

## **“Black Gash of Shame”: Assemblages of Memory in the 1981 Vietnam Veterans Memorial Competition**

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### **Abstract**

In a manner unprecedented in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Vietnam War shook the American national identity. A highly unpopular war contested by the citizenry that, at the same time, has afforded a hyper-visibility in the media and culture during and well after its long *durée*, discourses of public commemoration of the Vietnam War have become inextricably tied to the question of how war is brought to a closure in American society. This article investigates the 1981 Vietnam Veterans Memorial Competition and the competition’s historical “controversy” within this frame: how the selection of Maya Lin’s design—a black V-shaped stone horizontal to the earth and etched with the names of the American war dead—subverted the dominant codes of remembrance prevailing during Cold War American architectural culture. Taking from Nguyễn-Vo Thu-Huong’s description of memory as a “political and ethical act,” this study situates Lin’s aesthetic intervention within the shifting historical currents of the post-Vietnam War conjuncture, arguing that the competition served as a recuperative project for the American liberal self-identity in the war’s aftermath. Against this frame, this article thus argues that Lin’s design intervenes in and ultimately displaces this project, opening critical space for counter memory-work and political possibility.

**Keywords:** Vietnam War, Memorials, Aesthetics, Commemorative Art

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## Introduction

“Various surgical procedures of memory have healed the wounded reputation of the American soldier. The black wall is the most symbolic—a cut and a wound in the earth, but also a scar and a suture.”

— Viet Thanh Nguyen in *Nothing Ever Dies*

In 1975, when the Vietnam War finally ended, there were few who considered that a public memorial should or would ever be built to it. Most Americans felt that they knew the war only too well from nightly news reports on television. The final images of the mad scramble of departure atop the American embassy in Saigon were burned into the public mind. President Ford declared afterwards that the time had come to “put Vietnam behind us,” (Binder 1975, 1).

This article examines the visual legacy of the Vietnam War and what this legacy discloses about how we come to know and remember the war. Partly due to a lack of national reconciliation, the Vietnam War remained before the 21st century “the most chronicled, documented, reported, filmed, taped, and, in all likelihood, narrated war in United States history” (Rowe 1989, 197). But, as Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us in *Nothing Ever Dies*, the highly visible can be a type of invisibility such that the profusion of text and talk on the war actually conceals the costs borne by those hidden in sight—the lifelong costs that turn the fall of Saigon, for historical instance, into a “history of false endings” for the Vietnamese (Nguyễn-Vo 2005, 157). As scholars and public historians have repeatedly documented, Americans have instead been obsessed with the Vietnam War as an American tragedy, focusing relentlessly on the trauma and spectacle of its violence through mainstream media, iconography, and discourse.

Examining a proliferation of this historical moment, the war memorial, this study further considers how this (hyper)visuality of the Vietnam War, and its attendant processes of remembering and forgetting, encodes how we represent the war and, perhaps more significantly, whom among its dead we mourn. This research investigates the 1981 Vietnam Veterans Memorial competition,

organized by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), and its ensuing controversy within this frame: the ways in which the selection of the design by Maya Lin, then an undergraduate senior studying architecture at Yale, reinscribed and subverted the dominant modes of remembering prevailing during post-Vietnam War visual culture. Taking from Nguyễn-Vo Thu-Huong's explanation of memory as a "political and ethical act" (Nguyễn-Vo 2005, 159), I locate this aesthetic intervention within the conjuncture of the post-Vietnam War and Cold War era that—as this study shows—shaped the memorial as a recuperative project for the American self-identity in the war's aftermath and enduring legacy as much as it was a commemorative depiction of those who fought in it. Bringing Lin's work into this frame, this article thus argues that her work intervenes in and ultimately displaces reconciliation as a central credo in the modern war memorial, opening up critical space for encountering loss—and who merits mourning—as non-representational. In this study, I ultimately argue how war memorials, as national sites for the management and mnemonic expression of war, have been contested by cultural producers like Lin through unsettling nationalist frames of remembering in order to formulate alternative sites of memory and (geo)political possibility.

This article begins by a critical reading of the Vietnam War, forwarding the interpretation that the war as an event of *images*, that is, as a cultural-aesthetic event, is inextricable from how we come to know it in history. This study first examines post-war representations of the Vietnam veteran, locating the VVMF's proposal for a war memorial within the war's contested visual legacy. Turning to Lin's design, this article performs a close reading of the memorial itself and its media controversy, drawing upon criticism—both in the press and by veterans—to reveal how the memorial's non-representational form complicates this project. Lastly, this study considers the transnational engagement with the memorial, reading *across* English, French, and Vietnamese-language press in the U.S. and Vietnam as a means to reveal how national(ist) projects such as commemorative art and

architecture are entangled within transborder struggles to represent and remember war through the medium of the image.

