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Chapter Author(s): LAN DUONG

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# Việt Nam and the Diaspora

## Absence, Presence, and the Archive

LAN DUONG

During my last days of doing research at the Film Institute (Viện Phim) in Hà Nội, I watched *Battle at Moc Hoa* (1945) on a small editing bay.<sup>1</sup> Made by one of Việt Nam's most esteemed directors, Mai Lộc, the film is one of the few films to survive from the colonial period. Many film reels in Việt Nam were destroyed or damaged during the country's long war with the French, Japanese, and Americans in the second half of the twentieth century. While similar to other films about the anticolonial resistance, Lộc's film was especially compelling because of the state of the film it was in: framed between two whirring reels as I had screened it, *Battle at Moc Hoa* was without sound, the images blurry and unclear. Situated against the commercial streets that were just outside the archive's doors, the film's imagery of revolution seemed archaic and "out of joint," to use Jacques Derrida's term. Exquisitely shot and yet strangely spectral, *Battle at Moc Hoa* is a moving composite of light and dark, appearing ghostly in its details of another time of war, another era of sacrifice. Watching *Battle at Moc Hoa* in this way was a doubled sign of the poor material conditions under which the film was made in the past and screened in the present. This moment was symbolic of how the Vietnamese film archive is a jarring experience of both absence and presence.

I begin with these details about Việt Nam's Film Institute to delineate the ways that the archive—the country's most important cinematic trove—serves as a technology of state power in the postsocialist era and is perforated by absence. For the archive attempts to make legible the country's history through its collection of films, catalogues, journals, and ephemera, repressing texts that run counter to its narrative about nationhood, sacrifice, and revolution. It is at once rich and full of elisions. Southern Vietnamese films produced during the Second Indochinese War; diasporic Vietnamese films about the refugee or reeducation experience of the four million overseas Vietnamese, many of whom

fled the revolutionary regime; and the large number of colonial films produced before the founding of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam in 1945 are missing or not included in its collection. Some of these films instead circulate on the Internet, are sold in DVD stores in Vietnamese community enclaves, or are screened at local film festivals in the United States. Compounding the Film Institute's omissions is a central problem: film preservation remains a developing art in the country and a vastly underfunded state effort. These uneven developments in the country's cultural infrastructure are symptomatic of contemporary state politics; hobbled by a long history of war, Việt Nam is impoverished but also rapidly developing in its embrace of global capitalism. Việt Nam has become a major player in the Southeast Asian region in the wake of major developments: the country's implementation of market reforms in 1986 and World Trade Organization membership in 2004.

Even as the country's cultural institutions lack funding and organizational structure, the state nonetheless has the ability and authority to develop its archives as one way to commemorate the past and grow its futurity. On this point, I posit that what counters the statist impulse to document the past in perpetuity is a diasporic film archive. Virtual, decentralized, and provisional, this archive is vital to the remembrance of "South Việt Nam." Uploaded by film enthusiasts or digitized by production companies and sold at market, images of a prewar Saigon constitute a tenuous archive and contradict the state's gestures to erase the "disappeared history" of the southern Vietnamese.<sup>2</sup> This history begins with the formation of a Vietnamese diaspora following the war's end in 1975 when millions of Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese fled Việt Nam in fear of communist persecution. In response to those who left the country in staggered numbers from the 1970s to the late 1980s, the state denounced this group as "traitors" for having collaborated with the United States during the war and abandoning the country. Forty years since the "reunification" of the country, the state now embraces the return of diasporic Vietnamese as investors, artists, and tourists, having recently promulgated a series of legislation that seek to welcome the diaspora back into the fold of the nation. At the same time, the state dismisses the history of refugees and reeducation camp prisoners as well as a South Vietnamese culture that are central aspects of this community and its politics. Such a disavowal manifests itself in the space of the archive.

This study looks at state and diasporic archives in tandem since they embody what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih term "minor transnationalisms," or that which scores the relations of power between minority cultures in an era of global capital.<sup>3</sup> Here the concept of a "minor transnationalism" names the vexed historical relations between Việt Nam and the diaspora as an enduring contest of power about representation. More specifically, a "minor transnationalism" pinpoints the terrain constituting the transnational production and distribution

of Vietnamese movies—in particular, Vietnamese war films. My argument is premised on the fact that Vietnamese and diasporic cinemas cannot compete with the spectacular ways that major countries like the United States and France have represented the wars that pockmark the country's history and its relations with its foreign others. The country is a site of trauma and recovery for those in the West, circulating and recirculating as such in the Global North.

