OUR HEARTS AND MINDS

OUR HEARTS AND MINDS: (POST) REFUGEE AFFECT AND THE WAR IN

VIET NAM

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A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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McMaster University DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2015) Hamilton, Ontario (English)

TITLE: Our Hearts and Minds: (Post) Refugee Affect and the War in Viet Nam AUTHOR: Vinh Nguyen, B.A. (University of Calgary), M.A. (McMaster University) SUPERVISOR: Dr. Donald Goellnicht NUMBER OF PAGES: vii, 218

**LAY ABSTRACT**

*Our Hearts and Minds* examines expressions of gratitude, resentment, and resilience in literature, film, and activism by Southeast Asian refugees. It argues that the affective relationships former refugees form with one another, as well as with their countries of asylum, are important sites for understanding history, politics, and identity. The project employs “feelings” as a framework to explore and discuss the experiences of those who have lived through war and have sought refuge outside their homeland. It contributes to knowledge of (trans) nationalism, global diasporas, refugee movements, and the history of the War in Viet Nam.

**ABSTRACT**

*Our Hearts and Minds* examines how the “figure of the refugee”—as an analytic—both illuminates and complicates conventional understandings of nationhood, citizenship, and belonging, and in doing so, imagines alternative ways to think about history as well as socio-political formations to come. Through analyses of literary and cultural productions, my interdisciplinary project reconceptualizes “refugee” as a *condition of subjectivity*, as opposed to a legal category, a political anomaly, or a historical experience empty of rights and values. Taking the context of the War in Viet Nam, and the Southeast Asian diasporas that have resulted from it, as my case study, I focus on three affective categories—*gratitude, resentment, and resilience*—to explore how refugees remember, represent, and embody forced migration and its afterlife. Affect, I suggest, is an important means of turning to the *bodies* that migrate—its contacts, attachments, intensities, potentialities—as well as the forms of relationality and sociality that enable the refugee’s positioning in the world. Reading a range of texts including novels, short fiction, memoir, poetry, activist performance, and art videos, my research develops a critical framework for understanding refugee passages through the lens of feeling and embodiment, emotion and collectivity. This focus on affect departs from, and challenges, a field of refugee studies that take refugees as “*objects* of investigation” as well as popular modes of representation that characterize them as pitiful, identity-less mass. I center the textures of subjectivity and embodied experience, suggesting that rather than being restrictive and/or constrictive of diasporic lives, identities, and epistemologies, the refugee designation, or a sense of *refugeeness*, is valuable in making sense of entangled processes of war, migration, and diaspora. I contend that gratitude, resentment, and resilience are not only inevitable affective structures of American militarism overseas, they also illuminate the conditions of possibility crucial for the work of survival and memory-work in its wake.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Words of gratitude fall short of expressing how much this dissertation was made possible by the love, support, and sacrifice of others. The things written between these pages are a result of their collective care

My time at McMaster University has been transformative. I wouldn’t be here without my supervisor’s guidance and mentorship. Don Goellnicht’s presence and influence can be felt throughout this dissertation. I’m forever indebted to him, and can only hope to repay his generosity and love by striving to become half the scholar and person that he is.

Eugenia Zuroski-Jenkins and Chandrima Chakraborty showed enthusiasm even when I had no idea what I was talking about; their engagement with my ideas pushed my thinking and made my writing infinitely better. I couldn’t be luckier to have such fine readers. Thy Phu, my external examiner, was there for an invigorating defense.

Friends and colleagues (who are also family) kept me alive and laughing. Thanks to: Kasim Husain for sharing a home with me; Carolyn Veldstra for always being an inspiration; Asha Jeffers for being my boo; Malissa Phung for her fish-monger laugh; Marquita Smith and Randle DeFalco for sharing their reading breaks with me; Y-Dang Troeung for being my Big Sis. Many others—in Calgary, Hamilton, Toronto, and scattered across the globe—provided friendship and love.

Members of the Joy Luck Club (Don Goellnicht, Malissa Phung, Farah Moosa, Lisa Kabesh, and Y-Dang Troeung) and the UCSD writing group (Yen Le Espiritu, Ma Vang, Kit Myers, Long Bui, Lila Sharif, Angela Kong, and Ayako Sahara) provided feedback at important moments. Lots of love to the one and only Yen Le Espiritu, who took me under her wings at UCSD. I’m forever grateful.

Professors at McMaster who have facilitated my intellectual and personal growth include: Nadine Attewell, Sarah Brophy, Daniel Coleman, Grace Kehler, Mary O’Connor, and Lorraine York. Mary O’Connor gave me a chance—that act of kindness and faith will forever be remembered!

Mentors from far and wide: Cathy Schlund-Vials, Mimi Thi Nguyen, Catherine Fung, Viet Nguyen, Eleanor Ty, Christine Kim, Chris Lee, Guy Beauregard, Tina Chen, Eric Hayot, Donna Coates, and Jeanne Perreault.

Financial support from the Department of English & Cultural Studies, a SSHRC Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship, a Michael Smith Foreign Study Supplement, a Sir James Lougheed Award of Distinction, and a Harry Lyman Hooker Doctoral Fellowship allowed me the peace of mind to learn and write.

To Gökbörü Tanyildiz, who came into my life at the worst and best time. You gave me space to finish writing, and stayed even when you saw me at my lowest. Thanks PW!

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Their unconditional support, even though they are not entirely sure what it is that I actually do, is the steady ground of this dissertation and my career. To my father, whose absence created a shell, and to my mother, whose presence ensured that it was never empty.

Chapter One of this dissertation contains a revised and expanded version of my published article, “Refugee Gratitude: Narrating Success and Intersubjectivity in Kim Thuy’s Ru”:

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**INTRODUCTION**

WINNING HEARTS & MINDS

At a Dinner Meeting of the Texas Electric Cooperative, Inc. in May 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson made his famous remark about winning the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people: “So we must be ready to fight in Viet-Nam, but the ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and the minds of the people who actually live out there” (Johnson, n. pag.). In this revealing articulation of imperialist Cold War logic, the success of waging war pivots on how people *feel* and *think*; or, how effectively those in power garner the support and consent of the masses. Here, the bodies and psyches of the Vietnamese people become the fundamental targets of the American war endeavor. This “enlistment” of Vietnamese bodies during war is an affective technology that attempts to pull them into the orbit of American power. It also represents an initial move in the generation of future structures of affective relations—such as refugee gratitude—that will continue to bind these human war targets to America long after the fighting has stopped. Grateful Vietnamese refugees who are “rescued” by the US and other western nation-states after the War, for example, are “successful” precipitations of the larger American project to win hearts and minds in Southeast Asia.

Earlier that year, Johnson ordered the first sustained and extensive bombing mission of North Viet Nam (Operation Rolling Thunder), one that would continue for three years until 1968. A couple of months after the Meeting, he authorized the deployment of 100,000 American troops to join the fighting effort on the ground, initiating the “escalation” or “Americanization” of the War in Viet Nam. By the end of 1965 the United States was fully immersed in war, demonstrating that it was indeed “ready to fight.” In this context of intense militarization, Johnson’s conjuring of “hearts and minds” foregrounds *Vietnamese subjects* as the impetus and rationale for war, as well as the final metric of its success. It justifies the need for military intervention, but also points to its limits: Fighting aims to capture the people’s “hearts and minds,” but guns and bombs alone will ultimately fall short of achieving this desired objective. While a war of attrition is not mutually exclusive from a war of influence, larger victory rests upon affective and psychic transformation, on (re)orienting the Vietnamese subject in a certain direction, towards a conception of life and goodness more in line with the American worldview.

May 1965 was not the first or only time Johnson used the phrase “hearts and minds.” The phrase itself has a “long and circuitous” (Dickinson n. pag.) history that precedes the President’s usage of it in reference to Viet Nam. According to Elizabeth Dickinson, “It was first associated with democracy in the 19th century, later served as a call to national solidarity during the Great Depression, and finally became a slogan for a policy the U.S. military never quite implemented in Vietnam” (n. pag.). Although “hearts and minds” never became an official campaign, it was part of the larger pacification or counterinsurgency operations that attempted to quell Viet Cong insurgents in South Viet Nam. This work too preceded Johnson, but his formulation of it into a popular catch phrase provides an important window into the psychological and affective dimensions of war making. Examples of how the US deployed “hearts and minds” in Vietnam include: the dropping of leaflets with phrases and images appealing to the fear of villagers and the loneliness and isolation of Viet Cong guerilla fighters, encouraging them to reject communist influence; the enactment of the strategic hamlet program, which relocated villagers to small settlements under South Vietnamese and American control; the production and performance of “heart songs” to persuade villagers to resist communist recruitment; and the establishment of economic/social reform and development programs—building hospitals, roads, and water supply systems, for instance—to improve the government’s image and strengthen the resolve of the South Vietnamese to continue fighting.[[1]](#footnote-1) These counterinsurgent tactics, and others like them, made the lives of ordinary people (most often in villages) the “battleground” for a back and forth battle between South Vietnam and the US, on one side, and North Vietnam and the Viet Cong, on the other.[[2]](#footnote-2) The slogan “hearts and minds,” I suggest, provides one particular instance for thinking through *affect* as a technology of war: how war waging relies upon an appeal to the emotions and how feelings become an instrument of actual as well as abstract fighting.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler considers how wars are waged, first and foremost, through the work of frames and framing. Such forms of visual and discursive framing, she argues, are *material* components of violence, coextensive with the destruction caused by weapons. They function through a “conscription” of the senses to create both the conditions and the means of war. She writes,

every war is a war upon the senses … Without the assault on the senses, it would be impossible for a state to wage war. Waging war in some ways begins with the assault on the senses; the senses are the first target of war. Similarly, the implicit or explicit framing of a population as a war target is the initial action of destruction. It is not just preparation for a destruction to come, but the initiating sequence of the process of destruction. (xvi)

Butler’s usage of “the senses” is tantamount to sensations, the sensory or affective perceptions of the human body, which, for her, come to determine thinking and judgment.[[3]](#footnote-3) If conducting war depends upon controlling the senses, what the body *feels*, as Butler points out, and winning a war depends upon victory of the “heart” and “mind,” as Johnson claims, then affect clearly plays a crucial role in the overall event of war. Thus, one novel and unexplored way to trace the history of a war—in this present case, the one in Viet Nam—is through the lens of affect: what “battles” are fought on the body? What are the multiple ways bodies make contact, transform, persist, and perish before, during, and after moments of violence? What can feelings tell us about larger social, cultural, and political forces of war and its afterlife?[[4]](#footnote-4)

I begin this dissertation with a reference to “hearts and minds” in order to demonstrate the *centrality of affect* in war and its long-lasting legacies. My discussion rests upon the premise that an examination of affect opens up a different point of entry into the complex and extended history of the War in Viet Nam. *Our Hearts and Minds* is a record of war, but it is not a historical study in the traditional sense. Rather, it takes literary and cultural productions by those affected by the War as objects that register and express the ways individuals and collectives embody or feel the experiences of war and the migration that is often its aftermath. Such investigations, I suggest, think through how psychic states or emotional responses are connected to larger social and historical conditions. My study begins in the wake of war, when hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmongs were displaced internally, in neighboring countries, and further abroad. This uprooting of bodies as a consequence of war spanned three decades, impacting over two and a half million people. The story I follow is a particular one. Focusing on refugee passages that “arrive” in western, English-speaking nations such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, I ask how affect helps us understand the “(post) refugee” condition. What does it mean to have been a refugee, to have gone through asylum seeking and emerge on the other side? How do (former) refugees, and the generations that come after, make sense of past war, present diaspora, and future formations? What does migration and refugee diaspora *feel* like?

The affective targeting of Southeast Asian subjects during wartime, as seen in a campaign such as “hearts and minds,” is an important catalyst for the production of *future feelings*—like gratitude, resentment, and resilience—that come to mark the lives of those who survive war and seek refuge elsewhere. That is to say, a strategy of fighting like “hearts and minds” is but one node in a larger configuration of affect and violence, feelings and politics, emotions and sociality, that constitutes a history of war in Southeast Asia and its aftermath. For instance, to win the affective support of the Vietnamese people is, in part, to make (and remake) America into a foreign savior, and the war into a crucial rescue mission from the evils of communism. This, in turn, sets the stage for gratitude, when those fleeing communist persecution at the War’s end, are rescued by and assimilated into western capitalist nations such as the US, Canada, and Australia. Refugee feelings of gratitude are thus central to projects of war and empire, as well as those of nation-building and national exaltation; they are also integral to the refugee’s negotiation of life after war, of the self in diaspora. As I will argue in this dissertation, gratitude is a feeling that gives social and political contour to the (former) refugee because it is constructed as an appropriate, commonsensical, and expected response to what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls “the gift of freedom,” a transparent, coveted good conferred *through* and *with* violence, that binds refugees to the “freedom”-granting power through an interminable debt-repayment relationship.

My analysis begins with gratitude because it is a prominent (post) refugee affect, highly visible in many Southeast Asian diasporic public articulations. It is perhaps most forcefully expressed during commemoration ceremonies, particularly the anniversaries of the Fall of Saigon, where many (former) refugees are compelled to thank the nation that took them in and gave them a second start at life. These profuse expressions of thanks sit alongside remembrances of struggle and loss, asserting the social presence of the War’s refugee survivors. They can also be found in diasporic refugee literary and cultural productions, especially those that circulate within the social and cultural mainstream. Their ability to circulate, I suggest, depends precisely upon a discourse of gratitude. Because it can powerfully reaffirm the nation and its apparatuses and extensions, refugee gratitude is given public platform in a way that other affective expressions are not.

Of course, gratitude is not the only feeling in this affective economy, nor does it operate in one singular way. The crux of my argument is that the feelings arising from war and refuge, which come to shape sociality for (former) refugees, are not reducible to any one ideological direction or commitment; instead, they are employed in a variety of ways and “do” things that may seem incompatible or contradictory to one another. Moreover, these affects are not discrete, impermeable, or monolithic, but intersect and overlap at important junctions. In my analysis of refugee gratitude, I show how it can simultaneously shore up and critique the nation, how thankfulness can, paradoxically, be tinged with a sense of criticism. But, if gratitude is a publically endorsed and expected affect, then how might it be possible for refugees to express frustrations, bitterness, anger, and even hatred? Or more specifically, what are the spaces, channels, and forms for articulating negative feelings of resentment towards the nation? The seeming obverse of gratitude, resentment, then also becomes an affect crucial to the constitution, and understanding, of the (post) refugee condition. Alongside an examination of gratitude, I also trace how resentment enables a mode of refugee critique that draws attention to and calls into question the regimes of domestic, transnational, and global violence that produce and biopolitically manage refugees.

While gratitude and resentment tell us important things about the refugee’s complex relationship with the host nation(s) that provided asylum, the experience of the (post) refugee exceeds this “refugee—nation” dialectic. The question of survival is paramount for those who seek refuge in the wake of war, and their affective expressions are powerful statements of resilience and presence. The affect of resilience, I suggest, foregrounds the refugee subject’s process and experience of survival—the pains and joys, the losses and aspirations, the brutality and beauty, of living. *Our Hearts and Minds* focuses on gratitude, resentment, and resilience as critical frameworks to explore the ways Southeast Asian diasporic subjects position themselves, and how they are positioned, in a condition of “post-ness,” which is not a temporal progression, an after in time, but a time-space where the past continually impresses itself on the present. I contend that gratitude, resentment, and resilience are not only affective consequences of American militarism overseas, they also illuminate the conditions of possibility crucial for the work of survival and memory-work in its wake.

SPECTRES OF “VIETNAM” (WAR)

In 1991, another US President, George Bush, uttered another famous phrase that would come to describe a condition of national haunting, whereby “Vietnam” forcefully impresses itself upon American consciousness. After victory in the first Gulf War, Bush declared: “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all” (Bush n. pag.). In his pronouncement of its termination, Bush gave name to an affliction—of doubt, fear, and lost masculinity—that ailed the nation. Yet, his diagnosis of “cure” seems premature: forty years after its end, the War *remains* a living spectre, stubbornly sticking to memory, to the national body. Invoked every time the US embarks on a foreign military campaign (most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan), usually as a cautionary example, “Vietnam” is revived as potential danger, as a move that might shatter American political and military confidence as well as its social cohesion. From the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial to the vast body of cultural representations to the archive of historical documentation, the common perception emerges that the “Vietnam War represented a national trauma for the United States, a psychological shock” (Schulzinger xiv-xv). Examples of this psychological shell shock abound: scores of soldiers who fought “in country” came back suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); domestic student, anti-war, and civil rights movements created a divisive fracture in American society; and the 1973 withdrawal from Vietnam, and subsequent North Vietnamese victory in 1975, was a major defeat in a foreign war for the US. In short, “Vietnam” not only functions as a stand-in for “war,” but it is also a dense and complex signifier for the interplay of violence, trauma, and American (self)victimization. Embedded in the sign “Vietnam” is a cultural experience of perceived and felt collective trauma.

Sylvia Chong writes, “whether disembodied in the form of a ghost or in a psychological ailment, the Vietnam War is transformed in these metaphors [of ‘spectres’ and ‘syndromes’] from an active endeavor to a passive suffering” (3). This transformation from American aggression to American victimhood, narrates a certain history of how the US was *affected by* Vietnam; in it, the nation becomes a body that has been acted upon, that suffers—it *feels*. Such a record of American (post-war) feeling is part and parcel of the centering of American experiences and perspectives in the writing of history. American cultural memory remembers “Vietnam” as something that was *done to* the United States, and through this characterization as recipient of injury, it emerges as an agent of feeling. Scholarly and popular investigations of these feelings—what happened to the US nation, the ways it was impacted, how it suffered and recovered—enacts a(nother) displacement of Southeast Asian subjects, who remain inert bodies in ditches, flickering shadows in the jungle periphery, faceless refugees in crowded boats—bodies without story, without affect.

My project turns away from what and how the nation feels to consider the survivors most affected by the War, those who were *there* (and those who inherited this *thereness*), who lost places and people, whose bodies endured journeys across catastrophic events, numerous borders, and wide oceans. Undergirding my discussion is a personal and political commitment to understanding refugees as subjects, and to exploring *refugee subjectivity*. That is to say, I approach refugees not as sociological or humanitarian “objects of investigation and knowledge,” but as subjects of feeling, whereby such feeling speaks to the social, political, and cultural coordinates of their existence in the world. Subjects of feeling are not static or (im)passive; they are acted upon and, in turn, act on the forces that shape the many surfaces of life, of relationality between the subjects and objects that inhabit the social. They are dense, animate, and irreducible. I, therefore, come towards a conception of refugee subjectivity through meditations on affect. In particular, my analysis of gratitude, resentment, and resilience suggests that the term “refugee” might usefully signify a *condition of subjectivity* as opposed to a legal category, a political anomaly, or a historical experience empty of rights and values.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In taking this line of argumentation, I am influenced by scholars in the field of diaspora studies such as Steven Vertovec and Lily Cho, who have articulated the concept of diaspora as a “type of consciousness” and a “condition of subjectivity,” respectively. Their work demonstrates how concepts that refer to social or political formations, like diaspora or refugee, can be reformulated or re-signified through psychic and affective lenses, enabling a different mode of critical inquiry. I am also inspired by Liisa H. Malkki’s argument that “to be a refugee is a historicizing and politicizing condition” (“Speechless Emissaries” 383). In her critique of humanitarian and media constructions of refugees as “speechless emissaries,” abstracted (or rather, reduced) to identity-less victims, she calls for a “‘historicizing humanism’ that insists on acknowledging not only human suffering but also narrative authority, historical agency, and political memory” (“Speechless Emissaries” 398). Such an approach pays attention to the specificities of context, respecting refugees as complex subjects who must to be understood within history and politics, not outside of them. My project similarly insists on the importance of history, especially *the past that structures* (post) refugee feelings such as gratitude, resentment, and resilience.

In *Our Hearts and Minds*, the conception of refugee as a “condition of subjectivity” facilitates a rethinking of the relationship between temporality and experience. Envisioning refugee *as* subjectivity necessitates contemplation of its duration, its spatio-temporal limits. Thus, on a large conceptual level, my study thinks through the following set of questions: When does a refugee stop being a refugee? Is “refugee” a temporary designation, as it has been understood historically and legally?[[6]](#footnote-6) Does resettlement or repatriation, successful assimilation into the social body, or attaining the rights of citizenship void the condition of refugee? Does the re-placement or reintegration of refugee bodies to appropriately viable socio-political spaces effectively solve the “problem” or “crisis” that people seeking refuge have been perceived to denote?

I suggest that the experience of refugeeness endures and extends; it is not bound by historical acts of refuge seeking, bureaucratic documentation of refugee status, or the camp’s temporal and spatial confines. If “Vietnam” sticks to the American national body, then “refugee” stubbornly follows around the War’s displaced survivors; it is a consciousness that lingers, a feeling that pulses, a memory that eludes oblivion—it remains even when the legal designation dissolves. To claim that the condition of refugee is constitutive rather than transitory is not to say, however, that Southeast Asians in diaspora are “perpetual refugees” or “forever foreigners” in their countries of resettlement. This racist discourse of unassimilability has a long history and continues to circulate widely in western nations such as the US, Canada, and Australia. Directed not only at Southeast Asians but also other Asian ethnic groups, it bars them from crucial forms of social, political, and cultural access and participation. Such discourses flatten out the heterogeneity of groups that have had historical associations with immigration and refuge seeking, but have since encompassed a wide range of demographic diversity. My suggestion, on the other hand, is that the experience of “refugee” both marks and permeates this heterogeneity. Whether imposed by the mainstream or taken on as an empowering identification, enthusiastically embraced or vehemently denied, the refugee category hauntingly orbits Southeast Asian diasporic collectives and subjectivities.

I thus bracket the words “former” or “post” before the term “refugee” throughout this dissertation to gesture at the irreducible duration, and indeterminate reach, of refugee experiences. “Refugee” might not end when we think it ends; it could “show up” at unexpected places and times in unpredictable ways. If we think of refugee extra-legally, as a psychological, affective, and material experience or condition, then it becomes difficult to draw strict boundaries of time and space, of locatable beginnings and endings. Here, the prefix “post” does not signal a temporal shift or linear progression, an after in time, but rather an ambiguity that implies imbrication and entanglement. In my schematic, gratitude, resentment, and resilience are affects that gather around those who, at one point in time, were classified as refugees, but are not (or may not be) *technically* refugees in the present moment, as well as those who were never classified as refugees, but who must reckon with its lasting implications. To comprehend these supposedly “post-” affects we must accordingly consider what preceded—how the “post” came into being, how this process of becoming continues to be felt, how and what residues remain. Examinations of “post-” affects also look forward, especially to the kinds of life/living they enable, the communities they galvanize, and the political possibilities they perform. *Our Hearts and Minds*, then, traverses the past, present, and future of “refugee,” touching moments of arrival and eviction, camp life and newfound citizenship, social activism and poetic witnessing. Without fail, it inevitably returns to the scene of war.

Like the texts that I analyze, from Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong authors and cultural producers in diaspora, the War in Viet Nam provides the historical frame of reference for my scholarly narrative. I employ the name “the War in Viet Nam” as opposed to the more common “the Vietnam War” as a way to signify the shift away from a dominant American/western perspective.[[7]](#footnote-7) In this designation, “Viet Nam” is a conflict that is global and transnational in scope, involving a host of Cold War actors besides the US and Viet Nam; it is also a country (and a people) and not only a war. Most significantly, it draws attention to the multiple sites of fighting (hot war) in Southeast Asia, including Cambodia and Laos. Khatharya Um reminds us that while clandestine wars were fought in, and devastated, Cambodia and Laos, “The common reference to the war itself as the ‘Vietnam War’ locates it politically and geographically in a specific region and country. The war was promoted as being *in*, *about*, and *for* Vietnam” (“What’s in a Name?” 136). This centering of Vietnam in discussions of the War, even as it is marginalized and forgotten in other ways, results in the erasure of Cambodia and Laos. The invisibility of other countries and groups affected by the War presents a moral quandary for projects of counter-history and counter-memory that try to remember Viet Nam against the amnesiac cultural memory of the American mainstream. Viet Thanh Nguyen thus declares that “any urge to remember Viet Nam must go ‘beyond Vietnam’ to include Cambodia and Laos” (“Refugee Memories” 914). My project attempts to remember “Viet Nam” in this way, as a memory that is expansive, that recalls the many elisions of official or dominant history as well as alternative histories, the buried points of connections and convergences that make up the complex history of the War in Viet Nam, which is not only Viet Nam.

REFUGEE PASSAGES

In April of 1975, as a communist victory was looking imminent after American withdrawal from Southeast Asia over a year earlier, people began evacuating Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital. A total of 130,000 people fled the country in a matter of weeks before the arrival of North Vietnamese troops. On April 30, as foreign journalists reported the fall of Saigon, the image of Vietnamese escapees, scrambling to get onto the last helicopters and packing into tiny boats, indelibly entered the international public imagination. Two weeks earlier, on April 17, the Communist Party of Kampuchea, commonly known as the Khmer Rouge, entered Phnom Penh, beginning a catastrophic genocide that would leave two million people dead and up to five million people internally displaced. By the end of 1975, over 17,000 Cambodian refugees had crossed the Thai border to seek refuge. Similarly in neighboring Laos, 2,500 Hmongs, who had fought alongside the US during the war, were airlifted out of the country in May. By the end of the year, a total of 54,000 Laotians, including Hmongs, were living in Thai refugee camps.[[8]](#footnote-8)

These numbers, which calculate the movement of bodies immediately *after* the end of the War in Viet Nam, do not speak of the uprooting that occurred *during* the War. For example, “By 1972, more than 30 percent of the Laotian population had been displaced from their traditional homes” (Um, “What’s in a Name?” 137). In Cambodia, because of American bombing raids, Phnom Penh, the capital, swelled with over two million refugees, becoming four times its normal size. And,

By the time the first U.S. ground troops landed in Danang in March 1965, more than half a million Vietnamese were refugees in their own country. Each year added hundreds of thousands more to the list of refugees, evacuees and war victims. By 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed and the last U.S. forces were withdrawn, a total of about ten million people had been displaced in South Vietnam since 1954 […] When Saigon fell at the end of April, more than half of the entire South Vietnamese population had been uprooted at least once in the previous two decades. (Robinson 17)

Nor do the numbers account for the three decades of refuge seeking following the War’s end that produced over three million Southeast Asian refugees globally. The majority of these refugees, having first arrived in neighboring Southeast and East Asian countries, were resettled in third countries of asylum: “1.4 million in the United States, 260,000 in China, 200,000 in Canada, 185,000 in Australia, and 130,000 in France” (Robinson 2).

The story of the War in Viet Nam, then, is crucially a story of displaced bodies—of people forced to move from the countryside and villages to cities, from cities to other cities; across regions, landscapes, and geopolitical borders; over seas and oceans. The staggering statistics recounted above give us scale but not texture; they do not tell, for instance, of the reasons for leaving, the conditions endured, the losses suffered, and the difficulties of arrival. One place where such textures can be found is in cultural texts, including oral histories, memoirs, novels, films, documentaries, etc. by and on Southeast Asian (former) refugees. Yet, these statistics are an important starting point to understand the larger implications of studying something as focused as (post) refugee affect, as I do in this dissertation. I do not attempt here to cover the range or heterogeneity of displacement experiences, an impossibility for any one study. Rather, gratitude, resentment, and resilience represent little windows into this highly complex history of mass migration, specifically the work of rebuilding a life after migration. The scale of refugee movements provides a backdrop for the specific affects I examine in the rest of this dissertation, and crucially gestures to the relevance of such affects.

