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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
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Recalling Vietnam: Queering Temporality and Imperial Intimacies in  
Contemporary U.S. and Franco-Vietnamese Cultural Productions

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Southeast Asian Studies

by

Justin Quang Nguyễn Phan

December 2018

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Mariam Beevi Lam, Chairperson

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The Thesis of Justin Quang Nguyễn Phan is approved:

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Recalling Vietnam: Queering Temporality and Imperial Intimacies in  
Contemporary U.S. and Franco-Vietnamese Cultural Productions

by

Justin Quang Nguyễn Phan

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies  
University of California, December 2018  
Dr. Mariam Beevi Lam, Chairperson

My thesis is particularly interested in how French colonialism is selectively forgotten while the Cold War is emphasized in U.S. re-constructions of war in Vietnam. To demonstrate this, the thesis is organized into three main parts. The first part introduces an accounting of U.S. treatments of temporality, subjectivity, and geographies in archival and documentary remembrances of the Vietnam War. This is particularly important to my thesis since my thesis's main concern is in how U.S. remembrances of the wars in Vietnam elide—and in a sense, disavow—this interconnected and intimate relationship between French and U.S. empires, a connection I call *imperial intimacies*. In addition, Part II departs from a deeply historical inquiry of the Military Assistance Advisory Group – Vietnam archive and ventures into how this disavowal of French colonialism within U.S. archival sources is echoed in cultural sources like public television, documentaries, and novels. In doing so, Part II examines the nationalized, gendered, racialized, and

sexualized politics of memory in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 2017 documentary series called *The Vietnam War*.

Inversely, while the geographies, temporalities, and subjectivities can be constrained by the U.S.-Vietnam War and the subsequent memory-making apparatuses, Part III examines the role of two cultural productions that explicitly privilege Franco-Vietnamese diasporic subjects. I engage Monique Truong's 2004 novel *The Book of Salt* and Idrissou Mora-Kpai's 2011 documentary film *Indochina: Traces of a Mother*. These two productions provide an alternative representation of temporality and intimacies as experienced and created by Franco-Vietnamese subjects, in contrast to the temporality evoked by strict historical accounts that require a level of empiricism and positivism found in Burns and Novick's series and in the MAAG-Vietnam archive. Marking the Indochinese diasporic subject as both material trace of colonial violence and as the historical antecedent to these wars, my reading of Mora-Kpai and Truong's cultural productions insist on a different engagement with war memory and national memory that roots itself through a critique stemming from the many uses of imperial intimacies.



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## Introduction

While Vietnam has often been discussed as a country, concept, and war, mentions of ‘Vietnam’ elicit very different subjects, histories, and geographies. What is conjured when one talks about war and Vietnam differs as well. A popular U.S. imaginary of Vietnam often elicits images and stories about the U.S.’s war with Vietnam during the 1960s and 70s. Some of these stories could be centered on those events that rallied a large population of anti-war activists against the government’s war, those that created an exodus of Vietnamese refugees, and those that negatively impacted its veterans and their families. Some might recall the plethora of cultural productions about American men’s military experience in Vietnam, either fictionalized or biographical, as shown in cultural productions like *Deer Hunter*, the *Rambo* series, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*.

Others might recall that war in Vietnam is not only about the war with the U.S., but also about the wars that took place before it. For example, the French Indochina War—also known as the First Indochina War—was a war fought from 1946 to 1954 between the French colonial authorities and Vietnamese peoples mobilized for national liberation from the French colonial regime. Having started the uneven colonization process of different parts of Southeast Asia in 1858, the French created *le Union Indochinoise*, also known as French Indochina, by incorporating its five colonial components of Cambodia, Laos, Annam, Tonkin, and Cochinchina what is known today as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> With the end of the French Indochina War following

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<sup>1</sup> Brocheux, Pierre, et al. *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization ; 1858 - 1954*. UC Press, 2009, 15.

the Battle at Điện Biên Phủ of 1954, French colonial domination and its specific efforts to re-conquer its French Indochina had ended and would be followed by the U.S.'s involvement in *that* Vietnam War.

While the two are often narrated as different wars especially when some historical accounts describe them as a U.S. war with Vietnam and a French war with Indochina, both wars were quite entangled. France and the U.S. had a long history as it related to Vietnam and Indochina, and for some in Vietnam both wars were just one elongated project with two different entities. One example that establishes this entanglement is with the intimately connected histories of the U.S.'s Military Assistance Advisory Group Indochina (MAAG-Indochina) established during the First Indochina War and the U.S.'s Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam (MAAG-Vietnam) that was established after the end of the First Indochina War. My thesis is particularly interested in how French colonialism is selectively forgotten while the Cold War is emphasized in U.S. reconstructions of war in Vietnam. To demonstrate this, the thesis is organized into three main parts. The first part introduces an accounting of U.S. treatments of temporality, subjectivity, and geographies in archival and documentary remembrances of the Vietnam War. I begin Part I and devote much of Part II of the thesis with an analysis of the MAAG–Vietnam budget from 1958-1959 for this reason. This is particularly important to my thesis since the accounting performed in this document reflects my thesis's main concern in how U.S. remembrances of the wars in Vietnam elide—and in a sense, disavow—this interconnected and intimate relationship between French and U.S. empires, a connection I call *imperial intimacies*.

In addition, Part II departs from a deeply historical inquiry of the MAAG–Vietnam archive and ventures into how this disavowal of French colonialism within U.S. archival sources is echoed in cultural sources like public television, documentaries, and novels. In doing so, Part II also examines the nationalized, gendered, racialized, and sexualized politics of memory in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s 2017 documentary series called *The Vietnam War*. It does this to establish how contemporary popular U.S. remembrances of the war still locate U.S. military presence as separate from the concerns of colonialism and empire, thereby echoing the logics of the MAAG–Vietnam and illustrating what many have called a logic of American exceptionalism. Noting an ambivalent disavowal of imperial intimacies, I illustrate how the disavowal of French colonialism impacts what geographies, temporalities, and subjectivities can be recalled in American remembrance of these wars. I argue that the disavowal of French colonialism’s influence in the socio-political disputes of the U.S.-Vietnam War far exceeds the actual events of the different iterations of U.S. military assistance and advice to Vietnam. As the analysis of *The Vietnam War* and the MAAG–Vietnam budget will demonstrate, these U.S. cultural texts are only able to acknowledge French colonialism insofar as it is a context after which the U.S.’s main Cold War concerns can take center stage.

Inversely, while the geographies, temporalities, and subjectivities can be constrained by the U.S.-Vietnam War and the subsequent memory-making apparatuses, Part III examines the role of two cultural productions that explicitly privilege Franco-Vietnamese diasporic subjects. I engage Monique Truong’s 2004 novel *The Book of Salt* in how it highlights the interconnectedness of U.S., French, and Indochinese subject

formation. Truong triangulates these subject formations in her novel by also refusing to temporally set her story in the context of the Cold War; instead, she sets her novel even before the First and Second Indochina Wars. In addition, I engage Idrissou Mora-Kpai's 2011 documentary film *Indochina: Traces of a Mother* in how it actively poses questions that index the political and economic intimacy in the U.S. and France relationship *and* in how it indexes the disavowed intimacies of imperialism, specifically the intimate relations between his father and mother that made his social life possible.

These two productions provide an alternative representation of temporality and intimacies as experienced and created by Franco-Vietnamese subjects, in contrast to the temporality evoked by strict historical accounts that require a level of empiricism and positivism found in Burns and Novick's series and in the MAAG–Vietnam archive. Marking the Indochinese diasporic subject as both material trace of colonial violence and as the historical antecedent to these wars, my reading of Mora-Kpai and Truong's cultural productions insist on a different engagement with war memory and national memory that roots itself through a critique stemming from the many uses of imperial intimacies.

### *Empires and Intimacies*

In this context, I offer how the thesis will conceptualize and treat the concept of imperial intimacies. Empire and intimacy has had prior theorizations. In her article, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies", Ann Stoler discusses what she calls an activated interest in 'the intimacies of empire', ranging from matters of the "management of marriage,

domesticity, child rearing, and paid-for and unpaid-for sex” to matters of miscegenation as well as family and domestic life<sup>2</sup> (835). Such an attention informed also the conceptualization of intimacies that Lisa Lowe forwards in her chapter version of “Intimacies of Four Continents”<sup>3</sup>, where she explores intimacies in a tripartite way via 1) spatial proximity, 2) privacy via liberal bourgeois intimacies (e.g. liberal bourgeois families created within the annals of modernity and premised on the disavowal of any forms of colonial realities), and 3) contacts meant to be elaborated, especially those absented by the modern liberal human subject (e.g. relationships between colonized peoples for instance, or between the Chinese coolie figure alongside other forms of labor disavowed by modernity). Lowe and Stoler’s attention to intimacies informs the large part of how this paper conceptualizes intimacy and its political extension into ‘imperial intimacy’.

For this thesis, I situate imperial intimacy to denote three interrelated meanings. The first formulation of imperial intimacy explores the politically intimate relations between and amongst imperial powers, specifically in this case between the French and U.S. empires prior to the American War in Vietnam. This gets at some of the proximities that Lowe discusses in another context, but also gestures to the political and economic ties between French and U.S. power that had been the preconditions that led to the U.S.’s involvement in the Vietnam War.

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<sup>2</sup> Stoler, Ann Laura. “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies.” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 88, no. 3, Dec. 2001, p. 835.

<sup>3</sup> Lowe, Lisa. “The Intimacies of Four Continents.” *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, edited by Ann Laura Stoler, Duke University Press, 2006. It is important to note that Lisa Lowe’s chapter in this anthology was later revised and extended into a 2015 book of the same title. While this is the case, the thesis’s conceptualization of ‘imperial intimacy’ does not explicitly engage how Lisa Lowe developed these ideas into her 2015 books.

The second formulation elaborates on the epistemological register of empire and intimacy. This second formulation points to how cultural producers are also intimately embedded within webs of empire. As will be demonstrated by the following analysis of Burns and Novick, their proximity to American nationalism also renders them suspect to a kind of imperial entanglement with the discursive and ideological underpinnings of a Cold War epistemology. Similarly, as will be noted later or as noted in another space, the role of Vietnamese diasporic knowledge production is also ideologically and discursively linked to this kind of imperial intimacy. Navigating the role of multiculturalism, Vietnamese American knowledge production come to hold a particularly tricky space in the broader political configuration of Vietnamese experiences in the U.S. imaginary. This is the case because Vietnamese American refugee subject formations have been ideologically used for the bolstering of U.S. imperial interests elsewhere. This suggests that cultural productions that articulate the role of Vietnamese American refugees are also embedded in an intimate relationship with U.S. imperialism.

The third formulation of imperial intimacies expands more on what Lisa Lowe had originally deemed intimacies of contact that in a sense far exceed colonial measurements, specifically those between and amongst colonized peoples. This thesis also interrogates how intimacies created in the context of imperialism and militarism (or the pre-context in the case of *The Book of Salt*) can also fundamentally queer the geographies, temporalities, and subjectivities drawn by war-conditioned imaginaries. While one goal of the thesis is to examine how political power overlaps between French and U.S. military presence characterizes one of the conditions of possibility for the

normative temporalities found in historical treatments of the wars in Vietnam, the second goal is to examine what alternative lives and experiences exist beyond an affirmative recognition by the U.S. nation-state. Taking the social life of an indexical figure of a queer Indochinese cook in Paris during the 1930s with the social life of French African soldiers conscripted to fight in the French Indochina War as well as the social life of the women with whom they formed intimate unions and children, the thesis argues for how these ‘intimacies of contact’ present a queer reading of Cold War temporalities.

This thesis takes these three theorizations of imperial intimacy as a means of conceptualizing how entanglements with imperial power come in contingent, complex, and overlapping configurations. This term, then, might function as a heuristic device that can differently direct our attention to alternative analytical considerations of subject matter and interest even when historiographies about events seem overdetermined by a normative temporal schema. In so doing, this thesis treats official histories as always already contested space. It aims to demonstrate how conceptualizing these imperial intimacies as contestations over power highlights how there are embedded as well as obscured texts in official archives of history and memory as they pertain to U.S.-Vietnam and its effects.