In contrast, few Vietnamese films and images about the war are discussed or disseminated outside of Việt Nam and the diaspora. Even within these contexts, however, the terms of representation are problematic; the state has banned some diasporic films while some in the diaspora have treated with suspicion films made in collaboration with the government. While the Vietnamese state has revamped its film industry policies to include the work of diasporic filmmakers, it has also banned some of the diaspora's key filmic texts from circulating in the country. For Vietnamese diasporic filmmakers, they wield some cultural and financial capital in producing films in Việt Nam, but they must also work within the constraints of the state's cultural politics. Foregrounding the shifting postwar relations of power between Việt Nam and the diaspora, I investigate how a minor transnationalism inflects the ways that two films—*Land of Sorrows* (1971) and *Journey from the Fall* (2007)—are received in the Vietnamese American community.<sup>4</sup> While made in different time periods, the films exemplify state practices of regulating and censoring films in the past and present moment. Tracking the films' reception and their circulations, I gesture toward an archive formulated by new media technologies and shaped by local practices of commemoration, an archive that stands outside of the state's domain of control.

Besides speaking to the archive, another point of this essay is to demonstrate that images of war by the Vietnamese are greatly understudied within Euro-American film scholarship. Addressing these elisions in the production of knowledge about Việt Nam and its cinema, my essay highlights issues of memory, power, and capital underpinning the making and study of Vietnamese films. I underscore especially the formations of what I call the "archives of memory" as transnational sites that symbolize both absence and presence. On the one hand, the Film Institute in the country's capital represents state hegemony and its exercise of power in material form. On the other, an archive of memory can also be virtual, shared and screened by multiple users across transnational sites in the digital age. I underscore these differences between the archives to outline a different topography of the country, one that stands in contrast to the "Vietnam" that has been traditionally configured in the Global North. In the Western filmic archive, "Vietnam" functions as an enduring symbol of war and suffering. Mapping the nodes of production and reception of films across Việt Nam and the diaspora, I show how archives of memory are

buttressed by power and a deep investment—one that is both affective and material—in the cinematic past and more specifically, in representations of war. To reveal how these archival sites operate as technologies of memory is to view Việt Nam anew. Contrary to the notion that Việt Nam remains a leftist fantasy of revolution and site of trauma, the country has tried to redefine the bounds of the nation through cinema and culture, with the archive symbolizing this gesture of domination within a minor key.

### Archives of Memory

In thinking about the archives put forth by the state and by the diaspora, I turn to theorists who have framed the archive as both a symbol of (neo)colonial power and the location of an alternative archive. Investigating the archive-as-subject, Ann Laura Stoler argues that scholars must regard the archive not as an “extractive enterprise” but an ethnographic one. As she notes, colonial archives are not “merely sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography.”<sup>5</sup> Vesting the archive with the authority to organize order, Jacques Derrida discusses the “institutionalization of the archival event” and the way in which archival fever—the *mal d’archive* or the *archive du mal*—bespeaks the state’s feverish need to collect the past as well as the scholar’s desire to recollect it.<sup>6</sup> Derrida reminds us of the necessity of viewing the archive as an institutional and juridical space, one that simultaneously houses the state’s search for origin narratives and anticipates the future and future publics.<sup>7</sup> Temporality, therefore, constitutes a central part of the archive, whereupon the making and preservation of time becomes embedded in the project of modernity itself. Film scholar Mary Ann Doane emphasizes this point when she states, “what is at stake in modernity is not just a logic of mobility, circulation, and accelerated exchange but also a logic of the archive and especially the archivability of time.”<sup>8</sup>

The Vietnamese state operates on an analogous “logic of the archive.” Sited in Hà Nội (the country’s other, smaller film archive is in Hồ Chí Minh City), the state’s premier film archive showcases canonical works made by the country’s most notable filmmakers from its inception to the present day. In their video library, which is open throughout the day and fairly accessible, a visitor can screen films on site using the institute’s computers. On the second floor of the archive a reading library houses film journals and cinema books on a variety of different national cinemas. Most of these texts deal with Vietnamese cinema and its nationalist formations, however. In total, the Film Institute marginalizes a whole swath of filmic narratives about the others of communist Việt Nam. As a state-run archive that tries to guard itself against the intrusions of other histories, this space is indeed haunted by a “silenc[ing of] the past,” to

use Michel-Rolph Trouillet's words, an act that has implications for the future.<sup>9</sup> If situated within the *longue durée*, Vietnamese film historiography remains constricted for both present and future Vietnamese film scholars and students.

