

oppose or react to domination, that "they have their *own* politics," which has been forged through the logic of their "own locally and historically evolved bricolage."⁷⁴ In other words, even when refugees are reduced to an "aberration of categories" or "a zone of pollution,"⁷⁵ they are, to cite Avery Gordon, never, never just that.⁷⁶ In Tuck's eloquent words: "Even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression."⁷⁷ What I hope to show is that Vietnamese refugees are "intentionalized beings" who enact their hopes, beliefs, and politics, even when they live militarized lives.⁷⁸ My intent is not to valorize Vietnamese refugees but to note their "complex personhood,"⁷⁹ to be attentive to how they manage their lives, and to take seriously, rather than dismissively, their differing and different subject positions and political perspectives. I also hope to show, as Trinh notes, that "the state of indeterminateness and of indefinite unsettlement" that characterizes the refugees' life in transit *persists* in resettlement, even when the "happily resettled" tout their feelings of gratitude or flaunt their material success.⁸⁰ In short, the aspiration of the book is to call attention to lives that have been ravaged by war: to mark the broken trajectories as well as the moments of action as refugees search for and insist on their right to *more*.

VIETNAMESE AMERICAN STUDIES: ABOUT MILITARIZED REFUGE(ES)

"For general western spectatorship, Vietnam does not exist outside of the war," observes Trinh.⁸¹ Concerned that Vietnam exists only as a spectacle for the West, many Vietnamese proclaim that Vietnam is a country, not a war. Tired of being associated "only with *that* war" in which Vietnamese are represented most often as pathetic and passive victims, some Vietnamese American studies scholars have insisted that we move the field beyond the parameter of the war in order to study Vietnamese in all their complexities.⁸² The past four decades have seen a proliferation of articles and books that cover Vietnamese lives from more complex and critical perspectives. Nazli Kibria's ethnographic study of Vietnamese families in Philadelphia in the early 1980s remains the richest study of the changing family dynamics within the Vietnamese American community.⁸³

Following Kibria's example, subsequent studies began to conceptualize Vietnamese not as a refugee group in transit but as a new racial or ethnic group that is deliberately and gradually embedding themselves in their new communities.⁸⁴ Moving beyond demographic and needs assessment studies, an emerging generation of Vietnamese American scholars shifted the focus of study to the linguistic, cultural, and literary expressions of the Vietnamese diasporic communities.⁸⁵ As an example, a 2003 *Amerasia Journal* special issue on Vietnamese Americans emphasized the transnational dimensions of their experience, including studies on transnational cultural flows and forms of collaboration between Vietnamese American and Vietnamese music makers, transnational marriages between women in Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese men who live in Western countries, and transnational assembly work.⁸⁶

These studies also open up the category "Vietnamese American" by addressing the gender, sexual, class, political, religious, cultural, and generational diversity of the population and by articulating the localistic, familial, national, and transnational linkages of Vietnamese lives. As a group, these works on the Vietnamese diaspora integrate isolated studies of the "Vietnamese experience" into the larger field of migration studies and enable Vietnamese studies scholars to join postmodern theorists and others in cultural studies in the larger discourse about diaspora, exile, transnationalism, ethnicity, and identity.⁸⁷ In sum, these promising developments in the field of Vietnamese studies provide us a rare glimpse into how Vietnamese have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves—and in so doing, to restore, in Amitava Kumar's words, "a certain weight of experience, a stubborn density, a *life* to what we encounter in newspaper columns as abstract, often faceless, figures without histories."⁸⁸

Although I am certainly sympathetic with this desire to move beyond the war, I worry that such a decoupling of Vietnamese Americans from the Vietnam War risks assimilating Vietnamese into the apolitical and ahistorical category of "cultural diversity," in which Vietnamese become represented as just one more marker of cultural difference in the U.S. multicultural landscape. I am also concerned that, even some forty years after its "end," a "determined incomprehension" remains the dominant U.S. public stance on the history and legacy of the Vietnam War.⁸⁹ Despite the profusion of text and talk on the Vietnam War in Vietnam(ese) studies, I contend that

the field has yet to critically engage the war as an important historical and discursive site of Vietnamese subject formation and of the shaping and articulation of U.S. nationhood. This book thus asks us to return once again to *that* war and its "refugees." Although I recognize that Vietnam is a country and not a war, and that Vietnamese lives do not begin and end with the Vietnam War, I agree with Viet Thanh Nguyen that *its/our* "history still demands an ongoing engagement with what that war meant, if we are not to concede its meaning to revisionist, nationalist agendas in the United States."⁹⁰ Accordingly, I suggest that, rather than doing away with the term "refugee," we imbue it with social and political critiques that call into question the relationships between war, race, and violence, then and now.

