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# “Who was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn?": Theorizing the Relationship between History and Cultural Memory

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# **“Who was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn?”**

*Theorizing the Relationship between History and Cultural Memory*

by Eryn Lê Espiritu

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of a  
Bachelor's Degree in History  
Pomona College  
April 12, 2013

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## A Note on Terms

**VIỆT NAM:** Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to use the Vietnamese spelling of “Việt Nam” as the default to which to refer to the country, unless I am explicitly referencing an American conceptualization, such as the “Vietnam War,” “South Vietnam,” or the “Republic of Vietnam.” Furthermore, I acknowledge that “Việt Nam” is a temporally contingent construction; the space has gone through many name changes and identities through history; thus at times I may use the term “Việt Nam” when it is not quite historically accurate. However, unless I am expounding on a particular historically grounded space—such as the Nam Việt Kingdom—I will use the name “Việt Nam” as a default in order to retain narrative coherency.

**SECOND INDOCHINA WAR:** “Second Indochina War” is the term that historians prefer to use to identify the conflict in Southeast Asia that began in the late 1950s and ended with the Fall of Sài Gòn in 1975. Because it is considered the most “politically neutral” term—a neutrality that in and of itself should be problematized and questioned—I will use it as the default term for this chapter, unless I am referring specifically to the American perspective—in which I will use the “Vietnam War”—or the North Vietnamese perspective—the in which I will use “Chiến Tranh Chống Mỹ Cứu Nước,” “War to Save the Nation Against the Americans.”

# Chapter 1

## In the Beginning: Absence and Excess

*“The struggle of man against power  
is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”<sup>1</sup>*

War displaces people. Refugees flee from their homelands to escape death and violence. But war displaces memory as well. War is a gaping wound in the psyche’s conceptualization of the past. Different agents seek to heal this wound—to fill this hole—in different ways. Others leave the wound alone; they bury it in silence and hope it fades away.

This is a story that starts in silence. With a hole in memory—suddenly found, then painstakingly filled. This is a story about Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. But it is also a story of how I found Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn; of how he started as a displaced family memory, wrapped in silence; of how I then pieced together the fragmented narratives to reconstruct a multifaceted portrait—a portrait that reflects a struggle for control over the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 3.

Who was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn? He was born in Rạch Giá, Việt Nam in 1938; served in the South Vietnamese army—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)—during the Second Indochina War; and was publicly executed by the Communist forces on August 14, 1975, after refusing to surrender. Beyond that, it depends on whom you ask. To the current Communist government of Việt Nam, whose historical narrative of national unity against foreign invasion denies the legitimacy of South Vietnam, he is a political traitor. To the American state, who conceptualizes the Vietnam War as a struggle between the U.S. and the Communists, he is a forgotten subject. To patriotic South Vietnamese veterans in the diaspora, who push back against these state imposed narratives of “organized forgetting,” he is hero.<sup>2</sup> To Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s family members, most of whom live in Việt Nam, he is a loved a one. To me, he is a grand-uncle. But I did not know of his fame—of his story—until I was twenty-one.

I came to this project obliquely, through another project in which I was interviewing my grandmother, Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor, about her life both in Việt Nam and the United States. It was summer 2011. We were sitting in my grandmother’s living room in Oceanside, California. I was perched behind a video camera, asking my grandmother questions about her past. She answered in a surprisingly open manner. She told me stories she never had the space or occasion to tell me before. One of these stories concerned her brother, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. She was sad that she had left Việt Nam before he was executed, and thus never had a chance to say goodbye. She cried in front of the camera. At the end she mentioned that Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was famous; he had a following on YouTube.

Her parting comment did not stand out to me in the moment. It wasn’t until several months later, when I was going through the video footage in the post-production phase, that I

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<sup>2</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7.

re-stumbled upon my grandmother's insistence on her brother's fame and decided to look him up online. I was surprised at the abundance of information that popped up.

It was a jarring moment of simultaneous absence and excess, of silence and cacophony. As I watched the YouTube videos praising Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn, I felt like I was staring into the face of a ghost that I hadn't known haunted my family—haunted me—until now. I was struck by my ignorance of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn. If he was so famous, why hadn't I known about him until now? Why the silence surrounding his memory—his absence from my psyche—given the wealth of information online? And *why* was he so famous in the first place? What did it all mean?

These were the questions that sparked this project, whose purpose is not necessarily to reconstruct a factual account of Colonel Cấn's life, but rather to examine the conflicting narrative constructions and memory productions surrounding this controversial figure. This is a personal project. But it is a political and academic project as well—a project that has larger implications for the field of history and cultural memory studies. Researching Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn, I grappled with the following questions: Who has the power to write history? How do stateless peoples archive their own history? What is the relationship between history and cultural memory? How is cultural memory embodied and enacted? How do cultural memory practices both challenge and constitute “official” history and nationalist discourse? What is the nature and use of a politics haunted by ghosts and oriented towards the past?

Thus I place my project in conversation with the existing literature theorizing “history” and “cultural memory,” drawing most heavily from the work of Pierre Nora, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Lisa Yoneyama, Marita Sturken, and Avery Gordon. In “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” Pierre Nora draws a sharp distinction between memory and history:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.<sup>3</sup>

Nora theorizes an antagonistic relationship between history and memory, claiming that “History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it.”<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, Hue-Tam Ho Tai also outlines the differences and similarities between history and memory: “Unlike history, memory is not weighed by the need to unify the past, and its production is proceeding at a faster pace than the rewriting of history. Yet memory does not exist without reference to history. The unmooring of the historical past from its predicted end has undone the carefully erected structures of history.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, “[Memory] is considered more authentic and more democratic because it is more dispersed and, supposedly, less likely to be controlled from above.”<sup>6</sup>

In *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory*, Lisa Yoneyama contextualizes the recent explosion in memory projects and memory studies, identifying that “the postwar and postcolonial reality within which we remember is one of late modernity, of late capitalist culture, in which a sense of history has tended to dissipate, even as yearnings for the real and the original intensify.”<sup>7</sup> Yoneyama distinguishes the importance of memory in constructions of history: “By formulating the question of historical knowledge in terms of memory, and by illuminating its constructed and mediated nature, we can determine more

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<sup>3</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Le Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.

<sup>5</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Introduction to *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 4.

precisely the conditions of power that shape the ways in which the past is conveyed and ask how such representations interpellate and produce subjects.”<sup>8</sup> However, like Tai, Yoneyama troubles the dichotomy between history and memory, drawing from Foucault to point out that

the production of knowledge about the past, whether in the form of History or Memory, is always enmeshed in the exercise of power and is always accompanied by elements of repression. . . . [Memory is] as deeply embedded in and hopelessly complicitous with history in fashioning an official and authoritative account of the past.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in writing a counternarrative out of oral histories or memories, one must be cautious to not reestablish “yet another regime of totality, stability, confidence, and universal truthfulness”, but rather to continually ask, “How can memories, once recuperated, remain self-critically unsettling?”<sup>10</sup> Thus I do not romantically valorize the memories of South Vietnamese immigrants or Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s relatives as necessarily being “more true” than the state-imposed histories about the past, but rather look at how the multiple narratives interact dialectically. In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Marita Sturken examines the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic to theorize an understanding of “cultural memory.” According to Sturken, “Memory is crucial to the understanding of culture precisely because it indicates collective desires, needs, and self-definitions. We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present.”<sup>11</sup> What are the stakes and implications of shared memories, and how do they reflect the current geopolitical moment? Sturken also coins the concept “technologies of memory” to identify the “objects, images, and representations . . .

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>11</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 2.

through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”<sup>12</sup> In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon theorizes the figure of the ghost—that embodiment of the past that reaches out and touches us affectively. Gordon’s ghost is ultimately a political one: “It is something about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future.”<sup>13</sup> In this thesis I probe the stories surrounding the “ghost” of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn and explore what it means to create a countermemory for the future.

Building off these theories of history and cultural memory, I go a step further to theorize the role of the state in these narrative processes. Hue-Tam Ho Tai initiates this discussion with her assertion that “Memory is an important aspect of cultural production, a production that the state is eager to control.”<sup>14</sup> If history is the purview of the state, and memory is the tool of subaltern groups to construct counternarratives about the past, then how do we understand the history of stateless peoples—of communities, like the South Vietnamese diaspora, who trace their origin to a now-defunct state? What is the purpose of resurrecting this ghostly state? How does the ghosts of the past affect the present?

For history and memory are *not* relegated to the past; rather they intimately shape—and are shaped by—the present. To further understand this sense of non-linear temporality, I draw from queer theorists such as José Esteban Muñoz, who asserts the need to “call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>13</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 167-195 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 177.

being static and fixed, the past does things.”<sup>15</sup> He theorizes the importance of engaging ghosts for subaltern struggles over the present and future:

The double ontology of ghosts and ghostliness, the manner in which ghosts exist inside and out and traverse categorical distinctions, seems especially useful for a queer criticism that attempts to understand communal mourning, group psychologies, and the need for a politics that ‘carries’ our dead with us into battles for the present and future.<sup>16</sup>

What are these “battles for the present and future”? What is the purpose of remembering Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn and thus resurrecting the ghost of the Republic of Vietnam? On one hand, the political investment is personal: South Vietnamese veterans and Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s family members fight for their right to mourn their dead, to resist the state’s misrepresentation and erasure of their loved one. Thus they resist the state’s desire to control not only the living—what Michel Foucault calls “biopower”—but also the dead.<sup>17</sup>

This project also has larger implications in this post-9/11 moment. The American struggle against Communism has striking parallels with the current struggle against Terrorism, as embodied by this quote by President George W. Bush, who spoke at the official dedication ceremony for the Victims of Communism Memorial in Washington, D.C. on June 12, 2007: “Like the Communists, the terrorists and radicals who have attacked our nation are followers of a murderous ideology that despises freedom, crushes all dissent, has expansionist ambitions and pursues totalitarian aims.”<sup>18</sup> To remember Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn is to challenge these state-imposed histories—to remember an alternative history of the Vietnam War, which in turn encourages an alternative reading of the current war against terrorism. A reading that challenges

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<sup>15</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There or Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 27-28.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 242-244.

<sup>18</sup> Omar Fekeiki, “The Toll of Communism,” *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2007.

the state's rhetoric of decisive dichotomies, remaining ever vigilant of which narratives get erased or forgotten.

Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's story is an example of such an erased narrative. If "official history" is what the state considers "worth remembering," then the Vietnamese and American states have chosen not to remember Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. But this story is not a *forgotten* narrative—at least, not yet. In light of this threat of forgetting, I have researched, gathered, organized, and analyzed the multiple existing narratives surrounding Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, preserving them in a written document—an archive—lest they die with the memory holders.

In Chapter Two, I draw from websites created by South Vietnamese veterans—what I call a "subaltern digital archive"—to recreate a biographical sketch of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. This sketch is interwoven with a narration of the sociopolitical context—the different events that were happening in the Asian Pacific during Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's lifetime. To reconstruct this context, I draw heavily from online timelines of the Second Indochina War—I am interested in what information is disseminated to the general Internet-using public about Việt Nam, and how this information shapes popular conceptions of the Second Indochina War—as well as academic texts, such as Marilyn B. Young's *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*, A. J. Langguth's *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975*, and James H. Willbanks' *Vietnam War Almanac*. I acknowledge that all of history is a construction—a process of editing and making sense of the past—and thus I construct a history that centers, rather than effaces, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. Chapters Three and Four examine the cultural memory production surrounding Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. Chapter Three highlights the ways in which South Vietnamese Americans engage in cultural memory practices, carving out a space in the present for the ghost of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. In these

memory acts, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn becomes a symbol for the Republic of Vietnam—a way for veterans to resurrect the ghost of this now-defunct state. In this chapter, I quote interviews with two veterans (one South Vietnamese and one American), discuss a Vietnam War memorial, and analyze YouTube videos of commemoration ceremonies. Although South Vietnamese Americans’ resistance to state-imposed narratives is admirable, I acknowledge that not everyone has the privilege to be so vocal. Thus in Chapter Four, I highlight the oral histories of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s family members, most of whom live in Việt Nam, and thus are not allowed to publicly commemorate their loved one. These are stories that exist only in the space of memory—that are absent from both official state histories as well as the online timelines created by South Vietnamese American veterans. Those timelines focus on Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s military valor. In contrast, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s relatives offer an alternate version of heroism—a more feminine conceptualization of heroism that appreciates Colonel Cẩn’s virtues and domestic contributions as well as his masculine victories.

What is the significance of conducting and analyzing oral histories? In the edited volume *Soldier Talk*, Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin explicitly link oral history as a methodology to the Vietnam War:

Never before in the history of American military conflicts has such a vast archive of recorded voices—transcribed and published—become available, giving us an unprecedented opportunity to confront the brutal secrets of a devastating war through the testimonies of its historical protagonists. . . . In the broadest sense, the Vietnam War oral history project proceeds from the deeply felt recognition that there is something unfinished and incomplete, perhaps even something false, about the official accounts of the war.<sup>19</sup>

However, like most books about the Vietnam War, Budra and Zeitlin’s volume focuses exclusively on the oral histories of American Vietnam War veterans, ignoring the perspectives of

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin, “Introduction: Talk the Talk,” in *Soldier Talk: The Vietnam War in Oral Narrative*, ed. Paul Budra and Michael Zeitlin, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 2.

other participants. It is these perspectives of “other participants”—South Vietnamese veterans as well as Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cân’s relatives—that I thus highlight in this thesis.

In my use of oral histories, I reference this methodology’s historical commitment to social change. In “The Voices of the Past: Oral History,” Paul Thompson argues that oral history “can be used to change the focus of history itself,” opening up “new areas of inquiry” and giving “back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.”<sup>20</sup> The use of oral history, however, begs the question of the potential problematics of transcription. The spoken narrative is thus mediated by the historian, who not only edits and cuts the interviewee’s words, but who may also add punctuation, correct grammar, delete “umms” and pauses, and manipulate speech patterns.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, given that eight out of the eleven interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, I acknowledge the imperfections of translation: “Translation seeks faithfulness and accuracy and ends up always betraying either letter of the text, its spirit, or its aesthetics.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, whenever I quote the interviews, I have included both the Vietnamese transcription and the English translation, to highlight rather than elide these gaps and tensions in meaning and articulation. Since the primary audience of this thesis is American, however, I have chosen to place the English translation before the Vietnamese transcription, for the sake of greater readability.

Oral history also begs the question of “truth” and accuracy. The interviewee’s memory is colored by time and subsequent influences, and s/he may make conscious decisions about what to tell and what to hide. According to Avery Gordon, “Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Thompson, “The Voices of the Past: Oral History,” 1988, reprinted in *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 26.

<sup>21</sup> These problematics are outlined in Francis Goode, “Voice, Ear and Text: Words, Meaning, and Transcription,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (London: Routledge, 2006), 362-373.

<sup>22</sup> Trinh T. Minh Ha, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, Film, 1989. I should also note that I did not translate the oral histories myself. Thus I thank Yen Lê Espiritu for her indispensable assistance.

their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward."<sup>23</sup> Thus, when analyzing these oral histories, I try to pay equal attention to the silences, to probe what is not said or cannot yet be articulated. Francis Goode also points out that "disentangling the respondent's perceptions from behind-the-scenes pressure of relatives who feel they have a stake in presenting their family in a 'respectable' light can be a minefield too."<sup>24</sup> This is especially potent in the case of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, who is already such a politically charged and controversial figure. I choose to reconcile this problem by ultimately echoing Goode's rhetorical question: "[W]hose history is it anyway, and does the respondent not have a right to decide how they wish to be represented in the record?"<sup>25</sup> I am concerned less with reconstructing a factually accurate account of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's life, and more with analyzing *how* he is memorialized.

Lastly, I do not purport to speak on behalf of the interviewees, and I acknowledge that "[a]ttempts to mediate for others inevitably objectify and sometimes even patronize the mediated."<sup>26</sup> Thus I sincerely thank the Vietnam War veterans and Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's relatives for sharing their stories and memories—especially given the state suppression of these narratives—and for allowing my creative interpretations, projections, and conclusions. I ask them to generously forgive any misrepresentations of their words.

I am especially indebted to my grandmother, Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor, who helped me to conduct these oral histories in Vietnamese, and thus who very much shaped this project, as much if not more than it shaped her.<sup>27</sup> When asked about her reflections on interviewing her siblings and cousins about Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, she said, it "really opened my eyes a lot, and I really

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Goode, "Voice, Ear and Text: Words, Meaning, and Transcription," in *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (London: Routledge, 2006), 363.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>26</sup> Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>27</sup> I was especially interested in the way my grandmother would reframe and rearticulate my interview questions in Vietnamese when she translated my English inquiries.

have emotions!”<sup>28</sup> Public suppression of Colonel Cấn’s memory meant that Taylor was denied access to not only her own brother’s story, but also to her very ability to mourn. Unlike her other siblings, Taylor left Việt Nam in April 1975, before her brother was executed in August, and did not find out about his death until five months after the fact.<sup>29</sup> Even when she did find out, it was perhaps difficult to bring up past ghosts with her family. What is the nature of this silence—a silence that seems to parallel the effects of state-sponsored organized forgetting? According to Hue Tam Ho-Tai,

southern forgetting is not merely a case of individual memory collapsing under the weight of state suppression. Practically every southern family has members who fought on different sides of the Vietnam War and whose sufferings are therefore blamed on different agents. Every memory calls forth countermemory: stories of imprisonment under the South Vietnamese regime are countered by narratives of experience in reeducation camps under the new Communist one. . . . Only the suppression of memories such as these makes possible the continuation of family life, family sentiment, and even personal sanity.<sup>30</sup>

Thus forgetting may “also be an attempt to keep the past from damaging the present.”<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps this then is the answer to my original question: If Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn—my grand-uncle—is so famous, then why didn’t I find out about him until now? Perhaps there needed to be a space for healing. A time for distance and reflection, a period for escaping the ghosts of the past. After almost forty years of silence and forgetting, however, my grandmother was eager to engage with this painful memory:

Because I don’t know much about my brother when I left the country, because we don’t really talk—my family, we not in touch for at least about twenty years. And that’s why I don’t know much about that. . . . [When] Eryn want to interview the family, want to know more about my brother, I very excited! Because, you know, I want to know about him.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, July 17, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 190-191.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>32</sup> Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, July 17, 2012.

I wanted to know about him as well. Thus I embarked on this process, this journey.

This project is for the partial fulfillment of my History degree. It is for the field of history and cultural memory studies. But it is also for my family—for the stories they were finally able to hear and tell.

## Chapter 2

### Constructing a Narrative: Situating Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn

*“Personal memory, cultural memory, and history do not exist within neatly defined boundaries. Rather, memories and memory objects can move from one realm to another, shifting meaning and context. Thus, personal memories can sometimes be subsumed into history, and elements of cultural memory can exist in concert with historical narratives.”<sup>33</sup>*

Who was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn? There is no official history for this military figure, although he was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam’s most decorated battalion commander and the only South Vietnamese official that was publicly executed after the Fall of Saigon. What we know is sparse and fragmented, drawn from the memories of those who knew him. In the absence of an official archive, individuals of the South Vietnamese diaspora have uploaded, circulated and repeated what they know of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s life in blogs, on websites, and in YouTube videos.<sup>34</sup> Thus his biography—memories of his military promotions and

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<sup>33</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>34</sup> For this chapter, I reference: Phạm Phong Dinh, “Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” *Anh Hùng Quân Lực Việt Nam Cộng Hòa / Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn*, accessed March 31, 2010, <http://daitahongoccan.blogspot.com/>; Phạm Phong Dinh, “Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn Anh Hùng Vị Quốc Vong Thân,” *VCOMTech*, April 27, 2010, accessed March 31, 2013, [http://www.vcomtech.net/vn/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=644:i-ta-h-ngc-cn-anh-hung-v-que-vong- than&catid=38:lichsvietnam&Itemid=527](http://www.vcomtech.net/vn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=644:i-ta-h-ngc-cn-anh-hung-v-que-vong- than&catid=38:lichsvietnam&Itemid=527); Nguyen Huy Hung, “Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” *QUẢN TRƯỞNG ĐỒNG ĐỀ NHA TRANG THSQ-QLVNC*, May 22, 2008, accessed March 31, 2013, <http://dongdenhatrang.blogspot.com/2008/05/dai-ta-ho-ngoc-can.html>; Hieu D. Vu, “A Hard Time (Rangers after April 30th 1975),” Oct. 19, 1996, accessed March 31, 2013, <http://www.bietdongquan.com/article1/rgrhard.htm>; “The ARVN Generals,” *Armchair General and HistoryNet: The Best Forums in History*, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.armchairgeneral.com/forums/showthread.php?t=121048/>; “Vài nét về một anh hùng: Đại-tá Hồ Ngọc-Cẩn,” accessed March 23, 2013, <http://chinhnghia.com/hongoccan.htm>; Phạm Phong Dinh, “Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” *Biển Đông, Với Hoàng Sa & Trường Sa, Là Cửa Tô Quốc Việt Nam*, April 2, 2009, accessed March 30, 2013, [http://nguovietgtp.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=184:cvvvhongoccan01&catid=84:vvdvc &Itemid=76](http://nguovietgtp.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=184:cvvvhongoccan01&catid=84:vvdvc &Itemid=76); “Tâm hình Việt cộng xử bắn Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” February 16, 2013, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://hoaihuutaysonbinhdinh>.

recollections of his in-combat victories—is preserved online. It is from this subaltern digital archive that I draw in order to reconstruct a sketch of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.

The story of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, however, cannot be separated from the story of Việt Nam. Việt Nam, in turn, is defined by and against a host of other political actors such as China, France, Japan, Korea, Laos, Cambodia, and the United States. Thus this chapter situates Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn in his sociopolitical context, laying out the historical events that shaped Việt Nam and influenced Colonel Cẩn's life: the history of Vietnamese resistance to foreign invasion, World War II, the First Indochina War, and the Second Indochina War (alternatively called the “Vietnam War,” the “American War,” the “Vietnam Conflict,” and the “War to Save the Nation Against the Americans”). In order to reconstruct this history, I draw from Marilyn B. Young's *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*, A. J. Langguth's *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975*, and James H. Willbanks' *Vietnam War Almanac*, as well as reference eight timelines that have been posted online.<sup>35</sup> One timeline encompasses a wide overview of Vietnamese history, some are more American-centric in their description of key events, others highlight the influence of other countries like France and Korea, and a couple extend beyond the Fall of Saigon in 1975 to shed light on more recent occurrences. I deliberately chose online timelines for their easy accessibility, because I am interested in examining what information is disseminated to the general Internet-using public about Việt Nam, and how this shapes popular conceptions of the Second Indochina War.

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wordpress.com/2013/02/16/541/. I also draw from one book, published by a South Vietnamese military official: Quang Thi Lâm, *An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle that Saved South Viet Nam* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> These timelines are: “Fall of Saigon,” *United States History*, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1880.html>; Quang Tuan Luong, “Timeline of Vietnam History,” 2011, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.terrageria.com/vietnam/info/timeline.html>; BBC News, “Vietnam Profile,” *BBC News Asia-Pacific*, Feb. 5, 2013, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-16568035>; “Vietnam War Timeline: 1945 – 1975,” accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.vietnamgear.com/timeline.aspx>; Public Broadcasting System, “A Vietnam War Timeline,” *The American Experience: Vietnam Online*, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/timeline.htm>; Jennifer Rosenberg, “Vietnam War Timeline,” *20th Century History*, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://history1900s.about.com/od/vietnamwar/a/vietnamtimeline.htm>; Schmoop University, “The Vietnam War,” accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.shmoop.com/vietnam-war/timeline.html>; The History Place, “The Vietnam War,” 1999, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1945.html>.

In this chapter I attempt to synthesize all these narrations of history to construct a comprehensive representation of the sociopolitical context surrounding the life of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, all the while acknowledging that this is in no way a “complete” history, as such a thing can never exist. History is always a narration, a construction—an act of picking and choosing, however self-reflexive or aware the constructor. Thus this is my own attempt at an “accurate” narration—a synthesis of the different facts preserved online about Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, interwoven into an account of the sociopolitical context surrounding his life and death.

Việt Nam remembers the Second Indochina War as “Chiến Tranh Chống Mỹ Cứu Nước,” the “War to Save the Nation Against the Americans.” This memorialization of the war fits into a larger historical narrative of Việt Nam as a country both conceived in—and constantly shaped by—resistance to foreign invasion. Initially the main threat came from China. Thus, one possible point of entry into our story is 111BC, when the Nam Việt kingdom—located between what is now called the Red River delta and region north of China’s Canton Province—was forcibly annexed by the Han, who renamed it the Chinese district of Giao-chi. Despite occupation, over the next thousand years Việt Nam continued to develop its own sense of national unity and independence. It memorializes as folk heroes those who rebelled against the Chinese presence in Việt Nam, such as the Trưng sisters (40-43) and Ly Bon (542-545). In 939, General Ngô Quyền vanquished the Chinese armies at the Bạch Đằng River, finally freeing the country, which was then called Đại Cồ Việt. The Mongols continued to invade Đại Cồ Việt, but after thirty years of periodic attacks, Grand Commander Trần Hưng Đạo defeated them. In 1407 the Ming Dynasty once again annexed Đại Cồ Việt as its 14<sup>th</sup> province, but in 1428, General Lê Lợi won back independence and initiated the Later Lê dynasty, proclaiming himself emperor.

