

**Spatial Imaginations:
The Reconstruction of Memory**

Jolin Tran

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Committee:
Brian McLaren
Nicole Huber
Junichi Satoh

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University of Washington

Abstract

SPATIAL IMAGINATIONS:
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Jolin Tran

Chairs of the Supervisory Committee:

Brian McLaren

Nicole Huber

Department of Architecture

This thesis explores Vietnam in 2150 in the aftermath of a devastating flood that erases the past, present, and future memories of the country. Using storytelling as a tool, the thesis will retrace history to reconstruct the contours of the country as a way of remembering. It will re-examine the nature of unreliable memory as the starting point to rewriting the story of the past. Through these reimagined histories, how can the future that has yet to happen, be remembered differently? Presented in three different forms, the thesis remembers Vietnam as many different countries.

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Acknowledgements

To my family, thank you for your sacrifices.

To my advisors, Brian, Nicole, and Junichi, thank you for all of your support, encouragement, and guidance. Most of all, thank you for absolving me of my own self doubt when I couldn't do it on my own.

To Minhquan Nguyen, thank you for holding me through the past few years, in and out of school. This wouldn't have been possible without you, cảm ơn bạn.



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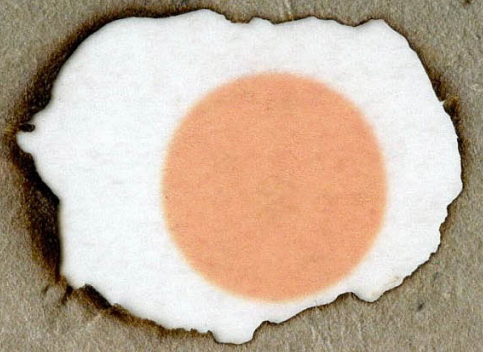
Introduction

Vietnam is often remembered as war. Despite its long history—often in conflict—it has been reduced to a single war, the Vietnam War, or as the Vietnamese people remember it, the American War. To remember Vietnam as a war is to mark its history with destruction and loss. Yet, for Vietnamese people, they remember the country as one that originates from a love between two people with fundamental differences and endured through sacrifices.

In order to remember Vietnam, one must forget. The long history of war creates a condition in which forgetting is necessary. But the condition of forgetting isn't created through wars and destruction alone. The landscape of the country is made to be forgotten. Through the monsoon season, water arrives and washes away the traces and memories of the country creating a condition for the imagination to unfold. If the history of Vietnam is remembered as a war, how can its history be reimagined so that the future can be remembered differently?

Figure 1 – View of the distant horizon from the forest. Mixed media.

Figure 2 - Slide image of Pasteur Street.







Chapter 1: On Origins

The earliest trace of Vietnam stems from the myth of Lac Long Quan and Au Co whose mythical union produced a sac of eggs that developed into 100 children who eventually became the ancestors to the Vietnamese people. The union between Lac Long Quan, who is the Dragon Lord of the Sea, and Au Co, who is the Mountain fairy, is short lived. Due to their differences of earth and water, they then decided to part ways with each parent taking 50 of their 100 children to the sea and the mountain.¹

The earliest trace of the country is not a trace, but a story with an unreliable origin. During the 10th century BC, the newly independent Dai Viet kingdom was faced with a dilemma. After a thousand years of Chinese rule, war and destruction, they found themselves without a past to tether their authority. The Dai Viet court sent their annalists to search for material proof that would allow them to establish an identity that was void of Chinese influences—a task that was deemed almost impossible as their own history had been forgotten due to the destruction of historical records. But somehow, in their search, dynasties such as Van Lang, Phung Hung, and the Hong Bang—from which the mythical figure Lac Long Quan originates—suddenly emerged. Whether these figures existed or not was not important as making the myth was a way to construct their own future and to construct a lineage of legitimacy.² In other words, the history of Vietnam is unreliable but it is not to say that it is unreal. With a newfound independence, the Dai Viet court reimagined certain truths and took the agency to modify the narrative in their favor.

Figure 3 - View of an early morning from the marsh. Mixed media.

Figure 4 - Slide image of Saigon 1968 by Otto Stupakoff.

1. Vo, Nghia M. 2012. *Legends of Vietnam: An Analysis and Retelling of 88 Tales*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 20.

2. Goscha, Christopher E. 2016. *Vietnam: A New History*. New York: Basic Books, 24.

The Father

As the sky darkens and light begins to disappear, he makes a detour to the National Archives. In the distance, he could see the fishermen making their way back to shore. In the floating houses, warm light spills out and flickers in the reflection of the water. He tied his boat at the dock and walked up the grand stairs. In the hallway, he sees his grandfather's portrait looking down on him. He had never stopped to look at the man that is his grandfather, and in the dim light, he could see the resemblance. The gentle slope of his eyes and the wary smile reminds him of his father. In the reflection, he could see himself too. Staring back at a man he has never met but who he could call family.

Everyone has gone home for the day. He makes the long walk up the stairs to his desk and unlocks the drawers. Inside, a file laid untouched for as long as he had begun working there. He sits down and begins reading what his father had left behind.

It didn't take long to find the marker hanging on the tree. It swayed back and forth in the gentle breeze of the wind. On it was his name and a white lotus carved in the back, a symbol of his service to the nation. There weren't many of these markers around.

Night

He wonders how people found their will to live. In the grief, in the sadness, in the unbearable loss and the unforgiving hunger—it had seemed that the odds weren't favorable, and yet they still lived on. He had often wondered how his father could have brought him into the world, knowing full well the magnitude of destruction in the reports that he reads each day.



Chapter 2: On Fragmentation

The Father

As the sky darkens and light begins to disappear, he makes a detour to the National Archives. In the distance, he could see the fishermen making their way back to shore. In the floating houses, warm light spills out and flickers in the reflection of the water. He tied his boat at the dock and walked up the grand stairs. In the hallway, he sees his grandfather's portrait looking down on him. He had never stopped to look at the man that is his grandfather, and in the dim light, he could see the resemblance. The gentle slope of his eyes and the way smile reminds him of his father. In the reflection, he could see himself too. Staring back at a man he has never met but who he could call family.

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Chapter 2

Vietnam has long been a fragmented country—or rather countries, with multiple Vietnamese states existing at the same time, creating multiple realities, languages, and cultural customs. In the 18th century, there existed two different states. In the north is the state of Dai Viet which is controlled by the Trinh lords, and in the south emerged an independent polity that was headed by the Nguyen imperials. The Dai Viet state in the north was called “Dang Ngoai” which is the “outer region” while the southern state was called “Dang Trong” or the “inner region”.¹ These two states existed side by side and evolved separately without exchanging trade or commerce, creating dual versions of memory that are recorded in tandem with each other though they never overlap.

These fragmented realities can be traced back to the origin myth of Lac Long Quan and Au Co whose separation to the sea and the mountain can be seen as a curse that created a division between the Kinh (lowlander) and the Thuong (highlander) people that still exists today. Even within the Kinh people, whose make up accounts for 85 percent of Vietnam’s population, there are further fragmentations and divides this ethnic group.² The most recent division resulted from the 1954 Geneva Conference, creating the Democratic Republic of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel line and the state of Vietnam in the south.³

Despite the reunification of the country as a whole after the Vietnam War, the country continues to be splintered in different directions and each version comes with

Figure 5 - Slide image of women dancing by Võ An Khánh.

Figure 6 - View of the forest at night. Mixed media.

Figure 7 - Fragmented view of the horizon. Mixed media.

1. Goscha, Christopher E. 2016. *Vietnam: A New History*. New York: Basic Books, 40.

2. Vo, Nghia M. 2012. *Legends of Vietnam: An Analysis and Retelling of 88 Tales*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 21.

3. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Geneva Accords.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. July 14, 2023.



The Father

He looked at the marker for a while and wondered if His Father would approve of his choices to become an archivist—a job he used to detest. It was a job that consumed the entirety of His Father's life, and he is only beginning to understand what it meant. To be the writer of the stories that someone may read some day often burdened him.

To forget death is to assume that one would live forever. No one dies anymore, it seems, they simply pass on. His father did not die—his memories still live on. He has simply passed away.

their own distinct and nuanced complexities. The city of Saigon or by its official name, Ho Chi Minh City, for instance, has many layered memories fragmenting in different contexts. Though these two names refer to the same city that is situated on the southern coast of Vietnam, there are deep historical implications that come with referring to the city by its certain name. For one, the city of Saigon no longer exists except in memory. It has been known as Ho Chi Minh City since 1976, yet many residents still refer to the city as Saigon as it had been known since 1698.⁴ By referring to the city as “Saigon” the memory of the city endures in the imagination of many people.