Militarized Refuge(es)

Since the 1993 publication of the landmark collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, in which Amy Kaplan called out the glaring conceptual and ideological "absence of empire from the study of American culture,"⁹¹ studies of colonialism and imperialism have proliferated as American studies scholars shifted attention away from nationalist paradigms and foregrounded America's embeddedness within transnational and hemispheric cultures and histories.⁹² Included in this critical scholarship is a growing body of work that examines the ways in which empire and war, especially the Cold War, have intersected in American culture.⁹³ Moving away from the voluminous military and diplomatic histories that focused on war's political leaders, military planners, and policymakers, these newer studies conceptualize war as a cultural phenomenon, paying particular attention to how "policy-making, intelligence-gathering, war-making, and mainstream politics might be profoundly shaped by a social and cultural world beyond the conference table or battlefield."⁹⁴ Most provocative are studies that reveal how colonial histories and cultures constitute the conditions of possibility for ongoing forms of militarization.⁹⁵

I recognize the value of conceptualizing war as a "knowledge project or epistemology,"⁹⁶ but I also believe that we need to continue to think of war in terms of "militarized violence"—not only epistemic or symbolic violence but the actual physical violence of "guns and bombs" unleashed on "expendable nonpersons," those devoid of names and faces, family and

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personal histories, dreams and hopes, politics and beliefs. According to U.S. Department of Defense statistics, close to six million U.S. troops served in Southeast Asia and/or South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The number of U.S. troops in Vietnam peaked at 543,000 in April 1969.⁹⁷ The My Lai Massacre, in which U.S. forces massacred about 400 unarmed women, children, and elderly men in the village of My Lai in South Vietnam, is widely considered "the most shocking episode of the Vietnam War."⁹⁸ U.S. military policies (e.g., search-and-destroy missions in the South, carpet-bombing raids in the North, free-fire zones, and chemical defoliation) cost Vietnam at least three million lives, the maiming of countless bodies, the poisoning of its water, land, and air, the razing of its countryside, and the devastation of most of its infrastructure. Indeed, more explosives were dropped on Vietnam, a country two-thirds the size of California, than in all of World War II. According to Heonik Kwon, the war in Vietnam was a culmination of technological advancement in the weapons of mass destruction and was a philosophical "total war." Whereas the war in North Vietnam was a "conventional war" with a clear division of labor between armed combatants and unarmed civilians, the war in the South was an unconventional one in which villagers had to fight as hard as any armed soldiers—not necessarily to win the war, but just to survive. In the southern context, war death could be the death of anyone.⁹⁹

U.S. scholarship has largely separated war studies and refugee studies into different fields of study. This decoupling obscures the formative role that U.S. wars play in structuring the displacements, dispersions, and migrations of refugees to the United States and elsewhere. As Setsu Shigematsu and Keith Camacho contend, "U.S. war waging has become an integral, if not naturalized, part of the grammar of . . . (im)migration narratives."¹⁰⁰ And yet, in the U.S. academy, popular media, and published autobiographies and memoirs, Vietnamese flight to the United States is most often portrayed as a matter of desperate individuals fleeing political persecution and/or economic depression, or simply fleeing "the Communists," completely discounting the aggressive roles that the U.S. government, military, and corporations have played in generating this exodus in the first place. It is not that the history of U.S. military, economic, and political intervention in Vietnam is excluded in studies on Vietnamese Americans; rather, it is often included only as background information—

as the events that *precede* the refugee flight rather than as the actions that *produce* this very exodus, the refugee subject, and the U.S. nation-state.

Juxtaposing refugee/immigration studies and war/international studies, I contend in this book that it is the presence of the refugees—Vietnam's runaways—that enables the United States to recast its aggressive military strategy as a benevolent intervention. As Jodi Kim argues, the refugee simultaneously is a product of, a witness to, and a site of critique of the gendered and racial violence of U.S. wars.¹⁰¹ I thus situate my discussion of refuge(es) within a specific frame of reference: the long, long *durée* of U.S. colonial expansion and war making in Asia. In chapter 2, I coin the term "*militarized* refuge(es)"—with its intended jarring juxtaposition—in order to expose the hidden violence behind the humanitarian term "refuge," thereby challenging the powerful narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam's discarded that erases the role that U.S. foreign policy and war played in inducing the "refugee crisis" in the first place.