### **Historical Amnesia and Forgetting**

On May 7, 1975, President Ford declared the end of American involvement in the Vietnam War. In a sweeping appeal to the national consciousness, Ford advocated for the resettlement of 130,000 Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees against tides of rising opposition to the government's refugee relief program, the *New York Times* reported. "The vast majority of Americans today want these people to have another opportunity to escape the probability of death," Ford convicted (Binder 1975, 1). Left unaddressed in Ford's speech, however, was the figure of the Vietnam veteran: individuals who had also chanced death but, as Myra MacPherson later wrote in the *Washington Post*, came to represent, at the end of the decade, the "embarrassing relics of an unwanted war," (MacPherson 1977, A1).

A disabling and highly unpopular war contested by social movements, the media, and the citizenry, the Vietnam War shook the "stability and coherence" of American exceptionalism (Lowe 1998, 5). Though the U.S.'s involvement evolved incrementally through the early 1970s, the very nature of the conflict—a guerilla war defined in large part by a series of "inconclusive" engagements (Hagopian 1980, 73) with the enemy—frustrated the production of traditional war reportage, accounts of specific campaigns yielding definitive outcomes. As a result, the national identity as global military diplomat and leader was disrupted by a decentered, politically fractured field of "symbolic actions and reactions," as scholar Lisa Yoneyama referred to talk and text (and as I show, images) materialized in the war (Yoneyama 1999, 24-29). The image of the Vietnam veteran, situated at the center of the war's political straits, therefore became a symbolic—and *visual*—site for contestation and debate over its most fundamental question: how should we represent and remember the war?

After the withdrawal of U.S. troops on March 30, 1973, the public came to identify veterans returning from abroad with the widely

accepted calamity of the war. Rather than seen as citizen-soldiers serving a “noble cause,” as President Reagan would later declare of the U.S.’s military interventions (New York Times 1980, 1), veterans stood in instead for the U.S.’s bitter defeat and delegitimization as a geopolitical actor on the world stage. The main agent of this shift in public rhetoric, the mass media, proliferated images of not only the crisis abroad during the height of wartime criticism, but its aftershocks brought home through the victimizing trope of the “drug-addled,” “psychopathic” Vietnam veteran. Visual depictions of Vietnam veterans published in the *Washington Post* in the months after withdrawal showed veterans wounded, hobbling on crutches, or seated in wheelchairs. For example, a cartoon by artist Paul Conrad shows a silhouette of the Iwo Jima memorial transformed into four figures labeled Vietnam veteran—two standing, two wheelchair-bound—raising an upside down American flag (Figure 1). Notably, Conrad’s figurative conjoinment of the image of the Vietnam veteran and that of the nation, produced through the metonym of the flag, demonstrates not only their ‘inverted’ but also entangled symbolisms following the war.



**Figure 1.** Editorial Cartoon in the *Washington Post* (Conrad 1974, A18)

The media conflation of “the war with the warrior,” as President Carter expressed it (New York Times 1978, 1), not only subverted the traditional images of the veteran, but also resulted in the alienation of Vietnam veterans from the political sphere. Returning home to a bloated Veteran Affairs bureaucracy and ballooning economy, veterans had the thorny task of advocating their needs to a disaffected public inclined to forget their existence (Hagopian 2009, 80). Often, this came through in overt demonstrations for recognition and improved material benefits. For example, the *New York Times* reported seventeen public protests in 1973, the most prominent being a nineteen-day hunger strike and sit-in by twelve disabled Vietnam veterans at the Los Angeles office of Senator Alan Cranston in April (New York Times 1973, 1).

However, efforts for political representation also coalesced into new coalitions that sought to overcome the “fundamental challenge” of public forgetting (Scruggs 1977, A17). The creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund in 1979 explicitly aimed at this goal; as Jan Scruggs, the organization’s founder, further wrote in the *Washington Post* of the Vietnam veteran, “The victory parades and hero status awarded to previous generations of military returnees were simply not present. [...] The indifference and lack of compassion that the veterans have received is a reflection of our lack of national reconciliation after Vietnam,” (Ibid). Lisa Lowe reminds us that national forgetting is also always mediated within the cultural space of nationhood, a symbolic terrain “introduced by the Statue of Liberty [...] and defended in the battle by the independent, self-made man.” Culture, Lowe continues, at once enfolds the citizen-subject into the national polity and expels the “unassimilable conflicts and particularities, [...] unrepresentable histories,” that unsettle the American self-identity (Lowe 1998, 6-7). As Scruggs explicitly connects, the post-war political project of the veteran therefore entailed and had to be routed through a project of *culture*, that is, a project of remembering and forgetting.