#### Part I: Consolidating Empire: Ambivalent Intimacies in U.S.-French Military Assistance

The MAAG–Indochina first arrived in 17 September 1950 following the approval of President Harry S. Truman to assist the French in the First Indochina War. President Truman approved National Security Council 64 in March of 1950, proclaiming that



French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) was a “key area” that could not be allowed to fall to the communists and that “the Departments of State and Defense should prepare as a matter of priority a program of all practicable measures designed to protect United States security interests in Indochina”, especially as it relates to the problem of “communist aggression”.<sup>4</sup> The MAAG–Indochina was later disbanded on 31 October 1955 following French defeat in 1954. The U.S. soon replaced MAAG–Indochina the next day on 1 November 1955 with the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG – Vietnam).<sup>5</sup> With French defeat, the name and mission of the U.S.’s military advisors would need to shift. Eventually, the US’s investment in Vietnam would find more direct and independent manifestations.<sup>6</sup> Following negotiations at the Geneva Accords in 1954, French surrender and military withdrawal was required by April 1956. These official events for the French colonial authority seemed to suggest that most if not all French military presence and personnel would have left Vietnam by 1956.

Yet, when examining the archival materials about the MAAG–Vietnam, a military document written by the MAAG–Vietnam illustrates the lingering presence of French colonial materials. This document, which sought to ask for more financial support from the US’s Department of Defense and Quartermaster’s Department, accounted for military

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<sup>4</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, Volume VI, East Asia and the Pacific, 1950, ed. James S. Lay, Jr. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 480.

<sup>5</sup> Stanton, Shelby L. *Vietnam Order of Battle: A Complete Illustrated Reference to U.S. Army Combat and Support Forces in Vietnam 1961-1973*. Galahad Books by arrangement with Kraus Reprint & Periodicals : Distributed by Bookthrift Marketing, 1987, 59-61.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* The MAAG–Vietnam remained up until 15 May 1964. Two years prior to the disbanding of MAAG–Vietnam, the first military advisors from the newly created Military Assistance Command–Vietnam (MACV) arrived in Saigon on 8 February 1962. The MACV would incorporate MAAG–Vietnam’s infrastructure on 15 May 1964. After this, MACV would work alongside the United States Army in Vietnam (USARV) starting in 20 July 1973.

expenditures in Vietnam within the previous fiscal year (1958-9). Among the budget line items, the authors asked for an additional \$119,268 out of the increased Miscellaneous Spending budget to operate and further supply the MAAG–Vietnam’s Uniform Making Shop. As part of their justification, the authors explained in bullet points:

- *The Uniform Making Shop is developed to such an extent that it is able to supply a sufficient quantity of clothings [sic] for the Armed Forces, which suppresses the necessity of bids.*
- *The quantity of material and clothing left by the French has been used up.*
- *The quantities estimated must be very large to meet the requirements of the Armed Forces.*
- *The material left by the French which has been repaired for utilization purpose is now in a miserable condition.<sup>7</sup>*

This list of justifications is particularly illuminating because it demonstrates that French military presence had *not* all but left by 1956 despite official narratives that established the opposite. As archived in this document, the authors of this budget account for a lingering French presence in Vietnam after decolonization albeit in the form of French military materials. Moreover, it accounts for an ongoing U.S. presence despite the closing of the First Indochina War. With the defeat of French colonialism in the region, the U.S. no longer had a place to function as a financial and political supporter of another’s war. The U.S.’s presence in Vietnam as military advisors who also provided military assistance continued through this period into what the U.S. calls the Vietnam War.

The budget identifies a continuity between the First and Second Indochina Wars within official narratives of MAAG–Indochina turned MAAG–Vietnam turned MACV. MACV would play a key war in the later Second Indochina War by playing a key co-

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<sup>7</sup> Report, Vietnam Military Budget Estimate FY 1959 - Part 2 of 3 - Records of the MAAGV Part 1, No Date, Folder 0006, Box 0011, Vietnam Archive Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 14 Dec. 2015.

constitutive role to the U.S. Army. In this example, growing U.S. military presence in Vietnam is told retrospectively as a developmentalist narrative: from aiding French colonists to supplanting French colonial military interests to succeeding in developing an autonomous military presence justified by a Cold War logic.

I began this analysis with MAAG–Vietnam/MACV to first establish how both wars—what have also been called the First Indochina War and the Second Indochina War—had deep economic and political ties. While such an intimacy was key, a close examination of the U.S.’s means of disavowing French presence in Vietnam even after the close of the First Indochina War suggests a central contradiction to be explained. If U.S. presence in Indochina was premised on contributing to French reconquering efforts, what would be the rationalizing reasons for continued U.S. military presence in the region and the further absorption of the MAAG–Vietnam into the MACV? Drawing on the military budget mentioned above, I argue that this example illustrates one microcosmic negotiation of how the U.S. absorbed and disavowed French imperial matter despite the presumed absence of French bodies and despite the indexed presence of French materials after the end of the First Indochina War.

The mention of these materials within the MAAG–Vietnam archive serves as an index of certain excessive matters that supersede the budget’s concerns. This U.S. document demonstrates that the presence of French military objects were also actively used and worn by the US’s military in Vietnam to a point of no repair. The materials donned by the French were now transferred literally onto the bodies of those working in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and onto U.S. bodies, whose

objectives were not to curb French anticolonialism but to geopolitically contain if not eliminate communist influence.

Noting the presence of these worn-out reserves of clothing and materials, it is important to understand that the symbolic and material quality of these clothes simultaneously archives and materializes both memory and history. It enables us to understand that budget's mention of one imperial power clothing themselves in a former colonial power's dressings has a dual archival significance. It illustrates an act of clothing, but that act also illustrates the conditions of possibility for the re-use of French clothes and the materialization of a soldier's quotidian re-presentation of French military power and aesthetics.

Rather than focus on how the MAAG–Vietnam clothed the armed forces, the analysis here instead reads against the grain in order to examine the material act of clothing *and* what this act symbolizes for the transference of power between two empires. In effect, this dual movement involves both personal and structural narratives as this index of clothing functions to reveal both an act of clothing by specific person(s) *and* an act of uniforming specific populations (read: military men).<sup>8</sup> If we were to acknowledge the mentioning of French clothes and materials within this document as a proposed French presence (in Vietnam and within U.S. Vietnam War archives), then perhaps we could also begin highlighting the intimately braided result of US imperial presence in the

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<sup>8</sup> Many thanks to Jodi Kim for pointing out this point of uniforming in earlier drafts of the paper.

Vietnam *and* the processes of French colonization in Vietnam, rather than separating them in the U.S. popular imaginary.<sup>9</sup>

In noting their inability to reuse French materials, which were in a miserable condition in 1959, the authors of this report requested that the Department of Defense approve their request to double the Uniform Making Shop's means of uniform production. Where they had 600 Singer sewing machines to work with in 1958, the MAAG–Vietnam authors proposed an increase of 667 sewing machines, resulting in a total of 1,267 Singer sewing machines by the start of 1959, to properly dress and clothe their soldiers and the “whole Armed Forces”.<sup>10</sup> If read literally, this budget report's framing these worn-out materials and clothing as French makes sense as these materials were owned by the French and left behind after the end of the First Indochina War. However, the level of financial involvement the U.S. had with France's efforts in Indochina during the 1950s suggests an alternative understanding of these clothes and materials. In the context of increased military expenditure, I argue that the U.S.'s proposed increase of Singer sewing machines animates a political move to further

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<sup>9</sup> In her chapter “Militarized Refuge(es)”, Espiritu links the politics of refugee camps with the US's history of colonization in the Pacific Rim with specific attention to the militarized condition of US occupation in Guam, the Philippines, and settler colonialism in California as the conditions of possibility for the US's militarized aid to Southeast Asian refugees.

<sup>10</sup> The notion of “the whole Armed Forces” is language used by this report. Although the actual use of this Uniform Making Shop still needs to be further researched, the shop nonetheless existed and created uniforms for a sector of Armed Forces in the document's political and economic imaginary. To be clear, the signification of Armed Forces can mean a variety of bodies and political contexts. Questions regarding the bodies who donned these clothes are still part of my ongoing research as this Tailor Shop could be more specific to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) or to include the over 1,500 advisors sent from the US to supervise the development of the ARVN defense, or to include the over 2 million enlisted and active US military personnel in the world in 1959. As these are crucial questions, this section of my paper, however, does not necessarily draw much more significance in this paper yet about the workings of the Uniform Making Shop, as it is interested in what furthering US financial support to control a means of producing military uniforms signifies for the US's investment in Vietnam and its relationship to French politics and colonialist military struggle.

strengthen the U.S.'s involvement in Vietnam as a branch out of an imposed alliance between the U.S. and France and in response to the waning of 'older' colonial power.

When it came to the First Indochina War, the U.S. and France's imperial intimacy had an *ambivalent* quality. One main example is how both the French and the U.S. perceived this military aid in the First Indochina War. Within U.S. archives, MAAG—Indochina's support was saturated by Cold War justifications that framed U.S. support as an act against communist aggression.<sup>11</sup> However, as noted by French historians Pierre Brocheaux and Daniel Hémerly, the French public perceived the French Indochina War as more determined by “the restoration of French supremacy” than it was about the “repression of international communism” (2009, 366). This incongruence in mission illuminated the reasons for why the French military still chose to accept U.S. financial support despite harboring some resistance to the MAAGV's advice during the four years of concurrent U.S. and French presence in Vietnam (1950-4).

France's economic relationship to the US during the French Indochina War is also another clear example that explicitly states this relationship. As the French economy was still impoverished by their defeat in World War II, France still needed financial support for their efforts in maintaining French colonial authority in Indochina. With U.S. support, France received just that. In 1950, the US invested about \$10 million to support the MAAG—Indochina and, indirectly, the French Indochina War. By 1953, the US was funding anywhere from 33-40% of France's budget for the French Indochina War. Within that same year, the U.S. committed around \$350 million to update and replace

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<sup>11</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Volume VI, East Asia and the Pacific, 1950*, ed. James S. Lay, Jr. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 480.

French military weapons, materials, and machines.<sup>12</sup> By 1954, as Howard Zinn accounts, “the United States had given 300,000 small arms and machine guns, enough to equip the entire French army in Indochina, and \$1 billion; all together, the U.S. was financing 80 percent of the French war effort” (2005, 471). Even after France’s defeat in 1954, the U.S. formalized their role in Vietnam in 1955 with more direct financial support to the MAAG–Vietnam. This continual increase in financial spending by both the US and France then renders visible that these military efforts—and the named wars—were anything but discrete phenomena.

If the U.S. was financially shouldering a large percentage of costs in the French Indochina War, can we still consider the worn-out clothes mentioned within the MAAG–Vietnam report as distinctly French? The fact of U.S. financial collaboration with France’s war demands that we also consider those “worn-out French clothes” as also U.S. clothes. The U.S.’s militarist interest in Vietnam financially supported the Franco-Vietnamese War, and the materials used to fight the war were also material manifestations of U.S. ‘aid’. As such, the clothes that the MAAG–Vietnam authors describe as miserable carry the materialized and archived memory of the U.S.’s and France’s political and economic relationship; and as such, the clothes were just as much French as they were American. Shifting the perspective regarding who possesses these clothes suggests a consideration of possession in economic and political terms.

This moment of doubling the means of uniform production serves as a key moment where U.S. military presence in Vietnam was formalized and established as an

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<sup>12</sup> Ott, David Ewing. *Field Artillery, 1954-1973*. Washington D.C.: Dept. of the Army, 2007, 21.

independent political interest separate from French colonial interests. The naming of U.S.-funded military materials and clothes as only French highlights a politics of disavowal that over-determines material ownership and categorization with national affinity. Calling these clothes French easily eclipses the intimate economic and political international relations between the U.S. and France into the realm of distinct national significations, despite the lived realities of imperial borrowing and use of military materials like the clothes mentioned here. The integral relationship that the U.S. had with France is easily forgotten as the distinctly French military debris is juxtaposed against (and affirms as a result) the U.S.'s desire to double its means of uniform production.

