear in the popular press to reaffirm the benefits of U.S. freedom, which often uses the model minority trajectory from the self-sufficient, sacrificial, and grateful low-wage labourer to an immigrant success story.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 25.

<sup>62</sup> Griffin, “Media Images of War,” 18.

<sup>63</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 84.

<sup>64</sup> Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*, 1; Osajima, Keith. “Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s.” In *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, ed. Kent A. Ono (Hoboken, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2004), 218.

The media news reports of Vietnamese refugees as model minorities uphold the national ideology of the U.S. as a land of equal opportunity and, therefore, a land free of discrimination. The model minority discourse serves as a tool in the processes of Asian American “immigration, assimilation, and racialization,” which draws from different myths to include and exclude Asian American subjects into and from the national fabric.<sup>65</sup> First, the model minority discourse often has less to do with success and more with disciplining other racialized minority groups, primarily African Americans, for their perceived failure or unwillingness to assimilate into mainstream (read: white) society.<sup>66</sup> Second, it further claims and promises that Asian American subjects can one day assimilate when their racially non-European features and perpetual images as aliens, strangers, and immigrants hinder them from being fully accepted.<sup>67</sup> Third, it insists that Asian Americans are spared from racial and social discrimination due to their perceived economic and educational success.<sup>68</sup> In turn, these myths obscure the “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” of Asian America, such as ethnic differences, socioeconomic disparities, distinct histories, and generational rifts, among other lived experiences.<sup>69</sup> These purported stories of economic success, gratitude, and forgiveness, consequently, absolve the U.S empire of the spectral violence involved in sustaining these discriminatory conditions. In contrast, Asian American studies scholars such as Anne Anlin Cheng, David Eng, and Shinhee Han have interpreted assimilation and the model minority trope through a “morphology of ghostliness,” or registers of racial loss, grief, and melancholy.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> David L. Eng and Shinhee Han. *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 40.

<sup>66</sup> Robert G. Lee. “The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth.” In *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu, et al. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 256.

<sup>67</sup> Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 39.

<sup>69</sup> Lisa Lowe. “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences.” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1.1 (Spring 1991): 26 – 28.

<sup>70</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20.

## Morphologies

In *Nước*, the opening scene in the dark room depicts the significance of (post) wartime photography for Vietnamese refugees and the U.S. nation-state. In the dark room, under the soft glow of the red safelight, the protagonist and love interest are flirting with each other while developing reproductions of the iconic wartime photographs. These include Malcolm Browne's *Burning Monk* (1963), Bernie Boston's *Flower Power* (1967), Eddie Adams's *Saigon Execution* (1968), and Nick Ut's *The Terror of War* (1972) (Figure 1). These photographs capture the anti-war movements in the U.S. and in Vietnam, the gunfire execution of suspected Viet Cong member Nguyễn Văn Lém, and the napalm bombing that scorched the clothes and body of "Napalm Girl" Kim Phúc, respectively. The protagonist arranges these photographs in chronological order, from the wartime icons to photographs of the protagonist's mother and of the "boat people" refugees.

These photographs do not only illustrate the chronology of the Vietnam War, but they also form a trove of seen and unseen narratives. As the protagonist and love interest begin leaning and inching closer to each other, the love interest looks at the mother's photograph hanging behind the protagonist and says, "Your mom's watching us" (Figure 2). The protagonist turns around to see that the love interest was just referring to the photograph and lets out a sigh of relief, "Don't scare me like that." The love interest then asks about their mother, "Will you tell me about her?" The protagonist, looking at the mother's portrait, offers, "This is my mom. She came to the U.S. after the Vietnam War. She doesn't talk about it much. I don't know how to ask. How do you ask about trauma when you don't even speak the same language anymore?" As the protagonist recounts the loss of their mother's story due to generational silence, the scene shifts from her photograph—the only personal marker of her past which has been obscured by the more iconic images—to her reflection in a pedicure chair's basin of water as she labours over a white woman's feet (Figure 3).

*Nước* illustrates the way photography can serve as conduits to retell stories, narratives, and memories, and the meanings produced through the genres of iconic and vernacular photography. Film scholar Sylvia Shin Huey Chong defines the photographs of the *Saigon Execution*, *The Terror of War*, and Ronald Haeberle's photograph of the *My Lai Massacre* (1968) (not included in *Nước*) as the "Vietnam triptych" of "iconic images" for their ceaseless reproductions and representations of decisive moments from the Vietnam War.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, media studies scholar Thy Phu writes that these photographs have gradually become "icons that transcend" their "particular conflict[s]" to symbolize the atrocity of war in general."<sup>72</sup> However, the reproductions of these photographs, as Asian American studies scholar Mai-Linh Hong argues, has contributed to an American "media-saturated national social imaginary" that render "Vietnamese refugees as speechless objects of mass spectatorship, familiar to Americans through iconic, wrenching photographs of endangered civilians, particularly children and 'Boat People'."<sup>73</sup> In addition, these images tend to follow the conventions of war photography which, to name just a few characteristics, often depict the markers of combat, wounded bodies, and ruined architecture, landscapes, and environments.<sup>74</sup> However, in *Nước*, the protagonist and love interest use these wartime photographs to retell the mother's past, placing the mother's portrait in the photographic timeline in the dark room to remind us that life before and after resettlement is still a part of this chronology of U.S. militarism, violence, and war. In this sense, the ghost of the mother's portrait "watching us" can be read as a countervisual form of looking. The mother, always "watching" from the shadows of the Vietnam War's visual record, still lingers despite the overshadowing and ubiquitous presence of the more iconic photographs.

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<sup>71</sup> Sylvia Shin Huey Chong. *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 76 – 77.

<sup>72</sup> Thy Phu. *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 2.

<sup>73</sup> Mai-Linh Hong. "Reframing the Archive: Vietnamese Refugee Narratives in the Post 9/11 Period." *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* (2016): 20.

<sup>74</sup> Phu, *Warring Visions*, 2.

Thus, *Nước* reimagines the photographic record of the Vietnam War by (re)developing the images of ordinary life that have been overshadowed and obscured by the icons of war. Whereas the iconic photographs tend to be mythologized as distant spectacles that circulate in the popular imaginary, photography historian Geoffrey Batchen writes that the vernacular photographs of everyday life, such as family photographs, “tend to occupy the home and the heart but rarely the museum or academy.”<sup>75</sup> Batchen also reminds us of the overlooked “morphology” of (vernacular) photographs, specifying that a photograph is oftentimes looked through as an invisible window into a scene or subject but not looked at or felt as an object with volume, opacity, and physicality.<sup>76</sup> Often made by the hands of the amateur and the anonymous, vernacular photographs make use of their physical presence through the photographed subject’s (in)direct involvement in the processes of production, intervention, and handling.

These physical processes inscribe the “autobiographical element to his/her story” into “photographs [that can] touch back, casually grazing the pores of our skin with their textured surfaces.”<sup>77</sup> In this vein, *Nước* depicts the “morphology” of the mother’s photograph, from the chemical and material processes of being photographed, developed, and then placed alongside the iconic images to dry. It thus reinscribes her past into the historical record. Although the protagonist admits that they do not know much about their mother’s past, the family stories that have been lost to generational silence and American spectacles can still be felt as photographic textures, grains, and chemical scents that linger in the dark room. The morphology of the mother’s photograph reveals how she is not only a silent image “watching” from the background, but that she is also a ghost that is biographically inscribed as a record who can look and touch back against her erasure.

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<sup>75</sup> Geoffrey Batchen. “Vernacular Photographies.” *History of Photography* 24.3 (2000): 262.

<sup>76</sup> Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” 263.

<sup>77</sup> Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies,” 263.

Similarly, the Vietnamese American artist Dinh Q. Lê, born in Hà Tiên, Vietnam, in 1968, before his family left and resettled to Southern California around 1977 because of the Cambodian-Vietnamese War, also explores the emotional tactility of family photographs.<sup>78</sup> In his installations *Mot Coi Di Ve* (1999) and *Crossing the Farther Shore* (2014), Lê collects and stitches written letters and orphan photographs of Vietnamese families into photo-weaving installations. After his return to South Vietnam in the late 1990s, Lê began to collect family photographs from antique shops, in search of his own after they were lost from his childhood departure.<sup>79</sup> Hung from the gallery's ceiling, *Mot Coi Di Ve* is a quilt-like curtain with letters and orphan photographs stitched by their corners. In *Crossing the Farther Shore*, Lê stitches black and white orphan photographs from the 1940s to the 1980s into three-dimensional structures and installations.<sup>80</sup> Lê's focus on collecting abandoned, orphan photographs—defined as the unclaimed photographs of which their “owners or producers, the subjects featured in them, or the families of those who witnessed or might authenticate their circumstances” are no longer accessible to us—reminds us of the effects of war and refugee displacement.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Thy Phu questions and expands the limiting rubrics of war photography, which conventionally depicts the destruction or immediacy of combat, by enfolding vernacular photography and portraits of family life into this genre. By following Thy Phu's ideas of expanding the scope of war photography, vernacular photographs of ordinary life, including those of the refugee mother in *Nước* and Lê's photo-weaving installations, can retrace the ghostly residues of U.S. militarism, violence, and war that are concealed in the everyday.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> “Dinh Q. Lê: *Crossing the Farther Shore* (10 April – 28 August 2014).” <http://www.ricegallery.org/dinh-q-le>

<sup>79</sup> Moira Roth. “Obdurate History: Dinh Q. Lê, the Vietnam War, Photography, and Memory.” *Art Journal* 60.2 (2001): 39; Thy Phu. “Diasporic Vietnamese Family Photographs, Orphan Images, and the Art of Recollection.” *Photography and Diaspora* 5.1 (Fall 2014), ed. Anthony W. Lee; Tina Campt. *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the Africa Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 87.

