

# Southern Memory, Southern Metaphor: Representing South Vietnam through the US South

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On January 6, 2021, pro-Trump insurrectionists stormed the US Capitol, calling into question the country's democratic institutions. Waving American, pro-Trump, and Gadsden "Don't Tread on Me" flags, angry rioters protested President Joe Biden's electoral victory and bemoaned the perceived betrayal of white nationalist ideals. Most striking, however, was the juxtaposition of Confederate and South Vietnamese flags, evidencing uncanny relationalities between South Vietnam and a particular iteration of the US South—two short-lived nations, now defunct—in this critical moment of political upheaval.



**Figure 1.** Confederate flags juxtaposed with South Vietnamese flags at the January 6 insurrection. Evelyn Hockstein for the *Washington Post*. Courtesy of Getty Images.

How do we make sense of the resurrection of these two very different southern spaces—one domestic, one imperial—during the January 6 insurrection? What happens when the specters of two civil wars a century apart—the US Civil War of 1861–65 and the Vietnamese Civil War of 1955–75—collide not only with each other but with the ongoing afterlives of the Cold War, particularly the US military intervention in Vietnam and the subsequent resettlement of anticommunist Vietnamese refugees in the heart of empire? As Amy Kaplan reminds us, the “boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, between ‘at home’ and ‘abroad,’” are ever shifting and unsettled.<sup>1</sup> US imperial culture maps onto not only an East-West axis of frontier expansion into Asia but also a “North/South axis around the issues of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the US Civil War negotiated not only domestic questions of slavery and Black citizenship but also imperial issues of racialized labor. As W. E. B. Du Bois notes in *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), in the wake of abolition “a new industrial slavery of black and brown and yellow workers in Africa and Asia” emerged, heralding in an “international and commercial imperialism” that, in Du Bois’s analysis, began with US involvement in World War I and would extend to US intervention into Southeast Asia to expand global capitalist markets.<sup>3</sup>

Vietnam’s Civil War also entangled the imperial and the domestic, affecting not only Vietnamese subjects and American soldiers fighting in Southeast Asia but also racial politics across the US home front more broadly. Antiwar protests, the civil rights movement, Black radicalism, and pan-ethnic Asian American activism erupted across the United States. In his famous “Beyond Vietnam” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. drew connections between the “war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America,” critiquing how military buildup in Vietnam directed resources away from the War on Poverty and how segregation in the US was only ameliorated by joining the military: “We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem.”<sup>4</sup> After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, these imperial and domestic convergences then culminated in the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese refugees across the United States. Far from what Christopher Lee has called the “idealized critical subject” of Asian American studies, these Vietnamese Americans often embrace rather than critique US intervention on behalf of the southern Republic of Vietnam; if anything, they criticize US withdrawal as a betrayal of the South Vietnamese struggle for freedom and



democracy, positioning them at odds with other anti-imperialist, Third World Liberation activists.<sup>5</sup>

After the January 6 Capitol Riot, Vietnamese American scholars, journalists, and community leaders rushed to respond to the presence of the South Vietnamese yellow-and-red-striped flag, rebranded the “Heritage and Freedom Flag” in the diaspora, at an event that manifested such white supremacist outrage. News articles noted how Vietnamese Americans, the only Asian American group who voted as a majority for Trump over Biden in November 2020, were attracted to Trump’s anticommunist rhetoric, antagonism towards China (long understood as an imperialist threat to Vietnam), and commitment to defending American freedom against all perceived threats, both foreign and domestic.<sup>6</sup> In a *Conversation* article dated January 12, 2021, Long T. Bui argued that Vietnamese Americans who “view their fallen homeland as an extension of the American push for freedom and democracy worldwide” understand the South Vietnamese flag as a symbol of “nationalism—a militarized patriotism that is simultaneously South Vietnamese and American.”<sup>7</sup> According to Phuong Tran Nguyen, such “refugee nationalism,” characterized by anticommunist exile politics and organized around nostalgic attachments to the fallen state of South Vietnam, eased Vietnamese refugees’ integration into US society after the Fall of Saigon by appealing to white conservatives who would otherwise reject foreign immigration.<sup>8</sup> Other Vietnamese Americans, however, have rejected the contours of refugee nationalism and its ongoing entanglement with conservative politics. In response to the January 6 insurrection, for example, PIVOT, the Progressive Vietnamese American Organization, released a statement condemning the “desecration” of South Vietnam’s flag for “flying alongside flags that symbolize hate and intolerance.”<sup>9</sup>

To these debates this essay offers “southern metaphor” as an analytic and a method to make sense of the particular juxtaposition of South Vietnamese flags and Confederate flags at the January 6 Capitol Riot. Southern metaphor invites attunement to the multiple southern tropes that link seemingly disconnected southern spaces across the globe, revealing uncanny intersections of militarism, empire, and displacement. Teasing out the complex interplay of southern metaphors that made the juxtaposition of South Vietnamese and Confederate flags at the January 6 insurrection possible, I posit that what links South Vietnam and the US South is a distinct articulation of southern memory and memorialization, forged in the wake of southern civil war defeat. Southern memory, however, is always already contested, manifesting in the US context either as Lost Cause mythology or as Black abolitionist remembrance. Southern

memory and southern metaphor can thus open up space for contingencies and interventions, to route South Vietnamese diasporic politics through Black freedom struggles instead of Confederate nostalgia.