Thus Việt Nam has a long and contentious history with China; it is simultaneously shaped by and against its more powerful neighbor.

Then the first the French Catholic missionaries came, and Vietnam's sovereignty was threatened by not only China but also France. In 1651, Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes created *Ngôn Ngữ*, the roman-based script currently used for the Vietnamese written language, thus replacing the Chinese-character based system. In 1771, the Tây Sơn brothers initiated a bloody rebellion against the again encroaching Chinese army and establish the Tây Sơn Dynasty, only to be overthrown by Nguyễn Ánh in 1802, who, with the help of French mercenaries recruited by Jesuit Pigneau de Behaine, unified what is now modern-day Việt Nam and established the Nguyễn Dynasty. This, however, was the last of the Vietnamese dynasties, for in 1858 the French navy attacked Đà Nẵng and initiated French colonial rule. France thus began to impose its imaginary of French Indochina upon the landscape and the people. In 1867, Cochinchina (the South) became a French Colony, and in 1883, Tonkin (the North) and Annam (the Center) become French protectorates. In 1887, France formed a federation of the three Vietnamese regions as well as Cambodia, adding Laos in 1893 and Kouang-Tchéou-Wan (Guangzhouwan) in 1900.

In opposition to French colonialism, revolutionary leader Hồ Chí Minh founded the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930. Hồ Chí Minh (meaning “He Who Enlightens”) is an interesting character in and of himself: born Nguyễn Sinh on March 19, 1890, Hồ Chí Minh traveled through the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union, and China from 1911 to 1940. It was in the United States that he developed the language of civil rights from the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and it was in France that he first came across ideas of Communism. However, neither President Woodrow Wilson nor the leaders of the Versailles

peace talks would heed Hồ Chí Minh's arguments in favor of Vietnamese independence. Meanwhile in Việt Nam in 1932, Bảo Đại (meaning "Keeper of Greatness") ascended the throne, becoming the thirteenth and final emperor of the Nguyễn dynasty. He only had nominal power over the French protectorate of Annam. Bảo Đại would rule until 1955, serving largely as a symbolic leader.

It was into this political turmoil that Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn enters the story. On March 24, 1938, Cẩn was born in the Vĩnh Thanh Vân Ward of the small countryside town of Rạch Giá, in the Southern Kiên Giang province. His birth coincided with another major shift in global politics: World War II. Although not a main actor, Việt Nam—then French Indochina—was indeed affected by the shifting geopolitical landscape, as greater powers such as France, Japan, and China fought for dominance in the Asian Pacific. In 1938, the Empire of Japan was already at war with the Republic of China for control over East Asia. Japan managed to invade Indochina in 1940, but the French administrations collaborated and continued to run the government. The next year, Hồ Chí Minh secretly returned to Việt Nam after thirty years in exile and organized the Việt Minh, a guerilla Communist national independence coalition initially formed in opposition to French colonialism. The Việt Minh's alliances were temporary and strategic; its main goal was Vietnamese sovereignty, and it aligned itself with or against the other global actors accordingly. On March 9, 1945, amid rumors of a possible American invasion, the Japanese troops ousted the French colonial government to seize control of Indochina, installing Bảo Đại as their puppet ruler. The Việt Minh then allied with the United States and the Republic of China to fight the occupying Japanese troops. Thus, contrary to the conception that the United States had always been in opposition to the Communist Việt Minh, during this time period the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) actually united with Hồ Chí

Minh and his Việt Minh guerrillas. After World War II, however, the Việt Minh opposed not Japan but France—who sought to reoccupy Vietnam—and broke its ties with the United States—who sided with France for the First Indochina War and then South Vietnam for the Second Indochina War.

What was Hồ Ngọc Cẩn like growing up? Unfortunately, little is known of Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's early childhood. What we do know—the official history that has been written and preserved—is what was happening on the global stage, and how these events affected Việt Nam. In July 1945, following the defeat of Nazi Germany, World War II's Allied Powers convened at the Potsdam Conference in Germany in order to plan the post-war world. Việt Nam, of course, was not invited, but it was there that its fate was at least nominally decided. In order to defeat the Japanese in Việt Nam, the Allies divide the country in half at the 16th parallel, agreeing that the Chinese Nationalists would fight the Japanese in the north while the British would do the same in the south. Representatives from France requested the return of all French pre-war colonies in Indochina, following the defeat of Japan. The Allied Powers' concern was Japan's defeat, not Việt Nam's independence. Thus, France's request was granted. On August 6<sup>th</sup> the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and three days later it dropped another on Nagasaki. The end of the war appeared near.

The Việt Minh, however, had other plans for Việt Nam. One week after the bombing of Nagasaki, the Việt Minh National Congress decided the time was ripe to incite a general uprising, in the hopes of independence. It elected the National Liberation Committee of Vietnam to serve as a provisional government and chose Hồ Chí Minh to lead as its president. On August 20<sup>th</sup>, the Việt Minh rebels successfully seized power in Hà Nội, and two days later they organized a celebration of national independence in Sài Gòn. Emperor Bảo Đại, who had served

as a puppet leader under first France and then Japan, now abdicated under pressure from the Việt Minh, serving as Supreme Advisor to the provisional Democratic Republic of Vietnam government. A Committee of the South was established to govern Sài Gòn; six of the committee's nine members were Việt Minh.

We will never know to what degree Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was aware of these events that were happening in the world around him as he grew up in the rural town of Rạch Giá. We can only speculate about his thoughts concerning the shifting nodes of power in Việt Nam. But we know from his later actions that he identified strongly with Sài Gòn and probably conceptualized the Việt Minh as an external threat.

On September 2, 1945, Japan surrendered, formally ending World War II in the Pacific. On the same day, Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed the independence of Việt Nam, quoting from the U.S.

Declaration of Independence:

All men are created equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable Rights: the right to Life, the right to be Free, and the right to achieve Happiness. . . . We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principle of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam. . . . Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country—and in fact is so already.<sup>36</sup>

Hồ Chí Minh declared himself president of the newly established Democratic Republic of Vietnam. President Harry Truman, however, refused to recognize the country.

The Allied Powers had not expected Hồ Chí Minh's declaration of independence. They retaliated. As planned at the Potsdam Conference, British soldiers arrived to occupy Sài Gòn and Chinese Nationalist soldiers began to loot Hà Nội. On September 22, 1945, 1400 French soldiers, released by the British from former Japanese internment camps, entered Sài Gòn and initiated a bloody rampage, attacking the Việt Minh and killing many innocent civilians in the

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<sup>36</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, "Declaration of Independence," reprinted in Marvin E. Gettleman, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* (Broadway: Grove Press, 1995), 40-42. The original Vietnamese transcript was not provided and thus is not reproduced here.

process. An estimated 20,000 French civilians were living in Sài Gòn at the time; many joined the rampage. It was during this time that the first American died in Việt Nam: Lieutenant Colonel A. Peter Dewey, head of an American OSS mission, was killed by Việt Minh troops while driving a jeep to the airport. Reports later indicated that his death was due to the fact that he was mistaken for a Frenchman. In October 1945, 35,000 French soldiers arrived in South Vietnam to restore French rule, led by World War II General Jacques Philippe Leclerc. The Việt Minh resisted. But the French succeeded in expelling them from Sài Gòn.

It is here that we have the first record of the surrounding sociopolitical context intimately affecting Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's life. In 1945 his studies were interrupted, and would not resume until 1947. In the meantime, Hồ Chí Minh attempted to negotiate Vietnamese independence with the French. On March 6, 1946, he signed a preliminary agreement with the French in Hà Nội, in which the French government consented to recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as a free state that belongs to the Indo-Chinese Federation and to the French Union. In addition, France agreed to carry out a referendum concerning of the reunification of the three protectorates: Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina. However, French troops continued to arrive in Việt Nam, and in June 1946, the French high commissioner for Indochina established a separatist French-controlled government for the Republic of Chochinchina, thus partitioning the formerly unified nation. This division foreshadowed the later divide between North and South Vietnam.

Hồ Chí Minh was angered by France's attack, and the two parties met at the Fontainebleau Conference that summer. However, they failed to come to an agreement, and the fighting was renewed. In November 1946, after a series of violent clashes with the Việt Minh guerillas, the French forces bombarded Hải Phòng harbor and occupied Hà Nội, killing 6000 civilians and forcing the rebels into the surrounding jungles. In response, on December 19,

1946, 30,000 Việt Minh launched their first large-scale attack, destroying the Hà Nội power plant and attacking French civilians. Thus the First Indochina War—alternatively known as the “Dirty War” in France or the “War of Resistance against the French” in Việt Nam —began, prompting Việt Minh General Võ Nguyên Giáp to proclaim: “The resistance will be long and arduous, but our cause is just and we will surely triumph.”<sup>37</sup>

In 1947, Hồ Ngọc Cấn was able to return to school. The Việt Minh troops retreated to the war zone and the French troops reoccupied the city. Cấn was only an average student, but he was described as gentle, simple, thoughtful, and quiet. In 1948 the ten-year-old had mumps, but otherwise he was a healthy individual.

Meanwhile, France was trying to secure its power in Việt Nam. It considered the French-educated Bảo Đại a more obedient and thus more favorable ally than in the Communist rebel Hồ Chí Minh. Thus on March 8, 1949, French President Auriol and Vietnamese Emperor Bảo Đại signed the Elysee Agreement, in which France reconfirmed southern Việt Nam’s status as an independent Associated State within the French Union. Thus the state of south Việt Nam—officially known as the State of Vietnam (1949-1955) and later the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975)—was established, with Bảo Đại as its puppet head of state. It is to this short-lived state that Hồ Ngọc Cấn would devote his unwavering loyalty.

France also agreed to eventually unify Việt Nam and place it under Vietnamese administration. However, the terms of this were to be negotiated subsequently. In the meantime, France would retain control of the Vietnamese Armed Forces and foreign relations. In July 1949, the French established the South Vietnamese National Army, thus upholding their pledge to help build a national anti-Communist army.

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<sup>37</sup> The History Place, “The Vietnam War: Seeds of Conflict 1945-1960,” 1999, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1945.html>.

Why did France think it important to help establish an anti-Communist army in Việt Nam? For this, one must look to the global political landscape: increasingly the world was becoming divided between Communism and Democracy. In October 1949, Mao Zedong's Communist forces defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Army in the Chinese civil war. This in turn sparked American anti-Communist sentiment and the perceived need to contain Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. In 1950, China and the USSR recognized the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam and began sending modern weapons and military advisors to the Việt Minh.<sup>38</sup> The same year, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin gave a speech claiming that the U.S. State Department harbored Communists; thus the era of “McCarthyism” erupted, instigating widespread fear and suspicion and making it hard for any U.S. politician to then appear “soft” on Communism. On June 30, 1950, President Harry S. Truman sent troops to Korea, following North Korea’s invasion of the South. The invasion, according to Truman, was a Moscow-backed attack by the “monolithic world Communism” that thus needed to be countered by American forces.<sup>39</sup> It is within this political climate that the United States and Britain’s decision to recognize the French-controlled Republic of Vietnam—and to oppose the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam—becomes legible. On July 26, 1950, President Truman initiated military involvement in Việt Nam, authorizing \$15 million in military aid to the French. Over the next four years, the U.S. would spend an additional \$3 billion on the Indochina War; by 1954, it would provide eighty percent of all war supplies.

In 1951, Hồ Ngọc Cấn initiated his military career. Because his father was a sergeant, Cấn was accepted to cadet school. He graduated in late 1952, and was admitted to the Republic

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<sup>38</sup> China sent automatic weapons, mortars, howitzers, and trucks. Perhaps ironically, much of the equipment was American-made because it had belonged to the Chinese Nationalists before their defeat by Mao. The influx of new equipment and Chinese advisors allowed General Võ Nguyên Giáp to transform his guerrilla fighters into conventional army units.

<sup>39</sup> The History Place, “The Vietnam War: Seeds of Conflict 1945-1960,” 1999, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1945.html>

of Vietnam Junior Military Academy when he was fourteen. It was there that he studied as the global geopolitical landscape continued to shift around him. In 1953, France granted Laos full independence. The Việt Minh forces pushed into Laos. Dwight D. Eisenhower, former five-star Army general and Allied commander in Europe during World War II, was inaugurated as the 34<sup>th</sup> U.S. President. The Korean War ended. An armistice divided Korea at the 38th parallel into the Communist North and Democratic South. Many international leaders saw the armistice model as a potential solution to the ongoing conflict in Việt Nam. The Republic of Vietnam—and by extension, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn—would have embraced such an agreement, but for Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh, independence *and* unification of Việt Nam were the ultimate goals.

1954 marked another major turning point. It was the year of France's defeat. In May 1954, a force of 40,000 heavily armed Việt Minh attacked the French garrison at Điện Biên Phủ. On May 7, 10,000 French soldiers ultimately surrendered. The French troops then proceeded to withdraw completely from Việt Nam. Thus the First Indochina War, which had claimed the lives of 400,000 soldiers and civilians during its eight long years, came to an end.

International response to the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ varied. For anti-colonial movements around the world, the battle was celebrated as a sign of hope: it was the first time in history that a colonized group defeated a colonial power. For anti-Communist leaders across the globe, the turn of events was perceived as a threat; when asked by the Copley Press to comment on the “strategic importance of Indochina to the free world,” President Eisenhower outlined his Domino Theory:

First of all, you have the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needs. Then you have the possibility that many human beings pass under a dictatorship that is inimical to the free world. Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the ‘falling domino’ principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.

So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.<sup>40</sup>

Eisenhower associated “disintegration” with the fall of the Asian Pacific to Communism—a fall that would upset the U.S.’s imperialistic plans for a democratic stronghold in Southeast Asia.

On May 8, 1954, the United States, Britain, China, the Soviet Union, France, Cambodia, Laos, and Việt Nam—both the Việt Minh and representatives of Bảo Đại—convened for the Geneva Conference. At the conference’s conclusion on July 21, 1954, it was agreed that a provisional demarcation line would be drawn at the 17th parallel, dividing Việt Nam until nationwide elections were to be held in 1956. However, neither the United States nor the Republic of Vietnam accepted the agreement; they opposed the unifying elections, fearing a likely victory by Hồ Chí Minh.

In October 1954, after spending eight years undercover in the jungle, Hồ Chí Minh returned to Hà Nội to formally take control of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Meanwhile in the South, Bảo Đại installed Ngô Đình Diệm as his prime minister. The United States identified anti-Communist Diệm as their best hope for a democratic South Vietnam, and thus facilitated his victory in a rigged presidential election on October 23, 1955. Diệm, however, predicted that “another more deadly war” would erupt—a war in which Hồ Ngọc Cẩn would establish his bravery and make his name.<sup>41</sup>

Although the recently established—and arguably arbitrary—17<sup>th</sup> parallel dividing North and South Vietnam was strictly policed, Vietnamese individuals—many of whom had family members and connections on both sides of the demarcation—still attempted to cross it. This was especially true at the beginning, when many Vietnamese were forced to choose their political

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<sup>40</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower, “News Conference on April 7, 1954,” in *The Pentagon Papers, Gravel Edition, Vol. 1* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 597-598.

<sup>41</sup> The History Place, “The Vietnam War: Seeds of Conflict 1945-1960,” 1999, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1945.html>.

allegiance. For example, some 90,000 Communists in South Vietnam went North. (Under the instruction of Hồ Chí Minh, however, an alleged 10,000 Việt Minh fighters remained quietly behind.) At the same time, nearly one million Vietnamese Catholics from the North fled South at the bidding of Diệm, a Roman Catholic in an overwhelmingly Buddhist country. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was Catholic himself; perhaps this religious affiliation deepened his identification with Diệm and consolidated his devotion to the southern Republic of Vietnam.

On October 26, 1955, Ngô Đình Diệm became the first president of the newly established Republic of Vietnam (formally called the State of Vietnam and informally referred to as South Vietnam). Diệm assigned most high-level government positions to his close friends and family members; most notably, he installed his younger brother Ngô Đình Nhu as his chief advisor. Throughout his term, Diệm failed to garner much popular support. He was described as aloof and autocratic, despite American advisors' efforts to popularize him via American-style political rallies and tours of the countryside.

1955 was a turning point not only for Việt Nam, but also for Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. According to cadet rules, a student who had not completed the First Five by the age of seventeen would be sent to professional school. Cẩn's early education had been interrupted by the chaos surrounding the First Indochina War, and thus he did not finish in time. He was sent to the Thủ Đức Military School for Reserved Officers, where he took a course in specialized weapons.<sup>42</sup> Although previously only an average student, after three months Cẩn graduated with distinction. He then decided to join the Vietnamese National Army, where he started out as a Private. He quickly

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<sup>42</sup> There were three types of officer military schools: Military Schools established by the French before 1950; the Đà Lạt Inter-armed Military School (later renamed The National Military Academy) established by Emperor Bao Dai in 1950; and the Thủ Đức Military School for Reserved Officers. There was no minimum level of education required for a candidate entering an officer military school prior to 1955. From this date on, the Đà Lạt National Military Academy required a full baccalauréat diploma (13 years of schooling; equivalent to 1st year of American college) and the Thủ Đức Military School for Reserved Officers a partial baccalauréat diploma (12 years of schooling; equivalent to American High School diploma). Many non-commissioned officers, due to the shortage of officers, were recruited to attend the Thủ Đức Military School for Reserved Officers. Such was the case with Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.

rose through the ranks to become a sergeant, and after nine months, was chosen as the Head Sergeant of the Military Arms. Upon graduating from the Thủ Đức Military School, Cấn stayed to teach the weapons course for the next four years.

What happened during those four years? On April 28, 1956, the last French soldier left Việt Nam and the French High Command for Indochina was dissolved. The U.S. Military Assistance Advisor Group (MAAG) assumed responsibility for training the South Vietnamese forces. This change was reflected in Hồ Ngọc Cấn's classes, which went from being taught in French to in English. In July 1956, the deadline established by the 1954 Geneva Convention passed without a unifying election. Diệm, backed by the U.S., had refused to participate, out of certainty that he would lose against Hồ Chí Minh. Diệm lacked popular support in the South, let alone the North. His administration attacked political dissidents, targeted Buddhists, and did not spend enough money on schools, medical care or other social services greatly needed in the countryside. In contrast, Communist guerrillas and propagandists in the South promised land reform and a higher standard of living, and were thus able to win the hearts of many South Vietnamese peasants.

In January 1957, the Soviet Union proposed a permanent division of Việt Nam into the North and South, with the admittance of the two separate states into the United Nations. The United States, however, rejected the proposal. It was unwilling to recognize the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The same year, Communist insurgent activity in South Vietnam began. Communist guerrillas assassinated more than 400 South Vietnamese officials. On May 8, 1957, Diệm visited the White House, where he was embraced by President Eisenhower as the “miracle man” of Asia and reassured of the United States’ continued commitment to South Vietnam: “The cost of defending freedom, of defending America, must be

paid in many forms and in many places . . . [and] military as well as economic help is currently needed in Vietnam.”<sup>43</sup>

The conflict escalated in 1959. In March, Hồ Chí Minh officially declared a People’s War to unite all of Việt Nam under his leadership. In May, he established the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN) and initiated construction of the Hồ Chí Minh trail.<sup>44</sup> In June, 4000 Việt Minh guerillas, originally born in the South and now part of Hồ Chí Minh’s People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), traveled across the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel to infiltrate the Republic of Vietnam. They blended into the countryside, indistinguishable from the South Vietnamese peasants. They recruited many South Vietnamese people to their side. Diệm labeled these infiltrators Việt Cộng, meaning “Communist Vietnamese.” To Hồ Chí Minh they were part of the National Liberation Front—those working in the South to establish Communism in the hopes of Việt Nam’s unification. Their efforts were unintentionally aided by President Diệm’s growing unpopularity. In response to the November 1960 failed coup against President Diệm, initiated by South Vietnamese Army officers frustrated with Diệm’s ineffective leadership, Diệm once again cracked down on all perceived “enemies of state,” arresting over 50,000 South Vietnamese individuals with the help of police forces controlled by his brother Nhu. Many innocent civilians were tortured and executed. Thousands fled to North Vietnam. Others joined the Việt Cộng.

Despite growing evidence of President Diệm’s human rights abuses and domestic unpopularity, the United States continued to support the Republic of Vietnam, believing firmly in the need for an anti-Communist stronghold in Southeast Asia. In 1961, newly elected President John F. Kennedy increased U.S. military aid to South Vietnam. Vice President Lyndon

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<sup>43</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted in Debbie Levy, *The Vietnam War: Chronicle of America’s Wars* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2004), 19.

<sup>44</sup> The trail would eventually wind through 1500 miles of jungle and mountain passes extending from North Vietnam’s coast to the highlands of South Vietnam, snaking down Vietnam’s western border through Laos and parts of Cambodia. A constant stream of soldiers and supplies from the North would thus pass to the South, despite the efforts of the South Vietnam army to stop them and the United States’ attempts to bomb the trail. In 1959, it took six months to make the journey, but by 1968 it would take only six weeks. In the 1970s a parallel fuel pipeline would be added.

B. Johnson visited Sài Gòn and praised Diệm as the “Churchill of Asia.” The next year, Defense Secretary McNamara visited South Vietnam and assessed, “We are winning the war.”<sup>45</sup>

President Kennedy signed the Foreign Assistance Act, promising “military assistance to countries which are on the rim of the Communist world and under direct attack.”<sup>46</sup> The U.S. Air Force began to use Agent Orange—a chemical defoliant named after the orange-striped fifty-five-gallon barrels in which it came—to burn away the jungle cover and expose trails used by the Việt Cộng. Over the next eight years, the United States would spray 20,000,000 gallons of Agent Orange over Việt Nam, killing or maiming over 400,000 Vietnamese people and causing 500,000 children to be born with birth defects.<sup>47</sup>

As the war brewed around him, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn rose steadily through the ranks.

To address the new shortage of South Vietnamese military officers, the Department of Defense opened up a call for special officers. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn answered the call, enrolling in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Dong De Academy, which specialized in the training of Non-Commissioned Officers.<sup>48</sup> In 1962 he graduated with distinction as a midshipman. After, he trained with the American Special Forces to become part of the Biệt Động Quân, the ARVN Rangers. As a Ranger, he served as Platoon Commander of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Rangers in District 42, which included the cities of Cần Thơ (Phong Dinh province), Chương Thiện, Sóc Trăng (Ba Xuyên province), Bạc Liêu, and Cà Mau (An Xuyên province).

Meanwhile Sài Gòn was fraught with political instability. The U.S. began to express doubts about Diệm’s leadership. In 1962 Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield visited Sài Gòn and reported back to President Kennedy that Diệm had irresponsibly wasted the \$2 billion

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<sup>45</sup> Robert McNamara, quoted in Kevin C. Hillstrom and Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *The Vietnam Experience: A Concise Encyclopedia of American Literature, Songs, and Films* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 179.

<sup>46</sup> John F. Kennedy, “Remarks Upon Signing the Foreign Assistance Act,” August 1, 1962, reprinted online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8797>.

<sup>47</sup> David N. Pellow, *Resisting Global Toxics: Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 159; Geoffrey York and Mick Hayley, “Last Ghost of the Vietnam War,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 12, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> This website has an archive of documents from the Dong De Academy: <http://rvnhs.com/museum/featured/ncoschool.html>.

that the U.S. had sent in support. In 1963, Diệm's regime attracted international outrage when news cameras and photographers captured footage of several Buddhist monks publicly setting themselves on fire in protest of Diệm's abuses. In response, Diệm imposed martial law and his brother Nhu instructed the Special Forces to crack down on Buddhist sanctuaries in South Vietnam. Anti-Diệm demonstrations spread throughout the country, leaving the White House in an uncomfortable bind: Diệm clearly did not adhere to American democratic and human rights principles, and thus it was unwise to continue supporting him; however, the U.S. could not back out of South Vietnam and simultaneously retain its hope for an anti-Communist stronghold in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, in face of the surrounding threat of Communism, it could not just publicly dispose of a democratic head of state—a leader that it had corruptly placed in power and so publicly supported in the past. Fortunately for the United States, a solution presented itself: on July 4, 1963, South Vietnamese General Trần Văn Đôn contacted the CIA in Sài Gòn about the possibility of staging a coup against Diệm. The next month U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge arrived in Sài Gòn to assess the situation, and after meeting with Diệm, who refused to cooperate, he offered the U.S.'s implicit support to the coup. On November 2, 1963, Diệm and Nhu were captured inside a Catholic church. They surrendered and were placed in the back of an armored personnel carrier to be taken into custody. However, on the way to Sài Gòn the vehicle stopped and Diệm and Nhu were assassinated. Their assassination was perhaps a chilly premonition of what was yet to come: be it fate, karma, or coincidence, just twenty days later, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. The political instabilities in Việt Nam found parallels in the United States.

