Ecologies of Memory: Memorializing Militarized Environments of the Vietnam War

HEIDI AMIN-HONG, University of California, Santa Barbara
KEVA X. BUI, Northwestern University

Abstract

This essay proposes ecological forms of memory that unsettle dominant processes of remembering war that privilege nationalist narratives of heroism and conquest in mourning the loss of human life. Instead, we theorize an aesthetic relationship between refugee memory and more-than-human witnessing that offers an avenue to remember militarized landscapes differently. While nationalist practices of memory often demand cohesion around a collective identity or a universal humanism, ecologies of memory prioritize diffuse stories of horizontal kinship that open up new possibilities of making community amongst more-than-human denizens caught in the web of imperial war. In this essay, we examine three incomplete aesthetic inquiries into the memorialization of militarized environments: the community curation of The Missing Piece Project Collective, Tiffany Chung's installation *For the Living*, and Binh Danh's chlorophyll prints *One Week's Dead.* These interventions respond to the enduring presence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, as a representation of how memories of scarred psyches and environments are consolidated into a national consciousness. In doing so, these artists complicate forms of memorialization by attending to the diasporic, ephemeral, and inconclusive, creating new forms of collective memory that account for communal relationships with each other and with nonhuman environments.

Memorializing Militarized Environments

At the 2017 ceremony commemorating the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, artist Maya Lin reflects on her design for the memorial as "a single impulse—to cut open the Earth and to polish the Earth's open

sides."[1] The long wall nestled into a tranquil section of the National Mall slopes below ground into the earth, the tallest sections meeting in the middle. The names of over fifty-eight thousand American veterans who perished in the war are carved into the wall's reflective black granite surface. As the viewer walks alongside the wall and enters the indentation into the earth, they see their own reflection merging with the record of the remembered and deceased. Here, in contrast to a representational aesthetic that commemorates and glorifies the dead, Lin's design abstracts the legacy of the Vietnam War into a gash in the American earth and psyche.

Figure 1.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Photo taken by Heidi Amin-Hong.

Lin's abstraction of the memorial faced significant pushback from US veterans, who criticized the design for dwelling on the shame of the Vietnam War thereby impinging the commemoration of the American soldiers' heroism. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Lowe have separately noted, Lin's aesthetic choice to use black granite that refuses to "rise above the earth" were criticized as symbolic of shame and feminized defeat during and after the memorial's construction.[2] Nationalist narratives of war demand finality—*we win or we lose*—in ways that obscure complex processes of war that are felt at a different frequency at the level of the earth. Thus, Lin's aesthetic choices, coupled with her identity as a young Chinese American woman, conflicted with veterans' desires for a national monument that glorifies the might of the US military and the sacrifice of American soldiers in a fight to contain communism.

To rectify this lacuna, a bronze sculpture created by Frederick Hart was unveiled in 1984, depicting three soldiers in uniform at a short distance from the memorial wall. The sculpture commemorated a vision of multiracial unity and camaraderie, depicting a white figure in the center next to an African American soldier on the right and a Latino soldier on the left, all of whom were based on several active-duty Marines when the statue was commissioned. In contrast to the abstraction of the memorial wall, the

statue consolidated an American multiracial fantasy of the Cold War—where a cadre of racialized and classed individuals coalesced into a singular national struggle for freedom and democracy against the threat of communist expansion.[3]

More than highlighting the Vietnam War as a "disunifying" event,[4] the contestations surrounding the memorialization of the war indicate a desire to resurrect a national hero and reunify a patriotic and patriarchal national consciousness without reckoning with how war, to borrow quite literally from Lin, "cut[s] open the Earth." As many American veterans of the Vietnam War contested Lin's memorial representation of the war that refuses to physically materialize the military bodies who fought in the war, their critiques elided the material earth upon which these very same bodies walk, fight, and ultimately destroy life. On the other hand, the environmental design of the memorial—its low walls that invite the visitor to walk into the earth—facilitate a passage through space and memory that recalls war's uneven ecological devastation in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Though Lin may not directly reference the ecological violence of American bombings in Southeast Asia, as well as the spraying of toxic defoliants Agent Orange and Purple in Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos and the subsequent chemical dumping into the Pacific, the memorial wall's design invites consideration of how the Vietnam War's environmental impact is entangled with its human impact by materializing the scar of the American psyche on US soil. Viet Thanh Nguyen describes Lin's memorial as a "geographic site of memory" that remembers the wounded reputation of the American soldier as "a cut and wound in the earth, but also a scar and suture."[5] Interpreted as a suture, the memorial wall alludes to the communal practice of memory as essential for national healing, where the physical environment and its capacity for renewal becomes a metaphor for a gradually unified national memory.

While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial makes a valuable gesture to the earth as a possible site of communal healing, we maintain that the memorial's entanglement with national scripts of memory obstructs recognition of material environmental ruin, felt most acutely in the places destroyed by American weapons and soldiers, in the wake of imperial wars and violence. In this essay, we interrogate dominant forms of memory that aestheticize militarized environments and consider the capacity of memorials devised and imagined by Vietnamese refugee artists and communities to (re)surface memory and make the material impact of war on the environment tangible, while resisting the notion of a complete and unified national memory. Countering practices of memorialization that demand cohesion around a collective national identity or universal humanism, we offer *ecologies of memory* as a system of communal practices of remembrance that are fundamentally diffused and incomplete. In contrast to design choices that reinforce a desire for resolution and cohesion around a singular script of memory, ecologies of memory, as developed by diasporic refugee artists that we examine here, produce a set of aesthetic strategies and practices of remembrance that refuse recuperation of a patriarchal nation state. In focusing on refugee artists of the Vietnamese diaspora, we build on what Yen Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong call "feminist

refugee epistemology," a form of knowing that privileges the everyday creativity of those displaced because of war and militarism, who in turn develop generative critiques of the gendered violence sustained against human life and more-than-human environments.[6]

Theorizing ecologies of memory invites a consideration of how memorials and practices of remembrance can articulate memory as horizontal and communal within and across human and nonhuman environments, developing modes of more-than-human witnessing that might reveal the reverberations of militarism across natural and terrestrial worlds. As scholars of war and empire principally interested in the ecological reverberations of US military intervention in Southeast Asia, we endeavor to develop a theory of environmental memory that takes seriously modes of witness that exceed the testimony of the liberal human form. While shaping the physical environment became a central aim and consequence of US military intervention in Southeast Asia,[7] the environment continues to play a crucial role in the making of war memories through the unresolved effects of chemical toxins that remain in the soil, water, and food chain, unexploded ordnance that continue to kill Southeast Asian civilians, and the acceleration of global climate change due to CO_2 emissions from military operations. As we write elsewhere, the "relation between matter and aesthetics [is] inherently political, charged with a material and affective force that reveals layers of compounded histories in soil, water, plants, and racialized human bodies."[8] As such, we are interested in how diasporic cultural works that critically commemorate the more-than-human destruction of war can also reveal the material reverberations of militarism and empire. Thus, rather than offer a de-politicized reading practice that attempts to misguidedly "represent" forms of nonhuman witnessing to which we do not have access, we are interested in how refugee engagements with more-than-human witnessing and the aesthetic relationship between human and nonhuman memory offer an avenue to engage with diffuse stories of intergenerational and multispecies kinship, creativity, and connection rather than human heroism and conquest in the remains of war.

As architectures of collective remembrance, war memorials are as much about the experience of communal grief and memory as they are about the aesthetic design choices that enable such experiences. Javier Arbona-Homar notes that "a memorial's design strategy [functions] to control the conditions of grieving, what remains after a disaster … [yet], remains are political … [and they] travel and take the living with them to other places."[9] This statement is even more so true with regards to the National Mall, as the geographical design of war memories captures a national memory that is inherently entangled with a patriarchal patriotism that travels the space, one that consolidates a *feeling* of US imperial power that is transferred from the memorial to the viewer, conditioning one on *how to remember wars of the past.* In this sense, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is pedagogical as a material force—composed of granite, a material prized for its durability and ability to withstand weathering, it participates in promoting a sense of permanence to the ephemeral lost lives that endure in memories,

entrenching them in a popular psyche that extends beyond the space of the National Mall.[10] In the heartland of empire among national monuments, this memorial is a testament to the solidity of US empire.