In a *Washington Post* article dated January 14, 2021, Viet Thanh Nguyen wrote, “In America, white nationalists and Vietnamese nationalists share a common condition: a radicalized nostalgia for a lost country and a lost cause.”<sup>10</sup> Taking Nguyen’s observation as a point of departure, this essay analyzes the work of the writer Andrew Lam and the photographer Anh-My Lê, two 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans, to offer antiracist alternatives to the southern entanglements witnessed on January 6. While other South Vietnamese diasporic literature and art have utilized the US South as a backdrop or setting, Lam’s short story “Show and Tell” (1998) and Lê’s ongoing *Silent General* photographic series (2015–) are exemplary in invoking the iconography and vernacular of the US Civil War and southern patriotism in order to shed light on the occluded history of South Vietnam as a fallen nation—“a lost country and a lost cause.”<sup>11</sup> While this work is fraught with the risk of white conservative appropriation, I argue that it can ultimately point toward alternative southern imaginations routed through Black resistance and anti-imperialist critique. Put otherwise, Vietnamese American aesthetic interventions can help mitigate the dangerous potential collapse of South Vietnamese nationalism into white nationalism in the US racial context.

This essay contributes to existing scholarship that recenters Vietnamese American perspectives on the contested legacies of the US War in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> It also engages research exploring how Asian Americans, including Vietnamese Americans, in the US South disrupt the Black-white racial binary.<sup>13</sup> Expanding on these scholarly conversations, I ask: How and why do diasporic South Vietnamese cultural producers, who may or may not themselves have lived in the US South, engage southern memory and southern metaphor? What can South Vietnam as a pedagogical analytic tell us about historical shifts in the US racial landscape, from the obfuscating rhetoric of colorblind multiculturalism during the Clinton era to the violent resurgence of white nationalism in the contemporary moment? Lastly, this essay prompts Global South studies to attend to seemingly conservative southern spaces that do not easily cohere to the anti-imperialist, socialist, Third World Liberationist politics typically associated with the “Global South.” For example, it engages but ultimately diverges from Sunny Yang’s concept of a “global southscape,” which remaps the literary scholar Thadious Davis’s “southscape” to “include the Global South by reconfiguring literal and figurative distances between the US South and

Vietnam.”<sup>14</sup> Focusing on the particularity of *South* Vietnam and its juxtaposition with the US South, understood as the Confederacy *and* abolitionism, I trace southern memories and southern metaphors to unpack how the imperial afterlives of the US and Vietnamese civil wars continue to impress upon US racial politics, as evidenced at the January 6 Capitol Riot.

### **Southern Memory, Southern Nostalgia: Situating Andrew Lam and An-My Lê**

Before proceeding, it is helpful to clarify what Nguyen meant by a shared southern “radicalized nostalgia for a lost country and a lost cause.” After the US Civil War, southern nationalists sought to control the civil, religious, and literary memory of what the war meant. Lost Cause rhetoric idealized the Confederacy as a heroic struggle for states’ rights against the more powerful Union, eliding the ethics of slavery and the fight for Black freedom.<sup>15</sup> One aspect of the Lost Cause explicitly memorialized Confederate politics: the writing of Confederate histories, the building of monuments to commemorate Confederate soldiers, and the veneration of a struggle to counteract Union urbanism, industrial capitalism, and alleged moral decline. But another aspect seemingly sidestepped the political to romanticize the cultural: the chivalry and Christian virtue of antebellum plantation life, as exemplified by the iconic if tragic character of Quentin Compson in William Faulkner’s novels. According to Charles Reagan Wilson, in the postwar period the Lost Cause became about preserving white “Southern religious-moral identity” as a “chosen people,” precisely to obfuscate a more “abolitionist memory of the war” promoted by Black leaders such as Frederick Douglass.<sup>16</sup>

Similar nostalgic sentiments about the need to preserve a distinct southern culture and politics resonate with the South Vietnamese diasporic community. According to Thuy Vo Dang, anticommunism should be understood not only as a political ideology but also as a “cultural discourse” through which first-generation Vietnamese Americans “articulate their loss” of South Vietnam, “validate their existence in the United States,” “challenge the erasure of the South Vietnamese story,” and “teach the younger generation about South Vietnamese/American history.”<sup>17</sup> Like the post-Civil War white southern elite of the nineteenth century, South Vietnamese refugees understand nostalgia for a fallen South Vietnam as a cultural identity as much as, if not more so than, a political ideology, whose potential erasure threatens their very subjectivity. For these displaced refugees, South Vietnam came to symbolize a certain iteration of individualist freedom, ever threatened by repressive regimes like

communism and socialism in both Vietnam and the United States. However, southern parallels between the lost cause rhetoric of the US South and South Vietnam elide significant differences: while the US Civil War was fought to keep Black slaves as property, the Vietnamese Civil War, in which the United States intervened to further its imperial interests, was fought over different visions of a postcolonial Vietnam. These southern resonances, moreover, do not foreclose other forms of antiracist identification. For example, in his analysis of the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, to defend the Confederate monument of Robert E. Lee, David Lê, who self-identifies as a “queer Vietnamese man,” notes a “structural kinship” between Vietnamese Americans and Black Americans such as Frederick Douglass, who critiqued the building of Confederate monuments after the US Civil War.<sup>18</sup> Lê, in other words, routes South Vietnamese southern memory through the abolitionist activism of Black Reconstruction leaders rather than the racialized nostalgia of Charlottesville’s Confederate monument defenders.

Aside from Lê’s work, however, existing scholarship documenting historical and literary entanglements between the US South and South Vietnam largely elides Vietnamese American perspectives. For example, Joseph A. Fry details how the US South influenced and was influenced by Vietnam War policy.<sup>19</sup> Owen W. Gilman Jr. examines how southern writers such as Clyde Edgerton, Madison Smartt Bell, Winston Groom, and Yusef Komunyakaa map regional memories of the US Civil War—including experiences of defeat, traditions of honor, and the afterlives of slavery—onto national understandings of the Vietnam War.<sup>20</sup> Noting entanglements between the domestic and the imperial, Doris Betts argues that the “regional guilt over a morally unjustified war” that characterizes much of southern American literature has been extrapolated to feelings of national guilt over US intervention into Vietnam’s Civil War.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Michael Kreyling questions to what degree “the central historical referent for southern identity is no longer the Civil War but Vietnam,” given resonant complicated feelings of southern defeat.<sup>22</sup> What has yet to be analyzed, though, is why diasporic *South Vietnamese* cultural producers, such as Andrew Lam and An-My Lê, incorporate southern US history and symbolism into their work.

