CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Collective remembering and necropolitical discourse: The American War in Vietnam commemorated

Minh Nghia-Nguyen and Panayota Gounari (ID)

Applied Linguistics, University of Massachusetts, Boston, USA
Corresponding author: Panayota Gounari, Email: panagiota.gounari@umb.edu

Abstract

This article presents a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) of collective remembering of the American War in Vietnam, also known as the Vietnam War, as embodied in forty-nine photographs taken during the war and published in the digital edition of *The New York Times* on the Vietnam War's forty-second anniversary commemoration. Collective memory and commemoration are understood as political and discursive practices that make up a site of contestation (Milani & Richardson 2022). This research attempts to unveil *The New York Times*' semiotic control in presenting and recontextualizing a historical narrative of the Vietnam War to sustain a necropolitical architecture in the making of collective memory. Three major themes emerging from the data—dehumanized death, gendered death, and paternalized death—are discussed in the context of what we call *necropolitical discourse* of collective remembering of the Vietnam War. (Necropolitical discourse, Vietnam War, CMDA, collective remembering, lieu de dispute)

Introduction: Vietnam War in context and in memory

The year 2025 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, a moment that inevitably revives historical narratives, collective memories, and unresolved traumas. At a time when conflicts and wars continue to take center stage globally, leaving trails of death and destruction, revisiting the Vietnam War is as relevant as ever. The war, which spanned from November 1955 to the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, marked two decades of devastation. While American troop withdrawal began in 1973, the consequences of the military aggression lingered long after. During this prolonged and costly war, the United States and its allies perpetrated unimaginable atrocities, inflicting profound and often unspoken suffering on the people of Vietnam, as well as neighboring Cambodia and Laos. Intergenerational damage extended to both human lives and the environment. An area of crops and forests equivalent in size to the state of Massachusetts was poisoned by chemical weapons, and 7.5 million tons of bombs—more than double the total dropped on Europe during World War II—ravaged the region. These actions resulted in millions

of civilian deaths and widespread destruction (Gounari & Grollios 2010; ĐHQGHN 2015). War's devastation spared no one: on the American side, more than a million lives were lost among soldiers (National Archives 2016).

The Vietnam War represents an important reference point in American political culture, collective imaginary, and beyond. Vietnam is regarded as a 'state of mind' and a 'syndrome' triggering collective emotions of illusion, patriotism, grievance, and resentment (Herzog 2005) about an era of loss and social instability (Grant 2020). In the post-war collective imaginary, the United States is typecast as the world's peace guardian and discursively portrayed as a war victor through its 'we-win-even-when-we-lose' syndrome (Espiritu 2006). Such a narrative has often overshadowed global anti-war activism, war casualties, and the intergenerational consequences of environmental and socioeconomic devastation in Vietnam. On the US side, the actual casualties of American soldiers were questioned, while the poor tribute to American veterans has been well documented (Dean 1992; Lembcke 1998; McMahon 2002; Grant 2020). At the same time, official government documents illustrate the distorted official narrative of four US administrations (Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson) regarding the real intentions behind the war (as evidenced in the Pentagon Papers, see Sheehan, Smith, Kenworthy, & Butterfield 1971).

Literature extensively documents the portrayal of the Vietnam War as a noble cold war, framed within the binary of Communist versus Anti-Communist ideologies (Ivie & Giner 2015; Lüthi 2020). This framing has legitimized and normalized the US military intervention through dehumanizing depictions of the Việt Cộng (Communist) and a language of savagery. Such representations have further silenced alternative anti-war movements, such as non-communist resistance, national liberation, religious liberation, and women's liberation movements (Hanh 1967; Ivie 2005; Espiritu 2006; A. T. Nguyen 2019). While the Vietnam War is a reference point for both the past and ensuing wars (McMahon 2002), the 'collective forgetting' (Middleton & Edwards 1990) in the discursive making of its collective memory has contributed to a distorted understanding of the war's broader impacts and its many intersectional layers.

Owing to the vast literature on the topic from many different disciplinary angles—from historiography to political science and media studies—the reframing of the Vietnam War narrative, fifty years later, remains a contested terrain and calls for an analysis and unpacking of the ideologies that shaped it in the first place, and the ways it has been semiotically represented, remediated, and (re)produced in recent years. In this article, we examine a corpus of multimodal data consisting of forty-nine photographs taken during the Vietnam War, employing a multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA; Kress & Leeuwen 2006; van Leeuwen 2008; Machin & Mayr 2012). These photographs were published in 2016 on the occasion of the forty-second 'Vietnam War' commemoration in the electronic edition of *The New York Times* (*NYT*) and were later reproduced as part of *The New York Times* Learning Network section that offers 'resources for bringing the world' into the classroom.[1]

We attempt to call upon the past, the Vietnam War, by initiating a meaningful dialogue through the lens of the *discourse of necropolitics* in the present (Mbembe 2003) and by looking at collective remembering as a *lieu de dispute* (Milani & Richardson 2022). The discourse of necropolitics, illustrated in the *NYT* data, creates a monolithic narrative that is used to legitimize and normalize the disposal of

the racialized, gendered Other—the Vietnamese during the war—while suppressing the Vietnamese understanding of history in the making of contemporary war commemoration. This collective remembering, as we argue throughout this article, is a political practice reproduced in the data that serves to continuously impose US imperial power on contemporary discourses about the Vietnam War, and by extension, about all wars where the United States is involved. We argue that by 'disturbing' the past and setting it in meaningful dialogue with the present, it becomes possible to foster critical discussions that challenge the dehumanizing binary of 'us vs. them'—where 'us' represents the civilized imperial power (the United States) and 'them' the so-called savage enemy (the Vietnamese). As such, we can comprehend the complexity of actions and reactions and initiate a praxis informed by the ethics of 'just memory'—a complex ethics of remembering that 'strives both to remember one's own and others, while at the same time drawing attention to the life cycle of memories and their industrial production, how they are fashioned and forgotten, how they evolve and change' (V. T. Nguyen 2016:21). Moreover, this ethics of 'just memory' resonates with the conceptualization of collective remembering as a *lieu de dispute*, a space of active contestation and negotiation (Wertsch 2002; Milani & Richardson 2022).

Engaging with Vietnam

We both identify as critical applied linguists and critical educators. Nghĩa was born in Vietnam almost fifteen years after the Fall of Saigon. The American war in her country has been very present in her upbringing and adulthood in the form of intergenerational complex trauma. Thus, collective healing deeply moves, fuels, and defines Nghĩa's commitment to research/community work both inside and outside the classroom. Her journey toward healing centers on 'restorying'—a process generated by 'peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession' to reclaim the ownership of their narrative (Achebe 2000:79). Panayota engages in socially committed research in critical applied linguistics. She sees her research as a social critique/active intervention that strives to illuminate human realities and understandings with the goal of educational and social change. Hailing from the European South, she examines the Vietnam War through the historical lens of multiple US 'interventions' around the world, including the establishment of a junta in her own country, Greece.

Collective remembering and war memory as discourse

Renowned Vietnamese American novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen has powerfully noted that 'all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory' (2013:144). We would go further to claim that wars are fought a third time, in the discursive construction of collective remembering. The memory of war is a cultural memory (Lê 2021) as war traumas are culturally mediated, and often presented through films, arts, and other modalities for collective remembering. War memories are further embodied and carried out in discourse. Discourse, in the context of historical events, can manifest in various forms, from a historical monument, a *lieu de mémoire*, to a policy, a political strategy, a narrative (in a restricted or broad sense of the term), a text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, and

to language per se (Wodak & Meyer 2009). War discourses are fluid and reproduced and reconstructed for present purposes.

History is often written in the present to legitimize or normalize particular versions of events; such an idea resonates with Abousnnouga & Machin's (2013:2) observation that through specific semiotic choices 'war becomes something that we are encouraged to think about in terms of the public service of the soldier and not in terms of maiming, starvation, terror, pain, fragmented families and misused power'. Particular histories become dangerous and threatening because they have bearings on the present—our present existence, understandings, meaning-making, and our present individual and collective identities, affects, and imaginaries (Gounari 2021). Therefore, 'investigating discourse about the past opens up a space to explore the dynamic nature of meaning-making practices' (Achugar 2017:298) in the context of the discursive construction of collective remembering.