Yet, the memorial and the space of the National Mall itself also provide opportune space for unsettling interventions that challenge such solidity. War memorials have been a site of commemorative protest, ones interested in following remains to make connections between wars past and present that exceed the possibilities of state memorialization.[11] The Vietnam Veterans Memorial's power is derived from its specificity and its potential for communal reflection, exemplified by the litany of names carved on its surface. However, its positioning in the heart of the National Mall captures memory itself within an imperial grasp, or what Arbona-Homar describes as "the absorption of public space into military control."[12] While Arbona-Homar writes in the context of memorials housed within military bases, we suggest that the National Mall's proximity to empire serves a similar function of absorbing communal grief of the Vietnam War into the script of a national wound, one that obfuscates possibilities of remembering the war otherwise.[13] As it carries the names of American soldiers who perished in the war, the granite wall and the surrounding landscape itself become participants in a collective staging of war memories. Visitors, often friends and relatives of the dead, are encouraged to leave objects at the wall itself. These objects, which commonly include letters, military memorabilia, photographs, and other possessions associated with the deceased are then collected and catalogued by the National Park Service into an archive. Tellingly, on a visit to the archive in 2015, Vietnamese American community organizer and cofounder of The Missing Piece Project (MPP) Kim Nguyen Tran found only six items out of hundreds of thousands had been archived from those of Vietnamese descent. MPP, an artist and activist collective that "envisions a nationwide, coordinated, mass dedication of objects at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial of Washington, DC by Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, Cambodian, and other communities still affected today by the legacy of the conflict in Southeast Asia,"[14] constructs a counter archive to the national memorial.

In the sections that follow, we examine MPP's political project to construct a more diffuse counter archive alongside two other incomplete aesthetic inquiries into the memorialization of militarized environments: Tiffany Chung's temporary exhibit *For the Living* and Binh Danh's chlorophyll prints *One Week's Dead*. These interventions directly respond to the enduring presence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a representation of how memories of scarred psyches and environments are consolidated into a national consciousness, as well as how land becomes a metaphor for the capacity to heal and recuperate the nation. Indeed, what compels us about these three aesthetic projects is their capacity to intervene in and ultimately transform nationalist sites of memory, and in doing so shift the project of memorializing war away from the figure of the soldier and towards the social ecologies that emerge in war's wake. These aesthetic projects do not simply expand mourning to a more diverse collective of human and nonhuman subjects impacted by war; instead, they draw

attention to how the aesthetics, processes, and materialities that constrain memory and memorialization are inherently political. Collectively, these three artistic interventions complicate forms of memorialization by attending to the ephemeral and inconclusive, creating new forms of collective memory that account for shifting relationships with nonhuman environments. In doing so, we propose ecological forms of memory that unsettle dominant narratives of war that privilege chronicles of heroism and conquest, and instead prioritize diffuse stories of intergenerational and horizontal kinship that open up new possibilities of making community.

The Missing Piece Project: Collective and Communal Memory in Diaspora

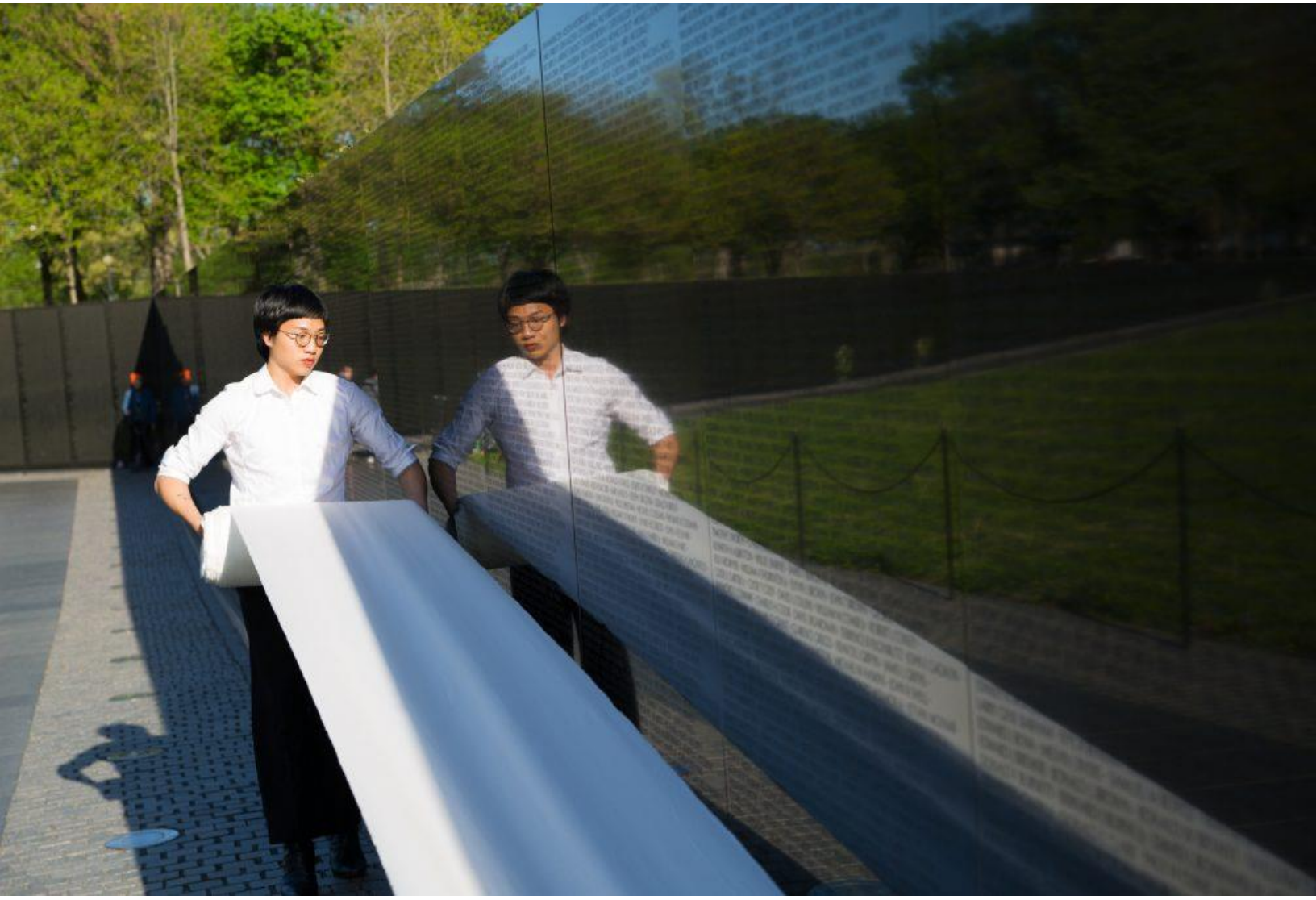

Figure 2. Artist Antonius Tin Bui dedicating a forty-yard length of Vietnamese white funerary cloth to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 2018, as part of the Missing Piece Project's pilot dedication. Photo taken by Lan Nguyen.

Nestled in the earth of the nation's capital, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is material evidence of what is missing from a national narrative that remembers American soldiers but not South Vietnamese veterans or civilians—who were both allies and collateral damage of US imperial intervention.[15] As a form of countermemory, The Missing Piece Project was envisioned by Tran and Antonius Tin Bui in collaboration with the Viet Unity-Southern California community to reimagine the existing structure of the memorial wall to stage a dialogue with space and memory for the Southeast Asian diaspora. As noted previously, in the more than four hundred thousand items left by visitors in memory of loved ones lost in the war and catalogued by the National Park Service, during her visit to the collection archives in 2015, Tran found only six items left at the Wall by members of the Vietnamese community.[16] This absence should be unsurprising for, as Yen Lê Espiritu notes, this collection of found objects serves as a form of national mourning and collectivity from which Vietnamese refugees have always been omitted, as the collection conjures "sentimentalized stories [that] invite the reader to mourn the innocent (American) dead alongside their loved ones, and in so doing become a member of the family nation."[17] Such national collectivity is inherently antithetical to the subject formation of the Vietnamese refugee, who "remains the symbolic 'alien,' the *metonym* for Asia that by definition cannot be imagined as sharing in America," even as refugees share the brutal costs of war.[18]

In contrast to the script of national memory performed by conventional visitors to the memorial wall, MPP collects found objects, creative artwork, and oral histories from Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian diasporic community members, both convened digitally on the project's website and, prior to a restructuring of the National Park Service's acquisitions guidelines in 2021, left at the wall to be catalogued in the national archive.[19] Such digital and mobile memorials of war, what Espiritu calls "moving memorials," signal a form of memory that unsettles national narratives of war and instead "constitute an alternative meeting place for the Vietnamese diaspora from which to transmit traumatic memory, forge cultural identity, and re-narrate national history."[20]