CRITICAL CONVERGENCES, BODIES THAT MOVE

*Our Hearts and Minds* is situated at the intersection of three established and emerging fields of study: (critical) refugee studies, affect studies, and Southeast Asian American studies.[[9]](#footnote-9) The point of nexus that brings them into productive conversation is the notion of *movement* or *motion*. In particular, with different points of emphasis and concern, each of the three fields has been interested in the movement of, and within, human bodies. Refugee studies and Southeast Asian American studies are intimately tied in their concern with issues of forced migration and diaspora. A foundational case study for the development of refugee studies was the “Indochinese exodus” in the 1970s and 1980s that prompted international response through intervention, research, and policymaking. The most nascent of the three fields, Southeast Asian American studies, builds on and against studies of refugees from the War in Viet Nam. Emerging out of “encounters” between Area studies and Asian American studies, it moves away from descriptive, sociological or policy driven accounts of Southeast Asian migrants to transnational examinations of “the traffic in bodies, images and capital, coming to and from Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam … as scenes for a multiply postcolonial imaginary and neoimperial geography” (Ngo et al. 672). Affect studies, while without a single unifying theory, is generally concerned with the intensities and forces that pass through and between bodies. It thinks through the sensations and emotions that arise from contacts, encounters, and de/attachments that produce the social world. As Michael Hardt sums up in his foreword to an important collection of essays, *The Affective Turn*, affects illuminate “both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers” (ix).

This larger focus on *bodies* and *movement* forms the backbone of my dissertation, which explores the affective dimensions of migration, the refugee passages that are a result of war. Bringing these fields of studies into dialogue, I inquire about affect’s role in diaspora, moving beyond (but not eschewing) loss, longing, and melancholia, to examine the multiplicity of feelings that structure (post) refugee life. To consider “refugee” and “affect” together, to suppose that refugees have feelings outside of *fear* (and that such feelings may be political), is to stand in contradistinction to an entrenched epistemological and representational regime that characterizes refugees as helplessly “invisible, speechless, and, above all, nonpolitical” (Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees* 3). Refugees cannot feel—they are only body and nobody—because we have difficulty seeing them as proper subjects within the existing national framework of social and political life. In making the distinction between exiles and refugees, Edward Said writes that the latter “are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word ‘refuge’ has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance whereas ‘exile’ carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality” (144). Said’s evocation of helpless herds, without identity or virtuous feelings, to describe refugees is telling of the vocabularies and images that readily come to mind, shaped by the media and political discourse, when we think of people seeking asylum. It relies on semantics and stereotypical generalities rather than any meaningful or particular instance of refugee context and social, political, and historical experience.

This tendency to generalize and essentialize a transhistorical “refugee experience” marks both popular and academic discussions of refugees. In her seminal review article, “Refugees and Exile,” Liisa Malkki points out how much of refugee studies “proceed as if refugees all shared a common condition or nature” (511), which then naturalizes the “national order of things” (512). Such studies attempt to “seize upon political or historical processes and then … inscribe aspects of those processes in the bodies and psyches of the people who are undergoing them. In this way, very mobile, unstable social phenomena may be imagined as essential ‘traits’ and ‘characteristics’ attached to, or emanating from, individual persons” (511).[[10]](#footnote-10) Here, refugee bodies *do not move*, as they are fixed into place in order to “prove” established conceptualizations of citizen and refugee, nationality and statelessness, life and non-life. This unequivocality, a political expediency, is often required for practical application of knowledge such as humanitarian interventions and policy development, which Richard Black, in a recent review essay, observes are issues and engagements that dominate the field of refugee studies (58). My project shares affinity with a different, more theoretically oriented strand of refugee studies—exemplified by scholars like Liisa Malkki, Peter Nyers, Yen Le Espiritu, Aihwa Ong, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Cathy J. Schlund-Vials—that is rooted in political philosophy and performs the work of social, political, and cultural critique rather than catering to the needs of policy and development.

Yen Le Espiritu coins this sub-field “critical refugee studies.” Building on the work of Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben, she writes:

This field begins with the premise that the refugee, who inhabits a condition of statelessness, radically calls into question the established principles of the nation-state and the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it. Critical refugee studies thus flip the script, positing that it is the existence of the displaced refugee, rather than the rooted citizen, that provides the clue to a new politics and model of international relations (*Body Counts* 10-11).

The study of refugees thus functions as a critical scrutiny of, and challenge to, the status quo, the normalized forms of political relations and organization. It disturbs the view that refugees and citizens are “permanently irreconcilable opposites” (Ong 79) by examining and deconstructing the processes and effects of sovereign power and biopolitical governmentality. In his short but pioneering essay, “We Refugees,” which rifts off of Arendt, Giorgio Agamben provides a manifesto of sorts for critical refugee studies. For him, the figure of the refugee provides “the paradigm of a new historical consciousness” because it represents “the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come” (n. pag.). As it “unhinges the old trinity of state/nation/territory,” the refugee “radically calls into question the principles of the nation-state and, at the same time, helps clear the field for a no-longer-delayable renewal of categories” (n. pag.). This hopeful investment in the refugee figure as a way into the political, and as a source of a new transnational politics, also animates Southeast Asian American studies. As they draw on critical refugee studies, projects in Southeast Asian American studies that trace the connections between state violence and the production of refugees such as Mimi Thi Nguyen’s work on the “gift of freedom” or Cathy J. Schlund-Vials’ analysis of Cambodian American genocidal remembrance, simultaneously contribute to its analytical growth.

FIGURING THE REFUGEE

In the introduction to their groundbreaking edited collection for the journal *positions* on the topic of Southeast Asian American studies, Fiona I.B. Ngo, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam observe that research utilizing the refugee figure as “an analytic for critical inquiry” (677) represents a prominent “new direction” in the emerging field. They write: “Southeast Asian American studies extend the analysis of the refugee figure as a strategy to open, rearticulate, and enable new lines of questioning across and sometimes against disparate but not disconnected forms of power” (677). This delineation echoes Yen Le Espiritu’s earlier call in her influential state-of-the-field essay in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* to imbue the term “refugee” with “social and political critiques that critically call into question the relationship between war, race, and violence, then and now” (411). Here, the refugee is productively conceptualized “not as an object of investigation, but rather as a *paradigm* ‘whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems’” (421).

For Espiritu, the Vietnamese (and I will add Southeast Asian) refugee figure throws into sharp relief how US military and political aggression in Southeast Asia directly produced the conditions of exodus as well as post-war diasporic (refugee) and national (refuge) identities. This critical lens importantly disrupts the exceptionalist narrative of “rescue and liberation” in which the American presence in Southeast Asia was cast and recast as a civilizing mission and, in doing so, also poses a challenge to the neoimperial logic that drives current and future US military excursions in other parts of the world. A connection to contemporary US war and empire—specifically the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—marks the topicality and urgency of Southeast Asian American studies. It also points to the transnational, intersectional, and comparative orientation of the field, by which the interdisciplinary and extra-territorial outlook of critical inquiry destabilizes boundaries and borders, of subjects, categories, and nations.

In this way, the refugee figure/concept, or what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls “refugee discourse,” is “oriented outside the nation and toward a future after the state” (“Refugee Memories” 938). It is a framework “produced from the experiences of refugees” that can, in turn, be used to “read such experiences” (“Refugee Memories” 934). *Our Hearts and Minds* builds its analytical framework by reading Southeast Asian refugee and diasporic experiences outside of any one particular national context, while cognizant of the ways the nation, as a concept and material reality, still remains a relevant and, for the time being, inevitable category of reference. It is a refugee discourse that pays close attention to the textures of embodied experience, what Trinh T. Minh-ha terms *refugeeism*, a tensional condition of displacement and settlement, of traveling and dwelling, or what Peter Nyers calls *refugeeness*, “the various qualities and characteristics that are regularly associated with and assigned to refugee identity” (*Rethinking Refugees* xv). Nyers further explains that while refugeeness attempts to define an identity, it also embraces a constitutive ambiguity “by refusing to fix the meaning of ‘refugee’ to any definitive definition,” and so opens up “the possibility for emerging political practices, whereby refugees themselves recast the terms of their identity” (*Rethinking Refugees* xv). While there are significant differences between how Nguyen, Trinh, and Nyers approach the question of refugee, I recall them together here to demonstrate the common interest in exploring an *experience* of refugee (not *the* refugee experience), which also drives my study. Suffice it to say here that refugee discourse, refugeeism, and refugeeness are ways to speak to the subjective dimensions that, as I have discussed, are so often lacking in discussions of refugee movements.

A *refugee discourse of affect*, my dissertation argues, enables a “homing in” on the irreducibilities of refugeeness, and the possibilities of self-representation, political articulation, and social presence through affective expressions. I make no claims as to providing an overarching theory of refugee subjectivity. Instead of theoretical totality, my work aims for partial explanation (Haraway 127). Gratitude, resentment, and resilience represent only three among a host of (post) refugee affects that come to shape experience—the contacts, engagements, and de/attachments that comprise “refugee.” I focus on them here because they, as I will demonstrate, most compellingly narrate the positions and positionings that Southeast Asian diasporics find themselves in when they resettle in a new nation-state; these affects provide insight into the various negotiations of identity and belonging between (former) refugees and the objects/subjects they encounter, including the nation, citizens, other refugees, and, ultimately, versions of themselves. My analysis of gratitude, resentment, and resilience performs what Jonathan Flatley calls “affective mapping,” a tracing of *the historicity* of seemingly individual or personal affective experiences (4). Affective maps outline the sociality of feelings, showing the connections between the personal and the political by charting the larger forces that come to shape “private” emotions and emotional responses. For Flatley, mapping crucially lays bare the shared or collective quality of affective experience. As such, it is a method of memory work that seeks to illuminate links between past, present, and future as well as create routes for thinking through the relationship between private and public, subject and structure.

The work of “mapping” Southeast Asian (post) refugee affect is thus a project of remembrance within “a field rooted in complex cartographies that urgently and consistently marry the personal and the political vis-à-vis stories of displacement and narratives of relocation” (Schlund-Vials, “Epilogue” 321). In the epilogue to another important omnibus in the field, *Southeast Asian Diasporas in the United States*, Cathy Schlund-Vials stresses the importance of memory work as scholars and practitioners face a “two-pronged task”: “negotiating a deeper political connection between the ‘way it really was’ and contemplating the ‘way it was remembered’” (327). “It” refers to the past, to a history of war that forced internal, inter-Asian, and transnational migrations, haunted by the suffering and losses registered and untold, acknowledged and un-rememberable. Because history—of that difficult, and not-yet-over, war—for Southeast Asians in diaspora is such a contested terrain, cultural memory crucially becomes “a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history” (Sturken 1). The War and its legacies continue to be “written” and “rewritten,” and Southeast Asian American studies as a whole, and this dissertation in particular, attends to the ways memory is a site where this remembering (and amnesia) plays out. In taking up the figure of the refugee as a lens or analytic for performing literary and cultural analysis, I am also figuring refugee as embodied memory—a kind of memory as well as a means to remember, via the body and its affects.

(POST) REFUGEE AFFECT

In 1951 the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees formulated a single definition of the term “refugee” as a means to address the multiple contexts of displacement in Europe that was a legacy of the Second World War. Since then, this definition, endorsed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has gained universal usage and application. The 1967 Protocol, which removed the temporal and geographic restrictions of the Convention, made the UNHCR a truly global regime. This definition designates as “refugee” any person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country.” Within this framework, *fear* is the defining and definitive affect that marks the refugee—fear of persecution, fear of return, fear for one’s life. Here, fear produces the refugee and in turn the refugee must reproduce fear as a form of intelligibility. The qualification of “*well-founded* fear” evokes the onus of proof, evidence, and performance that is placed on the refugee subject if he or she is to be recognized as such. Thus, both ontological legibility and legal existence arise from and through fear. In our current system of global politics, the figure of the refugee cannot be understood without an accompanying sense of fear; the refugee is bound by fear—a past that is feared, a present of fearing, and a future predicated on fear legitimized.

Yet, when the refugee is ostensibly freed from this fear—that is, refugee status is resolved, sanctuary is found, freedom achieved—what affects come to characterize the (former) refugee? If fear gives the refugee legibility, what feelings make visible the former refugee? My dissertation explores (post) refugee affects that construct life for those who have “arrived,” but whose arrival might be a continuing process that involves further movements, journeys, and negotiations. Employing Southeast Asian (post) refugees from the War in Viet Nam as case studies, *Our Hearts and Minds* presents gratitude, resentment, and resilience as affects that circulate and gather around the (post) refugee; or, in another sense, the (post) refugee moves through and in between them. To understand (post) refugee life in its fullness, I suggest, we need to attend to how these affects press upon, and are produced by, the lives that emerge in war’s long aftermath.

I follow Ann Cvetkovich in using the term “affect” in a generic sense, “as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways (whether as distinct specific emotions or as a generic category often contrasted with reason)” (*Depression* 4). The interchangeable and imprecise usage of affect, feeling, and emotion throughout this dissertation seeks to retain the conceptual closeness of the three terms, and “the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experience” (*Depression* 4). Affects are, then, both the “raw” bodily sensations as well as the social or cultural experience of such sensations, which theorists like Teresa Brennan and Brian Massumi reserve for the terms “feeling” or “emotion” respectively. Thinking of affect more in terms of a diffuse rubric for sensation and emotion allows for a fuller view, I believe, of its ubiquitous presence and indeterminate complexity in the everyday. In this manner, I employ an expansive understanding of affect—as arising from being in the world, from contact and relations; affects “can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects” (Sedgwick 19).

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed forwards an understanding of emotion as produced through *contact* with and between subjects and objects, which in turn shapes the very “surfaces” of those subjects and objects. For her, emotions are relational as opposed to being inherent *in* subjects or objects, or imposed from *without*. They “involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’” (8) to the many people and things of the world. In this way, “feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation,” which “allows us to think about the ‘sociality’ of emotions” (8). Taking off from Ahmed, my analysis attends to the sociality of gratitude, resentment, and resilience, contending that an examination of these (post) refugee affects helps us better make sense of the historical experiences, social relationships, and political negotiations of Southeast Asian (former) refugees. Although in this dissertation I describe (post) refugee affects as *expressions* that come from (former) refugees, such expressions, as Ahmed argues, emerge from their relationship to and interaction with exteriorities—people, institutions, and ideas. In other words, affects might be expressed by subjects or objects but they come about through encounters, “born in *in-between-ness*” and residing “as accumulative *beside-ness*” (Seigworth and Gregg 2).

Thinking affect in a generic sense does not preclude reliance on its more specific definition in the Deleuzian tradition, which builds from Baruch Spinoza, as intensities or capacities to affect and be affected. Such understandings of affect as “*forces of encounter*” (Seigworth and Gregg 2) usefully conceptualize the networked relations and contacts that form (post) refugee passages and positions. In other words, affect reveals the (post) refugee’s phenomenological existence in the world, his or her relationship to the infinite possibilities of attachments and detachments—a way of moving (or not) through the world. As Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg state in the introduction to their seminal anthology, *The Affect Theory Reader*, “affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations” (1).

Along similar lines, Lauren Berlant sees affect as revealing how a/the world works. It not only gives figure to the bodies that inhabit the world, but also tell us about the feeling(s) of the present, or the atmosphere that surrounds such bodies. She writes that affect’s

strength as a site of potential elucidation comes from the ways it registers the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energize attachments … Its activity saturates the corporeal, intimate, and political performances of adjustment that make a shared atmosphere something palpable and, in its patterning, releases to view a poetics, a theory-in-practice of how a world works.” (16)

Affects, in short, can tell us about the conditions of life and living (where living does not exclude certain kinds of deaths); it theorizes, in Patricia Ticineto Clough’s words, “the social”—the “cofunctioning of the political, economic, and cultural” (1)—in a contemporary moment marked by war and terror. This capacious ability of affect theory to provide a picture of the lived world and its relationalities is what makes it a powerful lens in considering war’s (former) refugees, who have been swept up in the grand force of historical and political processes, and who have felt and continue to feel intensely the thin and shifting line between life and death.

*Our Hearts and Minds* suggests that affective relations between the (former) refugee and the nation-state and its citizens, as well as other (former) refugee subjects, provide insight into the processes and constitution of (post) refugee subjectivity. They offer an account of the War in Viet Nam and its long legacies. One place where such affective relations come into play and are registered is literary and cultural productions. These cultural texts are what Ann Cvetkovich calls “archive[s] of feelings,” “repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (*An Archive of Feelings* 7). As they register affects, these texts also name emotions and “produce effects,” what Sara Ahmed calls the “emotionality of texts” (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 13). The “texts” that I read differ widely in generic and aesthetic form, ranging from novels to poetry, activist performance to memoir, short fiction to art videos. Their diversity speaks to the multiple sites in which affect rests and moves as well as the different ways gratitude, resentment, and resilience are expressed. In rooting my analysis in literary and cultural texts, I insist, with Berlant, that, “the aesthetic and formal rendition of affective experience provides evidence of historical processes” (16).

In chapter 1 of this dissertation, on gratitude, I analyze a semi-autobiographical novel, *Ru*, by Vietnamese Canadian writer Kim Thúy together with an activist pilgrimage, “The Gift of Refuge,” by Tri Nguyen, a Vietnamese Australian pastor. As Yen Le Espiritu has pointed out, refugee gratitude emerges from, and reinforces, a revisionist historical discourse of “rescue and liberation” that has become ascendant in the past decade to turn the War in Viet Nam into a “good” and victorious war for the US. It can also, importantly, elide the role of the Americans (and other western powers) in producing refugee populations so that asylum can be granted as a consequence. Gratitude, I argue, is an affect that “sticks” well to the refugee body, giving it value and visibility within the national mainstream. I suggest that expressions of thankfulness become an internal and external expectation for those who have been gifted refuge. Because it involves an exaltation of the nation, gratitude can become appropriated by exceptionalist discourses and used in extreme cases to justify further forms of war-making and violence. The novel and pilgrimage demonstrate, however, that gratitude is also a powerful affect that has the potential to aid (former) refugee subjects in making sense of traumatic pasts and incongruent presents. In *Ru*, gratitude is an “inventory” of kindness and contacts that collate the (former) refugee in intersubjective existence, while it is deployed in “The Gift of Refuge” as a plea for compassion towards contemporary asylum seekers reaching Australian shores—it is the refugee’s gratitude that facilitates national kindness to foreign others. I am less interested in what gratitude does for the nation and its citizens, but more so in what it can do for (former) refugees who experience this affect, and those seeking asylum who might come in the future to feel it.

Because gratitude is expected as an appropriate response to refuge, feelings of resentment do not “sit well” on (former) refugees. In chapter 2, I turn to refugee resentment, arguing that it is an “outlawed” emotion that disrupts dominant ideological narratives or politically sanctioned ways of feeling. Taking up the figure of the gangster in Vietnamese American Aimee Phan’s collection of short stories *We Should Never Meet*, I analyze refugee resentment as a sobering critique of the “rescue and liberation” discourse. As an example of “failed” refuge, the refugee gangster poses a challenge to historical and cultural narratives about the “good” of war, refuge, and the American Dream. Phan’s literary representation of a social problem—Southeast Asian refugee gang violence—is a discursive intervention that seeks to complicate the dominant understanding of, and approach to, refugee criminality, one that has dire material consequences for those under its legal purview. In recent years, the American government’s response to criminalized Southeast Asian (former) refugees, like gangsters, has been deportation.[[11]](#footnote-11) Without consideration or acknowledgement of their histories of arrival, difficulties adapting to life in the US, or familial and rehabilitational circumstances, thousands of Southeast Asian refugees are being forcibly removed from the US for criminal convictions.[[12]](#footnote-12) In the second half of this chapter, I focus on two short activist videos, “My Asian Americana” and “Return to Sender,” by Studio Revolt, an artist collective headed by Anida Yoeu Ali and Masahiro Sugano, working out of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. These videos, which feature Cambodia American deportees, employ a patriotic aesthetic to implore the US to reconsider its policies, to allow deportees back into the country, and in the process, articulate the injuries America has inflicted on (former) refugees. I analyze resentment as a counter-memory—one that brings back the narrative fragments that official, state history conveniently forgets—pushing at the contours of the nation and its constitutive master-narratives.

Both gratitude and resentment, as seeming opposites of one another, have strong orientations towards and away from the nation-state. That is, they most often (but not always) emerge in reference to the refuge-granting nation. The last chapter, on resilience, steps outside of this dialectic between thankfulness and anger in relation to the country of resettlement to consider the ways (post) refugees survive, and their experience of this survival. Shifting critical attention away from loss, which has dominated discussions about Southeast Asians in diaspora, I present resilience as a category that encompasses a range of affective sensations, including both grief and pleasure, melancholy and joy, despair and hope, to get at the complexity of living through and with war. Reading a collection of poems, *Found*, by Lao Canadian poet Souvankham Thammavongsa, and a memoir, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, by Hmong American Kao Kalia Yang, I argue that resilience is not just about physical survival, but also about the joys and pleasures that attend the minor moments of staying alive despite the threats of war, destruction, and death. Resilience, I suggest, describes a process of (post) refugee subjectivity that is attentive to the everydayness of living, to living as a politically and affectively complex act. It negotiates life and death, loss and hope, in ways that draw attention to the (former) refugee’s undeniable presence.

*Our Hearts and Minds* shifts away from the dominant focus on the United States as a controlling framework for the study of Southeast Asians in diaspora. While America’s central role in the War that initiated the formation of these global diasporas remains an important point of investigation, it is also critical to recognize that Southeast Asian refugees are scattered throughout, and exist within, national contexts *outside* of the US. A study like this dissertation, which aspires to understand the capacious reach of refugee experiences, must be attentive to the many different national, socio-political, and historical contexts that (former) refugees find themselves situated in. One difficulty that arises is the need to track the nuanced differences between the US, Canada, and Australia for dealing with the three affective categories I have identified. My discussion of gratitude examines its articulation in Canadian and Australian national spaces, while my exploration of resentment is focused on the United States. This schematic might suggest that refugee gratitude is somehow easier to express in Canada because it did not *directly* produce the conditions of violence that drove migration, but took in refugees instead, or in Australia, which played a relatively minor role in the fighting when compared to the US. In the same way, it might seem like refugee resentment is primarily directed at the US, one of the main aggressors during the War in Viet Nam. This is true to a certain extent, but as my analysis will show, gratitude, resentment, and resilience operate in much more complex ways within and across national borders.

For example, the resentment that Cambodian deportees express towards the US is simultaneously a declaration of patriotism, of love for America, while the gratitude that Tri Nguyen mobilizes in his pilgrimage involves criticism—itself a kind of resentment—of Australia. The point I want to stress here is that a variety and mixture of feelings can be felt by (former) refugees, and expressed to the host nation(s). My choice of “texts” or “cases,” whether national or ethnic, is guided by how each piece of work compelling articulates the affect in question. That is, in my organization of the study, I am interested, first and foremost, in what the texts can tell us or help us to understand about gratitude, resentment, and resilience. My purpose is not to paint an ideological picture that sets up the host nations, groups of refugees, or affects in any one particular way, and especially not in a hierarchy of praise or blame; rather, I endeavor to bring these disparate texts and contexts together in conversation as a way of gesturing to the transnational significance of the War in Viet Nam and its legacies. Through affect, *Our Hearts and Minds* seeks an alternative vantage point from which to consider the circuits of power and feeling that route across war, migration, and refuge. It offers a different account of Southeast Asian post-war migration: the lived experiences and affective negotiations of systemic and socio-historical processes.

**CHAPTER 1: GRATITUDE**

A REFUGEE’S OBLIGATION

In a global system of socio-political organization built around the nation-state, political asylum is, transparently, undeniably, a precious *gift*. Pitiful asylum seekers, who lack the rights and protection of a national community, zealously covet this gift, for it confers so much more than just physical safety, transforming them into politically legible and recognizable subjects, privileged beneficiaries of social life. It is a gift, in many cases, without equal. In the giving of refuge, the granting power demonstrates how it is the embodiment of liberal values such as freedom, generosity, and altruism. Unlike immigrants, refugees are not required to prove that they can enhance the nation with their presence (they *are* required, however, to prove fear of persecution). The admittance of refugees into the nation’s borders is then primarily construed as a question of humanitarianism. Refuge is a gift that the refugee has done nothing in particular to deserve, even though it is ensconced in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights as basic to human dignity.[[13]](#footnote-13) Instead, refuge points to the nation’s dutiful fulfillment of a democratic, moral, and international responsibility. It is thus sensible and logical (a common sense) for the recipient of asylum to feel thankful, to affectively appreciate and celebrate the enormity of the benefit. Ingratitude in the face of magnanimity, on the other hand, makes no sense, is unthinkable, repugnant, dismissed. Gratitude is not only logical, but is compelled as an internal and/or external *expectation*. Refugees (if they are to remain “good”) *must* feel grateful.

The account of refugee gratitude I have given above is generalized and overarching—it does not consider the contexts and nuances of individuals and groups, the textures of everyday negotiations, messy circumstances, and affective dynamics. Yet, it is a place to begin unpacking a notion that appears to be intuitive, a given—*of course* refugees would/should feel grateful; there are no other ways to react (correctly) to the gift of refuge! My purpose here is to establish that gratitude has a powerful pull within sociality, one that gathers strength because it makes so much sense and hence does not invite questioning. For those refugees who have found safe haven within a sovereign nation-state, gratitude is perhaps the most apposite, the nearest, feeling when fear is lifted. Gratitude settles well into the emotional apertures of new life, it sutures and binds as people begin the long process of resettling and rebuilding. It is also an affect that gives visible contour to (post) refugee life, illumining the (former) refugee’s position and potentiality within a framework of nationality and citizenship.

THE GOOD OF GRATITUDE

In his brief survey of gratitude in the history of (western) ideas, Edward J. Harpham maps out the consensus that it is an extoled civic good, a social virtue. Whether connected to God in the writings of Aquinas and theologians in the Middle Ages or to society in Seneca, Thomas Hobbes, and Adam Smith, gratitude is considered a positive affective state that should be cultivated because of its value to both the individual and the collective: “Gratitude … makes one a better person, a more virtuous person. It builds bonds of harmony and community in the world. Ingratitude, on the other hand, is a vice to be avoided, one that destroys the individual and society by disrupting the harmony that ties us together” (24). Robert C. Solomon further emphasizes that it is “an essential emotion of the good life as well as the virtuous life” (x). As an incontrovertibly “positive” emotion—it *feels* good and *is* good for everyone—gratitude is the “glue” of social cohesion because it promotes ethical social exchange among agents. Arising from a benefit received, it inspires reward, which, according to Adam Smith is “to recompense, to remunerate, to return good for good received” (59). This impulse for reciprocation is heightened because gratitude only emerges from undeserved benefit. Robert A. Emmons states, “At the cornerstone of gratitude is the notion of *undeserved merit*. The grateful person recognizes that he or she did nothing to deserve the gift or benefit; it was freely bestowed” (5). David Steindl-Rast further elaborates, “If what we receive is ours by right, our appreciation will not pick up that special flavor of something *undeserved*, something gratis. But this is essential, as even the stem (grati) of the word *gratitude* indicates” (284).

