

Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art

The severely burned Phan Thị Kim Phúc, screaming, arms flailing, running naked down a Vietnamese road after a napalm attack in 1972. The lifeless body of drowned toddler Alan Kurdi, lying facedown on a Turkish beach in 2015. These powerful iconic images, focusing relentlessly on the trauma and spectacle of war atrocities, freeze-frame the “victims” in time and space, prolonging their pain and agony in perpetuity. Intended to shock, visual images of “third-world” suffering in Western media—of the dead, wounded, starving—constitute generic decontextualized horrors that elicit pity and sympathy, not discernment and assessment. As Rey Chow (2006) has argued, Americans have increasingly come to know the world as a target: when wars break out, foreign areas and peoples briefly enter American mainstream public discourses, often via deeply disturbing images of suffering, as embodiments of (naturalized) violence, crisis, and disasters (Fernandes 2013, 193). The hyperfocus on suffering, and the outpouring of outrage and concern over dead and injured refugees, has become a substitute for serious analysis of the geopolitical conditions that produced their displacement in the first instance. Constructed for Western consumption, these spectacular(ized) images render invisible and inaudible displaced people’s everyday and out-of-sight struggles as well as their triumphs as they manage war’s impact on their lives (Lubkemann 2008, 36; Hyndman 2010).

In public representations, the contemporary figure of the displaced war victim is highly gendered: “the image is of helpless and superfluous women and children, dislocated and destitute; uprooted and unwanted” (Manchanda 2004, 4179). Feminist scholars have called for more research on women refugees, since this group is often vulnerable to sexual abuse and gender discrimination (Indra 1989; Castell 1992; Hyndman 2010). At the same time, a growing feminist literature has critiqued the visual depictions of women as naturalized victims of military atrocities, arguing that these images have in effect transformed displaced women in the global South into a

We would like to acknowledge the invaluable input from our colleagues in the Critical Refugee Studies Collective on an earlier draft of this article.

spectacle to be consumed by viewing publics in the global North (Kozol 2014). But there are other critiques to be made: if these spectacular acts of military atrocity are the markers of violence, then what off-screen violent acts remain unmarked? What are the affected spaces that exist behind, between, and beyond these public(ized) spaces? If access to home and security comes under the purview of the heteropatriarchal state and policy makers, then what questions about place and belonging remain unaddressed? What are the desires—and not only the needs—of the forcibly displaced, as they create improvised, fluid, and alternative homemaking, healing, and survival strategies on the run? In short, how do we approach the question of gendered displacement from the knowledge point of the forcibly displaced, which takes seriously the hidden and overt injuries but also the joy and survival practices that play out in the domain of the everyday?

As feminist refugee scholars originally hailing from Vietnam, we are deeply troubled not only by the current antirefugee rhetoric but also by liberal narratives of tragedy that represent war-displaced refugees as always already suffering feminized bodies. We situate our work in the field of transnational feminist studies, which links patriarchies to colonialisms, imperialisms, and racisms (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009), and in the field of critical refugee studies, which reconceptualizes “the refugee” not as an object of rescue but as a site of social and political critiques of militarized empires (Espiritu 2014, 174). Joining these two fields of study, we introduce the concept of “feminist refugee epistemology” (FRE) to reconceptualize war-based displacement as being not only about social disorder and interruption but also about social reproduction and innovation (Lubkemann 2008, 24; Grabska 2014, 195). FRE relies on a feminist refugee analysis that, in Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s words, “draws our awareness to routine, intimate and private sites where power is both reproduced and contested” (2015, 2). Our focus is not on women’s lives per se but on the intersection between private grief and public trauma—on the hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic interaction and queer sociality. Invoking the intimate politics of the everyday, FRE does more than critique Western media representation of refugees: it underlines refugees’ rich and complicated lives, the ways in which they enact their hopes, beliefs, and politics, even when their lives are militarized (Espiritu 2014). Following Angela Davis (1998) and Neferti X. M. Tadiar (2012, 10), we conceptualize these practices of life making as radical acts of social struggle and freedom.

Centering the more mundane, routine, and open-ended dimensions of the temporality and geography of violence and displacement, FRE reconceptualizes time and space not as natural and fixed but as materially and dis-

cursively produced—as being unsettled and remade by refugees. Adopting a feminist conceptualization of temporality that links time to power and that stresses “the coexistence of past, present, and future” (Bryson 2007, 100), we show how refugees inhabit a multilayered temporal consciousness. While we build on Eric Tang’s useful concept of “refugee temporality,” which posits that “the power of [refugees’] past captivities remains in the present” (2015, 173), our understanding of temporality is more fluid, dynamic, and multidimensional than Tang’s focus on creating an oppositional temporality counter to neoliberal capitalism.¹ FRE also acknowledges the multiplicity and openness of the spatial (Massey 2005, 88) and the importance of considering not only the geometry of space but also its lived practices (Lefebvre 1992). We build on the works of feminist refugee scholars such as Khatharya Um, who calls for an “analytic multifocality” that spans different regions and that “moves between past, present and future” (2015, 7), and Shalhoub-Kevorkian, who insists that “space is . . . not only a material landscape but also a linguistic and symbolic one, replete with concepts of memory and historical legacies” (2009, 154).

Contributing to the development of critical theory from the global South, FRE integrates the material, political, and creative dimensions of knowledge production (Fernandes 2013, 106; see also Anzaldúa 1987). Materially and politically, it calls attention to the braiding of militarism and imperialism that underlies displacement and forced migrations worldwide. Fusing the critical with the creative, it conceptualizes refugee artwork as a crucial site of new forms of knowledge that would otherwise not be produced or shared. Given the ubiquity of visual representation of refugee suffering in Western media, our article examines how refugee artists, as knowledge producers, articulate, contest, challenge, and reconfigure ways of knowing. We pay particular attention to the fusing of loss and “survance” (survival and resistance; Vizenor 2008)—the ways that the artists and their artwork push against but also bridge multiple borders, boundaries, and barriers.

In this article, we use the lens of FRE to examine the artwork of Vietnamese and Syrian women artists—Trinh Mai Thach and Nisrine Boukhari in the first section and Tiffany Chung and Foundland (composed of Ghalia Elsrakbi and Lauren Alexander) in the second—whose installations and paintings capture the fluidity and dynamism of time and space and the connections between contemporary displacement from Vietnam and Syria to Western interventions in the regions. We selected these artists because they identify—in their videos, statements, and biographies—as displaced gendered subjects and because they have produced a transnational body of

¹ We thank a *Signs* anonymous reviewer for calling our attention to this difference.

work that demonstrates how displacement operates through intersectional nodes of power. Our juxtaposition of Vietnam and Syria is in part historical: the two countries share a tumultuous past with French colonialism and US military interventions (Giebel 2004; Polk 2013). Vietnamese and Syrian refugees also share similar fates as “boat people.” According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, between two hundred thousand and four hundred thousand Vietnamese boat people died at sea (Vo 2005). As of May 2016, in a span of less than two years, an estimated four thousand Syrian refugees have died at sea while trying to reach Europe (Gebreyes 2016). Indeed, we bring together artwork by Vietnamese and Syrian refugees precisely because the visual representations of these refugee populations, particularly of their boat escapes, are some of the most highly sensationalized images of suffering that have circulated in the media in recent history.