Despite its ambitions to archive time, however, the Film Institute is remarkably deficient in other areas. As a frequent visitor to this space for the past ten years, I have witnessed its structural improvements but have noted that it still lacks the kinds of monies that would sustain the project of film preservation over time. The Film Institute is burdened by an excessive bureaucracy and disorganized in terms of its display of materials and resources. While armed with a degree of power to narrate history via its curation of films, the Film Institute's "archival fever" seems limited in scope and degree. Thus, while the country's film archives are important sites of inquiry into film because these are the only places in the world that houses hundreds of Vietnamese films, they also symbolize the terrific changes within which the country is caught. In fundamental ways, such archival sites are very different from the colonial archives that theorists like Stoler and Derrida discuss and critique.

The diasporic archive I discuss here also stands in stark contrast from either the colonial archive or the Vietnamese state archive because of its ephemerality and the use of technology that drives it. This virtual archive hinges on contingency and transiency because the sites upon which the films appear can easily be shut down due to international copyright laws. The films themselves are not copyright protected either. Moreover, they do not officially circulate in Việt Nam because of an implicit state ban on films from this era and region. And yet the fact that these films can be accessible via the Internet speaks to the market and affective desires that underpin their circulation and redistribution.

Some of the most intriguing images and films of South Việt Nam are archived on the Internet. Some of these films have been sold on the market and repackaged as "pre-1975" films. The films are part of a collection of films that were made in the South during the American War, or the Vietnam War. Funded by private investors, they make up what I call a "forgotten cinema" and encompass a variety of genres like the melodrama, war film, and the comedy, genre films that were generally not made by filmmakers in the North in most of the nation's official film history. Such works are uploaded and shared among film enthusiasts on YouTube. On a number of Vietnamese film sites one can stream the films for free or a small fee. Most conspicuously, they are sold in Vietnamese American DVD stores in cities like San Jose and Garden Grove, California, having been redigitized by major Vietnamese American production companies like Thúy Nga and Asia. "Pre-1975" films are remarketed for a niche market today, as powerhouse production companies such as these commodify a diasporic, nostalgic love for the past. DVD covers proclaim that the films are "in color" and

were made “before 1975,” clearly drawing on how the year “1975” signifies for those in the diaspora the time that precipitated the exodus of many Vietnamese from South Việt Nam. Underpinned by these marketing strategies, the films’ packaging promises the diasporic viewer a cinematic return to a colorful, unforgettable past.

Archived on the Internet and sold in community enclaves, these filmic texts are founded on nostalgia and desire and form an “alternative archive” to the state’s own. As Mike Featherstone argues, alternative archives are significant because they shelter the “active aspirations for the reworking of desires and memories and the making of cultural identities” within the larger context of hegemonic power.<sup>10</sup> On the question of archive and affect, Ann Cvetkovich further contends that the making of an “archive of feelings” functions as a “[repository] of feelings and emotions, encoded not only in content but in practices that surround their production and reception.”<sup>11</sup> Driven by market and affective desires, the user’s makeshift and often illegal practice of digitizing and sharing Vietnamese films countermands how an official film archive operates in Việt Nam. These practices also counteract the Vietnamese state’s own monumental memorializations of war and its gestures to preserve war memories in the face of globalization and tourism. In the years following the Second Indochinese War, the state has invested a great deal of money erecting monuments, museums, displays, cemeteries, and other war sites to commemorate the war dead and to generate tourism for domestic and international visitors.<sup>12</sup>