By tracing the financial link between U.S. and French militarism through an understanding of the collaborative possession of those re-used military materials that exceed the nomos of French Indochina War and the Vietnam War, my analysis thus far has demonstrated that this war nomenclature functions to obscure certain sociopolitical and economic histories about wars in Vietnam; the proposed request to double MAAG–Vietnam means of uniform production politically allegorizes the US's formalized transference of power in Vietnam from France's declining colonial influence to the US's increasing imperial presence in the region. Moreover, the doubling capacities for uniform production in Vietnam also parallels the U.S.'s own supplanting of MAAG–Indochina (1950-1955) with MAAG–Vietnam (1955-1962).

Whereas the US had occupied an unofficial role in Vietnam before by helping the French in its colonial efforts, the defeat and retreat of French military occupation rendered visible the US's own autonomous interest in Vietnam: that of curbing



communism for its own gains during the Cold War. Thus, my close reading suggests that the MAAG–Vietnam phrase ‘miserable French materials and clothing’ evokes a temporal break in what political affinities these clothes are meant to signify. By noting the miserable condition of French military presence in the region via clothes, the MAAG–Vietnam report carries an understanding that the US’s interests in Vietnam can no longer be partially legitimated through French colonial presence but must now retain its autonomy by controlling the means to materially produce uniforms for its military presence and to symbolically produce the visuals associated with US military occupation. Doubling the means of production for the Uniform Making Shop allegorizes this proposed independence.

In this way, although the US’s ventures in Vietnam are rooted in an ambivalent alliance with France’s war against the anti-colonialists, this report’s distinctions between the miserable condition of French clothes and the US’s desires to create its own clothes conceptually affirm the US’s presence in Vietnam as both *productive* in that it ideologically bolstered the American need to offer viable militarized aid and assistance in Vietnam and *reproductive* in that this ideological function of creating an anti-communist U.S. politically justified the purchase of the means of production to reproduce war and war presence in Vietnam during this French war to reconquer its rebellious colonies. Such a productive reproduction of U.S. Cold War ideologies renders forgettable the intimately ambivalent political alliance between the US and France. In essence, this affirmation asserts that not only is the U.S. able to fund another empire’s war, it is now able to emerge from the French colonial defeat to occupy Vietnam in its own way, in this

case by being able to support its need to produce uniforms for all and to have the capacity (e.g. a large number of sewing machines) to reproduce those uniforms at any time.

By 1962, the MAAGV would be augmented by the creation of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and entirely absorbed into the U.S. military infrastructure of the MACV in 1964. The MACV was implemented as a joint-service command of the United States Department of Defense that attempted to better coordinate U.S. military presence in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> The number of MACV and MAAG–Vietnam advisors would also quintuple over the course of 1961 to 1963, moving from 746 to over 3,400 military advisors in these respective years. Tracing these shifts in military organization in Vietnam is central to 1) understanding how U.S. involvement in Vietnam was naturalized, 2) noting the primary absorption and subsequent disavowal of French colonialism in U.S. historical narratives, and 3) establishing how a historically normative treatment of war history establishes a dominant temporality and historiography about the wars in Vietnam.

To review, I returned to this story of the MAAG–Vietnam document to establish the ambivalent entanglements of empire—what the thesis has called *imperial intimacies*—between the U.S. and France that some popular treatments of the Vietnam War might obscure. Popular imaginaries about the First Indochina War and the Second Indochina War have often been treated as separate events. A close reading of this MAAG–Vietnam document’s rhetoric establishes quite the inverse; these two events are

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<sup>13</sup> Stanton. *Vietnam Order of Battle*, pp. 59-60.

continuous in political, economic, and cultural terms. Its discontinuity is created more from a credence to historical breaks than one of discrete social formations.

The story of the MAAG–Vietnam animates one of the key ways that the U.S. justified its postwar expansion of empire into Vietnam and the broader Asia Pacific. Rather than couch the U.S. under the same imperial and colonial rhetoric as older forms of Western colonialism, the MAAG–Vietnam document’s rhetoric parallels how U.S. empire extends its power through the idea of American exceptionalism. In demonstrating how the U.S. claims that it is radically different from older and more tyrannical forms of empire like those established by Europe, Amy Kaplan reminds us that the United States’ desires to be exceptionally imperialistic lies in its belief that it holds “exemplary status as the apotheosis of the nation-form itself and as a model for the rest of the world”.<sup>14</sup> Donald Pease, Amy Kaplan, and other critics of American empire have highlighted the specific ways that American empire deemed itself exceptional and departing from ‘older’ forms of British, French, Spanish, Portuguese colonialisms.<sup>15</sup> The MAAG–Vietnam archive establishes this exceptionalism by affirming Cold War logics about American efforts to curb communism while distinguishing these interests from colonialism *and* while explaining away the imperial intimacies between European colonialism, U.S. empire, and the Cold War.

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<sup>14</sup> Kaplan, Amy. *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*. Harvard Univ. Press, 2005, 16.

<sup>15</sup> These conversations around U.S. empire and the discourse of American exceptionalism have also been demonstrated in: Kaplan, Amy, and Donald E. Pease, editors. *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Duke University Press, 1993; Stoler, Ann Laura, editor. *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Duke University Press, 2006; Pease, Donald E. *The New American Exceptionalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009; Cruz, Denise. *Transpacific Femininities: The Making of the Modern Filipina*. Duke University Press, 2012.

## Part II: Screening Empire: Normative Time in Burns and Novick's Documentary Series

The specific focus and obscuration of colonialism in place of Cold War concerns animate not just historical archival materials and how we view histories written in its time, but it also animates how we understand contemporary efforts to make sense of the wars in Vietnam. For example, the documentary series produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick called *The Vietnam War* reflects a normative emphasis on U.S. Cold War interests and the obscuration of French colonial histories in Vietnam. Spanning ten years to produce, *The Vietnam War*, was released on television and for internet streaming in 2017. Among its many reviews, *The Vietnam War* was praised for not only providing information about the “endless war that tore America apart, but with the French occupation of the country and the fear of communism which tracked back to the seeds sewn by Harry S. Truman’s administration of the ’40s and ’50s”.<sup>16</sup> In their interview with Mike Fleming Jr., Burns and Novick discuss how glad they were to include earlier Vietnamese histories in their series since many documentaries tend not to delve further into the U.S.’s entanglements with French empire, Japanese empire, and Vietnamese movements for self-determination prior to the Second Indochina War.<sup>17</sup>

Including these histories presented the documentary series with useful discussions of U.S. presence prior to the Second Indochina War. As established in “Déjà Vu”, the first episode of the series, Burns and Novick included some crucial moments of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam that are often not discussed in popular education about

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<sup>16</sup> Fleming, Michael. “Encore: Ken Burns & Lynn Novick On ‘The Vietnam War’ & The Eerie Parallels To Trump And Today’s Political Landscape — Emmy Q&A.” *Deadline*, Aug. 2018.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Vietnam and its wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. For instance, Burns and Novick present the U.S.'s interest in Southeast Asia by exploring a special operations team sent to Vietnam in 1945. It portrays an intimate relation between the U.S. and the younger Ho Chi Minh. As the U.S. was geopolitically concerned about Japanese imperial interest in China, the U.S. relied on Vietnamese peoples, including the specific groups that Ho Chi Minh was a part of, to help their ventures in Northern Vietnam. These ties established a kind of alliance between Ho Chi Minh and the U.S. Similarly, Burns and Novick also discussed the U.S.'s role in the First Indochina War. Although "Déjà Vu" did not name this war, it evidently tracked, as cited above, President Harry S. Truman's investment in this conflict between the Viet Minh and the French by sending advisors and assistance to help the French colonial authorities reconquer Vietnam in the 1940s and 1950s. While their inclusion of French colonialism in their series about the Second Indochina War is a welcome contribution, Burns and Novick's attempt betrays this intent, as they account for about a century of Vietnamese history with French colonization in one hour while other episodes focus only on one to two years of U.S. history from 1961-1973 at a time.

Another filmic example that parallels this logic of de-emphasizing the treatment of French colonialism in Vietnam War narratives is Stephen Spielberg's recent 2017 Blockbuster film *The Post* featuring Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks. It treats French colonialism as mere context to the ethical and moral questions posed to the film's journalists about reporting on the 'truths' of the Vietnam War. The film establishes the pertinence of the Vietnam War and the subsequent acts against the U.S. government's investment in Vietnam in the popular U.S. imaginary. Here, French colonialism serves as

the context that provides the historical material to substantiate some of the moral outrage levied by the populace against the government's claims to trustworthiness and benevolence. It is the establishment of the U.S.'s lies and longstanding relationship in Vietnam that provides some of the news stories that remain central to the plot in *The Post*. *The Post* serves as a particularly illustrative cultural source that exudes the importance of these events in Vietnam for American news journalists while also establishing the allegorical salience of this Vietnam War for a U.S. populace in our contemporary moment. While critical of the U.S.'s role in Vietnam, both *The Vietnam War* and *The Post* echoed how the MAAG–Vietnam treated French colonialism in U.S. remembrances of the Vietnam War; that is, French colonialism is only as useful for explaining U.S. Cold War interests and ascendant military aggression in Vietnam.

While these two films have illustrated a critique of U.S. Cold War policies, what is recalled regarding Vietnam and the wars in Vietnam are limited in some ways to a U.S. scope. Vietnamese peoples and histories are not included in Spielberg's melodrama about the inner workings of the Washington Post during the 1970s. Similarly, Burns and Novick's attempt to construct a narrative about the Vietnam War from three main sides of the war (e.g. North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the United States) is still catered to a U.S. audience. As the thesis will later establish, this U.S. focus on the wars in Vietnam and the relative obscuration of the First Indochina War work to reinforce normative ideas of temporality and imperialism. These normative ideas reiterate exceptionalist narratives that attempt to explain Vietnam as an exception to the U.S.'s benevolent practices. These

narratives are Cold War narratives. Such Cold War discourses come to overdetermine how Vietnamese histories and stories are to be rendered in the U.S. imaginary.

Moreover, that Cold War overdetermination of Vietnamese histories also come to the fore in how Vietnamese peoples are treated as well. Scholars like Mimi Thi Nguyen, Yen Le Espiritu, and Nguyen Vo Thu Huong have demonstrated how the U.S. attempts to recuperate their loss from that war in political discourses, cultural productions, and war memorials by exceptionalizing Vietnamese refugee narratives that had taken refuge in the U.S; their critiques demonstrate that this exceptionalization of Vietnamese American refugees has often justified U.S. militarist and imperial aims in other parts of the world.<sup>18</sup> Cold War structures remain pertinent apparatuses through which mainstream U.S. popular culture and Vietnamese cultural production come to engage with these histories of war, empire, and social life. The manner through which each cultural production engages with the imperial intimacies between the U.S. and France does vary.

As scholars of U.S. empire have highlighted, memories of U.S. empire have exceedingly been mobilized through various gendered racial, sexualized, and nationalized ways. Jodi Kim establishes this in her book *Ends of Empire* by reading against the grain of the U.S. imperial archive, especially as it mobilized through Cold War narratives. She argues that the specific logics through which U.S. empire articulated itself during the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Nguyen, Mimi Thi. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Duke University Press, 2012; Espiritu, Yên Lê. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(Es)*. University of California Press, 2014; Nguyen Vo, Thu Huong. "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" *Amerasia Journal*, edited by Yen Le Espiritu and Thu Huong Nguyen Vo, vol. 31, no. 2, Jan. 2005, pp. 157–75.

Century were premised on a gendered racial and imperial logic.<sup>19</sup> In the context of the Vietnam War, Marita Sturken has that the Vietnam War nostalgia industry was premised on the mutual constitution of memory, particularly through the relationship of what is remembered and what is not.

This in turn is defined against the normativity of the U.S. in terms of its racial gendered and national identity. As Yen Le Espiritu argues, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vietnam War was more interested in recuperating the everyday lives of U.S. soldiers, either killed or living as veterans, in place of the Vietnamese peoples.<sup>20</sup> Kim has also described the particular visual cultural, epistemological, and ideological apparatus through which memory and histories of the Vietnam War come to focus on white hypermasculine American figures in what she calls the “masculinist hypervisibility of American representations of the Vietnam War”.<sup>21</sup> In the context of U.S. popular culture, this attention to American representations of the Vietnam War is crucial to establish what is deemed normative or non-normative. What is normal to represent about this war? How are such representations also embedded in power configurations? How might this ‘masculinist hypervisibility of the Vietnam War’ impact the construction of normative historiographies, temporalities, and subjectivities?