Some take this imagination further by recreating enclaves called “Little Saigon” as miniature versions of the city they once knew. The Little Saigon of Orange County in which the city of Westminster is part of, for example, has adopted a distinct architectural style in new development through a formal Design Standards Manual to invoke nostalgia of the old city in a foreign landscape. The guidelines include the use of “architectural elements similar to those found on buildings constructed in Vietnam in the early 1900’s in the French colonial tradition... the use of design elements and details that follow a traditional Chinese architectural theme may also be used, as this style of architecture is used on many religious buildings in Vietnam.”⁵

What fragmentation allows for is space. The space between the fragmented pieces provides an opportunity

Figure 8 - Fragmented view of the mountain. Mixed media.

4. Vo, Nghia M. 2012. *Legends of Vietnam: An Analysis and Retelling of 88 Tales*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 8.

5. City of Westminster. “8.0 Little Saigon Community Planning Area Design Guidelines.”

Chapter 2

for the parts to be repaired or rearranged or reimagined to something entirely different. The reimagination of something new, like the Little Saigons that exists in various cities across the United States, which is created from something old, is an echo to the Dai Viet court taking agency to create a new history as a way of cementing their legitimacy. In rebuilding Little Saigon, there now exist many different versions of Saigons. And in doing so, each represents an anchor in which Vietnamese people can tether their identity to.

Figure 9 - Fragments of a map. Mixed media.

Figure 10 - View of the forest. Mixed media.

District 1

It is known by many names. The last being Hồ Chí Minh City. Before that it was known as Sài Gòn. And before that, it was known as Gia Định, Đồng Nai, Bến Nghé, Bến Thành depending on who you ask. But if you ask the Khmer people, they will tell you it is Prey Nokor with Prey meaning forest and nokor meaning city.

After The Great Flood, it is simply known as District 1. The name comes from what was once the former district of Hồ Chí Minh City. It was Hồ Chí Minh City, for the record, but many referred to it as Sài Gòn. Sai means firewood and gon means cotton stick that points to the cotton trees that once grew in the city.

Despite its name, it is, simply, still a city in the forest.

The Great Flood

It hasn't always been a library, he ha Though, no one really cared to listen to the warnings. It floods every year during the monsoon season, but this time, it was different. The rain came as usual, but it never stopped. When the rain continued to make landfall well after the first week without stopping, people began to worry. After the second week, panic set in and the fabric of the city began to tear apart. The torrent of rain overwhelmed the city's infrastructure. The drainage system was not adequate, the reservoirs and dams rendered useless.

They would hold funerals with the remnants of the city [redacted] The roads that connected each district disappeared under the water. People relied on their memories to navigate through the water. But the second month of continuous landfall, the traces of the city and its inhabitants could be carried. The water had paralyzed the city.

Two Flowers

They paddle along the edge of the River to set up their shop. In each canoe, there are many of brightly colored flowers wrapped in a bundle. There are white water lilies and purple lotuses. There is one canoe full of yellow and white chrysanthemums and another with a variety of orchids. They remind him of the story of two flowers that every child reads in their first year of school. The story comes from a collection of tales that his grandfather had written. It was one of his last works before he passed away.

It has been awhile since he had thought about this story. Perhaps he had stowed it deep inside his memory so that he is not reminded of the regret he now has. He had spent all of

his life trying to get to the Capitol on the end of the country, it had been too late to rectify that



Chapter 3: On Forgetting

The fragmentation of Vietnam brought wars and conflict, erasing and altering not only the landscape and the living, but official records that hold the memories of the country. In fact, there is an incentive to destroy official records as a way of establishing a power dynamic between the destroyer and the destroyed. In the 15th century invasion of China, original Vietnamese books were ordered to be sent to Nanjing and were presumably destroyed. The Vietnamese themselves also destroyed the official records of the Tay Son during a civil war that occurred between the 18th and the 19th centuries.¹ To erase the memories and traces of a country or a kingdom is to erase its legitimacy. These conditions of constant warfare creates a reality in which it is easy to forget, bringing the question of how can one remember when there is nothing left to be remembered?

Vietnam is often remembered not through archives or through the built environments, but through the body in which memories are passed down in the form of myths and folklores. The destruction of historical records and the fragmentation of reality creates a condition in which Maurice Halbwach calls “collective memory” in which memories are inherited through communities.² In other words, we remember by relying on the memories of others. Passing down stories from one person to another is how Vietnamese people remember each other and themselves. There can be war and destruction, a completely new country, or even the splintering of different diasporas spreading throughout the world. As long as Vietnamese people remember each other, there is a future ahead.

Figure 11 - Slide image of Scènes de moisson at Vinh Yen, 1920-1929.

Figure 12 - View of the mountain and the sea. Mixed media.

Figure 13 - Fragments of a map. Mixed media.

1. Henchy, Judith. February 1998. “Preservation and Archives in Vietnam.” Council on Library and Information Resources.

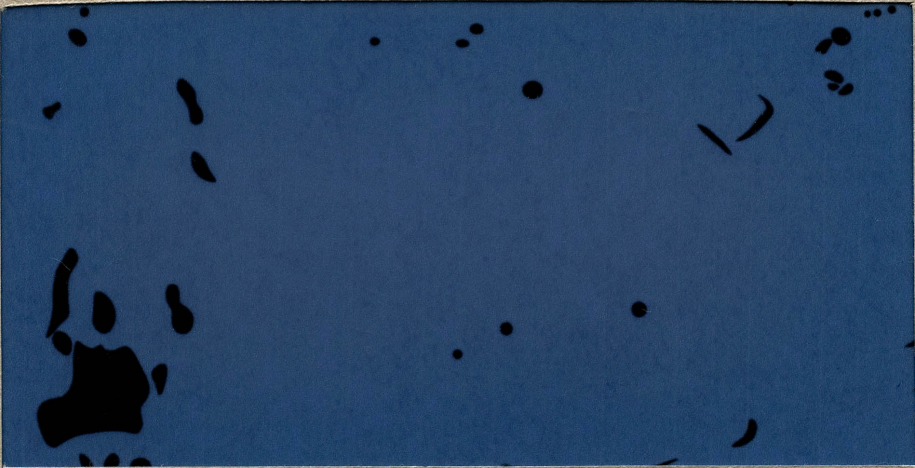
2. Halbwachs, Maurice, and Lewis A Coser. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



Two Flowers

In silence, she eats her meal carefully—chewing through the glutinous rice and drinking her soup slowly—savoring its sweetness. She wants to remember this final moment before she leaves tomorrow morning. She could push further south, rounding up the tribes she had encountered many years before the war began. She would take matters into her own hands, even if her sister disagreed.

On Fragmentation





Chapter 4: On Remembering

Looking back at the past to create a future is not new. We look at historical data of floods to project how the future would look like. Climate Central, a group of non-profit and independent researchers and scientists have projected that the southern portion of Vietnam will be underwater in 2150.¹ This projection is what we will remember of Vietnam's future: a country splintering between earth and water, yet again, just as the curse of Lac Long Quan and Au Co foresaw. But this time, it is not through war, but through natural disaster.

On the surface, the memories of Vietnam are altered by war, but underneath it, the contours of the country's land and water has been changing and shaping to the monsoon season that occurs every year.² This is what wars and natural disasters have in common: they both alter the landscape and bring destruction that changes the way we remember. But what is different between war and disaster is the possibility to be productive. For example, floods are destructive in the way they disrupt and displace the landscape and the living, but they are also productive in bringing nutrients to the soil and in refilling creeks and rivers.³

Floods have long been etched into the psyche of the Vietnamese people through the myth of Son Tinh (The Mountain God) and Thuy Tinh (Lord of the Water) who has to compete with each other through a series of challenges set by King Hung Vuong in order to marry his daughter, My Nuong. Ultimately, Son Tinh wins the challenges, and Thuy Tin, in spite of losing, summons torrential rain and raises the sea higher for a final

Figure 14 - Slide image of two elders from the North and the South in an embrace, by Võ An Khánh.

1. Popovich, Nadja, Christopher Flavelle, Henry Fountain, and Mira Rojanasakul. 2019. "Rising Seas Will Erase More Cities by 2050, New Research Shows." *The New York Times*, October 29, 2019.

2. World Bank. n.d. "Vietnam Climate Data: Historical."

3. National Geographic. 2024. "The Many Effects of Flooding". *National Geographic Education*. National Geographic Society.

The Grandfather

Some say he is a hero; some say otherwise. He remembers to save the boxes of documents but forgets to save himself and he dies doing so. At the entrance of the National Archive is his portrait, serving as a reminder that the organization only exists because he died trying to preserve it.