Just as significantly, an Internet-accessible diasporic archive of memory also contradicts the U.S. narrative about the loss of “Vietnam,” which has so dominated Vietnam War discourse. File sharing and film uploading allow for a redistribution of a particular South Vietnamese affect about the war, one that hinges on nationalist feeling and melancholic commemoration of the war. Such feelings are often dismissed in dominant U.S. culture. Investigating refugee memorial sites on the Internet in this volume’s essay and in her book *Body Counts*, Yên Lê Espiritu discusses the kinds of “new electronic media that are shaping remembrance practices.”<sup>13</sup> Situating these practices against a U.S. national culture that denies the South Vietnamese American experience, Espiritu argues that the “public display of South Vietnam’s war dead on the Internet is itself an instance of an oppositional political imaginary at work, an act of sedition” in which there is a collapse in the distinction between public and private: a private personal grief becomes part of a collective loss.<sup>14</sup> Espiritu looks at how the Internet has changed the terms of representation for marginalized groups within the United States as they relate to the Vietnam War.<sup>15</sup> Espiritu’s arguments align with my claims about the affective circulation of diasporic Vietnamese films appearing on the Internet since this kind of filmic imagery—especially those that visualize for contemporary viewers the space

and time before Sài Gòn's "fall"—work along similar registers of pleasure, nostalgia, and longing when they are uploaded online, shared, accessed, and sometimes commented on by users.

Elsewhere I have argued that "Vietnam" discourse as it has circulated in the Global North has been defined by an asymmetry of power relations and uneven access to culture making.<sup>16</sup> In what follows, I extend this argument to include an analysis of power in the Global South (Việt Nam) and for those who are a part of minoritized populations in the United States (Vietnamese Americans). In my readings of *Land of Sorrows* and *Journey from the Fall*, I demonstrate how the two films pivot on the trope of the national family and its dissolution. Thematically, the trope of the family has been vital for the retelling of the war from a point of view that falls outside of the North Vietnamese and American perspectives. Beyond these thematic concerns, however, the ways that the films locally travel and are received by the Vietnamese American community are fused with the stories of power that they (re)tell. This retelling speaks to the relations of power that Việt Nam and the diaspora share in the contemporary moment.

### ***Land of Sorrows and Journey from the Fall:* Remembrance and Reconciliation**

Made in 1971, *Đất Khô*, or *Land of Sorrows*, shows the rupturing of the national family and its devastating impact on civilian lives. The film's value as a historical document lies in the fact that it was made during the war and preserved when other wartime films made in the South were not. Dealing exclusively with the Tết Offensive in Huế in 1968, it also incorporates actual footage of villagers fleeing their homes during this time period. Moreover, it was the only film directed by Hà Thúc Cẩn, who originated from South Việt Nam and who collaborated with a number of artists and writers to make the film. Finally, *Land of Sorrows* remains the only movie that features the performance of legendary songwriter and antiwar activist Trịnh Công Sơn and his songs. Both in its production and in its content, the film brings together a constellation of fascinating, historical details about wartime Huế, a part of the country that often becomes occluded in discussions about how the war has been fought between North and South, the communists and nationalists.

The film focuses on the politically complex lives of those who were caught in the war's crossfire. Using rare archival footage, it retells the Battle for Huế for the people who had to experience it on the ground. Mixing Trinh's musician persona into the fabric of the film's narrative, *Land of Sorrows* centers on one family in particular. Its focus lies with antiwar musician Quân (Trinh's character) and his family. As the film unfolds viewers witness the ways his family becomes



increasingly divided; one brother fights for the North, the other for the South. Quân's younger sister tries to maintain a love relationship during a time of war, while another takes an antiwar position much like Quân himself. Amid the familial turmoil, Quân's mother tries to keep her family intact but fails to do so in the face of the many displacements that the (national) family experiences in wartime.

*Land of Sorrows* is partially based on Vietnamese writer Nhã Ca and her book, *Mourning Headband for Huế*, which provided the details for some of the film's more poignant moments, most notably when a woman (played by veteran actress Kim Cương) mourns the loss of her dead child in a church overrun by war refugees. Originally published in Vietnamese in 1969, Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Huế* was recently published in English and translated by Vietnam studies scholar Olga Dror. As Dror details, the Tết Offensive in Huế was a significant battle in which "80% of the city was destroyed by ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] and American forces" and caused the "deaths of 5,000 North Vietnamese soldiers, 400 ARVN soldiers, and 216 American soldiers."<sup>17</sup> Despite such troubling numbers, the state continues to deny its role in the massacre of civilians and instead celebrates the event as a victory for the communist war effort. Placing responsibility of these deaths directly on the Party, Nhã Ca's writing was deemed subversive by the Communist Party after 1975. She spent thirteen months in a reeducation camp thereafter. In 1985 she was able to immigrate first to Sweden and then eventually to the United States with her son.<sup>18</sup>