But the change in political leadership did not correlate with a change in the war's direction. 1964 marked a significant escalation in the United States' involvement in Vietnam,

sparked by the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident. To this day, it is unclear what exactly happened: On August 2, three North Vietnamese Navy torpedo boats allegedly fired at the USS Maddox destroyer in the international waters of the Tonkin Gulf, thirty miles off the coast of North Vietnam. The U.S. claimed that the attacks were unsolicited and unwarranted. Even if the details of this *particular* attack were unclear, the United States and South Vietnam *had* been conducting covert naval operations for at least the past six months. Two days later, the U.S. National Security Agency reported a second, even more highly disputed attack. Were the attacks legitimate, or merely an excuse—or worse, a provocation—that allowed President Lyndon B. Johnson to escalate the war, order retaliator strikes, and begin bombing North Vietnam? On August 7, all Congress members except two Senators passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing President Johnson to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”<sup>49</sup> This effectively allowed President Johnson to wage an all-out war against North Vietnam without ever securing a formal Declaration of War from Congress. In 1964, President Johnson—who advocated a de-escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam—won in a landslide against the more militant Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. However, Johnson did not keep his promise: throughout his term, U.S. military involvement in Việt Nam actually increased dramatically.

Meanwhile political unrest continued to brew in Sài Gòn. In January, General Nguyễn Khánh and the younger officers ousted Major General Dương Văn Minh and the older generation of generals in bloodless coup. In response, U.S. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, who had succeeded Lodge, summoned the young officers to the U.S. embassy and scolded them like

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<sup>49</sup> “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution,” *Our Documents: 100 Milestone Documents from the National Archives*, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=98>.

schoolboys, warning them that the Americans were “tired of coups.”<sup>50</sup> General Khánh took great offense to Taylor’s paternalistic language, and publicly denounced Taylor in the U.S. press, critiquing the way the U.S. was reverting to “colonialism” in its treatment of South Vietnam.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the succession of coups, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn remained fiercely loyal to South Vietnam, and was promoted to captain in 1965. The same year, President Johnson initiated “Operation Rolling Thunder.” Although initially scheduled to last eight weeks, the nearly continuous air raids would go on for three years. Throughout the war, the U.S. would fly 300,000 sorties and drop nearly 864,000 tons of bombs—nearly twice the amount of bombs dropped in the Pacific during all of World War II.<sup>52</sup> The majority of these were dropped on South Vietnam in an attempt to eradicate the Việt Cộng; in the process, numerous villages were destroyed and about a million civilians were killed.<sup>53</sup> In 1965 President Johnson also deployed the first American combat troops, the 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Brigade. Not long after, the U.S. Army and North Vietnam’s People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) clashed in their first major battle in Ia Drang Valley. Heavy casualties resulted on both sides.

Amidst the warfare Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s fame continued to grow. In 1966, he served as Battalion Chief of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment 33, 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, and for his strong leadership and valor in battle he was praised as one of the “Five Tigers” in Tran Yen Tu’s famous song “Ngũ Hồ U Minh Thượng” (Five Tigers of U Minh Thượng). The other four “tigers” were: Major Lu Trọng Kiệt, Battalion Chief TD 42; Major Nguyễn Văn Huy, TD 44 Rangers; Major Lê Văn Hưng, Battalion Commander TD 2/31; and Captain Dương Văn Trỏ, Battalion Chief TD 3/33.

The same year, South Vietnamese troops captured Huế and Đà Nẵng. President Johnson

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<sup>50</sup> Maxwell Taylor, quoted in Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965*, (New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 344.

<sup>51</sup> The History Place, “The Vietnam War,” 1999, accessed March 23, 2013, <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1945.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Carl Berger, editor, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973* (Washington DC: Office of Air Force History, 1977), 366.

<sup>53</sup> Nick Turse, “‘So Many People Died.’ Collateral victims of war in Vietnam and Afghanistan share one thing in common—they’re invisible,” *The American Conservative*, January 9, 2013.

promised the new South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ continued support for South Vietnam. Johnson warned, however, that the U.S. would be monitoring South Vietnam's efforts to expand democracy and improve economic conditions for its citizens, given the previous leaderships' human rights abuses and inability to win over countryside peasants. In some ways the United States' commitment to Sài Gòn's host of militant and unpopular leaders is ironic, given Hồ Chí Minh's initial quoting of the Declaration of Independence in 1945. Perhaps the United States and Hồ Chí Minh shared similar commitments to civil liberties; the U.S., however, was strictly democratic, and because Hồ Chí Minh advocated Communism, the two could be nothing but enemies in the given geopolitical climate.

As U.S. involvement in Việt Nam escalated, so did domestic criticism of the war. In 1966 veterans of World War I, World War II, and the Korean War staged a protest rally in New York City, burning their discharge and separation papers in protest. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) issued a report claiming that the U.S. military draft placed "a heavy discriminatory burden on minority groups and the poor" and called for a withdrawal of troops from Vietnam.<sup>54</sup> In 1967 Martin Luther King Jr. denounced the war and encouraged draft evasion, naming the United States the "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world."<sup>55</sup> The same year even Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara expressed doubts about the war. In a private letter to President Johnson, he wrote: "The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1000 noncombatants a week while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."<sup>56</sup> In a report before a Senate subcommittee, McNamara publicly admitted the futility of bombing North Vietnam: the movement of supplies to the South had not been reduced, and the morale of the

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<sup>54</sup> Congress of Racial Equality, quoted in James H. Willbanks, *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2009), 168.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., Anti-war Speech given at Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967.

<sup>56</sup> Robert McNamara to Lyndon B. Johnson, quoted in R. W. Apple Jr., "McNamara Recalls, and Regrets, Vietnam," *New York Times*, April 9, 1995.

North Vietnamese had not been broken. In response, President Johnson “released” Robert McNamara from his duties, offering him a position as head of the World Bank instead.

But McNamara’s doubts would become reality, as the events of 1968 would demonstrate. On January 30, 1968, both the People’s Army of Vietnam and the Việt Cộng attacked South Vietnam, catching the U.S. military off guard and temporarily capturing several key cities and provinces, including Sài Gòn. The assault would later be known as the Tết Offensive, for its concurrence with the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. Despite their initial surprise, American and South Vietnamese forces recaptured most of the occupied areas within several days. For his feats in battle, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was promoted to Major and became one of the most well-known ARVN combat commanders. In 1968 he was the most decorated battalion commander.

Although the Tết Offensive was technically a military victory for the U.S. and South Vietnam, it proved a significant political victory for the Communists. The Communists’ demonstrated force during the Tết Offensive dispelled American expectations of a quick and easy victory and dampened troop morale. To make matters worse, on March 16 the Charlie Company 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade of the Americal Division entered the village of Mỹ Lai in search of Việt Cộng, and under the approval of their superior officers, the angry and frustrated soldiers raped, tortured and brutally killed all the villagers. More than 500 civilians died in the Mỹ Lai Massacre. When the American public heard about the atrocities, support for the war fell even more. The White House realized the need to reevaluate its foreign policy. Peace talks between North Vietnam and the U.S. were slated for May in Paris.

In 1969, in response to growing domestic unrest, President Nixon and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird proposed a policy of “Vietnamization,” in which the United States would gradually shift the burden of defeating the Communists away from the U.S. military to the Army

of the Republic of Vietnam. Its ultimate goal was South Vietnamese self-reliance and American military withdrawal. However, a decrease in military troops did not necessarily mean a decrease in intervention: without the knowledge of either Congress or the American public, President Nixon approved “Operation Breakfast”—the secret bombing of Cambodia in an attempt to eradicate Communist supply routes and base camps along the Hồ Chí Minh trail. The bombings would continue for fourteen months. On September 2, 1969, Hồ Chí Minh died from heart failure at the age of seventy-nine. Although the Việt Minh and the Việt Cộng greatly mourned the passing of their beloved leader, they remained strong and determined to unite Việt Nam.

Despite the pronouncement of America’s imminent withdrawal, many ARVN military officials like Hồ Ngọc Cẩn continued to resist valiantly against the Communist forces. In 1970, Cẩn was promoted to lieutenant colonel and Commander of the 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. By that time, he was the most decorated ARVN soldier, with seventy-eight honors including the Officer of the National Order, twenty-five Gallantry Crosses with Palm, forty-five Gallantry Crosses with Stars, three Medals for the Wounded, and four U.S. medals bestowed by President Johnson and Lt. General William C. Westmoreland.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile in the United States, Americans continued to protest the war. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, the National Guardsmen opened fire on a crowd of militant student antiwar protesters at Ohio’s Kent State University, resulting in the death of four students and the wounding of eight others. Although President Nixon publicly denounced the Guardsmen’s actions, he did caution that “when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy.”<sup>58</sup> The Kent State shootings rattled the country, provoking some Americans to question the legitimacy of the U.S.’s intervention in Southeast Asia, given the country’s apparent failure to protect civil liberties at home. Nixon assessed the nation’s discontent. In 1970 Henry

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<sup>57</sup> Phạm Phong Dinh, “Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” *Anh Hùng Quân Lực Việt Nam Cộng Hòa / Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn*, accessed March 31, 2010, <http://daitahongoccan.blogspot.com/>; Nguyễn Văn Khậy, “ĐẠI TÁ HỒ NGỌC CẨN,” originally published in Bài viết được đăng trong Đặc San VÕ KHOA THỦ ĐỨC, no. 7, 2000, [http://www.tinparis.net/toisu09/2009\\_04\\_10\\_DaiTaHoNgocCan.html](http://www.tinparis.net/toisu09/2009_04_10_DaiTaHoNgocCan.html).

<sup>58</sup> Richard Nixon, quoted in John Kifner, “4 Kent State Students Killed by Troops,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1970.

Kissinger, Nixon's national security advisor, and Lê Đức Thọ, the diplomat from North Vietnam, started peace talks in Paris. The next year, however, another even greater scandal rocked the United States. In June 1971, the New York Times began publishing portions of the Pentagon Papers—officially titled *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense*—that had been leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, a U.S. military analyst who then opposed the war. The documents revealed the U.S. military and executive branch's deception regarding U.S. intervention in Vietnam. In what is perhaps the most well known instance of the American government attempting to inhibit the freedom of the press, the Nixon administration appealed to the Supreme Court to halt the Pentagon Papers' publication. However, the Court ruled in favor of the New York Times, and the American public was shocked and disillusioned by the contents of the files. This again hurt the legitimacy of the U.S. government's intervention in Vietnam.

In 1972, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn proved himself once again in the Battle of An Lộc, a major battle that lasted for sixty-six days and that culminated in a decisive victory for South Vietnam. Although he belonged to the IV Corps, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was ordered to lead his troops—the 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division—to come to the aid in An Lộc, which was in the III Corps. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn walked straight into the line of fire, refusing to duck and cover as he led his troops down Highway 13, towards the North Vietnamese 7<sup>th</sup> Division. Many of the soldiers were exhausted and wounded, but they were inspired by Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's brave example. Against all odds, they reached the besieged city of An Lộc. Despite his insistence to walk upright, Cẩn was not killed. Thus he gained fame as a mythic figure who was immortal, who *could not* be killed. Quang Thi Lâm recounts the incident in his book *An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle that Saved South Viet Nam*:

TF-15 finally linked up with elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Brigade near Thanh Binh hamlet. Colonel Nhut, province chief, went out to personally greet Lt. Col. Ho Ngoc Can, task force commander, and his advisor, Maj. Mandela Craig. Nhut presented them with a bottle of cognac, the last bottle in the entire city. It was a fitting reward for an embattled unit that had paid a heavy price for having successfully carried out its difficult mission after uninterrupted murderous combat with the enemy 7<sup>th</sup> Division. During the Route 13 reopening operation, TF-15 had 153 KIA, 592 WIA, 27 MIA; one M-60 machinegun and three M-16s were lost. The enemy had paid a heavier price trying to stop TF-15 from linking up with the garrison: They suffered 304 KIA; ARVN captured 41 crew-served and 85 individual weapons, and destroyed two PT-76 tanks.<sup>59</sup>

For his military feats, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was invited to attend the U.S. Army Command and General Staff in order to be promoted to a Division Commander. He turned down the offer however, saying that with his mere primary school education, he was not intellectually equipped to handle that level of responsibility. He would rather remain on the ground, in the heat of the battle. He would rather lead his soldiers, in the name of the Republic of Vietnam. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn thus accepted the position of Chương Thiện Province Chief in 1973, making him the youngest head of the Republic of Vietnam, at the age of thirty-five. When asked if he would ever consider a promotion to Division Commander, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn replied:

I have done a lot these past fourteen years, and while I am still not tired, my knowledge is limited. Being a Regiment Commander is already high enough. We all have to know our place. Why should I expect to be Division Commander? I will continue to serve as Province Chief one or two years then I will leave, so that those below me can have a chance to advance. Now I have asked to return to the Junior Cadet School, or to the training courses for Staff Sergeant or Battalion Chief, so that I can use my experiences in order to train them. I will share with them what I have learned from the more than 300 battles that I had fought.

Tôi lặn lội suốt mười bốn năm qua gỏi chưa mỏi, nhưng kiến thức có hạn. Được chỉ huy trung đoàn là cao rồi, mình phải biết liêm sỉ chớ, coi sư đoàn sao được. Làm Tỉnh Trưởng bất quá một hai năm nữa rồi tôi phải ra đi, cho đàn em họ có chỗ tiến thân. Bây giờ tôi xin về coi Trường Thiếu Sinh Quân, hoặc coi các lớp huấn luyện Đại Đội Trưởng, Tiểu Đoàn Trưởng, đem những kinh nghiệm thu nhật

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<sup>59</sup> Quang Thi Lâm, *An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle that Saved South Viet Nam* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2009), 175.

được dạy đàn em. Tôi sẽ thuật trước sau hơn ba trăm trận đánh mà tôi đã trải qua.<sup>60</sup>

Hồ Ngọc Cẩn thus was known for his selfless commitment to the next generation of South Vietnamese soldiers. He was also said to have been a kind and thoughtful ruler in Chương Thiện.

In 1973, Henry Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ finally reached a cease-fire agreement. On January 27 they signed the Paris Peace Accords, which stipulated a sixty day cease-fire while U.S. military troops withdrew from Việt Nam; negotiations between Sài Gòn and the Việt Cộng towards a political settlement that would allow the South Vietnamese people to “decide themselves the political future of South Vietnam through genuinely free and democratic general elections under international supervision;” and a reunification of Việt Nam that would be “carried out step by step through peaceful means.”<sup>61</sup> President Nixon praised the Paris Peace Accords as bringing “peace with honor in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.”<sup>62</sup> For North Vietnam, the agreement signified a victory—evidence of the United States’ defeat and retreat. For South Vietnam, the agreement was a loss, a premonition of eventual defeat. The agreement went into affect on January 28. By March 29 the U.S. combat troops had pulled out completely. Only American military advisors and some Marines remained. For many Americans, the end of American involvement had been long overdue. Over three million Americans had served in the war. Nearly 60,000 had died, some 150,000 had been wounded, and at least 1,000 were missing in action. For their efforts, Henry Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ won the Nobel Peace Prize. Kissinger accepted the award, but Thọ declined. Thọ declared that true peace did not yet exist in Vietnam.

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<sup>60</sup> Phạm Phong Dinh, “Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” *Biển Đông, Với Hoàng Sa & Trường Sa, Là Của Tổ Quốc Việt Nam*, April 2, 2009, accessed March 30, 2013, [http://nguoivietqgtp.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=184:cvvhongoccan01&catid=84:vvdvc&Itemid=76](http://nguoivietqgtp.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=184:cvvhongoccan01&catid=84:vvdvc&Itemid=76).

<sup>61</sup> “Agreement to end the Vietnam war, Paris, 27 January 1973,” reprinted in J. S. A. Grenville and Bernard Wasserstein, *The Major International Treaties of the Twentieth Century: A History and Guide with Texts, Volume 2* (London: Routledge, 2001), 626-632.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Nixon, quoted in Bernard Gwertzman, “Troops to Leave: On TV, Nixon Asserts ‘Peace With Honor’ Is Aim of Pact,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1973.

In 1974 President Nixon resigned and Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was promoted to full Colonel. But the end of the Vietnam War was immanent. First the Communist forces captured Phước Long province in January 1975. The victory was key: given the lack of U.S. response, it proved that U.S. involvement in Vietnam was truly over, and that Sài Gòn was thus open for the taking. On March 26 the Communists captured Huế, the largest city in northern South Vietnam. They then initiated the Hồ Chí Minh campaign, a concerted effort led by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) General Van Tien Dung to “liberate” Sài Gòn. The campaign was a clear violation of the Paris Peace Accords, but the U.S. did not intervene. The NVA reached the outskirts of Sài Gòn by late April, before the onslaught of the rainy season. On April 21, 1975, South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu resigned, broadcasting his sentiments in a ninety minute TV speech to the people of South Vietnam. Feeling betrayed, Thiệu tearfully read from a letter sent by Nixon in 1972 pledging “severe retaliatory action” if South Vietnam was threatened. He condemned Henry Kissinger and the Paris Peace Accords: “I never thought that such a good Secretary of State would produce a treaty that would bring us to our death.”<sup>63</sup> He lambasted his former American allies: “The United States did not keep its promise to help us fight for freedom, a fight in which the United States lost 50,000 of its own young men,”<sup>64</sup> and thus the United States “is inhumane. It is untrustworthy. It is irresponsible.”<sup>65</sup> Thiệu was then ushered into exile in Taiwan, aided by the CIA. On April 29 the remaining Americans in Sài Gòn evacuated by helicopter or fixed-wing aircraft. On April 30 the North Vietnamese Army took over Sài Gòn and renamed it Hồ Chí Minh City. General Dương Văn Minh, who had presided for the past two days of political upheaval, surrendered unconditionally: “We are here to hand over to you the

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<sup>63</sup> “Nguyen Van Thieu.” *The Daily Telegraph*. October 1, 2001.

<sup>64</sup> “1975: Vietnam's President Thieu resigns.” *BBC News*. April 21, 1975.

<sup>65</sup> James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, Kentucky: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 240.

power in order to avoid bloodshed.”<sup>66</sup> North Vietnamese Colonel Bùi Tín accepted the surrender and assured Minh that “Only the Americans have been beaten. If you are patriots, consider this a moment of joy.”<sup>67</sup>

Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, however, refused to surrender. He lived by his motto: “Fight to the death, never retreat. Sống chết nằm trong tay Chúa.”<sup>68</sup> He and his men—a combination of Regional Forces and Popular Forces—held the 33<sup>rd</sup> Provincial Headquarters until 11:00pm on May 1, 1975.<sup>69</sup> When his forces ran out of ammunition, he ordered his men to run to safety while he and another militiaman covered for them with a machine gun. Colonel Cẩn could have committed suicide like the five ARVN generals who also refused to surrender and are thus remembered alongside him: Brigadier General Lê Văn Hưng, Brigadier General Lê Nguyên Vỹ, Major General Nguyễn Khoa Nam, Brigadier General Trần Văn Hai, and Major General Phạm Văn Phú.<sup>70</sup> But Colonel Cẩn was Catholic; he believed that “Birth and death are in God's hands.”<sup>71</sup> Thus Colonel Cẩn did not escape. When Việt Cộng Commander Năm Thanh captured Colonel Cẩn, he pointed a K-54 at Colonel Cẩn's head and said bitterly: “Mr. Cẩn, you deserve to die for all the things that you have done to us.” Colonel Cẩn laughed but did not answer.<sup>72</sup>

After his capture, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was paraded through the streets and then put on trial in front of the municipal building. According to Nguyễn Văn Tín,

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<sup>66</sup> Public Broadcasting System, “A Vietnam War Timeline,” *The American Experience: Vietnam Online*, accessed March 22, 2013, <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/timeline.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 667.

<sup>68</sup> Phạm Phong Dinh, “Vinh Danh Cố Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” accessed March 30, 2013, [http://hon-viet.co.uk/PhamPhongDinh\\_VinhDanhDaiTaHoNgocCan.htm](http://hon-viet.co.uk/PhamPhongDinh_VinhDanhDaiTaHoNgocCan.htm). The original Vietnamese text reads: “Đại Tá Cẩn nhớ lại lời danh thếp của ông: ‘Chết thì chết chứ không lùi’.”

<sup>69</sup> Quang Thi Lâm, *An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle that Saved South Viet Nam* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2009), 240.

<sup>70</sup> “The Suicides of April 30, 1975,” accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.vietquoc.com/APR3098.HTM>.

<sup>71</sup> Phạm Phong Dinh, “Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” *Biển Đông, Với Hoàng Sa & Trường Sa, Là Của Tổ Quốc Việt Nam*, April 2, 2009, accessed March 30, 2013, [http://nguoivietqgtp.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=184:cvvhongoccan01&catid=84:vvdvc&Itemid=76](http://nguoivietqgtp.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=184:cvvhongoccan01&catid=84:vvdvc&Itemid=76).

<sup>72</sup> Phạm Phong Dinh, “Vinh Danh Cố Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” accessed March 30, 2013, [http://hon-viet.co.uk/PhamPhongDinh\\_VinhDanhDaiTaHoNgocCan.htm](http://hon-viet.co.uk/PhamPhongDinh_VinhDanhDaiTaHoNgocCan.htm). The original Vietnamese text reads: “Một viên chỉ huy Việt Cộng tên Năm Thanh hùng hổ chia khẩu K 54 vào đầu Đại Tá Cẩn dữ dằn gầm gọng: ‘Anh Cẩn, tội anh đáng chết vì những gì anh đã gây ra cho chúng tôi.’ Đại Tá Cẩn cười nhạt không trả lời.”

Alleged victims were encouraged to come up to humiliate him with cursing and beating. No one made a move. Then the trial ended when the death sentence pronounced by the judges could not get any approval by a raise of hands from the crowd.

Three weeks later, the Kangaroo court reopened at the public stadium in Can Tho. This time, the organizers were cleverer in planting plenty of moles amidst the crowd to make sure there would be enough shows of hands when asked, and in not attempting to draw out accusers that just did not exist from the non-committal crowd.<sup>73</sup>

Thus Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn was found guilty of the charge “Murder of thousands of innocents.”

Before he was shot, Colonel Cấn requested three things: that he see the flag of South Vietnam, that he be buried in his uniform, and that his blindfold be removed. He also declared defiantly:

If I had won the fight, I wouldn't have accused you as you have accused me. I wouldn't humiliate you as you humiliated me. I wouldn't have questioned you as you have questioned me. I fight for the freedom of my countrymen. I should be awarded rather than punished. Nobody has the right to accuse me of anything. Let History be the judge of who fought for the just cause. If you want to kill me, go ahead, but don't blindfold me. Down with the Communists! Long live the Republic of Viet Nam!

Nếu tôi thắng trong cuộc chiến, tôi sẽ không kết án các anh như các anh kết án tôi. Tôi cũng không làm nhục các anh như các anh làm nhục tôi. Tôi cũng không hỏi các anh câu mà các anh hỏi tôi. Tôi chiến đấu cho tự do của người dân. Tôi có công mà không có tội. Không ai có quyền kết tội tôi. Lịch sử sẽ phê phán các anh là giặc đỏ hay tôi là nguy. Các anh muốn giết tôi, cứ giết đi. Xin đừng bịt mắt. Đả đảo Cộng Sản. Việt Nam Cộng Hòa Muôn Năm.<sup>74</sup>

Thus Colonel Cấn was publicly executed in the Cần Thơ Stadium on August 14, 1975. He was the only high-ranking officer to be executed after his capture; the others, if they were killed, were incarcerated in re-education camps. Perhaps Colonel Cấn's execution was intentionally public, meant to dispel the myth that he was immortal—untouchable in battle. Thus for the Communists, the execution was a public display of power. But for South Vietnamese nationalists, the execution has become a rallying point, an event of remembrance—Colonel Hồ

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<sup>73</sup> Nguyễn Văn Tín, comment on “The ARVN Generals” online forum, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.armchairgeneral.com/forums/showthread.php?p=2205271>.

<sup>74</sup> “Tấm hình Việt cộng xử bắn Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cấn” February 16, 2013, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://hoiiahutaysonbinhdinh.wordpress.com/2013/02/16/541/>.

Ngọc Cấn is memorialized not only as a decorated soldier but also as a brave martyr, a loyal subject who refused to surrender and who fought for the Republic of Vietnam until the bitter end.

Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's story ends here. But this is far from the end of the story of Việt Nam (and its relationship to the United States). On July 2, 1976, Việt Nam was officially unified as a Communist country—the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. 1979 marked the beginning of what historians identify as the Third Indochina War: in January, Vietnamese troops entered Phnom Penh to end the murderous Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. In response to what it perceived as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's attempt to expand its territory, China retaliated and invaded northern Việt Nam. The conflict would last only a month. In contrast, Việt Nam would occupy Cambodia until 1989. In 1991, the USSR collapsed, and Việt Nam normalized relations with China. Similarly, it eventually obtained political reconciliation with the United States. In 1994, the U.S. lifted its 30-year trade embargo, and in 1995, diplomatic relationships were fully normalized with the United States. Việt Nam became a full member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 2000, U.S. President Bill Clinton visited Việt Nam and the U.S. pledged to help to clear landmines left over from the war. In February 2007, the U.S. finally agreed to help fund a study that would research the removal of Agent Orange. It is not until June 2011 though that the U.S. and Việt Nam would begin a joint operation to clean up the leftover contamination from Agent Orange. In June 2007, President Nguyễn Minh Triết visited the U.S., making him the first Vietnamese head of state to visit since the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975.