History and Memory

In the United States, public discussions of the Vietnam War often skip over the history of militarized violence inflicted on Vietnam and its people. It is not that the Vietnam War has been forgotten. Partly due to the lack of a national resolution, the Vietnam War "is the most chronicled, documented, reported, filmed, taped, and—in all likelihood—narrated war in [U.S.] history."¹⁰² But, as Ralph Ellison reminds us, the highly visible can actually be a type of invisibility such that the profusion of text and talk on the Vietnam War actually conceals the costs borne by the Vietnamese¹⁰³—the lifelong costs that turn the "Fall of Saigon" and the exodus from Vietnam into "the endings that are not over."¹⁰⁴ As scholars, public historians, and the media have repeatedly documented, Americans have been obsessed with the Vietnam War as an *American* tragedy. As a result, most American writings on the war involve the highly organized and strategic forgetting of the Vietnamese people: "They are conspicuously absent in their roles as collaborators, victims, enemies, or simply the people whose land and over whom (supposedly) this war was fought."¹⁰⁵ As an example, the highly controversial Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the very site where U.S. cultural memory of the Vietnam War is represented and debated, dis-

allows any acknowledgment of the war's effects on the Vietnamese. As Nguyễn-Vo Thu Huong observes, "Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us."¹⁰⁶

The nonrecognition of Vietnamese losses raises the question: what makes for a grievable life? As Judith Butler asks, how does mourning take place for those who never "were," who "fit no dominant frame for the human," and whose lives do not count as lives?¹⁰⁷ Butler is not simply talking about the process of dehumanization, where humans are not regarded as humans; rather, she asks us to be attentive to the "racial differential that undergirds the culturally viable notions of the human"—notions that open up questions at the level of ontology: "What is real? Whose lives are real? . . . What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered as 'unreal'?"¹⁰⁸ Butler argues that this failure of recognition—the insistence that there was no event, no loss—"is mandated through an identification with those who identify with the perpetrators of the violence."¹⁰⁹ Relatedly, in a book on the boom in testimonies, autobiographies, and memoirs emanating from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Gillian Whitlock notes that some life narratives move quickly into and within Western media, whereas others are "epistemologically disabled" and remain "trapped" within the immediate community that has suffered the pain; he argues that this disparity has everything to do with "whose lives count, and under what circumstances."¹¹⁰ To have traction, Whitlock contends, the refugee narrative needs "national history on its side" and must become linked to "civic virtue and the national good."¹¹¹

As a consequence of "the masculinist hypervisibility of American representations of the Vietnam War"¹¹² and the concomitant discounting of Vietnamese (especially of South Vietnamese) accounts of the war, the most that we have are fragmented "flashes" of memory, of partial and imperfect recollections. Looking for and calling attention to the lost and missing subjects of history are critical to any political project. In a different context, Toni Morrison has instructed us to be mindful that "*invisible things are not necessarily not-there*."¹¹³ How do we write about absences? How do we compel others to look for the things that are seemingly not there? How do we imagine beyond the limits of what is already stated to be understandable? To engage in war and refugee studies, then, is to look for the things that are barely there and to listen to "fragmentary testimonies, to

barely distinguishable testimonies, to testimonies that never reach us"¹¹⁴—that is, to write ghost stories.

Attentive to "the ghostly" and "the afterlives" of Vietnamese refugees,¹¹⁵ this book gathers accounts of Vietnamese exilic remembrance and represents them as events that disrupt what Khatharya Um calls "the too-early foreclosure upon the wounds of war and dispersal."¹¹⁶ Amid so much organized forgetting, I feel keenly the need to note Vietnamese American presence, rather than its absence, and to find different ways of knowing and writing about history outside of the realm of state-sanctioned commemorative discourses and practices. I also pay more attention to strategic and self-imposed silence than to the power-laden process of silencing, to the ways that subjugated histories are told "quietly" or told without words or sometimes safeguarded for future tellings, whether or not I grasp the reasons behind these decisions.¹¹⁷ At the end of the day, I concur with Grace Cho that "there is as much power in uncertainty as in knowing the truth," and I am grateful for what I have been able to glimpse and learn from these gaps and empty spaces.¹¹⁸

BOOK OVERVIEW

As a critical refugee studies project, *Body Counts* examines the ways in which the mutually constituted processes of remembering and forgetting work in the production of official discourses about empire, war, and violence as well as in the construction of refugee subjectivities. Throughout, I grapple with the difficulties and risks inherent in the methods and techniques of reading, writing, and sharing "ghost stories"—or "truths" that are unspoken or unspeakable. By paying special attention to Vietnamese American histories whose traumatic consequences are still actively evolving in today's space and time, *Body Counts* "is looking not so much for answers as for new *enabling questions*, questions that would open new directions for research and new conceptual spaces for the yet unborn answers."¹¹⁹

Body Counts critically engages the social science literature on refugees through an interdisciplinary and intersectional perspective that "deliberately unravel[s] seemingly stable distinctions among identificatory categories and disciplinary divisions."¹²⁰ Placing various critical fields in