One might be able to trace some of the ways that nationalized, gendered, sexualized, and racialized logics come to the fore in Burns and Novick’s *The Vietnam War*. The documentary tries hard to not indict or overly critique any parties. Burns and

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<sup>19</sup> Kim, Jodi. *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Espiritu, Yên Lê. “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Fall of Saigon.’” *American Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2006, pp. 329–52.

<sup>21</sup> Kim, 195.



Novick argue that their series tries to “just tell the truth”.<sup>22</sup> In an interview with Mike Fleming Jr., Burns describes that their goal for this documentary was, in a way, to let the facts speak for themselves. Burns elaborates further and goes on to cite his ‘funding bed’ to discuss the political spectrum that financially supported the production of *The Vietnam War*:

*We’re trusted across the aisle... We have people from the far right, people from the far left, and more importantly, lots of people in between. It is so important for us not to put our thumb on the scale, even though there’s a wonderful, honorable tradition of documentaries advocating certain political points of view.*<sup>23</sup>

While Burns claims that the series refuses to ‘put their thumb on the political scale’, politics and political positions are still articulated through the documentary series, despite such intents. The material presented in Burns and Novick’s series evokes questions about the political role of documentary films in articulating these histories.

This point is made exceptionally visible when we examine the unacknowledged *national* dimension of the series’ funding bed. As the series was publicly funded, the public sponsors were inherently an *American* public. Burns’ statement that points to their seemingly power-neutral funding bed is a statement that takes U.S. national politics as an already assumed position of neutrality so long as it is financially supported by both left, right, and moderate *American* political actors. In doing so, Burns scaffolds the political dimension of their work; it neutralizes and naturalizes U.S. national identity and U.S.

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<sup>22</sup> Fleming, Michael. “Encore: Ken Burns & Lynn Novick On ‘The Vietnam War’ & The Eerie Parallels To Trump And Today’s Political Landscape — Emmy Q&A.” *Deadline*, Aug. 2018.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

politics in this series despite the fact that the assumptions and authorial decisions by Burns and Novick are already political acts in that they utilize their ‘right to look’.<sup>24</sup>

This point about the Americanness of the documentary series is also revealed when Burns and Novick were interviewed about their filmmaking process. They had mentioned that they faced a dilemma between trying to “not sugarcoat the war” and to also not create “war pornography”. At their first screening, American author Tim O’Brien shared his concerns that the first cut of the film was “too much” in showing the horrors of the war wondering if his wife would watch this.<sup>25</sup> In the interview, Lynn Novick recounts the production team’s response:

*We all looked at each other, Ken and I, our writer Geoffrey Ward, and our producer Sarah Botstein. We asked him, “What’s your wife’s name?” It was Meredith. OK, we’re making the film for Meredith. Meredith O’Brien, we want you to watch. And so whenever we were in the edit room for the next two years we would think about how much is too much and tried to calibrate it so that we never lost sight of it, but also didn’t overdo it.*<sup>26</sup>

This scenario demonstrates some of the racial, national, and gendered politics in Burns and Novick’s film. Novick particularly noted that “[e]ven when you are trying to show how terrible war is, you sort of glorify it at the same time in this very strange way”.<sup>27</sup> In responding to the dilemma of hyper-representing war and sugarcoating war, Burns and Novick focused on making this documentary for Meredith O’Brien. Such an act reveals the ways that the series framed its target audience along the lines of nation, gender, and race. Moreover, in situating their target audience with Meredith O’Brien, Burns and

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<sup>24</sup> Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Duke University Press, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Fleming.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

Novick also idealize a heteronormative subject wedded to Tim O'Brien, famous American author of the Vietnam War.

Similarly, this point on the Americanness of the documentary series is reflected in how Burns and Novick talk about one of their interviewees and main contributors, John Musgrave. Despite there being 78 other people interviewed for the documentary series, Burns and Novick have described Musgrave's story as the "beating heart and soul of [the film]".<sup>28</sup> The documentary follows John Musgrave's story from having signed up to serve in the Vietnam War to when he's wounded on the battlefield to when he's attempting suicide as a means of coping with PTSD to when he's protesting with other Vietnam War veterans in the U.S. While they share that they do not try to undermine the other 78 other people who were interviewed for the series, Burns and Novick still *exceptionalize* Musgrave's story as an exemplar of the American experience in Vietnam. This emphasis on an American experience and the war in Musgrave's life demonstrates that the series inevitably leans towards an American representation of the war, even though their efforts triangulate such emphases with North and South Vietnamese experiences.

Burns and Novick had noted in another interview that such a disavowal of politics is useful. Yet, Burns and Novick's authorial decisions, interviews, and funding bed betray their insistence that they are merely—as in neutrally—telling the truth about the Vietnam War. How history is told, from what points of reference, who is interviewed, and how far one traces historical legacies are all power-laden decisions about historiography. In a separate context, Mariam Beevi Lam elaborates on this point when she situates what is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

deemed natural, normal, and aberrant about Vietnamese historiographies within their political, economic, and sociohistorical contexts.<sup>29</sup> It is important to remember that so much of the knowledge production written about Vietnam from a U.S. standpoint also is wrapped up with what Lam cites as the “military-academic industrial complex”.<sup>30</sup> Despite the seeming signs of neutrality or even common-sense focus on American subjects, temporalities, and historiographies, Burns and Novick’s series is anything but politically neutral. John Musgrave and Meredith O’Brien’s subject positions come to stand in as *normative* figures that provide an effective means to frame and structure Burns and Novick’s explanation of this War.

In doing this, *The Vietnam War* constructs a normative temporality through which its viewers can learn about the Vietnam War. Neither John Musgrave or Meredith O’Brien interfaced with the Vietnam War from the inherited legacies of French colonialism. Their engagement was mostly constructed through their enlistment (and in Meredith’s case, the enlistment of her husband) in this war. In popular education ventures like that of Burns and Novick’s *The Vietnam War*, how then do we make sense of their welcome decision to include French colonization of Vietnam in its narration of Vietnam War history in their first episode, “Déjà Vu”? Is it merely a matter of telling the truth?

As mentioned earlier, Burns and Novick includes many prior histories in Vietnam and collects exceedingly beautiful and rich collection of archival footage. However, despite these acts, Burns and Novick’s *The Vietnam War* still maintains a relatively

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<sup>29</sup> Lam, Mariam Beevi. “Cartographies, Historiography and Nomenclature, or Forty Years into the Aftermath.” *Asian American Literary Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

limited interest in the First Indochina War and Vietnamese histories. Burns and Novick's credence to French colonialism in their first episode suggests that the inclusion of French colonialism in the series is only useful for national remembrance as French colonialism helps contextualize the main event of U.S. political interest in the Vietnam War.

In an interview that Burns and Novick had with retired American politician, C.I.A. employee, and U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, Donald Gregg, Gregg reflects that the U.S. "should have seen [the First Indochina War] as an end of a colonial era in Southeast Asia, which it really was. But instead [the U.S.] saw it in Cold War terms and we saw it as a defeat for the free world that was related to the rise of China... it was a total misreading of a pivotal event which cost us very dearly".<sup>31</sup> While Gregg acknowledges and distinguishes between a war that ended a colonial era and a war that furthered a Cold War project, the rest of the documentary series fails to examine how colonialism and Cold War concerns existed together. In structuring their documentary as primarily focused on the U.S.-Vietnam War, Burns and Novick betray their aspirations of accounting for the prior histories and politics that led up to the Vietnam War.

Such an interest in U.S. experiences also carries over into their last episode entitled "The Weight of Memory, 1973—Onward". The episode opens and closes with Tim O'Brien reading an excerpt from his book *The Things They Carried*. As the filmmakers make sense of U.S.-Vietnam political events and personal histories, the episode itself is particularly in need of remembering the weight of the war in the lives of those who survived it. Yet, despite this attention to the weight of memory, the film

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<sup>31</sup> Burns, Ken, and Lynn Novick. "Déjà Vu (1858-1961)." *The Vietnam War*, 1, 2017.

provides an almost melancholic effect in recollecting the war. Vietnamese diasporic experiences were minimally included. However, the critiques levied by contemporary Vietnamese Americans or other critics of the war were not engaged with this attention to the weight of memory. Neither was any mention of intergenerational trauma experienced by the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese survivors of these wars. The weight of memory—emblemized by O’Brien’s writing *and* reading—is portrayed in this episode as an American one about U.S. failures. The Vietnam War is mobilized as a melancholic memory about war loss rather than another manifestation or a continued manifestation in the wars that followed the U.S.’s Vietnam, something that Donald Pease has argued continues and finds recuperation in the U.S.’s wars after Vietnam.<sup>32</sup>

In effect, *The Vietnam War* series underemphasizes the role of the First Indochina War, treating it in subsequent episodes as an opening act to the main event of the U.S.-Vietnam War. In doing so, *The Vietnam War* incorporates French material into the broader narrations of Vietnam War remembrance but does relatively little to explain how this absorption of French colonialism was part and parcel to the formation of U.S. exceptionalism and the growing role of U.S. empire. Burns and Novick’s documentary is generative for its exploration of how Cold War imperatives by the U.S. government facilitated sustained violence against all those enmeshed in the war, whether civilian or military. Yet, its focus is delimited by its attention to U.S. politics. Vietnam in this instance is rendered a geopolitical space on which certain peoples experienced and/or enacted atrocities created by a Cold War knowledge regime. As the analysis performed

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<sup>32</sup> Pease, Donald E. *The New American Exceptionalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

here demonstrates, certain narrations of the Vietnam War come to reinforce normative treatments of time, space, and subjectivity as it relates to the U.S.'s Cold War relationship to the First and Second Indochina War.

In effect, while presenting the truths of American abuses in Vietnam, Burns and Novick reinforce American exceptionalist depictions of U.S. military aggression in Southeast Asia. As demonstrated in the analysis thus far, contemporary cultural forms in U.S. popular culture can serve to construct a cultural continuity of U.S. exceptionalism and its concurrent logics in Vietnam War remembrance. As noted politically during the U.S.'s military presence in Vietnam and Indochina, U.S. exceptionalist logics are displayed in how the U.S. military came to supplant and absorb French colonial interests in Indochina as their own with the MAAG–Indochina, MAAG–Vietnam, and MACV organizations. Moreover, it also finds historical consolidation in the archival documents about and coming from these American political forces as demonstrated by the 1958-1959 MAAG–Vietnam budget. As my analysis so far has demonstrated, these logics also find an afterlife in American popular cultural sources like the 2017 documentary series about the Vietnam War.<sup>33</sup>

### Part III: Queering Empire: Intimacy, Temporality, and Vietnamese Diasporic Remembrance

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<sup>33</sup> These questions regarding contemporary lessons about the Vietnam War are not something that is dealt within U.S. popular culture alone. Asian American Studies and its subfield of Critical Refugee Studies has attempted to also deal with these questions of remembrance, albeit from a very different social position. Rather than examine these questions solely through the prism of national identity or U.S. historiography, Critical Refugee Studies and Asian American Studies attempt to produce different forms of methodologies and questions to approach how diaspora and the wars in Vietnam relate to one another.

“There is necessarily an excess in the collision between structural projects and social experience, and this excess, we contend, provides clues for how to study them.” (Pg. 4)  
— Macarena Gómez-Barris and Herman Gray in *Toward a Sociology of the Trace*

It is in this context of normative Cold War temporalities and U.S.-French imperial intimacies where my analysis examines the related concern of how cultural productions that privilege Vietnamese diasporic experiences come to queer temporalities through alternative economies of empire and intimacy. There have been a growing body of contemporary cultural works about Vietnamese diasporic experiences and by cultural producers of the Vietnamese diaspora. My analysis here will depart from the specific focus on both American political aggression in Vietnam and American popular culture to the representational practices of cultural producers that privilege Franco-Vietnamese diasporic experiences, specifically as seen in both Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* and Idrissou Mora-Kpai’s *Indochina: Traces of a Mother*.

