

SYLVIA SHIN HUEY CHONG



The Oriental Obscene

Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era

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Notes on Terminology, Proper Names, and Film Titles

Since Asian American studies has criticized the term “oriental” as being racist, it may seem strange that I am resurrecting it for this study. My use of “oriental” rather than “Asian” is polemically motivated; I wish to rework Edward Said’s notions of orientalism to apply to the American contexts and to distance the image of Asia and Asians produced in these texts from any strict reference to actual Asians and Asian nations. Also, following Lisa Lowe’s practice in *Critical Terrains*, I do not capitalize the terms “oriental” and “orientalism” in order to emphasize the multiplicity and heterogeneity of objects and phenomena to which these terms refer.

I have written Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese surnames first and given names second to conform to the practice in these languages. The only exception is when such names have been partially Anglicized (e.g., Bruce Lee, Angela Mao). I use the last syllable of Vietnamese given names rather than the surname when referring to individuals (e.g., Ngo Dinh Diem is referred to as Diem or President Diem).

All film titles are followed by their year of release in parentheses at their first mention in each chapter. Names of characters in the films are followed by the actor’s name in parentheses at their first mention. Films with multiple release titles are referred to by their most frequently used title, usually for U.S. release. Generally I transliterate Chinese titles into Mandarin using the pinyin Romanization system.

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Introduction

SPECTERS OF VIETNAM

Hello, Kuwait. Goodbye, Vietnam. Next month 16 years will have passed since Americans and their friends scrambled from rooftops into helicopters and left Saigon to Vietnam's victorious communists. The pain of that and so many other Vietnam memories—the dead children of My Lai, the shock of Tet '68, the coups and counter-coups, the fraggings, the drugs, the invasion of Cambodia, the killing of American students at Kent State—somehow only increased as the years passed. When the U.S.-led forces raced across Kuwait and Iraq last week, however, they may have defeated not just the Iraqi army but also the more virulent of the ghosts from the Vietnam era: self-doubt, fear of power, divisiveness, a fundamental uncertainty about America's purpose in the world.

—Stanley W. Cloud, "The Home Front: Exorcising an Old Demon," *Time*, 11 March 1991

What does it mean to view the present through the lens of the past? Even before it officially began, the Persian Gulf War of 1991 was seen as a second coming of the Vietnam War, both by those who welcomed it and those who dreaded its return. While the administration of President George Herbert Walker Bush tried to reassure an anxious public that this war would not become "another Vietnam," some sideline spectators saw the Persian Gulf War as an auspicious reincarnation of the Vietnam era, allowing the nation to right its historical wrongs. Uncannily echoing the publicity for the film *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), the historian Robert Dallek exclaimed of the Persian Gulf War, "It's Vietnam revisited, Vietnam the movie, Part II, and this time it comes out right." On the verge of victory Bush claimed the role of national exorcist and psychoanalyst in banishing this unwelcome historical ghost. On 1 March 1991, two days after he announced the liberation of Kuwait at the end of this forty-two-day war, Bush proclaimed to a gathering of state

legislators in Washington, “It’s a proud day for America and, by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!” The following day, in a radio address to U.S. troops in the Persian Gulf, Bush repeated his triumphant claim in different words: “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”¹

Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome

The trope of describing the Vietnam War as a national trauma for the U.S. is omnipresent not only in popular and journalistic invocations but also throughout academic histories and cultural analyses. Modeled on an analogy of the nation to the individual subject, the “Vietnam syndrome” or the “specter of Vietnam” not only imagines the U.S. nation-state as wounded like the soldiers it sent to war, but also calls upon the discourses of forgiveness and redemption to heal the nation of its psychological malaise. In one of its earliest invocations, in the early 1980s, Philip L. Geyelin defined the Vietnam syndrome as composed of several disparate symptoms: policymakers’ ambivalence toward the use of military force as an all-or-nothing option, legislators’ anxious second-guessing of presidential diplomatic and military decisions, and the media’s cynicism toward all actions of the government.² But in addition to these visible effects on public institutions, the Vietnam syndrome was also an affective disorder, coloring the mood of the nation, as seen in this reflection by one who had a hand in creating it, Richard Nixon: “Many of our leaders have shrunk from any use of power because they feared it would bring another disaster like the one in Vietnam. Thus did our Vietnam defeat tarnish our ideals, weaken our spirit, cripple our will, and turn us into a military giant and a diplomatic dwarf in a world in which the steadfast exercise of American power was needed more than ever before.”³ In Nixon’s melodramatic language the emasculated leaders become metonymies of the nation-state, their tarnished ideals and crippled wills becoming ours through a contagion of weakness and passivity. Borrowing from both Nixon’s first-person plural and Reagan’s “war” on drugs, Bush Sr. recast the Vietnam syndrome as a national addiction to defeat and cynicism that only his strong leadership could kick on behalf of the nation, although more skeptical critics like June Jordan likened the spell of victory to a “hit [of] crack [that] doesn’t last long.”⁴ To bury the specter of Vietnam is to reassert the wholeness and power of the nation in the face of a trauma that has paralyzed its legislative and military resolve.

However, embedded within these analogies is also a confusion of agency that undoes the stability attributed to this nation-subject. As Fred Turner

asked in *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*, “Was Vietnam something Americans did? Or was it something that happened to them?”⁵ Whether disembodied in the form of a ghost or a psychological ailment, the Vietnam War is transformed in these metaphors from an active endeavor to a passive suffering. The metaphor itself performs the cultural work attributed to its overcoming, burying the corpses—not only Americans of all races, but also Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipino, South Korean, and Thai—underlying the trauma of the Vietnam War, and replacing them with what Stanley Cloud of *Time* magazine describes as the other “ghosts” of Vietnam: “self-doubt, fear of power, divisiveness, a fundamental uncertainty about America’s purpose in the world.” Thus this initial transformation from activity to passivity stages its own reversal, allowing the Vietnam syndrome itself to be buried by the repetition of another war in the Persian Gulf.

Interestingly this national recovery takes place not on the analyst’s couch but within the public sphere, through the images of the national media. Unlike the unconscious kernels of individual trauma that must be laboriously uncovered by the work of psychotherapy, the national trauma of Vietnam is glaringly manifest, present in the images of the Vietnam War produced not only by newspapers and television news but also by fictional films and other cultural narratives. When the journalist Stanley Cloud spoke of the “pain of . . . Vietnam memories,” he located them not in the psychic contents of individual subjects, but in these visual objects of the national media: the iconic photojournalistic representations of My Lai, Tet ’68, and Kent State, as well as the fictional dramatizations of fraggings (intentional friendly fire) and drug abuse found in popular films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Susan Jeffords, Marita Sturken, Katherine Kinney, and many others have persuasively established the role of the visual mass media in constituting the collective memory of the Vietnam era—including not only the war, but the social and cultural movements shaped by their encounter with the war.⁶ These images were not simply records of a historical past whose experience lay elsewhere. Because of their mass distribution in the public sphere, these images *were* the Vietnam War for many Americans, supplementing and shaping the memories even of those who served in the war.