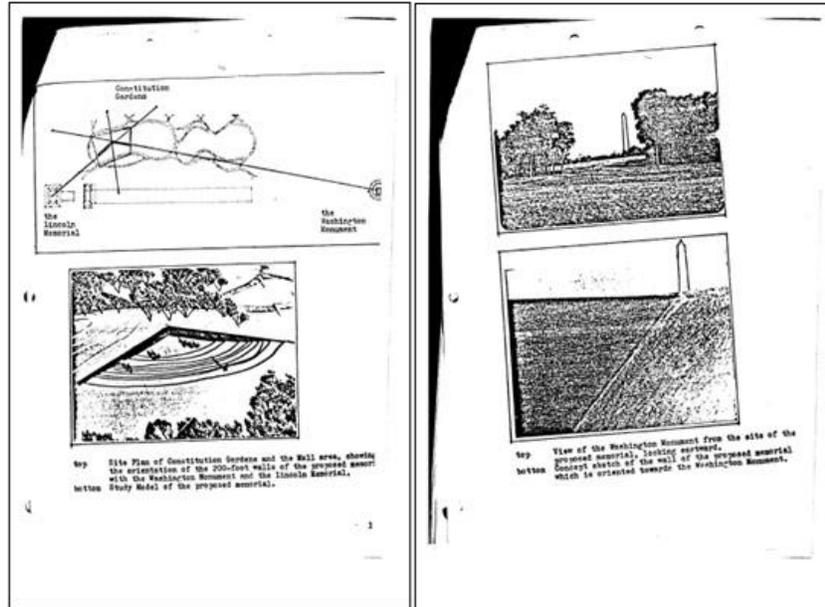
The VVMF's vision of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial thus emerged from a convergence of vectors, anchored in a narrative of national reconciliation. Pitched by Scruggs at a planning meeting for the Vietnam Veterans Week declared by Congress in May 1979, the idea for a memorial gained traction as a way for reinserting the veteran in national and political discourse (VVMF 1982, 5). In articulating the visual codes of U.S. military service—what historian Christina Schwenkel describes as the iconography of patriotism and service that first gained architectural currency during World War II—the memorial, moreover, became a central discussion point within veteran and policy-making circles over how best to “reconcile and reunify a nation shattered by a long and unpopular war,” (107; Scruggs 1979, A8). Indeed, the concept found bipartisan appeal among congressional leaders in the Vietnam Caucus, who recognized that the first step towards reconciliation involved the twin tasks of remedying the war and rehabilitating the image of the Vietnam veteran in the public mind (Hagopian 1980, 84). For example, introducing legislation authorizing the memorial's construction on the Washington Mall in 1980, Senator Charles Mathias argued its placement would “express the spirit of reconciliation and reunion that preserves us as a nation [now] that Vietnam is far enough in the past,” (Scruggs & Swerdlow 1980, 15). By framing the war “in the past,” Mathias implies the prospect of “reconciliation” not just as a closing resolution to the war, but to the divisions—between veterans and non-veterans—fractured by its outcome.

Crucial to this narrative was the language and logic of reconciliation that offered, in Naomi Paik's words, a “symbolic gesture of restitution” for the American self-identity (21). This logic, engendered by and operative within the geopolitical strategies and knowledge projects of the Cold War era, understood the U.S. as a defender of global capitalist freedom that, for that reason, rationalized military intervention—or, in Mimi-Thi Nguyen's words, the “gift of freedom”—as always exceptional and necessary (Kim 2010, 33; Nguyen 2012, 2-8). At the same time, the fallout of the Vietnam War

demonstrated the limits of this logic. Efforts by the government to contain the war's shifting discourse—for example, through national salutes and victory parades—failed to reach or move a national audience. The publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, moreover, exposed a history of public deception and misrepresentation of the war that, in turn, established the view of government officials as “agents of deceit” and “partisan” (New York Times 1971, 1). The rhetoric of reconciliation, steeped in the apolitical metaphors of healing, forgiveness and unity, therefore offered for the government both a point of (re)entry into the public discourse and an intelligible grammar for displacing the war to the past. Through this circuitous logic of forgiving (and forgetting), reconciliation then also performs a *recuperation* of the self-identity that seeks to manufacture for the national consciousness a rational course of progress out of U.S. military and geopolitical investments.