Thus in this new geopolitical context, the United States and Việt Nam are no longer political enemies. Since the implementation of Đổi Mới Policy in 1986, Việt Nam has increasingly moved towards a “socialist-oriented market economy,” adopting tenants of Western

capitalism such as private enterprise. Furthermore the world is no longer divided along the axis of “Communism” and “Democracy.” In this post-9/11 moment, the United States identifies its “enemy” as not “Communism,” but “Terrorism.” The geopolitical axes are redrawn between “freedom” and “Islamic religious fundamentalism.” The United States no longer sees Việt Nam as a threat, but as an economic “partner.” Many American commodities are now produced inexpensively in Việt Nam.

These shifting geopolitical partnerships inadvertently encourage a sort of ahistoricity—a forgetting of the genealogy of the past. Such a forgetting does not hold North Vietnam accountable for its violation of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. It discourages drawing connections between U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asian and current encroachments into the Middle East. All the while the memory of South Vietnam is slowly fading from the global stage—and with it, the memory Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.

This chapter has sought to ground the biography of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn—or what we know of it, culled from online blogs, forums, and websites—in a sociohistorical context. The following two chapters will focus on those who are invested in the memory of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, highlighting their stories, their stakes, and their agency. What is the nature and significance of their cultural memory practices—these attempts to remember and memorialize a hero and a loved one?

## Chapter 3

### Making Space in the Present: South Vietnamese American Cultural Memory Acts

*“Memory is most certainly constructed and, more important, always political.”<sup>75</sup>*

State-sponsored historical narratives tend to frame wars as strict dichotomies, delineating enemies and identifying a clear winner and loser. Thus the state makes sense of its genealogy, drawing distinct borders to separate the Self from Other.

But patriotic narratives are hardly natural. They are carefully constructed, eliding messy realities and erasing certain stories—certain agents—in the name of coherency. The narrative of the Second Indochina War is a telling example. As the previous chapter established, there were many players: North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the United States, France, Japan, Laos, and Cambodia. Yet the need to distinguish a clear enemy and conclusion has flattened the different narratives, often drawing the main dichotomy between North Vietnam and the United States. The Second Indochina War may be understood as a conflict between North and South Vietnam—conceptualized alternatively as a push for Vietnam’s unification or a defense against

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<sup>75</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There or Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 35.

Communist invasion—with the United States being merely an outside agent supplying troops and equipment to South Vietnam. However, contemporary historical narratives in both present-day Việt Nam and the United States erase South Vietnam. A South Vietnamese veteran attests:

Today in Việt Nam they want to say that the war was against the U.S. because that is a bigger feat than fighting the Republic of Vietnam.

Thành thử bây giờ nó muốn bên Việt Nam nó muốn nói đánh với Mỹ đó thì cái chiến công nó lớn hơn là đánh với Việt Nam Cộng Hoà.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, in Việt Nam the war is known as the “Chiến Tranh Chống Mỹ Cứu Nước”—the “War of National Salvation Against the Americans.” Likewise, in the United States, the Vietnam War is remembered (if at all) with shame—evidence of a failed attempt to secure a democratic stronghold in Southeast Asia, or of the United States’ dishonorable imperialistic gestures in the Asian Pacific. Under this construction, North and South Vietnam are homogenized. The Vietnamese all become the “Việt Cộng,” and the independence of the South Vietnamese army is historically negated. South Vietnam thus gets erased.

They say history is written by the victors. Victors, though, at least acknowledged their fallen enemies. In this triangulation between North Vietnam, the United States, and South Vietnam, South Vietnam gets forgotten. Not only is it a loser; it is also a failed state. The ability to write history is a privilege of the state. Thus, South Vietnam has no existing space from which to produce its own historical narrative.

But although the nation-state itself may cease to exist, its people persist, keeping the specter of this failed state alive through their persistent allegiance to it. South Vietnam thus exists in the space of memory. It exists in the memory of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. The South Vietnamese diaspora has actively attempted to keep this memory alive, etching it onto the

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<sup>76</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013.

present. They carve out spaces for their own history, stubbornly inserting their own narratives into places where they perhaps do not belong.

Other academics have dismissed South Vietnamese cultural memory practices—many of which are anticommunist in nature—as “conservative exile politics.” However, in the vein of Thanh Thuy Vo Dang, I take South Vietnamese cultural memory practices surrounding Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn seriously, examining how “the refugee (or first) generation apprehend and deploy anticommunism in community spaces and in their private lives in order to engage with conversations about how memory, history and silence intersect and reveal hidden dynamics of institutional power and violence.”<sup>77</sup> I echo her question: “How can acts of collective remembrance and the burdened silences of the first generation regarding the Vietnam-American war and post-war traumas work as alternatives to state sanctioned narratives (in Vietnam and the US) that erase or disavow South Vietnamese perspectives?”<sup>78</sup> In this chapter I read displaced South Vietnamese Americans’ public memory practices to commemorate Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn as attempts to create spaces for their own history—attempts to preserve and pass down their own memory: a memory that is at once national, collective, individual, and haunting. South Vietnamese Americans have fiercely held the United States accountable to its promises of freedom—particularly freedom of expression and freedom of speech—and thus have articulated narratives and erected monuments, bringing to life memories that perhaps others would like to forget. In this way they *defy* both North Vietnam’s desire to silence their narrative as well as the United States’ desire to forget the Vietnam War.

After drawing from two interviews in order to further examine this political triangulation that leads to the erasure of South Vietnam, I conceptualize South Vietnamese American public

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<sup>77</sup> Thanh Thuy Vo Dang, *Anticommunism as Cultural Praxis: South Vietnam, War, and Refugee Memories in the Vietnamese American Community*, PhD Dissertation (University of California San Diego, 2008), xii.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

memory practices as four different kinds of space-making acts: physical, ceremonial, digital, and oral. Examining a Vietnam War memorial in Westminster, California, I analyze how South Vietnamese American activists map their history onto the physical landscape. Next, I analyze South Vietnamese American's interactions with these spaces, arguing that they organize these elaborate commemoration ceremonies in order to carve out a space in time to memorialize Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, specifically, and South Vietnam, in general. Since these commemoration ceremonies are temporally contingent—once they are completed they cease to physically exist—there is an urgency to videotape and archive these ceremonies, carving out a space in the digital to house them. Transcending nation-state borders, South Vietnamese Americans use the Internet to archive their history and memories. Lastly, this chapter takes seriously the oral element: the telling of stories as a way of creating space for Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn in the present.

I conclude with a discussion of the political usefulness of these memory acts. What is the politics of memory? What is the purpose of these creations of space? Are public memory practices regarding Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn merely a nostalgic politics of the past? What is the use of remembering a ghostly state? What is the nature of this ghostly state's haunting? Is it better to be haunted—to remember or to forget?

### **Articulating the Triangulation: Why South Vietnam is forgotten and Colonel Cẩn's memory is suppressed**

In addition to analyzing physical memorials, online websites, and videos as historical archives that memorialize Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn as a South Vietnamese hero, I draw heavily from two interviews from Vietnam War veterans: one with South Vietnamese veteran Lieutenant Hoa Pham and one with American veteran Colonel Craig Mandeville. Although Lieutenant

Pham never met Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn personally—they both attended the ARVN Republic of Vietnam Dong De Academy, but Colonel Cấn was in an older group—Lieutenant Pham was deeply moved by the story of Colonel Cấn’s bravery and patriotism in the face of his execution, and continues to idolize Colonel Cấn as a hero of South Vietnam. Lieutenant Pham is at the forefront of carving spaces of memory for Colonel Cấn. In 2010 he organized an elaborate commemoration service for Colonel Cấn, inviting people from around the country. He also has a significant online presence: in addition to having a colorful and elaborate blog<sup>79</sup> that details his autobiography, complete with political commentary and video slideshows of himself, Lieutenant Pham also has a thriving YouTube channel<sup>80</sup> that currently has 481 videos and 440 channel subscribers. His channel has accumulated 2,907,787 video views since its origin on December 17, 2009.<sup>81</sup> Most relevantly, a preliminary Google search for “Ho Ngoc Can” features two of Lieutenant Pham’s YouTube videos.

Lieutenant Pham introduced me to Colonel Mandeville, who spoke at Colonel Cấn’s 2010 commemoration ceremony and who is thus featured in several of Lieutenant Pham’s YouTube videos. Born in a small city in Oklahoma, Craig H. Mandeville joined the military after participating in ROTC in college, and first served in Việt Nam in 1967, and then again in 1972:

The war started I think officially if you look at ’64, ’65. I was still in uh, I was in college and then I graduated in ’61. So I joined the military right after that. They didn’t send me to Vietnam, they sent me to Berlin. And while I was there, you know, I couldn’t wait to get to Vietnam. And after a year or so went by I got alerted and I went to Vietnam in 1967. . . . Well my first tour I stayed one year. I started with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, a separate airborne brigade where I commanded an artillery battery and I left there and went back to a stateside assignment and then back to Germany. Then I got my orders to go back. And I went back in ’72

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<sup>79</sup>Lieutenant Hoa V. Pham, “Life of Republic Of Vietnam Special Operations Member,” accessed March 20, 2013, <http://hpnkt.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>80</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/NhaKyThuat>

<sup>81</sup> As of March 11, 2013.

for another year. That tour I served as an advisor to the South Vietnamese military.<sup>82</sup>

It was on this second tour that Colonel Mandeville met Colonel Cấn, and after some initial distrust, they developed a special friendship. Colonel Mandeville is currently the Executive Director of the Westminster Vietnam War Memorial Committee; he helped in the initial organizing and fundraising for the memorial, and attests that it is the memory of Colonel Cấn that personally drives him to “protect the memorial to perpetuity.”<sup>83</sup>

The personal testimonies of these two men help to explain why South Vietnamese people—especially patriotic veterans and those that lived through the war—find it so important to publically commemorate Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn, elevating his story to the realm of collective memory. On one level, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn—with his stubborn refusal to surrender and his request to see the flag of South Vietnam before he died—becomes representative of this fallen and forgotten state. To pay tribute to Colonel Cấn is to pay tribute to South Vietnam. This is important, given the current Communist Vietnam government’s desire to suppress the memory of South Vietnam.

This suppression is motivated by a couple factors. For one, Việt Nam has a long-established historical narrative of defense against from foreign invasion, reaching as far back as the Han Chinese’s annexation of the Nam Việt Kingdom in 111 BC and the subsequent millennium of struggles against China. North Vietnam’s construction of the United States as a foreign imperialist invader fits into this narrative. As a result, the Vietnamese state is hesitant to give full voice and credence to the cause and demands of the now-defunct South Vietnamese state. A parallel geopolitical tension can be found in the United States’ careful and somewhat uneasy historical treatment of the cessation and later re-inclusion of the Southern states during

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<sup>82</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

the American Civil War era. Both North Vietnam and the Northern U.S. states conceptualized unification as beneficial to the country as a whole, and thus, there is a desire to suppress the alternative memory of unification as not embraced but rather coerced.

According to Lieutenant Hoa Pham, the Vietnamese state's choice to identify the United States and not South Vietnam as the primary enemy is an attempt to consolidate an image of greater political strength. When asked specifically why he thought the current Vietnamese state does not want to acknowledge Colonel Cấn's story, Lieutenant Pham cites geopolitical dynamics larger than the individual: "they bigger when they fought with the Americans than with the South Vietnam."<sup>84</sup> He insists that the Vietnamese government manipulates the history of the war:

The North Vietnam they win the war because, um, because the United States withdraw, not just because they win it. They have no capability to win it at all. 1968 they almost like wiped out. And they retreat everybody back into their stronghold area. . . . And then the same time, Nixon went to China and have a treaty and gave away South Vietnam.<sup>85</sup>

Thus Lieutenant Pham insists that North Vietnam is not as strong—and by extension, South Vietnam was not as weak—as dominant historical narratives would suggest. To remember Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's then is to remember an alternate history, in which the South Vietnamese army fought bravely for the independence of their state, but ultimately lost when their American allies abandoned them.

What is the nature of this memory suppression? It is more akin to the subtle and pervasive structure of hegemony rather than blatant acts of oppression. For one there is the issue of demographics: almost sixty percent of those currently living in Việt Nam were born after the war.<sup>86</sup> According to Lieutenant Pham, the current government tries to "brainwash" the "smaller, younger generation" with their version of history, and although the older generations in the

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<sup>84</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

South claim that “nobody pay[s] attention” to the “propaganda,” Lieutenant Pham worries that it will affect the kids, who have no alternative memory of their own: “[The kids] been watching over and over again, one day they believe it. . . . [The government] keep doing that until you think that’s the true story.”<sup>87</sup> Likewise, Colonel Mandeville highlights the erasure of the South Vietnamese flag:

[For those born in Vietnam after the war,] there’s nothing in their memory that shows the flag of South Vietnam. All their history books have been taken out. There’s nothing. The people that come up there today, only know one flag. That’s the Communist flag. And they make an attempt to guarantee that. There’s flags on every building, just about. I’m not exaggerating. I’ve been back. And, so they wanted that, “*Take it out of their memory!* It’s off the books.” What they teach; they don’t even talk about the war having a flag.<sup>88</sup>

Colonel Mandeville’s use of the word “memory” here is significant, and points to either a nonlinear temporal bending or an alternative definition of memory. For the flag to be *taken out* of the younger generation’s *memory*, it would have to have existed there in the first place. However, these Vietnamese individuals were born *after* the war, and thus the memory is not personal; it is not exactly *theirs*, in the sense that the memory does not stem from a literal physical experience of seeing the flag fly in honor of South Vietnam. Colonel Mandeville thus references the idea of a *collective* memory—a memory that is passed down through the generations. The memory of the South Vietnamese flag is thus transferred, ending up in the *unconscious* of the younger generations. It is like a ghostly image that cannot be fully articulated or recalled.<sup>89</sup> And yet the Vietnamese state desires to control this memory and “take it out”—to control not only its citizens’ bodies, but their unconscious psyches as well.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013. Emphasis added.

<sup>89</sup> Rea Tajiri, *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige*, Video Art, 1991.

Despite this undercurrent of psychological violence, the government appears benevolent, and “life goes on.”<sup>90</sup> In the only time that he breaks into Vietnamese, Lieutenant Pham points out:

Today people [the Vietnamese government officials] do not hold grudges like they did before. They let people go in and out of Việt Nam to go here and there, so that’s why in this period people have forgotten all about the heroes [of the war].

Mấy người ta bây giờ không có giống như là hận thù giống như là hồi xưa vậy đó. Ta để cho mấy người đi vô ra Việt Nam đi chơi đi này kia nọ đó, thời gian người ta quên những người anh hùng.<sup>91</sup>

Reform is the greatest inhibitor of revolution. The government allows greater freedoms to appease the people, to encourage them to forget the messy narratives of the past. The urgency for resistance threatens to fade. But an ocean away, South Vietnamese Americans try to rekindle that sense of urgency.

Given the historical geopolitical triangulation, it is not only Việt Nam that attempts to erase the Republic of Vietnam and its representative heroes, but the United States as well. Unlike other vocal anti-Communist South Vietnamese veterans, Lieutenant Pham does not unequivocally praise the United States and the Americans. He critiques the U.S. as well. Part of this critique is historical—a criticism of the United States’ decision to pull out of Vietnam too early: “Nowadays, a lot of document[s] come out. And uh, if we be able to, uh, hold the country for seven or eight months, and they could have some kind of treaty. So kind of, uh, thing that change it so we not completely to the Communists.”<sup>92</sup> Lieutenant Pham criticizes Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for allegedly abandoning South Vietnam in order to focus instead on Israel. In this way, Lieutenant Pham does not conceptualize South Vietnam as a dependent puppet, but rather as a sovereign state. It is equal to the United States, in dignity if not in

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<sup>90</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

military might. The U.S.'s promise to help South Vietnam was an agreement between allies. But the United States broke the promise.

Lieutenant Pham also moves beyond the historical, critiquing the American government's contemporary refusal/inability to acknowledge South Vietnamese veterans: "The only people [that] recognize the South Vietnam veterans is the U.S. veterans."<sup>93</sup> Even then, most American Vietnam War veterans do not see the South Vietnamese veterans as equals, as comrades from the war. Colonel Mandeville explains:

You know I hate to say this, but a large majority of American veterans don't like the South Vietnamese military. We in our typical macho American way, we go over and fight, we fight the American way, and we kind of bully our way in and take over. . . . But a lot of American soldiers saw the Vietnamese as lazy, cowards, didn't want to do anything. And they were fighting and losing their friends, and then they go back to base and they see the Vietnamese sitting around doing nothing and *they have that memory*.<sup>94</sup>

Colonel Mandeville does *not* believe that the South Vietnamese soldiers were inherently lazy, but rather places the blame on the American military: "Well, we created that problem. If we had gone over right and said well we're going to go ahead and do this but you got to come with us, and equally, given the ammunition and training, that wouldn't have occurred."<sup>95</sup> Colonel Mandeville believes that the U.S. did not invest enough resources into training the South Vietnamese soldiers or providing them ample ammunition. In this way he blames the American government for fostering a sense of South Vietnamese dependency. However, he sometimes slips into infantilizing naturalist rhetoric as well, conceptualizing South Vietnamese people as *inherently* in need of stronger leadership:

They were able to hold their own. . . . The only difference is that the South Vietnamese soldier requires leadership to lead them. They needed strong officers to lead them. Americans, with the officers gone, somebody will pick it up and

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013. Emphasis added.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

start leading. The South Vietnamese, as long as they had a leader, they were great.<sup>96</sup>

Nonetheless, Colonel Mandeville advocates greater collaboration and camaraderie between South Vietnamese and American veterans of the Vietnam War: The American veterans “didn’t know why they disliked the Vietnamese. What they disliked was, they didn’t really know them. *The war does funny things to your memory.*”<sup>97</sup> Here it is not the state directly, but rather the state-initiated agent of “war,” that manipulates “memory,” speaking again to the psychological violence that validates some historical narratives while actively erasing others.

Lieutenant Pham testifies that even if individual American veterans befriend and support their South Vietnamese counterparts, there is no institutional support for South Vietnamese veterans. “The veterans help the veterans more than the government. The government, they don’t care.”<sup>98</sup> The South Vietnamese people are a stateless people; there is no state to recognize them, to provide them material benefits or to acknowledge their bravery, sacrifices, and loss. Even the degree of inter-veteran support takes place on an individual rather than an organizational level. According to Lieutenant Pham, the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), the biggest organization for U.S. veterans in the United States, follows the “political agenda of the government.”<sup>99</sup> In November 2000, President Clinton became the first president to visit Vietnam since the end of the war, thus breaking the political embargo and in a sense legitimizing the Communist government. Thus Lieutenant Pham laments: “So right now the VVA they completely... they completely with the Việt Nam government but not, but they not really care to listen to the South Vietnam soldiers.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., Emphasis added.

<sup>98</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

And there is an urgent wish for people to listen to the South Vietnamese soldiers, for people to know the story of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. Lieutenant Pham conflates the personal and the collective, explaining that he wants Colonel Cẩn’s “story on the internet so to let the people know he’s a hero. And to let the people know that’s how—that’s how we conduct ourselves in the war.”<sup>101</sup> This is a story that exists in South Vietnamese veterans’ collective memory, but that must be then transferred to succeeding generations in a way that does not rely on state-sponsored historical narratives, given that a South Vietnamese state does not exist. Lieutenant Pham worries:

Right now they, they, they talk about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan but they do not talk about Vietnam war because it’s kind of like, old war for them, it’s too old. Most of the people right now, the youngest is already like sixty. So, twenty years from now, maybe, maybe nothing. Maybe all gone. A year from now. It will be gone.

In light of this eminent forgetting and historical erasure, South Vietnamese Americans engage in space-making practices, grafting their memories onto the landscape as a means of materializing memory and archiving their history.

## **1. Physical**

Westminster, California—the heart of Little Saigon in Orange County—is home to 36,058 self-identified individuals of Vietnamese descent, making it the city with the most Vietnamese Americans per capita.<sup>102</sup> Westminster also hosts a stunning Vietnam War Memorial: an impressive twelve-foot structure featuring two young and upright soldiers—one American and one South Vietnamese—standing atop a semi-circular arch of waterfall. The waterfall’s arms curve in to surround and embrace a central bowl of flame. Three flags billow in the wind:

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> 2010 U.S. Census

the red-white-and-blue of America, the three-red-stripes-on-yellow of South Vietnam, and the stark black-and-white of the POW flag. Flowers are lain at the soldiers' feet. People wander through the memorial to pay tribute to the veterans or sit on the surrounding benches. It is this memorial that at least one man, Colonel Mandeville, dedicates specifically to Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. It is this memorial that testifies to the history of the South Vietnamese soldier and the Republic of Vietnam. It is also this memorial—with the story of struggle behind its initiation and construction—that attests to how difficult—and therefore how important—it is to write South Vietnamese memories onto the physical landscape.

Most monuments and memorials are visual representations of state-sponsored historical narratives. According to James E. Young:

By themselves, monuments are of little value, mere stones in the landscape. But as part of a nation's rites or the objects of a people's national pilgrimage, they are invested with national soul and memory. For traditionally, the state-sponsored memory of a national past aims to affirm the righteousness of a nation's birth, even its divine election. The matrix of a nation's monuments emplots the story of ennobling events, of triumphs over barbarism, and recalls the martyrdom of those who gave their lives in the struggle for national existence—who, in the martyrological refrain, died so that a country might live. In assuming the idealized forms and meanings assigned this era by the state, memorials tend to concretize particular historical interpretations. They suggest themselves as indigenous, even geological outcroppings in a national landscape; in time, such idealized memory grows as natural to the eye as the landscape in which it stands. Indeed, for memorials to do otherwise would be to undermine the very foundations of national legitimacy, of the state's seemingly natural right to exist.<sup>103</sup>

But in Westminster, the Vietnam War Memorial resurrects the ghost of a now-defunct state—South Vietnam. The diaspora that does not have its *own* geographically-bounded state is perhaps then free to write their history and memory on the landscape of *other* politically sovereign nations. The messiness of diasporic memory thus offers an implicit critique of the limitations of the nation-state structure.

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<sup>103</sup> James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 2.

In 1997, Mayor Frank Fry initiated the Westminster Vietnam War Memorial project.

Colonel Mandeville explains:

Frank Fry was the mayor of Westminster, City Council member, WWII veteran, had seen how poorly the South—the American soldier was treated when they came back from the war. We were spit on; they didn't respect us. And he also had this huge community of South Vietnamese here. And so he said, "*We got to do something in memory of those people who fought.*" So he had this idea of this memorial.<sup>104</sup>

Americans' desire to forget the Vietnam War hurt both the American Vietnam War veterans as well as the South Vietnamese immigrant community. Mayor Fry recognized the overlapping interests of these constituencies and decided to construct a memorial that would pay tribute to both. He thus highlighted rather than ignored the *collaboration* between American and South Vietnamese soldiers. He acknowledged the South Vietnamese veterans as equals rather than dependents.

A contest was held to determine the design for the monument. A select committee, headed by Frank Fry, unanimously chose sculptor Tuan Nguyen's proposal. Tuan Nguyen's own biography is intimately tied to the story of South Vietnam. Born in Sài Gòn in 1963, Nguyen started his life in the midst of the Vietnam War. In 1988 he attempted to flee, but was captured by the Communists and sent to a reeducation camp. He eventually escaped by sneaking out through the Cambodian jungles and ultimately made it to the United States.<sup>105</sup> Here, he became interested in sculpting, and in 1995, Tuan Nguyen received his fine art degree from the Art Institute of Southern California in Laguna Beach, CA.<sup>106</sup> According to Colonel Mandeville,

Tuan has two things: if you look at the statues, the American soldier has his helmet off, and he's going home. He's looking to the future and he's finished his job and he's leaving. Proud of his service, etc. The South Vietnamese soldier's got his helmet on, and he's got his finger out pointing to the ground. And he's

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<sup>104</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013. Emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup> Stacy Willis, "Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster: a moving tribute to fallen soldiers," *examiner.com*, June 1, 2010, accessed March 11, 2013, <http://www.examiner.com/article/vietnam-war-memorial-westminster-a-moving-tribute-to-fallen-soldiers>.

<sup>106</sup> "Tuan Nguyen," *Fine Art Galleries*, accessed March 4, 2013, <http://www.pcart.com/tuan/index.html>.

staying to fight for his country. That was the symbolism that Tuan wanted to portray. . . . [I]t's the only memorial truly where soldiers stand upright. They fight for what they're asked to do. And they fight and they come home or they don't come home. And people wanted to put the names of the people that were killed in Vietnam and Tuan said, "No, no." People know in their head when they walk up that people died. He didn't want that. The thought of fighting for your country, just like the saying says below it. Freedom.<sup>107</sup>

Thus there is an emphasis on life, rather than death. The soldiers, forever young, bring this past moment of youthful camaraderie into the present. It is a liminal moment—a moment that marks the threshold between a time of intimate fighting, side by side in the jungles of Vietnam, and the reminder of distance, the fact that the American can ultimately leave and go “home.” It also references a lost time in which the South Vietnamese soldier can indeed point to the Vietnamese ground and claim the soil as his sovereign country—a gesture that no longer holds true.