Cultural producers that privilege Franco-Vietnamese diasporic experiences are central to a different kind of re-construction of the wars in Vietnam. In contrast to how French materials and intimate histories are absorbed within and disavowed in U.S. Cold War concerns about Vietnam, these Franco-Vietnamese cultural productions by Mora-Kpai and Truong linger on the aftermath and precursors of U.S.-French imperial intimacies. These productions insist that Vietnamese diasporic experiences coexisted in time, place, and subject with both U.S. and French presence in Vietnam/Indochina.

Reading these works in the context of the ‘masculinist hypervisibility of the Vietnam War in the U.S. imagination’, I demonstrate how these works provide a different kind of mapping than the overdetermined Vietnam War images of the Cold War through



an attention to intimacy and through Franco-Vietnamese subjects. Moving from the contours of historiographical treatments and popular culture treatments of ‘Vietnam’ to novels, I examine Monique Truong’s 2004 novel *The Book of Salt* for how it highlights the interconnectedness of U.S., French, and Indochinese subject formation through speculative story telling. As my analysis will illustrate, Truong triangulates these subject formations in her novel by also *refusing* to temporally set her story in the context of the Cold War; instead, her story exists *before* the First and Second Indochina Wars.

In Idrissou Mora-Kpai’s 2011 documentary film *Indochina: Traces of a Mother*, it actively poses questions that index the political and economic intimacy in the U.S. and France relationship *and* indexes one of the many disavowed intimacies of imperialism. In this case, those disavowed intimacies of imperialism are what Lisa Lowe called the ‘intimacies of contact’: the intimate relations between Christophe’s father and mother as colonized peoples that made his life possible. Screening his postcolonial presence decades after the formal end to the First Indochina War, *Indochina: Traces of a Mother* provides a means to queer the contours of imperial memory, time, and war historiography by interpolating viewers into Christophe’s temporal frame, a figure and subject that might exist beyond the scope of any U.S. historical reconstruction of the Cold War. Capturing a material trace of the First Indochina War through Christophe’s subjectivity, the film provides an avenue to critique normative temporalities found in American imaginations of Vietnam and the wars in Vietnam.

These cultural productions are of germane importance to my thesis. In contrast to the temporality evoked by strict historical accounts that require a level of empiricism and

positivism reflected in Burns and Novick's series and in the MAAG-Vietnam archive, these two productions provide an alternative representation of temporality and intimacies as experienced by and imagined about Franco-Vietnamese subjects. Marking the Indochinese diasporic subject as both material trace of colonial violence and as the historical antecedent to these wars, Mora-Kpai and Truong's cultural productions insist on a different engagement with war memory and national memory. They queer the contours of Vietnam War remembrance and provide avenues to engage (post)colonial realities in both Francophone and Anglophone cultural production. Their works insist that intimacy provides a key avenue through which one can identify, critique, and coexist with the legacies of empire and their "protracted afterlives".<sup>34</sup> Even when the protracted afterlife of U.S. is a nationalized, gendered, racialized, and sexualized obscuration as is in the case of Burns and Novick's *The Vietnam War*, I argue that Mora-Kpai and Truong's works articulate a concurrent form of imperial intimacy to the U.S.-French political and economic relationship.

*Entangled with Empire: Normative Temporality in Vietnamese American Refugee Narratives*

A key question for this thesis is to also discuss why it is focusing on narratives that center a Franco-Vietnamese experience. It is important to examine the figure of the Vietnamese refugee subject as it relates to U.S. popular culture, normative temporalities, and broader U.S. sociopolitical configurations of imperial power. These diasporic

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<sup>34</sup> Kim, Jodi. *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 4.

experiences in U.S. popular culture tend to highlight a normative figuration of the Vietnamese American refugee. Taken as a discursive formation, the Vietnamese refugee figure in the U.S. is perceived as a kind of *ahistorical* figure that holds ideological weight in the context of the U.S. Cold War.<sup>35</sup> By providing refuge from the threats of communism, the U.S. forwards a humanitarian mission that attempts to highlight the violence of communist regimes that also found reflections in their projects like Operation Babylift in Vietnam and Operation Peter Pan in Cuba.<sup>36</sup> History, in these cases, was treated in a way that emphasized the threat of communist aggression as one of the driving dialectic forces in the eventual displacement of Vietnamese refugees. The prior histories of U.S. aggression and those of French colonialism, Chinese domination, as well as Japanese imperialism required no historical substantiation. Dominant popular cultural discussions of the Vietnam War frame it as a civil war, characterized by Cold War concerns. In depicting this framing, the acts of providing U.S. refugee resettlement and militarized refuge could function as the synthesis to this purported civil war in the form of gifting freedom these Vietnamese American refugees ‘freedom’.<sup>37</sup>

This narration then takes the multi-layered histories and context of Vietnam and its people as temporalities and geographies outside the purview of the U.S.’s narration of “the Vietnam War”. In doing so, the Vietnamese refugee figure’s personal experiences mark an historical break, ‘denying the coevalness’ of prior historical influence in

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<sup>35</sup> Lee, Erika. “In Search of Refuge: Southeast Asians in the United States.” *The Making of Asian America: A History*, First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition, Simon & Schuster, 2015, pp. 314–34.

<sup>36</sup> Kim, Jodi. *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 203-204.

<sup>37</sup> See Espiritu, Y n L . *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(Es)*. University of California Press, 2014; and Nguyen, Mimi Thi. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> Their figuration views the refugee figure, following Stuart Hall’s analysis of Marx’s method, as the “point of departure” rather than the “point of arrival”.<sup>39</sup> U.S. characterizations of the Vietnamese refugee come to reinforce a kind of Cold War temporality, drawing delimited and Manichean geographies, and disciplining certain forms of subjectivities for both the American public conceptualizations of Vietnam and its conflicts, as well as for the many Vietnamese diasporics trying to understand these wars through a history of the present—to understand the “whys of the war”.<sup>40</sup>

Efforts within the growing field of Southeast Asian/American Studies and Vietnamese/American studies have attempted to grapple with the many limits and generative paths of intellectual inquiry when observing, for example, this Vietnamese refugee figure in the U.S.<sup>41</sup> The figure of the Vietnamese American refugee born out of the Vietnam War era and the following social scientific discourses about it posit a central premise through which Vietnamese/American studies has aimed to recuperate the Vietnamese refugee figure. Noting the violence of ‘communist invasion’, dominant studies of Vietnamese Americans have often prioritized social scientific research concerns pertaining to the acculturation of Vietnamese refugees within the U.S. body politic.<sup>42</sup> Such approaches have often reiterated the teleological narrative of Vietnamese refugeehood mentioned above that starts from the exoduses and displacements of the

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<sup>38</sup> Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> A point elucidated later. “Marx’s Notes on Method: A ‘Reading’ of the ‘1857 Introduction.’” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, Mar. 2003, pp. 113–49.

<sup>40</sup> Espiritu, Yén Lê. *Body Counts*, 2014, pp. 144.

<sup>41</sup> Ngo, F. I. B., et al. “Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue: Guest Editors’ Introduction.” *Positions: Asia Critique*, vol. 20, no. 3, June 2012, pp. 671–84.

<sup>42</sup> Kibria, Nazli. *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*. Princeton University Press, 1995.

Vietnam War and ends with their incorporation into the U.S. This narrative structure, interdisciplinary scholar Mimi Thi Nguyen argues, is particularly salient in the transmission of a debt between the freed Vietnamese American refugees and the freeing United States government. In effect, such an act of granting freedom to Vietnamese American refugees is a gift of freedom that Vietnamese Americans would be unable to pay back, despite constant performative gestures to national identity or appeals of Vietnamese people's assimilation into the U.S.<sup>43</sup>

Of importance here are the means through which Vietnamese American stories and narratives might ideologically and politically align with contemporary U.S. militarist and imperial interests. On a symbolic sense, the U.S.'s acceptance of Vietnamese refugees following the Fall of Saigon ideologically supported constructions of American exceptionalism, especially as it relates to the use of humanitarianism and increased surveillance of 'enemies' in service of U.S. imperialism. Yen Le Espiritu points this out in how news and museum memorialization of the Vietnam War are centered on the impact of the Vietnam War on U.S. veterans, while selectively obscuring the impacts of the Vietnam War on Vietnamese American communities by centering the U.S.'s benevolent role for accepting—and thus granting freedom to—Vietnamese refugees.<sup>44</sup> Interdisciplinary scholar Neda Atanasoski also discusses how this supposed benevolence from the U.S. is also part and parcel to how the US was able to mobilize humanitarian

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<sup>43</sup> Nguyen, Mimi Thi. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Duke University Press, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Espiritu, Yên Lê. "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon.'" *American Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2006, pp. 329–52. Erika Lee discusses this ideological function of refugees for a U.S. national politic in her book *The Making of Asian America: A History* (2005).

affect from the seeming transparency of the Vietnam War to then make a name of itself for humanitarian aid. As such, Atanasoski argues that these acts reinforced U.S. American exceptionalism by consolidating its power into humanitarianism on the global stage.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Vietnamese American identities may also come to denote political legitimations of U.S. empire as well. Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong discussed this when she explained how the principle author of the Patriot Act was a Vietnamese American man named Viet Dinh who had also formerly served as assistant attorney general in the U.S.<sup>46</sup> Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong describes this when she writes:

*When Viet Dinh was invited to speak as the University of California Irvine Chancellor's Distinguished Lecturer, this university chancellor repeated the Bush administration's promotionals and the usual media story in his narration of Dinh's escape from Vietnam as a boat person (in search of freedom) rising to one of the highest positions in the Bush administration.*<sup>47</sup>

Whereas Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong describes the particular ways that Viet Dinh alongside other diverse faces within U.S. national politics helped usher in a multicultural articulation of U.S. hegemony and neoliberalism, it is also important to emphasize this point of how Vietnamese American narratives—despite some desires to recuperate the refugee figure—can ideologically and politically bolster American exceptionalism through a bildungsroman narrative structure that starts with their displacements from a communist Vietnam to the purportedly free United States of America.

In a way, the intimate relationship that Vietnamese Americans receive by being settled in the heart of empire renders such figurations of the Vietnamese refugee

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<sup>45</sup> Atanasoski, Neda. *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Nguyen Vo, Thu Huong. "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" *Amerasia Journal*, edited by Yen Le Espiritu and Thu Huong Nguyen Vo, vol. 31, no. 2, Jan. 2005, pp. 157–75.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 166.

complexly situated within the U.S.'s comparative racial formations especially in relation to African American communities,<sup>48</sup> the U.S.'s racialized treatment of alien labor (both Asian and African) via ideologies of displacement and disappearance,<sup>49</sup> and the U.S.'s promulgation of militarized spaces across the Asia-Pacific.<sup>50</sup> In noting these examples, Vietnamese Americans are one of many populations who hold, however small, some form of imperial capital due to their entanglements within the belly of the imperial beast.

By drawing from how various scholars in and beyond Asian/American Studies have theorized the issues of Vietnamese identity politics within the broader perpetuation of U.S. multiculturalist white supremacy,<sup>51</sup> there is indeed a different form of imperial intimacy that Vietnamese American narratives are provided that diverge and converge with those imperial intimacies between the French and U.S. during the First Indochina War. As the previous discussion demonstrates, despite the plethora of Vietnamese American experiences and histories, the dominance of a Vietnam War refugee narrative characterized by Cold War narrations holds an imperialist function. It implicates Vietnamese generations in the United States within the broader articulation of American exceptionalism as an ideology that promulgates contemporary U.S. political austere budgets 'domestically', while justifying political expansion of the U.S. military in an effort to assert an imperialist and humanitarian ethics of war. Thus, the figure of the

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<sup>48</sup> Tang, Eric. *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. Temple University Press, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Day, Iyko. *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Espiritu, Y n L . *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. University of California Press, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Rodriguez, Dylan. *Policing and the Violence of White Being: An Interview with Dylan Rodriguez*. Interview by Casey Goonan, 12 Sept. 2016.

Vietnam War era refugee paired with the literal lives of Vietnamese American communities in the U.S. may serve as those entities that direct one's attention towards the benevolence of U.S. military intervention and U.S. occupation and the correctness of U.S. free market ideals in deciding how global trade and politics are to be enacted. In this way, Vietnamese American subjects can be understood as holding a strange entanglement with U.S. empire, indexing the many 'ends' of U.S. empire and the potential directive to end—as in terminate—empire altogether<sup>52</sup>.