On one level these images constitute a shared repertoire of visual memories that construct the U.S. as what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community,” building a web of relations among the nation’s citizens through the mediated experience of simultaneity and shared suffering.⁷ On another level these images also complicate and perhaps subvert the notion of the imagined community by pointing to fragments of historical reality that are

only incompletely digested by the process of national consumption and that subvert the centripetal forces of national consolidation. Their manifest appearance notwithstanding, these images point to a latency in the national imagined community, a psychic opacity that itself contributes to the traumatic effects associated with the Vietnam syndrome. What defines trauma is not simply the suffering of a violent shock, but the inability to fully comprehend that experience. If these images are symptoms of the Vietnam syndrome, it is not because they are evidence of tragic events, but because they depict scenarios that continue to elude our mastery, that refuse to be contained in historical narratives that close them off in a distant past.

In contrast to these messy, even obscene pictures of violence and civil disorder, the Persian Gulf War seemed to produce a series of clean, new images that directly rebutted the Vietnam syndrome. The dense, crowded greens of the Vietnam jungle and the black “pajama-clad” Vietnamese peasant-guerrillas gave way to the expansive pale deserts of Kuwait and the light, sand-colored uniforms of the professional armies of Iraq and the U.S. Based on a myth that images of wounded bodies turned the American public against the Vietnam War, the U.S. military took care to distance itself from the images of racialized violence that dominated perceptions of that war. In a double strategy of censorship (of images of bodily injury) and proliferation (of images of military technology) the military tried to avoid depicting racialized bodies in the Persian Gulf War altogether, substituting, in Margot Norris’s words, the “hard” targets of weaponry, machinery, and buildings for the “soft” targets of Iraqi and Kuwaiti casualties.⁸ In contrast to the images of Tet, My Lai, and Kent State, the most memorable symbol of the Persian Gulf War was reported to be the Patriot missile.⁹ Despite the knowledge that this war was, like all wars, a violent event with significant casualties, especially on the Iraqi side, its visual representation was sanitized of such referents, leading Jean Baudrillard to ask, “Did the Gulf War take place?”¹⁰

Nonetheless the specter of Vietnam haunts one of the visual icons of the Persian Gulf War, belying these assertions of cleanliness and mastery. On the eve of victory in the Persian Gulf, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* paired two photographs: a contemporary image taken by an anonymous Reuters photographer of U.S. marines landing by helicopter on a rooftop in Kuwait City to liberate the capital from Iraqi control, and an iconic image of the Vietnam War, Hubert Van Es’s photograph of the fall of Saigon in 1975 (fig. 1). This historical photograph depicted what Stanley Cloud called “Americans and their friends scrambl[ing] from rooftops into helicopters and le[aving] Saigon to Vietnam’s victorious communists.” E. J. Dionne



1. Hubert Van Es's photograph of an evacuation by helicopter from the fall of Saigon, taken 29 April 1975. Source: Bettmann/CORBIS.

commented in the *Washington Post* that “there was no more powerful symbol of the transformation” of the Vietnam syndrome than the reversal between these two photographs.¹¹ These photographs thus became not only symptoms but the substance of this psychic transformation: the pain literally embodied by Van Es’s photograph is answered not by an action, but by another photograph, one which quite literally restages the older image in order to resignify through it. As a reporter for the *New York Times* remarked, “There is an eerie similarity: military helicopters, rooftop landings in U.S. Embassy compounds, figures clambering through wide cargo doors. But the two images evoke a stunning difference in how two wars will be remembered: one helicopter brought in proud marines, the other carried out frightened evacuees.” Saigon becomes Kuwait City, an evacuation becomes an arrival, fleeing families become liberating marines, and defeat becomes victory, all around the structuring figure of a military helicopter on the rooftop of a foreign building.¹² However, these inversions do not erase the previous image, which remains ghosted into the peripheral vision of the present.

However, even the Van Es photograph is far from historical bedrock for the Vietnam era. Contrary to popular memory, it does not depict “Americans being evacuated from U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon,” as a caption in the *Chicago Tribune* asserted in 1975. Instead it shows the families of South

Vietnamese officials fleeing from the rooftop of an apartment building in downtown Saigon where CIA employees were housed.¹³ From a distance, the camera paints a form of racial drag upon these bodies, allowing these South Vietnamese allies to be mistaken for American bodies, and thus framing the fall of Saigon as an American retreat from a foreign territory and the end of a war rather than a South Vietnamese exodus from a homeland and the beginnings of a diaspora. Van Es recounts that this misunderstanding became “a metaphor for all the misunderstanding that plagued the Vietnam War. Americans, whether conservative or liberal, often imposed their own ideas on that troubling war.”¹⁴ It is striking that, at this moment of triumph for U.S. militarism in 1991, Van Es’s photograph would yet again be misunderstood in the service of symbolizing America’s past historical trauma. The relationship between Van Es’s image and the Reuters photograph of 1991 is not only one of inverted action, but of racial substitution, as U.S. marines triumph over the Vietnam syndrome in Kuwait by taking the place, not of fleeing Americans, but of South Vietnamese families soon to become postwar refugees in America, all against a background that erases both Kuwait and Iraq by incorporating them into the historical quagmire of Vietnam.

As a reminder that the disembodied specter of the Vietnam syndrome had a material and racial referent, some Vietnamese Americans spoke out during the Persian Gulf War against the reduction of their country of origin and themselves to mere historical ghosts. Pham Thanh, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece titled “My Two Countries, My Flesh and Blood,” asserted against the dominant rhetoric employed by politicians and journalists, “Vietnam is not a myth, a metaphor, or a memory.”¹⁵ Similarly Andrew Lam wrote in the *Nation* that Vietnam “has become a vault filled with tragic metaphors for every American to use,” and related the complaint of his uncle, a former pilot in the South Vietnamese Air Force, that “when Americans say ‘Vietnam,’ they don’t mean Vietnam.”¹⁶ Thanh too is haunted by the ghosts of Vietnam—but not in the form of historical or national trauma. Rather he mourns the loss of his family during the Vietnam War: “My father was beaten to death by South Vietnamese soldiers as he demonstrated outside an American base against the bombing and shelling of our village. A few months later, my mother and grandmother were killed when a G.I. threw a grenade into our bomb shelter.” Both Thanh and Lam—essentially children of the Vietnam War, although on different sides of the conflict—attempt to reinscribe in the American public sphere a memory of losses that the Vietnamese too incurred from the war, along with American complicity for those losses, all the while asserting their own claims on being part of the American nation. These dead and wounded

Vietnamese haunt the U.S. as well, casting an invisible racial phantasm into every image of the Vietnam War.