The memorial now stands proudly in Sid Goldstein Freedom Park. However, it took six long years for this project to come to fruition—six long years of raising money, resisting active suppressions of memory, and negotiating conflicts over the memorial's meaning and structure. Colonel Mandeville recounts resistance to the memorial from both the American community and the current Vietnamese state. On the American side, there is a desire to forget: “The war's still... not happy. The American people don't like the Vietnam War. They don't like Vietnam, American soldiers, they don't like Vietnamese. It was a bad memory for them.”<sup>108</sup> When I pressed further, Colonel Mandeville elaborated:

Kind of the turning point if you look back in history, it was Tet in '67, '68. And the press played it up that the South Vietnamese were getting killed, American soldiers were being killed, because they really didn't hit the whole country. But we destroyed the North Vietnamese. We killed them all and fought them all back. But the press turned against us. And so the people started rioting. I mean, they said, “Get us out of there,” and they turned on the military guys as we were the problem, rather than the politicians. They turned on the politicians but they thought we were the problem. The baby killers, the rapists, the burning people.

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<sup>107</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

You know, all that stuff, they thought that's what we were. And uh, so that, that's what's filtered into the American people's mind. And that's why I say those same generation, those were them and their kids today. They're doing what they do. And uh, you know, they just... They didn't understand why were fighting the war, they didn't understand the cost of the war, you know, 68,000 people died and they just don't like it.<sup>109</sup>

Colonel Mandeville articulates the feelings of “a bad memory” in terms of both an inability to understand and a lingering affect of shame. In “Dangerous History: Vietnam and the ‘Good War,’” Marilyn B. Young argues that the Vietnam War was the first event in American history that threatened the American historical metanarrative itself—a metanarrative that “has been based on a belief in the fulfillment, over time, of the enduring principles of the Founding Fathers” and which claimed that since its inception, the U.S. has “stood for self-determination, freedom, and democracy.”<sup>110</sup> The Vietnam War was posed as an antithesis to WWII, the “Good War,” in which Americans held the moral high ground and secured a decisive victory. Indeed, Colonel Mandeville identifies WWII veterans as some of the most vocal opposition to the Vietnam War Memorial: “They are *not* the greatest generation. Because those same people that fought turned against us when we were trying to build a memorial. The VFW and the Foreign Legion, whatever else came out, didn't want the statue!”<sup>111</sup> Part of this Colonel Mandeville interprets as a personal affront, an attack on the American Vietnam War veteran:

And it was like, they didn't think we were veterans that needed anything to focus on, to remember our veterans. I was devastated! So they're not the greatest generation. If they were they would have welcomed us home and treated us well, and they didn't. For some reason they thought they'd fought the only war and we were just not equal to them. Well statistics prove that we saw more combat than they did. Everything we did was a lot more than they did, except they got welcomed home.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Marilyn B. Young, “Dangerous History: Vietnam and the ‘Good War,’” in *History Wars: The Enola gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996) 200-201.

<sup>111</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

Another reason is the continual distrust of the South Vietnamese people and the conflation of North and South Vietnam, as this anecdote exemplifies:

Actually I was trying to raise money, I was working at Boeing, a veterans group there. And all of a sudden a couple of people said they didn't want to talk to me anymore. I asked, "Why?" And he said, "Why you dealing with the Vietnamese?"<sup>113</sup>

Whatever the reason, as a result of the lack of American support, "ninety-nine percent" of the money raised for the memorial—well over a million dollars—was "given by the South Vietnamese."<sup>114</sup> Despite the significant support of American allies such as Mayor Frank Fry and Colonel Craig Mandeville, the sense of camaraderie depicted by the memorial's statue is perhaps not as reflective of the reality in Westminster as one would like to believe.

However, it is not only the American community that would like to suppress the memory of South Vietnam's struggle as materialized by this memorial. Colonel Mandeville tells a chilling story of the extent to which the current Vietnamese state will go to silence the memory of South Vietnam. They sent "a formal complaint letter to our state department saying they did not want that memorial built, primarily because of the flag. And the state department sent it to the city of Westminster." However, "the city council just threw it away. Who were they to tell us what we could do with our property and our memories?"<sup>115</sup> Thus the act of constructing the Vietnam War Memorial is one of political defiance.

But defiance is not without risk. The question of memory—and who has a right to control it—became quite literally a question of life and death:

M: And they were serious about it. They threatened my life. I got calls, "If the flag goes up, I go down." So the city of Westminster—I carried a concealed weapon for three years. Uh, because the threats were real.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

E: Hmm. Who was calling you?

M: You know. Whoever is here: a relative, or gang member, or whoever they got. And they considered it to be valid threats. They threw glass at my yard, a lot of stuff which I had to deal with. I was married at the time; I think that's one reason we got a divorce. She was frightened to death. And I kept saying, "Just bring them on. I'll take them on, just like I did in Vietnam. They try one, I'll take them on."<sup>116</sup>

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam feels threatened by the memorial and Colonel Mandeville conflates contemporary opposition with his past enemies in Việt Nam. Thus the Vietnam War Memorial resurrects the South Vietnamese state in the present, bringing to life past struggles in its wake.

Not only were there difficulties with financial support; Americans contended with the degree of equality portrayed in the memorial as well:

They fought, we fought with them, and they should be standing equal to Americans and that's why in Frank's mind and my mind they're equal. You know, not one. I got in a battle with I won't tell you who, but they wanted the American flag higher than the South Vietnamese flag. Just because, American pride. We should have dumped him. I got to prove it to him, in American regulations they're equal height. Well then people said, "Well inch it down a couple of inches; nobody will know." Well we knew. So the flags are equal height and equal importance. You wouldn't believe there was so many innuendos that happened during that time.<sup>117</sup>

Even those who did not actively suppress the memory of South Vietnamese agency, bravery, and collaboration wanted to diminish it, to qualify it in comparison to the American soldier's representation.

How does this memorial connect to the memory of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn? For Colonel Mandeville, who served with Colonel Cẩn in 1972, the connection is deeply personal. His moving testimony speaks for itself:

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

But, uh, I got involved with it, and this sounds corny, and I may not get through it, but I heard when Colonel Can was executed he had three requests. He wanted to be in his full dress uniform, he wanted his blindfold removed, and he wanted to see the flag of South Vietnam. So... That's what I think I would want. And so in their cruel way, they let him have his uniform but then they brought his family out to watch the execution. And when I heard that story it really irritated me. So in my mind I got involved to build a memorial—getting a bit choked up here—to pay tribute to Colonel Can. 'Cause the flag is always there for him to see. And uh, that's a flag here. Don't put this in the tape but when you lose your country, you lose your flag. There's no longer a flag of free Vietnam. Now in my heart and all the Vietnamese here there is. And in reality all these flags around here are banners. But I wouldn't tell the South Vietnamese that; they'd run me out of town. But the memorial is on a piece of ground that was dedicated to be there 1965-1975, so it's a historical place, so as long as it stands there, that is a flag. And so when I look at the flag, it's Colonel Can. [tears up] Sorry.<sup>118</sup>

Thus the work of the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster is both personal and political. It commemorates a fallen hero—Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cân—that otherwise would be forgotten. For Colonel Mandeville and others, he was a dear ally and friend. It evidences a history of equal alliance between American and South Vietnamese soldiers during the Vietnam War. And it carves out a space of sovereignty—if only symbolic—for the specter of the South Vietnamese state on American land. A space where the South Vietnamese flag can snap briskly in the wind. This carving out of space is perhaps an anti-imperialist gesture in its own right: an act to reclaim a part of American soil for the Republic of Vietnam, in a telling reversal of the United States' encroachment on Vietnamese land forty years ago. It is an oblique and subversive move of resistance, as the South Vietnamese state is but a ghost, and thus not read as a real political threat to the United States.

But ghosts have very real effects on the present. They can be resurrected. One way that South Vietnamese interact with the physical landscape of the memorial and resurrect the ghost of the South Vietnamese state is by holding elaborate ceremonies for Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cân.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

## 2. Ceremonial

In his essay on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., American art critic Arthur Danto drew a philosophical distinction between monuments and memorials, ultimately defining monuments as spaces of the present/life and memorials as spaces of the past/death:

We erect monuments so that we shall always remember and build memorials so that we shall never forget. Thus, we have the Washington Monument but the Lincoln Memorial. Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. Memorials ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends. . . . Very few nations erect monuments to their defeats, but many set up memorials to the defeated dead. Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments, we honor ourselves.<sup>119</sup>

James E. Young troubles this division between monument and memorial though, pointing out that “the traditional monument (the tombstone) can also be used as a mourning site for lost loved ones, just as memorials have marked past victories. A statue can be [both] a monument to heroism and a memorial to tragic loss.”<sup>120</sup> Thus, the Westminister Vietnam War Memorial is not only space a death, “extruded from life,” marking the “reality of ends,” and memorializing the “defeated dead” of the Vietnam War. It also is very much a space of life; the Americans and the South Vietnamese may remember the Vietnam War as *ending* in defeat, but Tuan Nguyen’s decision to depict young, upright soldiers simultaneously calls forth the moments of “heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests”—moments that *cannot* be negated by the end result and that a queered understanding of non-linear temporality gives equal credence to. Furthermore, “memorials themselves remain inert and amnesiac, dependent on visitors for whatever memory they finally produce.”<sup>121</sup> Thus it is the visitors—the viewers of the present and not the dead of

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<sup>119</sup> Arthur Danto, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” in *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste, Essays*, ed. Gregg Horowitz and Tom Huhn (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association), 153.

<sup>120</sup> James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

the past—that ultimately activate the memorial, pulling the memories of past heroes such as Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn into the space of the present.

The Vietnam War Memorial has been incorporated into the fabric of contemporary life. The memorial has six reviews on yelp.com, and while three of these reference the history of the Vietnam War explicitly—one drawing a comparison between the Washington D.C. Vietnam Veteran Memorial’s somber inscription of names and the Westminster Vietnam War Memorial’s more “straightforward” construction in “a sunny cheery park surrounded by flowers”—all six refer to the site as a space to relax, reflect, study, and eat.<sup>122</sup> Part of this emphasis on everyday life practices has to do with the nature of yelp.com as a website to review places of interest and entertainment. But despite this selection bias, there is something striking about the decision to note that “[t]here’s benches and a small playground—good place to just sit, eat lunch, and have your kiddos play,” rather than to comment exclusively on the historical significance of the memorial.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, the ease with which the viewers incorporate the memorial into their everyday life practices speaks to the successful integration of the South Vietnamese flag—and thus the specter of the South Vietnamese state—into the present. Colonel Mandeville attests to how the memorial is simultaneously a space of relaxation, rejuvenation, reflection, and remembrance:

. . . sometimes, I’ll spend the day out here at the memorial sitting over there on the bench. It’s not because I’m feeling like the war. I like to see the people come out. I like to see them talking to their kids. I go over there and talk to them, I ask, they’re always talking to their kids about the war or their dad or whatever.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> “Vietnam War Memorial,” accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/vietnam-war-memorial-westminster>.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013.3

These acts of memory transfers, then, are not isolated lessons of history, but rather fluid moments of intergenerational sharing, interwoven into shared activities such as visiting a park or enjoying a picnic.

The South Vietnamese American community interacts with the memorial in more formal and ritualized ways as well. However, these acts can still be read as rooted strongly in the present, rather than merely oriented somberly towards the past. For example, in August 2011, a group of South Vietnamese military officials organized a memorial for Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn at the Westminster Vietnam War memorial, complete with flags, patriotic speeches, elaborate flower arrangements, and photographs of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. A Vietnamese woman dressed in a traditional áo dài sang both the South Vietnamese and the American anthem, back to back. Thus the gathered Vietnamese crowd paid respect to both nations, acknowledging their current presence in the United States, but refusing to give up allegiance to South Vietnam. They saluted both flags, calling forth the specter of the South Vietnamese state. Most importantly they paid tribute to their fallen hero, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, retelling his story and recounting memories of his victories.<sup>125</sup>

The Westminster Vietnam War Memorial writes South Vietnamese history onto the Southern California landscape. But it is ultimately a stone structure, and thus lifeless. Thus South Vietnamese ceremonial practices are important; they gather together live bodies in public spaces. The South Vietnamese people are not a people relegated to history; they actively make and claim space in the present. In some ways this ceremony for Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn is oriented towards the past. But it is simultaneously an act to pull Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn into the present and to advocate his continued remembrance in the future.

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<sup>125</sup> Federation of Overseas Free Vietnamese Communities, “2085 Lễ Tưởng Niệm Cố Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn 2085 Lễ Tưởng Niệm Cố Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” April 26, 2011, accessed March 20, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5iZXu-Sgpc>.

On August 15, 2010, Lieutenant Hoa Pham, President of the Dong De Military Cadet Association, dedicated the organization's annual reunion to Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.<sup>126</sup> The day marked the thirty-fifth anniversary of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's public execution; the ceremony was both a personal *đám giỗ đó*—a death anniversary celebration—and a more political commemoration. Over two hundred people came from around the country to attend the event, which took place at the Diamond Seafood Restaurant in Stanton, California. Lieutenant Pham started planning six months in advance, making sure there was adequate time to send out the invitations, reserve the restaurant, make a press release, acquire the sound equipment, find the musicians, hire a decorator, and schedule the nights' events. Lieutenant Pham cites five reasons for organizing the commemoration ceremony for the Dong De Military Cadet Association's reunion: First, he felt that as President of the group it was his responsibility to initiate and organize such an event. Second, many of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's classmates and military friends lived out-of-state, and this was the only time they came to California. Third, he wanted Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's friends to meet his family. Fourth, he felt the ceremony was a way to assert his belief that the Communists had violated the Geneva Convention by executing Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn when he was a prisoner of war without giving him a fair trial. Fifth,

the main [reason] I really want to do the event [is] because I want the people to remember him. . . . As who he is. Because during the war, even the shooting—no matter how big, how small the shooting—he never sit down. . . . You know your normal reactions, you always, when you hear the shooting, is always, you know, duck down little bit. But he never. He always stand up. He always. Big battle, small battle. Whoever shooting.<sup>127</sup>

Lieutenant Pham thus articulates a desire to specifically commemorate Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's bravery in battle. For Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn is not only an individual but also a symbol. He is a

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<sup>126</sup> The Army of the Republic of Vietnam Dong De Academy was one of the major military academies of the Republic of Vietnam. The academy trained NCOs and officers for all branches of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, as well as offering other specialized training. Lieutenant Hoa Pham and Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn both attended the Dong De Academy.

<sup>127</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013.

representative of the bravery and strength of the South Vietnamese army that is often forgotten or negated by teleologically driven narratives emphasizing the end result of the war.

The night of the ceremony, Lieutenant Pham came dressed in his full military uniform. He presided as Master of Ceremony on a wide stage complete with Christmas lights and banners honoring Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. Marine Corps Colonel Harold A. ‘Hal’ Hayes, a high-ranking commanding officer during the war, gave a speech in commemoration. Helen Elena Lopez, a third generation Spanish American who initiated her career singing in Vietnamese, performed an upbeat song.<sup>128</sup> Associate Justice Eileen C. Moore, who served as a combat nurse in Vietnam and is now a member of Vietnam Veterans of America, urged the audience to register Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn on the MY HERO website, a nonprofit digital archive and educational project.<sup>129</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, who knew Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn personally in Việt Nam and who met and befriended Lieutenant Hoa Pham in Westminster, was invited to speak as well.<sup>130</sup> Colonel Mandeville was moved by the ceremony and he teared up during his speech. “They made me dig out stuff I hadn’t looked at in a long time.”<sup>131</sup> Colonel Mandeville also appreciated the đám giỗ đó ceremony, articulating its importance from the perspective of a cultural outsider:

I thought it was very touching. It’s something Americans don’t do. You know, there’s been so many great generals and colonels and stuff, and people in my mind should be recognized. But they die, and the ceremony, and then they’re kind of remembered by a few. But I love the Vietnamese tradition of remembering their parents after they die and the tradition of well, they’re recognized as heroes too in fighting. So, it’s the first time I had been exposed to it. I thought it was great, you know.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> “Helen Elena Lopez,” accessed March 15, 2013, [http://helenelena.com/Helen\\_Elena\\_Lopez.html](http://helenelena.com/Helen_Elena_Lopez.html); “Helen Elena Lopez Spanish Singer in Vietnamese,” accessed March 15, 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=be1sIG\\_bISo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=be1sIG_bISo).

<sup>129</sup> “My Hero Project,” accessed March 15, 2013, <http://myhero.com/go/home.asp>; Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013; “Colonel Ho Ngoc Can Classmate, Justice Eileen Moore, Mrs Ho Ngoc Can and Colonel Mandeville,” Sept. 2, 2010, accessed March 15, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6k5OSu11wkc>.

<sup>130</sup> “Colonel Mandeville Honoring RVN Colonel Ho Ngoc Can,” April 29, 2010, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOuA-3Qvake>.

<sup>131</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

Vietnamese Americans make space in the present for the dead of the past, gathering together for communal acts of memory. Lieutenant Hoa Pham had taken a death anniversary ceremony that traditionally takes place in the private domestic space of the home and grafted it onto the more public space of the Dong De Military Cadet Association Reunion. There is a blurring of the personal and the political: the people had gathered to simultaneously remember a friend and a South Vietnamese hero. Memory here is not individual, relegated to space of the mind, but rather communal, acted out in speeches, songs, and rituals—physical movements of the body.

What is the significance of these memory practices? According to Colonel Mandeville, . . . it was also good for her, for his memory—his wife’s, but also his grandkids. The remembrance of their granddad. Also, the younger generation get exposed to realizing they’re over here, because of what the other ones, the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, been fighting for freedom.<sup>133</sup>

Ceremonies, then, are important not only for the collective enacting of memory by Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s peers, but for the potential transfer of memory to the next generation. There is the very real fear, coupled with a sense of urgency, that the memory of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn in particular—and of South Vietnamese heroes in general—will perish with this generation of military veterans. Insofar as the Republic of Vietnam is only a ghostly state that persists in the minds and hearts of the South Vietnamese diaspora, there is a worry that this state will cease to exist when it ceases to be remembered.

One safeguard against the failure of memory is the archive. However, because the Republic of Vietnam is but a spectral state, it no longer has the power to construct a state archive—a collection of textbooks, a library of documents, a museum of artifacts. Thus South Vietnamese patriots must find other creative ways to archive their history and memory.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Digital

In his article “Archive,” British cultural theorist Mike Featherstone traces the genealogy of the archive, explicitly linking its formation to the maintenance of the state:

The term archive refers to the place where government records are stored. It was initially conceived as the site where official records were guarded and kept in secrecy. The archive was part of the apparatus of social rule and regulation, it facilitated the governance of the territory and population through accumulated information. At the same time, alongside home territorial governance, there were also archives on foreign affairs to sustain the state in relation to other states and empires. State intelligence became more important and formalized in the intensifying and globalizing power struggles for hegemony.<sup>134</sup>

The archive, then, is not a neutral accumulation of documents, but rather a political construction of knowledge about the state and its history. With the coupling of the nation-state, the archive also became a “crucial site for national memory”—the “place in which the sacred texts and objects were stored that were used to generate collective identity and social solidarity.”<sup>135</sup> Thus the archive also works in the realm of memory, both drawing from and infiltrating into the subconscious of the people to create a sense of group identity and cohesion.

What happens, then, when there is no existing state to construct an archive? In some ways this opens up a space of freedom, unconstrained by the power of state coercion and hegemony. But in other ways it presents a difficulty: with no state to house or collect an archive, a people’s history and memory become threatened by potential loss. However, Featherstone optimistically coins the term “diasporic archive” to describe the “imaginative and creative work” of migrant groups “to form new collective memories, which are distinct from the official memories of the host and former home societies.”<sup>136</sup> South Vietnamese Americans construct these “collective memories”—which are shaped but not defined by the Vietnamese and the

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<sup>134</sup> Mike Featherstone, “Archive,” *Theory Culture Society* 23, no. 2-3 (2006): 591.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 592.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 594.

American state—through their cultural memory practices. This diasporic archive thus becomes an “active aspiration, a tool for reworking desires and memories, part of a project for sustaining cultural identities.”<sup>137</sup> The diasporic archive then is not only oriented to the past, but very much rooted in the work of the present, with the future-oriented desire to maintain a distinct sense of cultural identity in a foreign land—within the borders of another nation-state.

One way that the South Vietnamese diasporic community engages in this “imaginative and creative work” is to construct a communal archive on the Internet—to claim space and assert a sense of sovereignty online. The Internet is a transnational space—it transcends nation-state borders, while still being physically rooted in many computers simultaneously around the world. With the Internet, “informational control and formation ceases to be in the form of the panopticon with its bureaucratic forms of control and surveillance” and the “knowledge becomes freer to flow through decentred networks.”<sup>138</sup> Communities need not rely on the state to legitimize their archive; they can produce their own online archives, as exemplified by the Republic of Vietnam Historical Society’s website. Their mission statement reads:

The Republic of Vietnam Historical Society was created with the purpose to preserve the memory of the state of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) and the men and women whose lives became intertwined with its legacy. This organization aims to achieve this through the collection and archiving of artifacts pertaining to the government and military of the Republic of Vietnam, accumulation of the personal histories of individuals who served its cause and their families, and providing a venue for education and discussion. RVNHS is a registered non-profit historical group, and is not affiliated with any political activities or parties. We are based in California, USA, and are open to anyone interested in learning about and preserving the memory of the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>139</sup>

Thus they articulate the relationship between archive and “memory,” rather than *history*, in reference to the ghostly state of the Republic of Vietnam. The website is still relatively

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 594.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 595.

<sup>139</sup> Republic of Vietnam Historical Society, “About RVHS,” accessed March 10, 2013, <http://rvnhs.com/about.html>.

conservative in their presentation and conceptualization of “archive” though. The “Virtual Museum”—a space carved out in the digital rather than the physical world—presents mostly images of South Vietnamese military regalia: photographs of insignias, uniforms, and soldiers. They emphasize the traditional masculine markers of history.

In addition to the Republic of Vietnam Historical Society’s digital archive, there are a number of grassroots-created websites dedicated specifically to the memory of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.<sup>140</sup> Most are explicitly patriotic in nature. On many of these sites, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn is remembered as much—if not more—for his death as for his life. His body is significant because of its end—his refusal to surrender and his public execution in Cần Thơ.

Because the content of these websites was already cited and addressed in Chapter Two, in this chapter I focus more on the digital *video* archive of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. South Vietnamese individuals in the United States can upload videos that people in Việt Nam—where the state actively suppresses the history and memory of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn—can then view clandestinely. The current Vietnamese state may erase the Republic of Vietnam and its flag from Vietnamese history books and brand Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn a traitor, but they cannot control information on the Internet, which exceeds the sovereignty of its state borders.

Although commemoration ceremonies are important for the ways that they activate the space of memorials and facilitate the enactment of collective memory rituals, they are temporally contingent: once completed they persist only in the memories of the individuals present. Given the spectral threat of mortality—the pressing fact that many of the South Vietnamese people who fought in or lived through the Vietnam War are getting older and dying—there is a concern that their memories will die with them. Thus the importance of archiving. I myself would not have

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<sup>140</sup> “Black April 30th 1975,” accessed March 10, 2013, [vnafmamn.com/black\\_april.html](http://vnafmamn.com/black_april.html); “The Suicides on April 30, 1975” accessed March 10, 2013, [www.vietquoc.com/APR3098.HTM](http://www.vietquoc.com/APR3098.HTM); “A Hard Time,” accessed March 10, 2013, [www.bietdongquan.com/article1/rgrhard.htm](http://www.bietdongquan.com/article1/rgrhard.htm); “Colonel Ho Ngoc Can,” accessed March 10, 2013, [www.sacei07.org/Ho-Ngoc-Can.pdf](http://www.sacei07.org/Ho-Ngoc-Can.pdf).

known about the two commemoration ceremonies for Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn discussed in the previous section if I had not found them on YouTube. The former was uploaded by the Federation of Overseas Free Vietnamese Communities, a South Vietnamese American media network based in Orange County, California. The latter was uploaded by Lieutenant Hoa Pham. In these cases archiving consists of two processes: both video recording and uploading. There is an emphasis on not only preserving but also sharing.

Lieutenant Hoa Pham is one of the most active contributors to the digital archive on Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, and on South Vietnamese history, life, and contemporary cultural practices in general. Most recently he has uploaded nine videos of the February 2013 Tết Festival in Westminster.<sup>141</sup> Three videos of the recent funeral ceremony of Mayor Frank Fry, the Westminster Mayor who initiated the Vietnam War Memorial project, precede them. Lieutenant Pham also has a vibrant online blog entitled “Life of Republic Of Vietnam Special Operations Member,” which is replete with significant amounts of text, videos, and images.<sup>142</sup> It has an interesting feeling of excess; this is no ordinary biography. In his latest post, dated August 24, 2011, Lieutenant Pham carefully details his childhood, military career, escape from Việt Nam, experience in refugee camps, and his education and establishment in California. He uses multi-colored text, switching between paragraphs of black, blue, and purple and alternating between bold, regular, and italicized font. The text is interspersed with fifteen videos and 104 photographs, most of which were taken by Lieutenant Pham or which feature him in military uniform, in casual clothing, or shirtless. Some of the videos are of found footage from the Vietnam War. But others are autobiographical video slideshows of Lieutenant Pham’s photos, complete with campy stock effects. A photo of Lieutenant Pham and four other South

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<sup>141</sup> “Tết” refers to the Vietnamese Lunar New Year.

<sup>142</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, “Life of Republic Of Vietnam Special Operations Member,” accessed March 20, 2013, <http://hpnkt.blogspot.com/>.