Constructing historical narratives

How is meaning constructed for past events? How are historical narratives filled with meaning over and over? As Heer, Manoschek, Pollak, & Wodak (2008) observe, history as a retrospectively composed and meaning-endowed narrative is always construction and fictionalization. Historical phenomena as the result of social processes are borne out of contradiction, conflict, and the struggle over meaning. In this struggle, some events 'will become carriers of consensual values and ideals' and will 'therefore have value as objects in collective memory' (Heer et al. 2008:1). The process of retrospective attribution of meaning necessarily includes conflict, since decisions are being made on inclusions and exclusions in the production of specific discourses. Historical narratives are carried and reproduced through discourses in history books, films, photographs, documentaries, political speeches, and social media, among others. Discourses produced in diverse sites through a multiplicity of texts and modalities make up collective memory. History—written, oral, aural, or visual, official, or unofficial, distant or recent—is always a 'text' of some sort. But there is a lot more to its textual nature. Historical narratives are constantly made and remade, thought and rethought, discursively, in a process of 'multidirectional memory' (Rothberg 2019; Milani & Richardson 2022) that highlights the interplay and cross-referencing between memories and histories, while insisting on an exploration of underlying power dynamics and a recognition of our own positional entanglements in these histories.

The decisions about attributing meaning to select historical narratives impact, in turn, the discursive construction of identities, national and other identities, drawing on a wide range of collective and individual memories (de Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak 1999; Wodak & Richardson 2009; Milani & Richardson 2022). Pennebaker & Banasik note that 'history defines us just as we define history. As our identities and cultures evolve over time, we tacitly reconstruct our histories. By the same token, these new collectively defined historical memories help to provide identities for succeeding generations' (Pennebaker & Banasik 1997, cited in Strath & Wodak 2009:19).

For this project we draw on literature in critical discourse studies that investigates the construction of collective remembering discursively (Pennebaker & Banasik 1997; Wertsch 2002; Heer et al. 2008; Strath & Wodak 2009; Wodak

& Richardson 2009; Flowerdew 2012; Abousnnouga & Machin 2013; Achugar, Fernández, & Morales 2013; Achugar 2017; Gounari 2021; Milani & Richardson 2021, 2022). Our goal is to make a novel contribution to the burgeoning body of research on the use of the discourse of necropolitics in war remembrance that has focused so far, mainly on textual data. In order to explore the discourses of Vietnam War commemorations and collective remembering produced in the *NYT* commemorative digital section, we are employing multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). We align our work with Milani & Richardson's (2022) core assumptions: first, that collective remembering is a process, not a static snapshot of the past; second, that collective remembering is political in that it 'lies in the heart of intersectional social identities' and 'ensures that the political past is brought into the political present'; and third, that collective memory has an affective base, it is 'saturated with affective elements—from grief to anger, from shame to pride' [4].

The making of Vietnam War discourses

The Vietnam War, due to its extensive media coverage, has been dubbed the 'living-room war'—a term coined by Michael Arlen (1997) that graphically captures the public engagement with the war, as Americans gathered in their comfortable living rooms to watch televised coverage of deadly warfare happening on the other side of the world (McClancy 2013). The term 'living-room war' not only captures the extensive media portrayal of the Vietnam War but also underscores the cultural consumerism of war news and the voyeuristic consumption of the suffering and pain of the 'Other'.

In addition to the 'living-room' label, the war was initially characterized as 'uncensored' due to the unprecedented volume of independent photojournalistic coverage associated with the war. However, this characterization was later challenged by critical analyses of US news coverage, which revealed a dominant pro-war agenda in the media, only shifting toward anti-war perspectives during the later stages of military escalation (Minor 1981; Landers 2002; Espiritu 2006; Griffin 2010; Pearson 2018). Indeed, a turning point in anti-war reportage came with the release of widely circulated and award-winning iconic photographs that depicted disturbing war atrocities and human suffering and, ultimately, questioned the US government's stated 'peace-making' mission in Vietnam. As van Leeuwen & Jaworski (2003:255) state, 'photography has a long history of (de-)legitimation of wars'. In the case of the Vietnam War, photojournalism became a forceful source that (de)legitimized the war and significantly impacted public perception, transforming political responses from pro- to anti-war.

Some of the most iconic photographic works, or what came to be understood as 'defining images' of the Vietnam War, include *The Terror of War*, more commonly known as *Napalm Girl* (1972) by Nick Ut, *Saigon Execution* (1968) by Eddie Adams, *Burning Monk* (1963) by Malcolm W. Browne, Ron Haeberle's images of the Mỹ Lai Massacre, and the photo essays capturing battles and soldiers in South Vietnam by Henri Huet, Catherine Leroy, and David Douglas Duncan (Griffin 2010; Wade 2015; Hariman & Lucaites 2018; Durham 2023).

Iconic photographs represent significant events, cause strong emotional reactions, and circulate widely across contexts and genres (Sontag 1997, 2002; Hariman

& Lucaites 2018). More importantly, iconography embodies and transcends political power, evoking emotional responses, what Roland Barthes terms 'punctum' (1993), and, in the case of the iconic photographs highlighted above, influencing the anti-war movement. *Napalm Girl* (Figure 15), for example, is regarded as 'the picture that stopped the war' (cited in Durham 2023:3867). A rich body of literature has discussed the role of this photograph in anti-war movements, the story behind the making of *Napalm Girl*, and the processes of selecting and circulating the photo in public discourse such that it became an iconic image of the Vietnam War (Sontag 1997, 2002; Chong 2001; Miller 2004; Griffin 2010; McClancy 2013; Hariman & Lucaites 2018). The *Saigon Execution* by Eddie Adams (Figure 4) presents another example of an iconic image that both shocked and shook the world, drawing public attention to the questionable mission of the US military in Vietnam (Griffin 2010; McClancy 2013; Hariman & Lucaites 2020). Following the same motif of human destruction, *Burning Monk* (Figure 3) is known as an influential image that called out the United States' disastrous devastation of the 'war for peace' in Vietnam (Skow & Dionisopoulos 1997; Yang 2011; McClancy 2013).

To make sense of these photographs, we need to critically engage with the institutional processes whereby the selection and circulation of the images took place, as well as the cultural, political, and ideological forces that determined how and why some images, but not others, were publicized and iconized (Griffin 2010). In other words, we need to pay attention to the dynamics of power at work in representing war via iconography.

Due to their widespread circulation, iconic photographs are frequently recontextualized and remediated in media discourses, further highlighting collective remembering as both multidimensional and a *lieu de dispute*. And, these representations can have a profound impact on public discussions and perceptions of such iconic photographs (Hariman & Lucaites 2018). For instance, *Napalm Girl* has become a source of memes, widely circulated on social media. In certain cases, its meanings have been distorted as they are embedded within a capitalist consumer framework and, in more troubling cases, they have been represented as involving pedophilia (Boudana, Frosh, & Cohen 2017). Another example is the reworking of the *Saigon Execution* in the comic *The Best We Could Do* (Bui 2017, cited in Earle 2023). The photograph is presented in four frames, showing an image of the execution, a wider frame illustrating the social context, a focus on the protagonist's family history (the relational dimension), and the photograph's role in the collective memory of the Vietnam War. This discursive reconstruction is especially powerful for a critical inquiry into the nuanced (hi)story presented in *Saigon Execution.*

The creation of multimodal discourses surrounding the Vietnam War and its collective memory has largely hinged on the portrayal of war victims and US-sanctioned violence (Kennedy 2015), using the language of savagery. From presidential speeches to print media and photographic reportages, the depiction of the 'American pacifier', juxtaposed with the savage primitive enemy, the pathetic Vietnamese, and the animalistic barbaric Việt Cộng became cliché (Landers 2002; McMahon 2002; Ivie 2005; Espiritu 2006; Ivie & Giner 2015; McIntosh 2021). The core idea is to dehumanize the 'enemy' and to relegate them to a subhuman, savage status in order to legitimize aggression against them and to erase their existence under the guise of a democratizing, liberating, or other paternalizing mission.

Depending on context, ideological unfolding, and political impetus, the language of savagery varies multimodally and discursively. As shown in an extensive anthology of post-war writings, the language of savagery is implicated in the discursive making of the binary 'us vs. them' topos by extending dehumanization to Vietnam War veterans (Vietvets), subjecting them to the image of 'dysfunctional' and 'psychotic', 'baby killers', and a 'ticking time bomb' (Dean 1992; Grant 2020). While purported to discredit anti-war movements and anti-war veterans, the 'dysfunctional Vietvets' discourse stays at the center of the (post) Vietnam syndrome (Lembcke 1998; Ivie & Giner 2015; Grant 2020) in the collective memory of the war. Specifically, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), commonly diagnosed among Vietnam veterans after the war, became an important discourse in the mass media, portraying Vietvets through the lens of 'cultural debriding' required to regenerate 'a victimized American masculinity' (Jeffords 1989)

Challenging the dehumanizing discourse surrounding Vietnam veterans, recent interdisciplinary research advocates for and contributes to a more dynamic, nuanced, and engaged narrative. This includes themes of healing, post-war activism by and for anti-war veterans, and socially supportive therapeutic interventions for those who suffer from PTSD (Hamilton 2013; Grant 2020; McIntosh 2021). At the same time, not as much discourse-analytic research has addressed the notion of agency and its absence when it comes to representing Vietnamese people's identities, and anti-war perspectives beyond the binaries communist vs. anti-communist or the United States vs. communism (Hanh 1967; Latham 2006; A. T. Nguyen 2019). In a way, this invisibility speaks to the 'organized forgetting' (Espiritu 2005:19) that characterizes the US history of Vietnam.