Thus, gratitude carries with it a notion of debt to be repaid for an undeserved generosity, creating a form of relationality based on obligation and desire to facilitate the happiness of others (and as such, the whole). The bestower of generosity or benefit—with appropriate motive and intention, Adam Smith would add—becomes the *proper* object of gratitude, of reward. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith explains why it is not difficult for us to sympathize—in the sense of hearts beating in time—with gratitude. He writes:

When we see one man assisted, protected, relieved by another, our sympathy with the joy of the person who receives the benefit serves only to animate our fellow-feeling with his gratitude towards him who bestows it. When we look upon the person who is the cause of his pleasure with the eyes with which we imagine he must look upon him, his benefactor seems to stand before us in the most engaging and amiable light. We readily therefore sympathize with the grateful affection which he conceives for a person to whom he has been so much obliged; and consequently applaud the returns which he is disposed to make for the good offices conferred upon him. (61)

The “scene” of benefit received and gratitude repaid produces “good feelings” in both participants and observers of the interaction, making sympathy for and agreement with the propriety of grateful feeling as a response to benefit arise readily and naturally. To give a good and to return a good is without doubt, *good*. Smith’s account provides insight into how gratitude comes to be naturalized in social relations as a virtue: rational-minded individuals can easily perceive and agree upon its inherent goodness.

This agreement on the common sense of gratitude sheds light on why it is eagerly promoted in refugees, strangers who need to be enfolded (or at least accommodated) into the social fabric of national life. But the refugee is grateful because asylum also offers itself as a transparent good. Given that our frames for understanding the conditions of statelessness and refugee—as being “in limbo” or “empty” or “untenable”—are structured by reliance on the nation-state as ultimate reference, rescue and protection from the *lack of nationality* (and all it entails) is not only desired but is the only available conception of social existence within the global order of late capitalism. To be sure, there have been attempts to imagine a world system beyond the confines of discrete nation-states, most recently in concepts of transnationalism and globalization, but such “post”-national formations have yet to be fully realized. That is to say, the nation remains a central principle and material reality in discussions of borderlessness and global community. The three tenable solutions to refugee “crises” promoted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—refoulement, resettlement, and local integration—all rely on the absorption of asylum seekers into a defined state structure. The (post) refugee’s existence is contingent on recognition by state sovereignty.

Under the hegemony of the nation (as object and epistemology), the refugee cannot help but turn, orient itself, towards gratitude. I argue that gratitude is thus a central affective structure of (post) refugee life. It is part of what Sara Ahmed calls the national “happiness duty,” in which migrants are bound, by various means and for various ends, to “telling a certain story of your arrival as good, or the good of your arrival” (158). This “telling” serves a national ideal of integration and likeness, whereby proximity (or the aspiration to proximity) breeds good and correct feeling, and in turn, national harmony and happiness. The narration of such stories, or, in this present case, the expression of refugee gratitude, means that other narratives (of unhappiness: racism, colonialism, oppression, etc.) or irreconcilable attachments (usually to the past or another country), retreat into the background. What surfaces is the preference for and primacy of a certain feeling—gratefulness—over others such as resentment or melancholia.

Gratitude brings with it an obligation, but there is also an obligation to be (feel) grateful, especially for refugees who flee the ruins of war—shattered lives and broken societies, oppressive regimes, exterminations and genocides—in often traumatic and perilous fashion. As Yen Le Espiritu points out, a revisionist narrative of “rescue and liberation” blankets American remembrance of the War in Viet Nam. In this version of historical memory, Southeast Asian refugees are the *beneficiaries* of Western freedom. As the following analysis shows, even those who are “saved” elsewhere, outside the United States, often feel this sense of benefit, understanding their asylum as a gift, even though such a gift, as Mimi Thi Nguyen has pointed out, is contingent on incredible forms of violence.

This chapter examines the affective pull and direction(s) of refugee gratitude. Does the presence of gratitude signify that the refugee has overcome, has succeeded and/or been transformed? How does gratitude position the (former) refugee in relation to the nation and to other subjects? If gratitude is expected—if it interpellates—then what does/can it do? How does it give shape to post-refugee life? Analyzing *Ru*, an autobiographical novel by Vietnamese Canadian novelist Kim Thúy, and “The Gift of Refuge,” a performance of cultural activism by Tri Nguyen, a Vietnamese Australian Baptist pastor, I examine gratitude as a kind of social relationship, a way of relating, that reveals the refugee’s attachments to the nation as well as the excess of national exaltation, of feeling thankful. At the same time, gratitude (and the grateful refugee) comes into being through living and sharing with other people. Kim Thuy and Tri Nguyen’s texts trace the moments of contact—of affective encounters—that showcase how refugee gratitude is intersubjective, depicting refuge not as a singular event experienced in isolation, but as one that emerges as the (former) refugee relates to others. Ultimately, they suggest that refuge is necessarily a gift that needs to be continually extended to others. Both texts demonstrate the complexity of refugee gratitude, how it cannot always, easily, be ideologically coopted by power. Gratitude, I suggest, is a formative affect, one that guides us towards a glimpse of what the (former) refugee is capable of doing, his or her affective capacities to both affect and be affected.

I.

REVISITING SUCCESS

After recounting a narrative of warfare, migration from Vietnam, and resettlement in Canada through a series of impressionistic vignettes, Kim Thúy ends her semi-autobiographical novel *Ru* with an image of rebirth and renewal: a phoenix rising from its ashes. The narrator writes, “all those individuals from my past have shaken the grime off their backs in order to spread their wings with plumage of red and gold, before thrusting themselves sharply towards the great blue space, decorating my children’s sky, showing them that one horizon always hides another and it goes on like that to infinity, to the unspeakable beauty of renewal, to intangible rapture” (140). In addition, she reflexively draws attention to the existence of the novel as a document that attests to the possibilities of reinvention and immigrant “success.” The novel’s overarching theme of personal and collective resilience in the face of struggle, and triumphant final note, makes it an emblematic case of the Vietnamese refugee success story. Indeed, various glowing reviews in national newspapers have hailed the author as “the perfect immigrant” (Barber n. pag.) and praised her story as one following the path “from riches to rags to riches” (Barley n. pag.). In turn, the resultant critical and commercial success of the novel reinforces the image of Kim Thúy as a model refugee.

Recently, *Ru* won the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s Canada Reads 2015 competition, cementing its place in the national literary (and popular) canon, and exposing it to a wider public readership. Established in 2002 as a “battle of the books” event, Canada Reads sets out to find a book that will ignite a national conversation, one that all Canadians *should* read (and gather around). In this way, the competition is about creating what Benedict Anderson refers to as an “imagined community”—a sense of connectedness and collective identity through shared cultural, print-based media. The competition follows a format in which a celebrity or public figure defends one book from a list of five finalists. A winner is determined, after several rounds of debate, through votes cast by the participating panelists, with the results of eliminating one book on each day of the competition. In 2015, the theme of the competition was “one book to break barriers”: “Canada Reads 2015 is all about books that can change perspectives, challenge stereotypes and illuminate issues” (“Canada Reads 2015” n. pag.)

Competing against books that dealt with Indigenous history, aging and death, LGBTQ rights, and Arab politics, *Ru* was pitched by its defender, Cameron Bailey, the artistic director of the Toronto International Film Festival, as a universal immigrant story. He heralded the novel as a timeless narrative that speaks to the complexity of the immigrant experience, and “an enduring testament to the kind of Canada we want to live in” (“Canada Reads 2015” n. pag.). In his final defense of the book, Bailey, passionately waving his Canadian passport, said, “This is my Canadian passport. If you’re born here it is pretty easy to get one of these, but ask someone who wasn’t born here what it took to get their Canadian passport. My mother, my father, they fought, they worked their asses off to get one of these, and *Ru* brought me back to that, that struggle, what it takes to become a Canadian” (“Canada Reads 2015” n. pag.). Cast in this decidedly nationalistic term, in an unequivocal national project of identity production through literature and reading, *Ru* demonstrates the struggle and triumph of the immigrant, a figure that is central to the nation’s understanding of itself. *Ru*’s important win is but another instance of the refugee’s success, which gets celebrated in Canada’s ongoing mythology of multicultural nationhood.

The narrative of social, economic, and psychic “success,” as seen in a text like *Ru*, is a hallmark of mainstream Asian North American literature—literature that is, according to Viet Thanh Nguyen, “most likely to be read by non-Asian [North] American readers and critics” (*Race and Resistance* 147-48). As many scholars have pointed out, the in-text narration of success by minority and immigrant writers can play a crucial role in the mainstream reception of such texts. Read as public demonstrations of success performed by those who have been rescued by and/or allowed entry into Western democratic nation-states, these narratives help to confirm liberal ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality. They function as proof of the inclusive, tolerant, and fundamentally non-racist constitution of the national space. Thus the immigrant’s success can be construed as the nation’s own success at multicultural, collective-building projects. Because of their ideologically reaffirming function, stories of immigrant and refugee success are often more palatable and easily digested by mainstream readers and state structures alike.

Yen Le Espiritu identifies the discourse of the “good refugee”—deployed by mainstream society and by Vietnamese Americans themselves—as one that coalesced during a historical conjuncture that saw the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the War in Viet Nam and the emergence of renewed American imperial ambitions. She writes, “otherwise absent in U.S. public discussions of Vietnam, Vietnamese refugees become most visible and intelligible to Americans as successful, assimilated, and anti-communist newcomers to the American ‘melting pot.’ Represented as the grateful beneficiary of U.S.-style freedom, Vietnamese in the United States become the featured evidence of the appropriateness of the U.S. war in Vietnam” (“Thirty Years” xv). The figure of the well-assimilated and successful Vietnamese refugee not only allows for the revisionist casting of America’s role in Southeast Asia as defender and savior, but it is also appropriated as justification for present and future US military interventions overseas. The collapsing of refugee success with American “victory” in war has dangerous consequences for past, present, and future understandings of war and militarism. Espiritu’s analysis contributes to an ongoing critique of the model minority myth that has shadowed popular discussions of Asians in North America, and rightly warns us of the potentially dangerous implications of their success stories. The success narrative can become regulatory and punitive and, as a result, easily lends itself to appropriation by revisionist, nationalistic, and neo-imperial forces.

While structural critiques of Asian North American success and how it gets deployed are both crucial and urgent, they often neglect the nuanced subjective and contextual specificities that accompany instances of “making it.” I turn, thus, to a reconsideration of the success narrative by meditating on how these stories are integral to the intertwined processes of survival and subject formation for those who have experienced intense struggle, loss, and trauma. More specifically, I want to ask: What is the purpose and value of narrating various forms of success for individuals who have lived under the conditions of war and its aftermath, surrounded by both the imminent threat and immediate reality of destruction, disappearance, and death? How does the attainment of socio-economic prosperity—including educational, professional, and artistic success—signify for war survivors and refugees who have known incredible material lack and deprivation? Are celebrations of success, and affirmations of resilience and survival, different kinds of political statements in contexts where physical survival and livelihood has never been guaranteed?

The aim of this section then is not to dwell on how narratives of refugee success are produced for and deployed by the state and its apparatuses, but to seek a way of examining stories of struggle and triumph beyond the determining frame of liberal-democratic nationalism. I wish to momentarily remove immigrant success stories from the mainstream (white) context, not to suggest that this removal is ever entirely possible but to change the point of emphasis from how these narratives function as “capital” within dominant hegemonic structures to how they might serve the subjects who produce them. Such a shift will work to complicate Asian North American critiques of success and of figures like that of the model minority, and in doing so push for a more nuanced consideration of the complexity and heterogeneity of Asian North American subjectivities, particularly those borne out of the violence of empire.

Commenting on the radical, leftist tradition of Asian American studies, Viet Thanh Nguyen points out that Asian American intellectuals “prefer to see themselves and the objects of their critical inquiry as bad subjects” (144). Eve Oishi defines these “bad” Asian subjects as “any Asian who makes noise, acts nasty, or in any way flouts the expectations of racist stereotype . . . Bad as in ‘badass.’ Bad as in anyone who does not covet white patriarchal approval; anyone who challenges racism, class oppression, sexism, homophobia” (221). This ideological predisposition to idealize socially and politically resistant subjects leads many in the academy and beyond to disregard narratives of success as automatically and uncomplicatedly playing into nationalistic, multicultural, and assimilationist agendas—that is, to accept the common perception that success breeds compliant, normative “good” subjects, and vice versa. I contend that we need to pause before equating financial, social, and artistic success with absorption into neoliberal forms of capitalist citizenship, with consent to nationalist principles, with a desire for the status quo. An alternate mode of analysis, coexisting with a trenchant critique of ideological structures, could make room for consideration of the complicated niceties of Asian North America in discussions of success and failure, of the facts of war and other historical atrocities and the ways they imprint themselves on the bodies and psyches of the human remainders, and of the pain, as well as beauty, in the everyday struggle to live and survive.

To this end, I analyze Kim Thúy’s *Ru* as a text that reorients the question of success to return the discussion to the specificities of embodied experience and subjectivity. This return, however, is not towards a privatizing discourse of the individual, identified by David Palumbo-Liu as marking model minority discourse; instead, it seeks an investigation of the particularities of experience that views individuals and individual negotiations as indexes of a larger sociality. Unlike theories of post-identity that try to do away with the notion of subjectivity—such as Kandice Chuh’s “subjectless discourse”—my approach insists that the problem of subjectivity remains a pertinent concern for constituencies who emerge in the wake of war and atrocities, for whom a whole and healed subjectivity might still be a desired and as yet unfulfilled hope.

In its depiction of a movement towards an intelligible, articulable, and coherent subjective self, *Ru* addresses a problematic central to the study of diasporas: how to conceive of the self when some segments of that self seem so incongruent and incompatible with other segments. Put otherwise, the novel raises the question of how it is possible for former refugee subjects to embody and live multiple, oftentimes discrepant meanings, memories, and histories. It is a question of how to occupy that interstitial space—theoretically celebrated but materially vexed—where the legal designation of refugee has dissolved but a sense of *refugeeness* still lingers. The manner in which *Ru* works through or “resolves” these issues provides an occasion to contemplate the meaning of success, especially as it manifests through expressions of gratitude. This section takes the idea of success not as the teleological destination of the American Dream, but as a node in the continual process of survival and subject formation for refugee Asian North American subjects. Focusing on the context of the Vietnamese diaspora, I argue that for refugee subjects, success can become a narrative device, a rhetorical strategy, and a mode of articulation for working through and understanding *their* experiences and memories.

THE GRATEFUL REFUGEE

Thus far, I have framed *Ru* in an Asian North American and Vietnamese diasporic context by employing American-centered criticism. This is due mainly to the fact that the bulk of literary and cultural productions as well as theoretical and critical scholarship by and on the Vietnamese diaspora have come out of the United States. I do not wish to elide the particularities of the Canadian context or to appropriate the novel as an “American” text, as has been done in the past with works such as Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*.[[14]](#footnote-14) I draw on scholarship that focuses on Vietnamese American experiences because many of the arguments, insights, and claims can be extrapolated and applied to other parts of the diaspora, such as Canada, where similar scholarly activity is only just emerging. Considering that the origin of mass Vietnamese migration at the end of the twentieth century is a direct result of American military presence in Southeast Asia, it is also difficult to speak of Viet Nam and its diaspora in isolation from the US. Thus, in the novel, Kim Thúy explicitly references the “American Dream” as a master discourse guiding the desires of refugees who have landed in Canada, and Quebec no less, where questions of sovereignty and separatism have long been contentious issues. Kim Thúy’s usage of the blanket phrase “American Dream” in a French-Canadian context not only points to the way American culture and ideology have become transnationally pervasive in the era of globalization, but it also reveals how Vietnamese scattered across the globe continue to remain connected to America through both a backward- and forward-looking gaze.

At the same time, this unique Quebecois Canadian context also complicates many of the arguments that have been made by scholars regarding refugees of the War in Viet Nam. Mainly, it poses the question of how those in places *outside* the United States relate to the socio-political-historical specificities of their respective national contexts *in addition to* dominant American discourses surrounding the war and its afterlife. For instance, Canada as a nation did not officially participate in the War in Viet Nam, and thus the terms on which it took in Vietnamese refugees are different from those of nations like the US, France, or Australia, which fought, at one time or another, in country with a defined agenda. In stressing this difference, my intention is not to reinforce what Jason Ziedenberg calls the “peaceable kingdom” mythology of Canadian benevolence and innocence or to diminish its complicity in a war that needs to be understood as a global racial project. In fact, it must be remembered that while Canada did not join the fighting effort, it acted as the chief arms supplier to the US, providing resources and materials that fueled combat and drove the war economy. This implicates Canada not only in the military-industrial complex, but also in a global war machine directed at racialized peoples during the Cold War era.

Further, historians like John Price have begun interrogating the triangulated connections between Canada, the United States, and Great Britain that have facilitated the circulation of shared racial discourses and imperial logics between these “Atlantic” nations.[[15]](#footnote-15) Though never having possessed an overseas empire, the Canadian nation has a long history of restricting Asian immigration based directly on racist and imperialist ideologies. Canada’s relation to its immigrants and refugees is directly shaped by its relationship with empires. These colonial values have also undergirded its foreign policy matters. Yet, a fine distinction needs to be made between the direct ways in which the US waged war in Viet Nam and Canada’s supporting or peripheral involvement. The point I wish to emphasize here, and will return to later, is that texts, narratives, and subjects from other parts of the Vietnamese diaspora may not fit neatly into some of the theoretical and interpretive frameworks that have been put forward by American scholars to date.

First published in French in Quebec (2009) to critical acclaim, *Ru* went on to receive a host of prestigious prizes, including Canada’s Governor General’s Literary Award for Fiction (French language), France’s Grand prix litteraire RTL-Lire, and Italy’s Mondello Prize for Multiculturalism. While the novel’s narrative arc and details resemble those of Kim Thúy’s own life story, the book was marketed not as a memoir but as a work of fiction, making it the first novel by a self-identified Vietnamese Canadian. Written in a structure that mimics short recollections of memory, the poetic fragments oscillate in both space and time, weaving together the narrator Nguyễn An Tịnh’s childhood in and escape from Vietnam and experiences of settling in Canada with reflections on diverse subjects such as motherhood, autism, prostitution, and Amerasians. Pieced together into a narrative, however, the novel’s story follows a conventional trajectory in which war disrupts the comforts of middle-class life, forcing migration and resettlement in a new country. After enduring numerous struggles, the narrator and her family successfully rebuild their lives through hard work, sacrifice, and the kindness of those around them, rising from the poverty of refugee migrants to the socio-economic success of model minority citizens.

It is undeniable that written into *Ru*’s narrative is a sense of thankfulness, a belief in the benevolence and generosity of the Canadian nation for providing the opportunities and the conditions for the possibility of life and “success.” How that belief circulates in Canadian society, while extremely important to understanding the cultural politics of gratitude, is not my primary concern here. The very fact that *Ru* received the kind of national and international recognition that it did reveals how liberal multicultural ideology responds to such minority voices, as well as the political stakes involved in official acknowledgement. Countless scholars, including Himani Bannerji and Sunera Thobani, have convincingly critiqued official state multiculturalism in Canada as a discourse that contains and manages “difference” in a way that maintains white privilege and hegemony. The ideological ends and implications of the mainstream exaltation of a refugee narrative like Kim Thúy’s is but one side of the multifaceted story; I am interested instead in thinking through how the refugee subject herself constructs a narrative of intersubjectivity that is able to integrate such beliefs into the formation of a (post) refugee identity. Kim Thúy has said that the novel is an homage to Canada and to the heroes of her past. *Ru* itself reads like a catalogue of gratitude to the people who have made the narrator’s present a reality. The task at hand is to read the novel *alongside* the interpretation whereby the refugee’s achievement of success and feelings of gratitude constitute a model minority discourse celebrating the goodness of liberal nationalism and multiculturalism.

*Ru*’s narrator represents what I call a grateful refugee. The figure of the grateful refugee is closely related to that of the highly assimilated and successful “good refugee.” The “good refugee” is often also constructed as a model minority, who is perceived as hardworking and resourceful and, through both innate and cultural qualities, is able to achieve educational, economic, and social success with no or very little assistance from the state. Model minorities are made visible as exemplary ethnic citizens and as disciplinary cases marginalizing other, less compliant minorities who speak out against racism and classism, and refuse to evince seeming independence from social structures for their livelihood.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The grateful refugee, as I conceive of it, can occupy the discursive and ideological positions of both the “good refugee” and/or the model minority simultaneously. In that way, it is vulnerable to the same critiques that have been launched against both these other discourses. The grateful refugee, however, provides us with a different lens, one less conditioned to liberal judgment, with which to consider the complicatedness of refugee experience. While the “good refugee” is a construct that ultimately directs us to the contours of the nation-state, the grateful refugee allows us to focus in on the lives of refugees themselves. As a figure, it carves out a critical space for the expression of various forms of immigrant success and for feelings of gratitude to those peoples, institutions, and nations that have in one way or another provided the opportunity for such successes to materialize without being necessarily or automatically regarded as fodder for ideology or ideological maneuverings. What *Ru* demonstrates is that the articulation of success through gratitude can be a powerful tool in making sense of traumatic pasts, and permits—as a technology of the self in the Foucauldian sense—a critical process of self (trans)formation.

GRATITUDE AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Kim Thúy presents us with a model of subjectivity predicated on gratitude, in which gratitude enables the refugee who has had the stability of meaning pulled away—home, nation, family, property, rights, dreams—to reconstruct a life and a sense of identity, and to link that self with others to create an understanding of the individual and individual success as mutually constitutive, shared, and collective. In this way, an expression of thankfulness towards Canada is a fundamental component of the biographical narrative that accounts for her present existence (as a Canadian citizen), one which came into being against the odds, in situations where survival and success were not in the realm of expectation or even possibility. Thus, in the novel she expresses gratitude to the Canadian nation through its nearest representatives, the small Quebec town of Granby and its inhabitants. Granby is described as a “warm belly” (21) and “heaven on earth” (25), while its people are characterized as “angels” who were sent down to earth to care for the refugees: “By the dozen they showed up at our doors to give us warm clothes, toys, invitations, dreams” (22-23). Employing maternal metaphors and images, the narrator characterizes the white Canadians who initially guided her and other refugees in their early days as mothers and caretakers. Marie-France, the narrator’s first teacher in Canada was “like a mother duck”: “she walked ahead of us, asking us to follow her to the haven where we would be children again . . . She watched over our transplantation with all the sensitivity of a mother for her premature baby” (9). Jeanne, another teacher, “liberated my voice without using words . . . It was thanks to [her] that I learned how to free my voice from the folds of my body so it could reach my lips” (97). This picture of a nurturing and inclusive Canada neatly aligns with official state multiculturalism; it also rehearses the common belief in Canada’s “white civility.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Yet, through the narration of gratitude, what also emerges are formative moments in which an inchoate idea of self, being, and futurity began to crystallize for the narrator: Jeanne’s example taught the silent refugee how to utilize her voice; the sway of Marie-France’s full bum gave the angular narrator her “first desire as an immigrant” (9) and the “power to look ahead, to look far ahead” (10); the kindness of Granby’s residents reaffirmed hope and the possibility of livelihood. Underscored here is the idea that Canada did in fact give her the chance to begin anew. Her present understanding of “successful” self thus requires an account of these moments through the form of thankfulness, especially because self—existence, livelihood, being, identity—was not a given, but was, at one point, on the brink of vanishing. The importance of gratitude, then, must be read in the context of the narrator’s experience of “nothingness” and “emptiness,” one of material and existential uncertainty, that threads through her narrative of refuge.

Analyzing Vietnamese refugee narratives, Sucheng Chan identifies “immense suffering, deprivation, loss, and violent uprooting” (*Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* 251) as common features of migration experiences. Many oral narratives and life stories, like those collected in *Voices of the Boat People* and *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* recount political persecution under a Communist regime that uses imprisonment, indoctrination, torture, and execution in re-education camps; social and economic oppression, like racial discrimination (in the case of mixed-race Amerasians and ethnic Chinese); the confiscation of property and the restriction of access to education and employment; and poverty and lack of future opportunities in under-developed, postwar Vietnam as reasons for fleeing the country. For those who escaped, the dangerous journeys often involved illness, starvation, and death, and many boats encountered deadly storms and pirates, who plundered the passengers and raped women and children, on the South China Sea.

*Ru*’s narrator provides a description of a boat journey, relaying in hauntingly sensuous and visceral images the paralyzing fear felt and lived collectively by herself and her fellow passengers as they sit waiting, drifting in the hold of their boat:

Heaven and Hell embraced in the belly of our boat. Heaven promised a turning point in our lives, a new future, a new history. Hell, though, displayed our fears: fear of pirates, fear of starvation, fear of poisoning by biscuits soaked in motor oil, fear of running out of water, fear of being unable to stand up, fear of having to urinate in the red pot that was passed from hand to hand, fear that the scabies on the baby’s head was contagious, fear of never again setting foot on solid ground, fear of never again seeing the faces of our parents, who were sitting in the darkness surrounded by two hundred people. . . . fear was transformed into a hundred-faced monster who sawed off our legs and kept us from feeling the stiffness in our immobilized muscles. We were frozen in fear, by fear. . . . We were numb, imprisoned by the shoulders of some, the legs of others, the fear of everyone. We were paralyzed. (4-5)

This terrorizing fear expressed by the narrator also reveals a suspension of subjectivity, where fear of the many threats to life forecloses futurity, constricting and petrifying the self in a physical, psychological, and affective hold. The stunting of hope or a “turning point,” a “new future,” and a “new history,” part and parcel of the migration process, is a necessary frame within which to read the narration of gratitude and success recounted in Kim Thúy’s novel. The expression of gratitude for a second chance at life and the narration of how that chance gets utilized need to be understood against a backdrop of an affective and material experience of absence and impossibility. Early in *Ru*, the narrator recalls how this condition of suspended self is exacerbated when the “empty” refugee comes into contact with the newness of Canada in another paralyzing moment—this one of arrival. Upon landing in Quebec, she writes, “I was . . . unable to talk or to listen, even though I was neither deaf nor mute. I now had no points of reference, no tools to allow me to dream, to project myself into the future, to be able to experience the present, in the present” (8).

The sense of physical and psychic disorientation is directly shaped by the time spent in the refugee camp. In a RCI radio interview, Kim Thúy describes the experience of living in a camp as a life-altering event in which “everything went down to zero” and thus “everything else came as a gift afterwards.” She continues, “after that four months of emptiness, of nothingness, you don’t compare with what you have before, you’re just, I’d say, thankful that you have a new life, that you have a new beginning. Starting over, you’re just thankful.” The characterizations of the camp as “empty” and the new life after the camp as a “gift” are two tropes in conventional articulations of a refugee affect of gratitude. Mimi Thi Nguyen calls this the “gift of freedom” that America confers on refugee subjects—indeed it produces a kind of un-being or “poisonous” subjectivity—as a debt to liberal empire. The grateful Vietnamese refugee, who is born from this gift of freedom, first through war then by refuge, is enshackled in an endless debt-payment relationship to the state and its imperial logics. Here, because recompense through gratefulness is always incommensurate to the gift, it compels obligation by tying the debtor to the debtee, binding the refugee to liberalism’s governance and its past, present, and future empires of freedom. Among other things, Mimi Thi Nguyen demonstrates how gratitude dangerously slips into indebtedness.