Today *Land of Sorrows* serves as a trace of Nhã Ca's affective mode of writing and its impact. Both the book and the film are well regarded as accurate accounts of this historical event. Because of the works' notoriety and subject matter, these two texts have been banned in Việt Nam since the early 1970s. Even so, the Vietnamese version of her book as well as its English translation can be found and bought online. Similarly, one can purchase the English-subtitled film on Amazon and other bookselling sites, or one can watch the film for free on YouTube. While the details of the book and the film can be abundantly detailed, the film's screening history in Việt Nam has not been well documented. Online evidence, however, shows that in the United States, *Land of Sorrows* was screened for a short amount of time. As a website about the film's distribution states, the film "had its first commercial showing at Paris's Orient Theater in 1980 and its first U.S. showing in the Fall of 1996 at the American Film Institute's Kennedy Center location in Washington D.C.; then at The University of Maryland and George Mason University as part of the Asian American International Film Festival . . . in the Greater Washington D.C. area."<sup>19</sup>

Most recently *Land of Sorrows* was screened in Anaheim, California, at the Viet Film Fest in April 2015. Viet Film Fest (formerly the Vietnamese International

Film Festival) came into being in 2003 as a local film festival originating in Southern California that showcased the work of Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic filmmakers. Staffed by volunteers and supported by corporate funders such as Wells Fargo and Macy's, this festival has been the premier site for the screening of many Vietnamese contemporary films by those in the diaspora and in Việt Nam. Since its inception the festival has garnered national and international attention in the diaspora and Việt Nam and continues to be an important cinematic and cultural event for Vietnamese Americans in the region. Now annual, the film festival regularly attracts thousands of attendees each year. For Vietnamese American audiences, the film festival allows the community to see (sometimes for the first time) rare and popular films from all around the world. They are also afforded the opportunity to talk to actors, producers, and directors during panel discussions. At once expansive and intimate, the space of the Viet Film Fest emphasizes the notion of community, representation, and history in its formation and in the way it operates.

I have been chair of the screening committee for Viet Film Fest for three installments of the festival. In 2015 I was part of the organizers' plans to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war vis-à-vis the screening of the film *Land of Sorrows*. For the occasion, we invited writer Nhã Ca and the other screenwriters who collaborated on the film, Hà Thúc Như Hỷ (the director's nephew), Trần Lê Nguyễn, and Phạm Việt Lịch to attend the screening. We also recognized their work with individual awards and asked them to take part in a panel discussion after the film screening. Finally, we facilitated a book signing for the English-language translation of Nhã Ca's book as well. Albeit a small gathering of about thirty people, it was a memorable event that brought together mostly older members of the community as well as some members of the Vietnamese-language local press. As the screening and panel discussion made clear to me, the interest in the film and the book is ongoing and driven in part by the state's continued disavowal of the Huế Massacre. Within the Vietnamese American community, the resentment for this renunciation is ever-present.

Just as I was privy to the discussions to fête the film and book, I was also a part of the struggles to find the film's producers and director and acquire the permission to screen it at Viet Film Fest. After months of making inquiries into *Land of Sorrows*, we discovered that the director, Hà Thúc Cần, had died in Singapore in 2004. Through some investigative work via social media outlets and various Internet searches, we found that the film's distributor is an eighty-five-year-old retired artist by the name of George Washnis, who currently lives in Florida. In a phone conversation with me, Washnis relayed how he bought the rights to the film soon after it was made.<sup>20</sup> Along with his ex-wife, he acquired the film through some connections he had in Việt Nam during the

war. Washnis noted that his interest in the film stemmed from his own profound disenchantment with what he saw as the U.S. imperialist incursion into Việt Nam. Later on he played a large role in screening *Land* in the United States. In 2007 he and the distribution company, Remis, LLC, released the film on DVD. By phone, Washnis consented to the screening of the film at the last minute—right before the weekend the film festival opened. My renarration of Viet Film Fest's efforts to reach out to those who made and distributed the film demonstrates that the film's afterlife is, indeed, present and can be traced through these local efforts to preserve film outside of the Vietnamese state's purview. It is in these details, moreover, that a minor transnationality expresses itself within a minority culture.