<sup>80</sup> “Dinh Q. Lê: *Crossing the Farther Shore* (10 April – 28 August 2014).” <http://www.ricegallery.org/dinh-q-le>

<sup>81</sup> *Mot Coi Di Ve* roughly translates to “spending one's life trying to find one's way home.”

<sup>82</sup> Phu, *Warring Visions*, 1 – 4.

### The Skin of the Spectacle

Departing from the dark room, the scene then transitions from the photographic portrait of the mother to her reflection in a pool of water. The latter scene pans out to show the mother silently labouring over a white woman's feet at the base of a pedicure chair, a stereotypical image that reinforces the racial, social, and national hierarchy in the U.S. public imaginary. This implied visual hierarchy also points to the issues of the model minority discourse imposed on Vietnamese refugees. Although we only receive a glimpse of the mother's working conditions, the image of an Asian immigrant woman working in a nail salon carries enduring and loaded stereotypes associated with a racialized, gendered, and working-class form of labour.<sup>83</sup> The mother's silence as she works on the haughty white client's feet can be read as the contours of her ghost's morphology, or racial melancholia. A psychoanalytic concept, Anne Cheng describes the "morphology of ghostliness" as the registers of racial grief and loss that accrue in the processes of Asian American racialization, immigration, and assimilation.<sup>84</sup> This grief, however, is often disavowed by mainstream society which presents Asian immigrants as "successful" model minorities. In this vein, Asian American subjectivity tends to be negotiated with this "haunting negativity that has not only been attached to but has also helped to constitute the very category of 'the racialized'" or, more specifically, the failed promises of the model minority trope and U.S. freedom that haunt Asian immigrants.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Historian Julie A. Willet charts the demographic changes in the nail industry in the twentieth century, examining how race, class, and nationality are interwoven in the shifting cultural images of the manicurist (and pedicurist). From the 1920s and 1930s, much of the nail shops and nail technician jobs were occupied by working-class African American women who often served an upper-class, white clientele. Therefore, the images of manicurists in this period were often rooted in perceptions of the racialized working class and then reinforced in popular culture, with tropes such as the petty thief, the "dim-witted" gossip in *The Women* (1939), and the gold digger in *Hands Across the Table* (1935). For pedicurists, Willet recounts a manicurist who admitted that if asked about pedicures, "[y]ou just said you did manicures" because pedicures "may have smacked too much of subservience." These early stereotypes associated with working-class African American women gained a different racial tone with the proliferation of Asian-owned nail shops and Asian nail technicians from the 1990s. These racial differences ranged from language barriers, economic competition, and hygiene. Julie A. Willet. "'Hands Across the Table': A Short History of the Manicurist." *Journal of Women's History* 17.3 (Fall 2005): 70.

<sup>84</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 25 – 26.

*Nước* traces these racial losses from the public to the private sphere to show how the U.S.'s gift of freedom is sustained by intergenerational silence, sacrifice, and gratitude. Sharing a meal together in their kitchen, the protagonist's mother takes a pause from eating and recalls a memory, "Whenever I eat Chao [rice porridge], I think of your grandmother. Whenever I was sick, she'd make Chao for me to eat" (Figure 4). Taking the mother's recollection as an invitation to tread a bit further, the protagonist, instead of asking about her trauma, asks her an open-ended question, "Do you ever miss Vietnam?" The protagonist's prodding turns into a casual testimony of sacrifice when their mother responds, "Of course. But if I hadn't come here, I wouldn't have had you in the way I do today." The director Quỳên Nguyễn-Lê, as Ly Thuý Nguyễn writes:

once shared that this conversation in the scene comes from the familiar way many (immigrant/refugee) descendants learned about their family history: never an 'origin story' passed down in full speech. It was always those fleeting moments, in the middle of watching a film or eating a meal, a parent would absentmindedly share something about the past, a memory that descendants could not dwell on.<sup>86</sup>

While the protagonist's mother does not (or cannot) retell an "origin story," the protagonist also does not (or cannot) ask directly about it. In a seeming silent agreement, the protagonist and mother appear to be having two parallel conversations: one is speaking to an innocuous memory and the other resembles an engagement with, in Việt Lê's words, a "wayward archive, a grasping at the ineffable, a dialogue with ghosts."<sup>87</sup> This "dialogue with ghosts" echoes a conventional trope of the model minority myth, specifically the testimonies of how the filial sacrifice for low-wages and exploitative labour can supposedly secure the promised future of the next generation.

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<sup>86</sup> Nguyễn, "Queer Dis/inheritance and Refugee Futures," 229- 230.

<sup>87</sup> Việt Lê. "The Art of War: Vietnamese American Visual Artists Dinh Q. Lê, Ann Phong and Nguyen Tan Hoang." *Amerasia Journal* 31.2 (2005): 22.

Asian nail technicians, often those who are non-U.S. born and especially those who possess a foreign inflection in their speech, are sometimes met with condescension, ridicule, or suspicion due to language barriers. However, the popular images of Asian nail technicians secretly gossiping in a foreign language or silently labouring with their “lowered heads” in “sweatshop conditions,” which also renew the Yellow Peril fears of foreign contamination, can be disrupted through the disquieting and necessary sensation of touch and “body labour.”<sup>88</sup> To elaborate, body labour is a concept proposed in sociologist Miliann Kang’s study of Korean and Asian American nail salons in her book *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work*. Kang writes that body labour examines the “body-related contours of low-wage service work dominated by immigrant women of color” to explore the emotional and embodied encounters between “women who usually would not find themselves in the same social circles, let alone touching each other.”<sup>89</sup> This means that the concept of body labour helps to recentre touching, such as the routine tasks of cleansing, massaging, and washing, to confront how the emotional and embodied aspects of race, class, and nationality in low-wage service work have been persistently rendered invisible and silent in plain sight. In *Nước*, the disgruntled white client redirects her attention to a magazine, removing the mother from her line of sight and, in effect, erasing the mother’s visual presence. However, the mother’s body labour is still anticipated and inevitably felt as she prepares the client’s feet for the pedicure. Thus, despite the daily and historic attempts to distance the mother as a “speechless object of mass spectatorship,” the economic necessity of her touch also pulls the shadows of race, class, and nation that maintain the terms of her belonging directly to the surface of the skin.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> “Body labour” extends sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s concept of “emotional labour,” or the unpaid labour of managing emotions in service work, such as smiling and exchanging pleasantries, that is often expected of women in their interactions with male customers. Miliann Kang. *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in the Beauty Service Work* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>89</sup> Kang, *The Managed Hand*, 2.

<sup>90</sup> Hong, “Reframing the Archive,” 19.

This chapter examined the significance of photography in sustaining the ghost of the model minority in *Nước*. The introduction of this chapter charted the model minority discourse as a social tool to assimilate Vietnamese refugees into the national body and to uphold the political ideology of the U.S. as a benevolent land of equal opportunity. Turning to *Nước*, the analysis of the scene in the dark room focused on the photographic timeline, the portrait of the mother, and the tensions between iconic wartime and vernacular photography. Specifically, it aimed to critique and expand the rubrics of war images in order to trace out the spectres of state violence in the everyday. The refugee mother's life, as a photograph and as a pedicurist, was read along the lines of U.S. freedom and the unseen debts, failures, and losses sustained by this alleged gift. The conclusion then offered a critique by fleshing out the morphologies of the mother's ghostliness in the photograph, from her observing eyes to her physical touch, to expose the violent debts and conditions that bind the refugee-turned-model minority to the nation, the family, and the future generation.