Though illuminating in the way it reveals the complex forms of power and violence at play in obliging the refugee to give thanks, Nguyen’s analysis does not account for the situation whereby the state power in question is *not* “an uncontested superpower on the world stage” that “instrumentalizes an idea of human freedom . . . to reinforce a politics of war, terror, and occupation” (xi). In other words, the concepts of debt and gratitude take on different significations outside the United States, for instance, in contexts like Canada—a nation that is not a global military power committed to a politics of defending the free world against terrorism, a nation that did not directly bring about the upheaval and displacement of Vietnamese populations but did play an important role in their rescue.[[18]](#footnote-18) Much of the ally guilt and what Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan term “calculated kindness”—the strategic rescue and admittance of refugees directed by a Cold War anti-communist ideology—woven into US policy is missing from Canada’s decision to admit Vietnamese asylum seekers.[[19]](#footnote-19) To be clear, I am not simply advocating a position of Canadian moral superiority or global benevolence. My suggestion here, and *Ru* provides a good example, is that a different relationship between the Vietnamese refugee and the state arises in the Canadian context. For a grateful Vietnamese-Canadian refugee like *Ru*’s narrator, gratitude does not necessarily bind her (or him) to liberalism’s empire of freedom, because the nation did not extend, in the first instance, that violent “gift” to the refugees it took into its care. Thus, one of the major contradictions of refugee gratitude—that it elides the historical forces that created the conditions of flight and the need for asylum-seeking in the first place—is ameliorated when the recipient of that gratitude did not directly and actively create those very conditions.

But, as *Ru*’s public reception demonstrates, gratitude towards Canada affixes the refugee, like a piece of a puzzle, into the hegemonic mosaic of Canadian multiculturalism. The “stickiness” of gratitude that Mimi Thi Nguyen culls out in her analysis remains, and this adhesion bears further critical elaboration. At the end of her book, Nguyen takes a turn from her line of argument to gesture at alternate attachments to debt that have the potential to trouble the oppressive force of freedom. She writes,

[a]gainst the commodity logic of race, gender, or property, can we think of debt as producing another economy of intense contact with all the multiple, heterogeneous, not-same strangers . . . Clearly we cannot acquit the debt (indeed, we cannot but default), but, moreover, we can refuse to be circumscribed by the horizons of significance or obligation brought to bear on us . . . Debt points toward a different social order, keeping us in contact with alternate collectivities of others who bear the trace of human freedom that falls apart, or seizes hold, in its giving. (189)

Here, Nguyen opens up different possibilities and directions for debt attachments. The debt incurred by the gift of freedom may in fact become the very basis for the emergence of alternate forms of resistance, solidarity, and sociality; it may facilitate contacts and engagements that are unintended byproducts of violent freedom. My contention that gratitude—as a kind of debt repayment—can also facilitate the formation of “post”-refugee intersubjectivity builds on Nguyen’s prompt, but is in no way a full or complete response to her complex treatment of the “subject” under the layered envelopments of freedom. What I suggest, however, is that gratitude can engender the kinds of multiple attachments that constitute diasporic refugee subjects and communities.

In my formulation, gratitude can be regarded as an affect or social feeling—as theorized by Sara Ahmed and Teresa Brennan, among others—produced in moments of contact and exchange between the refugee and the state and its extensions—that is, as a “structure of feeling” in Raymond Williams’ sense, both produced in and constitutive of social moments. As such it exists in the interstices as a binding agent, linking subjects and institutions together within a larger socio-political and cultural field. Yet, gratitude’s ability to attach also allows the refugee to exist as part of a larger sociality and think of the self and its successes beyond terms of individuality. If gratitude is a binding agent, functioning to secure the refugee to the state in an interminable relation of debt-repayment, as in the American context, or to position the ethnic immigrant as an included and participating member in a multicultural mosaic dominated by a white, Anglo-Francophone dyad, as in the Canadian case, it can also facilitate the fastening of the refugee to *other subjects*—kin, lovers, teachers, kind strangers, benefactors, communities—and thus provide a potential model of subjectivity based on relationality, connectivity, and sociality.

*Ru* instantiates the various ways in which gratitude can be directed, as well as its multiple receiving objects and/or subjects. Feelings of gratitude are not solely directed at white Canadians or the Canadian nation, but also at other refugees and survivors. Thus, in addition to a celebration of Canada, the novel makes room for telling of the generosities, wisdoms, and altruisms of those “small” individuals who have had a hand in saving the narrator’s life and in shaping the contours of her subjectivity. For example, she pays tribute to Anh Phi, a family friend who found and returned the lost taels of gold the narrator’s family eventually used to pay for their passage out of Vietnam. His selfless and heroic act during postwar Vietnam’s “chaotic peacetime,” where “it was the norm for hunger to replace reason, for uncertainty to usurp morality” (89), established the condition of possibility for any kind of physical existence for the narrator and her family. Her aunt Six, who labored in a chicken processing plant in Quebec, enabled the narrator to form her own dreams of the future. By giving the narrator a simple gift of ten pieces of paper, each containing a different profession, her aunt showed her that there were other options besides medicine, a career that many refugee parents expect their children to enter into because of its professional prestige, earning potential, and perceived stability. She writes that, “[i]t was thanks to that gift . . . that I was allowed to dream my own dreams” (76).

Furthermore, the narrator describes how Monsieur An, a survivor of the communist re-education prisons, taught her about the important notion of nuance. His tale of facing the barrel of the execution gun and surviving through a defiant upward gaze to search for the sky’s blue colour is a lesson in the importance of life’s subtleties and the niceties of meaning. Monsieur Minh, another re-education survivor, who had “written” many books in his mind, “always on the one piece of paper he possessed, page by page, chapter by chapter, an unending story,” during his incarceration, was “saved . . . by writing” (88). He gave her the “urge to write” (88) and the gift of words, showing the narrator the power of stories and storytelling in the struggle to stay alive. In addition, the narrator reveals how her parents, who were “unable to look ahead of themselves” because of the opportunities closed off to them in Canada “looked ahead of us, for us, their children” (10). She emphasizes, “[f]or us, they didn’t see the blackboards they wiped clean, the school toilets they scrubbed, the imperial rolls they delivered. They saw only what lay ahead” (11). The gratitude expressed establishes her parents’ hard work and sacrifice as the foundation for the narrator’s own success, and renders the “gifts”—material and immaterial—from various individuals as fragments that fit together to create a conception of a future self.

Vignettes of intersubjectivity such as those mentioned above are littered throughout *Ru*. Taken together, they sketch and constellate a subject whose boundaries are expansive, whose constitution is based on multiplicity, whose presence is built on the sediments of others. It is possible, then, to view the narrator’s act of writing as a cataloguing or indexing of gratitude, one that actively gathers moments of self-emergence and -creation. Writing generates the self through the citation of others. Hence, the fragmentary and elliptical structure of the novel not only mimics the nature of everyday storytelling and memory, something Kim Thúy has said she tried to capture during the writing process, it also reflects the narrator’s method of self-construction. From this perspective, the self is an assemblage of others, an archive of, in the words of Judith Butler, the “enigmatic traces of others” (46). As a refugee who started with next to nothing in a foreign place, the narrator relies on individuals around her to provide the dreams, lessons, and material foundations for the formation of a wholly unique and legible self. In other words, the impression of others gives shape to the self, which becomes a network of interpersonal contact and relations. Gratitude, as an affect or emotion that has the potential to catalyze this process of intersubjectivity, enacts Ahmed’s understanding of emotion’s role in the social arena: “it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (10).

OBLIVION AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Intersubjectivity, performed in the novel through narrativization, presupposes remembrance in order to establish a complex, hybrid presence. As a constructivist modality, intersubjectivity is generative, drawing on and creating memories, subjectivities, and relations. Also part of the process, however, is the role of forgetting. In *Ru*, forgetting is a fraught process, crucial to survival and reinvention yet lamented as a kind of loss. The erasure of the past contrasts starkly with the accumulative pursuit of the American dream. *Ru*’s narrator characterizes this dream, this ideal of success, which sits on the horizon for new immigrants, as something material and tangible that can eventually be grasped, put on (to the body), and occupied.

To become the dream, or to have the dream become a part of you, means to be indelibly changed, to gain an addition or extension, but also to lose something in the process. She tells us that “[f]or many immigrants, the American dream has come true” (74); “[o]nce it’s achieved, though, the American dream never leaves us, like a graft or an excrescence” (77). Here, the attainment of success, the accumulation of social, cultural, and economic capital latches onto the body and weighs the subject down even as it propels her “upward.” In a scene of (mis)recognition, the narrator describes how a waiter in a Hanoi restaurant was taken aback when she, on a return trip, spoke Vietnamese to him. Explaining his surprise, the waiter tells her that she was “too fat to be Vietnamese” (77). She then goes on to reflect: “I understood later that he was talking not about my forty-five kilos but about the American dream that had made me more substantial, heavier, weightier. That American dream had given confidence to my voice, determination to my actions, precision to my desires, speed to my gait and strength to my gaze. That American dream made me believe I could have everything” (77). Revealed in this encounter are the physical and psychic ways in which the American dream alters those who come into contact with it. Success functions to mold the refugee into another guise of being, one that may not be identifiable or reconcilable with past versions of the self: “the young waiter reminded me that I couldn’t have everything, that I no longer had the right to declare I was Vietnamese because I no longer have their fragility, their uncertainty, their fears” (78).

Success thus creates gaps—distances between experiences, or elliptical spaces in the continuity of identity. For many refugees who have “succeeded,” present prosperity and past suffering become points of contradiction. Such contradictions emerge precisely through asylum, where a (relatively) “successful” life in the “post” makes the experience of refuge seem like *another life*.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the novel, this condition of tension and incongruity is poignantly elucidated in an episode where the narrator points to the irony that accompanies success through the example of her Aunt and Step-uncle Six. Describing how they currently lead a comfortable life in Canada, especially in comparison to their refugee past, she writes: “Nowadays . . . [t]hey travel first class and have to stick a sign on the back of their seat so the hostesses will stop offering them chocolates and champagne. Thirty years ago, in our Malaysian refugee camp, the same Step-uncle Six crawled more slowly than his eight-month-old daughter because he was suffering from malnutrition. And the same Aunt Six used the one needle she had to sew clothes so she could buy milk for her daughter” (74). The disjuncture that the American dream brings about necessitates a way of negotiating differing realities that press against the limits of a coherent conception of self. Forgetting, in the way that it mitigates these contradictions, offers the possibility of a subjectivity that is legible to the subject who must negotiate and live it herself.

In her analysis of Vietnamese diasporic popular culture, Nhi T. Lieu argues that “the formation of contemporary Vietnamese American identities . . . rests simultaneously on resisting the refugee image as well as constructing a middle-class ethnic identity under consumer capitalism” (xvii). Lieu’s formulation pivots, on the one hand, on the shedding of a past life, whether that refugee life was experienced first-hand or inherited through immersion in a diasporic social field, and on the other hand, on the assumption of a new idea of life and social existence. This project of identity formation through hybrid cultural forms that define a new, bourgeois Vietnamese ethnic identity within multicultural America is described as a translation of the “American Dream” to Vietnamese. The larger arc of Lieu’s argument posits forgetting as a means of subjectivity, one that attempts “erasure” of the impoverished refugee image that circulates widely and has the potential to constrain Vietnamese (diasporic) subjects.

While *Ru* does not resist the refugee image—in fact, it reproduces refugee experiences as a means of visibility—it speaks to Lieu’s argument in the portrayal of oblivion, the conscious forgetting of a refugee past, as a strategy that allows the former refugee to exist in the present moment of success without mental torment, psychic split, and affective guilt or shame. In one narrative fragment, the narrator brings us into a “smoky lounge,” where she socializes with friends and strangers, exposing herself as she regales them with bits of her past “as if they were anecdotes or comedy routines or amusing tales from far-off lands featuring exotic landscapes, odd sound effects and exaggerated characterizations” (136). The narrator is aware, in this candid moment, of how her past becomes a spectacle for white, mainstream consumption. As she performs this ethnic minstrelsy, however, she is not only catering to the desires and expectations of a particular audience hungry for stories of trauma, but also rendering the traumatic past for herself in a particular way that can be accommodated by the present. Put differently, the “selling-out” or “bastardization” of her past allows the narrator to forget, or, to let forgetting shape memory. She admits:

I like the red leather of the sofa in the cigar lounge . . . When I sit in that smoky lounge, I forget that I’m one of the Asians who lack the dehydrogenase enzyme for metabolizing alcohol, I forget that I’m marked with a blue spot on my backside, like the Inuit, like my sons, like all those with Asian blood. I forget the mongoloid spot that reveals the genetic memory because it vanished during the early years of childhood, and my emotional memory has been lost, dissolving, snarling with time. (136)

It is this critical work of forgetting, which may be characterized negatively as assimilation, that enables the “post”-refugee subject to accommodate the profound contradictions, the existential ironies, and the complications that make daily life difficult or impossible to live. Most importantly, forgetting, rather than creating the breaks and fractures of identity, makes critical space for them to occur—in a less devastating way—within the conception of a coherent and livable self.

The narrator goes on to explain how forgetting permits actions in the present that may seem foreign and unexplainable in the context of the past. She tells us that the fissures of forgetting, what she calls “estrangement,” “detachment,” and “distance,” “allow me to buy, without any qualms and with full awareness of what I’m doing, a pair of shoes whose price in my native land would be enough to feed a family of five for one whole year” (137). A Marxist critique might view the narrator’s explanation as a neoliberal rationalization of middle-class capitalist consumerism, but I suggest that this statement pinpoints a *difficult moment of living*, a moment knotted with contradiction and irony for the subject who was once a refugee, who still retains the memories of that experience but is also distanced from it, who has known impoverishment and has been touched by the hands of success. To “forget” in such moments is not simply a matter of a newly (recovered) middle-class self effacing its un-middle-class components for continuity. Rather, the novel presents us with a theory of selfhood that demonstrates how “impossible” versions of oneself must be actively “forgotten” or remembered differently in order for the self to experience itself as a reality. In buying the pair of shoes, the narrator is participating in capitalism, replacing a past of deprivation through an act of opulence, claiming an existence without guilt—she is both forgetting and remembering to *become*. Here, there is an emotional form of labor involved in coming to terms with such a purchase, a form of labor that reveals the demands of memory, of living in the “post.”

For the narrator, these difficult moments are lived, experienced, and contained “[w]hen we’re able to float in the air, to separate ourselves from our roots—not only by crossing an ocean and two continents but by distancing ourselves from our condition as stateless refugees, from the empty space of an identity crisis” (137).

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

Yet, what the quotidian requires one to “forget” in the act of living and survival the body remembers. Even as she speaks of the necessity of forgetting, *Ru*’s narrator recounts a transcendent moment of recognition in which the sight of an immunization scar—one that many immigrants acquire as a prerequisite for border entry—precipitates a kind of communion, a conjuring, a (re)kindling of memory. She writes:

. . . I was approached in a gas station by a Vietnamese man who had recognized my vaccination scar. One look at that scar took him back in time and let him see himself as a little boy walking to school along a dirt path with his slate under his arm . . . One look at that scar and our tropical roots, transplanted onto land covered with snow, emerged again. In one second we had seen our own ambivalence, our hybrid state: half this, half that, nothing at all and everything at once. A single mark on the skin and our entire shared history was spread between two gas pumps in a station by a highway exit. (132)

As a shared history, a common experience of homeland and migration is remembered a new sense of identity is revealed for the narrator and the anonymous man: the diasporic state of “half this, half that, nothing at all and everything at once.” The painful history of displacement, interlaced with nostalgic joy, is condensed in the bodily mark of citizenship. The retention of such memories in the form of a scar, no matter how painful, allows both refugees to accommodate the disparities, differences, and ambivalences that constitute the self. In other words, memory in conjunction with oblivion permits a kind of complex personhood, where, according to Avery Gordon, “people . . . remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (4).

Khatharya Um writes, “[w]hen refugees cast their sight onto the past, it is not simply nostalgia but a way of reconnecting with the many parts of their selves, of bridging this present that still shocks them with its foreignness, with a past that is familiar even in its painful reveal, and inspiring *because* of its painful reveal” (“Exiled Memory” 847). For the refugees of America’s war in Southeast Asia, memory acts as a connective, as a way of being so that existence is simply possible, to survive in a present haunted by the past and facing a still uncertain future. Remembering, then, is not an act that indulges in a bygone era or one that longs for that which has been lost, but an active practice that pieces together the broken shards of selfhood. In its “painful reveal,” memory facilitates an emergence in the present, a legible subjectivity not necessarily burdened by a pathological splintering.

The objective of this section was not simply to rehearse the experiences of loss and trauma that mark Vietnamese refugees—a vast body of literature, including artistic/literary and academic, that does this already exists. My insistence that we consider the trauma in tandem with, or as context for, success and its articulation through gratitude is an attempt to express that the specificity of experience *matters*, that it has material implications and should factor into our interpretations and critiques. That said, the abjection of refugee migration experiences and the sometimes “successful” endings do not justify a kind of patriotic gratitude that can become congratulatory, triumphal, and regulatory. Indeed it only comes to bear partial meaning in an experience that is so complex and heterogeneous, wrought with tensions, contradictions, and elusive or slippery significations. What this section has tried to do was open up a dialogue on how a different way of approaching and thinking through gratitude and success might be valuable to understanding “post”-refugee subjects who have passed through war and “rescue.” Individual and collective success is thus not simply to be critiqued or defended, but engaged in a way that gets to the complexities of experience and positionality.

II.

THE GRATEFUL PILGRIM

On March 18, 2014, Tri Nguyen, a Baptist pastor, and his team of three Iranian asylum seekers, set out on a walking pilgrimage from Brunswick, a suburb of Melbourne, to Canberra, the capital city of Australia and the seat of its government. Pulled along on the journey was a miniature replica of the boat on which the pastor and his family fled Vietnam to seek refuge in Australia in 1982. Emblazoned on the wooden boat are two words: “Thank You.” The plan was to walk the boat across three states and multiple country towns—traveling over 670 kilometers—to arrive at their destination on Good Friday and present the boat to Parliament as a gesture of gratitude for the “gift of refuge” the Nguyen family received three decades earlier. Nguyen explains that he wanted to thank Australia and its people for providing political asylum and for showing hospitality to the family. He writes, “[we] were given the most hospitable welcome and care by the people of Australia. We arrived at Midway Hostel, in Maribyrnong in 1982, with nothing in our hands. We were weary and overwhelmed, but the care and generosity of people fill us with great joy. We were free and we were welcome!” (Nguyen, Tri n. pag.)

For the Nguyen family, newly conferred freedom in Australia was enhanced by welcome, by admittance into social and affective formations of belonging. Foremost in these reception efforts were a group of people from the Moonee Ponds Baptist Church, who integrated the family into their community, eventually helping to sponsor Nguyen’s mother, who had stayed behind in Vietnam, to come to Australia and reunite with the family after eight years of separation. Such acts of kindness “overwhelmed” Nguyen’s father, who converted to Christianity two years after their arrival, despite coming from a very devout Buddhist background. It was also the inspiration for Nguyen’s eventual entry into the ministry and his life-long work with underprivileged and marginalized youths. In his emphatic display of refugee gratitude, the expression of patriotism is, at the same time, one of religious devotion, an affirmation of God’s magnanimity; or, what David Steindl-Rast calls “transpersonal gratitude,” a recognition of God’s presence and a “peak experience” of his grace (286-7). This deep religious element of the pilgrimage is an example of the layered complexity of gratitude, in which the refugee’s “thankful/indebted” relation to the nation-state is mediated by multiple social and (inter)personal circumstances, where an individual’s life is indelibly shaped by feelings of gratitude arising from sources *in conjunction with and/or other than* the asylum-granting power.

It is impossible to untangle the intertwining of nationalism and religion in Nguyen’s experience of gratitude, and it would be reductive to consider such inextricability as equivalency; rather, it demonstrates that gratitude is not one-dimensional or monolithic—an unadulterated exaltation of the nation—but is instead intersectional, heterogeneously composed, and ultimately irreducible. Like *Ru*’s narrator, the figure of the grateful refugee in Tri Nguyen’s “The Gift of Refuge” allows us to parse out the nuances and particularities of affective expressions that may, on the surface, seem to categorically and/or uncritically praise the nation, to paint a picture of democratic liberalism and generosity that reifies the nation-state as the exceptional site of socio-political life and freedom. Nguyen’s pilgrimage conjures up an image of Australia’s benevolence—indeed, his life is incontrovertible testament to such benevolence—but for a particular end in addition to and beyond a simple “thank you.” Embedded in his public display of gratitude is a criticism of Australia’s current immigration and refugee regime as well as an appeal for compassion and hospitality towards vulnerable asylum seekers. In other words, *alongside* gratitude is a critical questioning, a pushing of the limits of the nation and its ideological constitution.

During the Canada Reads 2015 debate discussed earlier, Cameron Bailey and Craig Kielburger expressed a similar argument regarding Kim Thuy’s narrative of immigrant success and gratitude—that a “good” immigrant story can compel the nation-state to be and do better, rather than simply or uncritically supporting its tenets. At the beginning of the competition, Kielburger believed that the narrator’s (and Kim Thuy’s) settlement in Canada “just came so easily for her,” adding “the barriers melt away for her” (“Canada Reads 2015” n. pag.). Yet, mid-way through, Kielburger changed his mind. He explains, “I realized I actually brought a prejudice into reading the book, because I thought the immigrant story *had* to be difficult to be an immigrant story, and you *had* to see someone struggle … look at Canada, one of the reasons we hold back from welcoming more immigrants is because we have *one* image in our mind. I look at the Vietnamese example—it was amazing, 50,000 people were welcomed in two years, very successfully, and then I look at Syria and last year we welcomed 13,000” (n. pag.). For him, *Ru*’s power rests in its ability to demonstrate that Canada was once “kind and gracious” (n. pag.), and to press the question of whether “we can repeat that generosity of spirit” (n. pag.). Casting his vote for Kim Thuy’s novel, Kielburger argues that it breaks barriers by asking: “Can we as a country be a compassionate country? Do we want to approach immigration from a place of scarcity or abundance?” (n. pag.). Echoing Kielburger, Bailey, pronounces: “the future of Canada is as a migrant nation … the question for me is can we open our doors to migrants, can we open our hearts to the people already here, who’ve come from elsewhere? And I think that’s what *Ru* does. That is our future” (n. pag.). Such questions are precisely the ones raised by Tri Nguyen’s pilgrimage. While differing in form and context, expressions of refugee gratitude in both *Ru* and “The Gift of Refuge” can signal a complex shoring up of the nation that simultaneously questions its constitution.

The genesis of the pilgrimage was sparked when an increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers began showing up at Nguyen’s church. The pastor saw many similarities between his own story of refuge in the 1980s and those of contemporary migrants. One crucial difference, however, was the restrictive and hostile environment that current refugees encountered as they reached Australia: “their situation is a lot more difficult than mine, coming to an Australia that is not hospitable” (“Spirit of Life” n. pag.) Recalling his arrival decades earlier with a sense of nostalgia, Nguyen says, “It was an amazing time to be a refugee, cause we were so welcome and care by the community [sic]” (“Spirit of Life” n. pag.). Thirty years after the Vietnamese “boat people” found shelter in Australia, the socio-political landscape around asylum has changed radically. Over the past two decades, successive governments have built a refugee system based on aggressive restrictions and deterrence rather than humanitarian welcome. Wanting to effect change, but having little experience with politics and policy, Nguyen decided to embark on another kind of boat journey, this time to plead asylum (symbolic and otherwise) for those who lack the rights and protection within the framework of nationality and citizenship to make their own case. A major aim of the pilgrim is to fight for the extension of refuge to contemporary asylum seekers. He explains, “I wanted to do something symbolic that changes the political conversations, to be something positive” (“Spirit of Life” n. pag.)

“The Gift of Refuge,” then, is a cultural intervention, a project of advocacy and activism that attempts to raise awareness and influence the direction of public debate and political discourse. The project utilizes gratitude as a form of visibility, as a topical occasion to voice an agenda—a grievance—that might otherwise not receive attention and exposure within the national mainstream. The impetus to express gratitude is the tragic recognition that many asylum seekers will never have the opportunity to make similar emotional pronouncements. Nguyen’s recalling of the past—his experience of boat migration—through gratitude is an attempt to illustrate what the present and the future *could be*, to provide an alternative possibility (one that *has been*) to the inhospitable and at times inhumane approach to dealing with foreign migrants. In Tri Nguyen’s pilgrimage “The Gift of Refuge,” the display and celebration of thankfulness to the Australian nation is not so much prompted by an obligation of debt (although it is, of course, part of the equation) but rather, more significantly, a feeling of dissonance, an unease with political discourse and government policies. Public gratitude here is a reminder that the nation is capable of better; it rehearses a version of national conduct more in line with its stated commitment to democracy and official multiculturalism.

Nguyen’s pilgrimage enacts what I call *strategic gratitude*, the deployment of gratitude for a particular purpose, a certain political end. The expression of grateful feeling is, on one level, a tactical calculation that contains an awareness of its social viability, political valences, and capacity to move emotionally. Yet the feeling is not insincere or false; in fact, it is the opposite—the heartfelt genuineness of Nguyen’s gratitude is precisely what draws in wider attention and compels ordinary citizens to offer their approval and lend assistance to his cause. The honesty of feelings is what *affects*. Gratitude thus serves multiple functions simultaneously—an expression of thanks and a publicity generating performance, an exaltation of the nation and a commitment to social justice work, a mode of remembrance that looks forward to a more humane future. In what follows I analyze Tri Nguyen’s “The Gift of Refuge” as a public performance of refugee gratitude—looking at social media (a Facebook page, a Twitter account, and an official website) and online news coverage of the pilgrimage—and how it offers an understanding of gratefulness that goes beyond obligation and praise (as repayment) to encompass dissent and dissatisfaction, where gratitude also occasions an opportunity for socio-political critique and the work of social advocacy.

AUSTRALIA’S REFUGEE REGIME

In the headline for a news article in *The Age*, a Melbourne daily, Susan Metcalfe, author of *The Pacific Solution*, declares: “Australia’s asylum seeker policy is breaking people” (n. pag.). Describing what she calls the “government’s war on asylum seekers,” Metcalfe points out that “Over numerous years, some of our politicians, radio shock jocks and other media commentators have made up their own context of implied criminality, distrust and suspicion, and projected it onto asylum seekers – and this has undoubtedly had an impact on the way asylum seekers are treated” (n. page). In their book *Refugees: Why Asylum Seeking Is Legal and Australia’s Policies Are Not*, Jane McAdam and Fiona Chong similarly observe: “Certain problematic notions about refugees and asylum seekers appear to have taken root in the Australian community. These have led a growing number of ordinary Australians – decent, kind and well-meaning people – to support tough ‘border protection’ measures, ostensibly designed to ‘stop the boats’ and ‘save lives at sea’” (n. page).