While the memorial wall is permanently etched into the earth of the National Mall and grants a material solidity to memories of war foreclosed to a past temporality, MPPs diffuse nature embraces memory as an ongoing process that remembers the war not as a finished event but ongoing structure. Linh Thủy Nguyễn has critiqued dominant memories of the Vietnam War, both from white and Vietnamese Americans, as exceptionalizing the war by "mak[ing] subjective claims about Vietnamese American experience" that are at risk of "overshadow[ing] … how the conditions of white supremacy and global capital that made the war possible continue to shape the conditions of Southeast Asians after resettlement."[21] Vietnamese diasporic imaginaries, as Long T. Bui asserts in the context of the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster, California, can reinforce such exceptionalism by centering South Vietnamese soldiers and military as defenders of democracy alongside American soldiers while "dismembering" other communal memories that do not fall into such a common,

nationalist, and patriarchal identity.[22] As we demonstrate in this section, MPP's collaborative yet diffuse process attempts to remember war in the diaspora highlight the conditions of racial and colonial dispossession that continue to enable war and sever human communities from their ecosystems.[23]

On April 30th, 2018, I (Keva) visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as part of MPP's pilot dedication of objects to be catalogued in the national archive.[24] As part of the dedication performance, artist Antonius Tin Bui unrolled a forty-yard-long white funerary cloth along the base of the wall, a symbolic commemoration of the uncounted and lost Vietnamese lives across decades of US military intervention. Park rangers immediately confronted the group, remarking that the MPP's commemoration impeded on and interrupted other visitor's ability to experience the memorial in peace to commemorate their loved ones.

Our presence—a group of around ten Vietnamese American descendants of refugees—seemingly ruptured the act of collective mourning performed by visitors, or at least those deemed as *proper* visitors, that ascribed to a national script of *how to remember*. In a site of public memory, how do park rangers, themselves enforcers of state remembrance, dictate what objects are "acceptable" for dedication and whose presence at the wall is for "commemoration" or "interruption," an act of enclosure that itself delimits how communities may mourn with and against nation? Our conversations with park rangers reinforced the notion of the wall as reserved for a particular form of national American memory—one that materializes the war's unfortunate loss of American lives as a gash in the American collective psyche and forcibly disappears those deemed collateral damage.

Yet, the memorial is merely the staging ground, not the end goal, for a larger political and aesthetic project of MPP to open space for memory as communal across time and space. In attempting a collective dedication of objects that refuse the narrative of heroism that consolidates in national commemorations of war, the project diffuses memory into a collective enterprise that creatively imagines intergenerational and ecological forms of remembrance. For example, dedicated objects include a jar by Vy Le labeled "memories of home," carrying sand and small plastic toys representing memories that children leave when they become war refugees, and Tiffany Le's paper boats made from funeral money placed on top of an illustration of refugees whose bodies merge with boats and ocean waves. Engaging the ecological imaginary of *nước*, which several Vietnamese American studies scholars have theorized as a refugee dialectic between the multiple translations of *water* and *homeland*,[25] both V. Le and T. Le's artistic interventions stage the convergence of mediations on diasporic longing for homeland with practices of placemaking in current sites of refuge.

Figure 3. Artist Tiffany Le in front of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as part of the Missing Piece Project dedication in 2018, dedicating her linocut-printed paper boats representing the missing narratives of the Vietnamese people. Photo taken by Lan Nguyen.

In the above photo, T. Le bends down in front of the Wall to arrange the boats as part of her dedication, with the image of the boats and her body together reflecting in the memorial's black granite. In perhaps the most literal sense, this image captures MPP's desire to "carve out space"—in front of the Wall and in the archive—for the voices of those impacted by the war in Southeast Asia. In doing so, Southeast Asian bodies and voices enter the space of the National Mall—as interruption, rupture, and as material presence—and in turn, their memories become catalogued in an official state archive,

serving as a countermemory of war that nonetheless risks institutionalization. This recuperation of monument space, situated in a National Park designated as "America's front yard," also signifies a Southeast Asian refugee critique of a built environment that valorizes a white, heteronormative citizen and family, or the *proper* visitor to the memorial. While this "gift of freedom" extended to the refugee, as Mimi Thi Nguyen has written, promises a normative sense of national belonging and inclusion, the acceptance of such a gift "is to be compromised by the one who gives … [and] to enter into an economy of indebtedness that is the concession or negation of [their] desires or directions."[26]

However, MPP refuses inclusion as its ultimate objective; instead, as a community project that seeks to intervene into national memorialization around the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the project articulates a theory of communal memory drawn from diasporic art, oral histories, and found objects to stage what Crystal Munhye Baik calls a "reencounter" with the war in Southeast Asia, one that "examine[s] the diverse manifestations that congeal as political, social, and affective formations seemingly removed from the context of war."[27] This exchange of memory often relies on intergenerational exchanges between community members and their families in translating stories into dedicated material objects. Baik theorizes this process as an "alternative repertoire of diasporic memories" that produce a "social ecology of narration-and-listening spaces" that constitute memory as collectively co-created. This articulation of a social ecology of memory proves instructive, in the sense that community practices of memory are *rhizomatic*; both in Edouard Glissant's sense as a relation beyond rootedness as well as what Natalia Duong theorizes as a form of potential kinship "created through rhizomatic connections [that exist] in their oscillation and vibrational spread."[28]

Whereas the national memorial privileges the solidified materialization of memory—indexed by the granite wall's enduring presence, the objects catalogued in the national archive, and the physical embodiment of soldiers' commemorated as sculptures—MPP's collective mission prioritizes the social relations that emerge in the wake of remembering differently. Less important is the object itself, even as it may be displayed on the project's website or catalogued for the archive itself, but the process by which community members engage in storytelling, memory making, and intergenerational exchange that produces relations in the wake of war. In modeling such diffuse yet collective forms of memory making, MPP opens up other aesthetic possibilities for considering memory as an ecological process that attends to first, how diasporic memory is necessarily rhizomatic and second, how land, water, plant life, and other elements of the nonhuman environment continue to be powerful material reminders/remainders of how the environment becomes mobilized in war and its aftermath—from enemy target to be destroyed to symbols of national healing. In the following sections, we consider how ecologies of memory—embodied by MPP and its process encouraging communal countermemory—enables alternative readings of Vietnamese diasporic memories of war in the work of Tiffany Chung and Binh Danh.

Figure 4. Tiffany Chung, *For the Living* (2023). Mixed media earthwork representing the global routes of Southeast Asian refugees displaced by the Vietnam War, adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Photo by Steve Weinik

In September 2023, I (Heidi) went to the National Mall to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the adjacent temporary installation, *For the Living*, by Vietnamese American artist Tiffany Chung (*see* Fig. 4).[29] Chung's memorial, against the permanence of the monuments and memorials on the National Mall, was designed to be temporary and portable in accordance with the schedule of the Beyond Granite outdoor exhibit, which was only permitted to take place from August to September 2023.[30] Visitors to the National Mall were sparse on that Sunday, and the few visitors to the wall me-

andered to examine the artifacts left in the crevice between the wall and the tiled sidewalk and puzzle over the ordering of the names, which are arranged not in alphabetical order but by their date of death. I overheard another visitor remark that Lin's original design omitted the sidewalks; she wanted the grass to meet the wall seamlessly, for the sculpture to emerge from the earth—a detail that apparently resonated with the visitor and resurfaces in Chung's ephemeral memorial. As a Chinese American woman from the DC area visiting with her mixed-race, blended family, I was familiar with the geographies of war memorials in the US capital and the racial politics they mediate.[31] That day, an older white veteran approached my stepfather, a retired white veteran who served in the air force, to tell him that the names of soldiers who died in the beginning and end of the war in Viet Nam meet in the middle, where the walls slope over the visitors to their highest point. The aesthetic force of the memorial's abstract design seems to be captured in these moments of reflection and connection for a particular proper imagined white American veteran visitor and his family, amplified in the contrast between the wall's immovable granite and the ephemerality of the objects left—bouquets of wilting flowers and laminated mementos that are not immune to the weather.