This visual palimpsest of the fall of Saigon beneath the liberation of Kuwait resists the conscious attempt to rewrite the memory of the Vietnam War through the Persian Gulf War, and ultimately shows how images cannot simply be reduced to narrative but retain the weight of their historical, material referents that lie within the field of perception but outside the grasp of conscious thought. As indexical media, photography and film are constructed not from the infinite play of linguistic signifiers, but depend quite directly on the material and historical substance of the world for their meaning. This is why, despite their propensity for commodification and mass reproduction, photography and film were heralded by Walter Benjamin as having the potential to isolate and reveal the “hidden details of familiar objects” which previously “floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception.”¹⁷ This optical unconscious, as Benjamin called it, opens indexical visual media to a materialist political critique that differs from the textual phantasmagoria that many scholars have associated with the linguistic turn in the humanities and the cultural turn in historiography. As Tom Gunning describes it, the optical unconscious erupts through photography and film as an “invasion of social history,” as the camera records more than can be consciously or ideologically accounted for.¹⁸ In my use of the term, the optical unconscious is not merely a negative unconscious in the sense of censorship (i.e., that which is excluded from the image); it is closer to what Foucault called a “positive unconscious,” a set of structures, relations, and “rules of formation” that make possible the enunciation of desires and narratives.¹⁹ Just as the individual unconscious may draw on the materials of everyday life to stage and structure its articulations of latent desire, the national unconscious makes use of these visual objects from film and photography—textual, but nonetheless material—as the conditions of possibility for articulating the political and social desires of its national subjects, and even the possibility of defining such desires as *national* to begin with.

The productivity of the optical unconscious is evident in the structural similarities between these two photographs of the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars. Although the Reuters photographer and the U.S. soldiers in Kuwait may not have intended to re-create Van Es’s “Fall of Saigon,” it is not pure coincidence that both photographs center on a similar scenario: the American military helicopter—a “Huey” or Bell UH-1 Iroquois in Vietnam, and an AH-64 Apache in Kuwait—performing a feat of technological mastery, ferrying the first or last U.S. occupants of a tiny piece of American territory

embedded within a hostile foreign land.²⁰ The icon of the helicopter invokes not only the two historical endpoints marked by these photographs, but also a terrain of alternative scenarios, both fictional and nonfictional, from other periods: the “telecopter” surveillance of U.S.-domestic urban unrest in the early 1960s and in 1992, the failed helicopter rescue “Operation Eagle Claw” during the Iran hostage crisis, the Wagnerian helicopter raid of *Apocalypse Now*, and even the restaging of the fall of Saigon in the climax of *The Deer Hunter* (1978). Furthermore the sense of narrative opening or closure signified by these actions—the “fall” of Saigon, the “liberation” of Kuwait—invites journalists to commemorate these events for the home audience, and these photographers are not simply neutral bystanders at these events but are authorized witnesses acting in the service of the U.S. military. And of course there are those South Vietnamese bodies in the earlier photograph, who were never erased from the image but simply recast in a different drama, their symbolic incorporation into the American national body masking the historical expulsion of waves of Asians from the U.S. body politic. Similarly we may never know the race of the U.S. marines landing in Kuwait, but again the narrative draped over the Reuters photograph parallels the military uniforms on their bodies, both conscripting a multiracial army to stand in for a nation marked invisibly as white. Thus the repetition compulsion of this scenario in both photographs is a sign of the enduring political and military structures that have persisted during the historical interval between them, and which have been unwittingly captured along with the ostensible narratives that these images are supposed to illustrate. These material hidden details function like the detritus of everyday life in Freudian dream-work, producing an endless cycle of fantasies and narratives to make sense of their opacity.

In this book I propose to read the optical unconscious of the American imagined community as revealed through the myriad indexical visual representations of the Vietnam War from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. The Reuters and Van Es photographs provide one small example of the larger textual network that I investigate: not only newspaper photographs, but also television news, documentaries, and fictional films, all linked by shared scenarios imagining the Vietnam War. *Indexicality* will be a key concept in my analyses of these texts, but in a more capacious sense than the mere fact of a connection between indexical visual texts and the material reality they represent. Indexical texts not only contain the physical traces of people, places, and objects, but they also register the social and historical formations that bring such constellations of material reality together in the image.²¹ In the case of nonfictional texts such as journalistic photographs, television newscasts, and

documentary film indexicality includes not only the events and phenomena they purport to document, but also the situations that enabled such images to be produced in the first place: the presence of American journalists and cameras or the desire to reproduce on film first-person testimony of lost events. But fictional texts such as television dramas and narrative films are also indexical, even if their characters and plots are artificially constructed. The actors, directors, producers, and distribution companies are embodied agents whose personal histories—including their social positions, oeuvres of prior or future work, relations to other subjects, films, or contexts—are fleetingly captured by the moving images they help produce. Thus in my film analyses I attend to such elements from production and reception histories to augment more formalist reading techniques, but both methodologies are directed toward elucidating the content of the image that is ultimately framed and thus distributed.

In one sense these visual texts consciously represent the Vietnam era to its participants, converting direct experience into visual forms that can be widely disseminated, debated, and shared throughout the national community. But in another sense these visual texts also outline unconscious structures of relations that generate particular political desires in excess of direct experience. The path from Vietnam War to Vietnam syndrome traces an imaginary space of racial encounter between a multiracial American body politic and these racialized foreign bodies. In this imaginary space the emphasis is not on the discovery of authentic or realistic racial subject positions, but on imagined racial relations between the white, black, and Asian American personas interacting with these oriental bodies in extremis. Thus this book has two goals: a historiographic one that attempts to write a new history of the visual mass media of the Vietnam era that accounts for the visibility of Asian and Asian American bodies in these cultural texts, and also a theoretical one that draws upon psychoanalysis and film theory to provide new models for thinking about the relationship of cultural texts to racial and national politics.