While the binary topos 'us vs. them' remains at the center of the discursive making and remaking of the Vietnam War and its commemorations we argue against a reductionist binary approach (e.g. pro-war vs. anti-war; pro-communism vs. anti-communism; north vs. south; east vs. west). Rather, in this project, we assert the significance of scrutinizing 'us vs. them' on multidimensional, historical, and intersectional grounds.

The discourse of necropolitics

The black-and-white and color photographs selected to be showcased in *The New York Times* Archive tell a specific story in disturbing ways, that is, through a grim visual interplay between life and death. To understand this deliberate and well-curated interplay, as shown later, we have relied upon the influential work of Achille Mbembe (2003) and his notion of necropolitics: how sovereignty has been articulated through the power and capacity to decide over people's lives and deaths. According to Mbembe, 'to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power' (2003:12). Mbembe stresses how the 'political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective' while insisting that war 'is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill' (2003:12). Mbembe's concept of necropolitics raises a series of important questions: If we imagine politics as a form of war, 'what place is given to life, death, and the human body (the wounded or slain body in particular)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?' (2003:12). To these questions, we add: 'How

is life and death semiotically inscribed in the order of power to produce collective remembering?'

If necropolitics is the power to decide over life and death, then the *discourse of necropolitics* is the symbolic, multimodally discursive normalization and legitimation of necropolitical power. It is the visual, discursive, spatial, gestural, aural, and other semiotic modes' interplay between life and death. Sovereignty is further articulated through the discursive power to semiotically represent and legitimize life and death.

The *discourse of necropolitics* builds on Mbembe's (2003) shift from the management of life to the management of death. In this shift, the (racialized and gendered) Other is by definition the 'illegitimate' who needs to be eliminated because 'he' [sic] poses a threat not just to 'us' but rather disturbs the very existence of life (Gebhardt 2020). Mbembe further talks about 'necropower' where 'sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not' (2003:27). Necropower establishes 'deathworlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of living dead' (2003:40). The photographs we are reviewing here contribute semiotically to the management of death.

Findings: Semiotic decisions and the making of deathworlds

Cultural artifacts, such as the selected photographs in this project, are important semiotic resources for the sense-making of the war and its commemorations. These resources signify broader sets of meaning-making processes, either explicitly or implicitly presented according to semiotic choices, such as view modes (how photographs have been displayed, thereby determining the way they are arranged and presented to the viewer), filtering, organizing, labeling, and captioning. Technical as these may seem, they present an ideologically informed practice of reconstituting the viewer's action and reaction toward historical narratives of the war that ultimately shape how it is collectively remembered.

Given that the intended audience for these slideshows, which are meant to serve as educational material, are students in social studies classrooms, semiotic choices further index a recontextualization of 'primary sources' for educational purposes. In what follows we discuss the semiotic manipulation of the presentation of the photographs that underlies the production of the Vietnam War historical narrative curated by the *NYT*. We, then, present the findings of the critical multimodal analysis of the photographs, highlighting the necropolitical discourse of remembering the war.

The New York Times Archive

The photographs analyzed in this study are part of a social studies curricular unit titled 'Teaching the Vietnam War with primary sources from *The New York Times*', designed for use in US classrooms (Gonchar 2017). This curricular unit is an archive of photographic slideshows alongside original reporting (articles published by *The New York Times* during the war), first-person accounts, and teaching activities, underscoring its pedagogical significance. The photographs included in the unit are drawn from an archive labeled 'Vietnam '67′, published by *The New York Times* to commemorate the forty-second anniversary of the Vietnam War. These photographs are categorized into three thematic collections, presented as slideshows: (i) 'How

young soldiers saw life in wartime Vietnam' (Collection 1); (ii) 'Images of the Vietnam War that defined an era' (Collection 2); and (iii) 'Vietnam War photos that made a difference' (Collection 3). Collections 2 and 3 are introduced with brief prefaces by journalist Ralph Blumenthal and *NYT* staff writer Joseph Berger, respectively.

Additionally, all three collections include captions for the images, offering contextual framing for their social and historical interpretations. Together, the prefaces, labeling, and thematic categorization of these photographs serve as critical semiotic tools that guide their meaning-making (Berger 1973; Barthes 1993; Sontag 1997) and pedagogical use. This archive and its three thematic collections form the primary data for our analysis, providing insights into how visual media and accompanying text shape public memory and educational narratives of the Vietnam War.

Semiotic filtering: Themes, captions, and introductory texts

The photographs that ultimately made it to the archive have undergone multiple layers of selection and curation as educational material, most likely meant to be 'representative' of the Vietnam War. Many of the images included had already achieved significant circulation, garnered international awards, and attained recognition as iconic representations of war, including *Napalm Girl, Saigon Execution,* and *Burning Monk.* Additional choices were made at the very moment the photographs were captured, whether by American soldiers (Collection 3) or Associated Press photographers (Collections 1 and 2). Each camera click encapsulated a series of deliberate and inadvertent decisions—choices about framing, inclusion, and exclusion that shaped the visual representation of the events and the narrative.

Photographic captions also bear significant importance as they provide historical and personal contexts for the viewer's understanding and sense-making of the photographs. Barthes, in *Camera Lucida* (1993), explains how captions shape a viewer's cultural or intellectual understanding of an image along the lines of what he calls 'studium', the cultural, historical, political, or social framework of a photograph. While captions may contribute to the studium, they cannot produce the punctum—the emotional or affective element of a photograph that 'pierces' or 'wounds' the viewer, as the latter arises unpredictably from the viewer's intimate encounter with the photograph. Captions may enrich understanding, according to Barthes, but they do not evoke the raw, personal impact that defines the punctum.

Captioning as a semiotic tool serves to situate the photographs in a historical narrative that supports the ideology of those with the semiotic power over the discourse, such as the publisher, the editor, the lesson plan author, journalists, photographers, and ultimately, the American audience. As shown in our analysis below, the captions achieve three goals: (i) with the language of brevity, they remove layers of historical complexity from the specific historical moments presented in the photographs, thus dehistoricizing them; (ii) with the language of transitivity, the subjects in the photographs (mostly Vietnamese) become patients rather than actors in their social roles; and (iii) with the language of erasure, they strip Vietnamese subjects of their identities and stories while inscribing those of the American subjects into the historical narrative and remembrance of the war. Thus, our multimodal analysis focuses on three aspects: the photographs, their textual framing in the introductory short texts and the photograph's captions, and the

semiotic choices made in presenting the photographs as educational material to be used in classrooms.

Before the viewer/reader sees and experiences the photographs, their textual framing and the semiotic choices surrounding them, the archive begins with an introductory statement and three short captions that refer to photographs not displayed in this section of the curricular unit. Introductory short texts are a powerful tool for situating the photographs in a historical narrative. For example, Collection 2 'Images of the Vietnam War that defined an era' is framed by a short introductory quote by Ralph Blumenthal followed by three brief texts describing iconic photographs (not present in this particular section of the archive):

> Half a century after the nation's fateful early missteps into the quagmire, what are Americans likely to remember about the Vietnam War?
> (1) A Buddhist monk, doused with gasoline, squatting stoically in the street as roaring flames consume his body.
> (2) An enemy prisoner grimacing as a bullet fired from a pistol at the end of an outstretched arm enters his brain.
> (3) A 9-year-old girl running naked down the road, screaming as her skin burns from napalm. (Ralph Blumenthal, cited in Gonchar 2017)

The introductory statement, established rhetorically in the form of a question, preempts an essential inquiry into what should really be remembered. It reduces a deadly war into a 'quagmire' whereby the 'nation' is used metonymically for the US political and military leadership and the social actors responsible for going into war. The nation is called upon to assume responsibility for early 'missteps'—an odd lexical choice for talking about deliberate and well-planned military decisions and operations with human casualties.

Language in sentences (1)-(3) above universalizes Vietnamese subjects as passive, agentless, and nationless, employing passive voice to linguistically remove them from the subject position. In fact, in all three sentences the social actors are erased: 'a monk DOUSED with gasoline', a 'bullet FIRED FROM a pistol at the end of an arm enters his brain', 'while her skin burns from napalm'. Further, the use of indefinite articles *a* and *an* for the Vietnamese subjects creates vagueness and generality. The initial framing of Collection 2 also obliterates the complexity of the historical dimension in each story the photograph depicts. Ultimately, these 'award-winning' photographs encourage an uncritical consumption of the events, representing them as self-evident truths.