Located a short walk from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and nestled into a green lawn, *For the Living* maps the global routes of Southeast Asian refugee displacement as a direct result of the Vietnam War. In contrast to the frequently visited granite wall, my family and I were the lone visitors at Chung's memorial, which was marked with temporary signage from the Beyond Granite exhibit curated by Monument Lab to showcase stories that remain untold at the National Mall.[32] The structure of the memorial was deliberately low-profile and easy to miss, the rope and landscape edging lines partially obscured by the grass. *For the Living* is a large-scale map that draws upon previous maps that Chung has made that depict Vietnamese refugee migration routes, which span six continents and cross multiple oceans. Chung's most well-known works include multimedia drawings, paintings, embroidered artwork, and installations that map geographies of war and migration from feminist and refugee perspectives. Keva and I draw from my previous writing about Chung's artwork, and her maps in particular, as a form of "feminist refugee memory" that resists what Chung has described as state-enforced historical amnesia in revitalizations of postwar landscapes in Southeast Asia.[33] Her maps are often embroidered with beads, thread, and metal grommets or drawn on layers of vellum paper that allude to the landscape as palimpsest of the memories of those displaced by war or development and environmental extraction. Through maps, Chung draws material and geographical connections across conflict landscapes, finding resonance across the displacement of Vietnamese refugees and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, including the more recent wars in Syria that produced an exodus of Syrian refugees into Europe.[34] Abstracting maps into stitches and patterns that allude to both topographic and demographic shifts, Chung attunes our attention to the minor landscapes and histories that are effaced through dominant national memories of war as past event or nation-states as static and unchanging.

In *For the Living*, Southeast Asian refugee migration routes are delineated using color-coded ropes that convey the mode of transit (blue for boat, orange for land, and yellow for air). A world map is outlined using rubber landscape edging, a flexible material traditionally used in gardens to define and contain flora from its surrounding landscape. Metal fixtures that resemble large thumb tacks dig into the land to hold the calibrated rope in place and mark destinations where refugees settled temporarily or permanently. The official photographs of the installation show the full map from an aerial view, where the density of air routes from Southeast Asia to Western Europe and North America is easily visible. In person, the contours of the map are harder to see, as they become partially abstracted by the curvature of the land and the grass growing within the fenced area. To see the installation in its entirety, visitors must walk around the map on the grass for an always partial and obscured view; as they walk, their footsteps follow the curvature of the migration routes, and such movement might open up contemplation of personal migration histories that led them to the current landscape in America's capital, a space that symbolizes the ideal of the heteronormative national family and the carceral logics of enclosure that enable such ideals.

For the Living's centering of Southeast Asian refugee geographies refuses a narrative of inclusion into national memory. Indeed, even as the Vietnamese refugee is assimilated into the US nation state as part of a militarized, anticommunist vision of democracy, Chung's map reveals that refugee memory cannot be reduced as such or contained within US borders. Chung creates an ephemeral world map that represents the vast and complex scope of Southeast Asian refugee migrations to West Africa, Australia, Latin America, and the Middle East alongside more familiar routes to North America and Western Europe. Such routes, she describes, were partially and incompletely documented in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) records that she pieced together—often from fragmented government documents, flight records, and oral histories.[35] Chung considers the artwork's relation to the surrounding landscape, to time, and the elements, describing ephemerality as central to the map's design: "[T]he grass will grow. The sun will wash the things away, maybe including the material that created this map."[36] The memorial's inherent instability structurally reflects the fragmented nature of documenting refugee passages and memories in institutional archives. By disappearing into the earth rather than towering over it, the map upends the aesthetic sensibilities of the traditional memorial that demands permanence in the historical record. Over the course of the memorial's short life, the grass might become overgrown and obscure the refugee routes, making them more difficult to trace, yet signaling an entanglement with the land and the natural elements that alludes to how cultivating home and new environmental ties become integral to refugee experiences.

As a form of countermemory, Chung's map reveals the global cost of the war in Viet Nam on peoples and environments of Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos, who disproportionately bear the consequences of genocidal and ecocidal warfare that decimated

Southeast Asian landscapes. These structures that enable global war, as Chung visualizes in another map that documents global CO_2 emissions by key fossil fuel and coal extraction projects, are also the forces accelerating climate catastrophe. As political scientist Neta Crawford reveals, the US Department of Defense is the single largest consumer of energy in the US and the single largest institutional greenhouse gas emitter in the world, an amount that Crawford attests is comparable to the emissions of entire countries.[37] Chung's site-specific map inscribes Southeast Asian migration paths on to the landscape of the National Mall with the materials of rubber, metal, and rope, reproducing memories of damaged landscapes overlaid upon stories of refugee resettlement and resilience. However, Chung does not uncritically reaffirm narratives of "refugee resilience," which Simi Kang has interrogated as a violent concept that produces refugees as environmentally expendable in a disaster timeline.[38] Rather, in drawing spatial connections between the erasures of the National Mall and the dispossession and eviction of Saigon residents in postwar development projects in Viet Nam, Chung critiques how war and capitalist development work in tandem to facilitate environmental transformation across global and local scales. Her maps also extend a politics of solidarity and relation from the Vietnamese refugee to other communities that continue to be subjected to militarized violence and displacements. In a 2023 interview about the *For the Living* memorial, Chung observed that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 paralleled its chaotic and abrupt withdrawal from Viet Nam in 1975.[39] If the structures of destruction and abandonment in Viet Nam seemed to enable similar militarized structures in Afghanistan, Chung's staging of countermemory in the heart of empire opens up possibilities for a relational process of remembering across Southeast Asian, Afghan, and other diasporic communities produced by war and its propensity to reshape environments.

Despite its proximity to monumental landmarks that signify American patriotism, the memorial intervenes in the geography of the settler colonial state to shift our attention to the land and labor that sustain these landmarks on a local scale. The borders constructed from landscape edging represent topographical boundaries between land and sea, while also alluding to the political boundaries that determine migration or exile. Moreover, they draw attention to the constructed environment of the lawn, meticulously maintained by irrigation systems, fertilizer, and an immigrant labor force of landscapers. In this context, Chung's memorial stages another communal experience from the vantage point of the refugee, which acknowledges the vast scale of refugee migrations and emphasizes that memories of war and migration are intimate and site-specific. The feminist materialist aesthetic of the memorial itself demands a reorientation to geographies of war that does not rely on aerial domination; rather, it requires us to bend toward the earth itself as we contemplate the fragility of politically constructed borders and more-than-human environments and the collective capacity of refugees to cultivate new life within and across militarized geographies.[40]

Binh Danh's *One Week's Dead*: Remembering Fallen Soldiers and Environments

Figure 5 (on left). Edison R. Phillips, 19 years old, 2008. Binh Danh, *Life: One's Week Dead Series*. Chlorophyll print on grass and resin. Frame: 18 1/8 x 15 1/16 x 1 3/8 inches. (courtesy of the artist)

Figure 6 (on right). Gary McCollough, 20 years old, 2008. Binh Danh, *Life: One's Week Dead Series.* Chlorophyll print on grass and resin. Frame: 18 1/8 x 15 1/16 x 1 3/8 inches. (courtesy of the artist)

Vietnamese American artist Binh Danh is most known for innovating the development of "chlorophyll prints" as a method of engaging a collective memory of the Vietnam War, utilizing photosynthesis to record and imprint iconic images of war onto the foliage of plants. After placing positives of photographs onto leaves or grass—often photographs that, rather than of his own taking, draw from iconic images of the war within an American national consciousness—Danh covers the piece with glass and leaves it exposed to sunlight over several days, allowing the image to materialize on the surface of the leaf. A process of trial and experimentation, Danh engages in this process multiple times before achieving desired results, when he preserves the leaf in resin. Danh's innovative method of chlorophyll printing exemplifies what environmental media scholar Melody Jue describes as "metabolic photography," or "the development of images through the vital processes of photosynthesis" that allow plants to participate in the creation of the image "not only as represented figures, but as metabolic agents."[41] Chlorophyll printing relies not on traditional artistic methods of chemical processes or ink, but on varying levels of sunlight in the natural world; the plant life itself—leaves and grass often found from Danh's mother's garden in

California—becomes an active participant in rendering war memories materially visible through metabolism. The metabolic, as Jue explains, accounts for "the necessary biological transformations that make continued life possible."[42] Photosynthesis transforms the sun's energy into the chemical compound of glucose, which is then absorbed by animals and humans to power the cells that compose organic life. Here, organic life is incorporated into a physical representation of war memory—if the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a physical "cut" into the earth to remember the war, then the chlorophyll print signifies its reincarnation in another land and time. We might interpret Danh's use of metabolic processes as a signifier of how the material traces of war transform over time; as the toxins from dioxin linger and travel through food systems, botanical and animal matter become entangled with militarized legacies of scientific experimentation and chemical warfare.