In particular I am interested in one set of relations, which I term the “racial phantasmatic,” building on the work of the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche. Racial phantasms describe imagined relations of identification, projection, transference, and countertransference between different racial subject positions, in ways that exceed the actual social relations between racialized subjects. The Vietnam era generates an especially fascinating set of imagined relations around the Vietnamese body-subject, which is situated within a nexus of relations involving Asian Americans, African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and white Americans, as well as participating in

the shaping of normative masculinity and femininity across racial lines. Even Asian Americans, a new political coalition and racial subject position that arose in the late 1960s, draw upon this racial phantasmatic to build their own imagined relations and similarities with a Vietnamese diaspora they have little contact with until the late 1970s, when significant numbers of Vietnamese begin migrating to the U.S. Thus the racial phantasmatic becomes a generative matrix for a Deleuzian politics—a becoming—Asian American, becoming-black, becoming-woman, becoming-nation—that takes place through the form of the indexical image. Drawing as well on Deleuze’s film theory I will argue that the visual mass media—photography, television, film—articulate their own kinds of political thought through movement-images and time-images that exceed the meanings generated from existing ideological or narratological analyses, opening up spaces for productive crises of affect, ethics, and meaning.

There are many kinds of racial phantasms overlapping in American culture; Eric Lott’s study of blackface minstrelsy and Philip Deloria’s work on “playing Indian” describe other examples of this phenomenon.²² But the specific racial phantasmatic I investigate is that of the “oriental obscene”: a set of fantasies that reveal the relation between suffering and violation, activity and passivity, and victimhood and victory in the politics of the Vietnam War. Because of the enormous impact of the Vietnam War on U.S. social movements as well as the popular culture of the 1960s through the 1980s, the oriental obscene animates a variety of political narratives far beyond the war itself, from the political coalition building within the Asian American and black power movements and debates over internal colonialism and neo-colonialism in the Philippines and on Indian reservations, to changing foreign relations with China and Japan, the rise of neoconservative discourses of law and order, and the body politics of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and the men’s movement of the 1980s. Thus the story of the oriental obscene is a narrative not simply of the Vietnam War, but also of the racialized and gendered subject positions that emerged and evolved during this period.

My periodization of the oriental obscene as spanning the years 1968 to 1985 traces a historical arc between a certain kind of collective memory of the Vietnam War, reified by films such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), and the reputed source of that memory in the historical real of the Vietnam War. In a sense this book begins where it ends, following the story of the genesis of the *Rambo* narrative back to its purported roots in both the Tet Offensive and urban race riots of 1968. That the oriental obscene plays out equally in nonfiction genres such as documentary, photojournalism, and television news, and

in fictional genres such as war films, martial arts films and television shows, and action cinema, reflects the situation of these scenarios in a space of psychic reality blurring the distinction between the historical real and collective fabulation. Thus what I term the Vietnam era is not bounded by the dates of the Vietnam War itself (of official U.S. involvement, 1964–73), but reflects the belated historical responses to the war in a variety of cultural contexts.²³

Although this book is about the Vietnam War, I begin this introduction from the perspective of the Persian Gulf War because it offers a way to understand the continuing force of Vietnam on American collective memory. From the vantage point of the future we can reflect upon the potency of the past, and in particular upon the visual contents of collective memory and how they are structured and transformed. Both of the metaphors of Vietnam used by Bush Sr.—as “specter” and as “syndrome”—underscore the ability of the past to haunt the present in immaterial yet substantial ways. The visual media function as both the site and the substance of these hauntings, producing the images that come to symbolize our collective memories of the war, as well as occasioning the reappearance of these images in other locations—quoted in other texts, allegorized in other genres, and even projected onto other bodies. These images become even more haunting when we consider their referents: violated and mangled bodies, individual casualties signifying the mass violence of war. Images of the dead, displaced, and wounded become like ghosts themselves, disembodied yet visible, residing in an afterlife of reruns and quotations, all the while insistently drawing our attention backward through history. These are the literal phantasms that float through the racial phantasmatic of *The Oriental Obscene*.

Psychoanalyzing the Imagined Community

What might it mean to traumatize a nation? To borrow this diagnosis from psychology might seem to impose an unnatural unity upon the unruly collective known as the U.S. nation. It is the same unity summoned by Bush Sr. in his declaration “We’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome,” projecting a present-tense semblance of national consensus regarding the Persian Gulf War by tying it to a seemingly shared historical past. However, it is in this move from subject to nation that psychoanalytic theory provides the insight lacking in popular psychological tropes often invoked in American cultural studies. If the personification of the nation as a patient on the cultural critic’s couch is to be more than mere poetic analogy, it must take into account the way post-

structuralist psychoanalysis has fundamentally challenged the coherence of the subject. To analogize the nation as subject is not necessarily to adopt the organic unities of the body politic or the universalities of the Jungian collective unconscious or the “myth and symbol” school of American studies.²⁴ Far from lending wholeness to the concept of nation, the individual subject in psychoanalysis is fundamentally split and lacking, whether in terms of the inaccessibility of the unconscious in Freud, the castration symbolized by the entrance into language in Lacan, the “Copernican” decentering of human agency in Laplanche, or the foundational foreclosures of sexuality and race expounded upon by Judith Butler, Anne Cheng, and others.²⁵ The modern nation, like the modern subject, must be understood as fundamentally split, historically and socially contingent, and incapable of complete self-presence or self-awareness. The nation becomes a “subject” in my analysis only insofar as it is a fictive field within which the scenarios of the oriental obscene circulate and take on meaning.

One useful place to begin the psychoanalysis of the nation is to interrogate Anderson’s definition of the nation as an “imagined political community” that lives on primarily in the minds of its members: “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”²⁶ The inadequacies of Anderson’s concept of the imagination have already been noted by many commentators, especially his collapse of “imagining” with “thinking” in the broadest sense, to the exclusion of the visual realm—an understandable association, if we consider his main focus to be forms of print capitalism such as the novel and the newspaper.²⁷ However, if we factor in visual culture, and in particular the indexical visual media that are the subject of this book, we enter a realm wherein images precede conscious thought, in many cases providing the materials for further ideological or intellectual elaboration, much like image rebuses of Freud’s dream-work.²⁸ This optical unconscious underlying Anderson’s imagined community might be more precisely linked to what Marita Sturken has called “cultural memory” and Lauren Berlant has called “national fantasy”—a space where public images and ideas circulate consciously and unconsciously through private psyches such that the national and individual, the collective and the local begin to blur into one another in a mutually constitutive yet contentious relationship.²⁹