Both Lam and Lê spent their early childhood in South Vietnam before evacuating to the United States as youths in 1975. Born in 1964, Lam grew up in an affluent family in the temperate alpine city of Đà Lạt, which had been developed as a French colonial resort in the early twentieth century. Lam’s father, General Lâm Quang Thi, served in the Army of the Republic

of Vietnam. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, Lam's family left Vietnam for California when Lam was eleven years old. After studying biochemistry at the University of California, Berkeley, Lam earned a master's degree in fine arts from San Francisco State University. His books include *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* (2005), *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres* (2010), and *Birds of Paradise Lost* (2013). Lê, meanwhile, was born in Sài Gòn in 1960. Both her parents are professors who had studied in France: her father founded the Teachers College in Huế, served as vice dean of the Teachers College in Sài Gòn, and has taught education and American studies; her mother was an English literature professor.<sup>23</sup> After the Tết Offensive of 1968, Lê, her mother, and two brothers temporarily moved to Paris. They returned to Vietnam in 1973, after the withdrawal of US troops, only to evacuate two years later right before the Fall of Saigon, resettling in California. Lê received a master's degree in biology from Stanford before earning a master's in fine arts from Yale. Since 1999, Lê has taught photography at Bard College. Her photographic projects include *Việt Nam* (1994–98), *Small Wars* (1999–2002), and *29 Palms* (2003–4), which document, respectively, the afterlives of the Vietnam War on the postwar Vietnamese landscape, Vietnam War reenactors in North Carolina and Virginia, and US Marines in California training for war in the Middle East.

The biographical similarities between Lam and Lê are significant in two regards. First, as South Vietnamese refugees who left Vietnam in 1975, both were part of the first wave of political evacuees who preceded the boat refugee exodus. This first wave of roughly 125,000 refugees consisted primarily of anticommunist politicians of the fallen Republic of Vietnam, high-ranking officials of the South Vietnamese military, individuals connected first to the French colonists and then to the US government, military, or embassy, and their families—in other words, those most vulnerable to political retribution after the Fall of Saigon. On average, this group was highly educated, well connected, and multilingual, as well as intimately entangled with the anticommunist politics of the South Vietnamese government. Second, because they left Vietnam as children, Lam and Lê make up the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese refugees: those who spent their formative childhood years in Vietnam but who came of age in the United States, straddling both cultures and political contexts, grappling with the looming role of the US Civil War in shaping American racial politics. The 1.5 generation assimilated more than their first-generation parents, but on average retained more Vietnamese language and sensibilities than the US-born second generation. They were old enough to remember living through



the Vietnam War, but young enough to learn the US's narrative of the war in their classrooms and understand that it elided the figure of South Vietnam. Navigating both the US Civil War and Vietnam's Civil War and their spatial and temporal collisions, Lam and Lê therefore reach for the iconography and vernacular of the US South in order to make sense of the occluded diasporic memory of South Vietnam. What makes their work distinct from other Vietnamese American cultural production is the particular deployment of southern metaphor to articulate a collective South Vietnamese refugee experience.

To be clear, Lam and Lê are not South Vietnamese nationalists in the same sense as the Vietnamese Americans who participated in the January 6 insurrection; indeed, their work both probes and undermines the toxicity of a South Vietnamese nationalism that seeks to resurrect a masculinist, anticommunist nation at all costs, crowding out other visions of Vietnamese freedom across the homeland and diaspora. Nonetheless, Lam's writing and Lê's photography reference the US South's Lost Cause rhetoric as a southern metaphor through which to render Vietnamese refugees' collective memory of the fallen state of South Vietnam legible to an American audience more familiar with the politics of the US Civil War than the civil war of decolonization in Vietnam. But they also draw on their South Vietnamese experiences to make sense of the racial stratification of a politically divided US nation, offering unique insights into US domestic and imperial culture. In doing so, Lam's and Lê's work draw attention to the *particularity* of the South Vietnamese experience during and after Vietnam's Civil War—a particularity that is often overshadowed by US representations of the Vietnam War as a binary conflict between US-style democracy and North Vietnamese communism, erasing the South Vietnamese experience. To reach for the US Civil War as a southern metaphor for South Vietnam's own struggle, however, necessitates a reckoning with the vexed racial politics that have shaped the US South: white supremacy, chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and their anti-Black afterlives. This essay explores both the promises and the risks of these southern metaphors, emphasizing connections as well as disjunctures between South Vietnam and the US South, as interconnected yet distinct southern spaces.

Key to my analysis of southern metaphors—how South Vietnam gets represented in and through the US South—is a focus on southern silence. As Jay Winter reminds, silence, or the absence of speech, is performative and pregnant with meaning, particularly in representations of war and its afterlives.<sup>24</sup> Silence is both the result of historiographical occlusions—the silencing of Black abolitionist memories of the US Civil War and of South Vietnamese memories of the Vietnamese Civil War—and a formal device deployed in Lam's writing

and Lê's photography to negotiate southern metaphors. Rather than privilege voice or visibility, I query how silence operates across the uneven translations between South Vietnam and the US South, examining how the silent and/or silenced subject can reframe dominant narratives.<sup>25</sup> In Lam's short story "Show and Tell," a white southern American narrator literally gives voice to a silent South Vietnamese refugee, sidestepping the figure of the emancipated Black subject. In Lê's ongoing photographic series *Silent General*, in contrast, it is the South Vietnamese refugee photographer who is best positioned to reveal how the US Civil War and the US South continue to impress upon contemporary racial politics. In these pictures, it is not the South Vietnamese subject who is silent but the US Civil War general; it is not South Vietnam that needs to be vocalized but, rather, the US South and its long shadow over the US racial landscape. Read together, Lam's and Lê's literary and visual texts demonstrate how South Vietnamese memory can play a pedagogical role in illuminating how the contours of white supremacy and anti-Blackness, articulated in Lost Cause rhetoric, continue to shape the imperial and domestic contours of the contemporary United States, erupting in moments of stark juxtaposition such as was witnessed at the January 6 insurrection.