Semiotic control: Slideshow view mode and the juxtaposition of photographs

The presentation of the photos in three slideshows, corresponding to the three collections mentioned above, sets up a fixed mode of viewing that represents a linear, sequential transition from one photo to the next rather than a random browsing of the photographs. This mode of viewing, however technical, functions semiotically to sharpen contradictions, while highlighting similarities between the photos, especially those juxtaposed in the slideshows. In fact, when reviewing the three collections, we noticed that photographs that either markedly align or strikingly contrast,

are deliberately juxtaposed, highlighting the stark contrast in how deathworlds and lifeworlds are discursively created.

Both sequence and juxtaposition of the photographs are part of semiotic control. They have a profound impact on how the viewer perceives and responds to the photos, or rather the historical texts that those photos generate/represent. In what follows, we present photographs that are consecutively displayed in the same collection in a horizontal dimension, while a vertical presentation will be used for those either belonging in different collections or in the same collection but not juxtaposed. Due to space limitations, the most representative photos from the archive are presented with their original captions (given after the collection number in the figure captions).

Figure 1. Photograph 5, Collection 2: A wounded South Vietnamese ranger kept his weapon ready to answer a Vietcong attack during the battle of Dong Xoai, June, 1995 (NYT Archive).

Figure 2. Photograph 6, Collection 2: Pfc. Clark Richie took in the scent of a letter from a girl back home in Jay, Okla., April 1966. A short while later his battalion took part in an assault on a tunnel riddled Vietcong stronghold (NYT Archive).

Two black-and-white pictures presented above of a South Vietnamese ranger (Figure 1) and an American soldier (Figure 2) are an example of the juxtaposition between different social actors in similar roles (soldiers) engaged in different types of action. In Figure 1, the social actor's identity is erased. Its caption discloses no personal identification beyond the generic 'a wounded South Vietnamese ranger'. The person's face is fully covered in white gauze, leaving only his eyes and part of his mouth exposed, rendering him faceless, unrecognizable, and unidentifiable. In Vietnamese culture, the head and face covered with white cloth symbolize death—only seen in funerals. The memory imprinted on this photo is of a Vietnamese man, a ghost, invoking death by pointing the gun away from the viewer and targeting someone or something that is not included in the frame. On the contrary, Figure 2, with a similar black-and-white aesthetic and naturalistic background (a forest) shows a tender moment of life. It captures Private First Class officer Richie who, according to the *NYT* caption, kisses and breathes into a letter from his loved one—a rare and affectionate moment of humanity in the most inhumane context. The photograph is saturated with love, tenderness, and life and evokes feelings of relatedness and affection. These two photographs, while sequenced, highlight and evoke radically opposite feelings. In the face of love and affection, the deathworlds appear even deadlier and more brutal, even though the South Vietnamese soldier pictured is a US ally.

We argue that the photographs in the collections are selected, grouped, and arranged in a way that establishes racializing, (hyper)sexualizing, and dehumanizing Vietnamese subjects, as central argumentative patterns in discursively creating deathworlds. By imposing inhumanity on the racialized Other in the banality of death, the photographs highlight white American soldiers' humanity. In what follows, we discuss the creation of deathworlds and the status of Vietnamese people as 'living dead' under three major discursive themes: dehumanized death, gendered death, and paternalized death, all of which we argue are inscribed within the visual and textual semiosis.

Dehumanized death

With death, human beings cease their material existence—their life as living organisms ends but not their humanity. The locution 'dehumanized death' might sound odd at first, but it is based on the premise that with death, one's humanity does not end, that is, the qualities that made one human throughout one's life persist. What the photographs under analysis do is dehumanize the Other, even in the moment of their death, stripping them of their humanity—human beings' fundamental power to confront their death, and their right to existence even during their last breath. Two very distinct examples are presented below.

Figure 3. Photograph 1, Collection 2: In the first of a series of fiery suicides by Buddhist monks, Thich Quang Duc burned himself to death in Saigon to protest the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government, June 11, 1963. The photograph caused worldwide outrage and hastened the end of the Diem government (NYT Archive).

Malcolm Browne, the Pulitzer Prize winner photographer behind this frame, offered a personal account of his experience taking the photograph of Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation in an interview with *Time Magazine* he did at the age of eighty. Asked about his reaction to the event unfolding before his camera, he said "I was thinking only about the fact it was a self-illuminated subject that required an exposure of about, oh say, f10 or whatever it was" (Witty 2012), articulating a professional concern, emotionally detached from the suffering he was witnessing. Additionally, Browne lamented the initial unfortunate fate of the photograph, noting that "*The*

New York Times did not run it. They felt it was too grisly a picture that wasn't suitable for a breakfast newspaper".

In this medium shot, the viewer is a voyeur in a public spectacle, with no direct interaction with the people or the event depicted. Voyeurism denotes the unsettling relationship between the watcher and the watched and establishes a semiotic boundary between the subjects in a deadly (and dying) world and the viewers who may show empathy and/or pity toward the living dead, very much resonating with Browne's positioning. In the photograph, the venerable Thích Quảng Đức appears as a passive agent of the action, being devoured by the raging fire. Other Buddhist monks and nuns in the background behind him look stunned in fear and terror—a memory freeze-frame, a fragment of memory (Sontag 1997, 2002)—while some are praying.

Life is present even in the deadliest context such as war or genocide. In this life-world, according to Mbembe, people exercise their existence—that is, 'live their lives out and confront the very forms of their death' (Mbembe 2001:15). In Buddhist teaching, the act of self-immolation bears profoundly significant meanings distinct from a suicidal way of ending life. Self-immolation is a pure expression of a compassionate mind, fearlessness, transformation of one form of being into another, and of the sacred seal of spirit (Hanh & Berrigan 2001; Long 2015). However, those meanings are erased by the lack of cultural context and the use of sentimentalist language in the caption and lesson plan: 'fiery suicides', 'burned himself to death', 'doused with gasoline', 'squatting stoically in the street', 'roaring flames consume his body'. Turning Thích Quảng Đức into a self-torturing subject and an extreme image of death creation, both the language and the photograph obscure the symbolism of life that is profound in Vietnamese Buddhist culture—the lotus pose that Thích Quảng Đức sat in purposefully, quietly, and steadily throughout his self-immolation (Hanh & Berrigan 2001). This highest and most noble exercise of existence from a Buddhist perspective is reframed into a radicalized extreme form of suicide.

Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation marks one of the profound moments in anti-war movements by Vietnamese monks in their attempt to call for the US-supported government of Ngô Đình Diệm to end religious suppression and the killing of Buddhist practitioners in South Vietnam. At the time, his activism was derogatorily referred to as a 'barbecue' by the Diệm government. Without the historical, political, and religious knowledge, the photograph is interpreted as a drastically radicalized form of torture, suicide, and sacrifice as the caption of Figure 3 coupled with the initial introductory short text presented earlier allude to.

Susan Sontag forcefully argues that most of us (viewers) can be consumers and tourists of our own reality, including war and suffering; 'But there is shame as well as shock in looking at the closeup of a real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it—say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken—or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether we like it or not' (Sontag 2002:89). This very much resonates with Browne's earlier remark that speaks directly to the Western voyeuristic approach to the Vietnam War visuals as a whole. There are different layers of voyeurism here: the audience at home watching the 'living-room war' (Arlen 1997) but also the photographer who was at the scene taking the picture that later became an icon and, among other iconic photographs, gained the dignified title of photos that stopped

the war. Voyeurism connects with the theme of dehumanization, since a complete emotional distance and detachment results from watching obsessively from a distance the racialized other suffering, while this suffering presents nothing but a professional opportunity for the photographer. It is interesting to note that Browne mentioned that he took 'about ten rolls of film' because he was 'shooting constantly' (Witty 2012).

By his account, Browne was the only American journalist at the scene that day. He shared that he had a good relationship with the monks in Saigon and had been informed of an organized movement by the monks. Despite this cultural immersion, in his recollection, Browne described the event as 'something pretty violent', and compared it to what 'in another civilization, ... might have taken the form of a bomb or something like that' (Witty 2012). This comparison aligns with the dominant dehumanizing interpretation of Thích Quảng Đức's activism from the Western gaze, devoid of its cultural and religious meanings.