## Chapter II. The Ghost in the Projection

This chapter examines the cinematic and phantasmagoric projections in *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*), focusing on the spectral technologies that conjure the Vietnamese “sex worker” in the experimental scene of the protagonist being reborn inside of a womb. The introduction to this chapter explores the historical and fictional conditions that helped to produce the Vietnamese sex worker during the Vietnam War and postwar era. Specifically, it explores how Vietnamese sex workers uphold the U.S.’s “image of protection” while they conceal the militaristic discourse and violence toward the bodies, clothes, and sexualities of Vietnamese women, as well as the predominantly American male clientele that sustained the wartime sex economy.<sup>91</sup> These historical, fictional, and violent conditions offer context to the “Da Nang Hooker” character, an unnamed Vietnamese sex worker in Stanley Kubrick’s film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), who returns to haunt *Nước*’s protagonist.

*Nước* uses phantasmagoric projections to expose the fictional elements of the Vietnamese sex worker. In the intersubjective scene of the protagonist being reborn, an audiovisual clip of the “Da Nang Hooker” repeating the now-infamous catchphrase “me so horny, me love you long time” to two U.S. marines flickers and echoes throughout the womb. This rebirthing scene can be read along with filmmaker Renee Tajima’s argument that generations of Asian (American) women have inherited “racist and sexist celluloid images.”<sup>92</sup> In this vein, the womb serves as a site to critique the continuities of early sexualized representations of Asian women to recent Vietnamese refugee women. This chapter argues that the phantasmagoric projection of the “Da Nang Hooker,” grafted onto the protagonist in the womb, exposes how the image of U.S. protection has been predicated on the militarization, fictionalization, and domination of Vietnamese women as sexual objects.

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<sup>91</sup> Stur. *Beyond Combat*, 31 – 52.

<sup>92</sup> Renee Tajima. “Cinemaya.” In *Making more Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women*, ed. Elaine H. Kim et al. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997), 317.

### Protection through Domination: The “Sex Worker”

In *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*, historian Heather Marie Stur examines the contradictions and expectations of gender roles during the Vietnam War. Stur explores the way gender ideologies were reinforced and challenged under U.S. military culture, as well as through mass media images, policymaking, and encounters between American servicemen and Vietnamese women.<sup>93</sup> Specifically, Cold War and American gender ideologies unfolded both on the battlefield and the “fields of gender,” or how combat, framed through “vocabularies [that] are sexually motivated,” is justified to protect (American) “round-eyed” girlfriends, wives, and mothers waiting at home against a distant, foreign, and feminized (Vietnamese) enemy.<sup>94</sup> These fields of gender were expressed through the tensions between the U.S.’s “image of protection” and the “reality of domination,” often through Vietnamese women’s clothes, bodies, and sexualities.<sup>95</sup>

The image of protection targeted the Vietnamese “damsel in distress” who was deserving of U.S. protection. She represented the idealized middle-class woman of Cold War domesticity, an image that was paradoxically being challenged in the U.S.<sup>96</sup> Disseminated on the covers of U.S. military handbooks, such as the Defense Department’s *Pocket Guide to Vietnam* from the 1960s, the “damsel in distress” was symbolized by the South Vietnamese woman in the traditional *ao dai*, a figure ready to be “benevolently modernized” by the U.S.<sup>97</sup> For the Americans, the Vietnamese woman in the *ao dai* was a “symbol of modern Vietnam” that needed to be “protected” from the “underside” of American cultural influence, military presence, and modernization.<sup>98</sup> This image of protection, however, differed from the reality in Vietnam with the presence of the miniskirt.

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<sup>93</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 7 – 9.

<sup>94</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 2 – 5; Susan Jeffords. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), xi.

<sup>95</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 2 – 6; 18.

<sup>96</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 31 – 52.

<sup>97</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 56 – 57.

<sup>98</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 2 – 5; 56.

The image, ideology, and underside of protection, which helped to justify U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War, contributed to the development of a wartime sex economy in the urban centres of Vietnam.<sup>99</sup> From the mid-1960s, as a response to the increasing presence of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson deployed American troops and implemented bombing policies in the region.<sup>100</sup> For example, the bombing campaigns of Operation Rolling Thunder from March 1965 to November 1968, and the war more generally, mainly targeted the Vietnamese countryside. This resulted in the displacement of Vietnamese women from the rural regions into Saigon and other cities, where employment in an unstable wartime economy for women from the lower class was often limited to jobs as bargirls, hostesses, and sex workers.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, sex work was also sustained and exacerbated by the mostly American male clientele who exploited the local women they were meant to protect, reinforcing the “militarization of these women’s lives.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, U.S. militarism also helped to produce the image of Vietnamese women as dangerous and undercover communist “dragon ladies” and “sexual objects” in American-style miniskirts, a subject who had to be symbolically, sexually, and violently “tamed.”<sup>103</sup> In this sense, domination and protection manifested in the fields of gender, or the “struggle between the *ao dai* and miniskirt,” wherein some of the American troops could reaffirm their masculinity through acts of militaristic violence in their actual and/or symbolic encounters with Vietnamese women.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 38 – 39.

<sup>100</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 44; Lloyd C. Gardner. “Lyndon Johnson and the Bombing of Vietnam: Politics and Military Choices.” In *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David Anderson (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 169.

<sup>101</sup> However, Vietnamese women also voluntarily left to the urban centres to flee the patriarchal expectations of their traditional villages and to experience the various freedoms that the cities offered. “Like China, Korea, and Japan,” as Gustafsson writes, “Vietnam has been heavily influenced by Confucianism, which holds women subject to the Three Subordinations: first to father, then husband, and lastly to son.” Mai Lan Gustafsson. “‘Freedom. Money. Fun. Love.’: The Warlore of Vietnamese Bargirls.” *Oral History Review* 38.2 (Summer/Fall 2011): 315; Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 44.

<sup>102</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 62.

<sup>103</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 17, 48 – 50, 61 – 63; Betty Hillman Luther. *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Representation in the 1960s and 1970s* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 14 – 21.

<sup>104</sup> Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 40 – 41; Jennifer Milken and David Sylvan. “Soft Bodies, Hard Targets, and Chic Theories: US Bombing Policy in Indochina.” *Millennium: Journal of International studies* 25.2 (1996): 334 – 338.

*Full Metal Jacket* (1987) is one example of how the image of the Vietnamese sex worker circulates in popular culture in the postwar era. Stanley Kubrick's feature length film follows a platoon of U.S. marines from their bootcamp days to their deployment in the Vietnam War. The first half of the film takes place at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot Island, South California, and the second half depicts the platoon fighting in the Tet Offensive (1968) in the cities of Hue and Da Nang. During a rest and recuperation period outside of a storefront in Da Nang, a Vietnamese sex worker, credited as the "Da Nang Hooker," attempts to negotiate a deal with U.S. marines Private Joker and Private Rafterman. The miniskirt-cladded "Da Nang Hooker" entertains the two U.S. marines by repeating the now-infamous catchphrase in "yellowvoice," or in mock Asian accent: "me so horny, me love you long time."<sup>105</sup> Rafterman plays along with this solicitation by taking multiple snapshots of the "Da Nang Hooker" who, unbothered with being photographed, continues to pose with Joker. Right after taking these photographs, however, a Vietnamese man steals the camera from Rafterman's hands before driving away with an accomplice. The depiction of two Vietnamese men stealing the camera can be read as a coalitional cultural, ethnic, or racial gesture that undermines how Vietnamese (and Southeast Asian) women have been historically represented and reproduced by American "hetero-colonial looking projects."<sup>106</sup> However, this brief struggle over the camera between the U.S. marines and Vietnamese men support the perceived complicity, passivity, and indifference of Vietnamese women in the circulation of their own misrepresentation.

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<sup>105</sup> Chung examines the less studied auditory properties of Orientalist stereotypes in cinema, focusing on the "me so horny" phrase as an example of "yellowvoice," or "mock Asian speech," that is characterized by grammatical mistakes and accented intonations. Through "yellowvoice," Chung argues that film producers and writers employ film dialogue and speech mannerisms to create a sense of on-screen ethnic, racial, and national difference and discrimination. Hye Seung Chung. "From 'Me So Horny' to 'I'm So Ronery': Asian Images and Yellow Voices in American Cinema." In *Film Dialogue*, ed. by Jeff Jaeckle (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 172.

<sup>106</sup> The authors define the "hetero-colonial looking projects" as the history of how "American male military and other personnel learned to fetishize Asian women as sexual objects for capture." Nadine Attewell and Wesley Attewell. "Sweating for Their Pay: Gender, Labor, and Photography Across the Decolonizing Pacific." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 24.2 (June 2021): 186.

### Racial Phantasmagoria

In *Nước*, the intersubjective scene of the protagonist being reborn inside of a womb depicts the significance of Hollywood cinema, popular culture, and phantasmagoric projections during the postwar era. Framed against the backdrop of the womb, dimly lit with an eerie red hue reminiscent of a phantasmagoria theatre or photographic dark room, the protagonist is shown struggling to tear off their own bloody umbilical cord (Figure 5). The womb abruptly illuminates, partially blinding the protagonist due to an audiovisual projection of the scene of the “Da Nang Hooker” repeating the line “me so horny, me love you long time” (Figure 6). The Vietnamese sex worker reappears as a ghost whose hollowed voice reverberates throughout the womb and immaterial body flickers across the surface of the protagonist’s body. The protagonist eventually manages to detach from their umbilical cord with a force that sends them plunging into an engulfing darkness (Figure 7).