### **Southern Narration, Southern Illustration: Lam's "Show and Tell"**

Lam's short story "Show and Tell" grapples with complex dynamics of visuality and voice, silence and speech, probing the possibilities and limitations of representing the southern memory of South Vietnam through the US South. Published in 1998 during the height of the Clinton era, the piece emerged during a different political moment than the white supremacist revival that characterized the Trump administration and the January 6 Capitol Riot, though one in which the US South nonetheless played a key role in shaping racial politics. A charismatic, self-fashioned southern Democrat who pushed the Democratic Party toward a more centrist position while nonetheless embracing liberal multiculturalism, President Bill Clinton was characterized by Toni Morrison in a 1998 *New Yorker* piece, published just months before his impeachment, as "our first black President," his "white skin notwithstanding."<sup>26</sup> According to Morrison, Clinton embodied "every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas," and his public "crucifixion" as the "always and already guilty 'perp,'" hunted down by the prosecutor "who makes new laws out of the shards of those he breaks," mirrored the experiences of many Black men in the post-Jim Crow United States. Here the afterlives of

slavery and the Confederate South were on full display in the national theater of domestic political upheaval. Here Blackness and its corruption of white men had to be disciplined and policed. It is this political moment that shaped the writing, publication, and reception of Lam's "Show and Tell," which utilizes the iconography and vernacular of the post-Civil War US South to make sense of the resettlement of South Vietnamese refugees in the heart of empire.

Set in an eighth-grade classroom in 1970s San Francisco, Lam's short story features the show-and-tell presentations of three main characters: Billy Baxter, a school bully whose father fought in Vietnam; Cao Long Nguyen, a South Vietnamese refugee who just arrived from Vietnam; and Robert Quentin Mitchell, or Bobby, a southern American transplant who befriends Cao, whom he affectionately refers to as "Kal Nguyen—Refugee."<sup>27</sup> Told from the first-person viewpoint of Bobby, the story quite literally narrates South Vietnamese subjectivity—both that of the diegetic character, Cao, *and* that of the Vietnamese American author, Lam—from the perspective of the US South, grappling with questions of failed masculinity in the wake of multiple military defeats: the US South after the US Civil War, South Vietnam after Vietnam's Civil War, and the United States writ large after the US War in Vietnam. In contrast to dominant representations of the Vietnam War that elide the South Vietnamese experience, "Show and Tell" renders South Vietnamese subjectivity legible by routing it through the genealogical memory of the US South.

"Show and Tell" commences with the teacher, Mr. K, introducing Cao as a refugee from Vietnam to the eighth-grade class. Billy shouts "cool!" and immediately flattens Vietnam as a signifier of war and American masculine struggle: "where my Daddy came back from with this big old scar and his chest and a bunch of grossed out stories," "where they have helicopters and guns and VCs."<sup>28</sup> Billy's representation of Vietnam mirrors the dominant visual tropes circulated by popular American Vietnam War films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), in effect foreclosing other visions of Vietnam from taking root in the classroom space. Later at lunch, Billy—a possible reference to Lieutenant Colonel William "Bill" Kilgore from *Apocalypse Now*—violently interpellates Cao into his Vietnam War schematic, asking, "Your Daddy a VC? Your Daddy the one who gave my Daddy that goddamn scar?"<sup>29</sup> Billy's taunts collapse Vietnam's Civil War into an imperial conflict between American soldiers and Vietnamese communists, erasing the specificity of Cao's identity as a *South Vietnamese* refugee whose family too had been terrorized by the so-called VC. Because Cao does not speak English, however, he cannot respond: "The new kid didn't say nothing."<sup>30</sup> Billy's narrative rep-

resentation of the Vietnam War goes uncontested and is even elaborated in his show-and-tell presentation the next day, during which he invokes iconic photographs of the war—Nick Ut’s “napalm girl,” Phan Thị Kim Phúc, and Malcolm Browne’s self-immolating Buddhist monk, Thích Quảng Đức—to depict Vietnam as a space of violent chaos. Reinforcing visual representation with oral narration, Billy concludes with “another picture of dead people in black pajamas along this road,” saying “these are VCs and my Daddy got at least a dozen of them before he was wounded himself,” at which point Cao “buried his face in his arms and cried.”<sup>31</sup>

Cao’s inability to speak fluent English inhibits his capacity to contest Billy’s representation of the Vietnam War, which erases the specificity of his South Vietnamese narrative as well as his happy, familial memories of Vietnam prior to the war’s outbreak. In “Show and Tell,” he therefore requires the narrator, Bobby, to help ventriloquize his South Vietnamese experience to their American peers. Interestingly, Bobby not only vocalizes Cao’s Vietnamese narrative into English; he also, by virtue of his own subjectivity as a recent southern American transplant from New Orleans, uses southern metaphor to translate Cao’s *South Vietnamese* story into the vernacular of the *US South*, rendering intelligible the specificity of South Vietnam to their eighth-grade classmates.