Furthermore the optical unconscious, like the individual unconscious, does not function like the ego to guarantee the illusion of a coherent, active self, but rather becomes a repository for forms of otherness that interrupt this

illusion. The theoretical framework of *The Oriental Obscene* draws mainly on the work of Laplanche and Deleuze to build a psychoanalytic theory of social trauma that precisely resists the dominance of ego-centric psychology. Laplanche's key concepts of primal scene, trauma, belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*), and the phantasmatic—terms I discuss in detail throughout the book—all share at their core a conception of the subject as a site of passivity rather than as an agent who acts masterfully on the external world. Laplanche's definition of the unconscious reveals the essential disruption of the self by otherness, evidenced by the fact that he calls the unconscious, following Freud, “das Andere, the other-thing in us,” an “internal foreign body” that is itself the trace of the influence of another form of otherness, “der Andere,” the other person against whom the self emerges as a subject.³⁰ As a result the radical alterity that lies at the heart of the subject for Laplanche is not only an existential but also a social reality, embedding the subject within a social order that he or she cannot transcend. By employing Laplanche I challenge the misconception of psychoanalysis as a purely bourgeois discourse of liberal individuality, designed only to normalize and discipline the unruly subject into an existing social order. In fact this model of disrupted agency shows the difficulty of maintaining ideological structures such as the self and the nation in the face of the otherness and other subjects who might resist such subjugation. Despite a set of shared images, an optical unconscious ultimately undoes the nation-building project associated with the print cultures of the Andersonian imagined community, interrupting the assertion of a national “we” through the visualization of various alterities: the internal foreignness of racial difference and political dissent, the external foreignness of international warfare, and even the interruption of the present moment by the traumatic historical past.

This difference between Laplanchean psychoanalysis and more popular psychological understandings becomes even more apparent in Laplanche's definition of the phantasmatic, over and against notions of fantasy as mere wish fulfillment or daydream.³¹ Even critiques of the “myth and symbol” school utilized this impoverished definition of fantasy, thus falling into a hermeneutics of suspicion by which one uncovers the false consciousness of national mythology only to find another fantasy that better describes the desires of the hegemonic state.³² But this meaning of fantasy overemphasizes the agency of the desiring subject, whether an individual or a collectivity such as the nation. In contrast Laplanche asserts that such presentations of fantasies effect a “reversal of passivity into activity through which an auto-centered or re-centered subject claims to be at the origin of what, primarily, he

has submitted to.”³³ The fantasy of fantasy, then, is not simply the content of the particular wish fulfillment (e.g., “I desire the frontier as a virgin bride waiting to be taken”), but is ultimately the fantasy of the subject as *agent*, reversing the passivity of historical traumas (Indian wars, class conflict, economic crisis) into a narrative of mastery. The difference between fantasy and the phantasmatic is thus similar to that drawn by Louis Althusser between false consciousness and ideology or by Judith Butler between performance and performativity; in each case the former term denotes a narrower realm of consciously driven and directed activity, whereas the latter decenters the subject within larger systems of desire, interpellation, or norms.³⁴ Throughout *The Oriental Obscene* I deploy the term “phantasmatic” in order to emphasize this contrast from ordinary fantasy as well as to invoke the sense of haunting and death conveyed by its root, “phantasm,” even as I sometimes use these terms interchangeably in order to highlight the slippage between them.

It is in this spirit of decentering the nation-subject that I also include Deleuze in my larger psychoanalytic framework. Deleuze has been lauded by many theorists as antipsychoanalytical, especially in resisting the binary and normalizing forces associated with Freud.³⁵ But Deleuze is also interested in the passive, masochistic subject as a counterpoint to the centripetal force of the Oedipal, neurotic ego. It is Deleuze who reminds us in *Anti-Oedipus*, coauthored with the anti-authoritarian psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, of the essentially social nature of fantasy and thus of fantasy analysis: “Fantasy is never individual—it is *group fantasy*.”³⁶ Writing this text in the wake of May 1968, Deleuze and Guattari link a classic Freudian fantasy, “A Child Is Being Beaten” (which is also central to Laplanche’s revision of Freud and is discussed further in my chapter 3), to the larger contemporary social landscape of repression and desire, and ultimately to the Vietnam War, riffing off the American documentary *Hearts and Minds* (1974): “If there is a *mise en scène* [in “A Child Is Being Beaten”], it is directed by a social desiring-machine whose product should not be considered abstractly, separating the girl’s and the boy’s cases, as if each were a little ego taking up its own business with daddy and mommy. . . . It is a whole chorus, a montage: back in the village after a raid in Vietnam, in the presence of their weeping sisters, the filthy Marines are beaten by their instructor, on whose knees the mommy is seated, and they have orgasms for having been so evil, for having tortured so well. It’s so bad, but also so good!”³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari do not discard the terms of psychoanalysis altogether; rather they turn their analysis away from the individuating and normalizing aims of healing and reintegrating the ego and toward the critique of psychoanalysis itself as a symptom of the repressive systems of

capitalism and state power. “Daddy-mommy-me,” the classic Oedipal triangle that Deleuze and Guattari deride here, not only participates in its privatized familial dramas but also replicates the power structures that underlie the military unit and the nation at war. We might think of the oriental obscene as a similar group fantasy, but with race taking the place of gender and kinship. Not only do phantasmatic, racial categories such as black, white, and oriental reflect the imaginary relations of individuals to their real conditions of racial difference in the U.S., but the identifications, projections, and transferences across racial categories provide the conditions of possibility that underlie the political identifications, projections, and transferences that emerge in the public sphere.

I also draw from Deleuze’s film theory, the two *Cinema* books which outline a phenomenological theory of film in opposition to the psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches of French film theorists such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry. Although Deleuze’s *Cinema* books are often read separately from his more explicitly political work, they also participate in the larger project of decentering of the individual bourgeois subject and outlining new political possibilities. Following Deleuze’s own cues in situating these books against the backdrop of the Second World War, I deploy his theories of the breakdown of the movement-image into the time-image as an indirect form of trauma theory complementary to Laplanche’s work on trauma. The historical traumas of global warfare are inflected in cinematic thought, not only in direct representation (i.e., films about war), but also in the impact on film’s formal structures (frame, shot, montage), including its presentation of movement and agency in general. It is here that the indexicality of the optical unconscious reemerges, in excess to the manifest, narrative content of photography and film. Just as the Second World War registered in Italian neorealist and French New Wave cinema as a new breed of characters and narratives in search of new ways to interact with the devastated social and physical landscapes left behind by the war, the Vietnam War produces crises of the paradigmatic Hollywood action cinema that manifest not only in film narratives but also in the techniques used to portray action and plot. The explosion of violence in American visual media after Vietnam is not simply a straightforward representation of historical reality within this cultural superstructure; it also raises important questions about what it means to see, display, and ultimately understand the violence of war.