On Father

To reimage war and destruction is not to forget what had happened, but rather to remember it in a different form. Forgetting creates space for the imagination to unfold. ~~Due to its meaning, it has~~ thousand years of Chinese rule, war and destruction, the lack of material proof and records to cement an identity and authority in the newly established state of Dai Viet prompted the court to send annalists and archivists to search for traces in history as a way to establish the origin of legitimacy. In their search, they found Van Lang, Phung Hung, and Hong Bach monarchs and laid claim to their mythic origins, even if these figures may or may not have actually existed in history.

gradually, death is forgotten.

From his boat, he searches for the marker that indicates his father's burial. There were other people there too, looking for their own markers on the tree. Quietly, the exchanges nod, acknowledging each other as they paddle around the islet.

Likewise, when The Great Flood arrives and leaves destruction in its aftermath, erasing the fabric of the city, creates space for the reimagining of the city.

We are called to remember things again and again, and we are also called to forget things again and again. There is no space

Chapter 4

challenge. Son Tinh, in turn, raises the mountain to escape. This back and forth battle between earth and water is an echo to the monsoon season that occurs every year.⁴ In Vietnam, the monsoon season occurs every year, bringing water to soften the earth, and changing the contours of the landscape. This creates a constant loop of remembering and forgetting. It creates a cycle in which, in order to be remembered, the same action must be repeated again and again.

Vietnam as a country between land and water points to the origin myth of Lac Long Quan and Au Co. In this myth, it seems that earth and water are two elements that cannot co-exist, yet, by tracing these two myths is how we remember the origin of the word “đất nước.” Separately, the word “đất” and the word “nước” means water. Together they make up the word country.

Figure 15 - View of the swamp and the forest. Mixed media.

Figure 16 - View of a tree trunk and an altar at the edge of the forest. Mixed media.

4. Leeming, David Adams. 2005. *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 395.

The Father

He looked at the marker for a while and wondered if His Father would approve of his choices to become an archivist—a job he used to detest. It was a job that consumed the entirety of His Father's life, and he is only beginning to understand what it meant. To be the writer of the stories that someone may read some day often burdened him.

To forget death is to assume that one would live forever. No one dies anymore, it seems, they simply pass on. His father did not die—his memories still live on. He has simply passed away.



At the edge of the Pine Forest, he paddles towards a tree that had

been struck by lightning.

The Archivist

They say it was a matter of time before he begins to disappear, he cries he had heard for they could be archives. In the distance, here, but he does not know what to believe. back to shore. In the fires are the things that are valuable, flickers in the reflects he had heard from his father in passing and walked up the

Though, he is not complaining about that. He is simply exchanging his memories for his portion of the ration that government employees receive. He does not understand why The State would be interested in collecting stories from him in particular. It is true, he comes from a long line of archivists who have all worked in the National Archive, but he was not a particularly good listener when it came to listening to the endless stories his father had told. His memories are hazy. If he embellished a few details here and there in his transcripts, they would still believe it, wouldn't they?

There is a hunger for the stories he has been told. Stories feed the mind when there is not enough rice to feed the hunger. Transcribing his memories of the old tales he had heard as a child gave him a purpose and the means to make it through the day.



Chapter 5: On Process

The thesis is informed by Hillside Terrace Complex, located in Tokyo, Japan. It was designed by Fumihiko Maki and built in seven phases spanning from 1969 to 1992. The project was commissioned by the Asakura family to gradually develop land that has long been held by the family to create a place where they could live for generations to come. The complex is situated in the Daikanyama neighborhood on a strip of sloped and forested land with an important burial mound to consider. Within the complex, there are ten different buildings, an underground exhibition space and interspaced courtyards throughout.¹

The project employs the idea of *oku*, a concept developed by Maki, in which he defines the “unseen center, one that is inaccessible or difficult to perceive, as opposed to an occupiable center or center of destination.”² Studying the idea of *oku* through the Hillside Terrace Complex was fundamental in formulating ideas on the exploration of memory. *Oku*, as a concept, has different abstract connotations. Words such as *oku-dokoro* (inner place), *oku-guchi* (inner entrance), and *oku-zashiki* (inner room) describe not only a physical depth but a psychological depth of being enveloped in space. The spatial quality of *oku* is paradoxical in nature as space is invisible, yet there is a presence in these spaces.³

In the Hillside Terrace Complex, *oku* is designed as courtyard spaces as a way to diffuse space, creating a void. What appears to be unbuilt, invisible and unseen in courtyard spaces is where life unfolds in the form

Figure 17 - Slide image of women hauling fishing nets in the Mekong River by Le Minh Truong.

1. Maki, Fumihiko. 2015. *Time, Figure, Space: Toward the Construction of Place*. Tokyo: Kajima Institute Publishing, 200.

2. Maki, Fumihiko, and Mark (Mark Edward) Mulligan. 2008. *Nurturing Dreams: Collected Essays on Architecture and the City*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 170.

3. Marshall, Richard. 2003. *Emerging Urbanity: Global Urban Projects in the Asia Pacific Rim*. New York: Spon Press. p. 44.

Chapter 5

of circulation, acting as a thread that ties separate buildings into one cohesive complex. The act of moving and circulating creates both a physical and psychological connection between the buildings, the occupants, and the visitors.

The exhibition is built on the idea of oku and the spatial layering of space to create depth. In the physical sense, opaque papers such as trace, mylar, and transparency film are used to create the appearance of depth. In the psychological sense, the exhibition is split up into three different forms with each offering a different perspective. When experienced altogether results in a deeper understanding of the story that is being presented. Like the Hillside Terrace Complex, the exhibition is tied together through circulation. Presented in three different forms the circulation of the viewers acts as the thread that ties the three forms together.

Figure 18 - View of the swamp and the forest. Mixed media.

Figure 19 - View of the forest at night.

Two Flowers

As it had been decided by their companions, there
appropriate that Đào re one's mind, it is only
sun in the sky and there was no place for her despite their shared
efforts. There could be no more fighting between them as they had
done as children, as queen, Đào words were final. No matter how much
she insisted that establishing a foothold in the northern region was
not enough. They must unite more tribes in the southern region as
one force if they were to be fully free from their foreign invaders.
And yet, her pleas fell on deaf ears. They are exhausted from being
away from home, she understands, but they could not stop now that
they were so close to forming a nation that their father had spoken
of many times before
f they lost what they had fought so hard for

No one wanted to take the posting in the Pine forest, so naturally,
the position fell onto him, The Archivist. Some say the forest is
filled with ghosts who lost their lives in the Great Flood. And some
say they could still see bodies float to the surface of the water
during the monsoon season at night.

They are just old tales and empty gossip, but at the crack of dawn
when shadows run deep and the sun still hangs low on the horizon, he
just might believe them.

Tales have some truth to them don't they?

He had grown up listening to tales from His Father who held the
post before him, and the lineage of passing down stories has been
so deeply woven into his family's history that there was no way he
could talk himself out of denying the position.

In the dim light of the early morning, a sudden flash of memory
burst into his mind. Had it been the olden days, His Father once
said, he would be riding a bicycle instead of paddling a canoe to
work.

He had not known what it was like before the Great Flood, before the
queen battered itself with the water. And perhaps, he will never







Chapter 6: On Display

In *Nothing Ever Dies*, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that “all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.”¹ But I would argue that all wars are fought three times: the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory, and the third in the imagination. The exhibition revolves around this framework: tracing the history of Vietnam to examine what had happened, exploring what had been remembered, and speculating the future by reimagining the country in 2150.

The exhibition is informed by Vietnamese-American photographer, An-My Lê, and her childhood during the Vietnam War. In an interview with the San Francisco Museum of Art, she recounts growing up in a war as being “actually not that dramatic” because it was part of her life. It was only until she moved to the United States and seeing the “news and looking back at the footage” that she realized “how scary it all was.”² There is a paradoxical nature to Lê’s memories. She remembers life in an active war zone as being filled with horrific violence and terror as part of a mundane life. It was through the act of displacing herself outside in what is considered to be a safe place, in the United States, that she began to feel distraught.

The exhibition references *Small Wars*, a series by Lê that documents the reenactment of the Vietnam War. A reenactment assumes that a moment in time is being re-experienced, which brings the looming question as to why anyone would subject themselves to experiencing war again. But in this instance, the veterans participating

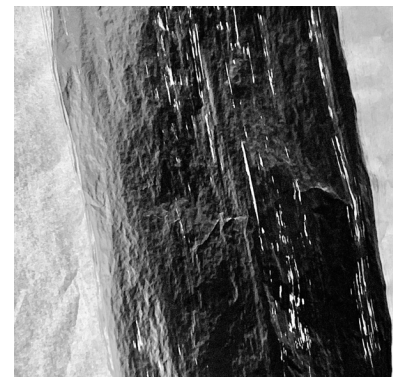


Figure 20 - Slide image of flooding in Saigon by Eddie Adams, May 30, 1968.