This troubling discourse of refugee threat and criminality forms what Richard Devetak calls “Australia’s politics of fear.” He remarks that, “By asking Australians to believe that asylum-seekers pose an existential threat to the nation, the government was exploiting a persistent fear, perhaps paranoia, in Australia’s national psyche – one that extends from the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901 to the *Border Protection Act* of 2001” (107). A deep social anxiety about racial purity and foreign “invasion” stretching back to the nation’s early beginnings continues to shape a wider cultural discourse on and around asylum seekers that has, in turn, significantly determined Australia’s contemporary politics. The construction of asylum seekers—particularly those arriving by boat—as *illegal migrants* forms the basis of justification for the country’s approach to refugees, one defined by detention, offshore processing, and turning back boats at sea. If the current refugee regime in Australia is largely a product of discourse, representation, and collective “mood,” then it is fitting that activist interventions target ways of thinking and feeling as a way of promoting social and political transformation. “The Gift of Refuge” addresses problematic and commonplace understandings of asylum/seekers that circulate both in parliament and the general public. Its emotional appeal, through gratitude, aims to *affect*, to reorient public opinion and action.

According to Sharon Pickering and Caroline Lambert, deterrence is the cornerstone of contemporary Australian refugee policy. They state, “Australia now operates a refugee policy that assumes that refugees *can* and *should* be effectively deterred from both claiming and gaining refugee status. It is a policy that operates across a boom and bust cycle, or lurching from crisis to crises, across governments of liberal and labor persuasion” (65). The biggest point of contention (and anxiety) for the government is the direct *onshore arrival*—a mode of entry deemed illegal by Australia, even though appropriate and legal by UN Convention standards—of asylum seekers on Australian shores. Appearing on boats and without visa documentation, they are characterized as unscrupulous, because many have paid “people smugglers” to take them out to sea and also because they are supposedly attempting to “jump the queue,” taking the spot of those who patiently wait to be processed in countries of first asylum such as Malaysia or Indonesia. As a result, the credibility of their claims for asylum gets called into question. Many of the draconian policies then, are aimed at asylum seekers arriving on boats, even though, “[o]ver the past 20 years, more than 90% of boat people have ultimately been assessed as refugees” (Burnside n. page). Nguyen’s invocation of the boat in his pilgrimage, while holding personal meaning, also resonates with the primary targets of Australian policies. The boat vessel, Nguyen wants to remind the public, carries those in need, those who have gone through incredible hardship and trauma to ask for help rather than those who pose security threats to the nation. It also carries, in the “Thank You” embodied by his replica, the feelings that are inspired by and encourage a more compassionate treatment of refugees.

A quick survey of policy highlights of the past two decades will give context to Nguyen’s activist performance. Beginning in the 1990s, a practice of mandatory detention was introduced: all asylum seekers arriving without a visa were detained for unspecified amounts of time. This practice of incarceration has endured into present times. In 1999, a category of Temporary Protection Visa (TVP) was created, which, as opposed to permanent protection, allowed for very restricted rights and access to social services, and required reassessment of refugee status every three years, keeping refugees in continual limbo. TVPs were abolished in 2008 but have since been revived in 2013 by the Abbott government. In 2001, the Tampa Crisis, in which a Norwegian freighter carrying 433 Afghan refugees rescued at sea was denied entry into Australian territory, prompted the passage of the *Border Protection Act* (or the Pacific Solution). The Solution “was devised whereby all intercepted ‘boatpeople’ would have their asylum applications processed offshore in Nauru, PNG or New Zealand. They would henceforth be prevented from landing on Australian territory. This is consistent with ‘the logics of camps, counting, and control’, which have come to shape state practices in recent years” (Devetak 105). The Rudd Labor government put a stop to the Pacific Solution in 2008, but the Gillard Labor government reintroduced it in 2012. Aid workers have described conditions in offshore processing facilities on islands such as Nauru, where there have been numerous protests and riots, as well as incidents of self-harm and suicide attempts, as “cruel and degrading” (Isaacs n. page). Most recently, Australia has made controversial attempts to resettle refugees in other countries; Cambodia is the first country to sign a memorandum of understanding with Australia to receive refugees in exchange for $40 million in development funds.

In contrast to the explicit contempt for refugees that marks the contemporary moment, Australia handled the refugee crisis in the wake of the War in Viet Nam in a relatively more compassionate manner. Commenting on Australia’s participation in the international response to the Indochinese refugee “exodus,” W. Courtland Robinson writes, “Over a 20-year span from 1975 to 1995 Australia resettled more than 137,000 Indochinese refugees … on a *per capita* basis, more than any other country in the world” (151). Having only repealed its *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901 (White Australia Policy), which restricted Asian immigration, in 1973, the influx of Southeast Asian refugees into the country represented a major shift in its demographic landscape. In total, 185,000 refugees were resettled in Australia by the end of the 1990s. As Robinson notes, this significant number demonstrates Australia’s new commitment to Asian migration and international refugee resettlement. Despite anxiety and apprehension around their arrival, Southeast Asian refugees were resettled in a comparatively “smooth” fashion: “New arrivals spent an average of 15 weeks in … hostels, where they had access to housing and employment counselling, dental and medical care, orientation classes, and intensive language instruction, all funded by the federal government” (Robinson 153). The Australian response was not perfect; in fact, it revealed how the state was “deeply reluctant to play the role of asylum country” (Robinson 155). Yet, the relative willingness to receive Southeast Asian refugees, and the availability of state resources for them, stands in sharp distinction from contemporary attitudes. It is this disjuncture between past and present that Nguyen highlights in his pilgrimage, making the point that things have not always been this way, and they do not have to be.

“CAUSING A RIPPLE IN A POND”

“The Gift of Refuge” uses the personal as a point of embarkment, as a way to draw attention to larger social issues. A past experience of Vietnamese boat passage becomes a means of emphasizing the plight of contemporary asylum seekers in Australia, who mostly come from Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. The second post on the official website, dated Friday October 18, 2013, is a highly intimate note of thanks to Australia, detailing the harrowing journey the Nguyen family undertook to reach Australia in the 1980s. It begins on the sea and rehearses a typical trajectory of Vietnamese boat escape narrative:

My family made several traumatic attempts to escaped Vietnam after the war. It was the fourth of these attempts that we made it out to the open sea, however this time with only half of the family able to get out. We then endured four days in a raging storm, which almost swallow us to the deep. The waves took us to an unknown island, where our boat finally fell apart. Before we could rejoice that we were alive, we were surrounded by pirates, who took anything that was of valued. We were then caged, tortured and some were harmed for a few days, before they gave us up to United Nations Troops, who took us to a refugee camp on an Island call Pulau Bidong, just of Kuala Lumpur. After a few months, My father sister and I were the few fortunate among the 68 in our boat from Vietnam, that were accepted to come to Australia [sic]. (Nguyen, Tri n. pag.)

Containing features common to “boat people” testimonies such as multiple escape attempts, storms, pirates, etc., Nguyen’s story importantly calls attention to the perils of seeking refuge in a *boat*. As it elicits sympathy by drawing on sentimentalist tropes to characterize refugee experience, the autobiographical story also establishes the context for gratitude, for the incredible value of shelter that will have been given; what makes asylum so precious is the difficulty and danger it took to get there. While unabashedly sentimental, such a narrative of trauma has a cachet, a certain cultural capital in the national mainstream. The story of the pitiful refugee is compelling. It is invoked here to intensify the good of the gift, to demonstrate, in a feel-good way, how far the refugee can/has gone and to craft a *remarkable* story. Thus, when Nguyen ends his note with, “Thank you for giving my family this gift of refuge and freedom and thank you for your extraordinary hospitality and care. You have model to me what life can be and what is worth working for,” the expression of gratitude gains a resonance that unequivocally testifies to the utter importance of both providing and receiving asylum.

Beginning his project with such a pronouncement of gratitude, I suggest, is a tactic for Nguyen to generate publicity, to gain a platform. If gratitude is easily recognized and processed, then the note, which gives the rationale for his pilgrimage, makes the refugee and his cause *visible* to the nation and its subjects. It exalts the nation in order for the (former) refugee to emerge into public consciousness. In Nguyen’s gratitude, Australia functions as a “model” of generosity and goodness, one that has *produced* the grateful refugee’s own sense of altruism and justice. His advocacy for other refugees and asylum seekers, Nguyen wants to convey, is a quintessentially *Australian* quality, intrinsic to its national constitution, even if laws and policies may not reflect such principles. The notion of “modeling,” then, is central to Nguyen’s performance of refugee gratitude. The emphatic act of pulling a boat, as a gift, across the land is a form of repayment for a good received, but it “repays” the nation by mimicking what it has done and can do (but refuses to do in the present) by literally and symbolically showing hospitality to asylum seekers.

As mentioned earlier, Nguyen traveled with three Iranian asylum seekers: Majid, Mohammad (Daniel), and Linda. Not much is known about them except that, at the time of the journey, they had been in Australia for only nine months. Part of the reason they remain somewhat anonymous throughout the trip is that, having been released from detention but not yet offered visas, their asylum claims were still pending. These fellow pilgrims play a vital role in the performance of refugee gratitude: they are grateful even though the gift of refuge has not yet been conferred on them, even though their lives remain in limbo. An article in the *Yass Tribune* describes them as “overwhelmingly grateful to Australia,” “simply for being able to live here in peace” (“Meet Iranian asylum seekers in Yass” n. pag.). Here, even the *possibility* of refuge generates thankfulness, where proximity to such a good is enough to inspire good affect. In addition to shoring up the feeling of gratitude, however, Majid, Mohammad, and Linda’s inclusion in the pilgrimage occasions an opportunity for Nguyen to enact care and welcome, this time “modeling” what hospitality looks like for the nation, and, more importantly, for the three asylum seekers. Through promotion on social media and church networks, Nguyen was able to secure accommodation for his team from ordinary citizens in small towns along his route. Australians—individuals and groups—opened their homes to the Iranian asylum seekers, providing them with a place to sleep, food, and conversation, repeating the warmth and generosity that was given to the Nguyen family thirty years ago. Majid, Mohammad, and Linda, who have known Australia primarily through detention centers, gain a different image of the country, another possibility of life as they “tour” the countryside.

In a March 26, 2014 update entitled “Happy Pilgrim,” Nguyen writes, “There is great joy and a real sense of freedom, in walking across the countryside. We are having a marvelous time making friends, and experiencing the wonderful welcome and hospitality” (Nguyen, Tri n. pag.). For the four pilgrims, the walk itself is an end, however modest, as three asylum seekers experience a taste of Australian hospitality, in a sense beginning the work of redeeming the government’s poor treatment of migrants, one individual at a time. Reflecting on the efficacy of the trip, Nguyen says, “In a sense it [the pilgrimage] might not make much difference, but for us it’s made a difference, it’s made a difference for the guys who are coming on this journey because they have been welcome, their experience of being welcome means the world to them [sic]” (“The Walker” n. pag.). The difference that Nguyen hopes to create is located in individual lives, in how people feel, think and experience—how they connect; the scale might be small but the intention is large and symbolic: anyone, from ordinary folks to politicians to the nation itself can make a difference, can provide the necessary welcome to transform the lives of a few or a multitude of people. The message is that hospitality is coterminous, not antithetical, to what it means to be Australian.

This bottom-up approach, focusing on individuals to make a bigger statement, is also an attempt to humanize asylum seekers. Majid, Mohammad, and Linda’s presence functions to demonstrate to people in the small towns, and in turn the larger national public, that asylum seekers are *actual* human beings with idiosyncratic stories and experiences as opposed to amorphous security threats or corrupt “queue jumpers.” At many of the stops, the asylum seekers were able to interact and engage with locals through public events, discussion panels, concerts, and school and church visits. These forums allowed them to tell their stories, on the one hand, and for people to learn more about how and why asylum seekers seek refuge, on the other. It is precisely these kinds of personal contacts, the project suggests, that open up new avenues of thinking, feeling, and action. The pilgrimage is then about “touching” people, affecting their worlds and worldviews. With affective appeals, it asks individuals and collectives to challenge the erroneous and damaging discourses of fear and criminality that dangerously circulate in the mainstream.

Through the bodies of refugees, “The Gift of Refuge” gathers bodies in modes of participation and action that work to counteract the dehumanizing regulation and administration of asylum seekers in offshore detention centers like Nauru and Papa New Guinea. One of the project’s biggest aims is to arouse the *energy* and *involvement* of Australian citizens on various levels. Here, there is a promotion of sharing gratitude; the refugee needs others to join in common feeling. After explaining the grateful impetus for the walk, Nguyen writes that it is “also an opportunity to express solidarity with the millions of refugees in the world, and with friends who are seeking asylum in Australia.” The call for solidarity asks Australians to contribute what they can, whether it is time, resources, or their physical presence. The official site states, “You can help bring this positive message to Australia by walking or running with the boat, or contributing to the fund of Baptcare Sanctuary. For those wanting to help in the pilgrimage itself, Tri is looking for support vehicles and drivers, walker/runners, accommodation along the way, and local media opportunities” (Nguyen, Tri n. pag.). A promotional video, with an accompanying song (“The Gift of Refuge”) by Kim Beales, was also produced as a call for participation. The video features footage and captured images of people from all walks of life pulling the replica boat around Brunswick and Melbourne. The point was to gain visibility, to stir curiosity, and make the sight of the boat a part of the Australian landscape.

By rallying the participation of ordinary Australians across the country in support of asylum seekers, Nguyen’s pilgrimage attempts to galvanize a discourse of collective, national *thanksgiving*. That is to say, gratitude is not just something that refugees and immigrants feel for the nation, but is an affect that *all* national subjects, including citizens, can do and feel together. The fostering of compassion for migrants is also a fostering of gratitude for the nation, a recognition of its (Christian) values and (western) exceptionalism. Unlike North America, Australia does not have a tradition of observing Thanksgiving Day as an important national holiday. In recent years, however, a Christian group—Australian Prayer Network—has promoted the celebration of a National Day of Thanksgiving, which has received enthusiastic endorsement by the government, but is not yet a part of the official holiday calendar. The tagline on its official website reads: “The National Day of Thanksgiving is a unique opportunity for Australians to celebrate and give thanks for our God-given heritage as a nation and to demonstrate the God-given values of honour, respect, thankfulness and gratitude towards our fellow man that have made us the great nation we are” *(National Day of Thanksgiving* n. pag.). Similar to American Thanksgiving, the National Day of Thanksgiving is an occasion to reinforce the cofunctioning of Christianity and patriotism in the creation of a sense of national community. Elizabeth Pleck writes that, in the US, Thanksgiving celebrates “the blessings of American nationhood as well as its domestic ideals. Thanksgiving was—and is—a holiday of American civil religion, that is, religious belief in the national purpose and destiny” (776).

While the mythology of Thanksgiving—of European settlement, patriotic gratitude, and religious singularity—does not have the same iron grip on the national imagination in Australia as it does in the US, I suggest that the cultural, political, and religious dimensions of a “thanksgiving project” are present in Nguyen’s pilgrimage. In other words, Nguyen’s performance showcases one immigrant’s successful assimilation into national society, particularly through the practice of gratitude, as it seeks to invoke a collective attuned to God’s grace and Australia’s magnanimous, Christian character. The pilgrimage’s strategic gratitude picks up on this wider impulse to (re)create and celebrate the country’s Christian heritage, one that makes, according to the proponents of National Day of Thanksgiving, “our Nation a country where the persecuted, the oppressed, and the displaced can find sanctuary.” In such projects of thanksgiving, a certain nationalistic and triumphant image of Australia is created, an image that, as recent immigration policies have shown, is incongruent with its supposed “values.” Yet, this strategic gratitude also points to the nation’s promise (what it purports to, and what it can, be), and its long history as a settler colony built on multiple migrations to land inhabited by Indigenous peoples. Part of feeling thankful and sympathizing with the plight of boat refugees—images of ordinary (white) citizens pulling the replica boat—is a remembrance that Australia is “founded” through settlement by seafaring migration from Great Britain and other parts of Europe, and that these seafaring journeys are not dissimilar to those of contemporary asylum seekers.

The song that accompanies the pilgrimage’s promotional video, inspired by Nguyen’s life story, reinforces the theme of national inclusivity and collective thanksgiving or gratitude. The full song reads:

I’m gonna carry my boat / Right across this land / I’m gonna set it sail / On the waters of parliament / I’m gonna carry my boat / Like a cross of hope / For the refuge I found /All those years ago / So, take up your boat / And come and walk with me, come talk with me / As I walk across this land to sing my song of hope and thanks / For, I want to see the nations’ discourse change / from fear to words of hope and empathy / come walk with me, / and my friend / for the gift of Refuge / I walk to remember / And I walk to give my thanks / I walk for the wisdom / That grows from compassion / I walk for the nation / I walk for the world / That bleeds from its troubles / Those who flee from the rubble / I walk for tomorrow / And the ones in my place. (Beales)

The lyrics clearly incite fellowship and dialogue, to come and walk and talk with “me.” The act of walking becomes a method of *orientation*—to orient bodies, minds, and hearts in a similar direction, on a common path. It is a way to literally as well as figuratively affect and be affected. In the song, walking is a “movement” from fear to hope and empathy; it is a means of fostering compassion, memory, and consciousness. The invitation to *walk* *with—*something that the project is deeply invested in—signifies a form of relating in which people *feel with* each other. Gratitude, in this case, has the capacity to facilitate relationalities of solidarity and identification, evoking similarly “positive” emotions and affirmations. Nguyen’s walking pilgrimage exemplifies the potentiality of gratitude as an affective structure: it can be highly “contagious,” multiplying and transforming in ways that are not just simply “thankful.”

But walking also evokes protest. “The Gift of Refuge” in this sense draws on the American Civil Rights Movement, particularly Martin Luther King Jr.’s brand of civil disobedience, to articulate its politics. When Nguyen references King in his arrival speech, discussed below, the pilgrimage resonates with the many marches such as the March on Washington in 1963 or the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 in demand of justice, that critique the law and the inequalities it enables. The pilgrimage is a physical statement that unequivocally speaks out against the government’s policies. The need for such advocacy work is itself evidence of political dissatisfaction, of Nguyen’s conviction that something is not right with the system. Thus, while “The Gift of Refuge” is a conspicuous celebration of gratitude, one that gladly narrates Australia’s generosity, it is also a stringent criticism of the nation’s conduct. In saying that the country needs compassion, Nguyen is pointing out that compassion is crucially *lacking* in the national “repertoire” of feelings. In a series of tweets, with links to news articles, on the pilgrimage’s Twitter account, Nguyen documents the injustices meted out to asylum seekers by the government. The titles of the news links include: “Refugee advocates call for justice and compassion,” “Perverse migration bill shreds the rule of law,” “Silence on missing asylum seeker boat a disgrace to the nation,” “Tony Abbott [the Prime Minster] fails another leadership test,” and “Ethics all at sea: stopping the boats and corrupting the state.” Encouraging followers to sign online petitions at GetUp!, Nguyen writes: “@ScottMorrisonMP [Immigration Minister] wants to flip a coin on people's lives. Tell the Senate that's a gamble we can't take” and “We, the undersigned, accuse the government of deliberate harm to #asylum seekers. Add your name here” (@TheGiftofRefuge n. pag.). These short tweets paint a picture of political and moral crisis; they show the utter transparency of Australia’s campaign to “stop the boats,” disregarding the law, human dignity, and democracy. These tweets and Facebook posts represent a clear condemnation of the nation’s government, and by extension, the nation itself. While this criticism may seem jarring next to gratitude, their coexistence is not a contradiction. Rather, Nguyen’s project demonstrates how gratitude can facilitate grievance and critique, how its affective terrain reaches beyond thankfulness and reconciliation to encompass other forms of relating with the nation-state. The refugee in “The Gift of Refuge” is both, and simultaneously, grateful to and critical of the Australian nation.

I TOO HAVE A DREAM

On April 20, 2014, when Tri Nguyen and his team reached Canberra, they were greeted by a crowd of supporters. The pilgrimage came to a successful completion, having gained wide media coverage in mainstream publications and broadcasts. The project’s Facebook page, which has close to 1300 followers, and official website continue to remain active. To date, over $12,000 (from over 70 donors) has been raised for Baptcare, an organization that currently supports approximately 70 asylum seekers. Having begun the journey with a note of thanks, Nguyen ends it with another. After reiterating his gratitude to Australia and to various individuals who made the journey possible, Nguyen recalls Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous phrase, “I have a dream,” in order to make a concluding appeal for a compassionate and humanitarian approach to asylum:

I too have a dream! That in thirty two years time, your [asylum seekers] children will walk from towns and cities to Canberra to thank the Australian people and the Australian parliament for giving their parents the gift of refuge. I too have a dream, that Australia will continue to be a nation that welcomes the strangers, that cares for the vulnerable and gives fair go to all who are seeking refuge. That’s the Australia to be proud of. Thank you Australia! (Nguyen, Tri n. pag.)

In this note, which was also delivered as a speech, Nguyen desires the replication and repetition of grateful feeling, which is intimately tied to the gift of refuge. A generous nation, he suggests, will continue to be celebrated, inspiring gratitude as the primary modality of social exchange, of a cohesive society. Yet, as the advocacy project has shown, the notion that Australia should be a nation that *continues* to welcome asylum seekers is not a statement about the factual present, but an aspiration for the future.

As a refugee performance of gratitude, “The Gift of Refuge” embodies what Jill Dolan calls a “utopian promise.” Dolan argues that in, and by way of, performance, “temporary communities assemble to look at social relations, to be provoked, moved, enraged, made proud by what human beings can do when they’re set in relation to one another. Performance offers us a practice that lets us rehearse new social arrangements, in ways that require visceral investments of bodies, of time, of personal and cultural history” (16). While Dolan’s ideas emerge mainly from theatrical and artistic performances, and Nguyen’s pilgrimage is not “theater” in the traditional sense, the spectacularity and underlying optimism of his walk/activism resonates with “utopian promise” in the hopeful sense of “acting” out a possible future. The recalling of the past, the pulling of the boat from town to town, the expression of profuse thanks, and the criticism of government policies all work in the service of enacting a different and more hospitable nation that is to come. Through the personal, “The Gift of Refuge” directs “itself to the broader sociopolitical context, to seek affirmation, understanding and acceptance and/or protest” (Balfour and Woodrow 19). Such a refugee performance, Michael Balfour and Nina Woodrow contend, “seeks to insert unfamiliar narratives into familiar bureaucratized or mediatized stories” (19), and thus resist “bureaucratic, dehumanizing portrayals of refugee[s]” (28).

The expression of strategic gratitude is one way to achieve this undermining of mainstream, dominant discourses of refugee criminality by foregrounding them as thankful. It is through such a “non-threatening” figure that the advocacy project is able to petition others to open their hearts and minds to different understandings of refuge and refugee, to recognize that a change needs to occur. Nguyen utilizes the rhetoric of appreciation because it is agreeable to and palatable for the nation and its subjects. If “The Gift of Refuge” is Tri Nguyen’s symbolic gesture, then the government’s response to his gift is also symbolic, and unambiguous: no boats allowed! A January 6 post on Facebook reads: “I just learned that Parliament won't received the boat as a gift of gratitude (*frown emoticon*) / so after doing the rounds in PM's offices - We may have to bring it home (*frown emoticon*) / maybe we can make it a permanent display on Sydney Rd. / Or take it on the road again, until it is receive [sic]” (Nguyen, Tri Facebook). The nation, here, rejects the (former) refugee’s gift of gratitude, sending the message that it neither needs nor wants such feelings. The refugee is thus denied the opportunity to be generous or to repay a debt, and his advocacy work remains officially “unheard” and “unrecognized.” Parliament’s decision can be interpreted as a move to maintain a power dynamic, reserving the categories of agency and executive judgments solely for the nation. And so, asylum seekers to Australia continue to be detained, sent to offshore centers, and denied basic human rights. While the government’s refusal of the boat might signify a kind of failure for Nguyen, it is powerful justification for, and bittersweet affirmation of, the importance of his pilgrimage in the name of asylum seekers suffering in inaccessible places unknown to the country, and the rest of the world.

**CHAPTER 2: RESENTMENT**

***Jane Kim:*** *A lot of people accuse you of being angry and perhaps over-reactionary … How do you respond to naysayers and critics or people that just don’t get your work?*

*Bao Phi: One thing that I’ve been thinking about lately is how other people can accept Asian people’s grief, but not our anger. Other people can accept, and in many cases consume, the stories of tragedies and sorrow from Asian and Asian American people. They have a harder time accepting, validating, or seeing our anger. Anger at injustice, at being silenced …*[[21]](#footnote-21)

ANGRY SUBJECTS

Performance poet Bao Phi’s response to an interview question regarding accusations that his poetry is too “angry” and “over-reactionary” is telling of the ways “negative” affects get read on Asian-looking bodies. Indeed, Phi’s poetic vision draws on an aesthetics of militant, uncompromising identity politics that marked the founding of Asian America during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Particularly notable in his poetry is an activist and social justice impulse, as well as an insistent and unapologetic bringing of racism, inequality, and histories of oppression to the fore. In short, Phi refuses to stay quiet in the face of historical and contemporary injustice. It is thus understandable that some audience members might interpret Phi’s work as angry, for the nature of its subject matter warrants such treatment, and Phi’s approach does little to hide his, oftentimes outraged, position. But such accusations of anger are criticisms rather than confirmations; they reveal a sense of discomfort *with* Phi’s anger, *with* his response to injustice. While we may never know for sure the specific complaints attached to the accusations—why some (certain) people cannot accept Phi’s anger—the interviewer’s question (and Phi’s answer) is indicative of the general unease with which Asian/American expressions of anger are received.

Why does anger in Phi’s words produce discomfort (and perhaps even anger) in some people, especially when it is so clearly rooted in actual injury and material structures of injustice? Phi is careful, in his work, to historicize and contextualize, and therefore rationalize, his anger. In her study of anger, Sue J. Kim explains, “regardless of the merits of that person’s reasons for anger, the characterization of ‘angry’ can dismiss not only the content of that person’s thoughts and feelings, but also the entire person, in a sense erasing subjectivity and agency” (1). The characterization of Phi’s poetry as “angry” can be seen as a kind of dismissal, a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of his grievance. Following Kim, to deem Phi “over-reactionary” is to disengage with his ideas, and even to render him invisible. This is perhaps a result of the socio-cultural inability to think of anger in social terms—Phi’s feelings are individualized (and pathologized), seen as a product of his radical worldview rather than wider historical and social conditions that produce such anger. Instead, Kim argues for a structural understanding of anger as reflecting conflicts arising from “complex social contradictions” (2).

In his answer, however, Phi places his finger on one of the central tenets of this chapter: different emotions or affective expressions are differentially (il)legible on Asian-looking bodies. In the example he gives, grief and sorrow are recognizable, digestible, and predictable (read: marketable) coming from Asian/Americans; these affects have come to be naturalized as suitable, even encouraged and expected. But anger does not bind so easily, because it is incongruent with the persistent understanding of Asian/Americans as “good,” complacent model minorities who do not disturb the peace, who respond with “quiet restraint rather than vocal complaint in the face of perceived or actual injustice” (Nguyen, *Race and Resistance* 146). Angry feelings, then, are difficult to register and process because they are not supposed to exist in certain bodies in the first place. For Southeast Asian refugees of the War in Viet Nam, in particular, displays of negative feelings, especially when they are directed at the American nation, verge on the unthinkable; the prominent narrative of “rescue and liberation” and the public celebration of refugee gratitude—a prescriptive discourse of thankfulness—leaves little room for anger and resentment.