In contrast to *Land of Sorrows*, *Journey from the Fall* has followed a more conventional pattern in its marketing and distribution practices. The film falls in line with how Asian American films are usually made and circulated, especially because the director, UCLA film graduate Ham Tran, is attuned to the networks that inform this kind of independent filmmaking and the minority politics that fuel it. Promoted as a Vietnamese American film, the film was released in movie theaters in major cities such as San Jose and Houston, and in Orange County where the largest populations of Vietnamese Americans live in the United States. As a result of this strategy, the film did fairly well during opening weekend (with receipts of approximately \$87,000).<sup>21</sup> After it was released, the media company *ImaginAsian*, which is known for distributing Asian American films, bought the rights to the film and currently sells the film through websites like *Amazon.com*; however, the company has been defunct since 2011.

When *Journey from the Fall* was screened in Orange County in 2007, it showed to packed audiences, with lines for the film that snaked around the movie theater. I was one of these viewers. I watched the film with a mostly Vietnamese American audience and I witnessed their highly emotional responses to the film. Though not a critical hit, the film won the adulation of a Vietnamese American audience that appeared to me not only multigenerational but also diverse in terms of class. Part of this positive reception has to do with the story that the film tells. *Journey* paints a bleak and yet redemptive portrait of postwar Việt Nam in the South, broaching topics that few Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic films have been able to discuss. The film explicitly deals with the plight of reeducation camp prisoners as well as that of boat people, two taboo subjects for the Vietnamese state.

Restaging the moment of “reunification” between North and South Việt Nam in 1975, *Journey* centralizes the profound divisions of the national family during wartime and in its aftermath. A former high-ranking officer in the South Vietnamese army, the patriarch of the family, Long, decides early on to stay in the country as Sài Gòn falls to the communists in 1975. Not long after, Long is

imprisoned in a reeducation camp where he and his fellow soldiers are tortured and beaten. As the film makes clear, Long is surrounded by other fathers and uncles who come from a similar background. Consigned to the task of demining the land, they are subject to immediate death. One of the most poignant moments of the film occurs when Long's friend, Trai, dies in a landmine explosion. Within these sections of the film, the narrative is essentially a male melodrama, focused on the men who fought for the South Vietnamese army and whose tender relationships with one another form the emotional core of the film.

Running parallel to this narrative about men is a narrative about women. Tran, who served as both director and co-screenwriter, creates a second layer in the film that speaks to the gendered experience of being a boat person and making the journey from Việt Nam to the United States as a woman. This story involves Long's wife, Mai, who along with her mother-in-law (played by veteran Vietnamese American actress Kiều Chinh) and son (Lai), tries to leave Việt Nam after 1975. On the boat, Mai narrowly escapes being raped by Thai pirates when her mother-in-law throws scalding hot water on her body to repel her attacker. The scars on her body as a result of this traumatic encounter are actual and metaphorical; the things she carries to America from Việt Nam are the wounds that mark her body in the transition from escape to resettlement.

Throughout the film Mai's and Long's narratives of escape are spliced together, effectively scissoring between past and present, mother and father as well as between Việt Nam and the United States. Juxtaposing the past with the present along a discontinuous continuum, the film's crosscutting of time and space disrupts the teleological narrative of history often narrated by official Vietnamese history of revolution, reunification, and progress that occurred after the country's civil war. As with *Land of Sorrows*, *Journey* powerfully demonstrates how Việt Nam was a house divided. While Cấn's film significantly took place during the war and captured actual footage of the war as it happened, Tran's film revealed that after the reunification of the country, the discord, hostility, and animosity between North and South, in fact, animated the post-war policies toward the South, policies that affected not only the lives of those who left but also of those who stayed behind. Those who stayed behind were sent to new economic zones or imprisoned in reeducation camps. Families who lived in the South had their properties confiscated; were afforded fewer education opportunities, especially if they were former members of elite military families; and were socially ostracized, particularly if they were of Amerasian descent.