In turn, the VVMF adopted the same rhetoric in its early press releases of the competition. In a 1980 *Washington Post* op-ed, Scruggs qualifies his earlier emphasis on the lack of recognition for the Vietnam veteran, stressing instead the importance of reconciliation: “The memorial will not raise the dead. It will not heal the wounded. But, it will preserve the names of the Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice,” (Scruggs 1980, 17). Likewise, the program and specifications of the competition explicitly stated for the design to make no “political statement” about the war, serving instead as a “common ground” by which “supporters and opponents [...] may recognize the sacrifice, heroism, and loyalty which were also part of the Vietnam experience,” (VVMF 1981, 4). In adopting the lexicon of reconciliation, the VVMF therefore made explicit the link between the organization's goals for political representation and the national desire for a palpable closure to the war. Indeed, the choice of the Washington Mall as the memorial's physical site (Figure 2) visually reaffirmed this language in and through the Mall's subtext as an arbiter of national memory. As Mathias further declared, “It is fitting that the memorial be placed near the Lincoln Memorial, because not since the Civil War had the nation

suffered ‘divisions and wounds’ as grievous as those caused by the [Vietnam War]. Time has a way of reconciling us to history. Wounds heal. Divisions mend,” (Scruggs & Swerdlow 1980, 15).



**Figure 2.** Site Plans of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington Mall  
(VVMF 1980, 12-13)

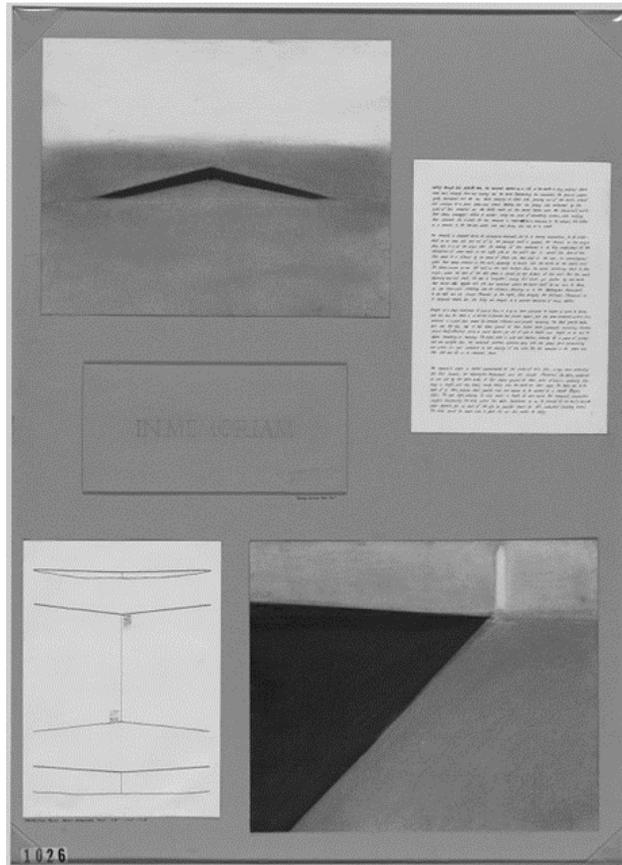
### Counter-Memory Forms in Lin’s Memorial

Maya Lin’s ultimate selection represented this nexus of political interests between the VVMF and government officials, as well as with the ‘art establishment’ charged with choosing and advising on the final design. After President Carter signed the bill authorizing the creation of a memorial, the principal tasks that remained for the VVMF were to select a design, negotiate for a site on the Mall, and fundraise for its construction. The organization’s espousal of reconciliation as a central tenet of the bill, while in ideological tension with their own goal of

recognition, lodged them in a narrow position of power for determining the remaining course of the competition as a result. For example, the signed legislation stipulated that statutory agencies, the Commission of Fine Arts (FAC) and the National Capital Planning Commission, and the Interior Secretary would all have approval power over the memorial's final design and construction (U.S. Senate 1981). Moreover, the final jury comprised eight landscape architects and sculptors while deliberately excluding any Vietnam veterans, afraid that the other jurors "might defer excessively" to the latter's political slant (Clay 1982, 118). Nevertheless, the VVMF anticipated that "some element of sculpture" would be included in the final design, alongside the original precept that it lists the names of the war dead, as part of the "inevitable outcome," as one representative described it, of the selection process (Minutes 1981, 65-66).