Part of our goal in this analysis is to examine our own voyeurism, so that we can move beyond being voyeurs and becoming 'those who could learn from it' (Sontag 2002:89). In this example, dehumanization operates beyond the identity level (Thích Quảng Đức is named in the caption) but on the level of consciousness. Necropolitics strips one of their control and engagement over the meaning of their death. In this case, it is Thích Quảng Đức's deliberate choice of life transformation, a fundamental nature of all sentient beings according to Buddhist teaching, for anti-war purposes. This control over death is a defining characteristic of necropolitics in both its physical and discursive dimensions. It is *The New York Times*' Western gaze that presents Thích Quảng Đức in a dehumanizing necropolitical discourse while stripping the visual of critical interpretations that would engage more deeply with the nuances of cultural, social, and religious meanings represented in the photo.

Figure 4. Photograph 12, Collection 2: Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, South Vietnamese chief of the national police, shot a suspected Vietcong official, Nguyen Van Lem, in Saigon, Feb. 1, 1968. The photographer Eddie Adams said that after the shooting Gen. Loan approached him and said, 'They killed many of my people, and yours too,' then walked away (NYT Archive).

Taken on a street in Saigon in 1968, Figure 4 depicts the disastrous conditions of warfare during the *Tết Offensive* under martial law. The photograph, initially described in the archive as 'An enemy prisoner grimacing as a bullet fired from a pistol at the end of an outstretched arm enters his brain' is a widely circulated image of the Vietnam War and supports a characterization of the war as a civil war where the Northern and Southern Vietnamese slaughtered one another and killed innocent civilians. As discussed in quote (2) above, the language of transitivity erases the shooter's identity while the murdered is identified generically as 'an enemy prisoner', alluding to the United States' communist archenemy. In the caption of Figure 4, however, both men are now identified. The 'outstretched arm' belongs to South Vietnamese General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan and his victim is 'communist suspect' Nguyễn Văn Lem. The caption includes an infamous quote by General Loan, 'They kill many of my people, and yours too', in an attempt to legitimize and justify this killing through reciprocity: Using the topos of threat ('they' are killers) and numbers (they killed 'many' of our people and yours), there is an attempt to normalize and mitigate the atrocity depicted (Wodak 2007). Such argumentative strategies legitimize the war on the basis of the 'us vs. them' binary. On the one hand, this strategy defends the act of killing (to protect us) while amplifying the brutality of the Other (they kill many of us but only one of them is killed and depicted in this picture). Such a binary built on the dichotomy, the 'north vs. south' conflict in Vietnam, works instrumentally to obscure the US nation-building in Vietnam that involved the bombing of the country and the killing of Vietnamese civilians. In addition, there are two layers of othering in this dichotomous 'us vs. them' discourse that portrays the Vietnamese as the politicized (Communist) and racialized Other. Dehumanization is a central topos operating across themes and with other topoi in our analysis.

Figure 5. Photograph 7, Collection 1: A Viet Cong prisoner held for interrogation at Landing Zone Stinson. Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam (NYT Archive).

Figure 6. Photograph 8, Collection 1: Marvin DeWitt with two puppies. Special Forces camp, Tay Ninh, Vietnam (NYT Archive).

Figures 5 and 6 are displayed subsequently in Collection 1. This semiotic choice of grouping photographs together once again intensifies the dehumanization and

racialization of Vietnamese subjects in the frame of necropolitics. Multimodally, both photographs were taken from a close to medium distance but the interaction and social relation between the social actors and the viewer are contrasting. Figure 5 features a captured skinny Việt Cộng who is 'faceless'—a recurrent pattern in depicting Vietnamese subjects. The man's face is put in a sack and is unidentifiable because the caption does not provide any personal information. He wears a typical Vietnamese male outfit—a black blouse and shorts—so he could be any Vietnamese civilian featured in the collection. He sits on dirty dusty ground while his skinny hand holds his dirty barefoot. His head seemingly turns toward the viewer but with his head in the sack, the viewer cannot see him or interact with him. Semiotic clues such as the dark color, dirt, the sack, and his posture, evoke an aura of darkness, evilness, and danger. Next to this animalistic depiction of a human being comes a lovely photograph of an American soldier, Marvin De Witt, who holds two cute puppies against a backdrop of rockets and other ammunition (Figure 6). Taken horizontally from the front, in the photo Marvin and the puppies are directly interacting with the viewer by looking straight at the camera. He looks happy. The photo elicits feelings of youthfulness, innocence, and liveliness. It conveys a message of life: even in a deadly situation like war, life exists. However, this message pertains only to the photographs of Americans.

Figure 7. Photo 10, Collection: Marine Lance Cpl. Roland Ball of Tacoma, Wash. began the day with a shave, wearing his flak jacket and using a military vehicle's rear view mirror and his helmet as a sink, in a trench at Khe Sanh. March 2, 1968 (NYT Archive).

Figure 8. Photo 11, Collection 2: American soldiers at a mass grave of insurgents after a daylong battle against the Vietcong. The United States military reported 423 Vietcong killed and American losses at 30 dead, 109 wounded and three missing. Often, these official 'body counts' overstated the numbers of insurgents killed. March 1967 (NYT Archive).

Figures 7 and 8 present two photographs similar to each other in terms of the spatial dimension. They were both taken in a war field trench. What makes them strikingly different is the central action of the social actors in each. Figure 7 features Captain Roland Ball beginning his day—a symbol of life and its quotidian happening. His mundane shaving is (dis)placed next to an image of a dumpster-like grave full of dead bodies of 'insurgents' and a group of soldiers, standing on one border, looking down at the bodies (Figure 8). The dead 'insurgents' are identified as Vietnamese people and are by and large unrecognizable, dumped in mass, with many of their faces turned upside down. The caption identifies them as Việt Cộng, that is, communist. Synecdochically, the death of communists here could also index the death of communism. Due to the shot from afar, Vietnamese soldiers are a hardly recognizable mass and there is no interaction between the soldiers and the viewer.

Meanwhile, the photo of Captain Roland Ball shaving and beginning the day taken from a short distance establishes semiotically a close social relationship between the target viewers students, teachers, and educators in the United States, and the social actor in the photo—a white American soldier.

Figure 9. Photograph 3, Collection 3: A South Vietnamese soldier kicked a suspected member of the Vietcong while another soldier tried to tie his hands. October 1965 (NYT Archive).

Figure 10. Photograph 4, Collection 3: A United States paratrooper wounded in the battle for Hamburger Hill waited for medical evacuation at a base camp near the Laotian border. May 1969 (NYT Archive).

Figures 9 and 10 strike the viewer with both the mirroring and the contrast that they present. They feature two soldiers in a similar pose and in what seems to be excruciating pain. They are both positioned in a halfway lying and sitting pose, with frowning foreheads and gritted teeth from pain. At the same time, they feature two markedly opposite pictures of pain. The Vietnamese person in Figure 9, identified as a Việt Cộng suspect, is being tortured by a South Vietnamese soldier who kicks him in the face (resonating with the civil war discourse identified earlier) while his hands are being tied by another soldier. The suspect, almost naked, and skinny as a skeleton, gazes to his left on the ground where there is a body lying. The American soldier in Figure 10 turns up to the sky, awaiting a medical evacuation. The caption of Figure 10 is written in the language of transitivity—'A United States paratrooper wounded'—where the source of the wounding is not identified. The photograph shows the paratrooper leaning against a pile of boxes, while far in the background frame, soldiers mind their own business, smoking a cigarette, and talking. In both photographs, even though the social actors are in pain and shown as victims, the Việt Cộng soldier appears hopeless, vulnerable, and stripped of power over his racialized body, pain, death, and/or salvation. Meanwhile, the American paratrooper is typecast as a wounded hero in an elevated romantic mode of confronting death—a common trait in depicting American soldiers (Wade 2015).

Gendered death

Warfare and gender structurally have an intimate relation to one another (Jeffords 1989). In the necropolitical work, gender and sexuality decisively impact the positioning of an individual, a group, and even an entire population in relation to death (Islekel 2022). Mbembe's (2003) conceptualization of necropolitics also draws

on the hypersexualization of Black women as justification for colonization and racialization. It is on this conceptual foundation that we argue that the selected photographs render Vietnamese women as hypersexualized objects. Figure 11 below is a telling example.

Figure 11. Photograph 1, Collection 1: A U.S.O. performance at Fire Base Rawlings. Tay Ninh Province, Vietnam. November 1969 (NYT Archive).

Figure 12. Photograph 2, Collection 1: Larry Diesburg taking a smoking break after filling sandbags near Binh Long, Vietnam (NYT Archive).