Focusing on the unseen and unspectacular(ized), we offer a deep study of the feminist visual practices by which these refugee artists reclaim the private sphere as a gendered space expressive of loss and grief but also of creative, improvised, and experimental refuge-making practices. Working through a range of mediums, these artists reimagine the interiority of refugee lives by featuring ordinary objects such as letters, dinner plates, tables, and maps, and by centering everyday acts of witnessing, waiting, writing, and mapping. In linking the term “refugee” with “feminist” and “art,” we challenge the imbalanced “looking relations” in refugee representations produced by Western media and within academia (Gaines 1990) and push for a looking practice that captures the quotidian details of displacement and emplacement in refugee lives. Our feminist task is to highlight these strategies as epistemological in nature.

Finally, we engage in the act of looking closely to discern the decolonial strategies in the artists’ work: uncovering histories of colonialism and imperialism that precede and shadow forced migration and critiquing nation-states and their claims to sovereign borders. Grouping the artworks by two themes—epistolary forms of art and cartography as epistemic mapping—we argue that the art pieces, both separately and together, formulate a radical re-viewing of refugees as producers of knowledge and potent figures of critique.

Epistolary art

Against the proliferation of public print forms in the early decades of the eighteenth century, the letter became an emblem of the private—a form of intimacy intended for a single reader. As such, the personal letter is intimately identified with the body, especially the female body, and the terrain

of the emotions (Cook 1996, 6). In the humanities, letters are often seen by historians and biographers as a rich source of information about the private lives of notable historical figures—a glimpse into the “real” person behind the public persona (Atkinson and Coffey 2004, 70). More recently, insisting that letters are not transparent but interpretive accounts of historical events, scholars have treated letters as objects of analysis, paying more attention to “the performative, fictive, and textual dimensions of letter writing, and the artificiality of the personally inscribed holograph” (Cardell and Haggis 2011, 129). Social scientists interested in the epistolarity have focused on the letter as a central medium for theorizing social relations: how might the letter produce rather than simply reflect or intensify aspects of sociality such as friendship or intimacy? (Cardell and Haggis 2011). In other words, letter writing is fundamentally a social practice and is produced by subjects situated in particular social relations and historical discourses (Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield 2000, 2).

We depart from the idea that letters are primarily private documents and instead treat them as discursive, performative, and politicized spaces within and through which writers expound on the complexities of history and memory, displacement and emplacement (Cross and Bland 2004; Poustie 2010, 17). We view letters as occupying a borderline “between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the everyday and the literary” (Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield 2000, 2). In this section, we examine two affecting art pieces, *Quiet* by Vietnamese American artist Trinh Mai Thach and *Unreceived Letters* by Syrian artist Nisrine Boukhari, both of which deploy letters in their installations to convey the abruptness of wars—the atrocities that sever and amputate without warning—but also the ongoingness of wars—the living effects of what seems to be over and done with.

Trinh Mai Thach's Quiet

Trinh Mai Thach's installation *Quiet* (fig. 1), featured at the *Vietnamese Focus: Generations of Stories* exhibit in Orange County, California, which ran from September 2015 to February 2016, is a hauntingly beautiful tribute-memorial for the Vietnamese women and children who went missing at sea at the height of the boat-people exodus in the 1980s.² Stories about the suffering of the Vietnamese boat people are firmly ensconced in Vietnamese family lore and collective memories. Vietnamese refugee families mourn not only the dead but also the missing: those who left the country on their own

² The *Viet Focus* exhibit was presented by Orange County Parks and the University of California, Irvine's Vietnamese American Oral History Project and took place in the old Orange County Courthouse's historical gallery, marking the fortieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon and arrival of Vietnamese in Orange County.



Figure 1 Trinh Mai Thach, *Quiet*, 2015, ink on voile, installation. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.

and were never heard from again, those who became separated from their families during the chaotic escape from Vietnam, and those who were lost at sea or kidnapped by pirates but were never confirmed dead. The public erasure of Vietnamese refugee history necessitates a feminist methodology that exposes and reclaims the something else that resides at the intersection between private loss and public commemoration.

Thach's *Quiet* contributes to FRE because it prods us to look for history outside the public realm of state-sanctioned commemorative discourses and memorials—and to engage other realms, such as feelings and emotion, in order to search for the quiet ways that subjugated refugees stories get (re)told. An interdisciplinary and classically trained abstract painter, Thach often uses found objects—teabags, rice, tiles, a suitcase, a map—to convey the everydayness of life in her art. *Quiet* was inspired by a box of letters that Thach discovered at the Orange County and Southeast Asian Archive Center of the University of California, Irvine—letters that despairing Vietnamese had written to an international agency, pleading for assistance in finding their family members who went missing during the escape from Vietnam. These missing women and children comprise just a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who disappeared during and immediately after the war and whose lives were never given a definite ending. Looking for the missing constitutes a feminist refugee practice because it shifts the gaze from officially sanctioned and bounded sites of commemoration to more fluid and out-of-the-way social memories—the types that *appear* (as in *apparition*) “throughout society at different scales and in mundane, everyday places” (Atkinson 2007, 521). For Thach, that mundane site is the box of largely forgotten letters.

The messages in the letters, with accompanying photos of the missing, are expectedly heart wrenching. An excerpt from one of the posts reads, “For the sake of humanity, I ask you to please help us find our two daughters” (in Berg 2015). These letters are not personal correspondences between two private individuals, a prevalent assumption in epistolary theorizing, but unequal exchanges between desperate family members and a prominent international human rights organization. To obtain assistance in locating their missing loved ones, Vietnamese survivors first had to “out” their private grief—a grief that is often still too raw and too intense to share even among themselves—to an unknown official who had the power to accept or deny their request. As feminists of color have shown, “there is no such thing as a private sphere for people of color except that which they manage to create and protect in an otherwise hostile environment” (Hurtado 1989, 849). On the flip side, these letters also evidence the relegation of Vietnamese grief to the private sphere, where Vietnamese refugees, as Nguyễn-Vo Thu Huong writes, “oc-

copy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us” (2005, 170). In this context, the installation *Quiet*, and the affects that it transmits, constitutes a rare moment when the past breaks through, when subjugated histories get told, and when Vietnamese ghosts are publicly acknowledged—and even mourned.