Vietnamese military cadets saluting the American flag is labeled “FIRST VIETNAMESE BOY SCOUT OF AMERICAN IN MARINES CAMP PENDLETON OCEANSIDE, CA” in bright pink text that covers half the picture; animated rainbow rings bounce around the photo in a bubble-like fashion. In two other self-portraits, Lieutenant Pham’s body is flanked by a stock photo frame of two half-naked white women. This is indeed a queered and creative archive. It asserts the story and presence of Lieutenant Pham in an almost camp-like fashion, exceeding the neat parameters of what is traditionally considered—and constructed to look—“legitimate” enough to be included in a formal state archive. There is an element of pastiche, of collage—of the radical bringing together of serious South Vietnamese refugee history with the colorful stock tropes of play and pleasure. But perhaps when one feels the urgency to create one’s own archive online, given the absence of a state to construct and harbor one, one only comes across as “excessive” to an outside viewer. There is an urgency to assert oneself in the present, within the pictorial language of contemporary visual tropes.

In any case, Lieutenant Pham has firmly established himself and his videos online, generating enough hits between his blogs and his YouTube channel to be recognized by Google. If you type in “Colonel Ho Ngoc Can” into Google, Lieutenant Pham’s videos are the *first* links to pop up. Twelve of Lieutenant Pham’s 480 uploaded YouTube videos are recordings from the August 2010 ceremony for Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. The most popular of these videos, which has amassed 31,949 views, depicts a candle lighting ritual performed in front of an enlarged and framed photograph of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. A man plays “Taps” on the bugle in the background. The other popular Google result is a video 5:24 minute slideshow entitled “COLONEL HO NGOC CAN HERO OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIET NAM.” It features photographs and illustrations of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, animated with a Ken Burns effect and

accompanied by a wordless patriotic South Vietnamese song. Lieutenant Pham included a transcription of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's last words in the video:

If I had won the fight, I would not have condemned you as you have in turn sentenced me. I haven't insulted you like you have insulted me. I haven't asked you the questions that you have asked me. I fight for the freedom of the everyday people. I am not guilty of crimes. Nobody has the right to persecute me. History will decide if you are the enemy or if I am the devil. If you want to kill me, go ahead. But please don't blindfold me. Down with the Communists. Long live the Republic of Viet Nam.

Nếu tôi thắng trong cuộc chiến, tôi sẽ không kết án các anh như các anh kết án tôi. Tôi cũng không làm nhục các anh như các anh làm nhục tôi. Tôi cũng không hỏi các anh câu mà các anh hỏi tôi. Tôi chiến đấu cho tự do của người dân. Tôi có công mà không có tội. Không ai có quyền kết tội tôi. Lịch sử sẽ phê phán đoán các anh là giặc đỏ hay tôi là ngụy. Các anh muốn giết tôi, cứ giết đi. Xin đừng bịt mắt. Đả đảo Cộng Sản. Việt Nam Cộng Hòa Muôn Năm.<sup>143</sup>

Thus he archives Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's speech on YouTube, lest it be suppressed in Việt Nam and then forgotten by the next generation. The video ends with a chilling black and white photograph of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's dead body draped under the South Vietnamese flag. A small crowd of people stands around, but apart. The camera zooms in to the body and the draped flag, then zooms back out and wanders across the faces of the crowd. It starts to zoom in again, and you cannot make out the new focus until it is too close for comfort: it is the face of a small child and what appears to be a mother. The child stares straight into the camera. The scene fades to black. The child's face, pale and ghost-like, is the last thing to disappear. It is a haunting reminder of the responsibility of the living, of those left behind, to keep the memory of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn—of the Republic of South Vietnam—alive.

This video is important not only for its relative popularity—31,094 views and 45 likes—but for the way it encourages the circulation and reproduction of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's story, as evidenced by the way it is cited in other videos as well. Sometimes the citation is just a

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<sup>143</sup> "Colonel Ho Ngoc Can Hero of the Republic of Viet Nam," April 3, 2010, accessed March 10, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lZdCiWjos8>.

certain photograph, or the text of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's last words, inserted into another video. Perhaps most interesting though is one video that starts out very obviously with a recording of a computer screen playing Lieutenant Pham's slideshow video. It then cuts to a screen shot of a poster labeled "The Face of Our Heroes" depicting a blue sky with faint clouds in the shape of what appear to be a face, and then cuts back to Lieutenant Pham's video just at the point when one of the illustrated portraits of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn fades into the scrolling text of his last words.<sup>144</sup> Uploaded on August 15, 2011—the anniversary of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's death—this video is only 1:06 minutes long and has 8,026 views.<sup>145</sup> The cut is sharp and juxtaposition is stark. The viewer realizes that the face is supposed to be that of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn. Further investigative research reveals that the "sighting" took place in Westminster, above the Vietnam War Memorial; the upload date suggests that the sighting took place at the very commemoration ceremony discussed in the previous section. The uploader is a Vietnamese American televangelist of sorts who makes money by selling posters of the faces of Jesus, God, and the Devil sighted in the sky. He also sells CDs of calming instrumental music. He insists that the end of the world is near and that the viewer must repent. He has 250 videos on YouTube. Amongst all the talk of religion, this video of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn and this direct citation of Lieutenant Pham's video is striking. Indeed, the importance of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn is implicitly compared to that of Jesus.

The Internet archive is also important for the ways in which it facilitates the online construction of community and collective identity, in transcendence of state borders. For example, the Republic of Vietnam Historical Society's website includes a "Guestbook" link, where people from all over the world—Minnesota, London, Sydney, Detroit, Vietnam, Vermont,

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<sup>144</sup> "Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cấn—Chiến Sĩ Hien Ra tại Tuong Dai Viet My, Chuyen La Co That at Bolsa," Aug. 15, 2011, accessed March 10, 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tZ\\_Xrk17ag](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tZ_Xrk17ag).

<sup>145</sup> As of March 10, 2013.

the Republic of Indonesia, Florida—can leave comments and questions.<sup>146</sup> Similarly, YouTube’s comment section provides a space for individuals to share their memories of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn or to explicitly resurrect the ghost of the Republic of Vietnam. For example, under the video posted by the Federation of Overseas Free Vietnamese Communities of the ceremony for Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn at the Vietnam War Memorial in August 2011, “THUCSVN1” writes:

I am so moved, I pray that Colonel Ho Ngoc Can’s soul finds peace and rest. Long live Colonel Ho Ngoc Can for his courage! He didn’t duck in front of the Communists! Vietnam! ... We are very proud of all the sons who gave their lives to safeguard the country like all of you! Long live the South Vietnamese military... Forever! Many thanks to all the brave fighters of the VNCH whether alive or dead...! Thank you my brothers..!

cảm động quá , xin cầu cho linh hồn cố Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn được an nghỉ bình an ! VINH DANH CỐ ĐẠI TÁ HỒ NGỌC CẨN ĐÃ ANH DŨNG , KÊU HÙNG ...KHÔNG CUỐI ĐẦU TRƯỚC LỬ CSVN ..! TÔ QUỐC VN ...QUÝ PHỤC NHỮNG NGƯỜI CON TRAI CAN TRƯỜNG GIỮ NƯỚC NHƯ CÁC ANH ! VINH DANH QUÂN LỰC VNCH ...MUÔN NĂM ...! GHI ƠN CÁC CHIẾN SỸ VNCH DÙ CÒN SỐNG HAY ĐÃ CHẾT ...! CẢM ƠI CÁC ANH ...!<sup>147</sup>

Some comments, such as those found below the video slideshow uploaded by Lieutenant Hoa Pham, move beyond the rhetoric of remembrance, articulating a desire to reinstate the fallen South Vietnamese state:

God Bless Colonel Ho Ngoc Can ...he had belong to ages !!! He will always be our Hero throughout Vietnam History !!! Communist V.C will fall soon when my generation take over !

Join me all Vietnamese around the world and in USA it is time to stand up and we must not be silent when our homeland is calling for our help and our people are in danger !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I love my homeland and want to go back to my homeland but only if Communist Vietnam doesn't exist free our homeland and protect our people and race!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!Bring back the Republic of South Vietnam!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!-!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

<sup>146</sup> These locations are self-reported; hence the variation in specificity.

<sup>147</sup> Comment section, Federation of Overseas Free Vietnamese Communities, “2085 Lễ Tưởng Niệm Cố Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn 2085 Lễ Tưởng Niệm Cố Đại Tá Hồ Ngọc Cẩn,” April 26, 2011, accessed March 20, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5iZXu-Sgpc>.

I want to join the ARVN Army today if South Vietnam exist  
I want protect my homeland,people,and my family and I will bring honor to  
Vietnam and the republic of South Vietnam and whenever my country calls for  
my help I will always be ready and prepared to fight off anyone or anything that  
tries to harm my country,family,and my people!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
Free Vietnam from the Communists of Vietnam and bring back the Republic of  
Vietnam!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!-!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!-!!!!!!!!!!!!<sup>148</sup>

Others address Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn directly, interpolating him into the present:

Thank You, Colonel HN Can.You are the martyr/love/strength/force/pow-er of  
natural freedom, inheritable liberty, and inalienable justice within Vietnamese of  
VNCH.Your fighting is the right within our nature/inborn/inseparable self, as in  
free speech/assembly/bear arm/education/etc, for the people, by the people. Your  
teaching on the youngster, as to be staying in school for education of free choice.  
No more one political party/a leader/concentration camps/etc. Not cheap,  
freedom, must protecting.<sup>149</sup>

Thus the digital archive is not static, but rather mutable and fluid, always changing as different individuals around the world respond and interact. The distinction between creator and receiver of knowledge gets blurred. The hierarchies surrounding historical knowledge production are challenged.

I came to this digital archive of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn as a student, as one in search of information. However, to my [perhaps naïve] surprise, my own research and writing on this figure has been subsumed back into the digital archive: the eleventh suggested link to a Google search of “Colonel Ho Ngoc Can” is a website citing own my research on Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, funded by Pomona College’s Summer Undergraduate Research Program in 2012.<sup>150</sup> Thus I contribute to the archive, and am a part of the dynamic cultural memory process surrounding Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.

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<sup>148</sup> [sic], Comment section, Lieutenant Hoa Pham, “Colonel Ho Ngoc Can Hero of the Republic of Viet Nam,” April 3, 2010, accessed March 10, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IzdCiWjos8>.

<sup>149</sup> [sic], Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> [www.pomona.edu/academics/research/surp/2012/media-studies.aspx](http://www.pomona.edu/academics/research/surp/2012/media-studies.aspx)

#### 4. Oral

Collective memory practices—building memorials, organizing commemoration ceremonies, and archiving information on the Internet—are public assertions of cultural identity and allegiance to a ghostly state, articulated through the act of remembering an individual, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. In these articulations of patriotism, however, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn is vulnerable to becoming a symbol, a mere abstraction. Thus the importance of the oral—of telling stories, one person to another.

I want to highlight the significance of Colonel Mandeville’s interview—of how his sharing of his personal memories of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was an act of transference, a way of carving out space for the intimate passing on of memories. The previous three sections of this chapter have analyzed the significance of South Vietnamese cultural memory practices as a way to animate the ghost of the Republic of Vietnam. In this section I would like share—and preserve in writing—the actual stories about Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn that Colonel Mandeville shared with me.

Colonel Mandeville remembers Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn for his patriotism: “he was extremely dedicated to his country, extremely dedicated to his family, extremely wanting the country to be free. He wasn’t worried about the politics of the country; he just knew he wanted a free Vietnam. He was extremely proud of the South Vietnamese flag.”<sup>151</sup> And it was this patriotism that Colonel Mandeville admired and sympathized with, despite his initial distrust of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn:

I was a little protective of my people. Colonel Can noticed that. And um, after I kind of humorous story he invited me to his tent for dinner. And by the way I was with an infantry unit. We lived in the jungle, ate in the jungle. Never saw any clean food, never saw any clean water. And but he invited me to eat with him a couple times. But when I went in there I came with full gear. I had my helmet

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<sup>151</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013.

on, I had my flag vest, I had my pistol, I had my weapon, and I walk in and I sit down. Well, after two times he said, “You know, you obviously don't trust me,” because he didn't have any of that. When he ate dinner he scarcely had on any gear. And I told him I don't trust him or his people. And I told him my story. And he said “Well, my job”—his job, was to keep me alive. You know? And I should just trust him. And he assigned somebody with me to protect me so to speak as a driver. And he said, “Your job is to give me American support when I need it. My job is to keep you alive so you can help my soldiers fight.” And that turned out to be the best thing that ever happened. Because he truly was a man of his word.<sup>152</sup>

He remembers moments of shared dedication; he recounted a conversation that he had with Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn in the face of great odds during the Battle of An Lộc:

And a lot of his soldiers wanted to surrender. We started out with a 715, we ended up with 115 left, and every one of us had been wounded several times, not once. And the easy thing to have done would be to surrender. And he looked at me and he talked to me and I said, “Well you know sir, I'll never let them get me alive because I'm not sure how I could POW and I don't want to embarrass my family.” And he said, “Me too. You know, we're going to fight to the end. And my soldiers will, and they'll never capture me alive.” And I thought that was a defining moment for my time in my life and also for his leadership. And that kind of filtered toward his soldiers in that way. So I thought it was a great moment.<sup>153</sup>

Colonel Mandeville remembers Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn most for his bravery, and has repeated this signature story many times:

As we went into An Loc, I never will forget, we were under fire and he stood straight up and walked right on down the road, and I said “Hey Colonel, let's walk on the side of the road, and let's crouch a bit.” Because I'm taller than him and—what he did I had to do. So if he stood up I had to stand up. Well I was a good foot taller than him, and I felt like I was the target, you know. So he was just, in face of any fire he would just stand up and take it on. And that's why the South Vietnamese began to believe he was kind of like a—couldn't be killed. And the North Vietnamese didn't think he could be killed. Because they actually overran us and everything. The only guy in that whole group who didn't get wounded was Colonel Can.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

It is a story that South Vietnamese soldiers, concerned that the end of the war will negate their moments of valor, embrace strongly. Lieutenant Hoa Pham referenced it several times in his hour-long interview with me. There are humorous stories too:

We'd walk through the rice paddies. And he was always out with his soldiers. He didn't sit back in his seat—excuse me, command post—and take it easy. He was out with his soldiers out front. And when they'd walk out in the rice paddies, they're lighter and they'd just walk in. And when I walk in the rice paddies I'd go down through my boots, my weight, and I'd be sunk in the rice paddies. And many times he'd look around and kind of harass me, "Can't you keep up?" Well I was knee-deep in mud and they were kind of walking on top, and he had a sense of humor.<sup>155</sup>

Some comedies are laced with tragedy though, made humorous only in face of the sheer terror and violence of war:

Combat is terrible. But during combat there's a lot of humor that takes place that people that weren't there wouldn't consider humorous but for those that were there there were a lot of exchanges back and forth. But the most—my famous story was that we were in An Loc, and we had fought our way for a little over a week. We were outside of An Loc. There was a big plantation headquarters which is still there today. It's not operational. It was then built by the French. It was a rubber plantation. And the North Vietnamese had put their headquarters in it. And everybody knew it was there. And we were fairly close to it. And literally we had fought ten meters at a time for several weeks. That's how tough it was. And we got a call to pull back 500 meters. And we said, "Why?" And they said "We're going to drop a Commando Vault." So we looked at each other. And he didn't know what it was and I didn't know but we didn't say anything. You know. And both of said, "We're not pulling back." Because if we pull back 500 meters, that's five days of fighting. So we stood there, stuck there on the ground. We had to dig fox holes. I've dug more fox holes as a field artillery officer, probably more than any other infantry guy in the world, because we dug fox holes two or three times a day to stay alive. So, we just dug in, told everybody to dig in. We had no idea what a Commando Vault was. A C1 30, and aircraft went over, saw a parachute coming out the back, and a platform. And it drifted down. Well, there were only a few of these bombs left. It was a 20,000 pound bomb left over from WWII or something. The biggest bomb they ever dropped, besides a nuclear one. And we didn't know what it was going to do. When it went off, it literally destroyed the ground. We were covered with banana—oh excuse me, rubber tree—they just covered us! The North Vietnamese... We woke up shaking our heads, couldn't see anything, and when it went off the ground literally raised up and came back down again. And we uh,

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

we had some Vietnamese injured because they weren't deep enough. But that was—if I look back in retrospect, if I would have moved back a couple of hundred yards, because it was really frightening when it happened. Later on we talked about it, I said “You know what it was?” and he said, “No, I didn't know what it was, I thought you knew and I didn't know,” so we laughed about it that we didn't know. So that was a great moment for both of us.<sup>156</sup>

Despite the level of intense sharing, this friendship forged in the danger of war, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn and Colonel Mandeville ultimately had to part:

First of all they pulled me out of the field. I had been wounded so many times. And they put me back in one of their training schools. And when I was taken out he was not happy with the American command. He wanted me to stay. Of course secretly I was glad to get out of there. [chuckles] But um—because I'd had it, and um, so... We departed, and you know it was the first time I really understood doing more than shaking a hand. You could tell there was a bond that we had. And he was really worried about me. I was more worried about him because he was staying where all the action was, and I was going back to a relatively secure training center in Sa Dec. And well, so. And then when I finally had to leave there was a ceremony and they gave me an AK 47 on a plaque, captured weapon, and they gave me the Vietnamese cross of gallantry, a bunch of stuff. And um, when they read the citation and all that stuff I could see that he was emotional. And uh, I was emotional too. Not—I could just sense that I didn't like leaving him alone. But he was going to be okay. Because after I left he got overrun by the North Vietnamese, once just totally overran his position and he comes out of it alive. And that was terrible, I was on the radio, I heard about it, I was worried about it. But uh, that was kind of it. It was just a field operation and ceremony and I was gone.<sup>157</sup>

Thus the reality that Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn and Colonel Mandeville were not the same—one had to stay while the other could leave; one was fighting desperately for the existence of his country while one was merely following government orders—was starkly reaffirmed.

Colonel Mandeville still feels residual guilt for leaving, and part of this guilt motivated him to dedicate his time to the Vietnam War Memorial project in Westminster. Colonel Mandeville also considers writing a book, to archive his memories in print form and to tell the story of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's contributions to the Battle of An Lộc:

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

Well, I, I don't read a lot about Vietnam because I got this, what they call PTSD. I don't like reading about stuff, I get angry real easy about it. But the battle of An Loc, there's a book written by General Nhut Tran who was actually the—I probably announced his name wrong, he's a good friend of mine—but he commanded the forces inside of An Loc. He was at that time a district chief. And General Or was his advisor and Colonel at the time. They were surrounded; they were the ones in there. He wrote a book about that. And he talked about the battle of An Loc. But the problem is, the real bad Loc—An Loc, was certainly won by those who stayed and fought. They didn't give up. But the end of An Loc was due to Colonel Can. The thing that broke the siege of An Loc was not the people fighting, but us fighting our way in to give them an opening. So nobody's told that story about how treacherous it was, and the skill that it took to get in there, to open up ten divisions of North Vietnamese, who had that place surrounded. So my idea was that somebody needs to tell that story about really breaking the siege of An Loc. Because all the other books talk about how tough it was. It was tough inside, I'm sure. But Colonel Can and the ranger unit next to us, we were the ones that... Colonel Can was the first one to walk in there, and it was the first time they'd seen anybody from the outside world from several months.<sup>158</sup>

As demonstrated in the Chapter Two, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's contribution to the Battle of An Lộc is only vaguely known. Thus, unless Colonel Mandeville archives his memories, they threaten to die with him.

What is significant, though, is not only what Colonel Mandeville says—the stories he shares—but how he says it. Thus I was drawn to Colonel Mandeville's concluding words:

I just want it recorded about what it was really like. How terrible it was, how American soldiers thought they had it bad, they don't know how bad they had it. South Vietnamese went through more crap than I ever saw on my first tour. And also the heroics of Colonel Can. . . . But he was truly an amazing person. He was who[m] you would want if you're an American soldier you'd want him with you. And uh, I just think it should be recorded someway. Yeah. The end?<sup>159</sup>

Colonel Mandeville ends with a question. There is an interrogation of the end. It is perhaps a rhetoric question; a hope that this is not, indeed, the end, and that Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's memory and story will live on after the conclusion of this interview—indeed, after the conclusion of Colonel Mandeville's life. Memories haunt the living. But it is the passing on of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

memories—the intergenerational transfer of memories—that requires an articulation for preservation. Thus the importance of the oral in carving out space for a narrative resistant to dominant state histories.

### **The Politics of Memory**

The Southern Vietnamese diaspora has no state to archive its history. And yet the Republic of Vietnam is an ever-present ghost that haunts the community and is resurrected by cultural memory practices. South Vietnamese people carve out space in the present, writing their memories onto the physical landscape, activating these memorials with ceremonial practices, and archiving these practices on the digital Internet. Yet the danger of a digital archive is that “knowledge will no longer be contained in a singular system in which all the elements are articulated into a unified corpus.”<sup>160</sup> With the overabundance and proliferation of knowledge on the Internet, memories might get lost. Thus the importance of the oral: storytelling is significant for its ability to transfer memories directly to the next generation.

What is the political nature of these cultural memory practices—this insistence to preserve the memory of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn? Is this merely a nostalgic politics oriented towards the past, with no stake in the present or future? At several points Lieutenant Hoa Pham and Colonel Craig Mandeville deny any “political agenda”—or rather, politics conceptualized in the traditional sense. When expressing frustration over the difficulty of obtaining a visa to visit Việt Nam, Lieutenant Pham says that he told the Vietnamese government, “I’m a soldier, I do things for the veterans, I—I have no political agenda. . . . I don’t try to overthrow you, anything. I don’t do anything damage for Việt Nam. Anything. I just take care my own veterans.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Mike Featherstone, “Archive,” *Theory Culture Society* 23 (2006): 595.

<sup>161</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013.

Likewise, Colonel Mandeville is not necessarily interested in critiquing the current Communist government in Việt Nam or agitating for social change: “I know there’s atrocities over there now, I know there’s not equal rights, I know there’s not religious freedom and everything else. That memorial is not about whether the war was right or wrong. A lot of people want to make it that way.”<sup>162</sup> Neither are Lieutenant Pham or Colonel Mandeville interested in actually reinstating the fallen Republic of Vietnam, of resurrecting the ghostly state in any literal political manner.

What then is the political use of these cultural memory practices? For they indeed have value in the present. As a queered understanding of temporality allows, memories are not bound to the space of the past, but touch and impact the space of the present and future. Furthermore, to control or suppress a people’s past—their history and memory—is to oppress or erase their existence in the present and future. However, individuals can resist this control, asserting their own memories and alternative histories. For example, Lieutenant Pham acknowledges that due to the insistence of South Vietnamese diasporic communities, “in the North, in the Communist area, they started to recognize what we have done in the war. . . . In the January 19, that the day the China attack South Vietnam. And I think we lost forty-six people. We lost one battleship. And the Vietnamese government, right now, they recognize the people. The South Vietnam people.”<sup>163</sup> Thus the Southern Vietnamese immigrants successfully changed the dominant historical narrative.

Lieutenant Pham also continues to disseminate the story of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn because he believes that Colonel Cẩn’s execution was a violation of the Geneva Convention’s rules against killing prisoners of war, and he wants the Vietnamese government to acknowledge

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<sup>162</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013.

<sup>163</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013.

the war crime and pay retribution to his family. Colonel Mandeville wants to open a Vietnam War Studies Center at the Westminster public library so that the younger generations can continue to learn about and research the war. The consequences of these cultural memory practices are thus very material.

There is also the importance of the transgenerational transfer of memory in and of itself.

Colonel Mandeville reflects:

I just want the Vietnamese community, the Vietnamese Americans to teach their kids, you know, that there's a cost for having freedom. Sometimes it's war, sometimes it's just money. I don't want them to forget that. Because there was so many brave people over there, Vietnamese and Americans, and so... You know, millions of Vietnamese lost their lives after the war. Americans don't know that. They don't want to know. But somehow I want that story, little things like that to never die.<sup>164</sup>

In the face of state suppression, memory work itself is an act of resistance—an insistence that one country's *did* exist, that past atrocities *did* happen, and that one's bravery and loss *should be* acknowledge rather than erased or forgotten. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love theorizes the use of a politics oriented towards a painful past: “It is crucial to find ways of creating and sustaining political hope. But hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future . . . instead, we have to risk the turn backward, even if it means opening ourselves to social and psychic realities we would rather forget.”<sup>165</sup> Perhaps then there is great use in haunting—in embracing the ghosts that push us to remember alternative histories, in order to remain ever critical of the way that states and other structures of power may flatten narratives or deny subjectivity.

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<sup>164</sup> Colonel Craig Mandeville, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 20, 2013.

<sup>165</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 29.

## Chapter 4

### Remembering in Private: The Subversive Practices of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's Relatives

*“Oral history is built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens the scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but also from the unknown majority of the people.”<sup>166</sup>*

According to Marita Sturken, “Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history.”<sup>167</sup> In their public commemorations of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, South Vietnamese Americans resurrect the specter of the now-defunct Republic of Vietnam. They carve out spaces for their articulations of the past—for their ghosts and their heroes—engaging in space-making acts that contend with dominant state narratives for not only “a place in history,” but also a place in the present.

Although subaltern in their relation to the state, these immigrant cultural memory practices still operate in the realm of the public, in the form of memorials, ceremonies, and online videos.<sup>168</sup> Thus South Vietnamese Americans benefit from their position in the United

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<sup>166</sup> Paul Thompson, “The Voices of the Past: Oral History,” 1988, reprinted in *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 31.