Figures 11 and 12 are presented consecutively in Collection 1. Both photographs invoke a degree of sensuality and sexualization, conveying a message about gender. Figure 11 shows a group of young Vietnamese women wearing minimalist tops and very short tight skirts on stage—a stylistic choice very foreign for Vietnamese women at the time. The women are dancing in front of a male band, inviting, and entertaining a group of male soldiers. Their focal entertainees are two white American soldiers. The women look at the soldiers, their gaze away from the viewer. This image of sexualized Vietnamese women precedes Figure 12 depicting a shirtless young American soldier sitting on a war truck. The photo highlights Larry's masculinity as he poses with his arm resting over the wheel, relaxed, smoking a cigarette, confidently gazing straight at the camera, and interacting with the viewer.

The perpetual image of Vietnamese women in an intimate relationship with American soldiers speaks to what Collins (2000) calls the controlling image of women of color through sexualization and (hyper)sexualization. Writing about gender-based violence, Collins discusses the (hyper)sexualization of Black women as the paradoxical controlling image that places them into the framing of sexually desirable animus but simultaneously threatening to social order and, thus, necessarily expendable. Lorde (1980:10) powerfully argues that Black women (and, really, ALL women of color) were 'born to die and no note taken'. In this sense, gendered control and domination fit into the necropolitical discourse. The semiotic choice in Figures 11 and 12 above recontextualizes these photographs in the (re)making of the Vietnam War collective memory by legitimizing the way that gender positioning is inflicted on Vietnamese women. Consequently, it justifies gendered and racialized violence perpetrated against them in the historical narrative of the war.

On the other end of the polarized discourse, Vietnamese women appear as perpetual victims—powerless, vulnerable, pathetic, and buried in dirt and mud.

Figure 13. Photograph 7, Collection 2: The actress Carroll Baker snapped her fingers at sailors cheering from the bridge as Bob Hope led her across the stage on the flight deck of the U.S.S. Ticonderoga, December 1965 (NYT Archive).

Figure 14. Photograph 8, Collection 2: Women and children crouched in a canal to take cover from intense Vietcong fire, Jan. 1, 1966. Paratroopers, in the background, escorted civilians through a series of firefights during the American assault on a Vietcong stronghold (NYT Archive).

In the *NYT*'s visual sequencing game, Figures 13 and 14 above are displayed consecutively. The two photos contrast in all aspects. The main social actors in Figure 13 are identified as Carroll Baker and Bob Hope, as are their actions—'snapped her finger', 'led her across the stage',—time and space—'flight deck, Ticonderoga, December 1965'. In relation to the viewer, the shot is taken from a vertical angle, symbolically indicating the power relationship between the viewer and the depicted. Positioned on the sideline, the viewer looks up at Carroll Baker and Bob Hope, the primary depicted social actors, who symbolically hold power over the viewer. Both photographs are in black and white, but the actress's sequin silver dress, hair, powerful feminine posture, and movement denote power, independence, and control, despite the fact that she is also objectified by the male gaze of onlooking soldiers. In the background, a large crowd of sailors look on from the upper decks of the ship, some of them taking pictures, cheering and smiling. There is also a music band on the flight deck behind the two actors—the viewer can see a guitarist, a bass player, and a saxophone player. The atmosphere is celebratory, and nothing indicates that this is happening in the middle of a deadly war, presenting a sanitized, feel-good image that veils death and destruction. This photograph could be a still from a 1960s Hollywood movie. The practice of Hollywood actors visiting warzones dates back to World War II, and the presence of women as morale-boosting actors in a hyper-masculine space raises important questions about their representations as caregivers, supporters, and emotional laborers and as objects of desire—a form of soft power for military industrial complex propaganda. Juxtaposed to this jubilant energy, the Vietnamese women and children in Figure 14 are overshadowed by muddy grey damp. In horror, they look up, watching out for bombing as they are escorted by paratroopers during a US offense. Apparently, they are standing, but the lower half of their body is buried in the muddy water as they are crouching and hiding. The woman at the front looks frail and terrified. Terror in the actors' eyes is the only motion in place. All women are muted and motionless. Time is still. The viewer could imagine the

sobbing drowned out by the roaring sound of bombs and war planes. On the contrary, Figure 13 is clean, sanitary, and full of motion. In the sky, there is music, roaring applause, and a cheerful buzz. The euphoria depicted in Figure 13 clashes with the necropolitical dysphoria and despondent vibe in Figure 14.

Vietnamese women in these collections are mostly captured in the passive role of prey to the voyeur, unknowingly being watched, and representatively appearing as either mistresses or victims. In most of the photographs, they represent a homogeneous group—either sexually provoking (e.g. Figure 11) or pathetically vulnerable (e.g. Figure 14). Furthermore, most Vietnamese female subjects are captured in the horizontal dimension, resonating with van Leeuwen's (2008) emphasis on the symbolic meanings of that dimension in terms of involvement or detachment between the subject in the picture and the viewer. Additionally, close shots signify a symbolically close relationship between the social actor and the viewer. However, taken in close shots and horizontally, the Vietnamese women in Figures 11 and 14 above are depicted one-dimensionally from an Orientalist angle: an object of desire or a savage.

Paternalized death: The emblematic victim and the father

The paternalistic discourse around the Vietnam War has been understood as a discursive framing that forges a child-father relationship, depicting the United States as the father figure, the humanitarian who protected 'little Vietnam' (Vesma 2022). Paternalism is understood here as a racial lens that sees non-European cultures as 'primitive' or 'exotic' (Borstelmann 2001; Frey 2003). This discourse became instrumentally integrated into the pro-war discourse of necropower, justifying the US intervention and bombing of Vietnam.

Figure 15. Photograph 14, Collection 2: Burned in an aerial napalm attack, children ran screaming, followed by South Vietnamese soldiers, June 8, 1972. A South Vietnamese plane seeking Vietcong hiding places accidentally dropped its flaming napalm on civilians and government troops instead (NYT Archive).

Figure 16. Photograph 15, Collection 2: Lt. Col. Robert L. Stirm. Returned home from Vietnam after five and a half years as a prisoner of war. Though the nation was euphoric at the release of P.O.W.'s, the feeling did not prevent Colonel Stirm's marriage from ending bitterly the following year. March 17, 1973 (NYT Archive).

Figure 15 is the Pulitzer Prize winner *The Terror of War*, also known as *Napalm Girl* by Nick Ut. It depicts a scene where Vietnamese children, with Phan Thị Kim Phúc in the middle, run and scream in horror against a backdrop of swirling smoke caused by bombs, with South Vietnamese soldiers holding guns walking calmly behind. In

the photograph, Phúc, the girl who was torn completely naked by bombs, is singled out to become the 'image' of Vietnam and its people. This presentation, as Viet Thanh Nguyen notes, racializes Vietnamese bodies, turning them into emblematic victims—'the way in which the victimized body politic manifests itself in American discourse, which makes no difference between representative and represented' (V. T. Nguyen 2002:112). The image of the now emblematic victim is further hegemonized through the language in both the Figure 15 caption and its description in the lesson plan. The caption removes Phúc's identity, including her name and her story.

While the text in the caption of Figure 15 decontextualizes the featured social actors from complicated historical political contexts, semiotic control is powerful enough to recontextualize and reframe those social actors into a new historical narrative. This narrative reinforces the power of the US empire while depriving the racialized Other of their power over their life and death. The sequencing and juxtaposition of photographs as a semiotic technique showcases the deathworlds of Vietnam and its living-dead people in comparison to the lifeworlds of the US and its social actors.

The photo of Kim Phuc is followed by Figure 16, a photograph depicting a moment of joy when Lt. Col. Robert L. Stirm returns home to a loving welcome from his family. The caption discloses his identity and personal story 'He was five and a half years in Vietnam as a war prisoner' and a 'bitter' divorce followed his return. There is a marked disparity in the verbal descriptions of the two photos.

In their multimodal framing, the two photographs are similar in multiple ways. In terms of the relationship between the viewer and the subject, both photographs present the depicted as active agents of their action—running—placed in a close social relation with the viewer as voyeur. Taken on the horizontal dimension, the shots imply a symbolic attachment or closeness between the subjects in the photographs and the viewer.

Despite these semiotic similarities, the two photographs tell two contrasting stories—one of life and another of death. All subjects in Figure 16 are agents of their action, RUNNING TOWARD each other in delight with warm smiles, and widespread arms in anticipation of long-awaited hugs while in Figure 15, the kids are patients of the action—they are RUNNING AWAY from bombing. The symbolic attachment between the subjects and the viewer displays very different meanings, with Figure 16 provoking a quotidian and endearing image of life—a father coming home as a war hero welcomed by his beloved family. Due to this semiotic control, Phúc's pain and nakedness are highlighted and intensified, invoking an even greater emotional response to the horror depicted. Years later, Phan Thị Kim Phúc lamented the publicity of the photo that made her into a victim all over again (Chong 2001)—a practice reproduced in the *NYT*.