In both literally and metaphorically inscribing the history of warfare onto ecological matter, Danh visualizes the material processes of the Vietnam War, a conflict that stretched the violence of war across human and nonhuman worlds and left a lasting imprint and legacy on environments of Southeast Asia. We might interpret Danh's use of metabolic processes as a signifier of how the material traces of war transform over time; as the toxins from dioxin and Agent Orange linger and travel through food systems, botanical and animal matter become entangled with militarized legacies of scientific experimentation and chemical warfare. If Viet Nam was the "proving grounds" for chemical war, then its material residues reflect a transforming landscape in the wake of war.[43] From aerial bombing campaigns to herbicidal defoliation projects, the munitions of US militarism linger in ecological lifeworlds of Southeast Asia, where the environment became reimagined from a source of sustenance for Vietnamese populations to a battlefield to be destroyed and reshaped for military objectives.[44]

In an effort to insert this narrative of ecocidal devastation alongside popular forms of commemorating the Vietnam War in the United States, Danh's exhibit *One Week's Dead* (2007), displayed at New York City's *Light Work* studio, draws its images for the chlorophyll prints from a 1969 *Life* magazine article, "Faces of the American Dead."[45] This widely circulated famous article from the wartime era published portraits of two-hundred forty-two American men killed during one week of the war, printed in the stylistic format of a yearbook with rectangular headshots with short captions listing the fallen soldiers' names, city and state of origin, age, and army rank. The *Life* article sought to humanize casualties of war in a time when the war remained abstract for those not fighting it—though, it did critically mention that the American dead were far less than those of the Vietnamese, both in the North and South, as a footnote. It also sought to bring the nation into collective mourning for the valorized, patriotic soldier who symbolized a universal humanity for a nation at war, remarking that at a moment "when the nation continues week after week to be numbed by a three-digit statistic which is translated to direct anguish in hundreds of homes all over the country, *we must take pause to look into the faces*."[46] These headshots are reminiscent of the

laminated photographs left at the memorial wall, which insist on the humanization of the individuals identified in the litany of names and the preservation of their memory against time and the elements (*see Fig. 7*). In these photos, the soldier's face is fixed as a vision of youthful vitality; paired with photos and replicas of medals as tribute, the images mourn the human costs of war while also valorizing a sense of heroism and sacrifice. Yet, in reprinting these iconic images onto grass, Danh redirects our attention—while our gaze is still fixated "into the faces" of the fallen soldiers, it is distracted by the unruly ecological canvas that stages a process of decay and transformation. Thus, a collective commemoration of fallen soldiers is interrupted by the unignorable questions of war's environmental costs, its continued ramifications, and the entanglement of human actions with the biological memory of plant cells.

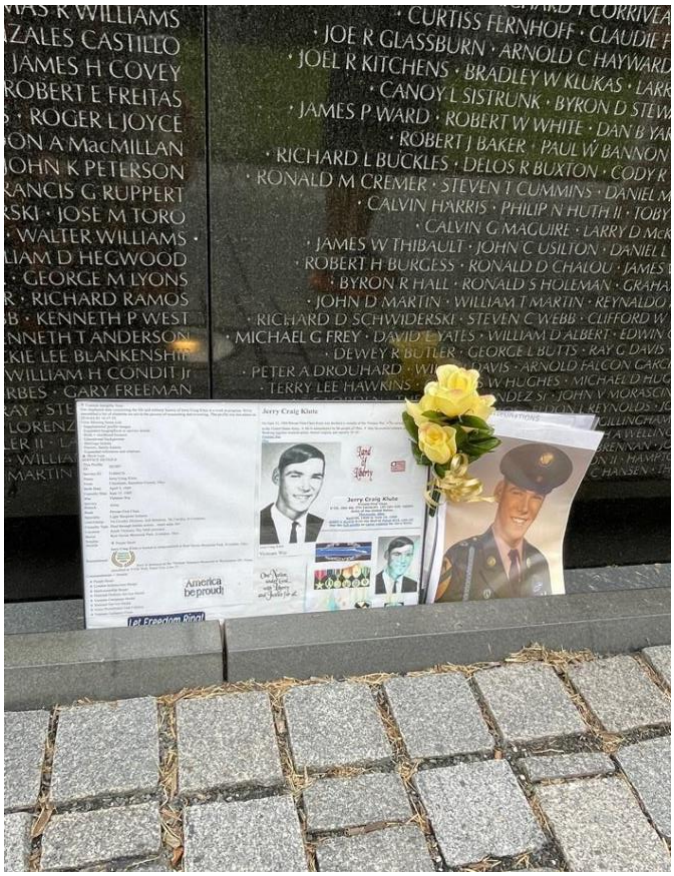

Figure 7. Headshots and other items of tribute at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Photo taken by Heidi Amin-Hong, 2023.

These chlorophyll prints, for Danh, express a desire to tell his community's history by bridging the gap between science and art. He notes in a *New York Times* interview that "one of the most important lessons [he] learned in science class is that our bodies are composed of atoms and that every atom in our body has a history."[47] Speaking to a fundamental theory of chemistry—that matter can neither be created nor destroyed, merely transformed—Danh offers a form of collective memory-making embedded in earthly ecologies to construct a global memory. However, Danh is also

quick to assert that these images are apolitical, not "anti-war" but rather offering a different method of remembering history that is "inspired by a philosophy that human memory is inextricably linked to the earth's memory.[48] Danh's apolitical posture mirrors a scientific adherence to objectivity that often emerges in positivist accounts of history that take a distant view to restage history as a set of discrete events, obscuring history as a contested process that is always being made and remade. Indeed, attempts to remediate Vietnamese lands and waters in the aftermath of Agent Orange dispersal have often relied on objective scientific accounts of toxic residue that assume a causal relationship between exposure and injury, though chemical spread defies causal logics and spans across multiple geographies and temporalities.[49] Such causal accounts reproduce narratives of ecocidal warfare as part of a distant past to be overcome through biological resilience and regeneration, failing to account for more diffuse processes of memory-making that highlight what Duong names as "a differentially distributed shared vulnerability to contamination."[50] Instead, we suggest that Danh's aesthetic work, in its attention to the ecological processes of photosynthesis and metabolism, enables us to perceive the properties of war's impact on the environment as much more dispersed and differentially distributed, spanning across bodies and geographies that carry the material traces of militarism, ecocide and memory that converge around the Vietnam War. His chlorophyll prints offer a possible method to stage collective diasporic memory as ecological and relational, created in dialogue with plants as active co-creators of memory rather than symbols of resilience and closure.

Memory *is* political—how we commemorate war in diaspora, nation, and community is constituted through a series of institutional structures that shape a collective imaginary of war and its afterlives. These narratives of war, to borrow from Jennifer Terry, are how a nation becomes *attached* to war as a structure "embedded in everyday life and institutionalized in and beyond governments."[51] Our attachments to war exceed the financial and material investments of the military-industrial complex, as they comprise the cultural forms through which the American populace invests in narratives of heroism at the heart of war. Such narratives shape a collective consciousness around commemoration, for they form the crux of how memorialization remembers war itself. Memory is not merely an orientation to the past; it is and can be a collective effort to strive for more just futures of demilitarization and environmental justice in the recognition of how war's reverberation across more-than-human worlds exceeds the bound temporality of pastness.[52] Indeed, Danh's concept of an apolitical memory-work may seemingly be congruent with the scientific processes through which these memories materialize—photosynthesis and its capacity to restructure the very cellular matter of foliage to bear witness to the event of war. However, as Donna Haraway has reminded us, the objectivity of science is merely a "god-trick," one that has succeeded in deceiving us into its ubiquity and obscuring the role of subjective orientations of knowledge *producers* to the making of scientific knowledge that shape its outcomes.[53] In other words, the politics of science is embedded in the process of

knowledge and artistic production through a series of decisions; in the case of Danh's work, the decisions to incorporate iconic images of war in a Western imaginary, to use the Vietnamese descriptor of "American War" rather than Vietnam War, and to turn to nature as witness to the violence of war are all political orientations dictating how we memorialize war itself. Such political practices of memory-work offer an orientation to remembrance that unsettle national memorializations of war and offer a different materialist form of memory that builds ecological connections in the wake of an ecocidal war.