This scene does not only depict the mass circulation of stereotypical images about Asian and Vietnamese women as sexual objects, but it also demonstrates how “racist and sexist celluloid images” have come to haunt the intergenerational gaps of *Nước*’s family history.<sup>107</sup> For example, the close-up shot of the protagonist shows them visibly distressed by the ghost enveloping their body, which contrasts the nonchalant demeanor of the “Da Nang Hooker” being photographed in *Full Metal Jacket*, perhaps signaling their struggle in parsing out the factual and fictional details of their mother’s shrouded past. In addition to the ghost of the sex worker, a glimpse of the mother in the nail salon also flashes before the protagonist’s eyes as they fall into the darkness of the womb (Figure 8). While intergenerational gaps can sustain the presence of various ghosts within the genealogy of the Vietnamese refugee diaspora, this scene further depicts how haunting can be seen, felt, and inherited as a racial melancholia and racial phantasmagoria.

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<sup>107</sup> Chung, “From ‘Me So Horny’ to ‘I’m So Ronery,’” 174; Renee Tajima, “Cinemaya,” 317.

This close reading of *Nước* through the ghostly metaphors and spectral technologies of the nineteenth-century phantasmagoria shows, which used innovations in projection media to create immersive experiences of fear, horror, and other Gothic themes, can help elucidate how a ghost can be inherited and internalized.<sup>108</sup> To be more specific, a significant metaphor associated with the phantasmagoria shows expressed the gradual internalization of ghosts that previously lingered in public life directly into the private mind.<sup>109</sup> This metaphorical process of internalization can help trace the return of the “Da Nang Hooker” from Hollywood cinema and popular culture into the intersubjective scene of *Nước*’s protagonist in the womb. To some, the original context of the “me so horny” catchphrase has been partially lost after its “infiltration” into “pop culture lexicon” and public life, helping to naturalize the stereotypes of Asian women as sexual objects.<sup>110</sup>

As film studies scholar Hye Seung Chung argues, the “me so horny” catchphrase has been “uprooted” from “its neo-colonial, Cold War context (in which American ‘protectors’ are eager to take advantage of Third World women providing cheap sex).”<sup>111</sup> These processes of inheriting and internalizing this uprooted ghost from public life and into the mind is depicted in *Nước* through spectral technologies. Specifically, these technologies conjure the ghost of the “Da Nang Hooker,” as a “phantom-train of images” and an (un)familiar voice, in order to etch Hollywood’s celluloid genealogy of Asian women onto the lives of Vietnamese refugee women.<sup>112</sup> In this interpretation, the ghost of the “Da Nang Hooker” is not only an immaterial shadow or a disembodied sound bite that has been displaced from its original context and into public life—it has infiltrated the silent intergenerational gaps of the Vietnamese refugee diaspora and of the generations to come.

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<sup>108</sup> Mervyn Heard. *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern* (Hastings: The Projection Box, 2006), 166.

<sup>109</sup> Terry Castle. “Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie.” *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (Fall 1988): 43.

<sup>110</sup> Chung, “From ‘Me So Horny’ to ‘I’m So Ronery,’” 174

<sup>111</sup> This catchphrase was also sampled in the chorus with the “sound of a woman’s moaning” in 2 Live Crew’s 1989 rap song “Me So Horny.” Chung, “From ‘Me So Horny’ to ‘I’m So Ronery,’” 174

<sup>112</sup> Terry Castle, “Phantasmagoria,” 43.

Since the protagonist can only understand their mother's "origin story" as partial fragments and pieces, the "origin story" that is inherited and internalized instead belongs to the "Da Nang Hooker" and, more importantly, Hollywood fiction and American popular culture. Phantasmagoric projections can be read along the lines of Anne Cheng's notion of "racial injury," the "beginnings of the slip from *recognizing* to *naturalizing* injury."<sup>113</sup> In other words, the idea of racial injury can help describe the way Vietnamese refugees encounter, recognize, and are sometimes imprinted by, the psychically harmful images of Vietnamese women as dangerous "sex workers" and, broadly, Asian women as sexual objects. Furthermore, racial injury describes how images are gradually naturalized as fact, especially, in this case, when the fictional elements and origins of the "Da Nang Hooker" have been obscured and concealed by the discourse of U.S. protection.

The protagonist's internal hallucination in their own racial phantasmagoria can be tied to colonial discourse. For example, the popularity of phantasmagorias during the period of European colonial expansion can be read in relation to the colonial dimensions of cinematic projections. As Marianne Heung argues, cinematic representations function in a similar manner to colonization by "taking over land and bodies" as well as "bodies because physical anatomies become the canvas onto which cultural meanings are projected."<sup>114</sup> In this sense, *Nước*'s portrayal of the protagonist being overlaid with the spectre of the "Da Nang Hooker" in the womb depicts their confrontation with the "cultural meanings" of Asian women that linger in the present. A racial phantasmagoria is therefore a projection of fictional images that can only conceive (former and future) refugees as powerless spectacles, reborn from a womb-like photographic dark room or phantasmagoria theatre.

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<sup>113</sup> Some of the other relevant and related psychoanalytic concepts to racial injury include racial loss, racial grief, and racial melancholia. Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, 5.

<sup>114</sup> Marianne Heung. "Representing Ourselves: Films and Videos by Asian American/Canadian Women." In *Feminism, Multiculturalism, and the Media: Global Diversities*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 1995), 90 – 91.

### Celluloid Genealogy

A closer reading of *Nước* through the theme of rebirth can serve as a site to critique the cultural continuities between Vietnamese and Asian American women. The “idea of rebirth,” as film scholar Cynthia Liu writes in her analysis of Asian American actress Anna May Wong and Asian American women, is a vantage point to explore the question of her essay: “When dragon ladies die, do they come back as butterflies?”<sup>115</sup> The notion of rebirth traces how Vietnam War era images of Vietnamese women as “dragon lady” sex workers have been influenced by and inherited from early American representations of Asian women. To elaborate, the early legislations, policies, and immigration exclusion acts that were passed over the course of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries that targeted immigrants from Asia, either implicitly or directly, corresponded with social anxieties called the Yellow Peril.<sup>116</sup> The Yellow Peril, which conflated the increasing presence of Asian immigration, labour, and culture from various nationalities and points throughout history, was also expressed through the immigration policies that aimed to morally regulate the gender and sexualities of Asian women. Specifically, the Yellow Peril manifested in the U.S. through The Page Act of 1875, among other policies that affected different Asian nationalities. These prohibited the immigration of Chinese women for “lewd and immoral purposes,” an ambiguous legal term that was inconsistently applied to ban the entrance of Asian women as potential sex workers and preconceived sexual objects.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Cynthia W. Liu. “‘When Dragon Ladies Die, Do They Come Back as Butterflies?’ Re-Imagining Anna May Wong.” In *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, eds. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000), 23 – 24.

<sup>116</sup> These anxieties included the fearful possibility that Euro-Americans would be economically and racially displaced by Asian migrant labourers. These early fears were then compounded with the increasing presence of U.S.-born Asian citizens, naturalized citizens, and immigrants (or the “foreigner-within”), which complicated the fragile notions of U.S. citizenship and nationhood. The twentieth century U.S. imperialist wars in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), the Korean War (1950-1953), the Japanese in World War II (1939-1945), and the Vietnam War (1955-1975), also signalled the military threat of foreign enemies. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 4 – 7.

<sup>117</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 11; Laura Hyun Yi Kang. *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 114 – 163.

The spectre of the Yellow Peril, or the figure of anti-Asian sentiment rooted in the historical and militaristic encounters with (usually East and Southeast) Asia, manifests through a repository of Orientalist settings, themes, and tropes related to the sexualities of Asian women. In the context of Hollywood and mainstream media, film studies scholar Gina Marchetti defines the cinematic representation of the Yellow Peril as the dark, irresistible qualities of the Far East, often imagined as a sexual figure or setting to morally corrupt the Western male protagonist.<sup>118</sup> For example, the Chinese supervillain Dr. Fu Manchu and, more pertinently, his “dragon lady” daughter (Anna May Wong) are often representatives of the cinematic Yellow Peril.<sup>119</sup> Filmmaker Renee Tajima charts other one-dimensional depictions of Asian women in American media, such as the “dragon lady” who acts as an accomplice for men of her race, the “lotus blossom baby” who serves as a passive love interest for white men, and the concubines, geishas, and China dolls.<sup>120</sup> Another figure is the innocent and sacrificial Asian “butterfly,” who has appeared in various forms and iterations from Pierre Loti’s novel *Madame Chrysantheme* (1887), Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904), and David H. Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly* (1986), among others. These are stories about interracial romance between a European/American man and an Asian woman, such as a U.S. naval officer and Japanese girl (*Madame Butterfly*) or a French diplomat and (male) Chinese opera singer (*M. Butterfly*). Importantly, the narrative structure, plot theme, and gendered imagery of the Asian “butterfly” influenced Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boubil’s musical *Miss Saigon* (1989), a story about the relationship between a U.S. marine and South Vietnamese bargirl.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Gina Marchetti. *Romance and the Yellow Peril: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>119</sup> Sax Rohmer (1883 – 1959), who created Dr. Fu Manchu, also wrote *Daughter of Fu Manchu* (1913). Anna May Wong played Princess Ling Moy, Dr. Fu Manchu’s daughter, in Llyod Corrigan’s film *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931).