In looking for the missing in the box of letters, Thach steers us toward quotidian memory places—the places where the refugees and their ghosts reside. Evoking ghosts hovering just overhead, *Quiet* is a tender yet powerful installation in which ninety-two twelve-foot-long *khăn tang* (white cotton sashes that Vietnamese families traditionally wear on their heads during funerals) hang from the ceiling in rows. Thach’s use of Vietnamese funerary items, the white *khăn tang*, centers the refugees’ own grieving practices, symbolically bestowing on each missing person the Vietnamese death ritual that they had missed. The presumed dead play a prominent role in this piece: painted onto the end of each white sash, in black, is the face of a disappeared person. Thach’s refusal to allow these missing bodies to simply disappear—to be reduced to “nonbodies” and “unpeople”—constitutes a feminist reconfiguration of time: invoking the intimate politics of the everyday and centering Vietnamese memory and memorialization, Thach conceptualizes displaced Vietnamese as those who temporally “keep on existing” (Fanon 1963, 308; quoted in Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 1). Against the masculinist American public representations of the fall of Saigon in April 1975 as the war’s unambiguous conclusion, Thach’s effort to respect and honor the Vietnamese dead offers a contested temporality—one that proclaims, in Khatharya Um’s words, “that those swept into the oblivion . . . were once here, were important, and above all were human, with personal dreams, hopes, and disappointments” (2012, 841).

Using an old typewriter, Thach then reverently typed out on the *khăn tang* excerpts from the letters from families pleading for assistance and added onto the white sashes her own response to the letters. This act of suturing—of splicing together her own stories with those of the missing children and their grieving parents—connects Vietnam-born and US-born generations across complex temporalities and spaces.³ In contrast to the freeze-framing of Vietnamese suffering in mainstream media, Thach’s installation depicts

³ It is important to note that like other US-born Vietnamese, Thach has had to learn about the details of this shared community trauma—the harrowing escape, the dead, the missing—largely on her own. In 1975, when Thach’s family escaped by boat, her uncle Hung never made it on the boat; he remains missing. Thach found Hung’s photo, along with other old documents, in her grandfather’s suitcase, under her grandmother’s bed, after her grandmother had passed on (Thach 2015).

the Vietnam War as an extended multigenerational experience—that is, as temporally and spatially unmoored. This feminist conception of history suggests that there is no way to close off new understandings of the Vietnam War, even for the postwar generation(s), and that it is precisely through the domain of the everyday—through the ordinary act of writing and responding to letters, in this case—that displaced people remember, forge, and transform a past that has been long suppressed.

The act of forging a past together across time and space constitutes a feminist refugee practice of “critical juxtaposing” (Espiritu 2014, 21)—the deliberate bringing together of seemingly different memories and stories in an effort to reveal the contours and contents of power and of subversion that would otherwise remain invisible. The act of forging a past together thus departs from the neoliberal and masculinist concept of individual knowledge and moves toward the feminist model of sutured knowledge, in which “one hears one’s own life in the stories of others. . . . Sometimes you lose track of which memory is your own and which belongs to someone else” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009, 195). Thach’s engagement with audience members as mourners, as participants in the installation’s performative funerary rite, is yet another example of grafting history—of stitching together a continuum of Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese memories and experiences as they engage in the public viewing and communal vigil in honor of the missing children. Finally, the installation *Quiet* is powerful precisely because of its quietness. Against the loudness of wars, both on the battlefield and in representation, Thach (2015) opted for the reverence that accompanies quietness:

The creation of this piece called for the quiet spaces in which I worked, in reverence of these lives lost. I contemplated the quiet that came before the storm, which funneled so tightly around our people. The quiet in which they walked, treading on dead leaves and the detritus of life around them. The voices that were made to quiet in the jungles while hiding from enemy forces. The quiet in which they prayed to their God and to their Ancestors as they pled for their lives and the lives of those they loved. This quiet that heavily drapes over us when we gather to mourn the departed. The quiet in which prayer flags billow.

This beautiful passage from Thach exemplifies our concept of FRE, as it calls attention not only to ruptures and danger but also to the quiet spaces and rituals that constitute refugees’ daily existence. Thach’s installation also evokes quiet contemplation rather than hasty emotion; in hanging the sashes from the ceiling, making them too high to read, Thach invites the viewer

to imagine rather than read the letters' content, thereby bypassing the risk of further exposing the families' private grief to curious strangers, however well meaning.

Nisrine Boukhari's Unreceived Letters

Disruption, displacement, dispersal—such has been the way of life for an estimated 11 million Syrians who have fled their homes since the outbreak of the war in March 2011. According to the UNHCR, as of June 2017, over 5 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq, and over 6 million are internally displaced within Syria.⁴ The Syrian refugee crisis caught the world's attention when tens of thousands of Syrians embarked on dangerous boat trips across the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Greece, in hopes of eventual resettlement in Western Europe. The sight of thousands of Syrians, especially of children, drowning at sea while trying to reach Europe alarmed observers and brought immediate comparison to the plight of the Vietnamese “boat people” some four decades earlier (Associated Press 2015). As such, the people of Syria, much like their Vietnamese counterparts, entered Western consciousness amid scenes of extraordinary violence—a violence that has often been racialized as being indigenous to the region.

The “terrible human suffering” (Ferdinando 2015) of the Syrian people, sensationalized on screen and consumed by audiences around the world, typifies the ways in which the figure of the Syrian refugee figure has become an iconic symbol of victimhood—of disaster, depletion, and death. In particular, the image of the drowned Alan Kurdi made global headlines and sparked grave international concern and outrage. As a metonym for the tragedy of mass displacement, the Kurdi photo has been republished, retweeted, and reposted many times over. In April 2016, the photo was included in a well-funded art exhibit titled *Refugee*, presented at the Annenberg Space for Photography in Los Angeles.⁵ The exhibit, which featured highly aestheticized and stylized pictures of refugees shot by photographers worldwide, intended to humanize the forcibly displaced yet ultimately objectified them as broken, feminized, and childlike bodies that require Western humanitarian assistance.

⁴ This is based on UNHCR's “Syria Emergency” statistics as of June 2017; <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

⁵ The *Refugee* exhibit featured photography by well-known and award-winning photographers, a short film narrated by Cate Blanchett, and a virtual reality display of refugee misery, all of which purported to document the lives of refugees who hailed from everywhere from Somalia to Syria, Cameroon to Colombia.

The public preoccupation with refugee deaths also precludes thoughtful discussions about refugee *life*, not only in terms of their livelihood, which once again emphasizes the refugees' neediness, but even more so in terms of their lived lives—how they have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves. In indigenous scholar Eve Tuck's (2009) eloquent words, "even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression" (416). For a dynamic engagement with Syrian "complex personhood" (Gordon 1997, 4), we turn to Syrian visual artist Nisrine Boukhari, whose work reconfigures the concept of space by addressing themes of nomadism, belonging, and coping with the loss of one's city. Born in Damascus in 1980, Boukhari was trained at Damascus University's Fine Arts Department and works in various mediums, including photography, sculpture, video, and performance. In 2005, she cofounded, with her sister and brother, AllArtNow in Damascus, the first art space in Syria that aimed to develop contemporary arts practice in the country—a refuge, of sorts, for emerging Syrian artists.⁶

The war certainly affected the lives of the Syrian people, but not all in the same way. In the case of the members associated with AllArtNow, one member moved his family and his parents into the exhibition space of AllArtNow to avoid the escalating violence in his village, while his brothers left Syria in order to find work; Boukhari's own sister and brother, the cofounders of AllArtNow, stayed in the country with their families in the hope "that tomorrow will be the beginning of a new life"; and Boukhari left for Vienna in 2012 in search of an alternative space for her work and her life (Boukhari 2014). (As Boukhari relays, she went to Vienna to work on an exhibition for a period of two weeks and was disallowed from returning to Syria. She has lived in Vienna ever since.)⁷ As these examples suggest, while influential, the macrostructural context (the Syrian war, in this case) does not produce uniform responses. Instead, each individual, weighing his or her own complex needs, wants, and responsibilities, opts to leave or stay in Syria in accordance with their own personal circumstances. These divergent responses to the civil war affirm FRE's focus on refugees' agency and empowerment: to understand the complexity of Syrian lives, we need to be attentive to not only the big picture—colonialism, imperialism, war—but also to individual needs, wants, and desires.