<sup>167</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>168</sup> My understanding of “public” is partially influenced by Michael Warner’s essay “Publics and Counterpublics,” in which he outlines five characteristics of a public: a public is self-organized; a public is a relation among strangers; the address of public speech is both personal and

States: although the U.S. does engage in its own forms of “organized forgetting,” publicly erasing the figure of the South Vietnamese soldier in its foregrounding of “the painful experience of the American Vietnam veteran,” it does grant its citizens freedom of speech, press, and expression.<sup>169</sup> Thus South Vietnamese Americans are allowed to defy their historical erasure and publicly commemorate Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.

Such is not the case in Việt Nam. Over the past five years, the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam has cracked down on political dissidents, curbing writers’, bloggers’, and journalists’ critiques of the state. In October 2008, U.S. and international media campaigners condemned the guilty verdicts of two Vietnamese journalists, Nguyễn Việt Chiến and Nguyễn Văn Hải, who had helped to expose a major corruption scandal in Việt Nam’s Ministry of Transport.<sup>170</sup> The same year the Vietnamese government tightened restrictions on Internet blogs, banning “posts that undermine national security, incite violence or disclose state secrets” and requiring “service providers to report to the government every six months and provide information about bloggers on request.”<sup>171</sup> In January 2009, the government released Nguyễn Việt Chiến and 15,000 other prisoners under a Lunar New Year amnesty, but dismissed Lê Hoàng and Nguyễn Công Khế, the editors of the country’s two largest pro-reform newspapers, who had covered the original October corruption scandal trial.<sup>172</sup> In December of the same year, pro-democracy activist Trần Anh Kim was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in jail for allegedly publishing pro-democracy articles online.<sup>173</sup> This year, Human Rights Watch’s most recent World Report accused Việt

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impersonal; a public is constituted through mere attention; and a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. For more, see Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49-90.

<sup>169</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7-8.

<sup>170</sup> Nga Pham, “Vietnam sends journalist to jail,” *BBC News*, Oct. 15, 2008, accessed March 31, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7671079.stm>.

<sup>171</sup> “Vietnam tightens rules on blogs,” *BBC News*, Dec. 24, 2008, accessed March 31, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7798681.stm>.

<sup>172</sup> “Two Vietnamese editors sacked,” *BBC News*, Jan. 2, 2009, accessed March 31, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7807519.stm>.

<sup>173</sup> “Vietnam sentences democracy activist to prison,” *BBC News*, Dec. 28, 2009, accessed March 31, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8432168.stm>.

Nam of continuing to restrict freedom of expression and intensifying its suppression of online dissent.<sup>174</sup>

Such is the sociopolitical environment in which the Vietnamese government continues to control history and memory production, reproducing dominant narratives of the Second Indochina War as that of the “Chiến Tranh Chống Mỹ Cứu Nước,” the “War of National Salvation Against the Americans.” In “Commemoration and the State: Memory and Legitimacy in Vietnam,” Edyta Roszko asserts that the Vietnamese state “seeks to promote its own ideological aims, such as legitimizing the war, showing its continuity with previous heroes and dynasties in its resistance against foreign invasion, and building a ‘strong and happy country.’”<sup>175</sup> By organizing public memorial services for fallen North Vietnamese liberationists while actively suppressing commemorations for South Vietnamese soldiers like Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, the current Communist government of Việt Nam maintains its national narrative of reunification and liberation. The sentiment of this national narrative is exemplified in a speech delivered by Lê Duẩn, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, on May 15, 1975:

In the spirit of national reconciliation and concord, our people have shown leniency to all those who have strayed from the right path and who are now returning to the people, no matter what their past was. Provided they sincerely mend their abilities to the service of the homeland, their place among the people will be guaranteed and all the shame put on them by criminal US imperialist[s] will be washed away.<sup>176</sup>

This emphasis on reconciliation and forgiveness, however, does not allow for recognition of the South Vietnamese soldiers who refused to surrender, who refused to reconcile—soldiers such as

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<sup>174</sup> Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2013,” Feb. 2013, accessed March 31, 2013, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2013\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/wr2013_web.pdf), 382-386.

<sup>175</sup> Edyta Roszko, “Commemoration and the State: Memory and Legitimacy in Vietnam,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25, no. 1 (2010): 5.

<sup>176</sup> Lê Duẩn, Speech in Hanoi Celebrating the Communists’ Victory, May 15 1975, reprinted in *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives*, ed. Michael H. Hunt (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 192. Because the original Vietnamese translation of this quote was not provided in *A Vietnam War Reader*, I have not provided it.

Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn. These soldiers remain publicly unmourned, their bodies uprooted from the national cemetery, their stories violently erased, and the pain and sorrow of their relatives publicly unacknowledged.

In light of this public memory suppression, this chapter highlights the private realm as another site of resistance. I drawn from nine oral histories that I conducted with Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's siblings and cousins during summer 2012, eight of whom live in Việt Nam and thus do not have the luxury to publicly commemorate Colonel Cấn the way that South Vietnamese Americans do.<sup>177</sup> These are the individuals who grew up with him, who loved him, and who continue to memorialize him in the privacy of their own homes and hearts. I examine the ways in which these relatives' narratives complicate the dichotomy between hero and traitor, as well as how their annual death commemorations, although private, defy state mandates of organized forgetting. In this way they articulate a nuanced resistance to the imperatives of state-sponsored historical narratives.

These oral histories were made possible by Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor, my grandmother, who helped me to conduct the interviews. Situating her family's narratives between the public suppression of South Vietnamese soldiers' memories in Vietnam, and the overt veneration of Colonel Cấn by Southern Vietnamese immigrant groups in the United States, Taylor asserted the need for her family's voices:

[In Vietnam] they always think my brother the traitor, or the bad guy, anything like that, so we cannot mention his name. Or, anybody who knew him before cannot say anything. And . . . I sure Vietnamese people [who] live in the United States here, they already know a lot about my brother, because every year they do memory day for him. And they meet, they do in the TV, Vietnamese TV, and

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<sup>177</sup> Because they are articulating memories and opinion that may be considered politically subversive by the current Vietnamese government, I have chosen not to identify the interviewees (with the exception of my grandmother) by name, but rather will refer to them by given initials.

they interview, and they done bundle stuff. Everybody—I feel like most the people already know. But I just want that this is my family’s side.<sup>178</sup>

Highlighting this story of Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor’s “family’s side,” I focus on five main themes: the distinction between crimes against the people and crimes against the state; the uprooting of graves and the subsequent presence of ghosts; politically-conscious articulations of heroism given the interviewees’ presence in Vietnam; the valorizing of attributes other than masculine strength and honor; and the significance and circulation of cultural memory practices honoring Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.

### **1. Construction of a Criminal: Crimes Against the People versus Crimes Against the State**

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, South Vietnamese Americans adamantly archive Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s biography on the Internet; thus we know that on August 14, 1975, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was tried, convicted, and executed by Communist officials in Cần Thơ, the largest city in the Mekong Delta. But there are many holes in these public biographies—holes that Colonel Cẩn’s relatives can help to fill in. For example, family members tell the story of another trial—a failed trial—that has been elided by the more public versions of history:

And at Chương Thiện, when Anh Hai<sup>179</sup> was captured, they wanted to hold the trial at Chương Thiện, but the people protested so vigorously. They would not allow it to take place there. So they had to move Anh Hai to Cần Thơ to hold the trial at Cần Thơ because the people would not allow the trial to take place at Chương Thiện. It’s because at that time the people felt very close to him and really loved him, so they did not agree to have the trial there.

Rồi ở Chương Thiện, khi mà anh hai bị bắt đó, khi mà bị bắt đó, thì người ta muốn xử tại Chương Thiện luôn nhưng mà ở dưới đó dân nó la quá, nó phản đối quá, nó không cho xử cho nên là ở đó mới là đưa anh hai về Cần Thơ để là xử ở Cần Thơ chứ không có giám sử ở Chương Thiện. Tại vì bây giờ dân đó là người ta giống như là người thân, người ta thương đó, người ta không đồng ý cho xử.

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> “Anh Hai” literally translates to “Older Brother Number Two.” It means “Oldest Brother” in Vietnamese. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was the oldest child, so his younger siblings to refer to him as “Anh Hai.”

Nói là ông này không có tội gì hết, không có tội gì với dân hết cho nên không được xử.<sup>180</sup>

This story is corroborated by another relative's narration of the events:

Usually the officials who intimidated the people around them would be tried at that place rather than being sent somewhere else, but in Cậu Hai's<sup>181</sup> case, when he was at the trial, the people said that he was a good person who really loved his people and who always helped everyone. He never treated them badly. So then they sent him to Cần Thơ to another trial and they asked why he did not surrender. He said that he lived over here so his loyalty was with the South.

Thường thường coi như là những cái người mà hà hiếp dân và kia nọ thì cái chỗ nào thì người ta xử ngay cái tỉnh đó chứ không có đưa đi chỗ khác nhưng mà cậu hai xử cái tỉnh đó thì người ta nói là cậu hai là người tốt thương dân thương này nọ, có giúp đỡ người này người kia không phải gọi là ăn hiếp dân, thành ra mới đưa về Cần Thơ xử rồi ra tòa đảng hoàng rồi nói tại sao cậu hai không có đầu hàng thì cậu hai mới nói là cậu hai sống bên này thì cậu hai phải có trung thành với bên này.<sup>182</sup>

These interviewees emphasize that the Vietnamese citizens of Chương Thiện embraced Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn—who had served as their kind and thoughtful Province Chief for the past two years—and refused to convict him. The relatives thus conceptualize Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's transgression—his participation in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and his subsequent refusal to surrender—as a *political* crime rather than a *war* crime: a travesty against the state rather than a travesty against the people. As one interview articulated it:

His crime wasn't against the everyday people but against the revolutionaries [Communists]. That's what I heard. Just like when he was in the military, he killed so many of the revolutionaries and therefore that was what his crime, but he committed no crimes against the everyday people. In fact he was known for his good deeds.

Ông không có tội với nhân dân nhưng có tội với cách mạng. Em có nghe vậy thôi. Là cũng như là đi lính đi giết bao nhiêu cách mạng vậy đó thì có tội, nhưng mà với nhân dân thì không có tội thì rất tốt.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> BC, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

<sup>181</sup> This interviewee identifies Hồ Ngọc Cẩn as an uncle.

<sup>182</sup> BB, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

<sup>183</sup> BA, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

Another insists:

But he was not found to have committed crimes against the people but only against the country so the people did not try him. During his career in the military, even when he became highly ranked he really loved his soldiers and the people around him. He always took care of them. He wasn't one of those people who did whatever he wanted because of his rank and who did not consider the needs and wants of those of whom he was in charge. Because of that, the people really loved him so at the people's court they said that he committed no crimes against them.

Nhưng mà có cái là không có tội với nhân dân, thì tội với đất nước thì mấy ông xử thì thôi chứ không phải là nhân dân xử. Trong thời gian làm việc, từ thời gian làm lớn anh hai thương lính thương dân nghĩa là lo cho lính lo cho dân chứ không có phải là ý là mình làm lớn rồi mình muốn làm cái gì thì mình làm không cần thiết tới những cái gì dân kêu gọi, dân muốn, cái đó là anh hai không có làm cho nên dân chúng thương, thì cũng có đưa ra tòa án nhân dân nhưng mà dân nói không có cái gì với nhân dân hết.<sup>184</sup>

Thus these interviewees defiantly challenge the Vietnamese state's insistence on Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's traitorous and criminal nature. They correct the government's misrepresentation of Colonel Cẩn's treatment of the everyday people. They insist on representing Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn as a virtuous and caring figure, who unfortunately just happened to be on the losing side of the war. However, we must acknowledge that this insistence on virtue is a rhetorical strategy itself, meant to perhaps to draw an implicit contrast with the Communist leaders: If Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was so virtuous, what does that imply about the people who executed him? In this chapter I do not contend that the interviewees' narratives are necessarily more "accurate," "moral," or "true" than that of the Vietnamese state; rather, I highlight these narratives in order to juxtapose them against the state narratives, to provide a more multifaceted representation of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was human: he was neither completely criminal nor entirely virtuous. However, because the Vietnamese state's narrative already has so much

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<sup>184</sup> BN, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 27, 2012

power and influence, in this chapter I choose to privilege the narrations of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's relatives.

## 2. Razing the Cemetery: Uprooting Graves and Disturbing Ghosts

The Vietnamese government's insistence on a totalizing narrative of unification and reconciliation led to not only the organized forgetting of the ARVN soldiers, but to the uprooting of their very bodies as well. Hue-Tam Ho Tai explains:

While those who fought against the French, the Americans, or the South Vietnamese government are interred in cemeteries devoted to revolutionary heroes, the remains of those who fought on the other side in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam had to be taken away when its military cemetery was razed after 1975.<sup>185</sup>

Thus the bodies were disturbed and displaced, their ghosts condemned to wander the earth. In Vietnamese culture, ancestor worship is very important, and thus, the inability to locate and memorialize the dead can be both traumatic and jarring.<sup>186</sup>

Such would have been the case with Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn, if his loyal followers had not rescued his body. Colonel Cấn's sister paints a politically subversive tale of multiple actors collaborating to (re)locate Colonel Cấn's remains.<sup>187</sup> According to this interviewee, after Colonel Cấn was publicly executed, his body was driven off and buried in an unmarked grave. However, a loyal friend followed the car and unobtrusively marked the grave so that Colonel Cấn's parents could at least honor their fallen son. Later though, the government decided to raze the cemetery. Colonel Cấn's relatives went to ask for his remains. Because Colonel Cấn was such a politically contentious figure, who publicly refused to surrender—indeed, when he died he brazenly requested that he be buried under the flag of the Republic of Vietnam—the relatives

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<sup>185</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting," in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 191.

<sup>186</sup> A. Terry Rambo, *Searching for Vietnam: Selected Writings on Vietnamese Culture and Society* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2005), 75.

<sup>187</sup> BN, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 27, 2012.

could not ask for his remains directly, but rather used the name of a son of another relative. They then transferred the remains to a Church cemetery in Long Xuyên. But he remained there only a year, until that cemetery was leveled as well. The family then had to move Colonel Cấn's body to private land: a relative's place. Finally in 1995, Colonel Cấn's wife and son sent money home for the family to send his remains on to the United States. Thus Colonel Cấn's remains were dug up once again, cremated, and carried to the U.S. by Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor, who was visiting Việt Nam at the time.<sup>188</sup>

The current Vietnamese state insists on reconciliation and unification, but this reunion is predicated not only on the suppression of ephemeral memories, but also on the eradication of material bodies. Thus Colonel Cấn's body traced multiple displacements, belatedly following the path of Vietnamese refugees who had fled before him. In this way his body reenacted the history of Vietnamese refugee displacement, twenty years after the mass exodus of 1975. It is an eerie echo of the past in the present—a duplication of that moment of removal and trauma. This duplication highlights the fact that war and its displacements have lasting effects that haunt the present, attesting to the necessity to remember and come to terms with the past.

Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn could have made this journey twenty years earlier, and perhaps then would have still been alive today. He was offered the opportunity to escape to the U.S. in 1975. However Colonel Cấn refused, instead choosing to steadfastly die for his country:

My older brother was a hero because he stayed back in Việt Nam and let them kill him. He did not hide or try to escape. If he had, he wouldn't have died that way. Only heroes would stay behind and try to fight back that way. Even when the airplane came, he still refused to leave. What was he fighting? It was already a lost cause, but he kept fighting. If he had left, he wouldn't have died.

Anh hai vậy, cậu hai Cấn là người anh hùng, nghĩa là ở lại nước Việt Nam để cho tụi nó bắn. Không có trốn. Nếu trốn thì đâu có chết như vậy. Người anh hùng mới ở lại chống cự như vậy. Tới sau này chị ngồi, chị còn nói là máy bay tới

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<sup>188</sup> BN, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 27, 2012.

cũng không có chịu bay, chống cự hoài, chống cái gì? Người ta đã bị ấy hết rồi, còn ông cứ chống hoài. Nếu đi thì đâu có chết.<sup>189</sup>

This quote suggests that Colonel Cấn is memorialized as a hero less for his accomplishments in battle as for his final refusal to surrender. Would he still be venerated and memorialized if he had fled to the United States? Perhaps Colonel Cấn is special not for his life but for his death; many South Vietnamese veterans feel like they betrayed their country by leaving in 1975, and thus look to Colonel Cấn as an epitome of bravery, patriotism, and heroism—as a figure to assuage their guilt.<sup>190</sup> This relative is more ambivalent about Colonel Cấn’s choice to stay though. Although she insists that “Only heroes would stay behind,” she also painfully acknowledges that “If he had left, he wouldn’t have died.” She wouldn’t have lost him so soon.

Despite his initial refusal to leave when still alive, Colonel Cấn’s body did ultimately end up in the United States. However one should be wary of conceptualizing the United States as a final refuge, given the fact that U.S. intervention exacerbated the war between North and South Vietnam in the first place. Thus although Colonel Cấn is laid to rest—his ghost freed from “wander[ing] along the highway” and “disturb[ing] the living”—he still haunts the present, serving as a constant reminder to his relatives in Việt Nam of his multiply uprooted burial, and to his loved ones in California of the painful journey of escape.<sup>191</sup> Yet rather than repress these painful memories—these haunting ghost stories—Avery Gordon advocates their engagement: “It is something about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future.”<sup>192</sup> By acknowledging the figure of Colonel Cấn’s ghost, his relatives and followers narrate a history repressed by both the Vietnamese and

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<sup>189</sup> TC, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

<sup>190</sup> Lieutenant Hoa Pham, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, Feb. 11, 2013.

<sup>191</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 191.

<sup>192</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 22.

American state, conceptualizing a countermemory in which Colonel Cấn and other South Vietnamese soldiers are honored for their bravery and self-sacrifice.

### 3. Honoring a Hero: Nuanced Narratives of Valor

When asked explicitly if they believe Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn is a hero or a traitor, all the interviewed relatives mark him as the former, though their answers are more nuanced than that of their counterparts in California, given their continued presence in Communist Vietnam. Thus it is interesting to note how they navigate their precarious positioning, valorizing Colonel Cấn's bravery and steadfastness while avoiding direct commentary on the political implications of his stance. They are careful to highlight his *devotion* to his cause, thus rendering the cause itself—loyalty to the Republic of Vietnam—almost inconsequential.

For example, this sibling admires Colonel Cấn's self-sacrifice for his country—an act of loyalty that should be acknowledged for its selflessness, regardless of the politics of the given state:

We always say that he is a hero because... *whatever side you are on, if you live on one side you follow that side, and you protect that side.* The people who knew him, they all believed that he sacrificed himself for his country. That his whole life, from youth to adulthood, and from the time that he joined the military, his whole life was for his country.

Luôn luôn nói anh hai là người anh hùng, tại vì ... *bên nào cũng vậy, thứ dụ như là sống bên nào thì mình theo bên đó, nghĩa là mình bảo vệ bên đó.* Những cái người mà biết về anh hai thì ai cũng nghĩ là anh hai hy sinh về cho đất nước, là cuộc đời từ nhỏ tới lớn đó khi mà bắt đầu ra đi lính đó là cuộc đời của anh hai là cho tổ quốc.<sup>193</sup>

Likewise Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's brother, who was sent to a reeducation camp for ten years due to both his relationship to Colonel Cấn and his service in the ARVN, qualifies Colonel Cấn's heroism as thus:

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<sup>193</sup> BN, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 27, 2012.

I think that my older brother is a hero but when we stand between freedom and communism, as an example, then one would have to live according to their duty to their motherland. So this means that if there are two groups who are fighting each other, whoever is loyal is given the title of “hero.” So if that’s the case, then I think that my brother, the way that he died... he should be a hero because he completely fulfilled his obligation to his country [by dying for his country].

Cậu tám thì nghĩ là anh hai là người anh hùng nhưng mà dẫu đứng trên một lập trường giữa tự do và cộng sản thứ dẫu đi thì người nào cũng phải sống theo cái bổn phận của quê hương của người đó cái tư tưởng của người đó bẻ vậy người ta nói là ngày xưa có truyện trung thần ... con có biết truyện trung thần không? Có nghĩa là giữa hai người hai bên đánh với nhau nhưng mà người nào trung thì người đó được trung thần thì cậu tám nghĩ là nếu cậu hai chết như vậy thì cậu hai cũng được trung thần vì cậu hai đã làm tròn được cái bổn phận trách nhiệm đối với cái đất nước của cậu hai.<sup>194</sup>

Although he also fought on behalf of South Vietnam, this brother does not explicitly venerate that now-defunct state, in the way that South Vietnamese veterans do in the United States. He admires the way Colonel Cấn “fulfilled his obligation to his country,” and thus identifies his brother as a “hero,” but he is careful not to betray his political loyalties when speaking about the conflict between North Vietnam and the South. Another interviewee, even when asked explicitly to comment on Colonel Cấn’s refusal to surrender, avoids a political answer and instead says that Colonel Cấn “did the right thing” because he remained steadfastly ardent to his cause. However, this interviewee shies away from explicitly condoning the cause itself:

I believe that he did the right thing because he followed the country that he belonged to, that he tried to protect. But when he no longer could protect it, he decided to sacrifice himself. He would rather die than surrender.

Cái đó là anh hai làm đúng tại vì anh hai theo cái nước của mình lúc đó, mình bảo vệ mà giờ không được thì thà là mình hy sinh, mình chết chứ mình không có đầu hàng.<sup>195</sup>

Taking this rhetoric a step further, one interviewee was almost philosophical in her answer, avoiding the question of politics and country altogether:

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<sup>194</sup> OT, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 24, 2012.

<sup>195</sup> BN, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 27, 2012

According to my values, the way that I think, everyone's life has a separate route. Each life has its own meaning. Each person has his own will that's different from another's, so we can't put a price on their action [we can't judge]. About Mr. Hồ Ngọc Cấn, to me, the way that I think, what he did was his own will, he gave it meaning and that was his own meaning.

Theo như tôi đánh giá đó, theo tôi nghĩ đó, đời ai cũng có một cái hướng đi riêng, không cho đó là một cái mà gọi là cũng như là chính nghĩa của mỗi người, mỗi người có một cái ý chí khác nhau cho nên mình không thể đánh giá người ta. Về anh hai, theo chị nghĩ thì đó là ý chí của anh, của ông, ông Hồ Ngọc Cấn, thì ông Hồ Ngọc Cấn cái ý chí của ông thì như vậy. Ông cho đó chính nghĩa thì đúng là chính nghĩa của ông.<sup>196</sup>

According to this interviewee, Colonel Cấn refused to give in to the demands of the Communist government; by refusing to surrender, he forged his own path and made his own meaning—a meaning that is kept alive by the oral tales of his remaining loved ones.

In contrast, Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor—who grew up in Việt Nam but moved to the United States in her late twenties—has more freedom to make politically-charged comments, given her current position in California rather than in Việt Nam. Thus throughout the forty-five minute interview she switched between politically-neutral evaluations of her brother's actions and more explicitly nationalist articulations of what constitutes heroism. For example, Taylor initially said that she does not know if her brother is a hero or not because he was really just defending his own side—in the same way that the Northern Vietnamese defended their own side in turn. Furthermore, she thinks he should be held responsible for the people he killed. But at another point, her rhetoric echoes that of her relatives in Việt Nam, praising Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn's steadfastness to his cause in politically neutral terms: “Sometimes they say when you die, you cry, you do something, but no. He think [it was] the right thing to do, and maybe the right time he die, and he accept that.”<sup>197</sup> However, she intersperses these comments with more politically-

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<sup>196</sup> CH, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, July 3, 2012.

<sup>197</sup> Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, July 17, 2012.

charged language: “I think he the hero for *my* country, because he not surrender.”<sup>198</sup> At points she explicitly identifies with the southern Republic of Vietnam, in spite of the now-defunct status of this political state.

Despite the general avoidance of politically-charged comments, when Colonel Cấn’s relatives in Việt Nam do explicitly reference the no-longer-existing Republic of Vietnam, they conceptualize Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn not as an aggressor or traitor, but rather as a protector and peacemaker, as exemplified by these two testimonies:

Ever since he was little he had it in his mind that he would do whatever needed to protect his country, so when there was a program for families who had sons fourteen or older to join the ARVN Junior Military Academy our dad signed him up so he could go study there.

Từ nhỏ đã có ý nghĩa là mình sẽ làm để là giữ gìn đất nước của mình, rồi cho nên lúc mà khi có chương trình mà gia đình của quân nhân con cái trên 14 tuổi được đi thiếu sinh quân thì ba mới làm lên để cho anh hai đi học ở đó, rồi đi học xong rồi thì khi mà ra trường thì là làm cho quân cụ thôi, trong thời gian đó, ở Thủ Đức đó.<sup>199</sup>

What we know about him is that every time he would talk to the family, he would always want peace for the country and to do whatever needed so that our country would become a prosperous and happy place. Whatever he could do, he would. That was his aspiration.