Figure 21 - Detail of sumi ink texture on trace paper.

1. Nguyen, Viet Thanh. 2016. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge, Massachusetts ; Harvard University Press, 4.

2. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. 2019. “An-My Lê: Landscapes of War.”

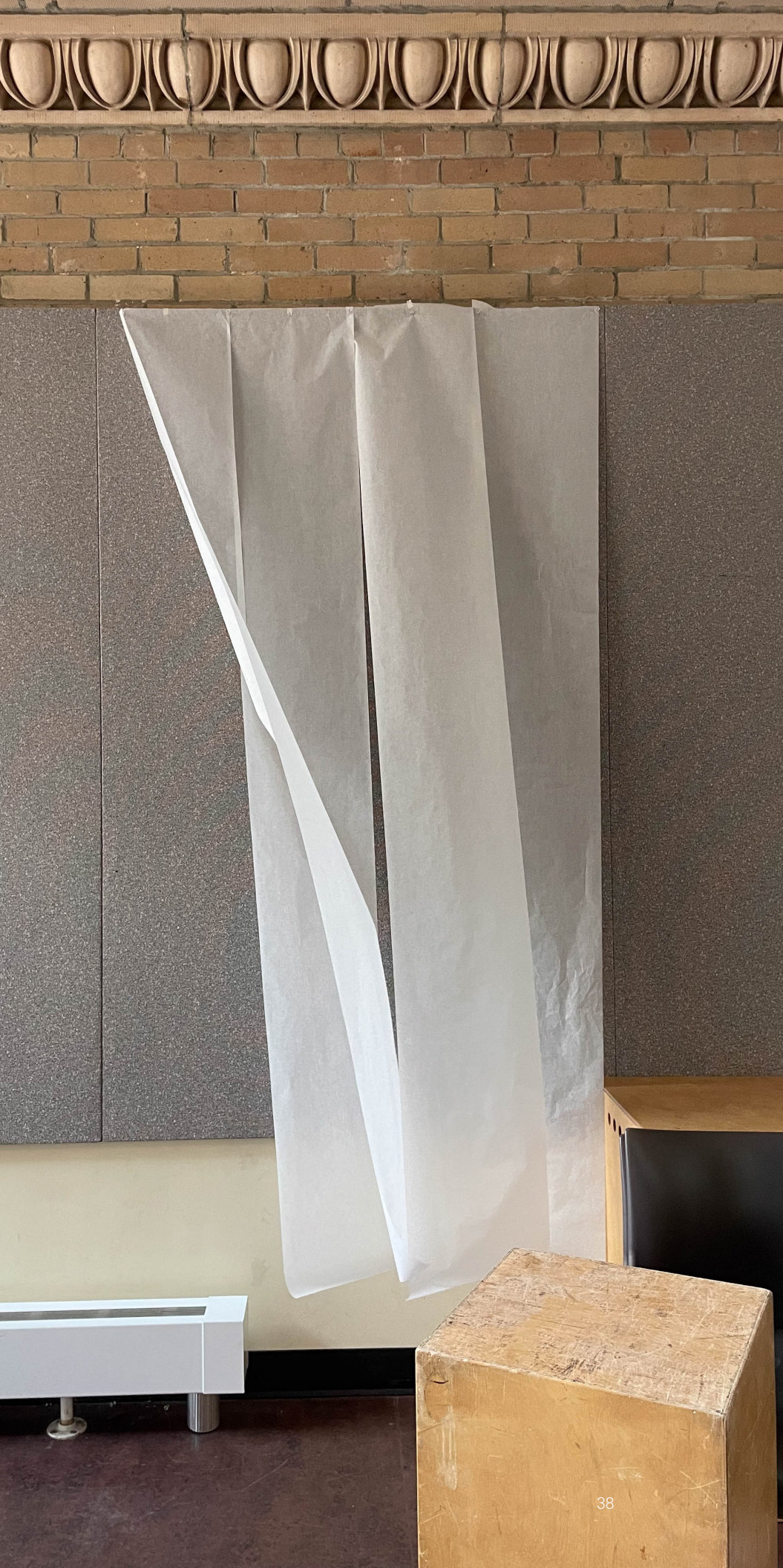
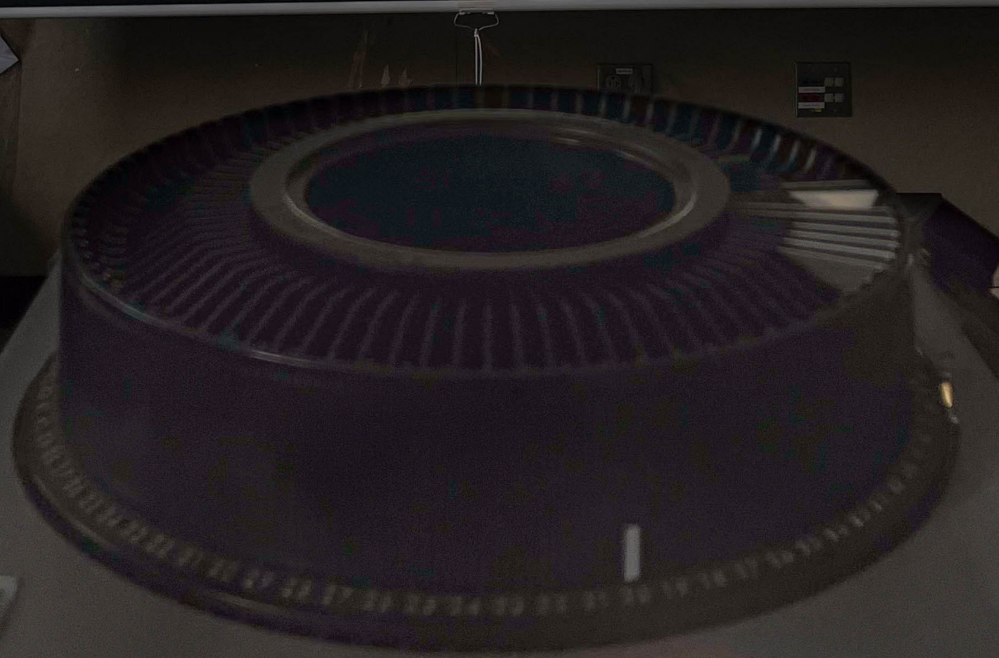


Figure 22 - Architecture Hall 250, layering trace paper on pin up boards to figure out the right length.

Figure 23 - Testing out Kodak Carousel Slide projector.