But leaving one's home, even when it is planned and desired, is often a wrenching experience. Away from Damascus, Boukhari experienced a deep

⁶ See the AllArtNow website, <http://www.allartnow.com>, and Boukhari (2014).

⁷ Email with the artist, August 23, 2017.

loneliness: “When we leave our city or country, we carry these places within us. When I left Damascus, I felt that I lost something bigger than the loss of a person. It was harder than breaking up with a lover. I felt this loss badly when I moved without having the will to move” (Boukhari 2015). Boukhari’s personification of Damascus as her lost love and still longed-for lover affirms Doreen Massey’s (2005) argument that the social is spatially constituted, and Henri Lefebvre’s (1992) contention that space carries symbolic meaning and significance. Adding a feminist refugee perspective on displacement onto the concept of space, Boukhari emphasizes that the home place carries “meanings and memories of individuals” and embraces their “aspirations and compelling life experiences” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 74). Cut off from her support networks that are located within and outside her family structure, Boukhari still held steadfastly to the memory and beauty of Damascus—her home place—in her mind.

To connect herself to her beloved Damascus, Boukhari took to writing quick daily notes, in the form of unsigned letters addressed to the city that she left behind, about what was in her mind about the state of exile, the conditions in Syria, and the city that she lived in, among others. As she explains, “these small notes let me feel that I am still in relation with my place while I am living my loneliness out of it” (Boukhari 2015). These text fragments, which reposition Boukhari in relation to her former home, form the content of *Unreceived Letters*, an installation that presents a personal case study of a city—Damascus—from the perspective of exile (figs. 2, 3). The setting is simple: the letters are placed in an open wooden box, which is set on the floor surrounded by decorative doilies, signifying home and hearth. The letters are merely quick notes, fragmented thoughts: “Dear Damascus: On this box I can say that this is my only free space to speak. Hope no one will burn it”; “The people are speaking silently. They are all dead” (Boukhari 2015). While these letters certainly allude to the violent conditions in Syria, they do not rely on suffering, feminized bodies to do so. Instead, they tell the story of Syria from the perspective of the displaced and share not only what is wrong but also what is right about the left-behind but still-treasured home.

Unreceived Letters also does not exceptionalize, and therefore does not sensationalize, the exodus from Syria. Like Thach’s *Quiet*, Boukhari’s piece encourages the viewers to engage the art. Viewers are invited to literally sit with the letters—reading, touching, thinking, reminiscing with them. As the viewers interact with the letters, as they connect their own experiences of estrangement, loneliness, and “missingness” to those expressed on the notes, they create new spaces of belonging that link their histories and lives with Boukhari’s, which generates the potential to understand, restore, and heal their respective communities. As such, *Unreceived Letters* elaborates on



Figure 2 Nisrine Boukhari, *Unreceived Letters*, 2014, installation (detail). Ongoing project since 2012 in different cities in the world. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.



Figure 3 Nisrine Boukhari, *Unreceived Letters*, 2014, installation. Ongoing project since 2012 in different cities in the world. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.

the meanings of feminist collaboration and the work of witnessing that is interwoven in it. Boukhari's attention to mundane and routine activities—writing and sharing letters—reiterates FRE's notion that the everyday is a space not only “for oppression and domination, but also subversion and creativity” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 2).

Scholars have documented migrants' use of letters to sustain contact with their homelands (Elliot, Gerber, and Sinke 2006). However, in *Unreceived Letters*, Boukhari's letters are not meant to literally connect her to Damascus: they are not signed, sent, or received. Instead, these letters constitute a performative act(ion) that illustrates Boukhari's concept of “wanderism,” defined as “a state of mind that is not about being displaced or lost but about creating an alternative road with no beginning or end.”⁸ As Boukhari explains, wanderism proclaims the point of view of those who have wandered, which departs from the idea of a fixed world and anticipates a connected new world in the process of becoming. It is important to note that Boukhari's concept of wanderism is not the same as the neoliberal idea of unbounded free space and free movement about the world, neither of which has ever been available to the world's poor (Massey 2005). Rather, it captures a notable recent change in feminist critics' thinking about exile: “the male modernist concept of exile as deterritorialization has been reterritorialized in feminist thought and given a new validation” (Karpinski 1999, 24). Boukhari's concept of wanderism, as visualized in her installation *Unreceived Letters*, demonstrates the concept of FRE because it perceives exile not as a stigma of marginality or homelessness but a dynamic location from which to question the dominant order and enable new ways of knowing the world (Karpinski 1999, 26).

Cartography as epistemic mapping

Moving to an analysis of the remapping of refugee spaces as a feminist project, we examine the artworks of Foundland and Tiffany Chung through the lens of cartography. Their collective work constitutes a series of reproductions of maps and recreations of drawings that chart the migrations and movements of refugees. As with the art of making maps, scale is important. For example, loss is detailed in both small and expansive ways: it is personalized through the use of family pictures and projected onto an international canvas as a means to critique global conditions of displacement. Foundland members are interested in exploring refugee memories that reside in the fa-

⁸ “I'd Rather Prefer Not to Speak about Politics Tonight,” AllArtNow, n.d., <http://www.allartnow.com/id-rather-prefer-not-to-speak-about-politics-toni.php>.

miliar sphere and in the domestic space. Tiffany Chung's two works, *The Vietnam Exodus Project* and *The Syria Project*, recreate the data used to track the movement of Vietnamese refugees in the years following 1975 and Syrian refugees after 2011.

Both Foundland and Chung engage in what Cindi Katz (2001) calls a "topography of feminist political engagement" (1215). To bring these sets of artists together is not to ignore the "politics of location" that marks either Vietnamese or Syrian refugees (Kaplan 1994) but to trace the lines of a countertopography, one that "might encourage and enable the formation of new political-economic alliances that transcend both place and identity and foster a more effective cultural politics to counter the imperial, patriarchal and racist integument of globalization" (Katz 2001, 1216). Katz's model, in Geraldine Pratt and Brenda Yeoh's words, tasks feminist scholars with "tracing lines across places to show how they are connected by the same processes, and simultaneously embedding these processes within the specifics of their fully contextualized, three-dimensional places" (2003, 163). Pratt and Yeoh further argue that countertopographies are useful in delineating transnational feminist politics that "build connections across struggles in different places, while paying close attention to the specificity of place and context" (163). Our close readings of these artists take a cue from such feminist geographers to outline the transnational feminist potential in the collaborative work that marks Foundland's art and design and the interconnectedness of politics and national memory that lies at the heart of Chung's remapping of refugee lives.