Thì theo như mà được biết về anh hai khi mỗi lần anh hai nói chuyện với gia đình đó thì anh hai là luôn luôn muốn được sự thanh bình cho đất nước và làm những cái gì mà có thể là cho đất nước được tốt đẹp nghĩa là yên vui đó, nghĩa là cái gì anh hai làm được thì anh hai sẽ làm, thì đó là nguyện vọng của anh hai.<sup>200</sup>

These interviewees emphasize that Colonel Cấn genuinely fought for what he believed was best for Việt Nam. According to them, Colonel Cấn’s ultimate goal then was not to defeat the North, but rather to protect and love his people—the people of Việt Nam. This rhetoric parallels the testimony of another RVN soldier, Ly Tong Ba, who survived the war and was interviewed in the 1980s:

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>199</sup> BN, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, June 27, 2012.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

I fought for my country. I did my duty. I did the best I could. And I lost. Yet I am proud, still. When I could not perform my job any more I still tried to fight. I lost my army, but I was never defeated. I just did my job for Vietnam. And when the [PAVN] General that I fought against said to me, “What do you think now?” I said, “I am Vietnamese. I want to see Vietnam rich and the people happy and free.”<sup>201</sup>

Like Colonel Cấn, Lý Tông Bá refused to be “defeated” and asserted that he was just doing his “job for Vietnam.” However, unlike Colonel Cấn, who ardently fought and died for the Republic of Vietnam, this brigadier general attempted to reconcile and reconceptualize his protection of the people of South Vietnam with a love for Việt Nam as a whole, regardless of leadership: “I still say to the leaders of the country, ‘I did my part. You won and I lost. And now you do what you wanted to do. If you do good, if the people become free and prosperous, then I have nothing against you.’”<sup>202</sup> However, Lý Tông Bá ultimately believed that the Communist leaders failed to bring freedom and prosperity, and thus he mourns the futility of Việt Nam’s civil war: “Việt Nam lost many good citizens in the war and now look at the country. I must say that we got nothing from the war.”<sup>203</sup> It is important to note though that Lý Tông Bá does not (explicitly) deride the current leadership for their Communist *politics*, but rather their failed *promise*. Thus his critique of the current state is implicit, like that of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn’s relatives. It is not of the forceful nature articulated by South Vietnamese veterans in the United States.

#### **4. Heroism off the Battlefield: A Gendered Critique of Masculine Might**

According to Hue Tam Ho-Tai, in Việt Nam heroism can be “celebrated without associating it almost exclusively with battlefield combat, as is the case with much Western

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<sup>201</sup> Ly Tong Ba (ARVN brigadier general), interview from the late 1980s, in *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives*, ed. Michael H. Hunt (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 195. These text did not provide the original Vietnamese transcription, and thus it is not reproduced here.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 195.

ideology.”<sup>204</sup> Heroism is rather associated with “determination, endurance, the spirit of self-sacrifice, and, above all, the willingness to fight against an invader whatever the odds.”<sup>205</sup> Thus it “need not be an especially aristocratic or masculine quality.”<sup>206</sup> Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s relatives take this reframing of Western and masculine notions of heroism a step further. Not only do they nuance the narratives of his military honor and political loyalty, qualifying the stock image of heroism constructed by his ardent South Vietnamese American followers and refuting the construction of traitor imagined by the current Vietnamese state. They also offer domestic stories of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn’s kind deeds and generous acts. Thus they honor and remember Colonel Cẩn not only for his bravery, but also for his compassion—his willingness to help those in need. They value more feminine conceptualizations of heroism.

One interviewee notes explicitly that she admires Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn not for his political refusal to surrender, but for his loving treatment of others:

I know Mr. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was a person with great integrity. I don’t know if he chose the right or wrong path. That is not a question of importance for me. What was important for me was how he treated the people around me. In that sense, I regarded him as someone who was very great. His virtues were very great.

Rồi tôi biết ông Hồ Ngọc Cẩn là một cái người rất là trung thực, không biết ông ấy đi đúng đường hay là sai đường, cái chuyện đó tôi không thèm nhằn đề, nhưng mà tôi thấy ông ấy là đối xử với mỗi người tốt thì tôi cho ông ấy là một người rất cao thượng. Cái công đức đó là rất là cao.<sup>207</sup>

When asked to describe their early memories of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, the interviewees praised Colonel Cẩn’s selflessness and compassion: “If anyone needed anything and he could help, he would. Các em mà cần cái gì anh có thể làm được thì anh hai làm.”<sup>208</sup> For example, several

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<sup>204</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 172.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>207</sup> CH, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, July 3, 2012.

<sup>208</sup> BN, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 27, 2012.

siblings shared stories of how Colonel Cấn personally took them in and cared for them, given their parents' precarious financial situation. One sister recounts:

When I was little, about seven years old, I went to live with my older brother. At that time his wife just had the baby. My brother really loved me. He was concerned that there would be difficulty between his wife and me so he gave me money himself for everyday use so that I wouldn't have to bother his wife. He really took good care of me. Sometimes I used to get sick, throwing up, but he took care of me, buying medicine and making sure that I was getting enough rest. He would take care of everything. When he went to Nha Trang for a year I went with him and I lived there with him. Overall, I will always remember how he took good care of me and how he made sure that there would not be any trouble between me and his wife.

À... hồi nhỏ khi em khoảng bảy tuổi thì em có lên ở với anh hai thì lúc đó chị hai mới sanh em bé thì anh hai rất là thương em. Lo cũng như sợ là chị dâu với em chồng bị mất lòng rồi anh hai cho em tiền để ăn hàng tá để không có đụng chạm gì chị hai. Anh hai lo dữ lắm. Hồi đó em hay bị bệnh bị ói thì anh hai lá lo cho em đi lấy thuốc lấy đồ em nằm đó thì anh hai cũng săn sóc đủ thứ hết. Thời gian khi anh hai đi ra ngoài Nha Trang một năm thì em có đi theo anh hai ở ngoài đó với anh hai. Nói chung ra là em là rất nhớ anh hai vì cái gì anh hai cũng lo lắng chăm sóc cho em chứ không có để em mất lòng với chị dâu.<sup>209</sup>

Another sister describes a similar situation:

When I was little, I lived with him for a little while, about half a year. I was six years old, at Thủ Đức. And after that, when I was about sixteen or seventeen years old, I lived with him at Bạc Liêu, for about a year. So then I stayed with him that year. He had a place in Gia Bình where he built a house, but he would go on military missions and he would go for several months at a time. So I would go there to visit him at the Gia Bình jungle, and that place was very harsh.

Lúc nhỏ thì cũng ở với anh hai một thời gian, khoảng nửa năm, lúc sáu tuổi. Ở Thủ Đức. Rồi sau này, lúc mà khoảng mười sáu, mười bảy tuổi, ở Bạc Liêu, thì ở khoảng một năm. Đi theo anh hai ở một năm thì lúc đó là anh hai coi như là có cái chỗ, khu Gia Bình đó, là cấp nhà ở, nhưng mà anh hai thì lại đi hành quân, đi thì vài ba tháng thì về nhà, rồi tôi cũng đi lên đó thăm, là ở rừng Gia Bình đó, thì thấy cũng cực khổ lắm.<sup>210</sup>

Likewise, Taylor remembers how Colonel Cấn paid for her housing when she had to leave her parents in Rạch Giá in order to go to high school in Sài Gòn. First Colonel Cấn took her away

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<sup>209</sup> BA, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

<sup>210</sup> BC, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

from the home of a miserly uncle who begrudged her cost of living: Colonel Cấn then paid “more than half of his salary for me to live every month. And but he do it, because you know, he don’t want me [to be] upset, don’t want me feel, you know, left out because my parents not here.”<sup>211</sup> As these testimonies show, Colonel Cấn went out of his way to take in his siblings or provide them with alternative housing, despite his military responsibilities and his minimal income. These are stories that have been left out of the existing historical record—that are missing not only from dominant state narratives, but also from the online timelines written by South Vietnamese American veterans. Those timelines only recount Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn’s military accomplishments. In contrast, these interviewees also emphasize the value of the domestic: they praise Colonel Cấn’s guardianship of his siblings, elevating these traits to the same status as battle victories. Thus they offer up a more feminine standard of heroism: one that acknowledges and appreciates domestic care work as well as battlefield victories.

Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn was also praised for his humility. Even when he became a decorated officer, he did not consider himself better than his fellow Vietnamese citizens:

Even though he was a high-ranking official, he lived simply, like an everyday person. He would come frequently to visit the grandparents. And it wasn’t just them. He treated all the elders around him with the utmost respect.

Sống dung hòa, mặc dù làm lớn nhưng sống như là bình dân dân dị. Tới lui thường xuyên để mà thăm ông bà. Mà không riêng ông bà, là những người già xung quanh ông ấy đều tôn trọng hết, chứ không riêng về ông bà trong nhà.<sup>212</sup>

Perhaps this humility was in remembrance of his own humble beginnings, growing up in the countryside of Rạch Giá. Indeed, when Colonel Cấn had raised enough money, he did not spend it on himself, but rather went back home to build a bigger and fancier grave for his grandparents:

He was a very devoted son who really loved his parents and his aunt, and who always remembered his grandparents. When he went to Xa Đét, that was the

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<sup>211</sup> Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, July 17, 2012.

<sup>212</sup> CH, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, July 3, 2012.

beginning of his rise in the ranks. He had saved a little money that he used to build a tomb for our grandparents. This tomb was very well-built, so today, even though all of the children and grandchildren don't live in Rạch Giá anymore, the tomb is still intact because he put such care into building it. Because at that time, our family was poor and we lived far away so there was no one else that could have done it.

Như là đối với gia đình đó, cậu Cần là một người con có hiếu, là thương cha mẹ, thương dì, rất là thương dì và còn nhớ ơn ông bà nữa, thì khi mà cậu đi về Xa Đét, là mới bắt đầu nhậm chức thì cậu cũng có để dành dụm được một ít tiền là cho mồ mã cho ông bà ngoại. Cái mồ mã đó rất là chắc chắn và để tới bây giờ mặc dầu con cháu đã đi xa không còn ai ở Rạch Giá nữa, nhưng mà mồ mã của ông bà cũng còn nguyên vẹn là nhờ công đức của cậu Cần đã xây dựng. Chứ lúc đó chúng tôi cũng nghèo và ở xa cho nên là cũng giống như con cháu cũng không có ai làm được.<sup>213</sup>

As reflective of Vietnamese culture, Colonel Cần retained the utmost respect for his ancestors, ensuring their restful state—in much the same way that his relatives would later try to do for him in turn. Thus, these interviewees highlight Colonel Cần's virtue in the familial space, offering different axes upon which to appraise Colonel Cần's heroism.

Notably, Colonel Cần's kindness extended even to those who were not in his family.

One interviewee attests that although Colonel Cần traveled around a lot, he was always very respectful and concerned about the affairs of those he met, however briefly:

I heard people say that every time Anh Hai<sup>214</sup> would ride in his jeep to the countryside, whenever he would see a funeral he would stop his car and go in to give his respects and share their sadness with them and drink with them and stay for a little while before he left. That's why so many people loved him, because of his compassion for those around him.

Em cũng nghe người ta kể là mỗi lần anh hai đi xe jeep đó đi tới vô mấy cái đồng quê rồi thấy đám ma gì đó thì anh hai ngừng xe lại rồi vô đó anh hai chào với lại chia buồn với cái đám ma của người ta rồi uống rượu để rồi một lát anh hai mới đi, thành ra nói về tình cảm thì người ta rất là thương anh hai.<sup>215</sup>

Another interviewee recounts a specific example of Colonel Cần's generosity:

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<sup>213</sup> OC, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

<sup>214</sup> "Oldest Brother"

<sup>215</sup> BA, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

Mr. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was a man who helped a lot of people. Whenever he saw anyone who was poor or who needed anything, he would help him or her. One time, I heard that there was a pregnant woman. Mr. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn was traveling on the road; he was in a car when he saw the pregnant woman about to give birth to her baby. But her family said that she was having a difficult time giving birth and that if she were to stay in the village, she would not be able to have the baby. The people were trying to catch a ride to go to a nearby town so that the woman could have a C-section. When Mr. Hồ Ngọc Cẩn spotted them, he stopped his car. He asked the family what was going on. And when they told him, he had his driver drive the woman straight to town so that she could have the operation. Both the baby and the mother ended up healthy. When I heard this story, I really cherished him for helping the woman to have a safe delivery. This story shows that he was a very virtuous person.

Ông Hồ Ngọc Cẩn thì ông giúp đỡ rất nhiều người, ông coi những người nào mà nghèo khổ đó là người ta cần cái gì thì ông hay giúp đỡ lắm. Rồi có một lần đó thì tôi nghe là có một sản phụ đó, ông Hồ Ngọc Cẩn đang đi trên đường, đang chạy xe trên đường thì thấy thì thấy một người sản phụ đó đang chuyển dạ sanh nhưng mà gia đình nói là sanh rất khó cho nên ở quê không có sanh được. Mới chuyên ra xe ra đường lộ để mà đi về tỉnh đón xe. Trên đường đón xe để đi về tỉnh để mỗ đưa con thì gặp Ông Hồ Ngọc Cẩn ông chạy xe tới thì ông mới ngừng xe lại, ông hỏi thì gia đình người ta kể lại như vậy, thì ông ấy cho người đệ tử ông đó là đưa cái người sản phụ đó đưa thẳng về tỉnh để mà mỗ sẽ đàng hoàng. Đưa bé và mẹ khỏe, hai người đó là coi như là an toàn. Cho nên tôi, tôi nghe nói như vậy thì tôi rất là quý ông ấy, đã giúp một người đàn bà sanh đẻ, như vậy thì coi như là một người quá nhiều công đức.<sup>216</sup>

Colonel Cẩn's actions in this story become even more relevant when another relative reveals that this woman was actually married to a Việt Cộng official. Thus, political factions did not limit Colonel Cẩn's compassion. Interestingly, Colonel Cẩn's generosity eventually paid off, as the husband of this pregnant woman would later be one of Colonel Cẩn's jailors at Cần Thơ. Out of gratefulness for Colonel Cẩn's kind deed, this man would sneak Colonel Cẩn extra food as he awaited trial.<sup>217</sup> Thus Colonel Cẩn's kindness was reciprocated.

The generosity exhibited by Colonel Cẩn in this incident contrasts with the Vietnamese state's portrait of Colonel Cẩn as an unrelenting ARVN criminal: Colonel Cẩn loved and fought valiantly for his country, but this did not hinder him from assisting Northern Vietnamese people.

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<sup>216</sup> CH, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, July 3, 2012.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

Overall these interviewees highlight stories of Colonel Cấn's selfless and virtuous nature off the battlefield—private stories that have been left out of the more public archives, but which are significant in their own right. They nuance masculine conceptions of heroism and highlight the importance of domestic care.

## 5. Honoring the Dead: Subversive and Transnational Memory Practices

The Vietnamese state attempts to not only control the production and organization of life—what Foucault termed “biopolitics”<sup>218</sup>—but also to “own the memory of its war dead,” as exemplified by the “official memorial services organized by local party cadres.”<sup>219</sup> In these state-sponsored ceremonies, a “fallen soldier’s sacrifice for the state and revolution” served to “exclusively define the meaning of his life and death.”<sup>220</sup> However, these “official memorial services” are not held on behalf of those who died for the losing side of the Vietnamese civil war; the “fallen soldier” does not reference the ARVN combatant. In fact, the Vietnamese state has actively suppressed any commemoration of the southern dead, because such memory acts threaten the state’s historical metanarrative of reconciliation and reunification. In her gendered analysis of state-sponsored war memorialization, Hue-Tam Ho Tai identifies mothers as the primary caretakers of memory in Việt Nam. However, the category of ‘Heroic Mothers’ “include[s] only those whose sons and daughters died in the cause of the Revolution and the War Against the Americans,” leaving the grief of Southern Vietnamese mothers to go “officially unacknowledged,” their war losses “erased from public memory.”<sup>221</sup> Given this context, it is quite significant that Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn’s sister—the oldest living member of his immediate

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<sup>218</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976* (New York City: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 242-244.

<sup>219</sup> Mark Philip Bradley, “Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting War in the Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 199.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>221</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 181-182.

family—continues to hold private commemoration ceremonies for this fallen soldier, gathering the remaining siblings together each year to pay respects to Colonel Cấn's spirit and to tell stories about his life.<sup>222</sup> Thus the private domestic home becomes a politically subversive space, where Colonel Cấn's family continues to remember him, despite state suppression.

Furthermore, Colonel Cấn's relatives seek out information about South Vietnamese Americans' public commemoration ceremonies on the Internet, thus constructing a transnational community and connection. One relative recounts:

Just the other day, his death anniversary celebration was on the computer and when I saw it, I called everyone in my family to come to see it, everyone! Even though he is now dead he still is better known or more famous than most people. Over in the U.S. they also celebrate him so there's a lot to be proud of. You only get that kind of special treatment if you are a hero.

Như hôm trước mà đám giỗ lên mạng đó, thì chị thấy, chị cũng gọi, kêu tùm lum hết trên, kêu con cháu đi ra coi như vậy đó, kêu hết. Nghĩa là thấy bây giờ chết mà cũng danh dự hơn người ta. Bên Mỹ người ta cũng làm vậy, người ta cũng chào, người ta cũng ấy vậy đó. Như vậy thì được hãnh diện dữ lắm đó. Anh hùng mới được hãnh diện như vậy.<sup>223</sup>

Thus the Internet is a medium through which transnational communities can subvert state restrictions. Colonel Cấn's relatives may not be able to personally celebrate Colonel Cấn's death anniversary in public, but they are heartened that their counterparts in America can do so.

Perhaps even more radically, there exists a whole town in Việt Nam that continues to publicly worship Colonel Cấn, despite state censorship: Chương Thiên, the town in which Colonel Cấn was originally captured and tried, but which refused to participate in the execution of their hero, thus forcing the Northern Vietnamese officials to move the trial to Cần Thơ. One interviewee testifies:

These people really respected and even worshipped him as if he were a saint, because when he was working there, he really helped the villagers by building the

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<sup>222</sup> BN, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 27, 2012.

<sup>223</sup> TC, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

Chợ Thiên open-air market, so that poor people who didn't have a place to sell things could go there. For people who didn't have a place to sell their wares, they would now have a decent place to sell their goods. Before that, this open-air market was a very run-down and muddy place, and now it's a very prosperous place. Everyone in that village really venerated him and felt indebted to him. We heard that the people at Chợ Thiên all really worship him. Even though he had died, they all continue to venerate him as if he were the patron saint of the town.

Thì những người dân đó là họ kính phục và tôn xù như là một vị thánh vì khi mà cậu Cần làm việc ở Chợ Thiên thì cậu có giúp đỡ cho dân bằng cách là lập cái chợ Chợ Thiên, rồi cho những người buôn bán lẻ, nghèo khó, không có chỗ buôn bán thì cậu Cần sắp chỗ cho những người đó để họ có chỗ họ buôn bán cho nó đàng hoàng có nơi có chỗ để không có phải khó khăn. Cái chợ Chợ Thiên hồi trước đó thì bùn sinh lầy lội bây giờ cái chợ đó thì khang trang. Mọi người dân ở đó thì mỗi người đều rất là kính phục cậu và mang ơn cậu Cần. Cái tin mà chúng tôi được nghe người dân ở vùng Chợ Thiên báo lại cho tôi biết và những người ở đó họ tôn thờ và họ kính phục lắm, mặc dầu cậu đã mất rồi nhưng mà dân ở đó người ta vẫn thờ, có người người ta thờ vậy đó, nghĩ là cậu sẽ thành một vị thần ở vùng đó.<sup>224</sup>

Likewise, in another interview Colonel Cần's cousin recounts visiting Chợ Thiên after the execution and being treated like a celebrity due to her relation to Colonel Cần. She was welcomed by the entire village, honored with a large feast, and showered with stories of gratitude and loyalty towards Colonel Cần, thus testifying to his significance to this town.<sup>225</sup>

Despite the excitement of these subversive public commemorations, one brother echoes Hồ Ngọc Hoa Taylor's desire to specifically highlight the *private* memories of Colonel Cần's relatives, insisting on the special place of his family in these memory productions:

His love for the family was very whole-hearted and the way he acted towards his soldiers—those who were below him—also really fulfilled his duty towards them. Because of this, many, many, many people get on the Internet and write about him. *But what I have to say is that all of those things don't equal what I do because I still remember him more than all of those people.*

Cậu hai tình thương cho gia đình trọn vẹn và cá tình đối với quân đội những người khấp hơn cậu hai thì cậu hai cũng làm tròn bổn phận đó. Chính như vậy đó thì cậu tám chỉ nói rằng có rất nhiều người rất nhiều họ đã lên trên internet và nói về cậu

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<sup>224</sup> OC, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 28, 2012.

<sup>225</sup> TC, Interview with Evyn Lê Espiritu, June 24, 2012.

hai. *Thì đơn nhiên đội với cậu tám là tất cả mấy điều đó cũng chưa hẳn cậu tám nữa. Cậu tám vẫn nhớ anh hai nhiều hơn họ.*<sup>226</sup>

Thus the family members provide a perspective missing from public negotiations of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's memory, filling in the gaps left by Việt Nam's and the United States' official historical records, as well as by South Vietnamese Americans' patriotic memory practices.

According to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, the struggle of memory against forgetting, or “collective amnesia,” can “be waged by constructing a counternarrative out of the suppressions and silences in official history.”<sup>227</sup> I read these testimonies by Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn's relatives as counternarratives in their own right, respecting their private nature but highlighting them here in this chapter, to show the ways in which they negotiate, challenge, and nuance existing public narratives surrounding Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn.

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<sup>226</sup> OT, Interview with Eryn Lê Espiritu, June 24, 2012. Emphasis added.

<sup>227</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Introduction to *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 7.

## Chapter 5

### The End? Writing History and Transferring Memory

*“A nation which loses awareness of its past gradually loses its self.”*<sup>228</sup>

This is a story about history and memory—about silence and resistance, suppressions and eruptions, narratives and counternarratives—surrounding the controversial figure of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. My initial question, “Who was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn?”, is not only a question of biography—an excavation of facts. It is also a question of perspective and construction: Who was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn *to whom*? Who has the privilege to share their story? Whose story do we decide to hear? Is one story “more true” than another? How do we know what we know?

In this thesis I probe the relationship between official history and subaltern cultural memory practices, examining the ways in which we narrativize the past—especially painful pasts, which powerful agents such as the state seek to erase or suppress. I have chosen to highlight these erased pasts, these memories, to see how they contend with and eventually constitute our understanding of “history”—of “what happened.” In Chapter Two, I situate the

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<sup>228</sup> Milan Kundera, “Afterword: A Talk with the Author by Philip Roth,” in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Hein (New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 235.

few facts we know about Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn —gathered from online timelines posted by South Vietnamese veterans—within their sociopolitical context, arguing that all history is constructed, and that this is my own careful construction. In Chapter Three, I examine the Vietnam War Memorial, commemoration services, YouTube videos, and two interviews with Vietnam War veterans to show how South Vietnamese Americans push back against state imperatives of organized forgetting. By publicly venerating Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn, they make space for their hero in the present. Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn thus becomes a symbol through which these immigrants resurrect the ghost of the now-defunct Republic of Vietnam, to make sense of their own lives as displaced immigrants and to demand recognition for their veterans, in order to gain material compensation for their losses. In Chapter Four, I highlight the narratives of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn’s family members, many of whom live in Việt Nam and thus cannot publicly commemorate their loved one. I read their domestic commemoration ceremonies as subversive practices and argue that they re-conceptualize “heroism,” focusing on Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn’s virtues and domestic contributions in addition to his military victories. Their stories are stories that exist solely in the space of memory; I wanted to archive them here, before they fade away.

My investment in Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cấn is personal: he is my grand-uncle, I desired to know more him, and I wanted to give my family a space to share their memories and learn more about him in the process. But my investment is also political: to construct counternarratives of the past is to image different futures for the present. Futures that recognize the agency and valor of displaced peoples—such as South Vietnamese veterans—and that challenge state-sponsored dichotomies—breaking down constructions of “hero” and “traitor,” “us” versus “them.” In the late twentieth century, the world was divided between Democracy and Communism; today, the

line is drawn between Freedom and Terrorism. To recognize that alternative constructions existed in the past is to search for erased but resistant narratives in the present.

Is this the end or is this the beginning? Where does the past end and the future begin? There is still much work to be done. The sharing of memories and the archiving of cultural memory practices does not guarantee the construction of a counternarrative; rather, it is the *transfer* of memories—of ghosts—that guarantees their life. These interviewees have transferred their memories to me, and I have archived them here; but for this work to resonate in the future, the transfer cannot end with me.

Furthermore, in order to develop the field of history and cultural memory studies, I suggest further theorization of the relationships between history, memory, diaspora, and statelessness. How do diasporic peoples—especially those who trace their “origin” to a state that now longer exists—articulate and organize “the past?” If narrations of history are driven by state imperatives, then how does one organize or articulate the past when a state no longer exists? Are archives the purview of the state, and if so, how do stateless peoples archive their memories? In order to answer these questions, I suggest comparing the cultural memory practices of South Vietnamese individuals with other stateless immigrant peoples, such as the Palestinian or Hmong.

History is a construction and memory is a process. I am grateful to all the individuals who helped in the construction and process of this thesis, in this careful study of Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn. Perhaps most importantly I thank my grand-uncle, Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, for haunting me, for inspiring me, for reaching out of the past to touch me in the present. It is because of him that I began to even ask and answer these questions.

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