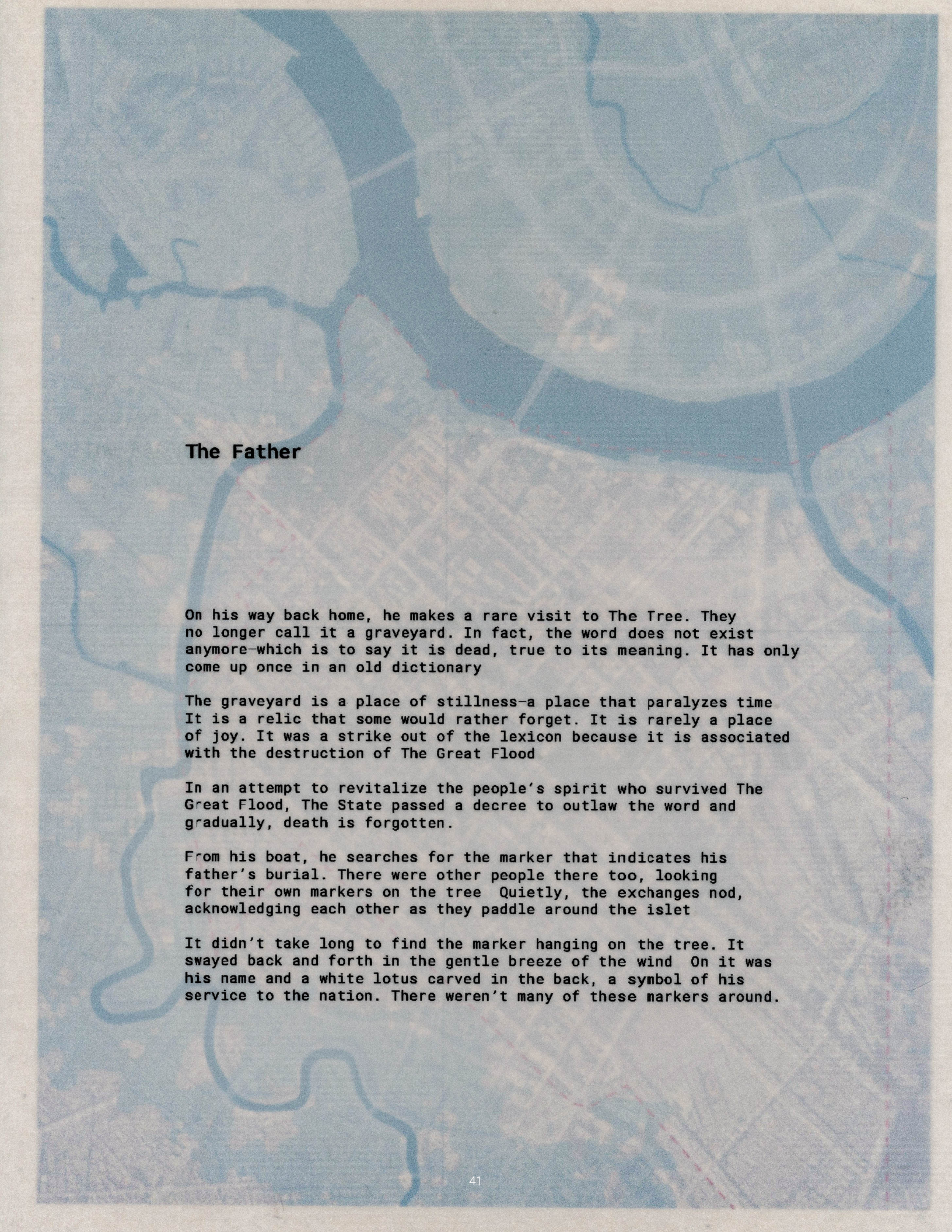
Figure 24 - Map of Saigon. Mixed media. Referenced map retrieved from the Bibliothèque nationale de France.



On Fragmentation

It had been known for decades, but no one knew the extent of destruction that began to fade. The storms came in waves, but the thunder that boomed across the plains each time it struck. For days. Soon it turned into weeks, then months passed by with the end in sight. It is as though [redacted] had come back to fight My Nuong, but this time, [redacted] was not there to raise the stakes higher. Perhaps, it was time for Thuy Tinh's triumph.

The flood swept away the fabric of the city and traces of life in its path. When it was finally over, it was as though the curtain had been lifted and the bruised sky became blue once again. In the brilliant light, it was as though the world had thawed into a new world and there was a deafening silence. Those who were lucky to have survived the flood quickly found themselves scrambling to high ground in District 1.



The Father

On his way back home, he makes a rare visit to The Tree. They no longer call it a graveyard. In fact, the word does not exist anymore—which is to say it is dead, true to its meaning. It has only come up once in an old dictionary

The graveyard is a place of stillness—a place that paralyzes time. It is a relic that some would rather forget. It is rarely a place of joy. It was a strike out of the lexicon because it is associated with the destruction of The Great Flood

In an attempt to revitalize the people's spirit who survived The Great Flood, The State passed a decree to outlaw the word and gradually, death is forgotten.

From his boat, he searches for the marker that indicates his father's burial. There were other people there too, looking for their own markers on the tree. Quietly, the exchanges nod, acknowledging each other as they paddle around the islet

It didn't take long to find the marker hanging on the tree. It swayed back and forth in the gentle breeze of the wind. On it was his name and a white lotus carved in the back, a symbol of his service to the nation. There weren't many of these markers around.

Chapter 6

in the reenactments in the forest of Virginia may have been associated with the war but did not have direct experience being on the front lines.³ By participating in the reenactments, they can situate themselves in a place that allows them to experience what their fellow countrymen went through and return to their homes without the wounds of war.

An-My Lê's work and the association of her memories are central to the exhibition. In displacing herself and suspending the violence in her life was what allowed her to explore the traumas that she didn't know she had. Likewise, in *Small Wars*, Lê is careful in redirecting viewers from the perception of war that is often filled with violence. She notes that, "I didn't want these men to replicate the horrors of war for my camera. It made sense that we came together to construct a version of the war where everyone walked away unscathed."³ It is through these reenactments and in the absence of violence that allowed for a sense of discovery and exploration. For both the veterans and for An-My Lê, it was the act of doing, the act of moving, and the act of participating in the reenactment that brought them another understanding of the war that wouldn't have been possible.

Building onto Lê's work, the exhibition is set as a reenactment of the past and the future in which participants explore the remnants of memories that are left—allowing space for interpretations and ideas of the future to form. Visitors take on the role of The Archivist to reconstruct a story of what had happened



Figure 25 - Printing mylar sheets for the pin up boards in Architecture Hall 250.

3. Guggenheim Museum. "An-My Lê, *Small Wars* (rescue)."



Figure 26 - View of the exhibition with pin up boards covered with trace paper.

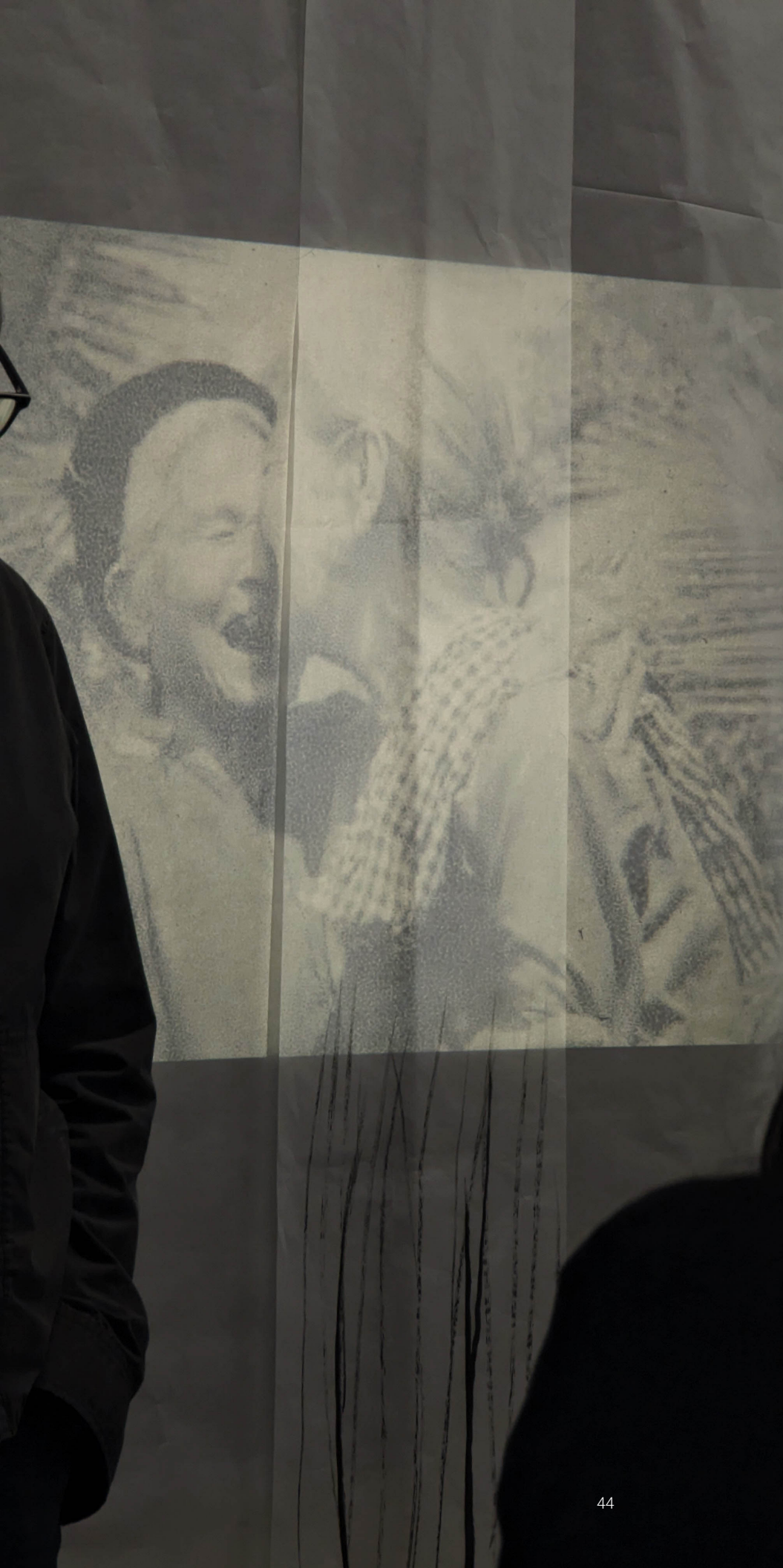


Figure 27 - Layering of slide projection on trace paper.