<sup>120</sup> Renee Tajima. “Lotus Blossoms Don’t Bleed: Images of Asian Women.” In *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and About Asian American Women*, eds. Diane Yen-Mei Wong and Asian Women United of California (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>121</sup> Jeffrey A. Keith. “Producing ‘Miss Saigon’: Imaginings, Realities, and the Sensual Geography of Saigon.” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 22 (2015): 269 – 272.

Tracing the incarnations of the Asian “butterfly,” “dragon lady,” and other stereotypical tropes, thus reveals the seemingly easy replaceability of Asian women and their bodies, faces, and histories in American cinema and popular culture. Similarly, in the context of Vietnam War films produced by Hollywood, film studies scholar Leilani Nishime writes that the Vietnamese “usually appear as dots in the landscapes or as unnamed victims, soldiers, and prostitutes. We view them in crowded scenes and in long shots, and they almost never rate a close-up. They barely seem to exist in their own countries.”<sup>122</sup> These cultural processes of erasures, or what Tajima calls an “aesthetic imperialism”—whether by treating bodies as replaceable props, by projecting nameless faces, or by reinforcing sexualized tropes—can arguably be disrupted by Vietnamese American films.<sup>123</sup>

In Vietnamese American filmmaker Ina Adele Ray’s 16mm, black and white documentary *El Paso Vietnam* (2002), narrated by the filmmaker’s Vietnamese mother Mary Chi Ray and American father Thomas D. Ray, the filmmaker uses family and wartime photographs, stock footage, and interviews to undo the “war bride” image.<sup>124</sup> *El Paso Vietnam* opens with footage of waving American and South Vietnamese flags, which frames Mary Chi Ray’s voice as she recalls the days after she arrived to the U.S. to work as a Vietnamese language teacher: “They thought I was a war bride. But really, it was the reverse.” The Rays recount their initial meeting as a language teacher and student relationship, detailing how their story was a reverse of the conventional power dynamics between Vietnamese women and American men. *El Paso Vietnam*, in this vein, purges the “war bride” ghost from the Ray’s everyday life by drawing from their own celluloid genealogy.

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<sup>122</sup> Leilani Nishime. “Remembering Vietnam in the 1980s: White Skin, White Masks: Vietnam War Films and the Racialized Gaze.” In *American Visual Cultures*, eds. David Holloway and John Beck (Bloomington, IN: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 250.

<sup>123</sup> Heung, “Representing Ourselves,” 90; Tajima, “Lotus Blossoms Don’t Bleed,” 314.

<sup>124</sup> “Original Films by Ina Adele Ray.” <https://www.adeleray.com/el-paso-vietnam.html>; Zeiger’s research on the topic of war brides “explores how women and women’s sexuality have been mobilized in the context of war, and especially postwar eras, as a means to enact social ends such as national purification, revenge, or social healing—processes that usually, though not invariably, oppress or stigmatize women.” Susan Zeiger. *Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 2.

*Nước*, in a similar fashion to Mary Chi Ray's rejection of the "war bride" moniker, draws from self-representation to critique the Hollywood representation of Vietnamese women by tracing how the "Da Nang Hooker" has been produced by a fictional genealogy of Asian women. From the projections of the Vietnamese sex worker (the "Da Nang Hooker") to the glimpse of the model minority worker (the mother) in the womb, the notion of rebirth and phantasmagoric projections draw attention to the way that "several generations of Asian women have been raised with racist and celluloid images" as part of their lives long before and after the processes of immigration and resettlement.<sup>125</sup> As a response to the generational effects of these celluloid images, Tajima argues for the significance of critical self-representation in order to create new images and stories that can undo the harmful cultural, cinematic, and popular stereotypes that haunt Asian American women and their communities.

Similarly, as Thy Phu eloquently writes about the role of photography and the Vietnamese diaspora, "wherever we settle, some of us start again; some of us hold losses close to heart; some of us make new images, perhaps to replace those we lost, perhaps to counter the many others that circulate in their stead."<sup>126</sup> Put differently, in order to counter and replace these harmful celluloid images, the strategies that these scholars suggest can be read as a form of intergenerational labour, such as the protagonist developing a new photograph of their mother in the dark room. Relatedly, rather than being reborn into the image of another Asian "butterfly" trope or grateful beneficiary of so-called U.S. freedom and protection, the protagonist rejects Hollywood's celluloid genealogy by managing to escape from their racial phantasmagoria. After plunging into the darkness of the womb, the protagonist regains consciousness from below the surface of the sea and is then pulled onto a stranded boat in the California desert with their mother.

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<sup>125</sup> Tajima, "Cinemaya.", 317.

<sup>126</sup> Phu, *Warring Visions*, 1.

This chapter examined the phantasmagoric projection of the sex worker, or the “Da Nang Hooker,” in *Nước*. The introduction to this chapter delineated the historical conditions that helped to produce the Vietnamese sex worker during the Vietnam War, focusing on the contradictions of U.S. military culture. Specifically, it traced how the tensions between U.S. ideologies of protection and domination did not only unfold across the fields of gender during the Vietnam War, but also projected onto the bodies, minds, and futures of Vietnamese women as a racial phantasmagoria. Through the notions of phantasmagoric projection and rebirth in the theatre-like womb, refugee resettlement and assimilation can also be understood as an assimilation into Hollywood’s celluloid genealogy. In this sense, the fictional lineage of Asian (American) women as sexual objects in the American popular imaginary is therefore a crucial element to uphold the image of U.S. protection and to conceal the militarization of Vietnamese women and their sexualities. However, this chapter examined how the protagonist of *Nước* navigated and recovered the loss of their mother’s history, who struggled to parse out the tensions between fact and fiction within the womb. The protagonist, however, eventually managed to escape their racial phantasmagoria. Then, as the following chapter will explore further, the protagonist emerges from an alternative genealogy or, more specifically, from the genealogy of their mother’s memories of the refugee boat passage.

### Chapter III. The Ghosts in the Archive

This chapter examines the significance of archives in *Nước (Water/Homeland)*, focusing on the politics and poetics of memory in the South Vietnamese American “boat people” refugee diaspora. The introduction to this chapter explores how archives have been used as sites for rebuilding a nation through a brief comparison of four (counter-)archives: the Texas Tech University’s Vietnam Center and Archive (VNCA) (Lubbock, Texas), the Vien Phim (Hanoi, Vietnam), the Viet Film Fest (Orange County, California), and the Project Ngoc Records (Irvine, California). Specifically, it delineates the methods that these archives have used to rebuild a nation or community, from the U.S. and Vietnam to the refugee diaspora, by reclassifying refugees as either “archival others” or counter-archival critiques.<sup>127</sup> These archives contribute to the formation of what Long Bui calls a refugee “ghost nation,” or the collective memories of refugees that are excluded from archives.<sup>128</sup>

*Nước* exposes the limitations of these archives, which often aim to include tangible records into their repository, through the intersubjective scene of the protagonist and their mother stranded on a boat in the California desert. This scene can be interpreted as an imagined communal meeting place, or “ghost nation,” wherein the unarchivable memories of the protagonist’s mother are held. This section uses Bui’s notion of the “refugee repertoire,” or the embodied memories of refugees, in order to trace how this “ghost nation” is sustained by the conditions under which “boat people” refugees often had to abandon or destroy their belongings during their exodus.<sup>129</sup> The concept of *nước* can also support the reading of the California drought as the loss of water and nation. This chapter argues that the mother’s haunting memories of the “boat people” passage can expose how the U.S.’s postwar inclusion of refugees in its archives also aims to conceal an exclusionary past.

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<sup>127</sup> Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and The Price of Refugee Memory* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 46.

<sup>128</sup> Bui, *Returns of War*, 1.

<sup>129</sup> Bui, *Returns of War*, 33.