Commemoration as Solidarity

At the time of our writing in 2025, thousands of Vietnamese refugees have recently gathered across the United States to reflect on and commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Vietnam War. These events often begin with statements of solidarity and affinity with Palestinian people enduring nearly two years of the latest instantiation of the Israeli genocide that ultimately began with the 1948 Nakba,[54] attempting to draw parallels between US military intervention in Southeast Asia and US military support for Israel. These commemorations by progressive Vietnamese in diaspora diverge from dominant national forms of remembrance, which recenter the experiences of American veterans and promote a patriotic script glorifying armed combat and the soldiers' sacrifice. They also depart from conservative diasporic forms of remembrance that mourn the loss of the South Vietnamese military, which becomes a metonym for the loss of a country and homeland—a particular loss that can only be felt and mourned by Vietnamese Americans aligned with the ideological project of South Vietnam.[55] Anniversaries are complex moments that often subscribe to dominant scripts of commemoration that institutionalize a bounded event as "over" and thus only then worthy of remembering. Such memorialization *after the fact* risks obscuring the conditions of violence in our present, those that are direct inheritances of empire's past, a recursive formation that reiterates the same violence we commemorate in the here and now.

Commemoration-as-solidarity is best captured by the Missing Piece Project's 2025 demonstration at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which gathered participants of different backgrounds to reflect on the forms of state violence that bind each other together in ongoing struggle against militarism. Sorrow for American soldiers, the beginnings of refugee transits, the fall of US-backed regimes in Laos and Cambodia, and the commencement of new genocides—all of these sentiments are captured in how different diasporic communities relate to the "end" of the Vietnam War which, all too evidently, does not result in the end of imperial violence.[56] Yet, the 2025 gathering at the wall took a different shape than the pilot dedication of objects at the wall in 2018—whereas the initial demonstration centered around dedicating found objects to the National Park Service's archive, a 2021 editing of the "Scope of the Vietnam Collection" excised objects dedicated by MPP from the archive's collections, limiting

the archive to objects connected to a "perspective of a casualty listed on the Wall." Ahead of the April 30th gathering, National Park Service rangers informed MPP organizer Kim Tran that no additional objects left in front of the memorial will be added to the archive.

Instead, a conversation with Tran reflecting on the MPP and this essay reveals the shifting goals of the collective. In this context of NPS neglect and exclusion of Vietnamese refugee memories, she tells us:

> Nurturing a rhizomatic, social ecology of memory has been an effective strategy for us to avoid the ways that government entities such as NPS and US Institute of Peace (USIP) can more readily destroy, eliminate, and erase more physical commemorative practices, such as object creation. If we hold and actualize these memories and knowledge in our bodies and in our collective practices, it's much more difficult for them to take this from us.[57]

Here, we witness ecologies of memory at play—less significant is the *object* produced and archived by the state, and more so the social processes of memorialization that brings different communities into relation. The NPS's deliberate erasure and carelessness with the dedicated objects reminds us that state archives and official records can never represent or contain the embodied and felt memories of war and imperialism's impact on everyday life. Rather than gathering objects for an archive that may no longer exist in the future, Tran describes how the April 30th event brought together descendants of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian diasporas with others impacted by militarism and other forms of state-sanctioned violence, including "an ordained Buddhist Upasika whose uncle was a Black American Vietnam veteran, a Ugandan graduate student researching educational facilities in refugee camps, a veteran who spent eight years in jail for organizing a mutiny of a naval vessel delivering napalm to a US air force base in Thailand, several members of [the anti-war, women-led collective] Code Pink, bureaucrats from USIP, and members of Veterans for Peace." Gathering these participants with divergent personal relationships with the Vietnam War does not produce a singular and cohesive memory of the war's lingering impact. However, the event prioritizes the militarized present in the question that the organizers pose: "as an ongoing genocide unfolds, what connects this war to the struggles of today—for Palestinian freedom, Indigenous sovereignty, Black liberation, climate justice, and a world where life is valued over profit?" This rhizomatic model of memory thus refuses to contain or claim memories of the Vietnam War for veterans, refugees, or their descendants, but extends outward to build coalitions that reckon with state violence in our present.

Analogies between the Vietnam War and other imperial violences, like Israel's genocide in Gaza and the West Bank, are not new; but they offer a critical vocabulary

for grappling with imperialist violence across time and space.[58] Instead of articulating a nationalist memory of South Vietnam that recenters militarized and patriarchal forms of remembrance, these commemorations apprehend reverberations of genocidal and ecocidal violences of the Vietnam War, felt in the embodied memories of diasporic Southeast Asian communities and continually reproduced in other sites of US military intervention. These community events draw attention to the contemporary destruction of Palestine as part of a longer structure of the "ongoing Nakba," a settler colonial process of "vanishment" that Lila Sharif notes "ontologically render[s] Palestine as always *already* disappeared."[59] We argue that diasporic memory work is integral to maintaining *presence* that refuses vanishment as a captive process of colonial memory that renders Indigenous and colonized lands as terrain for conquest and incorporation into an imperial nation-state. To borrow from Maryam Kashani, what might happen if we attune ourselves to a practice of remembering war that "ventures into a wild beyond that turns away from questions of a nation-state or ethnostate to direct relationships to land and the life that it makes possible; [one that] condemns the occupation but is not defined by it?"[60] For Palestinians, this practice of memory asserts a presence that refuses Israeli erasure and instead speaks to the reclamation of space and time against ongoing structures of genocide and ecocide. For Southeast Asians in diaspora, commemoration-as-solidarity offers memorialization strategies that resist our militarized present in pursuit of demilitarized futures for all.

In closing, we are less invested in presenting a coherent memory of the Vietnam War's ecological reverberations precisely because such reverberations are felt at intimate scales of being that resist objective knowability and institutional incorporation. Instead, we draw inspiration from the refugee artists in diaspora we discuss here, who mobilize experiments in memorialization that unsettle dominant regimes of war memory and instead offer us something diffuse and incomplete, that opens up more possibilities for solidarity and coalition-building through the process of co-creating memories of war that are reencountered in the present.[61] Indeed, such memory is necessarily incomplete—because the violence of the Vietnam War is not yet over, it still structures the conditions of white supremacy and racial capitalism that refugees continue to endure and, unfortunately, perpetuate. These aesthetic projects offer us a capacious mode of witness to make sense of violence in and across communities as a way to mobilize for solidarity across differentially affected communities, so that practices of commemoration do not become the proving grounds for future violence staged elsewhere.

Notes

We would like to thank Tiffany Chung, Binh Danh, and members of the Missing Piece Project for sharing their art and community work with us and the world. We especially thank Kim Nguyen Tran for providing generous engagement with our work and envis-

ioning an artist collective that models the ecologies of memory and community solidarity that continue to inspire us. Early drafts of this piece were shared at a "Militarized Landscapes" workshop at Boise State University; we especially thank Eleana Kim and Sunny Xiang for providing generative comments and questions. And of course, special thanks to Christina Hughes and Karín Aguilar-San Juan for their wonderful editorial work and ushering this special issue into the world. Any and all flaws in this article are our own.

1 Michael A. Chandler, "Ceremony Marks the 35th Anniversary of the Vietnam Wall: Architect Maya Lin: 'I had a simple impulse—to cut open the earth and to polish the Earth's open sides,'" *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/ceremony-marks-the-35th-anniversary-of-the-vietnam-veterans-memorial/2017/11/11/a6a6a006-c6f7-11e7-84bc-5e285c7f4512_story.html

2 See Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California Press, 1997); and Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

3 Christine Hong describes this fantasy as the "principle of indistinction," where the US military's occupation of Asia and the Pacific coincided with domestic regimes of desegregation, assimilation, and civil rights that restructured racial biopolitics from exclusion to inclusion as the means to manage race post-World War II. Here, it is the participation of racialized people of color in the US war machine that became the marker of national belonging for historically excluded populations, a fantasy of "Pax Americana" that, in its "very democratic veneer," promised a "multiethnic, multinational participation of US regional allies in a series of US interventions in the region" (16). The incorporation of Black and Latino soldiers in the US and Asian allies abroad signified a new era of US liberal militarism, an integrated force supposedly fighting for democracy worldwide. See Christine Hong, *A Violent Peace : Race, US Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

4 Lowe, *Immigrant Acts,* 2.

5 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 48.

6 See Yen Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong, "Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 3 (2018): 587–615, https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/695300; and Heidi Amin-Hong, "Militarized Sustainability: Feminist Refugee Memory and Hydropower in the Mekong Delta," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 1 (2021): 119–46, https://doi.org/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.7.1.0119

7 See Pujita Guha, "Seeding the Forest," *Cultural Politics* 19, no. 3 (2023): 353–73.

[8] Heidi Amin-Hong and Keva X. Bui, "Materialities of Empire in a More-Than-Human World." *Verge: Studies in Global Asia* 8, no. 2 (2022): 65, https://doi.org/10.1353/vrg.2022.0028

[9] Javier Arbona-Homar and Andrea Gaffney, *Explosivity: Following What Remains* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), vii.