This form of imperial intimacy gestures to the complexity of Vietnamese American subjectivity, but also to how the relative dominance of Vietnam War era narratives serve a hyper-spatializing function in Vietnamese diasporic remembrances of that War.<sup>53</sup> Indigenous studies scholar Mishuana Goeman describes the narration of histories as fundamentally temporal, visualized, and spatialized projects. Introducing “hyperspatialization”, Goeman notes how settler colonial histories are rendered partly through the over-production and dominance of stories about colonizer histories, rendering hyperspatialization—what some others might call overdetermination—a result. Thus, Goeman attends to the many ways that Native women come to remap their nations and fundamentally push against these colonial cartographies. The argument here regarding Vietnamese American performances of refugee identity is paradoxically aligned to U.S. empire, rendering such a relationship one that is oddly intimate and imperial in its

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<sup>52</sup> Kim, Jodi. *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Goeman, Mishuana. *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 10.



complicity, yet argued to also be necessary since many do not mourn or even remember South Vietnamese peoples within dominant U.S. channels of recognition<sup>54</sup>.

As Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong argues for the necessity of Vietnamese Americans to both understand the roles of self-mourning and the need to be able to define an ethics of mourning, the diametric ways in which Vietnamese experiences are bifurcated into Manichean domains of South vs. North Vietnamese histories requires a fundamentally critical interaction with Cold War epistemologies. As inheritors of Cold War politics, Vietnamese communities and families in the U.S. might both bear the violence of U.S. military intervention in their histories while simultaneously reaping some privileges of being refugees—and children of refugees—in the United States. The politics of knowledge that directly imply nostalgia for South Vietnam within Vietnamese American communities have often led to a conservative discourse of anticommunism.<sup>55</sup> These narrative structures come to justify what Viet Dinh had noted when he discussed his rationale for authoring the Patriot Act. Yet, it simultaneously gestures to how the bifurcated understanding of Vietnamese diasporic history that paints an aggressive communist threat against an innocent community of peoples can fuel U.S. empire and military intervention elsewhere.

The imagery and narrations of the Vietnam War, specifically as read in the United States context, offers some interesting points regarding the capitulation of Vietnamese histories within the American context. The images and narratives of Vietnamese refugees

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<sup>54</sup> Nguyen-Vo, 170.

<sup>55</sup> See Valverde, Kieu-Linh Caroline. *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*. 2013; and see Duong, Lan, and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud. “Vietnamese American Art and Community Politics: An Engaged Feminist Perspective.” *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2012, pp. 241–69.

in a Vietnamese nation-state context necessitate a different accounting of history and remembrance.<sup>56</sup> Yet, what is overwhelmingly represented in Vietnamese American studies and U.S. narrations of Vietnamese migrations is the visibility of the Vietnamese American refugee figure born out of the Vietnam War context.

We could perhaps note how Vietnamese American authors and writers have come to re-write the dominant refugee narrative by also considering the pain and trauma of Vietnamese refugees, that provide counter-points to the all-to-often celebratory tone of Vietnam War remembrance. Yet, such accounts of pain and trauma may still take the Vietnamese American refugee figure as a point of departure rather than a point of arrival.<sup>57</sup> In what ways would our explanatory apparatuses shift if we treat Vietnamese refugees as the point of arrival from various inherited histories and political maneuvers as opposed to a point of departure from which histories are conveniently forgotten? In what ways has the Vietnamese American refugee figure been alienated from its own conditions of possibility? How do we also note the continuities and discontinuities of political forces between how Vietnamese experiences are remembered specifically in the U.S.? And moreover, how does one expand the contours of conceptualizing Vietnamese refugeehood in ways that also take imperialism and untraditional definitions of migration and displacement into account?

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<sup>56</sup> Perhaps even Christina Schwenkel's book might gesture to some of these differences in remembrance as she examines how the Vietnam War is comparatively and relationally remembered in contemporary Vietnam and the U.S. See Schwenkel, Christina. *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*. Indiana University Press, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> Many thanks to Aaron Alvarado for suggesting that I draw from Stuart Hall's reading of Marx in Hall, Stuart. "Marx's Notes on Method: A 'Reading' of the '1857 Introduction.'" *Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, Mar. 2003, pp. 113–49.

This formulation of imperial intimacy, then, describes the entanglements that Vietnamese American narratives have with the U.S. nation state as an imperial power. It also describes how Vietnamese American refugee narratives come to overdetermine the heterogeneous trajectories of displacement and migration that characterize Vietnamese diaspora through various racialized, ethnic, gendered, and sexualized lines. Specifically, as this thesis begins to explore alternative memories and unofficial histories, the question then becomes how have Vietnamese American narrations of refugee experience come to over-determine considerations of alternative formations of diaspora due to its intimate entanglements with U.S. empire and U.S. hegemony as a result?

As knowledge producers situated alongside what many have called the U.S. military-academic-industrial complex, Vietnamese diasporic cultural producers and cultural producers that center Vietnamese diasporic experiences come to interface with the normative geographies, temporalities, and subjectivities evoked by mentions of ‘Vietnam’ and Vietnamese conflict. As the following analysis will demonstrate, intimacy becomes a privileged mode of analyzing and critiquing the heteronormativity and ‘chromonormativity’<sup>58</sup> within dealings of Vietnam War geographies, temporalities, and subjectivities.

*Material Traces and Coequality in Idrissou Mora-Kpai’s Indochina: Traces of a Mother*

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<sup>58</sup> Lam, Mariam Beevi. “Pacific Standard Time: Queering Temporality in Asian American Visual Cultures.” *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art*, edited by Laura Kina et al., University of Washington Press, 2017, pp. 61.

The imperial intimacies between the U.S. and French political and economic relationship during the First Indochina War are directly indexed in Mora-Kpai's *Indochina: Traces of a Mother*. If a kind of U.S. Cold War reading practice disavows the relationship between the U.S. and French relationship, then Mora-Kpai's film presents an affirmative acknowledgement about these very political ties. The film, in my reading, accomplishes this task by following the contemporary stories of the mixed-race children born of both Vietnamese and West African parents during the First Indochina War. In doing so, the intimacies within imperial and colonial contexts form a critically subversive time-space that exceeds dominant narratives of U.S.-French presence in French Indochina. As this close reading of Mora-Kpai's film will demonstrate, contemporary recognition and examinations of the children born of these West African-Vietnamese intimate ties evoke a queer notion of time as a melancholic and haunting call to the past within in the present.

Counter to how Cold War concerns have disavowed and supplanted colonial history, I argue that *Indochina: Traces of a Mother* returns both paradigms of postcolonial and U.S. Cold War concerns together through the material tracing of these mixed-race children-turned-adults. Mora-Kpai's film interpolates the viewer into a relationship with this time-space of the personal portrait documentary film form and insists that there is no way to deny the coequality of these postcolonial concerns within contemporary reckonings of Vietnamese diasporic histories and experiences. In doing so, the film evokes the bonds of imperial intimacy and demands that those bonds be accounted for when viewing the film. Part of that accounting is accounting for

socioeconomic and political intimacies between empires. The other part of accounting for these imperial intimacies is also by starting with one of the material traces created as a result of his parents' intimacy, whose meeting would never have occurred had it not been for the intimacies between imperial powers.

Mora Kpai starts this film with Christophe as he walks through the streets of present day Vietnam. In his first interview, Christophe speaks to how he is the most obvious trace of the First Indochina War. Like many other mixed-race children born during this time, Christophe was expected to follow his French father at the closing of the war. In this process, many of the Vietnamese mothers were left behind resulting in a separation between these mothers, the fathers, and their mixed race children. His mother is one among many Vietnamese women who formed unions with West French African soldiers during the French Indochina War and who were later left behind in Vietnam as a result of French repatriation efforts after Vietnamese decolonization.<sup>59</sup> Christophe was born one year before the end of the French Indochina War in Vietnam to a Vietnamese mother and a Beninese father. Christophe's father was one of over 160,000 colonial soldiers from North and West Africa that fought for the French against the Viet Minh during their reconquering efforts in Indochina between the years of 1946-1954. Because of French colonial defeat in 1954, Christophe and his father were repatriated to the French colony of French Dahomey (present day Benin where his father lived prior to colonial conscription), while Christophe's mother was abandoned and left to survive in

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<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that the consensual dimensions of these unions were not further explored or confirmed. Seeing as sexual violence was and continues to be used as a dimension of racial-colonial wars, such imperial intimacies or intimacies of contact are also vexed and contested spaces to recall; this is especially so for Christophe who does not find much clarity in his mother's relationship to his father.

the newly decolonized Vietnam. While looking for traces of his mother in Vietnam, Christophe and Mora-Kpai interview other Afro-Vietnamese children whose families were impacted by the transits of French colonialism and its defeat in Indochina.

Following Christophe's statement, the film treats Christophe's presence and his familial histories as a living trace of the First Indochina War. In reconstructing this history cinematically, Mora-Kpai brings the question of colonialism and the many ties between these two previously French colonized nations to bear on our present. This act implicitly asks: How do we make sense of these entangled and intimate colonial histories in our globalized world when Vietnam and Benin are two nominally independent states that ousted formal colonial rule?

In this context, I argue that Mora-Kpai's film follows the social and living trace of these children to accomplish a series of tasks: 1) to situate the intimately vexed experiences like Christophe's and his family's as central to the narration of French colonialism, and 2) to historically reconstruct an understanding of Third World solidarity between the Vietnamese and West African peoples. In his attempt to reconstruct Christophe's familial history, Mora-Kpai also undergoes a process of reconstructing present day dealings with colonial and imperial history. This point is the most vivid in his juxtaposition of stories told by authorities of Vietnamese history with the stories that Christophe tells about the loss he experiences by not knowing his mother. His film does not consult French or U.S. historical figures and instead consults the colonized actors and material trace of this conflict: West African veterans, Vietnamese historians from

Vietnam, and these Afro-Vietnamese peoples born during and displaced after the First Indochina War.

To tell these histories of Third World solidarity, Mora-Kpai draws on two Vietnamese elders named Huu Ngoc and Dang Van Viet. These elders both had experiential knowledge about the First Indochina War since they had served in the Viet Minh military and administrative forces *and* because they hold a sense of historical authority since they were widely published in Vietnamese history. For example, Huu Ngoc is also known for serving as Ho Chi Minh's personal translator and holds renown as an academic of Vietnamese history and culture. Concurrently, Dang Van Viet is also known as a decorated colonel of the First Indochina War. In the film, Huu Ngoc and Dang Van Viet narrate African and Vietnamese ties by recounting the histories of Vietnamese re-education camps for captured French soldiers. Following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, various French prisoners of war—African and European—were schooled in Viet Minh sponsored processes of re-socialization that aimed to present an anticolonial perspective on the First Indochina War.

Both Dang Van Viet and Huu Ngoc present the process positively for many of the “politically-aware” soldiers of African and European descent. For instance, Huu Ngoc's interview is drawn upon for how it speaks to the spirit of Third World solidarity in the work of the re-education camps. During this part of the First Indochina War, Huu Ngoc developed the curriculum as the head of the Re-education Committee and ultimately wrote the pamphlets targeted for European and African soldiers captured at the battle of Dien Bien Phu. In one segment of the film, Huu Ngoc evokes Ho Chi Minh's vision for

solidarity between colonized peoples as a rationale for Huu Ngoc's work at the Re-Education Committee, stating that...

*For Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese question, Vietnamese freedom, needed to be linked to the freedom of all colonized peoples, as without this solidarity between the colonized, we wouldn't be strong enough to give all colonized nations back their freedom. So that colonial solidarity, which started [here, at the re-education camps] later bore its fruit.<sup>60</sup>*

The speaker recounted that the Viet Minh strategically targeted the African prisoners of war in hopes of activating their common connection as colonized peoples, celebrating their ability to cultivate and maintain a vision of Third World solidarity.