The Basket

It has been said that the invention of the basket allowed the mountain tribes to collect and store more food. With this invention, they soon flourished and became invincible. The basket allowed them to create a food reserve in the years when there was a drought. He tied his boat at the dock and walked up the grand stairs. In the The baskets were first made out of grass. Soon the hunters him. He discovered bamboo in the forest and the grass baskets were soon replaced. The bamboo baskets lasted much longer and allowed for greater flexibility. It served as a vessel that carried food and children alike. But most of all, it was an invention that carried humanity forward, for without the basket, how could one hold the sustenance of life?

Everyone has gone home for the day. He makes the long walk up the stairs to his desk and unlocks the drawers. Inside, a file laid untouched for as long as he had begun working there. He sits down and begins reading what his father had left behind.

The Archivist

No one wanted to take the posting in the Pine Forest, so naturally, the position fell onto him, The Archivist. Some say the forest is filled with ghosts who lost their lives in the Great Flood. And some say they could still see bodies float to the surface of the water during the monsoon season at night.

They are just old tales and empty gossip, but at the crack of dawn when shadows run deep and the sun still hangs low on the horizon, he just might believe them.

Tales have some truth to them don't they?

He had grown up listening to tales from His Father who held the post before him, and the lineage of passing down stories has been so deeply woven into his family's history that there was no way he could talk himself out of denying the position.

In the dim light of the early morning, a sudden flash of memory burst into his mind. Had it been the olden days, His Father once said, he would be riding a bicycle instead of paddling a canoe to work.

He had not known what it was like before the Great Flood, before the earth softened itself with the water. And perhaps, he will never

Figure 28 - *Fragments of the sun*.
Mixed media.

Figure 29 - Northwest view of the
exhibition in Architecture Hall 250.





after a devastating flood had wiped out the city formerly known as Saigon. The reenactment is an echo to the 10th century Dai Viet Court annalists who were tasked to construct a version of the past due to the paucity of court records as a way to establish legitimacy.⁴

In conceptualizing the exhibition, three different forms of memory play out simultaneously. The exhibition is made up of three components: the first traces the history of Vietnam through a slide projection of archival photos, the second recounts the history of Vietnam

Figure 30 - Paintings of trees, sumi ink on trace paper.

4. Goscha, Christopher E. 2016. *Vietnam: A New History*. New York: Basic Books, 24.



through narration, and the third offers an experience through the transformation of the room as a way of situating the visitors in the future. In each of these three components, the past, the present, and the future are interwoven together.

In looking back at the past, the history of Vietnam is traced through a series of archival images that documented various moments in history. Archival images that showed the idyllic and mundane life were chosen as a way to re-present the warring landscape

Figure 31 - Layering of trace paper to test the opacity to create an illusion of depth.



of 20th century Vietnam. In the backdrop of war, life continued to unfold as exemplified in An-My Lê's childhood experience. In these photos, everyday scenes are displayed. Rice harvesting at the end of the growing season. A father and daughter on their way somewhere. Two elderly women in a joyful embrace. These photos showed another Vietnam, one where there is violence, but one where there is also an abundance of joy. These photos were printed on transparency paper and mounted on glass slides. They were projected onto the west wall covered with trace paper.

To provide the historical context to the exhibition, a spoken narrative was interspersed throughout the exhibition period. The narration explains the history of Vietnam through the fragmentation of the country and traces the history of Vietnam through myths and legends, and builds future scenarios through fictional storytelling. Each reading was read at random intervals and was preceded by the sound of the slide projector advancing to the next slide to convey a change and the passage of time. The slide projector is an old Kodak Carousel that was both clunky and noisy. Made in the 1980's, the slide projector itself is both a capsule of time and is also the essence of time. When used for too long, the bulb becomes too hot to be functional creating a small window of time in which it could be used. The projector was mounted on top of a stack of books that were used as references for this thesis. The slide projector embodies the idea of projecting and re-projecting another perspective of war that is often not represented.



Figure 32 - View of the horizon and islands in the distance. Mixed media.

Figure 33 - Initial sketch of the marsh viewed from the forest. Mixed media.



The room is transformed by covering the west wall of Architecture Hall 250, where the exhibition was held, in trace paper. Sheets of trace paper spanning 7 to 9 feet in length and in various widths were hung on pin-up boards that spanned over 40 feet. On trace paper, representations of trees were painted with sumi ink. To create depth and negative space, empty sheets of trace paper and sheets that are painted with trees are layered on top of each other. The goal was to transform the room as though the setting were a forest—pointing to the history of Saigon as if it were once a forest. In

Figure 34 - View of the west wall in Architecture Hall 250 with trace paper on the pin up board.

The Great Flood

In the months following The Great Flood, there was nothing left but debris. of his choices to become an archivist—a job he u to higher ground, everything was lost to the water. The computer servers that held billions of data points were fried, the paper records disintegrated, and culturally important objects were buried deep in layers of mud and debris.

No one cared for them, really. The rice fields in the southern region were wiped out. There was nothing to eat and the hunger was palpable. People would forget about the dead so they could remember to live. There was no warning before the flood.

The fragmentation
memory can exist.
concept of collect
memories already in
which is to say that



ation in which collective
of Maurice Halbwach's
that are "made possible by
ities to which we belong,
others."3

the middle of the room, there are five wooden pedestals spaced apart but are connected with a single sheet of trace of paper. On each pedestal are sheets of mylar and Vietnamese mulberry paper, each printed with a fragment of what the future holds. The absence of chairs encouraged viewers to walk around and engage with the materials of the exhibition.

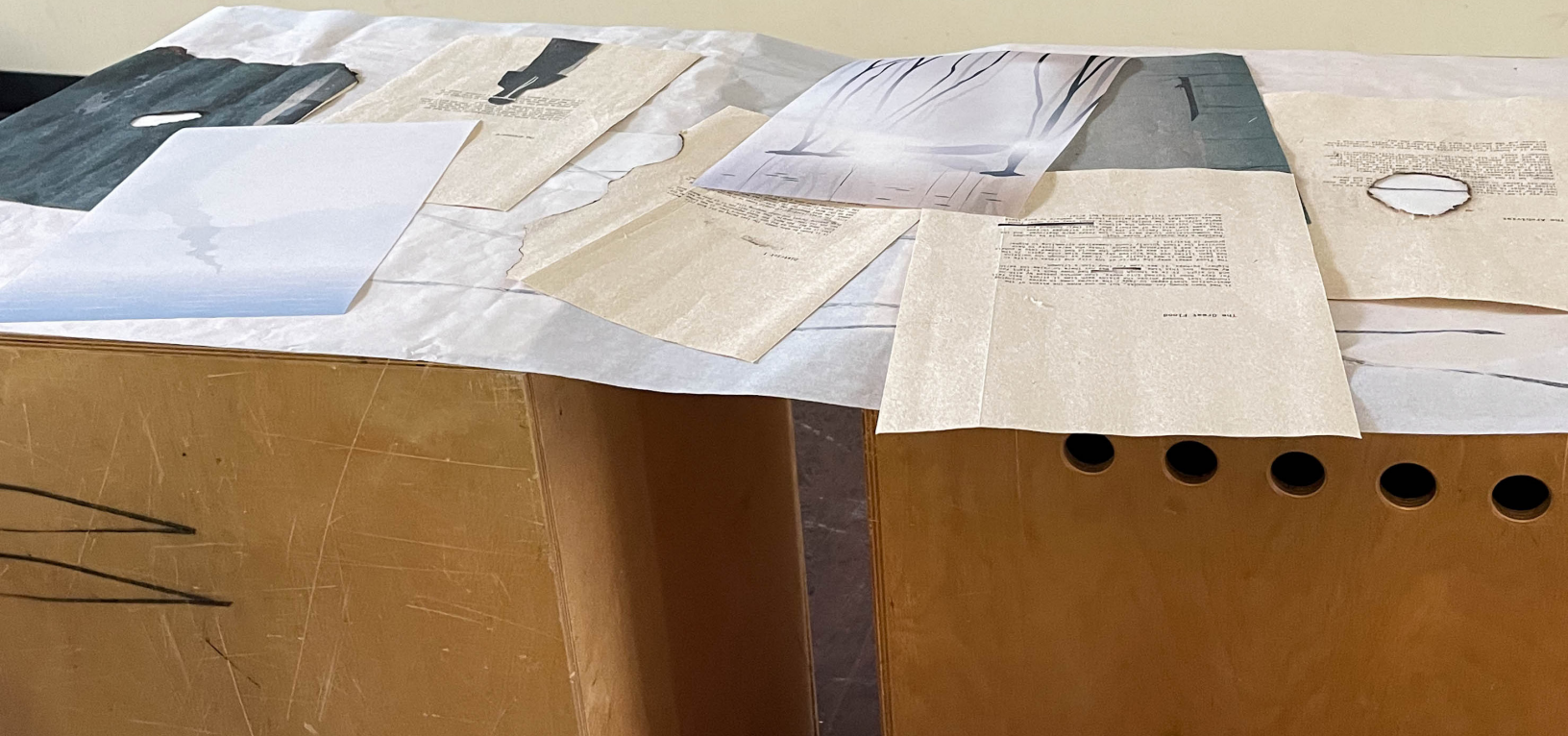
Each material used in the exhibition is considered through the lens of time. Paper was chosen as the primary material due to its versatility, adaptability, and its association with record keeping in memory institutions such as libraries and museums. Four different types of paper are used: mylar, transparency paper, trace paper, and Vietnamese mulberry paper. They are chosen for their ability to create layer and depth. Mylar, transparency paper, and trace paper all have an opaque quality which conveys a sense of depth and while Vietnamese mulberry paper does not have an opaqueness, it is constructed by layering three pages of thin paper together to create solidness. Mylar and Vietnamese mulberry paper are used to produce the pages in which visitors can interact with. Long strips of mylar were used to print an alternative version of the origin story of Lac Long Quan and Au Co. It is layered along with strips of trace paper on the west wall in which representations of trees were painted to transform the room into a forest. The transparency paper is used to print archival images for the slide projector.