### Archival Inclusions and Exclusions: The “Boat People”

In his book *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory*, Long Bui defines the collective memories of the former Republic of South Vietnam as a “ghost nation” that has been “firmly fixed at the center of [the] Vietnamese diasporic exile imaginary.”<sup>130</sup> While Bui attempts to trace these memories of his community at the VNCA, the largest archive in the U.S. dedicated to documents related to the Vietnam War outside the federal government archives, he instead finds the absence of South Vietnamese refugees.<sup>131</sup> Although the VNCA has made attempts to include the South Vietnamese, these requests to contribute to the archive have been met with resistance from the community because of the VNCA’s distance, language barriers, and archival contributions from the (North) Vietnamese government.<sup>132</sup> The outreach initiatives to fill in the gaps of the VNCA, however, have been expressed with a sense of U.S. benevolence, aimed at educating the future generations of Vietnamese-Americans by archiving the Northern, Southern, and American sides of the war from a supposedly neutral, peacemaking perspective.<sup>133</sup> However, the notable absence of the South Vietnamese presence at the VNCA speaks not only to the lack of materials but also to the depiction of the Vietnamese in their holdings as “archival others.”<sup>134</sup> After Bui’s search entries did not produce a lot of results, a VNCA archivist suggested that he would find more entries if he searched the term “g—k,” a racist term used by the U.S. military to refer to the Vietnamese.<sup>135</sup> Thus, the VNCA’s “benevolent” strategy of inclusion can be read as an attempt to correct and redeem their depiction of the Vietnamese as “archival others” and “g—ks.”

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<sup>130</sup> Bui, *Returns of War*, 1.

<sup>131</sup> Bui, *The Returns of War*, 1 – 2.

<sup>132</sup> Some members of the South Vietnamese American refugee diaspora harbor anticommunist sentiments against the current Vietnamese government, formed by the North Vietnamese-Communist forces after the Vietnam War and the reunification of North and South Vietnam. In the processes of reunification, the Communist forces also displaced (as refugees) or persecuted (the remaining) South Vietnamese allies and their families. Bui, *The Returns of War*, 28 – 45.

<sup>133</sup> Bui, *The Returns of War*, 40.

<sup>134</sup> Bui, *The Returns of War*, 33.

<sup>135</sup> The archivists retained the word “g—k” in order to maintain historical accuracy. Bui, *The Returns of War*, 46.

While the U.S.'s VNCA participates in a project of “benevolent” nation building through community outreach initiatives with Vietnamese American refugees to counter the overtly racist tone in their archive, national Vietnamese archives are also rebuilding a nation through erasures. “Vietnam’s own film archive – the Vien Phim in Hanoi,” as Lan Duong writes, “offers a veritable trove of Vietnamese cinematic history but has also omitted texts that run counter to its narrative of nationhood, sacrifice, and revolution, making it at once rich and full of elisions.”<sup>136</sup> Specifically, the collections of the Vien Phim omit South Vietnamese films (especially those produced during the Vietnam War and often in collaboration with the U.S. government) and diasporic films about the refugee, re-education camp, and potentially subversive experiences of the Vietnam War.<sup>137</sup>

In contrast to the traditional archives of the VNCA and Vien Phim, the Viet Film Fest serves as an alternative “archive of memory” or counter-archive for the diasporic, refugee, and South Vietnamese experience.<sup>138</sup> This “collective grief” over the loss of a nation is also reflected in the Viet Film Fest’s growth as its programming coincides with the changing demographics of the community, such as with the queer and youth filmmakers who touch upon the intersections of their queer and refugee experiences. This includes *Nước* which was screened at the Festival in 2018.<sup>139</sup> As Duong argues, the “Viet Film Fest represents an archive of memory for a refugee community that wants to rectify how its members have been represented by U.S. and Vietnamese national cultures in film, both in the past and in the present moment.”<sup>140</sup> The film festival can thus be understood as a metaphorical living “archive of memory” that actively contributes to the “ghost nation” that haunts the diaspora, countering the narratives and limitations of traditional archives.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Duong, “Archives of Memory,” 54.

<sup>137</sup> Duong, “Archives of Memory,” 54.

<sup>138</sup> The Viet Film Fest was formally called the Vietnamese International Film Festival, established in Orange County, California in October 2003. Duong, “Archives of Memory,” 54.

<sup>139</sup> Duong, “Archives of Memory,” 54.

<sup>140</sup> Duong, “Archives of Memory,” 54.

<sup>141</sup> Duong, “Archives of Memory,” 54.

In addition to the VNCA, Vien Phim, and Viet Film Fest, the Project Ngoc Records holds archival materials of the everyday lives of Vietnamese refugees in camps, detention centres, and processing centres across Southeast Asia. The Project Ngoc Records is a student-led initiative at the University of California, Irvine that collected paintings, photographs, and other ephemera from Southeast Asian refugees. For example, a vibrantly coloured painting, *The Dinner of Traditional Tet in Closed Camp* (1990) (Figure 9), depicts a Vietnamese refugee family sharing a meal during the Lunar New Year. Two photographs, *Project Ngoc Art Exhibit* (1990) (Figure 10), show refugee artists displaying their paintings in an exhibition about their recent experiences as “boat people.” A series of photographs entitled *Camp Protests* (1990) (Figure 11), taken in a Hong Kong detention centre, show groups of refugee activists standing on rooftops and on the ground carrying banners to protest their repatriation. These images illustrate how, at these camps and centres, refugees did not only experience the recent traumas of displacement but also the rhythms of daily life, from boredom to activism.<sup>142</sup> Despite their archival erasures and their representations as passive objects of U.S. benevolence, these photographs and paintings demonstrate that Vietnamese refugees were active as artists, storytellers, activists. As Espiritu writes, the Project Ngoc Records can be framed as a “politics of living,” or the persistence of creating liveable lives despite the bare conditions of camp life and the trauma of the boat passage.<sup>143</sup> The Project Ngoc Records and Viet Film Festival can be read as counter-archives, or the inclusions of the “everyday” that can (re)politicize and disturb the so-called “objective neutrality” of the archive.<sup>144</sup> However, the archives also need to be expanded to address the loss of tangible records in the processes of refugee resettlement.

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<sup>142</sup> “Project Ngoc Records.” UCI Libraries Special Collections, Southeast Asian Archive. <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt8z09p8pd/>

<sup>143</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 51.

<sup>144</sup> Paula Amad. *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn’s Archives de la Planète* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 4.

### An Unanchored Boat

As with many refugees and their families, *Nước* depicts the loss of archival materials and the strategies to recover and reimagine them. Specifically, archives need to be expanded beyond the frames of institutions to address how, for the family and personal archives of Vietnamese refugees, “many refugees bring little with them during their flight from danger or destroy or suppress information from fear of persecution or censorship.”<sup>145</sup> Whereas traditional archives focus on collecting tangible materials, Bui proposes the concept of the “refugee repertoire” to address the absence of physical records by focusing on the embodied memories that are carried by refugees and (in)directly passed on to their children.<sup>146</sup> Bui develops the notions of the refugee archive, repertoire, and embodied memories by drawing from the book, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, by performance studies scholar Diana Taylor. In her text, Taylor differentiates the *archive* as the tangible artifacts, documents, and files, and the *repertoire* as the embodied memories that are carried and conveyed through physical gestures, speech, and movement.<sup>147</sup> Bui employs the “refugee repertoire” to explore how second-generation Vietnamese Americans enfold their parents’ refugee experiences in their “coming-of-age narratives,” writing that, because “their public image in this country is interlaced with those of their elders, the next generation comes to recognize their refugeeness as a central part of their identities as Americans and their performances of cultural citizenship.”<sup>148</sup> Notions of the archive and the “refugee repertoire” can be used to examine how the protagonist of *Nước* rebuilds a refugee “ghost nation” with their mother’s memories of the stranded boat at sea and in the California desert.

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<sup>145</sup> Long T. Bui, “The Refugee Repertoire: Performing and Staging the Postmemories of Violence.” *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 41.3 (2016): 112 – 114.

<sup>146</sup> Bui also builds upon Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemories,” or the processes through which the second generation inherits the traumatic memories of their parents through art, literature, and storytelling. Bui, “The Refugee Repertoire,” 112.

<sup>147</sup> Bui, “The Refugee Repertoire,” 112.

<sup>148</sup> Bui, “The Refugee Repertoire,” 112 – 114.

In *Nróc*, the “ghost nation” of South Vietnamese American refugees, sustained through the archival absences and exclusions of the refugee experience, haunts the protagonist and their mother through the memories of the boat, water, and the California drought. After being engulfed in the darkness as they reached out to their mother in the racial phantasmagoria, the protagonist begins to regain consciousness from beneath the sea’s surface. Approaching onboard a dilapidated boat, their mother enters the frame and extends her hand to rescue the protagonist from drowning. The protagonist is pulled onto the boat with their mother, and both are now stranded in the California desert. The mother looks into the protagonist’s eyes with a look of reassurance while swathing and swaddling them in a towel, before the two embrace each other in a familiar silence.