Foundland: Intimacy and desire

Formed in 2009, Foundland is a team of two artists, Lauren Alexander and Ghalia Elsrakbi, who are based in Cairo and Amsterdam. After the 2011 Syrian uprising, the two artists began to collaborate on art pieces that take the shape of "small stories" (see Foundland 2015). One of the stories they tell deals with the domestic space. *Friday Table* was presented in Poland in 2013 as part of Foundland's exhibit called *Escape Routes and Freedom Mirages* and was later recreated for a solo exhibit in New York in 2014 titled *Escape Routes and Waiting Rooms* (figs. 4, 5). *Friday Table* is an installation composed of a white oblong table and four white dinner plates. According to an interview with the artists, drawn on the table is a map of the various places where some of Elsrakbi's own family members have migrated as a result of Syria's war (see Foundland 2014). As they note, the use of the personal here is more allegorical than autobiographical to underscore the dispersal of the diaspora amid war (Foundland 2014). Of the nineteen family members, four have stayed behind in Syria, but each family member has a dinner plate on the table to symbolize their absent presence. Superimposed and projected onto this

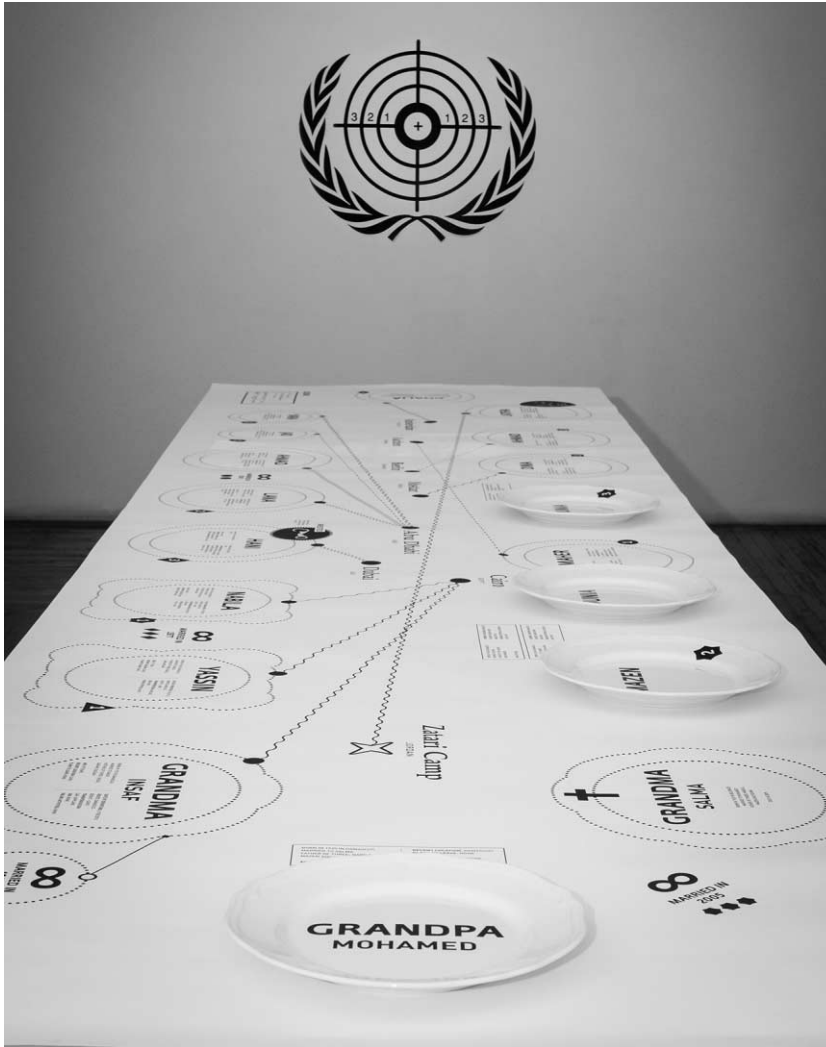


Figure 4 Foundland, *Friday Table, Escape Routes, and Waiting Rooms*, 2014, mixed-media installation, ISCP, New York. Photo: Julia Jamora. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.

black-and-white diagram are color family pictures showing families together in their most intimate moments at home: laughing, posing, and smiling.

Most remarkable about this piece is its recreation of loss through the quotidian, a focus on the personal that is the mark of FRE. In its simple design, the table remaps the affective trace that refugees leave behind in their home countries. Loss is recorded through absence and signified through

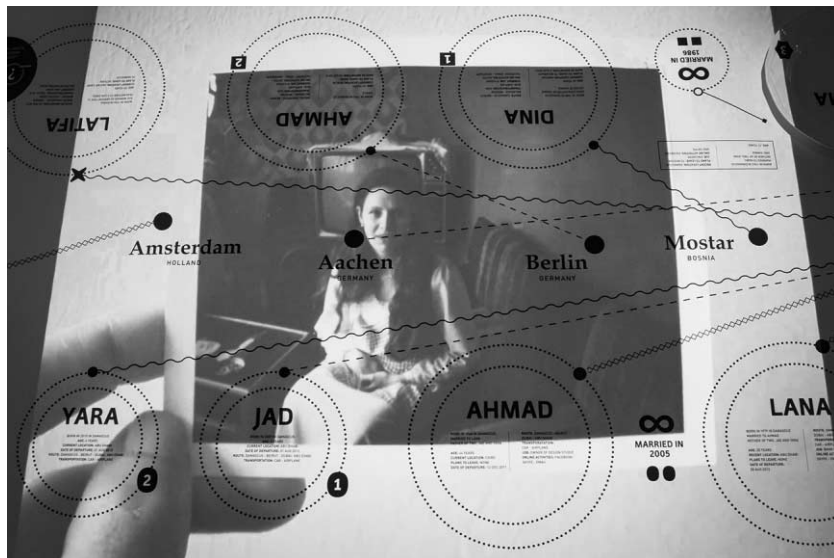


Figure 5 Foundland, *Friday Table, Escape Routes, and Waiting Rooms* (detail), 2014, mixed-media installation, ISCP, New York. Photo: Julia Jamora. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.

empty space—in the lack of bodies seated around the table and the lack of plates on the table. We are further reminded of this loss through a constellation of symbols and pictures. Based on Elsrakbi’s family album, the projected pictures signal a time when the family was intact, linking personhood to migration by way of family photographs. In *Friday Table* familial space is elasticized to be transnational and global, since the family members migrate to places as far as Germany and as near as Jordan.