Sontag (2002) reminds us that photographs do not help us understand but narratives do. Photographs haunt us. Phúc's personal narrative of victimizing, healing, and becoming a loving mom and an anti-war advocate (Chong 2001) is erased in this recontextualization that invokes a paternalized discourse. The ownership of her unique personal story is stripped away; and so, in this particular historical narrative, she is treated as an anonymous victim, torn by napalm.

In contrast, the symbolic closeness embodied in Figure 15 invokes urgent pity for the bombed children in the deathworlds whereas the father in Figure 16, by

implication, has just come back from his mission to rescue the pathetic horrified kids. Within this framing, the narrative of the US father figure is activated, discursively and multimodally.

Discussion and conclusion

Earlier in this article, drawing on Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, we asked 'How is life and death semiotically inscribed in the order of power to produce collective remembering?'. We have explored multimodal semiosis in the construction of an instance of collective remembering through photographs, produced in *The New York Times* around the Vietnam War and their question 'Half a century after the nation's fateful early missteps into the quagmire, what are Americans likely to remember about the Vietnam War?'. Placing our analytical focus on semiotic choices embodied in photographs, captioning, and presentation modes in the *NYT* digital archive, we identified a strong necropolitical discourse at play that shuts down 'multidimensional remembering' (Rothberg 2019; Milani & Richardson 2022). As such, this photographic collection makes strong claims to the legitimacy of a particular collective remembering, failing to showcase how this memory is still under dispute. However, a memory dispute is a political and historical dispute. In that sense, the *NYT* archive misses the opportunity to present these photographs as a *lieu de dispute*, providing instead a monolithic, hegemonic, static view of the war, fully aligned with the official US foreign policy narrative where the United States is portrayed as the protector, peacekeeper, and liberator. The use of necropolitical discourse to index the paternalistic attempt at saving 'little Vietnam' resonates interdiscursively with the official US narrative. *The New York Times* is known for its centrist, 'both-sides' news framing, and its liberal political leaning. Historically, the *NYT* has been supportive of US interventionist foreign policy, reproducing a narrative of 'national security'. With their focus on 'mainstream' progressivism, they have traditionally aligned with the US status quo and its dominant narratives. Fifty years after the war, and despite the vast body of research in academic historiography, military history, declassified documents, and official reports, collective remembering of the American War in Vietnam is projected through the eyes of the imperial power that holds total control over the remembering.

Semiotic control is further achieved through the process of inclusion/exclusion. In the organized 'collective forgetting', we note the absence of photographs from anti-war demonstrations in the United States, or of US veterans or Việt Cộng fighters as a liberation army; we also note the absence of any imagery of mutilated bodies, deformed Vietnamese children, desiccated and destroyed fields and crops, shattered villages, US soldiers torturing and executing Vietnamese civilians, and airplanes deploying chemical toxins. These photographs actually exist; indeed, many of them were taken by Americans and one of the authors (Panayota) had the opportunity to see several of them recently while visiting the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Thus, this missing imagery would generate a more complex and layered understanding of the war, its causes and consequences, moving beyond a 'singular and cohesive past' in favor of 'multiple, fragmented and cross-sectional pasts' (Milani & Richardson 2022:1). It would constitute collective remembering as a site of contestation, a political space where the story of people's life and death could

be presented as an attempt to reconcile diverse narratives against a well-researched historiographical backdrop. It could open a space for viewers, to use Sontag's earlier admonition, to position themselves as 'those who could do something to alleviate' the suffering and 'those who could learn from it'. In identifying Vietnam collective remembering as a *lieu de dispute*, acknowledging the antagonistic and synergistic narratives at play, and advocating for a 'just memory' (V. T. Nguyen 2016), we want to caution against a historical relativism that would legitimize 'an individualistic approach to history that presents subjective understandings or marginal opinions as historical dimensions of an event. This historical relativism has given rise to the phenomenon of producing highly individualized versions of history' that avoid broader systemic issues that 'would have to name oppressors and oppressed, colonizers and colonized, and the systems that sustain them' (Gounari 2025:212).

By bringing a discussion of dehumanizing death, gendered death, and paternalistic death into the semiotic discourse of Vietnam War collective remembering, we have attempted to provide a nuanced reading of the photographs, highlighting the collective remembering they produce as a political process lying 'at the heart of intersectional social identities' (Milani & Richardson 2022:4). Moreover, we have attempted to do a reading outside the Western gaze, one in which the Vietnam War is viewed as the 'American war' in Vietnam, a label used by the Vietnamese that names the aggressor—the US military and political apparatus. In every sense, the history of the Vietnam War is the history of people in lifeworlds where they 'live their lives out and confront the very forms of their death' (Mbembe 2001:15). Indeed, it is their (hi)stories and their transcendent power that led to momentous efforts and protests that ultimately ended the bombing of the country.

Necropolitical discourse imagines and imposes inhumanity on an entire population. It maximizes death quantitatively and qualitatively, and in so doing, it inscribes the population in a historical narrative made up of 'a bundle of silences' (Trouillot 2015). The necropolitical discourse does not concern only collective remembering of the past. It works to articulate a different kind of politics about whose humanity matters today, in the here and now. Much in the same way that we have demonstrated with our critical multimodal analysis, the Necropolitical Discourse has been used recently in tragedies across the globe, from the thousands of refugee deaths in the Mediterranean Sea to those crossing borders in Europe and America to the Ukraine and the Gaza deathworld. If collective remembering is a *lieu de dispute*, a site of active contestation and negotiation (Milani & Richardson 2022), then the discourse of necropolitics is a *lieu de mort* 'a site of death', both semiotic (as erasure, absence and/or rewriting) and physical (as actual death).

Note

1. The Learning Network, *The New York Times.* See https://www.nytimes.com/section/learning.

References

Abousnnouga, Gill, & David Machin (2013). *The language of war memorials.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
Achebe, Chinua (2000). *Home and exile.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Achugar, Mariana (2017). Critical discourse analysis and history. In John Flowerdew & John E. Richardson (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies*, 298–311. London: Routledge.

Achugar, Mariana; Amparo Fernández; & Nicolás Morales (2013). Re/constructing the past: How young people remember the Uruguayan dictatorship. *Discourse & Society* 24(3):265–88.

Arlen, Michael J. (1997). *Living-room war*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Barthes, Roland (1993). *Camera Lucida*. by Richard Howard. London: Vintage Classics.

Berger, John (1973). *Ways of seeing*. London: Penguin Classics.

Borstelmann, Thomas (2001). *The Cold War and the color line: American race relations in the global arena*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Boudana, Sandrine; Paul Frosh; & Akiba A. Cohen (2017). Reviving icons to death: When historic photographs become digital memes. *Media, Culture & Society* 39(8):1210–30.

Bui, Thi (2017). *The best we could do: An illustrated memoir*. New York: Abrams ComicArts.

Chong, Denise (2001). *The girl in the picture: The story of Kim Phuc, the photograph, and the Vietnam War*. East Rutherford, NJ: Penguin.

Collins, Patricia Hill (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

de Cillia, Rudolf Martin Reisigl; & Ruth Wodak (1999). The discursive construction of national identities. *Discourse & Society* 10(2):149–73.

Dean, Eric T. (1992). The myth of the troubled and scorned Vietnam veteran. *Journal of American Studies* 26(1):59–74.

ĐHQGHN Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân Văn (2015). Hậu quả của cuộc chiến tranh Việt Nam (1954–1975) - mấy vấn đề bàn luận. Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn - ĐHQGHN. [National University of Vietnam, Social Sciences and Humanities (2015). Consequences of the Vietnam War (1954–1975): Issues for discussion.] Online: https://ussh.vnu.edu.vn/vi/nckh/san-pham-nghien-cuu-tieu-bieu/hau-qua-cua-cuoc-chien-tranh-viet-nam-1954-1975-may-van-de-ban-luan-11757.html.

Durham, Meenakshi Gigi (2023). 'Napalm Girl' at 50: On photojournalism and the ethics of care. *International Journal of Communication* (17):3865–77.

Earle, Harriet E. H. (2023). How do comics engage with the Vietnam War? Two photography case studies. *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture 1900 To Present* 22(2). Online: https://americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2023/earle.htm.

Espiritu, Yen Le (2005). Thirty years afterWARd: The endings that are not over. *Amerasia Journal* 31(2):xiii–xxiv.

Espiritu, Yen Le (2006). The 'we-win-even-when-we-lose' syndrome: U.S. press coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon'. *American Quarterly* 58(2):329–52.

Flowerdew, John (2012). *Critical discourse analysis in historiography*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Frey, Marc (2003). Tools of empire: Persuasion and the United States's modernizing mission in Southeast Asia. *Diplomatic History* 27(4):543–68.