This scene depicts the intergenerational struggle and resilience of Vietnamese refugees as they attempt to recover their family history after experiencing the various losses of resettlement and assimilation, especially the loss of archival records and materials. These ruptured histories can be further muddled by the unwillingness of some from the first generation to pass on their story because of the language barriers, traumatic silences, or desire to withhold the burden from their progeny. However, although silence can distance and estrange family members, it can also pull them together by serving as a barometer for how much one can transgress into the past. Similarly, in Espiritu’s words, “[a]s complex and subtle as spoken language, silence, as a language of family, can protect and cherish and/or deny control.”<sup>149</sup> Therefore, silence is not only an absence of noise, sound, or speech but also a constitutive element of ordinary life. In this sense, to share a familiar silence on this metaphorical boat is to also tug at the fragile tensions that hold a family together.

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<sup>149</sup> Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 147; In the context of Korean American war memories, Grace Cho begins her book with a semi-autobiographical story about a “silence” and an “unhappy wind” that somehow “came to define my daily fabric.” Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 1 – 11; In a different context, Avery Gordon uses haunting to mean “those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction” from the affective and subjective entanglements with “noisy silences.” Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 200; Additionally, a related and important concept of the unfamiliar is Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic concept of *unheimlich/unhomely*.

The boat functions as a vessel of an embodied memory that belongs to the mother but is then shared with the protagonist. Although only large enough to fit a few people, the boat is a meeting place for the ghosts of Vietnamese “boat people” who have been erased, lost, or never made it into the official archives in the first place. As literary scholars Alexandra Kurmann and Tess Do write, the “boat becomes a shifting memorial meeting place, offering communion between generations and bringing together, albeit momentarily, the fragmented memories of a people’s ruptured personal histories.”<sup>150</sup> Similarly, the shared boat serves as a haunting metaphor to explore the durational and generational dimension of the refugee condition. As Vinh Nguyen asks, “When does a refugee stop being a refugee?”<sup>151</sup> Nguyen explores this question with an excerpt from Nhan T. Le, a former refugee who works as an electronics board tester in Manchester, New Hampshire. Contemplating her post-refuge and resettled life in the U.S., Le admits: “Didn’t everybody want to be somebody? I didn’t have an education or any skills, but I had hope that my children would do better than me. I was a boat person, a refugee, and I was still on the boat. Sometimes I wonder where I would be anchored.”<sup>152</sup> The sense of still being on a drifting boat suggests that obtaining employment (often in exploitative, low-wage labour) does not offer the socioeconomic security and/or upward social mobility that the model minority discourse espouses. Nguyen describes the weight of the refugee condition that lingers, even after the status has been legally resolved, as an “experience, consciousness, and knowledge.”<sup>153</sup> The refugee condition is not only confined to a singular moment (such as pre- and post-refuge), but it is also a way of navigating the world by drawing from the boat as a haunting memory, metaphor, and motif to understand that movement.

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<sup>150</sup> Kurmann and Do, “Children on the Boat,” 226.

<sup>151</sup> Vinh Nguyen. “Refugeetude: When Does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee?” *Social Text* 139 37.2 (June 2019): 109.

<sup>152</sup> Nguyen, “Refugeetude,” 109.

<sup>153</sup> Nguyen, “Refugeetude,” 114.

### The Ghost Nation

As the protagonist adjusts their eyes underwater, the mother can be seen slowly reaching out to them from a boat. Still in a daze, the protagonist looks around to see that the California drought has dried out the surrounding area of its water (Figure 12). This transition from being submerged underwater to being stranded on an unanchored boat in a suddenly arid landscape can be further examined through the concept of *nước*, a Vietnamese word that means both “water” and “homeland” (or “country” and “nation”). This double meaning has been explored by Vietnamese diasporic artists, filmmakers, and writers to contemplate the experiences of citizenship, migration, and belonging across and along bodies of water. As Vinh Nguyen writes, the word *nước* “helped to define a distinct consciousness of peoplehood” before the Vietnam War, from the creation myths of the country and its people to the meeting of communities near sources of water to grow rice.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, poet Huỳnh Sanh Thông writes that “the most significant derivation from the meaning of *nước* as ‘water’ is the concept of people who have gathered near a body of water to grow rice for one another, founding a stable community, sharing rain and drought, plenty and famine, peace and war.”<sup>155</sup> However, *nước*, from these reflections on water and its associations with community, nation, and life-sustaining qualities, takes on an additional layer of meaning after the Vietnam War when many refugee migrants left their homes overseas by boat.<sup>156</sup> With the Vietnamese “boat people” refugee exodus, *nước*—especially in relation to the dangers of the sea and the dehydrating qualities of salt water—then became associated with drowning, droughts, thirst, and the loss of a nation with its people lingering as unmoored ghosts.

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<sup>154</sup> Vinh Nguyen. “Nước/Water: Oceanic Spatiality and the Vietnamese Diaspora.” In *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion and Survival*, ed. Lyna Mannik (New York City, NY: Berghahn Books, 2016), 65 – 66.

<sup>155</sup> Huỳnh Sanh Thông. “Live by water, die for water: Metaphors of Vietnamese Culture and History.” *Vietnam Review* 1 (Autumn/Winter 1996): 121 – 153.

<sup>156</sup> Nguyen, “Nước/Water,” 65 – 66.

Through the concept of *nước*, losing a country can be understood as an “ordeal of thirst.”<sup>157</sup> Reflecting on the nuances of this postwar Vietnamese consciousness, Huỳnh writes: “[t]o say in English that a man has ‘lost his country’ is not the same as to say 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.”<sup>158</sup> This “ordeal of thirst” also reappears in the work of Vietnamese refugee artists. For example, in her performance *salt | water* (2015), the artist Patricia Nguyễn re-enacts the memories of her parents and the unnamed, perished “boat people” refugees who were stateless at sea. Nguyễn draws from the oral histories and the media representation of the “boat people” to situate herself in the loss of this “ghost nation,” exposing the failure of the nation-state to care for refugees and, instead, returning them to the form of statelessness.

Whereas Patricia Nguyễn performs the memories of the “boat pushbacks” by submerging and drowning herself in salt water to express the “ordeal of thirst,” *Nước* uses droughts to express the haunting of the Vietnamese refugee “ghost nation.”<sup>159</sup> Set in California, this concluding scene can be read as a collective drought and rainfall, represented by the mother rescuing the protagonist from drowning by pulling them onto the vessel of her memories as one of the many “boat people” refugees. The protagonist and mother embrace each other under the desert sun until the sound of rain droplets cause them to look upwards to the sky, where they observe a rain cloud drifting closer until it gradually drapes the scene in a grey cast. Just as the protagonist and mother begin to feel the first drops of rain on their skin, they are immediately doused in heavy rainfall (Figure 13). Thus, rather than a return to Vietnam or the U.S., the protagonist and mother continue to exist as stateless “archival others,” waiting for the return of a lost home in the form of replenishing rain.

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<sup>157</sup> Huỳnh, “Live by Water,” 121 – 153.

<sup>158</sup> Huỳnh, “Live by Water,” 121 – 153.

<sup>159</sup> Huỳnh, “Live by Water,” 121 – 153.

This chapter examined how the ghosts of the Vietnamese “boat people” have been included and excluded in both material and figurative archives. For material archives, such as the VNCA and Vien Phim, the strategies of inclusion and exclusion have been based on rebuilding a nation, either as a benevolent peacemaker between the two Vietnams (VNCA) or to uphold an image of revolutionary sacrifice (Vien Phim). The Project Ngoc Records can be understood as a counter-archive that (re)politicizes the everyday, especially for the Vietnamese refugees who were deemed stateless in the refugee camps and detention centres. Though the Viet Film Fest is not a traditional archive, in comparison to the previous examples, it functions as a living “archive of memory” that actively reimagines and rebuilds the “ghost nation” of the South Vietnamese American refugee diaspora. The introduction thus offered the historical and theoretical context of archives, from their counter-archival potentials but also to their limitations, particularly for their incapability to include materials that have been lost or destroyed in the refugee exodus.

The chapter then discussed the concepts of “refugee repertoire” and embodied memories to explore how refugees and their descendants navigated their absence in the national archives of the U.S. and Vietnam. The chapter then turned to an analysis of *Nước* to examine how the mother’s haunting memories of the boat, the sea, and the “ordeal of thirst” manifested in this intersubjective scene as a “ghost nation” in the California desert. This “ghost nation,” or the collective memories of refugees, is sustained by the unwillingness or incapability to include Vietnamese refugees into national archives. These tensions between archival exclusions and inclusions revealed that the VNCA aimed to include “boat people” refugees in order to form a future-oriented image of U.S. benevolence and to conceal their current classification of the Vietnamese as “g—ks.” Through the Vietnamese concept of *nước*—as a shared drought and rainfall rooted in a refugee consciousness—this scene suggested that the future of the South Vietnamese refugee diaspora is still undetermined.