Beyond the family photographs and their nostalgic function (Hirsch 1997), we can further read the installation for what it says and does not say, demarcating an FRE method of reading in between the markers of time and space. While the effects of such disruptions to the Syrian family-as-diaspora are, indeed, marked by absence and loss, *Friday Table* also implies that for those left behind, waiting performs an emotional and physical labor and promises a regeneration of sorts. As Alison Mountz argues, it is a material process; for refugees, to wait is not a sign of passivity but gestures toward multiple acts of “organiz[ing], network[ing], speak[ing] out and us[ing] technology to garner attention and collaborate with activists” during the waiting period (Mountz 2011, 383). If *Friday Table* deals with loss so evidently, underlying such loss is also the possibility of the formation of communal ties and a queer sociality that challenges the nuclear structure of the family. The

piece, as we read it, opens up the possibility that refugee social formations may be queerly produced, that is, formed outside of the heteronormative constraints that are often used by nation-states to define refugees and their relations to one another. Outside of the frames of the installation, for instance, we see how the founding of Foundland itself exemplifies this type of activist community formation, one that is not defined by kin and bloodlines but by political affiliation and aesthetic vision. Indeed, the two artists' collaboration formulates a powerful transnational feminist praxis (Swarr and Nagar 2010) that contests the monolingualism of auteurist work and wrestles with the problems of telling stories about refugee displacement in multiple languages and through multiple formats.

For the US exhibition, Foundland also included an installation involving tents that are currently used by Syrian refugees in the Zaatari camp in Jordan, one of the largest Syrian refugee camps in the world. As with *Friday Table*, in *Ground Plan Drawings* (see fig. 6), the use of projection is key, as both the dinner table and the white tents are the sites through which the artists' "small stories" are detailed. Through such inanimate objects, the intimate details of refugee lives are projected and enlarged onto a more expansive canvas. In its smallness, this piece undoes the formulations of ab-

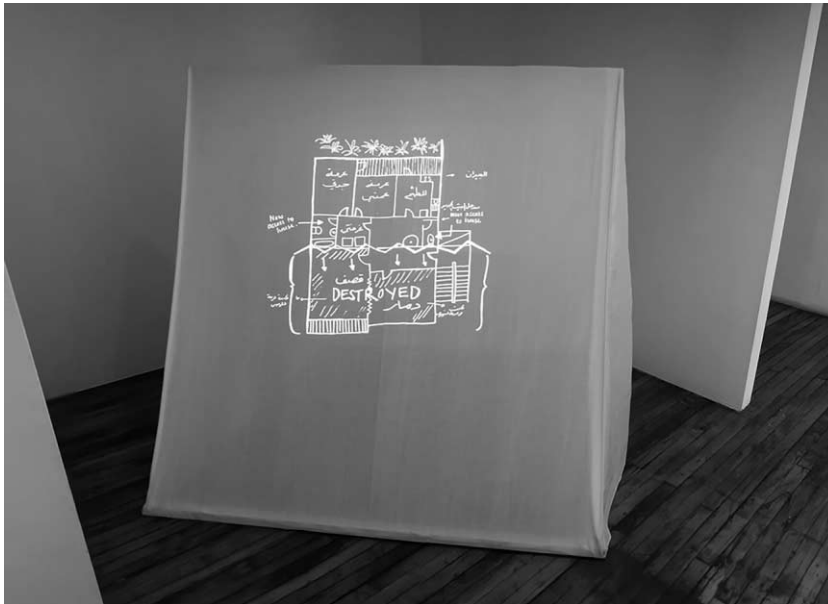


Figure 6 Foundland, *Groundplan Drawings* (detail), 2014, series of drawings, ISCP, New York. Photo: Julia Jamora. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.

jection put forth by Giorgio Agamben in his theory of sovereign power and the “bare lives” of stateless subjects (1998). While Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* has been influential in its analysis of the state’s absolute power within zones of exception, feminist scholars have also critiqued the ways in which the subject of his work also represents a universal and undifferentiated one (Ong 2006; Chow 2012). Mountz, for example, calls for a reworking of Agamben’s theory in order to make room for nuances and differences across exceptional spaces (2011, 383).

In *Ground Plan Drawings*, an attention to these fine particularities of refugee lives is found in the white tents, which are evocative of both surrender and impermanence; the thin material indicates the extent to which they are acutely vulnerable to state power and the natural environment. However, because the tents are also used as screens to project refugee memories—the projected images are of the houses that refugees had left behind—*Ground Plan Drawings* demonstrates the complex temporalities and spaces that refugees inhabit. While the tents visualize conceptually the act of waiting and the sense of liminality that marks refugee encampments, they also embody the processes of memory making.

Refugee camps are at once marked by a deferment of time and an occupation of space. But they are also dwellings that—in the aggregate and as time passes—become large campsites that operate with their own economies and form the basis for community. To illustrate this, Elsrakbi and Alexander project homemade drawings onto the white tents. These sketches are similar to architectural blueprints but done on a smaller scale, serving as mnemonics for the homes and homelands that refugees leave behind. The artists asked refugees to sketch from memory their homes in what is captioned the “before” pictures, and in the drawings marked “after,” their pictures represent what their homes would look like in the future, once and if the refugees were able to return home. As such, the refugee camp may be scored by immobility and stasis, but as Elsrakbi and Alexander show, it is marked, too, by negotiations with time and space and functions as a site of conditional possibility for refugees.

In the final analysis, Elsrakbi and Alexander’s art about waiting underscores how refugees reimagine their psychical and physical locations in between the markers of past, present, and future. Their attention to “small stories” and the recrafting of everyday objects to tell these stories corresponds to the ways in which FRE is concerned with collaborative acts and intimate spaces. Tiffany Chung’s work, however, poses a different question about scale and the geopolitical; even so, in retracing refugee migration, Chung’s work is a cartographic projection of an FRE method of analysis in its re-visioning of the epistemological imperative.

Tiffany Chung: Cartography as the project of empire

Chung was born in Da Nang, Vietnam, in 1969 and emigrated with her family to the United States as a refugee. A multimedia artist who is based in Vietnam, in 2007, she founded Sàn Art (along with Đinh Q. Lê and others), one of the most important art spaces operating independently in the country. Like Foundland, Chung places her sights on the small stories of refugee movement but also critiques global displacement as a narrative that can be captured in the archival record and contained in official memory. What she offers instead is a pointillist reconstruction of official records to show how the minutiae of migration—the small stories of displacement—are elided in the massive efforts to collect data about refugees. From a distance, Chung’s maps are aesthetically beautiful, as they are comprised of vibrant blooms of color and straight symmetrical lines. Upon closer inspection, they challenge the utility and bloodlessness of the data sponsored by institutions like the UNHCR and reveal the ways in which the cartographic, itself an integral part of the colonial enterprise, reproduces knowledge about the other.