The jury's choice of Lin's design, out of 1,482 entries and 36 finalists, however reflected a process rife with internal strain between their aesthetic nous and the demands of the VVMF. Specifically, the jury sought to balance the latter's focus on sculptural, representational form with their own predilections for a landscape design that avoided "visual disruptions" with the site and centered artistic merit as its key element (Minutes 1980, 34). The FAC, in particular, stressed their concern over any structure that would obstruct the sight lines or landscape of the Mall; Paul Spreiregen, the competition's professional advisor, later emphasized in *Harvard Magazine* that the memorial had to be "sensitively wedded" to the existing character of the Constitution Gardens (Clay 1982, 118). This friction came to a head in the final deliberations in May 1981, when the jury announced their selection of Lin's entry (Figure 3) much to the chagrin of the organization's representatives. Eschewing the given design criteria, the jury stated that Lin's design and proposal took the contest instructions "almost literally" while simultaneously transforming them into "symbolic elements of great elegance and simplicity," (Minutes 1981, 219). The remainder of this section performs a sustained close reading of Lin's proposal and design, interweaving narrative and historical accounts by

Lin, her critics, and artistic and intellectual reception in order to examine the political straits embodied in and beyond its aesthetic form.



**Figure 3.** Entry 1026: Maya Ying Lin  
(Lin 1981)

Lin's work transforms the fundamental requirement—the names—into a central, dramatic element that symbolizes the individual character of loss. Consisting of two tapering walls of polished black granite set into the earth at an angle of 125 degrees, the memorial

inscribes the names onto the walls in chronological order, with opening and closing inscriptions. The chronology of names begins at the right-hand side of the hinge and continues until the sloped end, before continuing again from the receding end of the left wall and returning to the origin—forming a “narrative circle” of the war that, as Sturken argues, refuses the linearity of the war’s chronology (Sturken 1991, 128). In view, the names create a textual expanse of memory: they are necessarily multiple in nature and replete with “complex personal stakes” (Sturken 1991, 121) that invite their beholder into intimate reflection. The reflective surface of the walls further creates what Lin calls an “interface” between the living and the dead—the names therefore not only invite but implicate the viewer in the act. Lin makes this relationship explicit in her proposal, stating that the viewer is “brought to a sharp awareness of loss,” which demands ultimately for “each individual to [either] resolve or come to terms with death,” (Lin 1981, 1).

However, Lin’s design also transcends the vernacular aspect of memory through insisting beyond loss as an individual event. In defiance of the VVMF’s vision for the design to “convey a sense of the ideals for which these individuals gave their lives” (Scruggs & Swerdlow 1980, 15), Lin lists the names without elaboration, that is, with no place or date of death, place of origin, nor sense of military rank. This abstract rendering, in Lin’s words, allows for the names to look and seem “infinite in nature, [to] convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying those individuals into a whole,” (Lin 1981, 1). For Lin, coming to terms with loss is therefore both a private and historical act, one that intimates the individual nature of death while simultaneously eclipsing it by the “overwhelming” specter of loss in and of the Vietnam War. As scholar Crystal Baik argues, representations of war casualty necessarily exist in “perceptual dissonance” between its material event and psychic afterlife or ‘postmemory,’ such that the loss itself becomes an “experiential means of reinhabiting a past that fuses into the present,” (Baik 2019, 10). Extending Baik’s consideration of the habitual

presence of war, the names, in being dislocated from their spatial-temporal contexts, achieve a similar historically-coded presence that allows for the viewer to reckon with loss on multiple scales: as a “personal and private matter” (Lin 1981, 1), and as an incomplete historical event—a collective wound—of the nation.

Lin furthermore builds this relationship between loss and its historical resonance into the aesthetic environment of the memorial. Rather than standing erect like its neighboring monuments, the memorial cuts into the sloping earth: it is not visible until the viewer is almost upon it. As one conceptually moves inward, the two walls slowly rise on either side to a height of ten feet at the center origin, where Lin reminds us “the memorial is to be fully understood,” (Lin 1982, 1). Sturken notes that this origin further becomes a “pivotal space” between the beginning and endpoints of the war, a “temporary peace” in its history that calls forth the war’s irresolution within the intimate site of interaction (Sturken 1991, 128). Thus, the memorial’s refusal to be considered in one frame, but as a “moving composition” (Lin 1982, 1) that shifts in ocular scope and legibility as one moves through it, inverts the codes of remembrance that situate the dominant architecture of the Washington Mall—defined almost exclusively by vertical form and traditional iconography. Rather, by departing from the classical forms of the Mall, the memorial privileges a non-representationalist reading of the Vietnam War; as Arthur Danto reminds us in a 1985 *New York Times* criticism of the design, the work “evokes contemplation rather than declaring its meaning” (Danto 1985, 1) that ultimately contravenes a singular narrative or official memory of the war.