## Conclusion

This thesis examined *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) as a crucial site to expose the concealed role of U.S. militarism in the production of the Vietnam War refugee exodus and refugee subject. *Nước* encapsulates the sometimes difficult-to-grasp and ineffable experiences of refugee displacement, resettlement, and assimilation, often caused and sustained by traumatic silences. However, rather than exploiting the traumas of refugees through “damage-centred research” by locating the refugee condition in the “bodies and minds of the Vietnamese people,” this analysis approached *Nước* as a semifictional portrait of a refugee family and their encounters with the ghosts from the Vietnam War.<sup>160</sup> Hauntology is an approach that follows the ghosts that have been disavowed or suppressed by contemporary society, in this case by U.S. humanitarian discourse and visual culture. Fleshing out the shape of their haunting can result in a “transformative recognition” of one’s difference.<sup>161</sup>

*Nước* explores how Vietnamese refugees, artists, and filmmakers recognize their difference in U.S. society as model minorities, sex workers, and “boat people,” and how self-representation can counter and critique these stereotypical spectres. Specifically, this analysis aimed to contribute to recent studies on the legacies of the Vietnam War, exploring how Vietnamese refugees represent themselves to confront, challenge, and enact the changes to unsettle and undo the harmful images that remain in their everyday lives. The focus on ordinary Vietnamese refugees and their everyday lives is a response to the research on the Vietnam War, which has been characterized and framed mainly by “military policy, diplomacy, legislative, and executive decision making.”<sup>162</sup> Although each chapter drew from studies related to U.S. foreign, military, and refugee resettlement policies, the intent was to critique them for their (in)direct influence on the production of violent spectres.

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<sup>160</sup> Tuck, “Suspending Damage,” 409; Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

<sup>161</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

<sup>162</sup> Boyle and Lim, *Looking Back on the Vietnam War*, 5.

In addition to this project, some of the recent directions in Asian American studies, critical refugee studies, and visual culture studies have focused on the comparative analysis of the refugee subject in the contemporary, transpacific, and global contexts. For example, Lan Duong and Sharif Lila in their text, “Displaced Subjects: Revolution, Film, and Women in Viet Nam and Palestine,” “critically juxtapose” the female resistance fighter featured in revolutionary films by Vietnamese and Palestinian women, two countries affected by U.S. militarism and financing.<sup>163</sup> Similarly, YẾN Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong argue in “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Art,” that examining “contemporary Vietnamese and Syrian art in terms of surviving violence is a decolonial practice of looking that hinges on reading the small stories of refugee lives within and against the context of empire and militarism.”<sup>164</sup> From a transnational and transpacific context, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi’s book, *Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization across Guam and Israel-Palestine*, focuses on the “refugee settler condition,” or the relationship between refugees and the Indigenous peoples of the lands they were involuntary resettled to.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, in Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu’s edited volume, *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada*, the authors explore how the inclusions and exclusions of refugees have been crucial to Canadian “humanitarian exceptionalism.”<sup>166</sup> Thus, potential directions for future research in these areas include exploring the political subjectivity of refugees in multiple contexts, from the legacies of U.S. imperialism, the ongoing state violence of settler-colonial societies, to the transcultural analysis of art, film, and other forms of representation.

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<sup>163</sup> Lan Duong and Sharif Lila. “Displaced Subjects: Revolution, Film, and Women in Viet Nam and Palestine.” *Verge: Studies in Global Asia* 6.1 (Spring 2020): 168 – 171.

<sup>164</sup> YẾN Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong. “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Art.” *Signs* 43.3 (2018): 587 – 615.

<sup>165</sup> Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi. *Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization across Guam and Israel-Palestine* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 1 – 18.

<sup>166</sup> Nguyen and Phu, *Refugee States*, 3.

This thesis developed a hauntological critique, through a sustained historical, theoretical, and visual analysis, of the ghosts that linger in the everyday lives of Vietnamese refugees and in American visual culture. The introduction delineated the historical context of the Vietnam War refugee exodus, production of the refugee subject, and the processes of resettlement. It then turned to the methodological and theoretical framework to discuss the ways that U.S. humanitarianism also functions to conceal the historical and contemporary traces of militarism in the everyday lives of ordinary refugees. Following the introduction, the three chapters then fleshed out the ghosts that haunted the Vietnamese refugee family in *Nước*—the “model minority,” the “sex worker,” and the “boat people”—to expose the contradictions and fictional elements of U.S. humanitarian discourse that circulate in American visual culture.

Specifically, the three chapters revealed the ways that, in the American popular imaginary, freedom often comes with a debt, protection is offered through domination, and national inclusion can function to bury a history of prior exclusions. Furthermore, the three chapters embedded *Nước* in a genealogy of Vietnamese diasporic and refugee aesthetics, art, culture, and film to unsettle the dominant American mythology of the Vietnam War. Therefore, instead of reframing Vietnamese subjects as speechless spectacles or wartime icons of an American tragedy, this research project focused on self-representation as a way for refugees to critically look and touch back against these dominant forms of suppression and unresolved spectres of war. Ultimately, despite the conclusion of the Vietnam War, this thesis fleshed out the ghosts of *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*) to argue that the Vietnamese refugee diaspora continues to be haunted by the concealed presence and the ongoing effects of U.S. imperialism, militarism, and state violence in everyday life.

## Figures



Figure 1. The protagonist and love interest in the dark room. Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).



Figure 2. The portrait of the mother in the dark room. Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).



Figure 3. The mother working in a nail salon. Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).



Figure 4. The protagonist and their mother eating chao. Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).



Figure 5. The protagonist in the womb. Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).



Figure 6. The close-up shot of the protagonist in the womb. Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).



Figure 7. The protagonist plunging into darkness in the womb. Still from *Nước (Water/Homeland)*.



Figure 8. The glimpse of the mother in the nail salon in the womb.

Still from *Nước (Water/Homeland)*.



Figure 9. Vu Van Minh. *The Dinner of Traditional Tet in Closed Camp*.

Project Ngoc Records. UC Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive. Painting, 78 x 56 cm, 1990.



Figure 10. *Camp Protests*. “Vietnamese refugees protest forced repatriation at Hong Kong refugee camp.” Project Ngoc Records. UC Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive. Photographs, 1990.

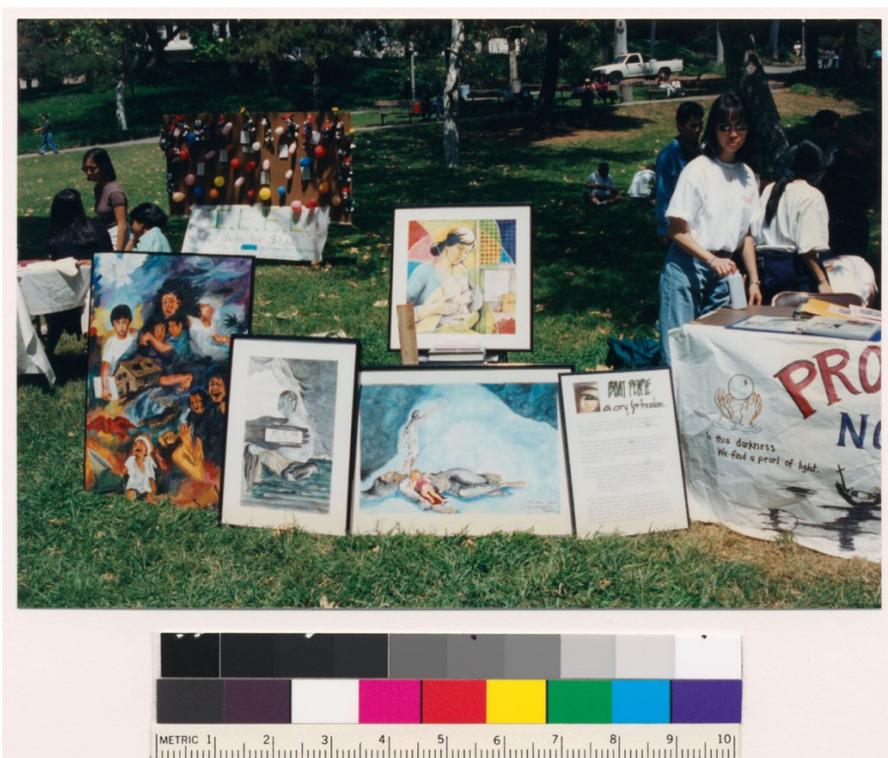


Figure 11. *Project Ngoc Art Exhibit*. Project Ngoc Records.

UC Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive. Photographs, ca. 1996.



Figure 12. The protagonist from beneath the surface of the sea. Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).



Figure 13. The protagonist and their mother on the boat in the California desert.

Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).



Figure 14. The heavy rainfall in the California desert. Still from *Nước* (*Water/Homeland*).

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