To unpack how the US South and the legacy of the US Civil War shapes Bobby’s subjectivity—and how this legacy then sparks a connection between Bobby and Cao, two displaced southern boys—I turn to Lam’s depiction of Bobby’s own show-and-tell presentation. Via a narration of his family tree, Bobby firmly situates his mother’s side of the family as the plantation-owning class in pre-Civil War Louisiana, depicting generations of noble grandeur that slowly deteriorated in the wake of southern civil war defeat. Bobby’s “great-great-Granddaddy Charles Boyle the third . . . was this rich man in New Orleans” who had “a big old plantation during the Civil War,” but because he “supported the losing side” he “lost everything and killed himself after the war ended.”<sup>32</sup> Bobby’s ninety-seven-year-old great-aunt Jenny Ann Quentin, meanwhile, “lives in this broken-down mansion outside of New Orleans” and “talks to ghosts and curses them Yankees for winning the war,” stubbornly clinging to remnants of the Lost Cause in the face of diminishing wealth and status.<sup>33</sup> Bobby’s maternal family name Quentin clearly references Faulkner’s character Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936): the tragic southern gentleman who desperately tries to uphold an ideal of southern virtue despite the dissolution of his plantation-owning family—and by extension, the US South—after the US Civil War, and who

ultimately takes his own life. Similarly, Bobby's maternal family is plagued by untimely suicides, which his Mama describes as "a family curse or something," and the moral breakdown of Bobby's own nuclear family culminates in his father's departure when Bobby is four and the subsequent displacement of Bobby, his sister, and his mother from New Orleans to San Francisco.<sup>34</sup>

Bobby concludes his show-and-tell presentation, "In summary, had we won the war a hundred years ago, we might have all stayed around in the South. But as it is, my family tree has its leaves fallen all over the States."<sup>35</sup> Here Lam draws parallels between two distinct experiences of southern displacement and diaspora following civil war defeat. If readers change "a hundred years ago" to "this year," Bobby's observation could also apply to Cao, whose family would have stayed in South Vietnam rather than evacuate to the "States" if "the South" had "won the war." These shared experiences of losing a home(land) and resettling elsewhere bind Bobby and Cao together in their San Francisco classroom: two social misfits who by working together are able to contest Billy's dominant representation of the Vietnam War and its disregard of South Vietnam.

After Billy's show-and-tell presentation, which causes Cao to cry, Cao marches up to the blackboard at the front of the classroom and begins to draw scenes from his life, countering Billy's violent narrative of the Vietnam War with his own joy-filled illustration of South Vietnam: "First he drew a picture of a boy sitting on this water buffalo and then he drew this rice field in green. Then he drew another boy on another water buffalo and they seemed to be racing. He drew other kids running along the bank with their kites in the sky and you could tell they were laughing and yelling, having a good time."<sup>36</sup> Illustration alone, however, cannot completely counteract Billy's audio-visual presentation, so Cao implores Bobby to narrate in English on his behalf:

Kal tapped the blackboard with his chalk again and . . . then I don't know how but I just kinda knew. So I just took a deep breath and then I said, OK, OK, Kal, uhmm, said he used to live in this village with his Mama and Papa near where the river runs into the sea . . .

I talked. He drew.

We fell into a rhythm.<sup>37</sup>

In this passage, the silent story of the South Vietnamese refugee is quite literally given voice by the transplanted southern American subject—the story of South Vietnam narrated through a descendant of the pre-Civil War US South. As the scene continues, Cao illustrates and Bobby narrates the subsequent Việt Cộng attack on Cao's family, the loss of Cao's father, Cao and his mother's escape from Vietnam as boat refugees, and their resettlement in San Francisco.



South Vietnam slowly emerges to the American audience—both the diegetic eighth-grade students as well as the short story’s readers—as a coherent subject worthy of respect via transposition through the US South: what I call southern metaphor. Lam, however, does not depict this interaction as a unidirectional transaction—Bobby granting Cao the “gift of freedom” or saving Cao from his silence.<sup>38</sup> Instead, the interaction is represented as one of mutual exchange, given that in an earlier scene, after Bobby’s own show-and-tell presentation about his family tree, Cao had gifted Bobby a portrait of himself, which Bobby then tapes on his US South family-tree chart once he gets home. In other words, Cao first gives Bobby the gift of southern identity, of a particular rootedness within his own southern family history, which empowers Bobby to in turn branch out and assist other displaced southern subjects like Cao. In sum, Cao and Bobby connect over shared narratives of southern loss and displacement, mapping sociopolitical connections between South Vietnam and the US South.

In “Show and Tell,” southern loss is also represented as loss of a father, a crisis of masculinity, and the breakdown of the nuclear family after civil war. Both Cao and Bobby are fatherless boys: Cao’s show-and-tell presentation reveals that his father died in a communist reeducation camp, and in Bobby’s own show-and-tell presentation he lies and says that his own father had died to avoid explaining the lack of paternal branches on his father’s side of the family tree. Cao’s and Bobby’s fatherless families are a key point of bullying for Billy, who conflates the loss of a father figure with the loss of masculinity and heterosexuality, making a point to depict Cao and Bobby’s friendship as a perverse queer relationship. Similarly, the military defeats of the US South and South Vietnam after their respective civil wars have also been associated with a crisis of masculinity, with lost cause rhetoric then taking on an overcompensating masculinist veneer. Interestingly, however, in “Show and Tell” it is not Cao and Bobby who embody this insecure hypermasculine stance, but Billy: Cao and Bobby never outright reject Billy’s accusations of queerness, seemingly comfortable in their less masculine pursuits of drawing and comic book reading as well as their shared intimacy as mutual social outcasts. In contrast, Billy is repeatedly reprimanded by Mr. K. for venerating “the atrocities your father committed in Indochina.”<sup>39</sup> Vocalizing a liberal antiwar stance, Mr. K. elides the fact that though Billy’s own father had not died or disappeared, he was wounded; and that like the soldiers of the US South and South Vietnam, his father had also suffered crushing military defeat, calling to mind Gilman’s, Betts’s, and Kreyling’s analysis of the affective and literary resonances between US Civil War and Vietnam War representations, as discussed above. In other

words, in “Show and Tell,” it is not only South Vietnam and the US South but the US nation writ large that must grapple with questions of military defeat and failed masculinity in the wake of civil and imperial warfare.