Similarly, Dang Van Viet recounts that the Viet Minh often had African soldiers joining their side once they realize their common context of anticolonial struggle. He tells a story of six Senegalese soldiers tasked with protecting their French captain. Rather than protect the captain in the bushes, Dang Van Viet claims that these men turned around and announced that *they had had enough*, and joined the other side, joined the Viet Minh as a result. By including these interviews, Mora-Kpai's film engages the long legacy of anticolonial struggle and more specifically engages with the long legacy of Third World solidarity. In the film, Mora-Kpai oscillates between these macro-histories of the First Indochina War, colonial solidarity, and specific interviews with Afro-Vietnamese peoples. These interests form an influential force in Mora-Kpai's tracing of these colonial histories. Yet, while exploring the geopolitical histories of the First Indochina War seems valuable for Mora-Kpai, I argue that Mora-Kpai's film continually asks about what bodies are lost and/or are not as legible in the discourse of national independence and

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<sup>60</sup> Mora-Kpai, Idrissou. *Indochina: Traces of a Mother*. Third World Newsreel, 2011.



state-based notions of Third World solidarities. Seen within our discussion so far, these lost bodies and illegible subjects also animate what subjectivities, geographies, and temporalities elude U.S. normative constructions and popular cultural treatments of the First Indochina War and French colonialism in Indochina more broadly.

I am particularly interested in this question for contemporary activations of this history since I believe Mora-Kpai's film is ultimately interested in reconstructing this colonial history through the vantage point of these mixed-race peoples and their Indochinese mothers. The film provides key moments of French Indochinese history as they are told from an expert opinion of African and Vietnamese engagements during the First Indochina War. The film also provides rich recollections by the French African soldiers that recount their own experiences with the First Indochina War. This is especially so when we learn how they were forcibly conscripted, and actually learn about how some fathers were able to bring their own children and partners back to Benin with them while many others didn't. Despite these recollections and narratives from these experts, I believe the film is more interested in the relative presence *and* absence of Vietnamese women in this cinematic exploration of colonial histories. In a sense, I argue that the film treats the relatively absent presence of these women as central to the strong celebration of Third World solidarity. Rather than seen as discrete, the two are co-constitutive.

In the film, the viewer is constantly met with the absent presence of Christophe's mother and, more broadly, the figure of Indochinese mothers that had given birth to these mixed-race children during the period of the French Indochina War. This is felt most

strongly in the film as the main driving force of the documentary—the quest to define a knowable and material trace of Christophe’s mother—is confirmed in her very illegible presence on the screen. Mora-Kpai’s splicing of audio and video suggests this illegibility as the only mention of Christophe’s mother is paired with banal scenes of exercising Vietnamese women in a random park in Saigon. Their bodies are screened faceless while Christophe narrates his questions about this woman he can’t quite remember. Mora-Kpai takes the viewer through time and space in hopes of confirming the visual image of Christophe’s mother, but the viewer is constantly met *without* her image. Thus, her presence is an absent presence that can only be confirmed through her very unknowability.

In this way, *Indochina*’s focus on Christophe and the other Afro-Vietnamese children born during this crucial moment in French imperial descension encourages a reckoning with histories and experiences that could augment our memorializations of these Afro-Asian intimacies, both public and private. Rather than simply celebrate Third World solidarity in this film and glorify French African and Vietnamese struggles for power, *Indochina*’s representation of Christophe’s journey and the absent presence of the biological mothers of these Afro-Vietnamese children ask of its viewers of “what-is-to-be-done” about her absent presence.<sup>61</sup>

To answer this question, Mora-Kpai’s film creates a parallel between the viewer and Christophe through Christophe’s narrations. Mora-Kpai’s decision to follow Christophe’s journey through his narrations then implicates the viewer into this journey

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<sup>61</sup> Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. New University of Minnesota Press ed, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

as witnesses. While Christophe reflects on his inability to know his biological mother, the viewer is asked to feel her absent presence. Christophe's narrations about his failed ability to find her trace suggests that her trace cannot necessarily be confirmed or rendered fully legible through empiricism or through nationalist historiographies since his mother's presence as well as his own very existence exceed the ethno-nationalist constructions of French, Vietnamese, and Beninese historiographies.

This filmic use of silences is particularly useful to our consideration of what coexisting stories and figures might we violently forget in recuperations of history, memory, and experience. Especially within a Vietnamese American diasporic context, Mora-Kpai's haunting treatment of the present absence of Vietnamese mothers in these Afro-Vietnamese diasporic lives gestures to a different treatment of narratives of displacement than that of the Vietnam War era refugee. In effect, if we take seriously this traceable presence of Vietnamese mothers as well as the presence of mixed-race peoples born in the context of U.S.-funded efforts for French reconquest of Indochina, then an alternative remembrance of Vietnamese subjectivities emerges. Rather than view Vietnamese diaspora solely through the frame of the Vietnam War, alternative geographies and cartographies of displacement could be drawn in however 'unintended' ways<sup>62</sup>.

Thus, Mora-Kpai's film animates the mutually constitution of imperial intimacies in its political, entangled, and contact-based configurations. Whereas the political intimacies between U.S. and French empire were not explicitly highlighted, Mora-Kpai

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<sup>62</sup> Schwenkel, Christina. "Vietnamese in Central Europe: An Unintended Diaspora." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, Feb. 2017, pp. 1-9.

often presents Christophe's questions about the conditions that made his displacement and division from his mother a possibility. By juxtaposing both the history of U.S. military aid and assistance to the French during the First Indochina War and the history of these Afro-Vietnamese children forced to leave Vietnam as a result of this political conflict, I argue that the film productively highlights how the selective affirmation of the U.S. Cold War as well as the affirmation of French colonial efforts is contingent upon the forgetting of the intimate contacts amongst and between subjects of empire. Therefore, despite the fact that the film does not look into the U.S.'s material support of the French Indochina War, there is an exceedingly dialectic relationship between political intimacies and experiential intimacies in the context of war and colonialism that is obscured via the violent economy of affirmation and forgetting that Lisa Lowe describes as central to modern liberalism.

By interpolating the viewer to feel the figure of the Indochinese mother, Mora-Kpai's film then points to the role of the viewer, the witness, to reconsider the conditions that constituted these wars. Inquiring about Christophe in our present is to inquire about the very fabrics of the wars themselves and to radically view this colonial history in conversation with the discourses that engage French Indochinese histories, French African histories, and U.S.-French-Vietnamese histories. It's a task of recognizing that, while Christophe's mother might be haunting Christophe, there is a way in which her ghost is asking the viewer to examine these wars as if they were one's own. As such, her absent presence might push us to examine the categorical limits of approaching her figure

solely through a French paradigm, or the figure of the Vietnam War era refugee as simply a U.S. paradigm.

Despite the dominating U.S. logic that attempts to disavow French colonialism in Vietnam during the 1950s, Christophe and other Afro-Vietnamese children born to these West African fathers and Vietnamese mothers occupied a coeval temporality and geography to the U.S. military advisors and aids stationed in Vietnam since 1950. By reading the film's representational practice of occupying a space to screen Christophe's story as a material trace of the First Indochina War, I argue that Mora-Kpai counters the normative time-space disciplined by American exceptionalist discourses that relegate French colonialism as mere context to the 'real' Vietnam War. The film takes the aims and claims of Third World solidarity activists and anticolonial leaders as a meaningful discourse to portray. As Vietnam comes to mean a very different image for leftist and anticolonial activists throughout the Global North and Global South, *Indochina: Traces of a Mother* defies an historical collapse of the First Indochina War in contemporary cultural productions about war in Vietnam. Far from excessive, the First Indochina War is key to conceptualizing the broader contours that link French, North and West African, Indochinese, and U.S. politics together. As demonstrated so far, my analysis insists that Mora-Kpai's film cannot be simply read through an Africanist, Asianist, or French standpoint. Its contribution must be threaded through the political relations that are evoked by the existent imperial intimacies that run counter to the politically intimate configurations of empire. In this way, Mora-Kpai's film carries an important critique written ultimately through a language of loss. Rather than interpreted as any old tale of

military and postcolonial violence, the cinematic maneuvering of this film is telling a story in which intergenerational knowledge transmission is not only limited, but also severed. His mother is simply not there to discuss her experiences and his father who serves as the de facto transmitter of knowledge is also suspect.

There have also been contemporary efforts to highlight forms of resistance and subversion that contemporary Francophone mixed-race communities are formulating in our present moment. In other regional and local contexts, there are filmmakers and communities who are also tapping into these histories to tell their specific experiences. In Senegal, there are efforts by the Senegalese-Vietnamese community that are addressing these colonial histories and their manifestations today. In the Senegalese-Vietnamese context that is currently organizing their community, intergenerational transmissions of stories and the matters of the alienated mothers is not necessarily severed like Christophe's. The protagonist in her documentary called *Si Loin Du Vietnam* Helene Ndoye Lame speaks fluent Vietnamese, interviews her Afro-Vietnamese mother, and reunites with her great-uncle in Vietnam. I present the avenue of this Senegalese-Vietnamese community's documentary to posit a different form of inquiry that also takes the idea of militarized resiliency and resistance into account as well. Provided with this alternative perspective, one can also consider Mora-Kpai's meditation on the figure of the lost untraceable Vietnamese mother as an intentional omission towards a political means of engaging the histories of these French conscripted soldiers through alternative means.

It is in this context of where I believe Mora-Kpai carries an allegorical question for contemporary activations of these intimately entangled histories. As Mora-Kpai

demonstrates in his film, narrations of national, interpersonal, communal, and familial histories are imbricated in these racial, gendered, and postcolonial configurations of nation and identity, animating what Bill Nichols has identified as the political saliency of the personal portrait documentary film genre.<sup>63</sup> If Mora-Kpai's film advances a question about what is to be done about the haunting absence and presence of Vietnamese mothers and these mixed-race peoples born in the context of war, the film perhaps then highlights the inherent lack and disciplinary apparatus that limits a consideration of colonial or ethno-nationalist concerns in Vietnam outside of the demands of an ethno-nationalist invention of national identity.

It is here where ideas of national and transnational storytelling also mark a delimiting effect. What is the role of cultural productions that tell stories that mark global connections and transnational ties? As it cannot be fully contained within the genre of national culture that center specific temporalities, geographies, and subjectivities, how do we also make sense of how Vietnamese diasporic subjects, for instance, function beyond the parameters of delimited state concerns?

*Intimate Ties, Speculative Worlds: Queering Time in Monique Truong's The Book of Salt*

Monique Truong provides one answer by creating speculative worlds through an alternative understanding of imperial intimacies than those of inter-imperial relations. As the book has been widely analyzed and critiqued, the analysis that follows attempts to demonstrate how Truong's 2004 novel *The Book of Salt* effectively queers U.S. imperial

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<sup>63</sup> Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Third edition, Indiana University Press, 2017, pp. xv.

time and nation-based understandings of Vietnamese histories especially those forwarded by a Cold War logic of remembrance that simultaneously disavows French colonialism. I demonstrate how Monique Truong's authorial decisions to generate a speculative fiction recast and effectively queer normative constructions of Vietnam War temporalities, geographies, and subjectivities by refusing to tell a Vietnamese American refugee tale.

I first read *The Book of Salt* when I was an undergraduate student; I was enthralled. What captivated me most about *The Book of Salt* was Truong's inspiration to write this novel. It wasn't the fact that Truong was trying to find Alice B. Toklas' recipe for hash brownies that interested me (though that too was met with giggles amongst my friends and me). It was the fact that, in purchasing the *Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, Truong found a "minor footnote" in this cookbook-turned-memoir about two Indochinese cooks that Toklas and Gertrude Stein had hired in their summerhouse on 27 rue de Fleurus in Bilignin, France. In an interview, Monique Truong mentioned that:

*I was, to say the least, surprised and touched to see a Vietnamese presence—and such an intimate one at that—in the lives of these two women. These cooks must have seen everything, I thought. But in the official history of the Lost Generation, the Paris of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, these Indochinese cooks were just a minor footnote.*<sup>64</sup>

It was a novel of 272 pages inspired entirely by *one* social trace of Vietnamese presence in a cookbook whose goal was to document Alice B. Toklas' memoirs. *The Book of Salt* was a novel that took the limits of a trace and meditated on the narratives that could be created from it. What to some might have been a lack of factual reality to base a novel on was to me a deep speculate reconstruction on the limits of empirical methods of inquiry

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<sup>64</sup> Houghton Mifflin. 2003. "An Interview with Monique Truong. [http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/booksellers/press\\_release/truong/](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/booksellers/press_release/truong/).



and the limited ways Vietnamese American novels and novelists were expected to portray Vietnam. What interested me about *The Book of Salt* was its capacity to identify traces within officiated archives of knowledge or experience, and to then explore the interconnectedness of seemingly liminal, aberrant, or even tangential events. Truong's particular methodology of constructing and re-constructing narratives through traces, I argue, is how it queers temporality and imperial intimacies provided by the U.S.-French relationship.