As part of this installation, a piece titled *UNHCR Records and Figures: Remapping Regional Movements, Arrivals and Resettlements of Vietnamese Refugees in 1979* draws attention to this problem (fig. 7). Chung’s methodology is noteworthy here because she builds on and recreates—by poring over archival documents and reworking the data provided by the UNHCR—the breadth of Vietnamese refugee migration in her maps. Chung points to the poverty of information that is often found in the “records and figures” provided by the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations. Buttressed by her own interviews with Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong, this map outlines how comprehensive Vietnamese refugee movements were during the height of the “Vietnamese boat people” crisis, in which hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees fled on precarious boats that were often seized by Thai pirates or capsized in the water (Chung 2015). At the time, the scandal of this humanitarian crisis was Hong Kong’s enforced closure of refugee camps in the late 1980s and early 1990s after the government detained thousands of Vietnamese refugees for long durations. Hong Kong authorities also negotiated with the Vietnamese government to repatriate refugees under pressure from Beijing to settle the refugee problem, most notably before the control of Hong Kong was transferred from the United Kingdom to China in 1997 (Chan 2011, 8–9).

Part of Chung’s larger project is to challenge a form of statecraft predicated on borders. In *UNHCR Reports and Figures*, Vietnam is centered in the map but remains small in comparison to outlying countries, which are shaded in lightly and treated with pastel colors of blue to symbolize water

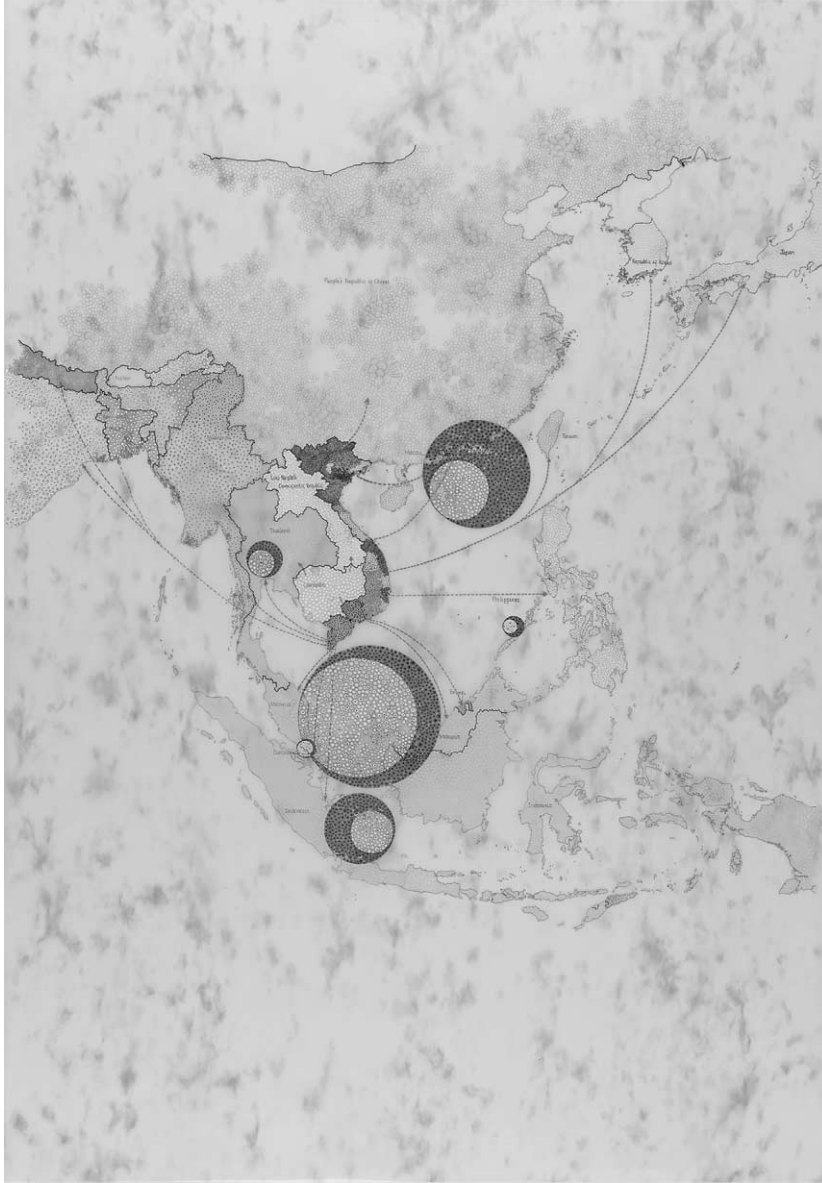


Figure 7 Tiffany Chung, *UNHCR Records and Figures: Remapping Regional Movements, Arrivals, and Resettlements of Vietnamese Refugees in 1979, 2016*, acrylic, ink, and oil on vellum and paper, 110 × 70 cm. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.

and light yellow for land. For Chung, borders may be artificially imposed, but they are also internationally enforced by treaties, agreements that dramatically restrict the lives and migratory patterns of those who are often the most politically vulnerable of the world. Marked by delicate lines and vibrant colors and rendered on transparent paper, the map brings together aesthetic beauty with the abstraction of statelessness, a condition that Chung does not romanticize with her ethereal colorings but which she anchors in her art practice of archival research and cartographic recreations.

For *The Syria Project*, Chung uses the same meticulous technique. In this work, Syria's geography is a mass of dots that signify the destruction of the country's ecology and landscape as a result of the current war. Presented at the Venice Biennale in 2015, *The Syria Project* comprises different maps, composed using information culled from a variety of sources (UNHCR, the BBC, the International Office of Migration) about Syrian casualties and refugees. Similar to her work on Vietnamese refugees, the aggregate data that Chung collects are translated into patterns of intensely colored dots and circles that, in turn, reflect the conditions of death and displacement that Syrians currently face. Laid out onto several walls, the installation is both intensive and extensive because of the detailed attention that Chung offers in relation to Syria's contemporary history.

As with the maps that make up *The Vietnam Exodus Project*, the Syrian maps Chung makes are small in size, but they collectively speak to historical patterns of worldwide refugee movements. Chung repurposes statistical data about refugees, forcing the viewer to contemplate anew the devastating consequences of the war in Syria. She illustrates the ways that cartography, perceived to be an empirical practice, originates in imperial forms of memory making and knowledge production (Anderson 1991; Pratt 1992) and how data collecting in today's era is in service of such a technology. Mining these databases, Chung graphically re-presents the numbers about the displaced. Monumental and yet intimate, Chung's work digests a prodigious amount of information to track the immense scale of war and its impact, distilling inert data into tiny spheres that ultimately look like living organisms, molecular and cellular in appearance.

Our use of body metaphors to describe Chung's corpus in *The Syria Project* deliberately highlights the vital migrant bodies that the work references and the bodies of power that it critiques. This is most apparent in a drawing titled *Straight Line Carved and Shaped the Region: The Secret Deal of the 1916 Sykes and Picot Agreement* (fig. 8). The work re-presents Syria during the time of French colonialism, during which Syria became a French protectorate by mandate. Chung draws on this historic treaty to represent the lasting effects of a temporary mandate that was in place from 1920 to 1946.