For antiracist readers, Lam’s depiction of Bobby—great-great-grandson of the slave-owning, southern plantation class—as an empathetic narrator, as the ally of Cao against the bullying of Billy, may cause discomfort, for seemingly reproducing rather than challenging the Lost Cause narrative of noble struggle in the face of inevitable decline—a narrative that neatly sidesteps the horrors of slavery. Cao’s reliance on Bobby to narrate his story thus implicates South Vietnam’s narrative with the white supremacy of the US South’s Confederacy. The last scene of the short story, however, troubles any easy reading of Bobby and, by extension, Cao. After his silently illustrated show-and-tell presentation, Cao suddenly repeats in a loud voice a phrase recently taught to him by Bobby: “*Hee, Fooock headss, leeevenme olone!*”<sup>40</sup> In the last sentence of “Show and Tell,” Bobby narrates as Cao walks back to his seat: “He was smiling and looking straight at me with his teary eyes like he was saying *Robert Quentin Mitchell, ain’t we a team or what?* and I wanted to say yes, yes, Kal Long Nguyen—Refugee, yes we are but I just didn’t say anything.”<sup>41</sup> In a radical reversal, then, it is Bobby, not Cao, who at the end is rendered the silent subject.

How should we read Bobby’s inability, or perhaps refusal, to speak in this concluding sentence? On the one hand, “Show and Tell” ends with Cao’s reclamation of voice: a defiant warning against further taunts, an exclamation of victory for countering Billy’s dominant narrative representation of Vietnam. His South Vietnamese story vocalized through a representative of the US South, Cao is now rendered legible to his American classmates as a full, speaking subject. In this scenario, we can read Bobby’s silence as a nod to Cao’s newfound independence, a respectful deferral to Cao to have the last word. On the other hand, we can also read this last scene as a premonition of unraveled coalitions: Bobby’s refusal to agree that he and Cao are indeed on the same team. That is, once the South Vietnamese refugee reclaims their voice and is no longer dependent on the southern American narrator to tell their story, the latter may retaliate, made uneasy by the newfound self-reliance of the nonwhite speaking subject. Mimi Thi Nguyen has written about the indebted gratitude expected of South Vietnamese refugees by Americans for “saving” them from Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> In this scene, Cao refuses such indebtedness, rendering Bobby speechless.

By suggesting a potential breakdown in alliance between Bobby and Cao, Lam ultimately draws attention to the asymmetries between the US Civil War and Vietnam’s Civil War, between the US South and South Vietnam: even

as southern metaphors may serve to render South Vietnam intelligible to an American audience, the two should not be conflated or collapsed. Bobby, I argue, is ultimately an embodiment of Clinton-era politics and its limitations. Like Clinton, the affable southern “Black president” who elides actual Black people, the liberal multiculturalist who embraces diversity solely when convenient, Bobby assists Cao only to the extent that it also benefits himself. That is, in helping Cao to tell his South Vietnamese story, Bobby is able to vindicate his own southern narrative in the wake of US Civil War defeat, a narrative similarly derided by the likes of Billy. Thus, in “Show and Tell” Lam grapples with the complex contours of southern metaphors, noting that while in this particular 1990s moment South Vietnam can become legible only via mediation through the US South, due to the systemic erasure of South Vietnamese subjectivity by US media and historiography, ideally the South Vietnamese story could stand on its own. In introducing a fissure in the final lines of the story, Lam offers an opening to disentangle the South Vietnamese narrative from the white supremacy of the Confederate South. How South Vietnamese memory then navigates the ongoing afterlives of slavery and anti-Blackness that shape the US racial landscape writ large, however, is left unanswered in “Show and Tell,” necessitating a turn to Lê’s *Silent General* series.

### **Southern Landscapes, Southern Frames: Lê’s *Silent General***

If Clinton was America’s “first black president,” to quote Toni Morrison, then Trump was its “first white president,” to quote Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose “ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power.”<sup>43</sup> Whereas previous presidents had obfuscated structural racism with the language of multiculturalism, Trump made the power of whiteness explicit, targeting Muslims, Central Americans, and Black Americans, and emboldening Klansmen and other Confederate apologists to publicly express their white nationalist grievances. Lê started her ongoing *Silent General* series in 2015, when the polarizing political rhetoric that characterized the 2016 election and the four years under Trump began to circulate. In previous photographic projects, Lê had examined the landscape of war and the “complicated beauty” of US military exercises via a focus on clearly bounded topics—Vietnam War reenactors in the southern US forests of Virginia and North Carolina or US Marines training for deployment to Iraq at 29 Palms—but in 2015 she felt “the war was coming home, on the home front,” necessitating a wider spatial and temporal framing of war and its unruly aftermath: one that spanned the entire US landscape and that grappled with a range of “contemporary issues I

was concerned about, like immigration, racial tensions, social justice,” from a longer historical perspective.<sup>44</sup> Crucially, *Silent General* pinpoints the US Civil War’s influence in shaping contemporary US politics and interpolates South Vietnamese refugees into the contested racial landscape of the US South.

To help organize the broad scope of *Silent General*, which captures everything from migrant workers in California’s Central Valley to churches in Montana, the press on the White House Lawn to border patrol along the US-Mexico border, Lê turned to Walt Whitman’s *Specimen Days* for inspiration. Journalistic, autobiographical, and lyrical, “brimming with human sympathy that transcends political schism” and structured as a collection of prose fragments written across two decades, *Specimen Days* interweaves Whitman’s Civil War experiences with his musings about geography and literature—a format that inspired Lê to string together suites of six or seven pictures from her ongoing, multiyear “American road trip” to “suggest something like an essay,” probing the “space in between each picture” as well as the meanings that arise from their juxtapositions.<sup>45</sup> The series title, *Silent General*, is taken from one of Whitman’s fragments about Ulysses S. Grant, who “distinguished himself as a general” on the battlefields of the US Civil War, fighting for the Union against the slave-owning Confederacy.<sup>46</sup>

An analysis of “Fragment I” of *Silent General* reveals the key role of the US Civil War, Vietnam’s Civil War, the US South, and South Vietnam in shaping the origins of the series, and by extension, the contemporary US racial landscape that it seeks to capture. First featured at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, the longest-running survey of American art, “Fragment I” consists of seven pictures taken in Louisiana between 2015 and 2016 with Lê’s signature nineteenth-century-style large-format, five-by-seven sheet-film hood-and-bellows camera. In interviews, Lê has credited nineteenth-century Civil War photographers such as Timothy H. O’Sullivan for inspiration.<sup>47</sup> Her photographs thus reference the US Civil War in both style and content.