In its reception, the memorial opened up a public controversy flanked by veterans’ demands for a ‘representational’ monument and Lin’s insistent commitment to a non-representational aesthetic. The controversy following Lin’s selection, in many ways, brought to bear the exposed nerve of public debate over whether the war should or could ultimately be “put behind us.” Before it was constructed in 1982, Lin’s work was an object of protest not only because of its modernist

aesthetics, but more critically, because it violated the implicit visual codes of wartime remembrance. Termed a “black gash of shame” in the *Washington Post*, the design drew strong backlash to its alleged disavowal of traditional commemorative images of war in favor of one that conveyed the Vietnam War’s “dishonor and shame” (Carhart 1981, 1). A veteran in *National Review*, for example, raised objections to the “Orwellian” mode of listing the names, asserting that it “[made] them senseless deaths, not deaths in a cause; they might as well have been traffic incidents,” (64). Indeed, Lin’s work often drew comparison to dominant memorial iconography of the time; critic Ross Perot called for a return to the realist architecture of the post-World War II era, praising, in particular, Felix de Weldon’s U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial as an unambiguously “affirmative representation of [World War II] and those who fought it” that, as Perot places in contrast with Lin’s work, “allow[ed] no room for doubt or shame,” (Perot 1981, 1).

The distaste among veterans for the memorial’s doleful modernism almost always accompanied an accusation of its political nature and “mocking” tone of the war. Thomas Carhart, a Vietnam veteran and leading critic of Lin’s work, further remarked in a letter to the FAC, “The formal failing of this design is that it violates one of the critical criteria [...] that it must make no political statement. [The memorial] is clearly at least a statement of sorrow,” (Minutes 1981, 1). The profusion of views on Lin’s work swelled to a peak in 1982, when the VVMF and FAC organized a series of testimonial meetings to determine possible compromises to the memorial, or else, postpone its construction. During the meetings, James Webb, a Vietnam veteran, proposed modifications to the original design: the placement of the memorial above ground, the addition of an American flag and “strong inscription” denoting the values of service, and the revision—or abandonment—of the names’ chronological listing (Minutes 1982, 3-4). In her testimony, Lin retorted such changes in defense of the “artistic integrity” of the original design, asserting, “The experience or visual perception of the [memorial] should not be interrupted visually

by the abrupt verticality of a flag pole, or conceptually by a sculpture that forces a specific interpretation,” (Minutes 1982, 152-53). Indeed, the irony in adjoining patriotic symbols—that are themselves charged with partisan meaning—to the memorial as a means to ‘depoliticize’ it, as Lin points out, evinced the central antagonism between the national(ist) desire for reconciliation and the discordant realities—or, in Lowe’s words, the “unrepresentable histories”—of the war.

Therefore, to call the resulting discourse an ‘artistic’ controversy is to privilege a conceptual reading of the memorial and ignore its symbolic function and historical subtext. In rejecting the aesthetic codes that defined past war monuments, Lin’s work also refuses the closure and implied tradition of those structures. Put differently, the memorial itself marked a permanent “gash” of the nation’s failed venture into the war, one that denied the war’s ‘healed’ resolution in the national consciousness. In defense of Lin’s work, art critic Elisabeth Hess argued, “Facing the myriad names, it is difficult for anyone *not* to question the purpose of war,” (Hess 1987, 265). Notably, public discourse yoked the memorial’s “ambivalent” politics to Lin’s Asian American identity—made explicit not only in concerns (made primarily by veterans) over her ability to interpret and represent the American self-identity, but in commentary crediting the memorial’s “non-traditional” design to Lin’s marginal position of “otherness” (Perot 1981, 1; Hess 1987, 267). Invoking Lin’s Chinese heritage, the *Washington Post*, for example, titled the memorial the “Great Wall of China” (McCombs 1982, F1). At the same time, the press surmised that, “perhaps, Lin’s ‘otherness’ enabled her to create such a moving work [...] in answering for the need for representation of a group of people—the Vietnam vets,” (Sorkin 1982, 16). In this way, the discourse engendered by Lin’s work brought to bear the ways culture remains a contested terrain that at once embodies and exceeds its containment by the logics and categories of the nation.