This chapter focuses on the juxtaposition of refugee and resentment; or, what happens when refugees become resentful rather than grateful. I analyze resentment as an affect that reveals the contentious, and sometimes hostile, interplay between the refugee and the nation. From the perspective of powerholders (the mainstream, the dominant, the nation-state), resentment is unexpected and unacceptable, indeed inconceivable, coming from those who have been “gifted” freedom and a second chance at life, from those who have openly pleaded for asylum and been granted the privilege of protection, the right to social life, within the nation’s borders. Resentment in this context is the ultimate form of ingratitude, and to lack appreciation and thankfulness in the face of generosity is to be illogical and ungrateful, which makes the refugee subject underserving and dismissible. Thus, I am interested in examining the seemingly counterintuitive emergence of refugee resentment, in how it disrupts prevailing ideological narratives, or sanctioned ways of feeling.

OUTLAWED AFFECTIVE EXPRESSIONS

In this chapter, I analyze affective expressions that are difficult to recognize, not because they are intrinsically obfuscating, but because their articulation by certain bodies in certain socio-political contexts are deemed illegible/illegal. They are those “conventionally unacceptable” (160) emotions that are out of sync with the affective flow, the “mood” of mainstream society, what Alison M. Jaggar calls “outlaw emotions.” Marked by an “incompatibility with dominant perceptions and values” (160), they have the potential to “enable us to perceive the world differently” (161) from hegemonic versions. In that way, outlaw emotions are politically resistant and oppositional, posing a critical challenge to the “law,” not only in the promulgated legal sense but also the unwritten codes that are deeply embedded in the everyday, structuring the very shape and function of society. I suggest that an emotion’s outlaw status arises from systemic unintelligibility. That is, within a framework that follows a specific value-ascribing logic, which sets the parameters of possibility, the grammar of articulation, and the governmentality of social relations, some affective utterances are suitable, encouraged, and recognized while others are not. Moreover, any single emotion is not outlawed equally, indiscriminately across the board, for all members of the system. The range of acceptable and recognized feelings differs from group to group (and even subject to subject) within a social body, differentiated along intersecting lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Thus, for example, an emotion like anger is unreadable on the Asian body in North America, but is persistently attached to the black body, pathologized as its unassimilability, its inherent, incurable *dis*ease. Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan call this the difference between racist love and racist hate, the positive and negative stereotypes ascribed to different non-white races in the US as modes of white supremacist control. Affective divisions become ways of rationalizing racial hierarchies and racism, defining and naturalizing racialized subjects through and against each other in order to uphold the schema of white supremacy. Therefore, if Asians in North America are understood as model minorities and model minorities are satisfied, then Asian North Americans are not supposed to, indeed cannot, feel angry. Anger thus becomes an outlaw emotion, systemically unintelligible, for Asian-looking bodies. Within such an affective economy, outlaw emotions are not just illegible, but effectively illegal as well, in the sense that, once (if) expressed, they flout and disrupt the order of things and must be contained through forms of erasure and censorship. The concept of *outlaw* points to issues of legality and criminalization—to be outlawed is to be sanctioned, to be illegal within the law (explicit or implicit) and also outside it, beyond its purview. The kinds of criminalized social individuals that this chapter is concerned with—refugees, gangsters, and deportees—are all subject to the law and simultaneously deprived from protection by it. They are, as Lisa M. Cacho puts it, “ineligible for personhood.” Cacho describes these populations as “subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them” (6).

ON RESENTMENT, AND MEMORY

Outlawed affective expressions can be analyzed through the organizing category of resentment. As a diffuse structure, resentment sheds light on a milieu’s power relations, its politics of public (in)visibility and social articulation, its political struggles and movements of resistance. While it could encompass a range of “negative” emotions such as anger, hatred, and revenge, resentment is not formally any of these emotions. Rather, resentment *proper* describes a wider sense of dissatisfaction, frustration, and rage that is not necessarily verbalized or acted upon but is nonetheless powerfully constitutive of moments of outward verbalization and action. Yet, because it is ontologically defined by a repression, a delay or inexpressibility, we only come to know resentment indirectly, through more immediate affective forms such as anger. Indeed, anger and resentment are often conflated and used interchangeably in both popular and academic discussions, and many scholars conceptualize resentment as a kind of anger. For my purposes here, resentment is that which propels an emotion like anger; as a result, anger can be seen as its precipitation, its affective trace or residue.

According to Manfred S. Frings, resentment has an extended temporality that clearly differentiates it from anger. Describing its emotive structure, he writes: “The constant state of resentment is distinguished sharply from furious reactions or outbursts of anger. Whenever a prosaic resentment-feeling finds satisfaction by way of, say, successful revenge and retaliation, there is no resentment proper at hand” (7). While, on a purely taxonomic level, Frings’ distinction is useful for understanding the nuances between different, but interrelated, negative emotions that seem to overlap or blend into one another, the imbrication itself is significant to my contention that brief, reactive “outbursts” can tell us much about the simmering, underlying resentment. In the specific examples that I analyze in this chapter, the angry, violent, and accusatory declarations that come forth from refugee bodies provide insight into a deeper sense of resentment, a structure of relationality that is an inevitable product of empire, war, and oppression. I suggest, then, that even as resentment is characterized by an inability to act directly or a blockage of expression, it is still accessible through moments when other emotions “flare up” or materialize.

While philosophical accounts of resentment differ on its function, from a pathological and (self-)destructive passion in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler to a morally and politically valuable claim on justice in Adam Smith and Jeffrie Murphy, all agree that it arises from conditions of inequality, from a locatable injury, trauma, or injustice.[[22]](#footnote-22) Scheler calls it a reactive impulse as “it is always preceded by an attack or an injury” (29). Such attacks or acts of injury, and their resentful response, occur either in a prior state of unequal power relations and/or they produce and perpetuate those very dynamics. Thus, Marlia E. Banning stresses the sociality of the emotion, stating that it is “linked directly to the relations of hierarchically organized societies” (74). The basic constitution of resentment, then, develops from a wound—material and immaterial—that reveals the organization of privilege and power as well as the points of critical fissure within a social structure. In the way that it directs us to moments of injury and violence, resentment is a useful rubric that explores the refugee’s uneasy relation with the nation—one in which the promise of refuge (and freedom, happiness, and love) functions to obscure past and ongoing wound(s)(ings).

If injury shapes resentment, then resentment can come to shape processes of grievance, of the demand for acknowledgement, retribution, and recompense. Indeed, rage is often the last and only method of address for the marginalized and powerless, without recourse to other means of articulation and access. In his study of resentment in Western history, Marc Ferro states that it is “the precursor of revolt” (128). He elaborates that, “in history, resentment has been the matrix of ideologies of protest, on the left and on the right. The frustrations that produce it – broken promises, disillusionments, and wounds – provoke an impotent anger that lends it substance” (128). In a similar vein, Dolores Martin Moruno writes that resentment can be found in “individuals, groups and national communities that have defined their identity through the denunciation of their suffering and misery, and by the accusation of the aggressor that had transformed them into victims” (4). The enunciation of resentment, in the way that it takes an unequivocal position *against* power, forms the basis for the possibility of shared political purpose and personal and collective identity. In these descriptions, resentment is understood as the impetus, as that which facilitates what Ann Anlin Cheng has famously described as the “transformation from grief to grievance, from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury” (3) in her classic treatment of racial melancholia.

The recuperation of resentment in recent theory mirrors the post-Freudian reconsideration of melancholia, most forcefully explicated in the works of Judith Butler, David Eng and David Kazanjian, Ann Anlin Cheng, and Paul Gilroy, as a politically and socially generative condition. Like melancholia, resentment is increasingly being viewed as an affect of affiliation and political address, a moral category for social transformation, and a social passion. In her reassessment of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Alice MacLachlan writes that “resentments of any kind, whether proper or improper, contain [sic] a desire for *accountability* and *acknowledgement* from the wrongdoer that she be made to grieve on account of her behaviour towards me” (165). In other words, resentment seeks repentance and recognition, and not only punishment; or repentance must accompany any attempt to “right the wrong.” It is not simply a mode of retribution, but also, like melancholia, an “ongoing emotional engagement” (167) that seeks to bring about a change in the wrongdoer’s attitude. Resentment is an affect that contains a drive to reprogram or recircuit the terms of social relationality and engagement itself: that is perhaps the radical sociality of this traditionally “unsocial passion.”

Yet, the progression from injury to resentment (as a way of understanding the injury) to grievance (as a corrective to the injury) is not a straightforward, smooth or easy process; it is not even a widely accepted trajectory for emotions culturally understood as negative. The enduring popular understanding of anger and resentment as reducibly individual renders them privatized pathologies that destroy those who feel them, paralyzing and counterproductive as they shut down appropriate “solutions” to complex problems. This popular sentiment is in part inherited from a philosophical tradition dating back to Nietzsche. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche describes resentment as inferior because it lacks ontological integrity. He writes that it “first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all, — its action is basically a reaction” (20). This dependence on exteriority for its existence—a reaction and not an independent action—produces a “slave morality” that skews valuation of the world. He goes on to characterize those afflicted with the condition: “the man of *ressentiment* is neither upright nor naïve, nor honest and straight with himself. His soul *squints*; his mind loves dark corners, secret paths and back-doors, everything secretive appeals to him as being *his* world, *his* security, *his* comfort; he knows all about keeping quiet, not forgetting, waiting temporarily humbling and abasing himself” (21). Among its many pathologies, resentment here is a *problem of memory*, of an inability to forget. The extended temporality of resentment that I mentioned above becomes that which drives the resentful individual’s descent “underground,” into the dark recesses of the psyche.

In contrast, the “noble” individual is endowed with the ability to quickly excise resentment, through methods of forgetting, when it arises:

When *ressentiment* does occur in the noble man himself, it is consumed and exhausted in an immediate reaction, and therefore it does not *poison* … To be unable to take his enemies, his misfortunes and even his *misdeeds* seriously for long – that is the sign of strong, rounded natures with a superabundance of a power which is flexible, formative, healing and can make one forget (a good example from the modern world is Mirabeau, who had no recall for the insults and slights directed at him and who could not forgive, simply because he – forgot.) A man like this shakes from him, with one shrug, many worms which would have burrowed into another man. (Nietzsche 22)

Forgetting is offered as a moral antidote to resentment. The faculty of forgetting demonstrates a strong character not burdened by the injuries of the past. In routing his examination of resentment through the issue of memory, Nietzsche’s formulation resonates with Freud’s original conception of mourning and melancholia. Like melancholia, resentment involves a persistent, if secretive, “hanging-on” to the injury or loss in a relation that is characterized by an inability to “let go” and successfully mourn the object of attachment, to forget. Freud’s metaphorical description of melancholia as an “open wound” is applicable to understanding the way resentment operates. Moruno echoes this melancholic quality of resentment when she writes that it requires an “intimate relationship with temporality, as it needs to be constantly cultivated by memory … resentment implies the renewal of the original suffering which is caused by the traumatic event. It even modifies our perception of time as it chains us to a permanent past; a past full of dark memories that prevent us from living in the present and looking with hope towards the future” (5).

If resentment is an inability to forget, or rather, a way of remembering, then it can be considered a form of *melancholic memory* that refuses the forward march of history, the official and unofficial prescriptions to let go and move on. I suggest an understanding of resentment as embodied memory, an affect (felt bodily) shaped by the remembrance of injury and the desire for justice. As such, it runs counter to the status quo, posing a challenge to the hegemony of the violent present. In articulating the injuries, injustices, and inequalities that have created and continue to structure the present moment and the future to come, resentment represents an ideal form of critique, illuminating a matrix of conflicts and contradictions in the exercise of power and the relations it establishes. It is the drive towards justice, to rectify a wrong, however, that gives resentment its critical edge. As I will demonstrate in my analysis of refugee resentment, affects are integral components of the demand for justice, facilitating the formulation as well as the tactics of critique and grievance.

RESENTFUL REFUGEES

In what follows, I take up two refugee figures—the gangster and the deportee—in order to explore how resentment might enable ways of relating to the host nation beyond feelings of gratitude or affects of reconciliation. I follow Thy Phu—who usefully reconceptualizes Viet Nguyen’s notion of the bad Asian American subject—in thinking about “badness” not through the lens of a “pedagogy of resistance” but through “the juridical process of criminalization” (151). If the criminalized refugee signifies a failure of refuge and freedom, then refugee resentment is outlawed, difficult to register and condemned as an inappropriate response to a seemingly transparent humanitarian act of protection. Because refugee resentment is often difficult to articulate and seldom acknowledged (if not silenced altogether), this chapter explores the complicated, and even surprising, ways it comes to be outwardly expressed. Through readings of short stories by Aimee Phan and videos by the Studio Revolt artist collective, I trace how individual expressions of resentment reveal a deeper social structure, demonstrating the connection between personal feelings and social and historical conditions.

I acknowledge that resentment can be embodied by a range of agents, and propelled in multiple directions; its legitimacy or illegitimacy depends on context and perspective, shifting from subject to subject, viewer to viewer. A prime example is the resentment felt by many white Americans at the large influx of Southeast Asian refugees, whom they saw as taking away scarce resources and jobs, during the economic downturn of the 1980s. For refugees too, resentment is *not only* directed at the United States; many Vietnamese Americans harbor deep resentment at the Vietnamese communists, and many Cambodian Americans cannot but feel pain and anger at the mention of the Khmer Rouge. I center my discussion on relations between refugees and the nation-state that “rescued” them because resentment is outlawed within this framework, and as such is dangerous to the nation’s ideological constitution. My chapter aims to elaborate on the deeply political nature of emotions and feelings through the case of refugee resentment, to examine how one “can defy an ideological stance by inappropriate affect and by refusing to perform the emotion management necessary to feel what, according to the official frame, it would seem fitting to feel” (Hochschild 567).

I.

THE REFUGEE GANGSTER

In what ways is gang violence an example of resentment? What does the sign “refugee” mean when refugee subjects are unable to be cast as model minorities, and assimilated into the national social body? In other words, what becomes of the refugee when the conventional arc of refuge fails? In this section, I explore the conjunction of refugee and gangster through a close reading of two stories—“Visitors” and “Emancipation”—from Aimee Phan’s debut collection of short stories *We Should Never Meet*. Phan’s book portrays the lives of transnational adoptees in interconnected stories that move back and forth in time and geography, between the past and present, Vietnam and the United States. In “Visitors,” a story about a violent home invasion, the gangster figure is theorized as a kind of *counter-memory*, a resentful way of remembering, that makes possible a more complex and nuanced account, if through brutal means, of American imperialism and Vietnam War politics. The story’s gangster character, Vinh, who is simultaneously a refugee, an orphan, and a criminal, is excluded from multiple configurations of belonging and protection. As he occupies the role of the outsider, the gangster is able to extend and refract perspective on a highly contested history, and in doing so, voice a crucial challenge to both dominant American *and* Vietnamese American understandings of war and its consequences.

Resentment here manifests in the form of physical violence, of a destructive outburst that attempts to “return” the injuries of war, migration, and difficult resettlement borne by the refugee to the American nation-state that first created the conditions of uprooting and then offered the promise of refuge. The enactment of that violence, however, does not reach far as Vinh and his fellow gang members prey on an innocent Vietnamese American family in the story. Although this act may seem random and misdirected, I suggest that the family (and other law-abiding, middle-class Vietnamese Americans) represent the *closest* manifestations of the nation-state, the symbolic attainment (and attainability) of the American Dream. Their ostensible “success” approximates them with an entire system that has precluded belonging to “bad” subjects like Vinh. It is no coincidence, then, that the criminalized refugee in Phan’s collection embodies the affect of resentment, for the gangster is an exemplary case of *refugee failure*.

If the grateful refugee highlights a narrative of success—of successful refuge—then the gangster indexes multiple failures: of correct feeling, of gifted opportunity, of citizenship, of American-style freedom. Regardless of whether such failures are privatized within the individual or explained structurally, by virtue of failing, the refugee gangster disrupts the revisionist narrative of American rescue and liberation of Vietnamese people, ascendant in the early 2000s to rationalize renewed neo-imperial ambitions in the Middle East. Yen Le Espiritu points out that two strategic narratives—the innocent Vietnam Veteran and the good Vietnamese refugee—converged twenty-five years after the War’s end to “conjure triumph from defeat,” “enabling ‘patriotic’ Americans to push military intervention as key in America’s self-appointed role as liberators” (“The ‘We-Win-Even-If-We-Lose’ Syndrome” 330). This, what she calls “the ‘we-win-even-when-we-lose’ syndrome,” “has energized and emboldened the perpetuation of U.S. militarism” (330). Because the hegemonic liberation narrative is so dependent on “good” Vietnamese refugees of a past war to prove its thesis, the gangster is inconvenient evidence within this logic of intervention, of ideological victory—for surely the US did not save these individuals only for them to turn into violent criminals; that would be a failure of the civilizing mission, of liberalism itself. Yet, it would be misleading to designate resentment as belonging exclusively to those who “fail” in the eyes of the nation. As Mai, the honor student, in “Emancipation” demonstrates, seemingly “good” refugees can harbor just as much resentment as bad subjects. Read together, “Visitors” and “Emancipation” blur the line between the binary figures of Asian America—the good and bad, the model and failure—and suggest that resentment is an inevitable affective structure for the survivors of American militarism overseas.

To be clear, my purpose here is not to valorize gang violence as an appropriate political response or viable act of resistance to state power. Rather, I am more interested in the context of and build-up to violence: what kinds of injuries and matrices of resentment shape the experience of gangsters as well as the enactment of gang violence? Beyond the obvious criminalizing impulse, how might we analyze the figure of the refugee gangster as encoding complex social and historical dynamics? If violence is a mode of communication, then what does it articulate? Phan’s stories provide an entry point from which to approach the gangster as a *concept*—although not divorced from material conditions—and thus to begin a discussion of the cultural significations of a social phenomenon. While my focus is on a literary (fictive) representation of a real social problem, I maintain that this discursive account and others like it (including media coverage, sociological data, and police reports) do not just describe but also *produce* reality through processes of meaning making. In my discussion, the medium of the short story is a valuable epistemological lens with which to think about gang violence.

The problem of Southeast Asian gangs became a mainstream issue in the early 1990s, when rising gang activity across North America, but particularly in places of concentrated refugee settlement such as New York and California, attracted local and national media coverage. In his chronicle of Born To Kill (BTK), what he calls “America’s bloodiest Asian gang,” T.J. English describes how a deadly shootout at a funeral for an assassinated gang leader in July of 1990 became a “popular news item” and subsequently a “defining event, the moment at which the idea of Vietnamese gangsters in America entered the national consciousness” (8). Under a year later, in April of 1991, the deadly Good Guys hostage situation in Sacramento, in which four armed Vietnamese youths held up an electronics shop, facilitated the popular construction of Vietnamese refugees as violent and criminal. Even though none of the boys had any proven gang associations, the characterization of their actions as gang-related nonetheless circulated widely in the press. While these two spectacular events contributed to a public profile of Southeast Asian crime, in actuality, street gang activity was largely confined to auto and retail theft, home invasions, and extortions, with the targets being almost exclusively Asian refugees and immigrants. These “new breed” of gangs were notable for their “nomadic” and highly mobile operations—perpetrators would hide out in a network of motel rooms or flee to other states to “cool down” immediately after a hit. Sam Quinones writes, “This is a brand-new strain of street gang, popping seemingly out of nowhere in the late 1980s. These boys claim no turf, have no hand signs or colors, no graffiti—making them difficult to track” (25).

Inevitably, investigators and researchers sought explanations as to why young refugees joined gangs. In *The Dream Shattered: Vietnamese Gangs in America*, Patrick Du Phuoc Long, an experienced counselor in juvenile correction and rehabilitational facilities, explains how cultural and socio-economic conditions contribute to gang involvement. He lists cultural conflicts; role reversals within, and disintegration of, the family; alienation at school; peer pressure; racism and estrangement from American culture; and the general difficulties of resettlement as playing important roles. In addition to these immediate factors, and without fail, journalists, academics, and policymakers return to the brutality of the War to account for present day violence. James Diego Vigil, for example, writes, “To assess the rise of Vietnamese gangs, we need to look back to the Vietnam War and understand some of its ramifications” (99). T. J. English declares that “there was little doubt that the war’s legacy of violence, inhumanity, and abandonment had played a formative role in shaping the lives and actions of these young gangsters” (280). James Dubro describes gangsters as “tough and cynical young men who had come through the horrors of life in Vietnam, Communist re-education camps, then the bleak refugee camps” (224).

While it is imperative to understand the lives and behaviour of criminalized refugees in the context of the War in Viet Nam and its legacies, these accounts problematically facilitate and/or reproduce a model of causality that *explains* gang violence through the violence of war. A striking example comes from a criminal justice newsletter article by Tod W. Burke, Charles O’Rear and Al Lotz. In it they draw a direct, causal link between criminal activity in Viet Nam during wartime and gang activity in North America:

Vietnamese gang membership dates back to the early Vietnam war era. In the closing years of the war, gang membership was at its peak; gangs known as the “Frogmen,” the “Saigon Cowboys” and the “Thunder Tigers” gained notoriety within Asian communities. Gang members were usually former military personnel who had learned their tactics during the war.

Around 1975, many Asian refugees settled into camps where some were able to renew gang ties. These gang members were young Vietnamese who preyed upon their own people.

Aware that many Vietnamese citizens had left their homeland for employment in the United States and Canada, some gang members followed in the hopes of finding an open criminal arena. Gang members working as home invaders in the United States have now been able to recreate the horrors of the refugee camps by actively terrorizing members of the Asian community through criminal activity and violence. (17)

This chronology neatly locates criminality and violence *in* Viet Nam and *in* the bodies of the Vietnamese, bypassing larger socio-historical conditions and American complicity in imposing and perpetuating violence during and after the War. The explanation of gang violence as an *inheritance* of war or violent pasts privatizes the issue, naturalizing criminal “character” as a result of personal background and historical experience. In other words, criminality becomes a foreign import that makes its way into the national space with asylum, as opposed to a category and identity created by and within the American nation itself. This discourse of wartime violence elides and deflects attention away from the military intrusion that plays a large part in creating the conditions of “Vietnamese violence” as well as racism and other forms of structural marginalization in the US that drive gang membership. That is, emphasizing the war in a way that figures it as a source for violence pathologizes refugees while clearing the US of moral responsibility. Against this construction, Phan’s stories recall the War to elucidate a connection between gang violence and US foreign policy, making possible an understanding of Southeast Asian American gangsters as byproducts of American imperialism that extends inside and outside its borders, rather than foreign aberrations to its national constitution.

JUST VISITORS, OR AN OVERSTAYED WELCOME

In her analysis of *We Should Never Meet*, Jodi Kim argues that Phan employs a politics of compassion to create in Vinh “a thoughtful, complex character with a critical political diagnosis of the American War in Vietnam and the contradictions of the so-called American Dream. Instead of dismissing, judging, criminalizing, or indeed pitying Vinh as a gang member, Phan shows how he is a complex embodiment and index of the persisting legacies of the Vietnam War” (220-221). In contrast to compassion, a politics of pity, which dominates representations of refugees and transnational adoptees, obscures the facts of failure—the instances of unsuccessful adoption, of how American policies such as Operation Babylift did not unfold according to plan or how refuge often does not lead to uncomplicated resettlement. Phan’s compassionate mode of representation thus enables a discussion of refugee failure that nuances the multidimensionality of non-model subjects who struggle for physical and social life within the American nation-state. Elaborating on Kim’s assessment, I analyze the figure of the gangster not only as providing political diagnosis and critique of dominant narratives of the War in Viet Nam, but also a critical resistance to them. The violence committed by Vinh and his gang, however misdirected, unfair, and ineffectual, aims to shatter an ideological system that has itself violently shaped the lives of refugees. The resentment that bursts forth from the refugee gangster illuminates a cluster of injuries as it attempts to disrupt American exceptionalism.

Arriving in the U.S. as an “unaccompanied minor” boat refugee, Vinh is placed in the foster care system, where he meets two other orphans, Mai and Kim. While Mai, another refugee, eventually secures placement in a stable foster family, Kim, a returned adoptee, and Vinh move from home to home, never settling permanently within any kind of stable familial structure. Experiencing first-hand the deep failings of the system, and witnessing Kim’s physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her foster fathers, Vinh instead finds camaraderie, kinship, and protection with a local gang of “brothers,” *Brookhurst 354*. The gang, with its own power dynamics and social demands, becomes a structure of belonging for Vinh, an alternative formation to the nation or the family.

The story “Visitors” begins with Bac Nguyen, a recent immigrant in his old age, attempting to find his way home after a trip to one of the supermarkets in Orange County’s Little Saigon. He chances upon Vinh, out on one of his scouting missions for potential home invasion targets. After a brief conversation in which Bac Nguyen is led to mistake Vinh for an economics student, the youngster helps the old man carry his groceries home. They get onto the topic of family and, assuming that Vinh belongs to both a traditional nuclear family unit and the larger Vietnamese American community, Bac Nguyen inquires about Vinh’s parents. The exchange between them after the orphaned Vinh lies and tells the old man that his parents died in Vietnam is worth quoting at length here:

We’ve lost so many people. Bac Nguyen placed his arm on the boy’s, and they began walking again. My wife and son died during the war, too.

They’ve taken so much from us, the boy said.

Yes, the communists were heartless. Bac Nguyen still couldn’t control the rush of blood to his head remembering that communist sniper who gunned Anh [his son] down that day so long ago on the beach in Vung Tau.

You misunderstood Bac, the boy said. I wasn’t meaning the Communists.

Oh, Bac Nguyen said, slightly confused, I just assumed—

I was talking about the Americans. (94)

This moment of misinterpretation on Bac Nguyen’s end, assuming a shared anti-communist politics, is also a moment of reorientation as Vinh’s correction changes the site of critique, moving it away from the North Vietnamese to the Americans. Vinh’s anger opens up the possibility for resentment, for the expression of dissatisfaction with, and anger at, the Americans, once South Vietnam’s ally in the War and now the host to many Vietnamese refugees. It names injury—the human costs of larger Cold War geopolitical conflicts—and points to the U.S. as aggressor, describing not only the destruction of life but also the situation in which the American presence in Vietnam actually created the conditions for migration and refuge seeking, to reveal American culpability in the creation of refugee populations. For Vinh the situation is unequivocal; in a later scene he tells Bac Nguyen: “They [the Americans] destroyed our country, then they left. To ease their guilty conscience, they took some of us in. It’s really simple” (96). While, as Bac Nguyen rightly points out, history is not black and white, Vinh’s seemingly simplified assessment of the War and its aftermath, what Jodi Kim calls his “productive unambiguity” (222), compellingly presents an opposition to the pervasive narrative of rescue and liberation that circulates in American cultural memory.

Vinh seems to possess an acute understanding of how Vietnamese refugees are useful to the U.S. as human evidence of American benevolence, facilitating a revisionist casting of the War’s mission and its outcome. His resentment interrupts refugee feelings of sadness and anger directed at the communists, which are politically significant and expedient for the narrative of American freedom-fighting righteousness. The rush of blood to the head or the tears that swell up when Bac Nguyen thinks of his murdered son can be taken as visceral proof of why the US needed to intervene in Southeast Asia. Here the grief stricken Vietnamese body possesses deep ideological value. The “unruly” direction of Vinh’s anger, however, is incongruent with refugee feelings such as grief and gratitude that demonstrate the morality of American militarism. Ultimately, his critique makes clear the larger issue of American presence in Vietnam, of foreign intervention/invasion in what many considered a civil war. The problem for Vinh, unlike many others in the Vietnamese American community, is not that the Americans withdrew militarily and abandoned Vietnam during the final stage of fighting, but that the US was involved in Vietnam in the first place, whereby an anticolonial (against the French) and then a civil war in Vietnam became a site of hot war between the US and Sino-Soviet superpowers in what the West calls the Cold War. Echoed is the deceptively simple but powerfully resonant refrain during the war era—“why are we in Vietnam?”—that, according to Marilyn B. Young, continues to haunt the American historical imaginary (ix).