The *Silent General* series began in 2015, when Lê was invited to photograph the set of *Free State of Jones*, a Hollywood film about Newton Knight, a poor white farmer from Mississippi who led a successful rebellion against Confederate authorities in Jones County during the US Civil War. According to Matthew McConaughey, who plays Knight, the film feels very “relevant today,” given ongoing voter suppression across the US South: “Reconstruction is a verb that’s ongoing.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, the afterlives of the US Civil War continue to impress upon the present. By themselves, however, the photographs of the film set felt “insufficient” to Lê, and it was not until she returned to New Orleans in 2016 for another commission, after the Charleston church

massacre of June 2015 and during heightened activism to remove the city's Confederate monuments, that the *Silent General* series began to take shape around questions of historical repetition: "a looping around of past, present, and future."<sup>49</sup> Lê became inspired by "the conversation that was going on between a Civil War set and this sense of history sort of coming back to haunt us, with the 2016 presidential election opening all these wounds and starting all these conversations."<sup>50</sup>

"Fragment I" includes one color photograph from the *Free State of Jones* set, shot in Bush, Louisiana.<sup>51</sup> Featuring a scene from the Battle of Corinth, Lê's picture captures actors in trenches, gray-smoked explosions, an overhanging boom microphone, and a white sheet for lighting, blending past and present, war and its reenactment. Three photographs capture the days leading up to and just after the tumultuous November 2016 election, noting the particular impact of Trump's victory on the post-Civil War US South: Black congregants after Sunday Mass on a sunny street corner under construction; burning sugarcane fields in Houma, Louisiana; and black graffiti on a rust-red store wall that reads in capital letters, "FUCK THIS RACIST ASSHOLE PRESIDENT." Another photograph from April 2016 features four trees—two bare, two with leaves—standing serenely in the middle of a steel-gray swamp in Venice, Louisiana: an enduring reminder that, in Lê's words, "our American landscape and the communities within it transcend this cultural and political moment."<sup>52</sup>

The remaining two photographs of "Fragment I"—titled "General P.G.T. Beauregard, Monument, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2016" (fig. 2) and "Day Workers, November 10, Venice, Louisiana, 2016" (fig. 3)—most clearly depict the entanglements of the US Civil War with Vietnam's Civil War, the US South with South Vietnam, with which this essay grapples. "General P.G.T. Beauregard, Monument" features a statue of Confederate general Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard perched in the middle of a grassy New Orleans square, the hazy gray sky a backdrop as black cars and red cars drive past. Born in 1818 to a prominent Creole family, Beauregard grew up on a sugarcane plantation outside New Orleans.<sup>53</sup> In February 1861, after Louisiana seceded from the Union, Beauregard resigned from the US military to serve as a Confederate general. He is credited with ordering the first shots of the US Civil War during the bombardment of Fort Sumter in April 1861 and was instrumental to the early Confederate victory at the First Battle of Bull Run.

When Lê visited New Orleans in November 2016, the monuments venerating Beauregard, Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, and the Battle of Liberty Place were being targeted for removal—the result of years of activism by city residents and Take Em Down NOLA, a Black- and community-led group





**Figure 2.**  
 “General P.G.T. Beauregard, Monument, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2016.” An-My Lê, *Silent General*, “Fragment I.” © An-My Lê, courtesy of the Artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

whose driving principle is “We don’t need a renaming commission; we need an entire restructuring of the system.”<sup>54</sup>

In 1870, Frederick Douglass had critiqued the construction of Confederate monuments “to canonize rebels,” predicting that “monuments to the ‘lost cause’ will prove monuments of folly, both in the memories of a wicked rebellion which they must necessarily perpetuate, and in the failure to accomplish the particular purpose had in view by those who built them.”<sup>55</sup> While the Lost Cause myth unfortunately gained strength in the decades after the US Civil War, Douglass’s words have finally begun to ring true. Feeling threatened, white supremacists arrived in New Orleans waving machine guns, Confederate flags, and Trump banners to “defend” monuments that lionized not only slavery but also the settler occupation of Bvllbancha.<sup>56</sup> Beauregard’s descendants argued that Beauregard was reformed enough upon his death for the statue of him, riding a horse into battle, to remain on public display. In an interview clip included at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, Lê explains that she “started photographing those monuments because they are such an incredible reminder of the history but also perhaps there was something about history repeating itself, or something about progress not quite being progress.”<sup>57</sup> As Lê explored previously in *Việt*

*Nam* (1994–98), one cannot understand Vietnam's present without grappling with the influence of Vietnam's Civil War. Similarly, one cannot apprehend the US's present without addressing US Civil War history and the ongoing afterlives of slavery, which shaped Trump's white supremacist rhetoric and sparked competing visions of the country's future. Time loops nonlinearly, interweaving past and present, haunting what is to come.