### Constructing a Transnational Memory

In deploying memory as its central device, the memorial blurs the boundaries between national and foreign historiographies and modes of remembrance. Whereas the Vietnam War in the U.S. engendered a recuperative remembering and forgetting of American involvement vis-à-vis a reflux of traditional war iconography, the war's afterlife in Vietnam encoded a new political order that canonized “socialist realist” (Trùng Chinh 1997 [1948], 142-43; Schwenkel 2015, 113) modes of cultural and literary production. In the advent of Renovation [*Đổi Mới*] after 1975, the Vietnamese Communist Party cleared the way for official reunification by expanding industrial and agricultural collectivization programs initiated in the 1950s into the commercial hub of the South, renaming Saigon after Hồ Chí Minh, and sending hundreds of thousands of former officials of the Republic of Vietnam to reeducation and labor camps in the Central and Northern Highlands (Chương-Đài 2009, 21-35). As the new aesthetic of the revolution, socialist realism was understood to be a “method of artistic creation” that would depict the lives, work, and revolutionary spirit of the masses by reorienting arts toward “truthful” rather than “aestheticist” representations of social development (Trùng Chinh 1997 [1948], 163).

As a result, the production of monuments in this period diverged from former western, namely French, colonial memorial styles—specifically, the figurative element of war conveyed by hero iconography. Reunification gave rise, for example, to the prevalence of contemporary “martyr cemeteries” [*nghĩa trang liệt sĩ*] and “martyr temples” [*đền liệt sĩ*] honoring those lost in wartime. The emphasis within the memorials on strict uniformity and non-hierarchy in size and location demonstrated, as Hoàng Định Kinh articulates, a renewed national intent to “commemorate and pay respects to the dead, rather

than to propitiate and worship [*thờ*] them,”<sup>1</sup> (Hoàng 1999, 24-26). French colonial architecture is vital to understanding the historical vector of this shift. As literary theorist Panivong Norindr has exhorted, French colonial discourses around architecture were central to the production of Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam) as phantasmatic imaginary, which served to “reinscribe the colonized subject within a framework that answers to the political and aesthetic needs of an imperialist’s appropriation of exotic worlds,” (Norindr 1999, 23-24). Colonial memorial design, predicated on the “reordering and, at times, erasure of deities and national citizen-heroes” in Vietnamese historical memory in order to make way for French classical form and iconography depicting the heroic soldier of the *troupe coloniale*, therefore became a visual reminder of French political domination and cultural superiority (Schwenkel 2015, 110). In this way, the post-war production of memorials not only marked a socialist turn towards democratizing the dead, but represented a transnational effort to define a post-colonial identity distinct from “foreign” influence and western “militarized images and discourses of war” that glorified the dead (Schwenkel 2015, 133).

The Vietnamese response to Lin’s work, and its transnational context, is thus inextricable from how we understand the memorial’s memory-work as unsettling national frames of remembering. In Saigon, public reception drew itself towards Lin’s non-representational form. For example, the *Labour* [*Lao Động*] newspaper heralded the memorial as “familiar to the people [...] symbolic of the pain of the war,”<sup>2</sup> (Hoàng 1999, 26). In the Saigon-based, French-language magazine *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient*, Ha-Hong-Van Ha-Van likewise praised Lin’s aesthetic as ultimately affirmative of the commemorative nature of loss:

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<sup>1</sup> Translated, “*Tượng niệm và bày tỏ lòng kính trọng đối với người mất, hơn là cúng bái và thờ phượng họ.*”

<sup>2</sup> Translated, “*Quen thuộc với quốc gia [...] tượng trưng cho nỗi đau chiến tranh.*”

“[Lin] interpréta le monument à Trường Sơn à sa manière, lui donnant une forme qui convenait à sa vision personnelle, toute de douceur et de mélancolie. “Ces noms, écrit-elle, qui semblent en nombre infini, produisent l’impression accablante de l’innombrable en même temps que les individus isolés se fondent en une sorte de tout.” Lors qu’on a brutalement pris conscience de ce que représente une telle perte, c’est à chacun d’assumer cette perte, ou d’apprendre à l’accepter. Car, en fin de compte, la mort est une affaire personnelle et privée, et l’espace du mémorial comme lieux de mémoire est destiné à la réflexion privée, au bilan personnel.” (Ha-Van 1991, 94).

[Lin interprets the monument at Trường Sơn in her own way, giving it a form suitable to her personal vision, of softness and melancholy. “These names,” she writes, “seemingly infinite in number, convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying these individuals as a whole.” When we abruptly realize what such a loss represents, it is up to each of us to take up this loss, or learn to accept it. For, ultimately, death is a personal and private matter, and the memorial’s space as a site of memory is intended for private reflection, for personal reckoning.]