As I saw it, *The Book of Salt* attempts to grapple with the limitation of one's imagination around the Vietnam War as it relates to how "we are left with little room for imagining connections to other people, alternative histories, places, or even futures",<sup>65</sup> and instead imaginatively tells a creative story that connects histories, places, and futures not privileged in the context of Vietnamese story telling in spaces like U.S. popular culture, the U.S. nation-state, and so forth. As Mishuana Goeman has argued in another context, fiction becomes a key space of contesting dominant geographies and settler maps because of fiction's imaginative qualities. Truong performs a kind of refusal of U.S. imperial imaginations of Vietnam and Vietnamese subjectivities by situating her novel within 1930s Paris and by providing snapshots between her main character and the mysterious man on the bridge. This refusal is what to me animates her queering of these Cold War temporalities.

One of the key methods that Truong implements in her book a recasting of historical events that centers intimacies whether traceable or speculative. *The Book of*

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<sup>65</sup> Goeman 2013, 10.

*Salt* is a novel about a queer Vietnamese cook working in 1930s Paris for his two Mesdames, the famous modernist American writers Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. This cook is also our narrator, referred throughout the novel as Binh. Others have noted the way that this proximity to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, two figures that evoke U.S. imperial sexuality, comes to point out the flaws of U.S. notions of queerness and calling for a reading practice of queer sexualities that can acknowledge imperialism and colonialism.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Marguerite Nguyen also highlights that Binh's proximity to Toklas and Stein creates the forgotten conditions of possibility for their uptake of a multicultural ethics in their modernist writings.<sup>67</sup> To Nguyen, Binh's working for his Mesdames and speaking in the French language performed a naturalizing effect: while Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas wrote in English, their everyday dealings in French highlighted their Americanness and left un-interrogated Binh's proximity to French colonialism as a colonized subject. This point is reinforced as well in the epigraph that starts Truong's book:

*We had certainly luck in finding good cooks, though they had their weaknesses in other ways. Gertrude Stein liked to remind me that if they did not have such faults, they would not be working for us. – Alice B. Toklas*<sup>68</sup>

As Truong's book will establish, such weaknesses are imagined in a variety of ways ranging from Binh's alcoholism, his queerness, and his racialized-colonial subjectivity.

In this context, I find that Nguyen's point here especially salient to establish how Truong recasts the French-U.S.-Vietnamese relationship in these complicated ways.

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<sup>66</sup> Cohler, Deborah. "Teaching Transnationally: Queer Studies and Imperialist Legacies in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*." *The Radical Teacher*, no. 82, 2008, pp. 25–31.

<sup>67</sup> Nguyen, Marguerite Bich. *America's Vietnam: The Longue Duree of U.S. Literature and Empire*. Temple University Press, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Truong, Monique T. D. *The Book of Salt*. Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

There exists a kind of intimacy that Truong expands on between these three figures that is ultimately facilitated by Paris. Truong imagines this intimacy by triangulating these three nationalized spaces of belonging, particularly the United States, France, and Vietnam.

It is important to note that, while there are these intimacies, these relationships were also ambivalent as well. Truong presents Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein as holding a kind of ambivalent sentimentality for Binh. Moreover, Truong writes about the many ways that Gertrude Stein would ask Binh to perform tricky tasks of translating and answering her questions. They, like other Parisians, would also treat Binh as ‘suspect’.

These ambivalent intimacies also extend beyond those felt between Binh’s relationship to his Mesdames since the Mesdames relationship to Paris and France itself was also portrayed as a kind of ambivalent intimacy. As Binh observes, many Americans arrived in Paris following Prohibition and stayed during the national economic upheaval as experienced by the Great Depression era. He narrates these events:

*...in the beginning there had been sympathy. When the Americans first began arriving, the Parisians had even felt charitable toward them. These lost souls, after all, had taken flight from a country where a bottle of wine was of all things contraband, a flute of champagne a criminal offense. But when it became clear that the Americans had no intention of leaving and no intention of ever becoming sober, the Parisians wanted their city back.<sup>69</sup>*

Truong’s inclusion of this sort of context helps to delegitimize U.S. presence in France as well. As narrative figures, none of these characters came without their historical baggage. For *The Book of Salt*, Toklas and Stein were in Paris due to various economic and political reasons. Their relative entrance in France in part facilitated by their proximity to colonial and imperial power.

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<sup>69</sup> Truong, Monique T. D. *The Book of Salt*, pp. 6-7.

Of course, these ambivalent intimacies also found expressions in Binh's relationship to his Sweet Sunday Man, Lattimore. As a mixed-race American, Lattimore eventually requests Binh's time from Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas for Sunday gatherings. In reality and as demonstrated in Truong's narrations, the two would engage in various intimate moments on these Sundays. While the relationship is one where a queer intimacy is formed, this relationship is also premised on an exploitative relationship as Lattimore eventually asks that Binh steal one of Alice B. Toklas' writings. When Binh does and gives it to him, Lattimore leaves. This exploitative relationship is alluded to in the beginning of the novel as Truong narrates Binh's first Sunday with Lattimore. Having met outside of his place, Lattimore asks Binh, "Well, are you coming in with me, or shall we conduct our interview here in the doorway?" As they walk up the stairs, Binh is reminded about the true nature of these intimate Sundays with Lattimore:

*I wanted to open my mouth and taste each word. "Interview," though, slapped me in the face. The word was a sharp reminder that I was a servant who thought himself a man, that I was a fool who thought himself a king of hearts. I got up and walked with you into the stairwell.... I followed up four slight of stairs, and with each step I was a man descending into a place where I could taste my solitude, familiar and tannic.<sup>70</sup>*

This reminder, of course, brings up the ambivalence of seeking intimacy for Binh in Lattimore and even with his Mesdames. Binh's relationships with these figures are all performed through his labor as a colonial cook in France. The very conditions that made his labor possible was that of French colonization, and the free transit of the three Lattimore, Gertrude Stein, and Alice B. Toklas was facilitated by the relatively consistent modern-colonial world system in which the U.S. and France played a key part in shaping

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<sup>70</sup> Truong, Monique T. D. *The Book of Salt*, pp. 40.

as colonial figures. By recasting her subjects as queer actors, Truong provides an analogy to not only queer the time-space of Vietnamese experiences even when it comes to U.S.-France relationship, but to also queer the figures that inhabit these imperial intimacies. In choosing these representations, I argue that Truong effectively works against representational practices that take Vietnamese subject formations as well as U.S. subjectivities in Vietnam as tethered to a U.S. teleology of Vietnamese-world relations, and as inevitably heteronormative figures.

Truong's examination of queerness is also supplemented by her casting of a kind of intimate relationship between Binh and Nguyen Ai Quoc. Truong re-configures the affinity between her Vietnamese subject with a mysterious man on the bridge, who goes by the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc. While the man on the bridge's name is only alluded to, with various illustrative descriptions about his personality and identity through depictions of his love for photography, cooking, and travel, Truong places markers that gesture to the possibility that Binh's frequent visits with the man on the bridge—Nguyen Ai Quoc—is actually the man who became the internationally known Ho Chi Minh. However, set in 1930s Paris, Binh's meeting with the man on the bridge gestures to a time when Ho Chi Minh was eager to find help in his nationalizing efforts and in confronting the French colonists.

Much like Truong's writing in the rest of her book, Binh's meetings with Nguyen Ai Quoc is speculative but plausible all the same. While scholars have noted that the political economy of Vietnamese American literary production might have made it so that extant histories of anticolonial Vietnamese subjects in Paris at the same time were not

told in Truong's novel,<sup>71</sup> this move is particularly salient for a literary work that is both navigating the postwar U.S. imaginaries of the Vietnam War and attempting to queer the subjects of such a tale. Moreover, Cynthia Wu has explored more in depth the homosocial and potentially queer configuration of Binh's relationship to his romanticized view of a Scholar-Prince as later mapped onto this mysterious man on the bridge.<sup>72</sup> Written in the context of the Hi-Tek incident in 1999 where the image of Ho Chi Minh galvanized Vietnamese American community towards public protest, *The Book of Salt* is incredibly suggestive in its treatment of Ho Chi Minh. Rather than seen as a figure to avoid, Ho Chi Minh is placed in proximity to, and deeply intimate scenes with, Binh. Truong's decision to do this suggests a queer temporality for Vietnamese diasporic subjects as well. As Vietnamese refugee acceptance into the U.S. was also partly premised on the denial of communism, Truong's exiled diasporic subject not only meets this figure. He eats and dialogues with him. In this way, Truong forwards a political act that brings the Vietnamese subject not only in conversation with prior histories. The Vietnamese subject is marked as a material trace to provide avenues of noting the dynamics of colonialism and the demands of decolonization in the present. Granted, Marguerite Nguyen has pointed out the inability for Truong to meaningfully discuss this history of decolonization or anticolonial thinkers who were also in Vietnam during the 1930s due to funding sources and the broader literary market in 2004.<sup>73</sup> Yet, this marked

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<sup>71</sup> Nguyen, Marguerite Bich. *America's Vietnam: The Longue Duree of U.S. Literature and Empire*. Temple University Press, 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Wu, Cynthia. *Sticky Rice: A Politics of Intra-racial Desire*. Temple University Press, 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Nguyen, Marguerite Bich. *America's Vietnam*.

intimacy with Nguyen Ai Quoc gestures to questions of Third World concerns, even if the novel is written through personal experience.

As these examples portray, rather than provide contemporary readers (as of 2003) a historical examination of a well-adjusted refugee figure, Truong provides a queer exiled character that instead travels to Paris rather than the US. In providing this alternative genealogy and characterization of Vietnamese movement, Truong provides a novel story about Vietnamese subjectivity that does not become circumscribed by the Vietnam War and effectively highlights the role of intimacy in facilitating some of these connections. By refusing to provide an ahistorical refugee narrative, Truong in fact evokes a politics that is highly aware of what is expected of her as a Vietnamese American writer and as a refugee from the Vietnam War herself.

By representing this refusal in both her characters and in her novel's setting, Truong queers the militarized contours of Vietnam War remembrance and constructs a concurrent world of plausibility. Thus, in this act, Truong adds an imaginative component to her literary act of queering and remapping the geographies associated to Vietnamese diasporic experiences. By mobilizing narrative writing in the form of literature, Truong is able to play with the ideas of history that do not get defined and interpreted solely through an empiricist epistemology and to instead present stories of speculative pasts and potentially different futures.

## Conclusion

By reviewing notions of time, empire, and intimacy across various genres and modes of recalling Vietnam such as archival documents, contemporary popular culture, contemporary documentary film, and speculative fiction, I demonstrated the ways that differing configurations of temporality came to impact the geographies and subjectivities deemed normative for contemporary remembrance of Vietnam. As it hoped to illustrate, the temporalities forwarded by the U.S. state presents a very different relationship to temporality and imperialism than that of the Franco-Vietnamese cultural productions discussed above. By privileging the site of intimacies as the means of interrogating power differentials, the thesis aimed to illustrate how these intimacies came to characterize imperial might, the disavowal of certain subjectivities and prior histories, deep and intimate relationships between subjects, and the various ways those relationships become ambivalent ones due to power differentials like colonialism, imperialism, race, gender, sexuality, and the like. While the idea of Vietnam and the wars that are associated with it do differ based on context, I hope that this thesis has culled together enough materials and examples to proffer the necessity of approaching Vietnam through a more interdisciplinary and transnational way. As the project further develops, I aim to explore more ways that representational culture about and archival treatments of Vietnam can come to hold in productive tension the concerns of Cold War epistemologies and structures with those of an anti-colonial/decolonial stance against the many ways imperialism and colonialism continue to manifest in our contemporary moment.



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