Furthermore, Vinh’s reorientation makes room for a crucial challenge of the staunch anti-communist stance of Vietnamese American communities, a stance that predisposes a large number of them to politically conservative views and to support American military endeavors overseas as a result of a determined belief in American intervention. This anti-communist politics, directly tied to the alliance between the U.S. and South Vietnam during the war, has significantly shaped postwar Vietnamese diasporic formations. Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud explain that anti-communism is a “purposive force that the Vietnamese American community displays to construct an identity and place for itself in the United States” (251); it is also, however, a discourse of power that functions to regulate and discipline identity and group membership. As the prevalent and dominant “community politic,” anticommunism can at times shut down dissent or difference, marginalizing those who “test the bounds of an ‘imagined community” (242). Vinh, however, is not a part of this community, although his actions press at its limits, threatening its safety and coherence. His resentment is not oppositional to anti-communism per se, but it defiantly refuses to demonize the communists as perpetrator of war, instead implicating South Vietnam’s close former ally as the primary agent of military escalation. In contrast to dominant Vietnamese American memorializations, Vinh’s account of history does not valorize the anti-communist, freedom-fighting cause.

If anti-communism circumscribes belonging, then Vinh’s political critique advocates a transnational mode of affiliation that transcends borders and political viewpoints. For Vinh, it is Vietnam and the Vietnamese people that matter. In a poignant moment, Vinh articulates his utter alienation in the US:

Even though I don’t remember much of it [Vietnam], I still feel like it’s my home, and this place [the US], while nice, isn’t. It’s like I’m visiting, and I’ve overstayed my welcome. Why are we here when we lost so many people there? Shouldn’t we be with them? It seems unfair that while the people we love are rotting in Vietnam, we’re here enjoying a better life. (97)

As he states the precarious and transitory nature of his existence in America, Vinh establishes affinity and identification with people living in post-revolutionary Vietnam. Since his transpacific migration has not resulted in the enjoyment of a “better life,” Vinh cannot and does not align himself with Americans and/or other Vietnamese Americans. For him, community is based on loss and injury inflicted by the US, which he shares more deeply with those left behind in Vietnam, who have not been “gifted” freedom, than with the immigrants seemingly concerned with upward mobility who surround him. Even though his assessment that people suffer and “rot” in Vietnam may lack material basis, Vinh’s move attempts to critically link the difficulties faced by subjects of war living under both communist and democratic ideological systems. This transnational affiliation with people in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam emphasizes the failures of American interventions during and after the War, most profoundly marked by its human afterlives. Because the entangling of asylum and anti-communism was so formative for American refugee policy during the Cold War era, Vinh’s eschewing of anti-communist politics indirectly questions the understanding of the US as a torchbearer of freedom, a land of equal opportunity, providing safe haven for Cold War warriors “voting with their feet” as they flee communist regimes.

Vinh’s two-pronged critique of both American and Vietnamese American politics dislodges master narratives of the War in Vietnam and its aftermath. It asks us to consider the lived and embodied experiences of subjects touched by war, especially those who have seemingly failed to recover, to leave behind past traumas. It is significant that a gangster figure initiates this turn towards the material costs and legacies of war. Vinh is unable to successfully develop what Jodi Kim, following Toby Alice Volkman, calls “new geographies of kinship”—familial connections that are formed through transnational adoption. The closest he gets to forging kinship ties, beyond his gang and on-again-off-again girlfriend Kim, is in his meeting with Bac Nguyen, who at one point hands him a gold necklace—a family heirloom—to offer to the girl he loves. Such a gift, usually imparted to one’s descendants during marriage as a sign of inheritance and belonging, symbolically pulls Vinh into Bac Nguyen’s lineage. It is a gesture of generosity on the old man’s part that holds within it possibilities of familial connections, of intimacies to be established. It is only later that same evening, in loyalty to his “brothers,” his fellow gang members, that Vinh robs Bac Nguyen and physically attacks him the moment the old man calls out his name. As Bac Nguyen is left bleeding on the ground, Vinh is again an outsider (his “brothers” angry at him for divulging personal information that could compromise the gang), the fleeting promise of belonging foreclosed; another casualty of history.

For all the political acuity that Vinh displays, he remains precarious and vulnerable, struggling to resolve the conflicts, pressures, and inconsistencies that make everyday life livable. He never recovers from the overlapping injuries of American freedom. Even as she makes room for the gangster figure to express resentment, Phan complicates the utility of such affective articulations and political positioning for the *individual* who must *live through* the life war has made. This is perhaps one of the most devastating conundrums for refugees of American imperialism, existing under liberal freedom: how to be politically critical of, to express rage at, a system of encompassing (biopolitical) power and, at the same time, survive and persevere within it. A politics of resentment, while astute, expedient, and necessary, can shape experience in a way that makes it materially difficult for the subject to sustain itself in more pragmatic terms. While this point recalls the pathological definition of anger, it also highlights the realities of politicization and resistance; although attractive as theoretical ideals, they present real complications and vexing challenges for those who carry them through day to day. In the story, Bac Nguyen is unable to register Vinh’s anger, not because that feeling is unwarranted, but because he understands the messiness of politics and history—that even the best political diagnosis or critique inevitably falls short of capturing the complexity of any situation:

Bac Nguyen wondered what this young boy knew about the war and the American’s role, where all this anger came from. He saw it in his own children, the passionate, resolute ideology, the black-and-white view of history. Only with time, experience, and loss could a person realize that there isn’t simply one bad guy or one good guy—that in war, there are many sides at fault. (96)

In what might be interpreted as a retreat from politics, a naïve solution to the complexity of the present, Bac Nguyen advises Vinh: “We spend so much energy and time on the larger issues, religion, country, political parties, that we ignore the smaller ones, like family and our homes, which are ultimately more important” (97-8). Also a victim of war, albeit in different ways than Vinh, Bac Nguyen recognizes that the personal costs of fighting for political ideals far exceed the returns. For him, Vinh’s anti-Americanism is also a “resolute ideology” (like communism and democracy) that is limited and limiting, and political critique often falls short of what it aims to “fix.”

Yet, for Vinh, who assumes a Manichean perspective, physical violence, which is a manifestation of his critique, takes on the aura of a sobering, consciousness-giving tool in the fight against oppressive power. Recalling Franz Fanon’s advocacy of violence in postcolonial struggles, the gangster figure employs it in an attempt to materially and symbolically “overthrow” the dominant system. Surveying, with a sense of satisfaction, the chaotic scene of overturned cabinets and drawers, broken dishes, and spilled papers—a kind of domestic battlefield—that the *Brookhurst 354* gang had inflicted on the Nguyen family home, Vinh imagines the destruction as a literal shattering of the American Dream. For him, the violence of the scene exposes the illusory fiction of belonging that America holds out to refugees and immigrants. In this moment, material violence slips into symbolic violence, and the work of resentment becomes a harbinger of truth, a gift of valuable insight. The extra-ordinary violence of the home invasion makes legible to other immigrants the insidious, everyday, normalized violence that the state enacts on its racialized members, fixing them compliantly into place within the order of white supremacy. According to Vinh’s logic, “illegitimate” gang violence occasions an important revelation, a sobering reminder to those hard-working immigrants seeking upward mobility that total, unconditional, national inclusion will forever be out of reach. The immigrant’s hard work is ultimately a Sisyphean effort:

Vinh convinced himself that they were ultimately doing these people a favor. All of them in such a delusion about attaining this material dream of fortune and comfort, but at what expense? Didn’t they realize they’d always be under the thumb of this government? It wasn’t any better than Vietnam just because this government was more successful at deluding their people. They were fools to believe they could actually live among the Americans and become one of them. They never would. They would never be allowed. (108)

Vinh’s critique of materialism points out how socio-economic success does not necessarily guarantee social, cultural, and political belonging. His reasoning positions the gangster and gang violence in opposition to the state, functioning as a critical (and physical) disruption of American hegemonic cultural discourse. According to Jack Shadoian, the gangster is a “paradigm of the American dream” (3). He explains that, “[t]here is an inherent contradiction in American thought between America as a land of opportunity and the vision of a classless, democratic society … The gangster is a vehicle to expose this central problem of the American people” (6).

As Vinh and his “brothers” destroy what Vietnamese immigrants have labored to accumulate, they preemptively prevent false inclusion in a kind of neoliberal citizenship based on capital and consumption. The gangsters brutally seek to demonstrate that such capitalist accumulations, no matter how vast, are ultimately futile for racialized immigrants in a nation built on racial hierarchies, on the entrenched institutionalization of inequality. Violence here delinks the industrious and hopeful immigrant from the American Dream that needs such subjects in order to sustain itself. The irony of the situation, one that Vinh fails to see, is that the human recipients of his violence are people, like Bac Nguyen, who have already experienced the traumatic impacts of violence, who might desire inclusion, no matter how imperfect and illusory, because they have known worst fates, because of their need to physically survive and move forward. In a radical reversal, Vinh claims that the unwanted, those outside American national belonging, are “better off” in comparison to model minorities because there is no ambiguity as to their relationship with the nation. He is convinced that “[s]elling out to the Americans wasn’t worth it” (103):

Look what happened to those who did. The orphans adopted by American families didn’t even think they were Vietnamese anymore. And those who were left behind, unwanted, forgotten, had to suffer in foster homes. For a long time Vinh was angry about it, but now he realized they were better off. They knew where they stood with the Americans. The golden children didn’t. (103)

Being “better off” here means being “free” of American patronage, and the privileges and successes that such patronage supposedly makes available. The gangster figure boldly embraces the outsider position, pointing out the inconsistencies, ironies, and costs of being “inside.” Phan’s “Visitors” provides rare insight into the political and affective motivations of a gangster figure who the US media has persistently portrayed as a failed and thus ungrateful refugee, where ingratitude might be the very cause of failure. If, in the story, Bac Nguyen – the new immigrant – signifies certain feelings of gratitude through his unchecked belief in the American dream, then Vinh, through his injuries, his resentment, and the violence he enacts on others shatters the shell of a promise that is empty for so many.

THE GOLDEN CHILD

Vinh’s counterpart in the collection, Mai, is one of the “golden children” who covet national belonging by diligently working for upward mobility and social inclusion. Unlike Vinh, she grew up comfortably in a traditional foster family unit, and ardently pursues a better life through the path of higher education. Mai invests in the American Dream’s attainability and is, in many ways, a prime example of a successful refugee and model minority. In “Emancipation,” the narrative tension hangs on an admissions decision Mai is anxiously waiting on from Wellesley College, her top choice school for fulfilling her dream of upward mobility through higher education. Even though she perfectly fits the Ivy League profile, she is placed on the waitlist, which aptly symbolizes her secure positioning within, but also uneasy relation with, America(ns). Condensed in this central conflict is the perpetual *uncertainty* that Vinh identifies as characterizing the experience of the golden children, the “good” refugees who choose to “assimilate” into mainstream society.

In her college admissions essay, Mai strategically engages in what Jodi Kim calls “refugee performativity, or ‘playing’ the refugee by ‘playing it up’” (222). That is, she embellishes her story and exaggerates her emotions in order to elicit sympathies from decision makers. Despite “playing the part” by offering a narrative of grief, struggle, and triumph that makes for a compelling personal statement, and having “worked to ensure a future other children already inherited” (147), Mai is still not guaranteed a spot at the prestigious college. The events of the narrative unfold on Mai’s eighteenth birthday, the day she becomes an adult in the eyes of the state, and is thus emancipated from legal guardianship. It is on this day of transition, where Mai is pushed to contemplate the realities of her future, that the contingencies of her situation are most pronounced. As she is released from the custody of one social institution, that of the nuclear family, she has yet to gain entrance into another, that of the academy.

The trope of the *waitlist*, of being made to wait, evokes institutional power, both academic and governmental, to decide the fate of individuals, to keep them waiting, both within and simultaneously outside. To “make wait” is a technology of power that selects and manages bodies, that suspends them in (sometimes indefinite) limbo, between recognition and disposability. This is precisely the trade off for “selling out” to America that Vinh rightly pinpoints and criticizes: to be, in Homi Bhabha’s words, “*almost the same, but not quite*” (122). The condition of waiting also recalls the refugee and the adoptee, who are often understood as existing “in-between” various configurations, waiting for the conferment of social and political life. In Mai’s difficult situation, Phan makes a direct connection between the refugee waiting for citizenship, the adoptee waiting for adoption, and the model minority waiting for admission. The suggestion here is that a structure of what Vinh calls being “under the thumb” (108) of government, subjected to national will, imposes itself on categories that seem wholly disparate; the ostensibly “successful” immigrant is thus not so far removed from the pitiful refugee because both depend on the caprice of American mercy.

This scenario of uncertainty is also played out in Mai’s domestic life. While the Reynoldses, a white American couple, give her a safe home, Mai is never formally adopted as part of the family. She admits that she was “allowed a childhood, unlike her former foster brothers and sisters” (147), but also understands that there are limits placed on her privilege:

[T]here were times she [Mai] thought she could change their minds. She did everything to demonstrate she’d make a nice daughter. She listened to them, never disobeyed house rules, and always respected curfew. The Reynoldses talked about how proud they were of Mai, what a fine person she was. That was where their admiration ended. They had so many years to make her a legitimate part of their family, but the possibility was never even discussed. (158)

Again, Mai performs the role of the “good” refugee—here a dutiful “daughter”—but to no avail, as complete belonging remains an impossibility. As a character Mai seems to prove Vinh’s thesis regarding the golden children—that they do not know where they stand with the Americans, strung along in a cruelly tantalizing game. While Mai dismisses Vinh as a “nobody,” she does not realize that the two of them tragically occupy similar positions, that they are two sides of the same coin. In an antagonistic encounter between the two, Vinh tells her, “You may be smart, little girl. But don’t think you’re better. Today, you’ve been released into the world, just like the rest of us” (167). Mai’s emancipation ends the state’s responsibility towards her, and “freedom” means that the “good” refugee has to now fend for herself without the aid of the state, much like the unwanted orphans left behind.

Vinh’s blunt words fracture the fiction of Mai’s refugee performance, and the belief that such “acting” will result in permission, validation, and acceptance. He throws at her the question that pushes her to confront the failure of her efforts: “Don’t you ever wonder why those hippies never adopted you? Why no one ever wanted you?” (166). According to Vinh, Mai got her “American dream family” (165) by selling out her former foster brother and sister, and maneuvering, or “playing it up,” so that *she* was the one who was saved, the one who got placed in a good home, rather than Vinh or Kim. Yet, as he makes brutally clear, in the end she never received what she desired, rendering the performance ultimately ineffectual, the betrayal pointless. Referring to the sexual abuse that Kim experienced throughout her stays in foster homes, abuse that Kim often protected Mai from, Vinh queries, “Do you think it’s fair what happened to Kim and never to you?” (166). He points out that she was not simply lucky or special, that her good fortune was gained at the expense of others.

The ironically titled “Emancipation” demonstrates that the pursuit of the American Dream itself can become a source of resentment, especially when the pursuit is, from the beginning, coded with restrictions and limitations for the aspiring subject, or worse yet, rigged for failure. At the story’s end, when Mai arrives home visibly upset after the devastating encounter with Vinh, she gets into a quarrel with her foster father. Seemingly about her late return, but actually about Mai’s anger at his lack of commitment to her as a “real” daughter, the fight takes a treacherous turn when he tries to help her up from her slumped position on the ground. As he goes to lift her, Mai screams at him: “Don’t touch me! Don’t you ever touch me like that” (169). At the moment when she is able to express her anger at the Reynoldses, and her frustration with the entire social system, Mai also voices the sexual trauma that her close friend and older foster sister, Kim, has endured. This dramatic “taking on” or internalization of Kim’s injuries could be read as a result of Mai’s guilty conscience or distraught state of mind. It could also be interpreted as an incredible display of resentment, in which the model minority collapses into the bad subject, exposing how the discourse of American freedom—and the American Dream—grinds down all its subjects, good or bad. In the story, failure to belong is intensified by the effort invested for its cause. Mai is resentful, frustrated, and hurt precisely because she tried in the first place, because she has worked so hard in a bid to earn her place. The climatic emotional outburst that concludes Phan’s story dramatizes the often-invisible denials and slights that lock the model minority into place. When Mai finally notices the large envelope from Wellesley on the kitchen counter containing her acceptance letter, it has already become tragically clear that the enterprise is insurmountably stacked against her, and admission does not equal belonging.

VIOLENT RETURNS

In discussing the figure of the refugee as a “spectre of global flows,” the example *par excellence* of the neoliberal production of what he calls “wasted lives”—the unwanted human surplus of global capitalism—Zygmunt Bauman writes, “in addition to representing the ‘great unknown’ which all strangers in our midst embody, these particular outsiders, the refugees, bring home distant noises of war and the stench of gutted homes and scorched villages that cannot but remind the settled how easily the cocoon of their safe and familiar (safe *because* familiar) routine may be pierced or crushed and how deceptive the security of their settlement must be” (66-7). As it unsettles the alignment of home, security, and nation, the “ghostly” refugee also brings histories of violence that happen overseas, histories that have shaped and built Western nationhoods but have rarely been recognized by these nations as their very own, onto home ground. The figure of the refugee, then, can be read as a haunting vestige of violence, a persistent materialization of entangled histories that the national imaginary disavows and would rather forget. In other words, refugees remind us that transnational acts of violence haunt the very constitution of the nation.

If, as Bauman suggests, the refugee stands to signify violence within the ostensibly safe national imaginary, what happens, then, when they become gangsters, those who engage in criminal activity and enact material violence within the nation’s borders? I return to a question that begins this section to emphasize the problematic that Southeast Asian refugee gangsters pose for the nation-state. It is this problem of violence that facilitates the criminalization and outlawing of the gangster, where resentful affective articulations (often with violence) become difficult to socially index and comprehend. But as my analysis of Phan’s stories have shown, the gangster is a vexing figure who continues to unravel the tenets of American exceptionalism through the expression and physical enactment of resentment.

II.

THE DEPORTEE PROBLEM

One of the “solutions” the Department of Homeland Security has adopted in response to the “problem” of Southeast Asian refugee gangs and criminality is detention and deportation. This action, which physically expels the rem(a)inders of American violence overseas is perhaps an ultimate disavowal of the War and its legacies. In the wake of 9/11, “the ascendancy of deportation as an ever more pervasive and increasingly standardized instrument of statecraft” (De Genova and Peutz 3) followed the global obsession over border security and anti-terrorism. This ascendency had its precedent in the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which laid the legal groundwork for the concerted removal of “criminal aliens” *after* they had served prison terms and paid their debt to society, thereby creating a kind of “double jeopardy.” In 2003, however, U.S. immigration authorities “declared a ten-year enforcement plan (2003-12), whose stated mission [was] to promote ‘national security by ensuring the departure from the United States of *all* removable aliens’” (De Genova and Peutz 4). A year earlier, the U.S. had coerced Cambodia into signing a repatriation agreement that would allow refugees—who had been living in the U.S. as permanent residents—convicted of aggravated felonies to be “returned” to their homeland.[[23]](#footnote-23) The irony of the situation is that most returnees either escaped Cambodia at a young age or were born in Thai refugee camps, and therefore have no cultural or material connection to Cambodia. They came to the US as refugees, and many, unaware of the naturalization process, neglected to apply for citizenship. While most of them had committed serious felonies such as attempted murder or firearm assault, many were exiled for misdemeanors like shoplifting, public urination, or bouncing a check.

Writing in *The Boston Globe* in 2013, Olesia Plokhii and Tom Mashberg report that “Some 600 Cambodian-Americans, virtually all of them male and a majority convicted criminals, have been shipped to Asia’s most traumatized nation since 2002 […] Federal data show that deportations averaged 41 per year from 2001 to 2010, only to leap to 97 in 2011 and 93 last year” (n. pag.). This forced “return” of subjects—who had journeyed to America as war refugees—through “border control policies” designed to “manage and control the migration process” (“Abject Cosmopolitanism” 1070) is an example of what Peter Nyers calls a *deportspora*. In such a global landscape, migrants are “increasingly cast as the *objects* of securitised fears and anxieties” (“Abject Cosmopolitanism” 1070). Soo Ah Kwon sees the production of what Nyers calls an “abject” class of migrants and stateless individuals as illuminating “a racialized neoliberal regime of punishment (of detention, incarceration, and deportation) and governance (of shaping good and bad moral subjects)” (743). Rachel Ida Buff similarly argues that deportation is a “crucial technology of the state,” in which “the creation of statelessness is an ongoing enterprise central to the political coherence of national identity” (525). The forcible removal of criminalized Cambodian Americans is, therefore, part of a larger global process of biopolitical control, drawing and redrawing the lines of citizenship and social life in the exercise of sovereign power. The issue of deportation brings into sharp relief the nation-state’s political reach (and its limits) in regulating the movement of bodies, the rights and freedoms of those under (and outside of) its purview. The case of Cambodian returnees, in particular, brings into focus the (former) refugee’s tenuous position within the nation-state, and the oftentimes circuitous refugee trajectories, of how displacement, trauma, and refuge are ongoing processes that push and pull on the social recognizability of these very subjects.

Refugees who become involved in gang and criminal activities, like the ones depicted in Aimee Phan’s short stories, are often subjected to state-regulated deportation as punishment. Two activist videos produced by Studio Revolt, an independent, artist-run media lab based out of Phnom Penh, Cambodia speak to this experience of forced repatriation. Headed by filmmaker Masahiro Sugano and performance artist Anida Yoeu Ali, the studio collaborates with Cambodian and deported artists to create socially and politically engaged artistic works. “My Asian Americana” (2011), a public service announcement, and “Return to Sender” (2012), a short documentary, are videos that deal with the issue of Exiled Khmer Americans (EKA) separated from home and family. The former video was submitted to the White House’s Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders’ “What’s Your Story?” Video Challenge, and the latter was released when the submission failed to be honored despite winning the contest with popular votes. Both videos address the American nation-state directly—that is, they were meant for viewing by members of the government administration as well as the general public—and as such are strategic in their discursive, aesthetic, and affective deployment. Featuring exiled individuals narrating their experiences, the videos utilize common symbols of patriotism (and human subjecthood) as a platform to construct a public “speaking voice,” something that refugees and those without citizenship rights crucially *lack* within mainstream representations.[[24]](#footnote-24) They are not “angry,” nor do they outwardly blame or criticize the U.S. for repatriating Cambodian refugees. In fact, the “tone” of the pieces can be described as *loving*—a plea for mercy that pledges allegiance to the nation and belonging to an American way of life. For the deported speakers in the video, American citizenship is an exalted object of desire, coveted for its immeasurable value.

Yet, I argue that “My Asian Americana” and “Return to Sender” also seethe with resentment. It is ironically through patriotic expressions that the contradictions and failures of American freedom, liberty, and justice are brought to the surface. Coming from the mouths of deported Cambodian subjects, those marked for total exclusion, patriotism illuminates the inequalities and injuries that the state has enacted on individuals to whom it has previously promised refuge. As they convey love for the United States, seeking reintegration into the national body, the speakers in the videos also articulate the conditions of injustice that prompted the display of desire and devotion. This subtle incongruence between speaking and feeling subject—a wronged subject who feels love for the wrongdoer—creates an affective slippage that allows for resentment to also seep through; to return injury with expressions of love may be one of the most damning indictments, the most vitriolic articulation of resentment. Studio Revolt’s videos demonstrate that not all expressions of resentment precipitate anger or other negative feelings. Rather, resentment is sometimes most potent in affective expressions of love and friendship, in subtle gestures of reconciliation and desire. Writing on the repressed quality of resentment, Max Scheler remarks: “the repressed affect suddenly bursts across the threshold of consciousness whenever the repressive forces happen to relax their vigilance […] How often does ressentiment betray itself through a smile, a seemingly meaningless gesture, or a passing remark, in the midst of friendship and sympathy!” (51). Following Scheler, I explore how resentment surfaces intimately with and through “benign” feelings. In these visual activist pieces love is not a ruse for the expression of resentment, nor is resentment somehow disguised as love in order to be “heard” and “felt.” Rather, love and resentment coexist, are coterminous, where the expression of love is *simultaneously* the utterance of resentment.

CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

In the summer of 2011, the White House’s Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders launched the “What’s Your Story?” Video Challenge. Participants were asked to submit a three-minute video highlighting important community building and service work. The specific submission guidelines were: “In your video, tell us: How have your unique experiences shaped who you are today? What issues matter to you? (ie. arts, immigration, civil rights, public service, health, education etc.). In what ways are you making a difference in your community?” (“‘What’s Your Story’” n. pag.). After receiving over two hundred entries, eleven finalists were chosen to have their videos featured on the official Challenge website. Organizers then asked the public to view and select the most “inspirational” video, and from these results an “exceptional group of finalists” would be invited to the White House to “share their stories in person with officials from President Obama’s administration” (“‘What’s Your Story’” n. pag.).

Studio Revolt’s “My Asian Americana,” directed by Ali and Sugano, garnered the most votes in the contest, with over 13,000 YouTube hits.[[25]](#footnote-25) Yet, when the six winners—deemed “Champions of Change”—were announced, the filmmakers were not amongst those invited to the White House. In response, Studio Revolt issued a public statement, staged an alternate awards ceremony called “Champions of Change, too” in Phnom Penh, and released a follow-up video, entitled “Return to Sender” to address what they perceived to be an “attempt to silence voices criticizing deportations.” The collective also urged citizens to write to their congressional representatives, senators, and the President himself to express their concerns as well as hold video screenings and discussion groups to spread awareness of deportations. The situation gained some media coverage, most notably in the *Los Angeles Times* and *ColorLines*, and became an expedient occasion for generating protest and activism.

Ali and Sugano, however, were well aware that the subject matter of their submission would make it almost impossible for the U.S. government to recognize and celebrate the video. In recent years, deportation has become a sensitive and controversial issue for the Obama presidency, with the dubious title of “Deporter-in-Chief” having been bestowed on the President for issuing more deportations than any of his predecessors. It stands to reason that the administration would not (indeed, could not) champion and showcase the stories of those it has physically, and in many cases unjustly, purged from the country. Moreover, deportees do not fit the profile of the good “nation-building” Asian American subjects that the Initiative had set out to find. The filmmakers rhetorically inquire:

As we read the submission challenge and viewed the launch video, we wondered what stories this White House committee will select to show the public? What issues are considered worthy of public discussion within an Asian American framework? Who gets to be celebrated in Asian America? Can we accept that our community includes an “unwanted” group of forgotten voices—the refugees, addicts, ex-convicts, gang members? People who are also fathers, brothers, sons, daughters and mothers.  Narratives that are not so pretty, not so clean or simple to tell. (*Studio Revolt*)

As they reflect on the place of “unwanted” voices in the national imaginary, Ali and Sugano also understand that there is little room for the “not so pretty” narratives that, accept it or not, make up the diversity of Asian American experience. If the dominant framework cannot accommodate these “unruly” voices, then how are they to gain visibility and further their cause? Tasked with such a conundrum, Studio Revolt created two complex pieces of video activism that appeal to the nation while also critiquing it. Drawing on the affective experience of returnee narratives—that is, the oftentimes contradictory, overlapping feelings and individual details that form life in exile—the videos offer a compelling vocalization of aspiration and resentment.