Most important, Deleuze’s film formalism merges with the play of the Laplanchean phantasmatic to free this study from the refrain of stereotype analysis that paralyzes many discussions of race in mass media. Despite the

frequency of images of Asian violence in this study, the oriental obscene does not refer to a stereotype of Asians as violent, which then must be refuted on the grounds of verisimilitude, or of the political economy of representation. The tragedy of the stereotype, as Homi Bhabha argued, is that it “impedes the circulation and articulation of the signifier of ‘race’ as anything other than its fixity as racism.”³⁸ Under this Laplanchian and Deleuzian framework the oriental obscene foregrounds exactly this circulation and articulation of race through visual mass media. It is not the product of any one author’s or audience’s fantasies or desires regarding the Vietnam War, but rather constitutes a phantasmatic space of imagined racial relations from which the various meanings of the Vietnam War emerge and are contested. If the Vietnam War is a national primal scene rather than an American Dream, the aim of this book is not to heal the nation of this trauma, exorcising its ghosts through an act of recuperative, truth-telling historiography. If anything, this national trauma proves to be extraordinarily productive, enabling the formation of both progressive and reactionary political alliances in the wake of the Vietnam War that persist even today. Like the constitutive melancholia that supports ego formation, the trauma of the Vietnam War both aids and undermines the formation of national identity. To paraphrase Freud, *the shadow of Vietnam fell upon the nation*, a war that was both loved and lost—loved precisely because it was lost, and lost but forever preserved in the form of the nation itself.³⁹

American Orientalism

My resurrection of the term “oriental” over “Asian” or “Asian American” is in some ways a throwback to an earlier regime of racist representation, now referred to as “orientalism” and criticized for its distortion of Asian peoples and cultures. This project is inspired by Said’s foundational definition of orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, structuring, and having authority over the Orient,” in which I interpret “style” as referring to a visual formalism that exceeds the content analysis used in most critiques of racial stereotypes.⁴⁰ In contrast with Said’s many critics, I take seriously the Foucauldian roots of his concept of orientalism, treating it as a discursive formation with material roots in the history of colonialism.⁴¹ While Said’s work has focused on academic disciplines and artistic genres that provided epistemological and rhetorical support for structures of European domination over Africa and Asia, my project extends Said’s analysis of literary tropes—“figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances”—to

include the visual, extralinguistic aspects of film and television that also shape the meaning of the moving image.⁴² Visual media such as film and television, far from “reinforc[ing] the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed” by “forc[ing] information into more and more standardized mold[s],” as Said maintained, in fact make orientalism more diffuse, broadening his notion of “latent orientalism” to include a visual unconscious in which the mnemonic traces of historicized power relations are deposited in all aspects of visual form and structure.⁴³ Throughout my analyses I emphasize visual style as a way of moving away from the racial indexicality of many forms of stereotype analysis, which assume an uncomplicated mapping of racial meaning onto bodily difference. If there is a difference between orientalism and racialization, it is that orientalism’s psychic terrain reveals conflicted forms that do not easily translate into the clear social categorizations that mobilize racial hierarchies. Orientalism comments as much upon fantasies of the normative self as upon the construction of racial others.

By invoking this phantasmatic construction of the “orient” rather than a veridical discourse about Asia, I also intend to focus on the mutability of concepts of racial difference as they are put into play in what Michael Omi and Howard Winant have called “racial formations,” or historically contingent deployments of racial categories in specific sociopolitical contexts.⁴⁴ In the phantasmatic, racial formations such as “oriental,” “black,” and “white” always appear as provisional positions rather than stable signifiers with clear referents to an outside reality or racial essence. In using the terms “imagined” and “phantasmatic” I am not arguing for a postmodern phantasmagoria in which race does not exist. Nevertheless I am less interested in the actual positioning of these racial categories in social reality than in the imagined relationships between them. One way to conceptualize this approach is as a psychoanalytic version of what Claire Jean Kim calls “racial triangulation”: each racial formation is not hermetically sealed into its own history, nor are they all arranged into a single racial chain of being.⁴⁵ Instead triangulation entails a consideration of all the combinatory relationships that might be engaged in any imagined scenario of social being. Racial triangulation complements the nondyadic nature of Laplanchian psychoanalysis, which refuses to reduce scenarios into binary oppositions: self/other, occidental/oriental, active/passive. While my central concern is to uncover the meanings placed onto orientalism (my preferred term for phantasmatic Asian racial difference), this project requires forays into the phantasmatic meanings mapped onto whiteness, blackness, and other racial formations as well.

Although I began by invoking Said’s orientalism, the specific history of

American encounters with Asia, particularly through war and immigration, produces a different form of orientalism than the totalizing system of radical difference between the Christian West and Muslim East that Said reads in European colonialist memoirs and comparative religion and history. Lisa Lowe begins her own critique of British and French orientalisms by arguing for “a conception of orientalism as heterogeneous and contradictory.”⁴⁶ She continues, “The Orient as Other is a literary trope that may reflect a range of national issues; at one time the race for colonies, at others class conflicts and workers’ revolts, changes in sexual roles during a time of rapid urbanization and industrialization, or postcolonial crises of national identity.”⁴⁷ As the presence of Asians in America indicates, a crucial part of American orientalism is its reconfiguration of American national identity, character, and subjectivity. Mae Ngai summarizes the contribution of Asian American studies to the study of orientalism as “reframing the question of distance and the location of the subject. . . . If [Said’s notion of] oriental difference relied on distance, that difference was altered, but not eliminated, by the mass immigration of Chinese to the American West in the mid-nineteenth century.”⁴⁸