What is striking about Lê's photograph of the Beauregard monument is the hazy screen through which one views the dark silhouette of the Confederate general (fig. 2). The screen serves as a physical manifestation of both temporal and spatial mediation: how the US Civil War mediates both the preservation of and the protest against Confederate monuments in the present, as well as how Vietnam's Civil War and the photographer it displaced mediates the US's understanding of itself at this political juncture. In contrast to Lam's "Show and Tell," the power dynamics here are reversed: it is not the Vietnamese refugee subject who is rendered silent, obscured behind the narrative or screen of the US Civil War, but the Confederate soldier, the silent general about to be dethroned, who is shrouded behind the veil, privileging the perspective of the image maker, the South Vietnamese refugee photographer, Lê.<sup>58</sup> Rather than reify voice as a symbol of power, Lê's work emphasizes the political import of the silent yet visual medium of photography, routing the ongoing legacy of the US Civil War through her own South Vietnamese frame.<sup>59</sup> In interviews, Lê cautions that biography "can be a red herring in visual art. . . . My story has been valuable to my work only because it provided me with intense curiosity about certain situations, places, and sensations."<sup>60</sup> Rather than reduce Lê's perspective as a South Vietnamese photographer to a recitation of biographical origin, I am interested instead in how Lê's own experience of civil war in Vietnam attunes her to the ongoing influence of the US Civil War on the country's racial landscape, necessitating a parallax analysis of the imperial and the domestic, of civil war afterlives across multiple southern fronts.

"Fragment I," moreover, juxtaposes the US South and South Vietnam through its photographic content. The seventh image of "Fragment I" is set in Venice, Louisiana, seventy-seven miles south of New Orleans and the last town along the Mississippi River accessible by car (fig. 3). Three figures in red, blue, and white hoodies, respectively, their brown faces turned away from the camera, tend to plants and hug a dog on a grassy green lawn overlooking the river's murky brown-green waters, adjacent to a pier and a white-and-brown corrugated metal overhang protecting an area for storing fishing boats. According to Simi Kang, who accompanied Lê on her trip to take this picture, the dock is run by a South Vietnamese refugee called Handy and staffed almost entirely

by Central American workers. Handy consistently refers to the workers as his sons and brothers, evidencing “complicated, often ad hoc families that folks make on the coast and across the Gulf South” in response to “the imperative of environmental sacrifice: if these men choose each other as kin—treat each other as kin—then they will help keep each other’s families, homes, labor, and futures alive.”<sup>61</sup> In her analysis of the photograph, Marguerite Nguyen notes that rather than reify a Black-white racial binary and exoticize the South Vietnamese and Central Americans workers as somehow foreign to the US South, “Lê gives these bodies a quotidian feel,” naturalizing “their presence in the Louisianan landscape.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, South Vietnamese refugees first resettled in southern Louisiana following the Fall of Saigon, drawn by the comparable climate, Catholic influence, and French colonial culture. Today, Vietnamese Americans make up almost two thirds of the commercial shrimping fleet of Louisiana, the second-largest supplier of seafood in the United States.<sup>63</sup>

In the photograph, the unmarked South Vietnamese workers tend to the lands and waters of the US South—the soils and rivers that also bear the southern memory of chattel slavery and its afterlives. The gently undulating brown-gray waters suggest the recent passing of a fishing boat, calling to mind



**Figure 3.** “Day Workers, November 10, Venice, Louisiana, 2016.” An-My Lê, *Silent General*, “Fragment I.” © An-My Lê, courtesy of the Artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.

Christina Sharpe's invocation of "the wake" to refer not only to the rippling afterlives of the transatlantic slave ship and the responsibility to keep watch over the dead but also the need to come to consciousness via antiracist praxis.<sup>64</sup> Wake can refer as well to waves left behind by a refugee ship, invoking the southern memory of Vietnamese refugees' boat migration out of post-Civil War Vietnam. Southern metaphors thus extend expansively, invoking both Black *and* South Vietnamese histories of displacement as well as their contemporary co-presence on the lands and waters of the US South.

Read together, the suite of pictures that make up "Fragment I" juxtapose South Vietnamese presence with that of Confederate monuments, prompting questions also raised by Lam's "Show and Tell": namely, how do South Vietnamese refugees navigate the racial politics of the US South and its Lost Cause rhetoric? In charting resonances between South Vietnam and the US South, between the US Civil War and Vietnam's Civil War, do South Vietnamese subjects inherit the exclusions or the privileges of white supremacy, articulated during both the nineteenth century and today? What possibilities are there for antiracist intervention, to avoid the pitfalls of the January 6 Capitol Riot's southern metaphors and instead route South Vietnamese memory through Black freedom struggles?

Reflecting on accompanying Lê to photograph both the South Vietnamese fishing economy and the growing protests around Confederate statues, Kang writes: "Perhaps in a place where white supremacy is equally visible in the form of confederate monuments in city squares and uncertain working conditions at water's edge, the resistance we witnessed—whether rebuilding chosen families or tearing down memorials to racist violence—can fundamentally change what we understand American life to be. Vivid and frank, An-My's images show both possibilities: the impossible present and . . . what is to come."<sup>65</sup> In other words, the looping of history is intersected with the progress of change. If we are living in "the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation," to quote Sharpe, then Lê's photographs can be read as a South Vietnamese iteration of "wake work": a "mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing" the afterlives of slavery via a dwelling with southern memory and southern metaphor and their multiple, complex articulations.<sup>66</sup> By juxtaposing South Vietnamese labor with Black activism, "Fragment I" of Lê's *Silent General* series captures the contested present and emergent futures of the US racial landscape, through the frame of a South Vietnamese refugee's watchful camera.

The January 6 Capitol Riot evidenced one kind of southern metaphor, juxtaposing South Vietnamese and Confederate nationalism to render stark what

Viet Thanh Nguyen called a shared “radicalized nostalgia for a lost country and a lost cause.” But South Vietnamese memory in the wake of war, empire, and refugee displacement can reach for other southern metaphors and possibilities routed through Black resilience, deployed not for reactionary purposes but for racial justice. South Vietnamese diasporic cultural production—Lê’s photography as well as Lam’s writing—reaches across intersecting southern geographies, offering expansive modalities for relating otherwise.

### Notes

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