While Chung's other maps feature faint lines demarcating borders, in this piece, the "straight lines" of French colonialism are defined by a bold blue that borders the regions, demonstrating the extent to which Syria and Lebanon were "carved up" and divided by the French. These divisions served to inflame the ethnic and sectarian groups that variously claimed control over

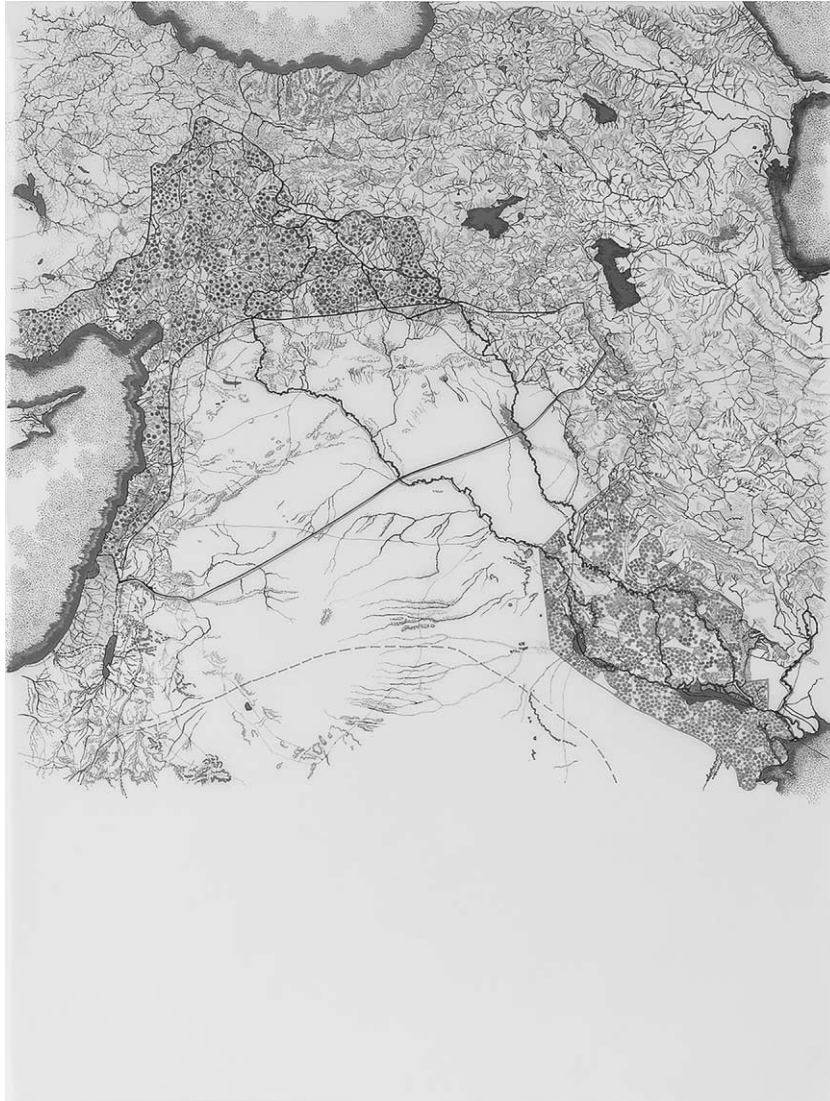


Figure 8 Tiffany Chung, *Straight Line Carved and Shaped the Region: The Secret Deal of the 1916 Sykes and Picot Agreement* (detail), 2014, oil and ink on paper and vellum, 110 × 70 cm. Reprinted with permission. A color version of this figure is available online.

these areas. Marked by the axes of past and present, Chung's piece illustrates how Syria's current war can be traced back to this colonial legacy, the costs of which are felt most acutely by Syria's refugees and internally displaced people, ironically re-presented through the act of mapmaking.

The historical ties that bring Chung's projects on Vietnam and Syria together are compelling and reveal the long-lasting cleavages that colonialism has created. France's colonization of Syria, as in Vietnam, mobilized fervent anticolonialist movements founded on nationalism and a reordering of gender relations in the latter part of the twentieth century that permanently changed the political landscape of the country thereafter (Thompson 2000). As a result of French colonialism in both Vietnam and Syria, US military involvement in the two countries was secured. US incursions into these countries not only exacerbated ecological destruction and political instability but also created the conditions for the expulsion of refugees from their respective borders. Chung's maps of the convergences between Vietnamese and Syrian history bespeak the power of cartography, revealing it to be a colonial and imperial enterprise in the organization of history and the construction of meaning. It is these acts of tracing and interlinking that also underlie an FRE line of inquiry, one that engages with the question of convergence and synchronicity in refugee histories at the same time that it remains alert to the differences that exist between refugee populations in both time and space.

Conclusion

In cowriting this article, our objective has been to engage with dialogic works of art that traverse the global North and South through a collective voice that we have deliberately fashioned. The use of the "we" here emphasizes the importance of feminist collaborations in the formation of ideas and arguments, collaborations that advance a reflexive reading of power and privilege. As Richa Nagar (2016) reminds us, "doing positionality" in academia often fails, because researchers tend to elide the "stories of our own lives and trajectories; the languages, yearnings and hauntings that we come from and that breathe inside us . . . as scholars, thinkers, writers, learners, educators, and creative or intellectual community builders" (73). Following Nagar, we speak in a collective voice as refugee scholars of color. As our own experiences tell us, the lives and afterlives of refugees are messy, replete with long histories marked by colonialism, military incursions, and violence that cannot be encapsulated within a single retelling.

Against the public erasure of such complex stories, we have offered a feminist approach to the study of refuge(es): feminist not in the sense of fo-

ocusing on women's lives but in the sense of paying attention to the intersection between private grief and public commemoration; of listening for unsaid things by relying on other realms, such as feelings and emotions; and of looking for the hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic and familial interaction. Defining the tenets of a feminist refugee epistemology, we have resisted the objectification of refugees and their bodies. By illuminating as feminist interventions the epistolary and cartographic act in refugee art, this article has centered the diverse works of women artists that illustrate the gendered dimensions of refugeehood and make visible the psychic and material realities of refugee precarity. Collectively, we have argued, their work prompts a reading of refugee interiority as a feminist, not feminized, space and the figure of the refugee/artist as knowledge producer, not as informant.

The different geographic and geopolitical locations from which these artists hail, and in which they have collaborated and exhibited their art, moreover, form an important facet to our proposal for FRE and its method of analysis. Rather than conflating the political histories of the Vietnamese and Syrians, our articulation of FRE has demonstrated a measure of interconnectedness between these groups at a historical moment when the plight of Vietnamese refugees is being recalled in light of the war in Syria and the country's refugee exodus. As outcasts of modernity (Bauman 2004), both refugee populations have been made to speak through the idiom of suffering. Countering this impulse, we have posited that a feminist understanding of the creative texts of Vietnam, Syria, and their diasporas can be rich and expansive. As the editors of *Syria Speaks* argue, "simply put, creativity is not only a way of surviving the violence but of challenging it" (Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud 2014, vii). Analyzing 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. It is also a way to encourage further and deeper inquiry into refugee cultural production as an essential element in refugee studies. In short, feminist refugee epistemology seeks out the stories and lives that are not publicized but are nevertheless there.

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