The American oriental was and continues to be represented not only by the foreigners in Asia, but also the “foreigner-within,” the Asians in America who apparently cannot be assimilated within the American mainstream. As a unique internal other whose racial formation brings together issues of domestic racial order with American colonialism, the Asian American poses interesting questions for the American body politic, especially during periods of social crisis. The idea of the foreigner-within persists even in the late twentieth century, after the repeal of the immigration laws of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth that singled out Asians for exclusion and restriction. As Lowe explains in *Immigrant Acts*, “In the period from World War II onward, ‘Asia’ has emerged as a particularly complicated ‘double front’ of threat and encroachment for the United States: on the one hand, Asian states have become prominent as external rivals in overseas imperial war and in the global economy, and on the other, Asian immigrants are still a necessary racialized labor force within the domestic national economy.”⁴⁹ The importance of Asian immigrants in the formation of a particularly American orientalism is also emphasized by Henry Yu, who claims, “If there was a unique feature of American Orientalism in the 1920s that distinguished it from earlier American and European versions, it was the connection of Orientals at home with those in the Orient.”⁵⁰ Echoing Lowe’s “double front,” David Palumbo-Liu describes a “double movement” in which American orientalism copes

with the oriental other both inside and outside its borders, using a psychoanalytic model which constructs the American nation as a form of bodily *imago*, by “imagining a set of possible modes of *introjecting* Asians into America, and *projecting* onto East Asia a set of possible rearticulations of ‘western presence.’”⁵¹ This model points to a psychoanalytic understanding of otherness within orientalism that goes beyond a prosaic concept of difference, exclusion, or rejection—an otherness which, although radically different from the self, is also constitutive of the self.

In the second half of the twentieth century the trajectory of U.S. military and political relations with the Far East replaced immigration to become the main influence on American orientalism. The events which Said called “our recent Japanese, Korean, and Indochinese adventures” not only generated a large quantity of images for the American culture industry, but also sparked changes in Asian immigration to the U.S.⁵² David Desser has called this historical period America’s “encounter with Asia”: “veritable encounters with Asian cultures and societies that offered sometimes different, troubling, challenging, or intriguing (usually all at the same time) alternatives to American culture and values.”⁵³ The violence of these encounters is readily apparent in their largely military nature: the Pacific theater of the Second World War, the American occupation of Japan, the status of communist China in the cold war, and military actions in Korea and Vietnam, which some continue to call “conflicts” rather than “wars.”⁵⁴ These encounters facilitated the introduction of cultural forms which produced the oriental obscene. For instance, martial arts, mainly in the form of Japanese karate, first entered America with U.S. soldiers stationed in Japan and Okinawa during the occupation of Japan after the Second World War. The Vietnam War instigated the development of televisual and filmic representations of explicit violence in a quantity and with an immediacy lacking in previous newsreel coverage of the Second World War and the Korean War. Thus, like Asian immigration, these wars were not simply encounters with the orient as a foreign entity; they also brought the orient home to the U.S. through popular culture, television, and film.

The political collectivity known today as “Asian America” came into being during the Vietnam era, in response to the issues raised by American orientalism: racism against Asian immigrants and their descendants that marked them as unassimilable and essentially foreign, and the effects of American neocolonialist militarism abroad that associated Asians in America with larger Asian diasporic communities. Led in large part by middle-class, college-educated Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino Americans who

were born and raised in the U.S., the Asian American movement was influenced by the New Left and the broader antiwar movement as well as by African Americans in both the civil rights and black power movements.⁵⁵ The Asian American movement attempted to build panethnic coalitions among previously separate Asian ethnic groups by mobilizing a shared history of discrimination and racial violence. Its first large-scale activities took place in 1968 and 1969, as students at San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, protested institutional racism and lack of community self-determination in higher education. These strikes led to the formation of the first Asian American studies and ethnic studies programs in the country, and also coincided with the activities of the burgeoning Chicano and American Indian movements.

Additionally, as I discuss in greater detail in chapter 2, Asian American activists participated in antiwar protests and draft resistance mobilizations, since the war against North Vietnam made this history of anti-Asian violence especially visible. The historian Sucheng Chan recalled her own moment of consciousness raising during the Vietnam War: “With the help of the television evening news, an increasing number of Asian American college and high school students realized with a shock that the ‘enemy’ whom American soldiers were maiming and killing had faces like their own.”⁵⁶ Given the symbolic importance of the Vietnamese in the formation of an Asian American identity, it is notable that Vietnamese Americans themselves were absent from this panethnic coalition, since the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese Americans did not immigrate until after the end of the war in 1975. The Vietnamese were no less phantasmatic to Asian Americans than they were to whites and African Americans, existing mainly as media images in the public sphere. But Asian Americans themselves were a fragile and small imagined community, having little or no voice in the mainstream press and nearly as spectral as the Vietnamese. In the Vietnam era Asian Americans were “missing,” as Deleuze might say, not because they did not exist *per se*, but because they were “always several peoples, an infinity of peoples, who remained to be united, or should not be united.”⁵⁷

The phantasmatic status of Vietnam and of Asian America in general is complicated but by no means eradicated by the growth of the Asian American population as a result of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and the eventual mass immigration of Vietnamese to the U.S. after the Vietnam War. Much has been written about the extraordinary character of Asian immigration after 1965, focusing on how the changes made to immigration law

replaced restrictive quotas based on national origins with a system of preferences that favored skilled, middle-class workers—and partially contributing to the phenomenon of the “model minority.”⁵⁸ Describing the Asian immigrant after 1965 as the return of the repressed of American neocolonialism in Asia, Lowe argues that these immigrants, a large number of whom come from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Taiwan, the Philippines, and South Korea, “embod[y] the displacement from Asian societies in the aftermath of war and colonialism to a United States with whose sense of national identity the immigrants are in contradiction precisely because of that history. . . . These immigrants retain precisely the memories of imperialism that the U.S. nation seeks to forget.”⁵⁹ Asian immigrants’ bodies are corporeal memento mori of such acts of violence, even if they themselves are not the refugees of war and colonialism. Importantly, though, the material effects of Asian immigration after 1965 are not felt significantly until after the Vietnam era. Even before these Asian bodies migrate to the U.S., images of Asians, both fictional and nonfictional, enter into American visual culture and anticipate the arrival of their bodily referents. It is difficult to say which of these bodies are real and which are phantasmatic, for even though the later bodies mingle in the flesh within the American body politic, they seem belated afterimages of the earlier bodies whose images were burned onto American retinas.

In short the “oriental” in the oriental obscene refers not to Vietnamese Americans or other Asian Americans in particular, but rather to this phantasmatic, visual presence that dominates the American cultural imaginary in the absence of an Asian American political collectivity that can speak for itself. Asian American identity—a still nascent formation in the Vietnam era—defines itself dialectically against the American national body as well as against the Vietnamese bodies affected by the war. Hence my focus on the oriental is less about recuperating an authentic Asian American subject at the moment of its origin and more about exploring the imagined set of relations that create not only orientalism but also particular forms of whiteness, blackness, and other positions in the racial networks that mark the Vietnam era in the U.S. Revisiting my earlier statement that the *shadow of Vietnam fell upon the nation*, we might understand this melancholic formation as referring not only to the war, but also to the racialized otherness of the Vietnamese nation helping to constitute an American nation that refuses to acknowledge the Asian subjects that it itself incorporated previously. Thus the oriental obscene ultimately speaks not only to the trauma of the imagined oriental body, but also to that oriental body as the index of trauma within the national body.