For most of the film, *Journey* focuses on the suffering that the South Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugees experienced in the years following the war. Despite the tremors of pain running throughout the film, it nevertheless

ends with the notion of reconciliation as the diasporic family becomes reconstituted in the United States. The final images of the film memorialize Long's death in important ways but also visualize for viewers the restoration of the nuclear family in the diaspora. Mai, Lai, the mother-in-law, and Nam (a character who serves as a surrogate father to Mai's son by the film's end) make wishes to Long's spirit in flying a kite along an open expanse of sun and sand. More metaphorically, they say goodbye to a country that symbolized destruction, dissolution, and death for them. It is key here that the film concludes on a tenor of reconciliation—not between Việt Nam and the diaspora but between the United States and Việt Nam more exactly. The traumas of (economic and political) displacement that Vietnamese refugees faced in resettling in the United States are resolved in the film's conclusion. The final note of the film is premised on how, for those in the United States, a new beginning awaits. Such hope for renewal in the diaspora may be one of the reasons why the Vietnamese state banned the film soon after it was released, as well as barring the director from making a film in Việt Nam.

The story of *Journey from the Fall* does not end here, however. While initially banned from returning to Việt Nam to make films, director Ham Tran has since been back many times. Ironically, his filmmaking prospects have only flourished in the country in the wake of the state's overtures to welcome the diasporic community "home." For example, in recent years, the state has allowed for the diaspora to acquire dual citizenship, five-year visas, and land-ownership in the country. These legislative acts followed Resolution no. 36, when in 2004 the state posited that the overseas Vietnamese community was "an integral part of the nation."<sup>22</sup> This recognition on the part of the state toward the diaspora has bolstered the return migration of many diasporic filmmakers who work in Việt Nam today. Tran is one of them. In 2010 Tran was asked by film officials to edit a historic film about the origins of the country's capital, Hà Nội. Celebrating the millennial founding of the country's political center, *Khát Vọng Thăng Long* [*The Prince and the Pagoda Boy*] (2010), however, performed poorly at the Vietnamese box office.<sup>23</sup> Yet it was through this collaboration that Tran was able to extend his stay in Việt Nam and pursue his filmmaking projects. Funded by a Vietnamese production company, Tran's next directing feature was a box office hit in Việt Nam, a romantic comedy called *Âm Mưu Giày Gót Nhọn*, or *How to Fight in Six Inch Heels* (2013).<sup>24</sup> Ham then followed this comedy film with a high-concept horror film called *Đoạt Hồn*, or *Hollow* (2014), which focuses on the sex trafficking of young women at the Vietnam–China border.<sup>25</sup> Despite having made a film extremely critical of communist ideology, Tran's filmmaking career in Việt Nam attests to the extent to which the state now accommodates certain subject matter (sex trafficking) and genres (horror)

in order to expand on its own archive and repertoire of both film and culture.

### Culture and the Reinvention of the Vietnamese State

Since 2002 the state has allowed for the establishment of private film studios in the country and the private funding of films. This moment paves the way for transnational coproductions to take place in the making of film in the country. It has also spurred the phenomenon of return migrations for Vietnamese Americans who make films in Việt Nam. Such developments tell a story of how directors find both the funding and inspiration to make films in the country. They also narrate a particular moment for the country as it moves from postwar country to a postsocialist one. Aspiring to be an Asian Tiger like some of its Southeast Asian neighbors, the country positions itself as a major geopolitical player. In so doing, the state constantly refurbishes its relations with France, the United States, and its own diaspora, parts of which still agitate for regime change and thus severely test the model of affiliative relations that the state envisions for itself and the overseas community. In the contemporary moment, Việt Nam, as Martin Gainsborough observes, “proves adept at reinventing itself.”<sup>26</sup>

The state’s decisions to embrace the diaspora’s return also keys into this adaptability. But its gesture of inclusion toward the diaspora is perhaps best understood in economic terms, underscored by the way that remittances to Việt Nam total in the billions. At last estimate the Vietnamese diaspora sent US\$11 billion to Việt Nam in 2013.<sup>27</sup> The annual incomes of those living abroad also represent a tremendous amount of money that can be tapped. The incentive to attract the Vietnamese diaspora to the homeland remains strong and cloaked in language that accents their ties to the national family, despite the state’s dismissal of refugee histories and memories.