[10] The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund also supported a traveling three-quarters scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and an accompanying educational tool kit, which has been displayed throughout the US in churches, schools, memorial parks, veteran's day events, and other community events to "spread [...] the Memorial's healing legacy" and enable a broader American public to interact with the wall. See "The Wall That Heals," Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, 2025, https://www.vvmf.org/The-Wall-That-Heals/

[11] The Ending the Korean War Teaching Initiative staged such a commemorative protest on Friday, April 5, 2024 on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Organizers led a walking tour of the World War II, Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr., and Korean War memorials to commemorate the four million Koreans killed in the Korean War and to reckon with the global structures of violence that facilitated and continue to enable US warfare. See "Activists Take Over National Mall, Call for End to Korean War," *Ending the Korean War Teaching Initiative*, April 5, 2024, https://www.kpolicy.org/_files/ugd/64fbbc_52086c417a184c75b8fe9759d999d335.pdf

[12] Arbona-Homar and Gaffney, *Explosivity*, 79.

[13] While access to the memorial may be public, visitors are increasingly surveilled and policed within the confines of the National Mall. As we discuss later in this essay, park rangers often intervene into forms of commemoration or protest deemed "disruptive," constraining possibilities of engaging with the space in ways that acknowledge the ongoing structures of violence inherent to a war memorial that continually erases the lives of those deemed disposable within US military intervention abroad.

[14] "*The* Missing Piece Project," Missing Piece Project, accessed June 1, 2025, at https://missingpieceproject.org/.

[15] This section is written from Keva's perspective, with Heidi's analytical input.

[16] "About The Missing Piece Project," *The Missing Piece Project*, accessed May 1, 2021, https://missingpieceproject.org/about/

[17] Yen Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (University of California Press, 2014), 90.

[18] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 6.

[19] In 2021, the National Park Service rewrote their guidelines for archiving objects left at the memorial wall, limiting the scope of acceptable objects. These objects

primarily prioritized significant items left by descendants of those named at the wall, and curiously omitted others (namely, Vietnamese diasporic people) affected by the war.

[20] Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 125.

[21] Linh Thủy Nguyễn, *Displacing Kinship: The Intimacies of Intergenerational Trauma in Vietnamese American Cultural Production* (Temple University Press, 2024), 6.

[22] This memorial features a representational statue of a South Vietnamese soldier standing side by side with an American soldier, commemorating them as "defenders of freedom and democracy." Long T. Bui, *Returns of War : South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York University Press, 2018), 88.

[23] The MPP's activities have focused on intervening against national scripts of memory harbored by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, including dedications and gatherings at the VVM to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of April 30, 1975. The collective has also organized symposiums and film screenings to reflect on these commemorative activities.

[24] One of the coauthors of this article, Keva X. Bui, is a part of The Missing Piece Project collective.

[25] For more on Vietnamese American engagements with *nước*, see le thi diem thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (Knopf, 2003); Patricia Nguyen, "Salt | Water: Vietnamese Refugee Passages, Memory, and Statelessness at Sea," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 45, nos. 1 and 2 (2017): 94–111, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44474110; Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, *Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization Across Guam and Israel-Palestine* (University of California Press, 2022); and Quyen Nguyen-Le, *Nuoc (Water/Homeland*, 2017).

[26] Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Duke University Press, 2012), 8.

[27] Crystal Mun-hye Baik, *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique* (Temple University Press, 2020), 78.

[28] Natalia Duong, "*Rhizopora*: Queering Chemical Kinship in the Agent Orange Diaspora," in *Crip Genealogies*, ed. Mel Chen, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, and Julie Avril Minich (Duke University Press, 2023), 153

[29] This section is written from Heidi's perspective, with Keva's analytical input.

[30] The title of the memorial, "For the Living," alludes to Chung's intention for the primary focus of the memorial to be the displaced survivors of war, who bear the weight of their individual and collective memories.

[31] Though I had often seen the memorial with family or friends, those visits were often interrupted by school field trips or tour groups, and I rarely found the exercise to be as meditative as the original design intended.

[32] "Beyond Granite: Pulling Together," Monument Lab, August 2023, accessed June 1, 2025, https://monumentlab.com/projects/national-mall-project

[33] Amin-Hong, "Militarized Sustainability," 119–47.

[34] For more of Chung's work, see "The Syria Project: Tracking Conflict and Displacement," Tiffany Chung, accessed June 1, 2025, https://www.tiffanychung.net/projects-archive/the-syria-project-2015-ongoing and "Shifting Geographies," Tiffany Chung, accessed June 1, 2025, https://www.tiffanychung.net/cartographic-work-archive/shifting-geographies

[35] Mark Philip Bradley, "For the Living: A Conversation with Tiffany Chung." *Portable Gray* 6, no. 2 (2023): 272–83. https://doi.org/10.1086/728277

[36] Neda Ulaby, "A Groundbreaking Exhibition on the National Mall shows Monuments aren't Set in Stone," September 5, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/08/27/1195465948/national-mall-monuments-playground

[37] Neta C. Crawford, *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions* (MIT University Press, 2022), 7.

[38] Simi Kang, "What Is Refugee Resilience? Reframing Survival under Environmental Sacrifice." *American Studies* 61, no. 3 (2023): 43–76. https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.2023.0002

[39] Bradley, "For the Living: A Conversation with Tiffany Chung."

[40] Here, we draw from Vinh Nguyen's concept of "refugeetude" or "lived refuge," defining refuge "not as a predetermined sociopolitical 'good,' but a continual process in which refugees negotiate, revise, and recalibrate what it means to exist in, with, and under refuge." See Vinh Nguyen, *Lived Refuge : Gratitude, Resentment, Resilience* (University of California Press, 2023), 3.

[41] Melody Jue, "The Metabolic Photography of Bladderwrack, Chorella vulgaris, and other Algal Media" in *Tumbling Ecologies* (forthcoming in *American Art Catalogues*), ed. Anicka Yi.

[42] Jue, "Metabolic Photography."

[43] Historian of science Sarah Bridger has discussed how scientific experiments in chemical and nonnuclear war treated Viet Nam as a "proving ground" for "limited war," or types of warfare designed specifically for localized conflicts within jungle terrains. Not only the Vietnam War, but the Korean and Pacific Wars became fruitful testing grounds for munitions such as napalm, Agent Orange, tear gas, and more as the US sought to expand its arsenal beyond the dominance of nuclear proliferation during the Cold War. See Sarah Bridger, Chapter 3, "The Science of

Nonnuclear War," in *Scientists at War: The Ethics of Cold War Weapons Research* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 63–87.

44 For an account of how bombings and defoliation campaigns shaped ecological lifeworlds of Southeast Asia for generations to come, see Keva X. Bui, "Objects of Warfare: Infrastructures of Race and Napalm in the Vietnam War," *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 299–313, https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2021.2021775; Natalia Duong, "Agent Orange Bodies: Việt, Đức, and Transnational Narratives of Repair," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 48, no. 3 (Winter 2018): 387–414, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/710957; Davorn Sisavath, "Cluster Bombs and War Metals: Reforming U.S. Cold War Debris in Laos." *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 2 (2021): 230–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2022.2038506; and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam* (Duke University Press, 2021).

45 Binh Danh, *One Week's Dead* (2007). http://binhdanh.com/Projects/1Week/1Week.html

46 "Faces of the American Dead: One Week's Dead," *LIFE Magazine*, no. 66, June 7, 1969.

47 Adam McCauley, "Vietnam War Images, Photosynthesized," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2012. https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/reading-the-leaves/

48 Binh Danh, *One Week's Dead* (2007).

49 Even after decades of litigation and scientific studies in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, tracking dioxin's link to chemical exposure is mired in what historian Edwin Martini calls a "politics of uncertainty." Itself subject to diffuse chemical spread and relations, Agent Orange cannot be pinned down to a single space, time, or geography. Instead, scholars such as David Biggs and Natalia Duong have proposed "metabolic" and "diasporic" analytics respectively that are attentive to chemical spread as a relational process rather than scientifically defined. Duong critiques the "causation model" that depends on disability to transform Agent Orange's toxic effects "into something detectable, calculable, and, potentially, reparable." Such logics of causality, Duong argues, frame disability as a problem to be solved on the international stage, without recognizing more dispersed but shared vulnerabilities to contamination. See Edwin Martini, *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Duong, "Agent Orange Bodies," 391-392; and David Biggs, "Following Dioxin's Drift: Agent Orange Stories and the Challenge of Agent Orange Stories," *International Review of Environmental History* 4, no. 1 (2018): 7–31, https://doi.org/10.22459/IREH.04.01.2018.03

50 Duong, "Agent Orange Bodies," 391.

[51] Jennifer Terry, *Attachments to War: Biomedical Logics and Violence in Twenty-First Century America* (Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

[52] For more examples of how collective memory work can be entwined with liberation and justice, see Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, and Baik, *Reencounters*.