The Obscenity of Violence

And so when thirty years from now our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and small boys ask why, we will be able to say “Vietnam” and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning.

—John Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, quoted in Tom Buckley, “Reports of Its Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated,” *New York Times*, 25 April 1971

Violence is a key element of the scenarios of the oriental obscene. Violence not only directs attention to these images in a crowded visual field, in a sense demanding to be seen, but it also solicits a visceral and affective response that complicates the intellectual or cognitive reception of the image. Thus the oriental obscene is an *obscene* scenario, featuring a dialectic of transgressive visibility and invisibility that pushes its images to the forefront of the national consciousness. As described by John Kerry in his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as part of a weeklong Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) protest nicknamed “Dewey Canyon III,” the memory of the Vietnam War is not only traumatic but “filthy obscene,” encapsulated in the maimed bodies of American veterans. Previously censored or hidden by the mainstream news media, these bodies now literally demanded to be seen, as many disabled veterans participated in Dewey Canyon and other events sponsored by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, displaying their wounds as a form of protest against the violence of the war. Interestingly although the obscenity of such images is obviously heightened by expectations that the normative American body be whole, healthy, and self-sufficient, it is not the American body but the bodies of its foreign others—the Vietnamese—that form the bulk of obscenely violated bodies in the Vietnam era. Like the misidentified bodies in Van Es’s photograph of the fall of Saigon, the Vietnamese of war coverage and Hollywood war films stand in for the suffering of American soldiers and citizens as a result of the war, their extremely visible bodily violation taking the place of invisible violence done to American bodies and psyches. Even the antiwar movement fetishized the violence done to Vietnamese bodies, at times using them to dramatically illustrate the moral quandaries presented by the use of napalm or aerial bombing.

Images of the Vietnam War and its antiwar movement were not the only sources of violence in the visual media in this era. In the news media images of the civil rights movement, the Kennedy assassination, the murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and urban race riots were often as

violent as those from the war itself. The loosening of censorship over Hollywood films also unleashed a flood of fictional violence in various genres, such as the crime film, horror and science fiction, the western, and the martial arts film. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a liberal historian and Kennedy speechwriter, lamented in 1968 what seemed to be the exceptionally violent character of contemporary American life, excoriating in particular the development in film and television of “a pornography of violence far more demoralizing than the pornography of sex which still seizes the primary attention of the guardians of civic virtue.”⁶⁰ For Schlesinger and other critics of “televiolence” in the 1960s and 1970s the representation of violence in the visual media was clearly tied to the increasing violence taking place in the world: crime, war, assassination, riots. These images helped contribute to the sense of an American nation under siege, traumatized by the visual repetition of already traumatic violence.

But these images did not only capture an index of physical violence taking place throughout the U.S. and the world. They also symbolized an epistemic violence taking place within the American body politic, as its citizens engaged in various social and political movements that would alter the symbolic identity of the nation: the civil rights movement, second-wave feminism, gay and lesbian rights, black power, Chicano power, and the Asian American and American Indian movements. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin even named this era the “Civil War of the 1960s,” evoking the conflict that also tore the nation apart over issues of race and sovereignty.⁶¹ This epistemological chaos within the terrain of national identity parallels the civil unrest caused by the realignment of social relations, even if such rearrangements of power were not as permanent or far-reaching as the utopian desires that accompanied them. Images of violated and violating bodies seemed to mirror the transgressive movements of American subjects from their “proper” places throughout the social body. Writing in this same period, Raymond Williams commented in *Keywords* that the various meanings of the word “violence” as physical assault, social disorder, and vehement affect constantly overlap, such that the term even does “violence” to itself, by being “wrenched from its meaning or significance.”⁶² In this last sense the demands of formerly marginalized or silent subjects did violence to the normative conception of the American citizen as a white, heterosexual, middle-class male, even if these subjects were not themselves agents of violence.

Obscenity law provides an important hermeneutic and historical context to the reception of violence in the Vietnam era. As I have argued elsewhere, the rhetoric surrounding the legal redefinition of sexual pornography in the

1960s impacted the emerging debates on the role of violence in American film and television and framed the transition of film censorship from the regime of the Production Code to the age-based restrictions of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system.⁶³ Following a speculative etymology of the term itself, I assert that obscenity simultaneously invokes the violation of the body's boundaries (*caenum*, or filth) and the display of that violation (*scaena*, or scene), showing a mutual imbrication of physicality and visibility.⁶⁴ Both the anxiety over sexual obscenity and violent obscenity centered on a shared debate over the status of the body as object—as physical object and as object of spectacle. John Kerry's fear of the “filthy obscene memory” of Vietnam centered on the excessive visibility of wounded bodies, “without a leg, without an arm, or a face,” whose presence threatens to obliterate other ways of memorializing the Vietnam War era.

But if sexual obscenity foregrounded the gendering of the body and becomes an important terrain for second-wave feminism, violent obscenity in the 1970s highlighted the racialization of the body, particularly as documentary representations of violence in the news media exerted pressure on systems of realism in fictional visual media. In 1968, against the backdrop of the Tet Offensive, Jack Valenti, president of the MPAA (and a former assistant to LBJ), defended the new ratings system and its more lenient orientation toward film violence: “For the first time in the history of this country, people are exposed to instant coverage of a war in progress. When so many movie critics complain about violence on film, I don't think they realize the impact of 30 minutes on the Huntley-Brinkley newscast—and that's real violence.”⁶⁵ Because of the informal censorship of American casualties in the news media, the “real violence” of the Vietnam War entered American living rooms through the guise of the Asian rather than the white American body. The Asian body served as an economical condensation of the overdetermined meanings assigned to violence in the Vietnam era. The image of a South Vietnamese general executing a Viet Cong spy on national television, or of the dead bodies of Vietnamese women and children in the My Lai massacre, seemed to convey the violence of the Vietnam War better than any written report of body counts or troop movements. Even the iconic photograph of the fall of Saigon, which does not depict an act of violence directly, comes to symbolize the loss of the Vietnam War and the totality of individual losses as a result of that war.

But journalists of the era also connected the racialized violence of the Vietnam War with another, domestic crisis: the unruliness of the black body in both civil rights protests and urban race riots, which itself draws on a long