In considering the aspect of time, trace paper has the shortest life span due to its fragility and thinness. Mylar



Figure 35 - Fragments of the moon. Mixed media.

Figure 36 - Testing out a small burn of Vietnamese mulberry paper.



and transparency paper are made of synthetic materials, creating a sense of endurance but in an artificial manner. On the other hand, Vietnamese mulberry paper is made from the bark of mulberry trees. It is one of the few traditional craft that still exists in Vietnam and due to its intensive production process, Vietnamese mulberry paper is considered to be of archival quality and can last up to 800 years.⁵

Mylar and mulberry paper were used to print an imagined landscape and stories that are situated in the future where Saigon splinters between earth and water.

Figure 37 - Initial arrangement of the wooden pedestal in Architecture Hall 250.

5. Zo Project. "The Spirit of Vietnamese Traditional Paper."



The story is set after a devastating flood that erases the fabric of life in the southern portion of Vietnam. Digital drawings imagine Saigon as covered in water and the stories trace the surviving memories of the city in place of material trace. The drawings printed on mulberry paper were collaged, burned, and cut up to create a sense of loss, paucity, and unreliability of the information that is presented on paper. In layering mylar and mulberry paper, there is an interplay between the artificial and the real, a product of manufacture and traditional craft, and the sense of opaqueness versus solidity.

Figure 38 - Southwest view of Architecture Hall 250 during the exhibition set up.



Figure 39 - Viewers engaging with the exhibition in Architecture Hall 250.

Figure 40 - Smoke rising at night. Mixed media.





Chapter 7: On Preservation

In writing about the past, Maurice Halbwachs asks whether past memories can be preserved if it is not a recurring memory.¹ For Vietnam, water has been on the mind of every Vietnamese since the creation of the country. Water, as an element of earth, has the dual ability to both nourish and destroy. The tropical climate of the country, for example, makes it easy for records to disintegrate.² Yet, water is one of the key ingredients to make Vietnamese mulberry paper that can last for centuries.

The preservation of memory is only possible when they are revisited—to remember requires the action of doing things again and again. For Vietnam, water has been on the mind of every Vietnamese since the creation of the country. Each child is taught the origin myth when they begin school, and as new generations are born, the story is repeated again and again. By extension, remembering the myth enforces the memory in which the country will continue to fragment.

Saigon, as a city and a landscape, is defined by water.³ Currently, it faces dual problems: it is simultaneously sinking and flooding at the same time. Saigon is a coastal city that is situated in a low-lying area and 65% of the city is located less than 1.5 meters above sea level.⁴ Since 1990, the city has been sinking by two to five centimeters a year due to its geological structure, outdated infrastructure, mismanagement in city planning, and ground water extraction.⁵ Even at the lowest rate of 2 centimeters per year, the city will have sunk 2.52 meters by 2150.

Figure 41 - Slide image of a woman walking on Pasteur Street, 1950 by Carl Mydans.

Figure 42 - Fragmented image of the horizon. Mixed media.

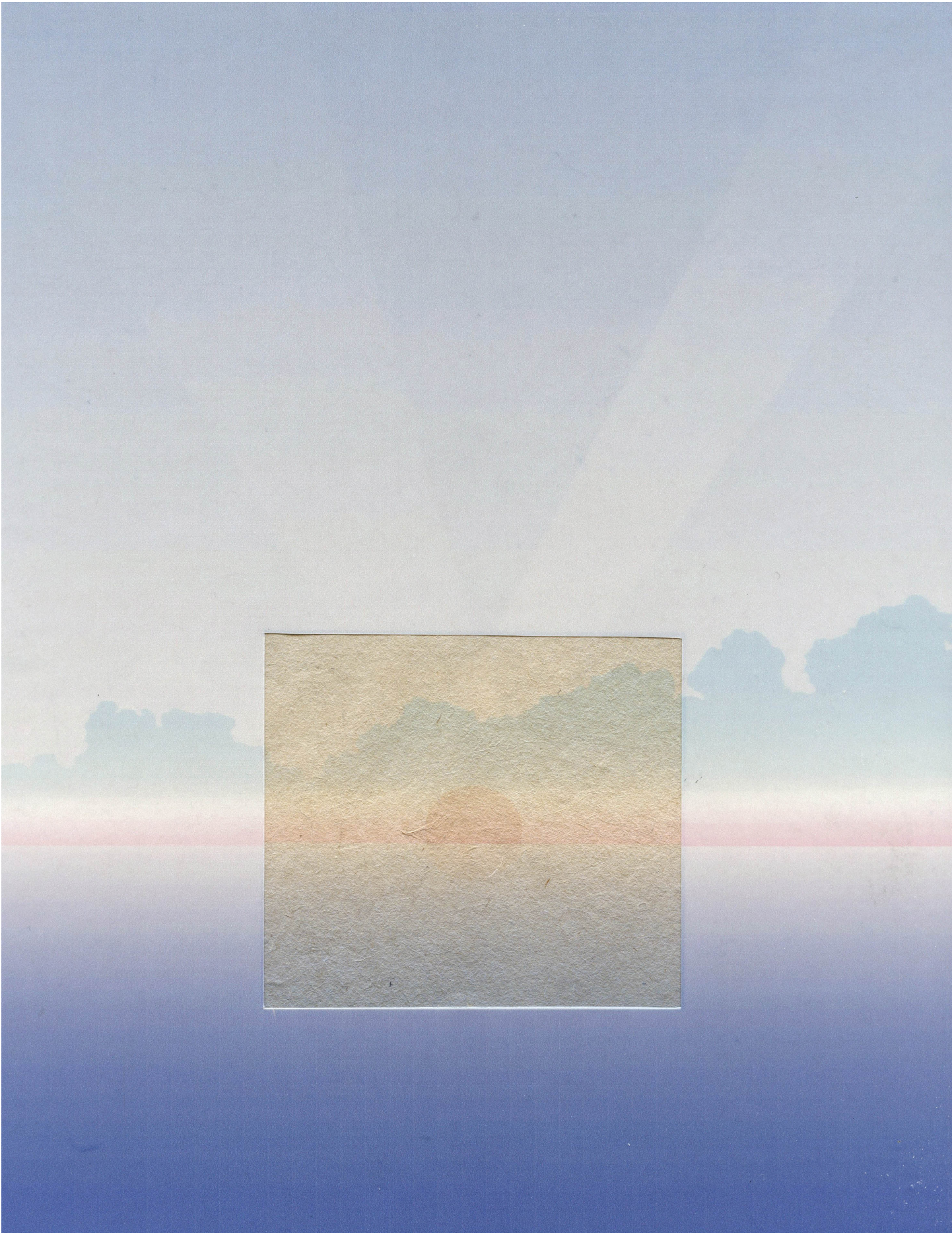
1. Halbwachs, Maurice, and Lewis A Coser. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 39.