[53] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066

[54] Rabea Eghbariah, "Toward Nakba as a Legal Concept," *Columbia Law Review* 124, no. 4 (2024): 887–992, https://columbialawreview.org/content/toward-nakba-as-a-legal-concept/

[55] See Bui, *Returns of War.*

[56] Long T. Bui and Phi Hong Su have both written about how conservative Vietnamese refugee community members have pushed back against diasporic Vietnamese political and artistic expressions perceived as pro-communist, such as the infamous demonstration against the exhibit "F.O.B. II: Art Speaks," organized by the Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association. They draw attention to how clashes over communist politics are rooted in a conservative discomfort with gender and generational differences, as well as an enduring belief that the war is not over. However, commemorative activities led by the Missing Piece Project Collective have not, at the time of writing, been publicly targeted for censorship. See Phi Hong Su, "The Militarized Imagined Family: How Children of Refugees Negotiate Cold War Politics in Community Arts Organizing," *Amerasia Journal* 47.2 (2021): 253–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2022.2028533; and Bui, *Returns of War*, 107.

[57] This quote is drawn from our email correspondence with the Missing Piece Project organizer and cofounder, Kim Tran.

[58] See Gandhi, *Archipelago of Resettlement*.

[59] Lila Sharif, "Vanishing Palestine," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 25, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.1.0017

[60] Maryam Kashani, "The Wreck Itself: Between Palestine and American Indian Studies' Sovereignty and the Surreal," *Critical Ethnic Studies Journal* 8, no. 1 (2023), https://manifold.umn.edu/read/ces0801-08/section/6ff6ead6-1ee8-4423-b96e-d335990e69f7

[61] We borrow this term "reencounter" from Crystal Baik to call attention to the myriad of ways in which refugee memories and lived experiences of war depart from dominant narratives. See Baik, *Reencounters*.

Selected Bibliography

"About The Missing Piece Project." *The Missing Piece Project*. https://missingpieceproject.org/about/

"Activists Take Over National Mall, Call for End to Korean War." *Ending the Korean War Teaching Initiative*. April 5, 2024. https://www.kpolicy.org/_files/ugd/64fbbc_52086c417a184c75b8fe9759d999d335.pdf

Amin-Hong, Heidi. "Militarized Sustainability: Feminist Refugee Memory and Hydropower in the Mekong Delta." *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 1 (2021): 119–46. https://doi.org/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.7.1.0119

Amin-Hong, Heidi, and Keva X. Bui. "Materialities of Empire in a More-Than-Human World." *Verge: Studies in Global Asia* 8, no. 2 (2022): 65–89. https://doi.org/10.1353/vrg.2022.0028

Arbona-Homar, Javier, and Andrea Gaffney. *Explosivity: Following What Remains*. University of Minnesota Press, 2025.

Baik, Crystal. *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique*. Temple University Press, 2019.

Biggs, David. "Following Dioxin's Drift: Agent Orange Stories and the Challenge of Agent Orange Stories." *International Review of Environmental History* 4, no. 1 (2018): 7–31. https://doi.org/10.22459/IREH.04.01.2018.03

Bridger, Sarah. "The Science of Nonnuclear War." In *Scientists at War: The Ethics of Cold War Weapons Research*, 63–87. Harvard University Press, 2015.

Bradley, Mark Philip. "For the Living: A Conversation with Tiffany Chung." *Portable Gray* 6, no. 2 (2023): 272–83. https://doi.org/10.1086/728277

Bui, Keva X. "Objects of Warfare: Infrastructures of Race and Napalm in the Vietnam War." *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 299–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2021.2021775

Bui, Long T. *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory*. New York University Press, 2018.

Chandler, Michael A. "Ceremony Marks the 35th Anniversary of the Vietnam Wall: Architect Maya Lin: 'I Had a Simple Impulse — to Cut Open the Earth and to Polish the Earth's Open Sides.'" *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/ceremony-marks-the-35th-anniversary-of-the-vietnam-veterans-memorial/2017/11/11/a6a6a006-c6f7-11e7-84bc-5e285c7f4512_story.html.

Chung, Tiffany. "The Syria Project: Tracking Conflict and Displacement." Accessed June 1, 2025. https://www.tiffanychung.net/projects-archive/the-syria-project-2015-ongoing

———. "Shifting Geographies." Accessed June 1, 2025. https://www.tiffanychung.net/

Crawford, Neta C. *The Pentagon, Climate Change, and War: Charting the Rise and Fall of U.S. Military Emissions*. MIT Press, 2022.

Danh, Binh. *One Week's Dead*. 2007. https://binhdanh.com/project-13/

Duong, Natalia. "Agent Orange Bodies: Việt, Đức, and Transnational Narratives of Repair." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 48, no. 3 (2018): 387–414. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/710957

Eghbariah, Rabea. "Toward Nakba as a Legal Concept." *Columbia Law Review* 124, no. 4 (2024): 887–992. https://columbialawreview.org/content/toward-nakba-as-a-legal-concept/

Espiritu, Yen Lê. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. University of California Press, 2014.

Espiritu, Yen Lê, and Lan Duong. "Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 3 (2018): 587–615. https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/695300

"Faces of the American Dead: One Week's Dead." *LIFE Magazine*, no. 66, June 7, 1969.

Gandhi, Evyn Lê Espiritu. *Archipelago of Resettlement: Vietnamese Refugee Settlers and Decolonization Across Guam and Israel-Palestine*. University of California Press, 2022.

Guha, Pujita. "Seeding the Forest." *Cultural Politics* 19, no. 3 (2023): 353–73.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99. https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066

Hong, Christine. *A Violent Peace: Race, US Militarism, and Cultures of Democratization in Cold War Asia and the Pacific*. Stanford University Press, 2020.

Jue, Melody. "The Metabolic Photography of Bladderwrack, Chorella vulgaris, and other Algal Media." In *Tumbling Ecologies*, edited by Anicka Yi. Forthcoming in *American Art Catalogues*.

Kang, Simi. "What Is Refugee Resilience? Reframing Survival under Environmental Sacrifice." *American Studies* 61, no. 3 (2023): 43–76. https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.2023.0002

Kashani, Maryam. "The Wreck Itself: Between Palestine and American Indian Studies' Sovereignty and the Surreal." *Critical Ethnic Studies Journal* 8, no. 1 (2023). https://manifold.umn.edu/read/ces0801-08/section/6ff6ead6-1ee8-4423-b96e-d335990e69f7

le thi diem thuy. *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Knopf, 2003.

Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Duke University Press, 1996.

Martini, Edwin. *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.

McCauley, Adam. "Vietnam War Images, Photosynthesized." *The New York Times*, May 30, 2012. https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/30/reading-the-leaves/

Monument Lab. "Beyond Granite: Pulling Together." August 2023. https://monumentlab.com/projects/national-mall-project.

Nguyễn, Linh Thủy. *Displacing Kinship: The Intimacies of Intergenerational Trauma in Vietnamese American Cultural Production*. Temple University Press, 2024.

Nguyen, Mimi Thi. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Nguyen, Patricia. "Salt | Water: Vietnamese Refugee Passages, Memory, and Statelessness at Sea." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1–2 (2017): 94–111. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44474110

Nguyen, Phi Hong Su. "The Militarized Imagined Family: How Children of Refugees Negotiate Cold War Politics in Community Arts Organizing." *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 2 (2021): 253–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2022.2028533

Nguyen, Vinh. *Lived Refuge: Gratitude, Resentment, Resilience*. University of California Press, 2023.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

Nước (Water/Homeland). Directed by Quyên Nguyen-Le. Visual Communications, 2016.

Sharif, Lila. "Vanishing Palestine." *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 17–39. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.1.0017

Sisavath, Davorn. "Cluster Bombs and War Metals: Reforming U.S. Cold War Debris in Laos." *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 2 (2021): 230–42. https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2022.2038506

Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. University of California Press, 1997.

Terry, Jennifer. *Attachments to War: Biomedical Logics and Violence in Twenty-First Century America*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Tu, Thuy Linh Nguyen, *Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Ulaby, Neda. "A Groundbreaking Exhibition on the National Mall Shows Monuments Aren't Set in Stone." National Public Radio. Updated September 5, 2023. https://www.npr.org/2023/08/27/1195465948/national-mall-monuments-playground