Gebhardt, Mareike (2020). To make live and let die: On sovereignty and vulnerability in the EU migration regime. *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 23(2):120–37.

Gonchar, Michael (2017). Teaching the Vietnam War with primary sources from The New York Times. *The New York Times*, March 29. Online: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/learning/lesson-plans/teaching-the-vietnam-war-with-primary-sources-from-the-new-york-times.html.

Gounari, Panayota (2021). *From Twitter to Capitol Hill: Far-right authoritarian populist discourses, social media and critical pedagogy*. Leiden: Brill.

Gounari, Panayota (2025). Radical pedagogies in the age of authoritarian neoliberalism: History as liberatory praxis. In Noah De Lissovoy, Raúl Olmo Fregoso Bailón, & Alex J. Armonda (eds.), *Teaching as radical logic*, 195–220. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Gounari, Panayota, & George Grollios (eds.) (2010). *A reader of critical pedagogy*. New York: Gutenberg Publishers.

Grant, Lenny (2020). Post-Vietnam syndrome: Psychiatry, anti-war politics, and the reconstitution of the Vietnam veteran. *Rhetoric of Health and Medicine* 3(2):189–219.

Griffin, Michael (2010). Media images of war. *Media, War & Conflict* 3(1):7–41.

Hamilton, Sam (2013). Writing with the wall: Inventing memory of the Vietnam War. *Writing on the Edge* 24(1):81–93.

Hanh, Thich Nhat (1967). *Vietnam: Lotus in a sea of fire*. New York: Hill & Wang.

Hanh, Thich Nhat, & Daniel Berrigan (2001). *The raft is not the shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian awareness*. New York: Orbis Books.

Hariman, Robert, & John Louis Lucaites (2018). Predicting the present: Iconic photographs and public culture in the digital media environment. *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 20(4):318–24.

Hariman, Robert, & John Louis Lucaites (2020). Street execution of a Viet Cong prisoner, Saigon, 1968. In Jason E. Hill & Vanessa R. Schwartz (eds.), *Getting the picture*, 91–93. London: Routledge.

Heer, Hannes; Walter Manoschek; Alexander Pollak; & Ruth Wodak (2008). *The discursive construction of history: Remembering the Wehrmacht's war of annihilation.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Herzog, Tobey C. (2005). *Vietnam war stories: Innocence lost.* London: Routledge.

Islekel, Ege Selin (2022). Gender in necropolitics: Race, sexuality, and gendered death. *Philosophy Compass* 17(5):e12827.

Ivie, Robert L. (2005). Savagery in democracy's empire. *Third World Quarterly* 26(1):55–65.

Ivie, Robert L, & Oscar Giner (2015). *Hunt the devil: A demonology of US war culture.* Tuscaloosa: The University Alabama Press.

Jeffords, Susan (1989). *The remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kennedy, Liam (2015). Obliterating distance: The Vietnam War photography of Philip Jones Griffiths. In Michael Patrick Cullinane & David Ryan (eds.), *U.S. foreign policy and the other*, 208–21. Oxford: Berghahn Books. Online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qct9n.13 accessed 21 December 2024.

Kress, Gunther R., & Theo van Leeuwen (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design.* 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Landers, James (2002). Specter of stalemate: Vietnam War perspectives in *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, 1965–1968. *American Journalism* 19(3):13–38.

Latham, Michael E. (2006). Redirecting the revolution? The USA and the failure of nation-building in South Vietnam. *Third World Quarterly* 27(1):27–41.

Lê, Việt (2021). *Return engagements: Contemporary art's traumas of modernity and history in Sài Gòn and Phnom Penh.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lembcke, Jerry (1998). The 'right stuff' gone wrong: Vietnam veterans and the social construction of post-traumatic stress disorder. *Critical Sociology* 24(1–2):37–64.

Long, Nguyen Cong (2015). The self-immolation of venerable Thich Quang Duc according to Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective. *Journal of International Buddhist Studies College* 1(2):79–96.

Lorde, Audre (1980). *The cancer journals.* London: Penguin Classics.

Lüthi, Lorenz M. (2020). *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Machin, David, & Andrea Mayr (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis: A multimodal introduction.* Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Mbembe, Achille (2001). *On the postcolony.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mbembe, Achille (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15(1):11–40.

McClancy, Kathleen (2013). The iconography of violence: Television, Vietnam, and the soldier hero. *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 43(2):50–66.

McIntosh, Janet (2021). 'Because it's easier to kill that way': Dehumanizing epithets, militarized subjectivity, and American necropolitics. *Language in Society* 50(4):583–603.

McMahon, Robert (2002). Contested memory: The Vietnam War and American society, 1975–2001. *Diplomatic History* 26(2):159–84.

Middleton, David, & Derek Edwards (eds.) (1990). *Collective remembering.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Milani, Tommaso M., & John E. Richardson (2021). Discourse and affect. *Social Semiotics* 31(5):671–76.

Milani, Tommaso M., & John E. Richardson (2022). Discourses of collective remembering: Contestation, politics, affect. *Critical Discourse Studies* 20(5):459–76.

Miller, Nancy K. (2004). The girl in the photograph: The Vietnam War and the making of national memory. *JAC* 24(2):261–90.

Minor, Augusta Denita (1981). A content analysis: Attitudes of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* toward the Vietnam War, as expressed in their editorials (1968). Ames: Iowa State University master's thesis.

National Archives (2016). Vietnam War U.S. military fatal casualty statistics. *National Archives.* Online: https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.

Nguyen, An Thuy (2019). The Vietnam women's movement for the right to live: A non-communist opposition movement to the American war in Vietnam. *Critical Asian Studies* 51(1):75–102.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh (2002). *Race and resistance.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh (2013). Just memory: War and the ethics of remembrance. *American Literary History* 25(1):144–63.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh (2016). *Nothing ever dies: Vietnam and the memory of war*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pearson, Andrew (2018). How Vietnam changed journalism. *The New York Times*, March 29. Online: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/29/opinion/vietnam-war-journalism.html.

Pennebaker, James W., & Becky L. Banasik (1997). On the creation and maintenance of collective memories: History as social psychology. In James W. Pennebaker, Dario Paez, & Bernard Rimé (eds.), *Collective memory of political events: Social psychological perspectives*, 3–19. London: Routledge.

Rothberg, Michael (2019). *Multidirectional memory in focus: Interview with Michael Rothberg*. Magazine of the European Observatory on Memories (December 20). European Observatory on Memories. Online: https://europeanmemories.net/magazine/multidirectional-memory-in-focus/.

Sheehan, Neil; Hedrick Smith E. W. Kenworthy; & Fox Butterfield (1971). *The Pentagon papers, as published by The New York Times*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.

Skow, Lisa M., & George N. Dionisopoulos (1997). A struggle to contextualize photographic images: American print media and the 'Burning Monk'. *Communication Quarterly* 45(4):393–409.

Sontag, Susan (1997). *On photography*. New York: Picador.

Sontag, Susan (2002). Looking at war. *The New Yorker*, December 1. Online: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/12/09/looking-at-war.

Strath, Bo, & Ruth Wodak (2009). Europe-discourse-politics-media-history: Constructing 'crises'? In Anna Triandafyllidou, Ruth Wodak, & Michał Krzyżanowski (eds.), *The European public sphere and the media*, 15–33. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph (2015). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Boston: Beacon Press.

van Leeuwen, Theo (2008). *Discourse and practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Leeuwen, Theo, & Adam Jaworski (2003). The discourses of war photography: Photojournalistic representations of the Palestinian-Israeli war. *Journal of Language and Politics* 1(2):255–75.

Vesma, Georgia (2022). 'Grateful' children and 'humanitarian' marines: Georgette 'Dickey' Chapelle's Vietnam photography, 1962. *Photography and Culture* 15(2):171–90.

Wade, Patrick (2015). The 'living room war' in the escalation period: Romance, irony, and the narrative ambivalence of tragedy in Vietnam War era photojournalism. *Media, War & Conflict* 8(3):312–28.

Wertsch, James (2002). Voices of collective remembering. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Witty, Patrick (2012). Malcolm Browne: The story behind the burning monk. *Time*, August 28. Online: https://time.com/3791176/malcolm-browne-the-story-behind-the-burning-monk/.

Wodak, Ruth (2007). History in the making/remaking of history. In Christine Anthonissen & Jan Blommaert (eds.), *Discourse and human rights violation*, 115–42. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Wodak, Ruth, & Michael Meyer (eds.) (2009). *Methods for critical discourse analysis*. 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Wodak Ruth, & John E. Richardson (2009). On the politics of remembering (or not). *Critical Discourse Studies* 6(4):231–35.

Yang, Michelle Murray (2011). Still burning: Self-immolation as photographic protest. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97(1):1–25.