2. Henchy, Judith. February 1998. "Preservation and Archives in Vietnam." *Council on Library and Information Resources*.

3. Ngoc, T.D. Tran. 2016. "Ho Chi Minh City growing with waterrelated challenges." In *Water, Megacities & Global Change*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 46.

4. Nguyen, Qui T. 2016. "The Main Causes of Land Subsidence in Ho Chi Minh City." *Procedia Engineering*. 142: 334-341.

5. NST. 2022. "Ho Chi Minh Sinking at an Average of Two to Five cm per Year." *New Straits Times*. August 28, 2022.



There is no need to wait until 2150 to experience the effects of climate change. Sea level rise and flooding are already present in the city. During the monsoon season, heavy rainstorms create high tides and submerge the streets of Saigon. Water surges into alleyways, flooding homes, and disrupts everyday life.⁶ According to Climate Central, the southern portion of Vietnam will be submerged during high tide in 2150, affecting nearly a quarter of the overall population.⁷ What the data doesn't account for is land subsistence resulting in only worse scenarios for the future.

What is forgotten about Vietnam is that it is a country that knows how to preserve itself despite losing nearly everything. Wars and natural disasters may fragment the country into multiple polities and realities, but these broken pieces ensure that at least one version of the story will survive. This idea can be traced back to the origin story of Lac Long Quan and Au Co whose union eventually led to a divorce in which each parent took 50 of their 100 children to the sea and the mountain.⁸ What the myth did not mention is the reason for the divorce and perhaps we can deduce that the curse of separation is the sole reason that allowed the family to preserve themselves and the continuity of their lineage.

As a city, Saigon has physically remained in its place despite its new name, the spirit of old Saigon has been lost for both the residents who live in the city and for the residents in the new version of Little Saigon. The city before the reunification of Vietnam can only be revisited in memory, but the rebuilding of a new Saigon

Figure 43 - Funeral scene. Mixed media.

6. Tuan, Phuoc, and Gia Minh. 2004. "Rainstorms bring back flooding to Ho Chi Minh City environs." *VNExpress*. May 7, 2004.

7. Lu, Denise, and Christopher Flavelle. 2019. "Rising Seas Will Erase More Cities by 2050, New Research Shows." *The New York Times*. October 29, 2019.

8. Vo, Nghia M. 2012. *Legends of Vietnam: An Analysis and Retelling of 88 Tales*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 20.





Chapter 7

in places like Orange County and Seattle allows for the memories of the city to continue.

The Vietnamese mind has been compared to an impenetrable forest in which a tree trunk sinks its root into unknown depths with an impenetrable canopy of leaves that forms a dark shadowy vault where there is no beginning or end in sight.⁹ Having lost a city once, Vietnamese people have created multiple versions of Saigons in different parts of the world, ensuring that at least one version will survive. They are fragmenting memories as a way of preserving themselves. Similarly, part of the tree trunk may be lost, but the memories of the city have already been rooted in different parts of the world. Sea level rise may erase the physical remnants of the city, but perhaps one day, these roots will grow a new tree and allow for the continuity of memory to be formed.

Figure 43 - Funeral scene. Mixed media.

9. Vo, Nghia M. 2012. *Legends of Vietnam: An Analysis and Retelling of 88 Tales*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 15.

On Fragmentation

It had been known for decades, but no one knew the extent of destruction that began to fade. The storms came in waves, with thunder that boomed across the plains each time it struck. For days. Soon it turned into weeks, then months passed by with no end in sight. It is as though [redacted] had come back to fight My Nuong, but this time, [redacted] was not there to raise the stakes higher. Perhaps, it was time for Thuy Tinh's triumph.

The flood swept away the fabric of the city and traces of life in its path. When it was finally over, it was as though the curtain had been lifted and the bruised sky became blue once again. In the brilliant light, it was as though the world had thawed into existence and there was a deafening silence. Those who were lucky to have survived the flood quickly found themselves scrambling to high ground in District 1.



Chapter 8: On Arrival

In *Godzilla Minus One*, the film depicts the destruction of postwar Japan as having reset to a blank slate. In other words, it has been set back to “zero”. In the aftermath of World War II, Japan is already a ruinous landscape. With the emergence of Godzilla who bring destruction at each step, Japan turns into a place of “unprecedented despair,” pushing the country into a “negative” state. In order to portray the devastation of the country beyond imaginable, the film crew designed Godzilla into a monster who could be seen as “fear’ walking towards” the viewer and “where despair is piled on top of despair.”¹ Although the movie exploits the emotions of the viewers as they watch the destruction of a country reduced to rubble, it is also for entertainment purposes in which viewers could leave the movie theater unscathed.

Figure 44 - Slide image of a rice field at dawn.

In the aftermath of World War II, there was no escape from violence or destruction in Vietnam. In the span of one century, the country fragmented multiple times due to imperialism, colonialism, and a civil war splintering memories and geographies. It saw multiple natural disasters and one of the worst famines in history to follow.² Vietnam, in the 20th century, was set back in the negative.

We have placed a great emphasis on institutions to remember for us that we forget what is truly important. From archives, to libraries, and museums—all are important institutions of memory, but these institutions are not immune to war or natural disasters. The same idea can be applied to architecture: we rely on buildings

1. “GODZILLA MINUS ONE Official Press Release”. *SciFi Japan*.

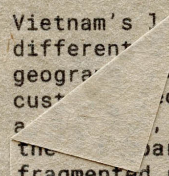
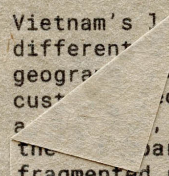
2. Huff G. *Causes and Consequences of the Great Vietnam Famine, 1944–5*. *The Economic History Review*

Chapter 8

to be sustainable for us. We ask them to do the hard work so that we do not have to, and in doing so, we forget that we are capable of doing hard things. We forget that we can rely on each other.

On Fragmentation

Vietnam's has long been a fragmented country—of rather, countries—different Vietnamese states existing at the same time, creating geographical realities, languages, traditions, and cultural customs. Recent fragmentation resulted from the 1954 Geneva agreement, creating the Democratic Republic of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel line and the State of Vietnam in the south. These fragmented realities can be traced back to the origin myth of Lac Long Quan and Au Co whose mythical union produced a sac of eggs that developed into 100 children who eventually became the ancestors to the Vietnamese people. The union between Lac Long Quan, who is the Dragon Lord of the Sea, and Au Co, who is the Mountain Fairy, is short lived. Due to their differences of earth and water, they then decided to part ways with each parent taking 50 of their 100 children to the sea and the mountain respectively. This separation is one of the first recorded accounts of "divorce" in history and perhaps, it can also be seen as a curse that fragments the country into war and political conflict, creating a mosaic of different Vietnams and a condition of forgetting.





Conclusion

Vietnam is often remembered as a war. This is a form of collective memory that is only remembered outside of Vietnam. This thesis reimagines Vietnam through a different war, one that every county with a coastline will have to contend with in the future in consideration of sea level rise that will undoubtedly bring destruction. To reimagine Vietnam, through yet another devastation is not to forget its history. It is precisely because of its long history that it is possible to reimagine Vietnam. The memories of flood, through folklore and myths passed down through generations, have created a basis in which it is possible to live between earth and water.

A single story, the origin story of Lac Long Quan and Au Co, has shaped much of Vietnam's history and cultural identity, despite its unreliable origins. What if we begin to collectively believe in a different story—in one that prevails global climate change and one in which we are able to truly live as a small part of the world?

We have to ask ourselves what kind of future we want for ourselves, because we first have to imagine the world we want to live in before we can construct it. We don't have to wait for a war or a flood to do the hard work now, but if a war or a flood arrives in the future, how do we want to remember that moment now?

Figure 45 - Slide image of monsoon flooding in Saigon on Lê Lợi street by Eddie Adams.

Figure 46 - Fragment of a forest. Mixed media.

Figure 47 - Fragment of a funeral scene. Mixed media.



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The Graveyard

There was not enough land to simultaneously bury the dead and support the living. The State issued a decree that those who have passed must be cremated so that their ashes could be used to repopulate forest growth. It has been said that the forest is gold. Without it, there is no life. It would be the last and most profound contribution one could make to their country.

It should be noted that no business has been as profitable as the funeral business. Scores of people die everyday after The Great Flood. What was once a forest is now a graveyard. Indeed, we are living with the ghosts of



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Note

The chapters in this thesis are stylized after *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* by Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Two Flowers

In the early morning of dawn, the fog has yet lifted. Under the dim moonlight sky, Mai sets out in the chilly air. Passing through winding rivers and open plains, through the pine forests and the marshlands, she would encounter many people who not only share her