The vexed relations between the state and the diaspora and the imbalance of power that mark these relations serve as the context for my readings of two war films, *Land of Sorrows* and *Journey from the Fall*. Both films have been censored by the state and yet embraced by many in the Vietnamese American community. Both texts are part of a body of work that archives a certain southern Vietnamese nationalist and anticommunist sentiment. Framed against Việt Nam’s turn toward neoliberalism, these films reflect on the losses that the Vietnamese in Central and South Việt Nam experienced during and after the war. *Land of Sorrows* and *Journey from the Fall* and other films like them constitute a cinematic memorial to the other narratives of the war that are decidedly not found in either Việt Nam’s archives of memory or those of the United States. Through these films I have tried to elucidate the power relations that enable

films of the prewar and postwar eras to circulate in Việt Nam and the diaspora via official and unofficial routes. The minor transnational relationships analyzed in this study dramatize how the archives and the memories contained within them are structured by an absent and present dynamic, one that is powered by capital and desire.

## NOTES

1. *Trận Mộc Hóa* [Battle at Moc Hoa], dir. Mai Lộc, Film, Cinema Zone 8, 1948.
2. Ashley Carruthers and Boi Tran Huynh-Beattie point out that against a context of a South Vietnamese memory that is being “disappeared” by the state, the Vietnamese government has been actively “trying to woo the diaspora in the West to participate in a project of transnational nation-building.” Ashley Carruthers and Boi Tran Huynh-Beattie, “Dark Tourism, Diasporic Memory, and Disappeared History: The Contested Meaning of the Former Indochinese Refugee Camp at Pulau Galang,” in *The Chinese-Vietnamese Diaspora: Revisiting the Boatpeople*, ed. Yuk Wah Chan (New York: Routledge, 2011), 149.
3. Resisting a binaristic model that pits the center against those in the margins, Lionnet and Shih develop the notion of a “minor transnationalism” to speak to the creative expressions of minority cultures that are “products of transigrations and multiple encounters.” As they note, minor transnationality “points toward and makes visible the multiple relations between national and transnational.” Shu-Mei Shih and Francoise Lionnet, “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Shu-Mei Shih and Francoise Lionnet (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 10, 8.
4. *Đất Khổ* [Land of Sorrows], dir. Hà Thúc Cần, DVD, CreateSpace, 1971; and *Journey from the Fall* [Vượt Sóng], dir. Ham Tran, Film, Asia Entertainment, 2007.
5. Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 90.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18.
7. As Derrida notes, the archive is marked by an anticipation of the future, even as it dwells on the past. He writes: “The archive seems at first to point toward past, refer to signs of consigned memory, to recall faithfulness to tradition. . . . The archive also calls into question the coming of the future.” *Ibid.*, 33–34.
8. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, Archive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 105.
9. I borrow this from the title of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
10. Mike Featherstone, “Archive,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 594.
11. Ann Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.
12. In her book *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, Christina Schwenkel discusses the politics of commemoration and of war tourism sites in Việt Nam. See Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

13. Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 112.
14. *Ibid.*, 114.
15. *Ibid.*, 113.
16. Lan Duong, *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).
17. Olga Dror, "Introduction to *Mourning Headband for Hue*," in *Mourning Headband for Hue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), xxvii.
18. *Ibid.*, xxii–xxiii.
19. The following website promotes the film in order to sell it online: "*Land of Sorrows* on Create Space," accessed May 1, 2015, <https://www.createspace.com/225161>.
20. George Washnis, personal correspondence, April 15, 2015.
21. Information regarding this film has been culled from *imdb.com*, accessed May 15, 2015.
22. "Politburo's Resolution on Viet Kieu." *Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, accessed March 3, 2004, <http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org/news/story.php?d=20040511170158>.
23. *Khát Vọng Thăng Long* [The Prince and the Pagoda Boy], dir. Lư Trọng Ninh, Film, Ky Nguyen Sang Studio, 2010.
24. *Âm Mưu Giấy Gót Nhọn* [How to Fight in Six Inch Heels], dir. Ham Tran, DVD, Galaxy Film Studios, 2013.
25. *Đoạt Hồn* [Hollow], dir. Ham Tran, Film, BHD and Old Photo Films, 2014.
26. Martin Gainsborough, "State, Party, and Political Change in Vietnam," in *Rethinking Vietnam*, ed. Duncan McCargo (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 51.
27. "Remittances to Developing Countries to Stay Robust This Year, Despite Increased Deportations of Migrant Workers, Says WB," World Bank Group, accessed July 11, 2014, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2014/04/11/remittances-developing-countries-deportations-migrant-workers-wb>.