Ha-Van’s comparison of Lin’s work to the state monument, titled “Contribution to the Fatherland” [*Tổ Quốc Ghi Công*], at Trường Sơn National Cemetery forms an explicit link between Lin’s work and the commemorative aspect of socialist realist architecture. Constructed in 1977, the monument honors the Northern citizens and soldiers killed on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail between 1959 and 1975, many of whose graves at the cemetery are marked *vô danh* for unknown individuals. In this way, the monument locates itself in the cultural renovation towards “traditional” modes of remembrance as architects sought to personalize acts of memory at state sites in ways that imbued democratic symbolism and individual reflection (Hoàng Kim Đàng

2007, 1). As Hoàng Đạo Kính—adopting the subject position of “the people”—expresses in *Labour*, “It’s a tradition in Vietnam to visit a temple, not to construct large monuments or statues [...] This came from the influence of French colonialism,” (Hoàng 1999, 26). Hoàng’s rejection of “foreign” memory practices reveals how Lin’s work critically intervenes in such aesthetic hierarchies in ways that allow for transnational engagement.

The appeal of Lin’s work to Vietnamese critics on the basis of its resignification of “traditional” Vietnamese memory practices indexes the ways in which her work enables, rather than forecloses, alternative historical framings of the war that move beyond and outside the nation. Crucially, the question of who are and are not named on the memorial’s walls begets notice of the conspicuous absence of Vietnamese—those who died fighting in the People’s Army of the DRV, or even the southern National Liberation Front—from the site. Extending Lowe’s assertion that the terms of citizenry is also always a cultural project, this question likewise registers who, as Judith Butler eloquently voices, we deem and deny as “grievable” within the frame of the nation-state (Butler 2004, 32). In its absence, this lacuna leaves only “partial and impartial recollections” of the Vietnamese in moves that erase (national) difference under the guise of healing (Lowe 1998, 9).

However, rather than enclose the absence of the Vietnamese, the memorial admits and implies their “overwhelming” presence. In claiming a critical space for encountering loss *as* non-representational, Lin’s work asks us to instead consider the myriad spatial and temporal orientations from which we come to understand war and its victims. As Viet Thanh Nguyen notes, the multiplicity of encounters made possible on the memorial’s walls not only resists any one representation, but actively subverts one that excludes and forgets others, what Nguyen calls the ethical force to “remember one’s own” (Nguyen 2016, 40). For example, Ha-Van further asserts, “This is why this monument so moved the Vietnamese people—we

who believed that this war had definitively rejected us.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Ha-Van’s referral to the memorial as a “lieux de mémoire,” a concept invented by French historian Pierre Nora to mean sites in which the past is channeled in order to “mitigate the anxiety of memory’s displacement in modernity” (Nora 1989, 7), not only indexes the transborder (French-Vietnamese-American) historical currents and cultural circuits that situate Lin’s work, but demonstrates how her work itself opens up a site for transnational intimacies and memory-making.

### **Conclusion**

In view of the Vietnam War, this article demonstrates how history is (re)made in images, including for those left out of the frame. As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes:

“For the forgotten and disremembered, the important question is this: how can we recall the past in a way that does justice to the forgotten, the excluded, the oppressed, the dead, the ghosts? This question is central to an ethics of recalling others. It assumes both the injustice of forgetting others and the justice of remembering others” (Nguyen 2017, 32).

Thus, remembering is in itself a form of forgetting—a sentiment seen in the context of a very active scripting and rescripting of the war since the memorial’s installation. Indeed, the memorial has tapped into a reservoir of need to express publicly the pain of the war, a desire to transpose individual loss into a collective experience. Seen at the walls’ base are “personal artifacts left as offerings; coffee-table books of

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<sup>3</sup> Translated, “Voilà pourquoi ce monument a tellement ému les Vietnamiens— nous qui croyons que cette guerre nous avait définitivement rejetés.”

photography that document the visual memory of the war; and letters offered up as testimony to bear witness to the pain suffered,” (New York Times 1985, A6). Often left anonymously and stored by the Mall, these objects present a textured archive of memory that rescripts and unmoors the naturalized temporality and historicity of the Vietnam War. The memorial’s engagement with those who contribute as active participants, as co-authors in its memory-work, ultimately performs what YẾN Lê Espiritu calls a “grafting of history”: a stitching and suturing together of—Vietnamese and American, veteran and non-veteran—stories, experiences, and memories within its mnemonic opening (Espiritu 2014, 19). In the critical act of forging a past together, the fiction of consensus, of *closure*, remains to be questioned and rewritten.

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