RESENTMENT IN LOVE

“My Asian Americana” unequivocally professes love and devotion to the United States. It begins with a sequence of individual speakers in medium shots reciting the pledge of allegiance as they gaze directly into the camera’s lens. With seriousness and conviction, their right hands over their hearts, and flanked by the star-spangled banner they repeat: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Then, each speaker goes on to enumerate his or her version of “Asian Americana”; what follows is a litany of popular culture references, American holidays, food dishes, and mundane personal memories. Two-thirds of the way through, they all converge on white steps, to stand, once again, with hands over their hearts under a single fluttering flag. In the next series of shots, the speakers reveal their citizenship status, “American” or “Exiled American,” and those individuals who can and cannot go home. Finally, the screen fades to black and the following text appears: “Featured Khmer Exiled Americans (KEAs) served their time for mistakes they made in their youth. Upon release, they were additionally detained by U.S. Immigration then deported to Cambodia, a country they had never seen.”

On the surface, the video is a powerful object of patriotism, wherein Asian bodies proclaim their loyalty to the nation, their unwavering attachment to American values and way of life. The overall “affective tone” of the video is one of love and longing for a place of familiarity and comfort. Although it might seem jarring for these feelings to issue from expelled subjects, this patriotic affection should not be considered insincere, for the immediate political project of the video is to beseech the administration to reconsider its deportation policies, to take deportees back into the fold of Western society, because America is the only “home” they have ever known. In the video, American citizenship is held up as an incontrovertible “good” and life in America is desirable and beautiful in its everyday iterations. Y-Dang Troeung convincingly argues that these deportee voices complicate the predominant analytical paradigm of Southeast Asian American studies. That is, in seeming to ask for a second chance, for rescue and return to U.S. soil, deportee activism runs counter to stringent critiques of American “rescue and liberation.” The appearance of desirous exiled subjects knocking at America’s front gates proves not only the continual need and want of American intervention but also the value of its political protection.[[26]](#footnote-26) Yet, I contend that alongside this expression of patriotic love and desire wafts resentment, or more specifically the expression of love illuminates the underlying resentment that occasioned love’s emergence. In other words, the visual public display of love exists only because the U.S. government committed an injustice against exiled Cambodian Americans in the first place.

Thus, when Anida Yoeu Ali emphasizes the words “justice for all” in the video by drawing out the syllables, the fact that justice has been denied to *some*, the very people who appear on screen, renders the pledge of allegiance hollow. Flowing from the mouths of those who have been excised from the polity, from the supposedly “indivisible nation,” the act of recitation becomes an urgent reminder for the nation to live up to the liberal ideals ensconced in the pledge. The image of the U.S. as torchbearer of freedom, as land of opportunity, falls short precisely at the moment when deportees avow love that also airs grievance. The irony that arises between deported body and patriotic speech underscore the deep injury of exile, the absence of due process, justice, and liberty. Remarking on the severity of deportation decisions, Bill Ong Hing writes that “virtually no relief from deportation is available from an immigration judge […] Issues of rehabilitation, remorse, family support, and employment opportunities are irrelevant” (217). The mercilessness and finality of deporting former refugees betrays the seemingly humanitarian generosity of harboring them from the horrors of war and genocide just a few decades ago. A subtext of suffering then emerges that implicates the U.S. as an agent of displacement, not just during “foreign” wars but also in their long aftermath. This strategic invocation of the pledge of allegiance by returnees, then, both reinscribes American exceptionalism and exposes the fault lines in its master narrative.

Furthermore, through the declaration of national love, returnees compellingly recalibrate the fixed dynamic of magnanimity and gratitude that characterizes the normative relation between the nation and the refugee. Whereas, the nation is the generous benefactor and the asylum seeker is the indebted recipient of that generosity in conventional discourse, the deported refugee’s continued loyalty *in spite of* the nation’s failed hospitality shifts the distinction of altruism away from the nation’s exclusive proprietorship. By embodying love (and forgiveness), and the ability to “gift” it, the deportee becomes an affective agent positioned to define the terms of feeling relations. Gestures of refugee forgiveness, reconciliation, and love are not uncommon—refer, for example, to Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the infamous Vietnamese victim of napalm who publicly forgave her injurers, and by extension, the American nation. In Phan’s case, and the cases of others like her, the refugee is a lucky “beneficiary” of Western freedom, while returnees have been stripped of any rights and privileges, making their forgiveness unexpected and even more virtuous because the recipient is underserving. “My Asian Americana” radically suggests that “bad” refugees can be generous too, especially when the host nation commits a wrong against them by rescinding an offer of asylum. In the follow-up video, Kosal Kiev, a returnee and spoken word artist, defiantly states: “No matter what decision you [government officials] make, I still love you.” In the deportee context, unconditional patriotic love establishes those who have been rendered obsolete as feeling subjects, as agents within the arena of affective cultural politics.

Agency is also asserted in the drive to name, and make meaning of, displacement. This is most evident in the choice of the word “exile” to define the returnee experience. “Exile” presupposes a prior condition of belonging, while pointing to the political and punitive nature of state banishment. The self-generated label “Exiled Khmer *American*” leaves open the possibility of return by retaining the specter of U.S. citizenship. In exile, returnees are still locked in association, in a form of relationality, with the state, even if that state wants nothing to do with them. The most striking visual dissonance in the video occurs between the ubiquity of American flags in the background and the garments that adorn the speakers’ bodies. While the stars and stripes appear in virtually every frame, visually reiterating the spoken contents of the pledge, the printed black t-shits worn by the speakers cue an alternate “nation,” an abject shadow of the tolerant, inclusive U.S. Printed on the shirts is an image of the Seal of the President of the United States encircled by the phrase “The United States of Exiled America.” This appropriation of the symbol of state power, of sovereignty, to illustrate how that power has *literally* created another exiled “nation,” undeniably a part of but involuntarily separated from the U.S., calls into question policies designed to divide and “control its unwanted immigrant populations that are the consequence of its decades-old imperial ambitions” (Kwon 753). While the logo image might appear irreverent, it is a perfect example of love through resentment or resentment through love. As a complex signifier the EKA’s seal derisively undermines sovereign authority, augmenting a powerful icon in order to show injury and disaffection; but in doing so, it also centers the state as *the* site of politics, aspiring to national belonging and investing in state power to confer political citizenship.

Yet, marked for and with expatriation, the state designates these former refugees as criminal *and* foreign (“criminal aliens”), ineligible and underserving of the privilege of citizenship. Describing the convergence of refugee and criminality in what she calls the United State’s “inhospitable politics of repatriation,” Thy Phu writes: “As the ultimate penalty, deportation marks the moment when criminal identity lays bare the tenuousness of the refugee’s welcome. Rather than merely meeting or overlapping in the spectrum of rights, the criminal and the Cambodian refugee today potentially share an uncomfortable, indeed infelicitous, identity. The identification of the refugee as criminal, specifically as alien felon, helps erase the former category and any claims to compassionate, humane treatment that could otherwise be made on its behalf” (152). Criminalization effectively functions to remove the *claims for refuge*, which acts as a precondition for the granting of citizenship. In the context of deportation, the criminalized (former) refugee not only loses the rights of citizenship, but also, retroactively, the right to *seek* the rights of citizenship. As a process, criminalization erases any affects (compassion, sympathy, and pity) that might positively bolster the refugee’s attainment of citizenship and social life; in turn, the refugee is emptied of feelings (principally, fear) that once made him or her worthy of and eligible for state protection. Criminalizing the refugee, thus, elides the socio-economic background, personal circumstances, and broader social and historical conditions that have shaped both migration and settlement; this, as Lisa Cacho has argued, denies subjectivity and personhood.

The video evokes a sense of “Americana,” an essentialized yet nebulous cultural identity that, like the pledge and the flag, serves as a strategy to align deportees with the state, to say, “we are *people* just like you.” It also functions to counter the characterization of criminality, to critically erase the criminalized identity that has been imposed on deportees. The deployment of subjective experiences and personal memories is thus a tactic for claiming cultural citizenship, where legal citizenship has been categorically denied. In snippets of palpable detail, the speakers relate what *precisely* makes them American:

Going to New Hampshire. Sunday morning, the leaves are changing. My sister sittin’ in the front braggin’ of all the stuff she would buy at the outlet … Thanksgiving and my lay-z-boy recliner. Sitting there and watching the game with all the guys while my sisters and mom cook in the kitchen, my nieces and nephews running around like the chicken head cut off … Halloween, where I had to make my own costumes cause my parents never bought me one … Saturday morning cartoons. Thundercats. Voltron … Playing football during the snow time in New England. Not being able to feel my feet … And we go fishing, then we will run out of night crawlers, and what we use: wonder bread. Yup, that works all the time. (“My Asian Americana”)

This recourse to everyday subjective experience attempts to make deportees more “relatable” to a general audience, and to demonstrate that criminal conviction and deportation alone do not define them. The narration of life moments, principally centered on family, nostalgia, and simple pleasures, humanizes the “non-subject” violently produced through deportation. If criminalization and the erasure of subjectivity are necessary for establishing *deportability*, then the recounting of life, in its mundane ordinariness, reestablishes the personhood that, at the very least, challenges and contradicts the depersonalized, indiscriminatory, and sweeping removal policies of the state. Therefore, at the end of the video, with the minor reveal of who *can* and *cannot* go back home to the United States, the humanizing project of the PSA reaches a poignant climax.

Picking up from this humanist appeal in “My Asian Americana,” “Return to Sender” also conjures life narrative as a retort to exile and the discourse of deportability. In the form of a video letter, the piece provides testimonies to the embodied *lives* that have lived—and are living—through the deportation regime. Intended to be delivered at the White House had Studio Revolt been invited to the “Champions of Change” event, it directly addresses powerholders—the President, congressmen and congresswomen, judges, and fellow Americans. At the beginning of the video, the pledge of allegiance is once again recited, and a suppositional question is posed to the viewer by one of the speakers: “If your citizenship was stripped away from you, and you was dropped off into a foreign country you know nothing about, with nothing, how would you *feel*?” The emphasis on feelings is significant here, as the video calls on viewers to engage with emotions as a way of understanding the complicated issue of deportation and the human textures of exiled life. By demonstrating that the hypothetical scenario is real for deportees—experienced and felt bodily—the speakers’ testimonies are meant to elicit feelings of empathy and sympathy. What follows from the question is a mapping out of multiple individual narratives that share a common arc: birth and early life in refugee camps, growing up in the United States, criminal activity in youth, and reform in and after incarceration. One speaker tells us, “I was born in a refugee Camp in Thailand,” while another says, “I left Cambodia at the age of two.” In another segment, a speaker confesses, “I don’t remember nothing about Cambodia. I don’t know how to read Cambodian or hardly speak Cambodian.” Later, “We are not any different from any other American kids,” and “All we know is American culture.”

These testimonial truths stress the absurdity of deportation as a legitimate and logical solution to the difficulties some Cambodian Americans face in the U.S. The most damning evidence against the injustice of deportation is, however, the fact of rehabilitation—that many of these “bad” individuals have actually become the kinds of productive members of society that such policies aim to produce through citizenship regulation. A speaker recounts, “While I was in prison, I rehabilitated. Got my GED, my barber license, my fiber optic degree.” Another speaker claims with conviction: “[I] was home for seven years, basically became a reformed and changed person to take care of my family. Lived my life as a quote unquote citizen, doing what I got to do, paying my taxes … I started a family. I left five children behind.” After their incarceration, many returnees became gainfully employed and started families of their own. In the video, the age of their children is vocalized, accentuating the far-reaching costs of family separation that also recalls the sudden disappearance (and usually execution) of family members, usually male, during the Khmer Rouge era, adding another layer of trauma to the experience. The violence of the Khmer Rouge, a specter that looms over subsequent generations of Cambodians, is reinvoked and relived in these state practices of deportation. The resultant destruction of familial structures and disposability of human lives is not so much an inherited postmemory of genocide, but is rather a lived reality of continual state-approved biopolitical control. The merciless deportations of (former) refugees, here, is an extension, one instance in a line, of bodily subjection, of genocidal tendency. With this picture of (broken) family life sketched in the video, the banishment of Cambodian Americans is revealed as a grave injustice, an affront to the principles of reform and rehabilitation that structure the American justice system. With tears welling in his eyes, and frustration in his voice, one speaker implores: “Just take a look at my life. Yes, when I was fifteen, I committed a crime. To label me a criminal then, fine. I accept it. But for you to call me a criminal fourteen years later does not speak the truth. So judge me for who I am and not for who I was.” A female returnee states, “Sometimes I get angry at the government.” This expression of resentment indicts deportation polices as a betrayal not only of American ideals but also of the individuals who have put their trust in them.

The rapid jump cuts that characterize the editing of “My Asian Americana” and “Return to Sender” stitch these individual narratives together into a collective experience of exile, longing, and resentment. This technique also functions to underscore a common political cause, to challenge the injustice of forcible removal with subjective testimony and a communal act of remembrance. Deportation is part and parcel of what Cathy Schlund-Vials calls the “Cambodian Syndrome,” “a transnational set of amnesiac politics revealed through hegemonic modes of public policy and memory” (*War, Genocide, Justice* 13). As one such amnesiac policy, forced removal forgets the extraordinary circumstances that surround contemporary cases of deportation—a history of war, genocide, and American culpability in creating the violent conditions of migration. In light of organized and imposed forgetting, any sense of justice and equity, then, must incorporate the work of memory, an active anamnesis that facilitates less myopic conceptions of the relatedness of events, the deepness of history, and the complexity of the moment.

Bill Ong Hing calls on an ethics of American responsibility to argue against deportation. He writes: “The case involving the removal of Cambodian refugees provides an opportunity to think about the way in which the migrant seeking sanctuary, seeking to be admitted as a guest, has in fact been forced to wander because of the actions of that very host, who should then be acting not out of an ethic of hospitality or sympathy but out of an ethic of responsibility” (278-79). Responsibility here is tantamount to remembering, it means to look back at, and acknowledge, a history of military intervention in Southeast Asia and consider how that history has indelibly shaped the present, for better or for worse. It follows that there is no justice when state actors fail to account for “the ongoing effects of the killing fields on the community, the circumstances after arrival, the upheaval in family and culture, the challenges of relocation, the age at entry of most potential returnees, and ultimately the failure of the U.S. resettlement program to provide the tools necessary to deal with their new situation” (Ong 277).

In this context, “My Asian Americana” and “Return to Sender” are acts of recollection that urgently narrate the unexamined lives of returnees, in particular how deportation has impacted individuals, families, and communities. According to Khatharya Um, remembering is a critical source of identity and resistance for exiled Southeast Asian communities who have been subjected to multiple forms of violent erasure in the latter part of the twentieth century. She points out that “The struggle to remember for many of history’s battered subjects is […] also a struggle for relevance” (“Exiled Memory” 834). Through both remembering *and* forgetting, Cambodians at home and in the diaspora continually grapple with the devastating effects of the Killing Fields era. Against official regimes of genocide amnesia, however, much of this “coming to terms” requires cultural memory labor that, as Cathy Schlund-Vials explains, provides an “alternative site for justice, healing, and reclamation” (*War, Genocide, Justice* 17). Even though the videos do not explicitly reference the Khmer Rouge genocide, they nevertheless participate in genocide remembrance by highlighting the precarious fate of its human survivors, young refugees who escaped genocide only to be subjected to another type of biopolitical social control that targeted their lives as, in Giorgio Agamben’s term, “bare” and dispensable. Constituting a different kind of “exiled memory” from the one Khatharya Um discusses, the returnees’ justice seeking is focused on deportation, an issue seemingly unrelated to the genocide in Cambodia in the late 1970s. However, in their activism, in the act of “speaking out” against U.S. policy, the specter of war and genocide is inevitably raised. As they present the stories of returnees, speaking of refugee camps, the videos also gesture to the original migration that brought these individuals across the Pacific, linking past uprooting with present displacement. Studio Revolt’s activist work represents “a critical mode of cultural labor that brings into dialogue genocide remembrance, collected memory, and juridical activism” (Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, Justice* 182).

ACTIVIST “RETURNS”

In his important article “Abject cosmopolitanism: the politics of protection in the anti-deportation movement,” Peter Nyers asks: “what implications does the activism of abject migrants have for regimes of the political which operate on the assumption that such acts of agency are, in fact, impossible?” (1071). To rephrase this question in the present context: How does the U.S nation-state respond to the agential voices of Exiled Khmer Americans, whom it has already relegated to social death? If deportees are *outlawed* (illegal and illegible), situated outside the framework of recognizable sociality and politics, then what kind of interventions can and do “My Asian Americana” and “Return to Sender” make as pieces of cultural activism? How can we rethink politics itself in light of such forms of deportee activism? Nyers theorizes the concept of “abject cosmopolitanism” to describe “the emerging political practices and enduring political problematics associated with refugee and immigrant groups resisting their targeted exclusion” (1072-3). I suggest that Studio Revolt’s work with Cambodian American returnees is an example of such abject cosmopolitanism, whereby abject subjects, once a part of the social body but who have since been severed and expelled, “return” to demand, first and foremost, political speech, to “interrupt the dominant political (speaking) order not just to be heard, but to be recognised as a speaking being as such” (1078). This unwelcomed “participation” pushes at the limits of the political itself, asking anew who can and cannot speak, who is and is not a political subject.

The politicized pageantry of the White House’s IAAPI contest to collect “good” model minority voices was disrupted, even if momentarily, by the appearance of ex-convicts and deportees. The submission of “My Asian Americana” to the state-sanctioned search for narratives of honorable leaders and productive community organizations calls into (re)consideration definitions of acceptability, civility, and belonging that undergird citizenship and political agency. The paramount question then becomes: How can the state manage the voices of its cast-offs? The fact that the state has to continue to engage with the lives they have already made “bare,” with those they have renounced all responsibility for, is indicative of the political potential of abject cosmopolitanism. Drawing on Bonnie Honig and Jacques Rancière, Nyers explains that “Acts of citizenship are as likely to be enacted by abject subjects as by citizen subjects […] This involves those moments when abject subjects (in Rancière’s terms, those who have ‘no part’ in the social order) articulate a grievance as an equal speaking being” (1078). Understanding the videos as acts of citizenship, as articulations of politics that attempt to change political processes, clarifies the contradictory coexistence of both patriotism and resentment in them. The case of Cambodian returnees shows that to claim citizenship is to make visible injustice and injury, and to express resentment is to hold the nation to a higher standard of accountability, to be what it purports to epitomize.

At the end of his state-of-the-field discussion of Southeast Asian American studies, Viet Nguyen articulates an important political and moral quandary facing scholars and cultural workers. He writes,

[I]n arguing for the study of Southeast Asian Americans, we are also arguing that the United States is our own country. This is a complicated claim. It means that we wish to sit at America’s multicultural banquet and savor the citizenship and equality promised to all. It also means that we must partake of strange fruit: the responsibilities of being a US citizen in an age when the United States willingly wields the power to wage war and create refugees, acts that should make us wonder if this is, indeed, our America. (“Refugee Memories” 939)

Outlined in this quandary is the paradox of American citizenship for many immigrants and refugees: how to love, desire, and benefit from citizenship, but also to remain vigilant, skeptical, and critical of it. The critical work of Southeast Asian American scholars, activists, and artists is located in between claims of national belonging and subversive reconstitutions of its meaning. Studio Revolt’s “My Asian Americana” and “Return to Sender” straddle this line that cuts across love and resentment, but as “voices” of abject subjects they orbit in an uneasy relation with the national center, the imperial metropolis. The telling absence of an invitation to the White House, the symbolic “home” of the nation, and the lack of recognition in the face of success, does not just indicate a silencing, as the videos’ producers have pointed out, but effectively an *outlawing*—to be outside the law and that of protection and consideration, to be illegal. This denial and disavowal, as Sara Ahmed would characterize it, is a barring from a “gathering” around a symbolic communal “table” that “direct[s] us in specific ways or that make[s] some things possible and others not” (*Queer Phenomenology* 81). If the table, as a kinship object of sociality, requires its sitters to follow certain directives, then exclusion deems those excluded outside such directives and regulations, ungoverned and ungovernable. The lack of response from the IAAPI organizers is a refusal to register, not the outward love and longing for America that deportees describe in the videos, but the deep resentment that oozes and lingers as they recount their (exiled) life narratives. While dismissed by those in power, these voices and their affective registers continue to persist at the threshold of political recognizability and social death.

**CHAPTER 3: RESILIENCE**

LOSS AND RESILIENCE

In the afterword to a special issue of *Amerasia* commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the “end” of the Vietnam War, Nguyên-Vo Thu-Huong argues that Vietnamese American attachments to the past cannot be wholly understood through dehistoricized and decontextualized “categories of psychoanalytic pathology” (168). Rather, expressions of refugee memorialization are “acts of anamnesis against historical and on-going erasure of Vietnamese American distinct presence by forced forgetting” (169). That is, for Vietnamese Americans, recalling the past or holding on to loss in the face of American cultural amnesia, an “organized and strategic forgetting” (Espiritu, “Thirty Years” xiii), is not melancholia in the traditional sense, but constitutes resistant affirmations of presence, of continued relevance. Nguyên-Vo’s assertion relates to recent critical reconsiderations of loss, mourning, and melancholia within cultural theory. This work—exemplified by David Eng and David Kazanjian, Judith Butler, Anne Cheng and others—returns to Freud’s distinction between normal mourning and pathological melancholia, as well as his later troubling of this distinction, to explore the generative potential of loss.[[27]](#footnote-27) As opposed to a debilitating condition of withdrawal from the world, melancholia’s persistent attachment to lost objects, or a “hanging on” to the past, becomes that which might facilitate a type of counter-hegemonic politics and/or a historical perspective that keeps the past alive and open to engagement.

In the introduction to their seminal collection of essays, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Eng and Kazanjian “find in Freud’s conception of melancholia’s persistent struggle with its lost objects not simply a ‘grasping’ and ‘holding’ on to a fixed notion of the past but rather a continuous engagement with loss and its remains” (4). For them, “This engagement generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future … Avowals of and attachments to loss can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings” (4-5). This world of remains, Judith Butler argues in the afterword to the same collection, “is a place where belonging now takes place in and through a common sense of loss … Loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community” (“Afterword” 468). In this vein, articulating loss, as Nguyên-Vo points out, becomes a means of defining community and subjectivity, of making claims to a history that has elided Vietnamese/American existence and suffering. She emphatically notes, “The mode of expression in the Vietnamese American community is mournful of loss and evocative of trauma. It is a world of survivors” (168).

While Nguyên-Vo’s observation is specific to Vietnamese Americans, it is equally pertinent for and applicable to other Southeast Asian groups displaced by the War in Vietnam, both in the US and in other global diasporas. The secret (and not so secret) American bombings in Cambodia and Laos, the Khmer Rouge genocide, the Pathet Lao extermination of Hmong people, and the forced migrations of millions of refugees in war’s aftermath enumerate some of the key events in which trauma and loss pervade physical and psychological experience. Like Vietnamese Americans, Cambodian, Laotians, and Hmong in diaspora reckon with traumatic pasts within and against American hegemonic cultural memory of the War, one that circulates within and beyond its borders. It is through the enunciation of their losses that these groups demonstrate how they have survived and declare that they exist. Inhabiting the “world of survivors” involves naming loss, for the possibility of doing so presupposes perseverance and persistence, life in the wake of destruction. Loss is thus a resilient cultural form for Southeast Asians in diaspora, and as such has been deployed to various personal and political ends.

Yet, the preeminence of loss and grief in Southeast Asian cultural productions and criticism leaves unexplored (and under-theorized) other embodied feelings that constitute the multidimensional experience of surviving war. This chapter employs resilience as an affective concept to examine the experience of *survival*—in the physical sense but also as immaterial forms of persistence and inheritance—that encompasses a range of affective sensations, including both grief and pleasure, melancholy and joy, despair and hope, and what falls in between, to get at the complexity of living through and with the aftermath of war. My foray into an analysis of resilience is an attempt to decenter the critical emphasis on loss and mourning that saturates contemporary discussions by and on Southeast Asian refugees to make room for thinking through the everyday pleasures and delights that intermingle with the looming recognition of loss. To be clear, my point is not to discount discussions of loss—it is undoubtedly an important cultural form and has proven itself to be valuable in illuminating survivor impulses and desires. But, because of its centrality, loss overshadows other affective experiences, ones that might tell us more about the possibilities of “post”-refugee life. This chapter thus attempts to articulate another kind of engagement with loss through explorations of what it means to be resilient.

THE TURN TO RESILINECE

According to Brad Evans and Julian Reid, in the contemporary moment marked by volatility and vulnerability, we have “all become part of an interconnected catastrophic topography of endangerment” (8), where “instability and insecurity are the new normal as we become increasingly attuned to living in complex and dynamic systems which offer no prospect of control” (3). In such a milieu, the turn to resilience as a concept and praxis that responds to, and potentially ameliorates, the impact of change and disruption seems to be occurring in many aspects of public life. In fields as diverse as ecology, self-help psychology, engineering, security, business, sustainability, and governance policy, resilience has emerged as a mode of equilibrium maintenance, of surviving (and thriving in) the unpredictability of a globalized world system. Because it describes how people and systems recover from crisis and change, how continuity may be (re)established, resilience is crucial to dealing with the complexities we face in our present existential condition of what Zgymunt Bauman calls liquid modernity. In their book *Resilience*, Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy ask a question that characterizes the immense topicality of the concept: “In an age of constant disruption, how do we build in better shock absorbers for ourselves, our communities, companies, economies, societies, and the planet?” (7).

Evans and Reid, however, see this resilient imperative as a neoliberal ideological project that naturalizes the “terrifying yet normal state of affairs that suspends us in petrifying awe” (16). The logic of resilience reduces life to survivability, demanding adaptation or death, or life in spite of catastrophe. They explain that resilience is a “key strategy in the creation of contemporary regimes of power that hallmark vast inequalities in all human classifications. Little wonder that resilience is most concerned with those deemed most vulnerable” (32). David Chandler’s discussion of resilience in policy-making exemplifies this neoliberal push. He notes that resilience is principally about making failure productive; “changing our approach to failure is a central tenet of resilience-thinking” (3), for “[n]ot only is failure to be expected in a complex world, but the key point is how we use failure or limits to enable progress” (5). The operative meaning here is progress, the neoliberal transformation of an impediment into an advantage, to succeed against the odds. The resilient individual then is hyperconscious of his or her inner attributes and external surroundings, always attempting to maximize both to stay afloat and move on/upwards. Chandler describes this quality as “bounce-back ability,” remarking that,

The resilient subject emerges not as a secure subject but as a self-aware subject: self-aware not only of its own internal capacities and attributes and the need to be constantly adaptive but also increasingly aware of its own relational vulnerabilities and how these are reproduced through different embedded relational systems—through cultural, social, economic, and environmental processes of emergent causality, operating across a range of interrelated and overlapping levels from the local to the global. (11)

As an ideological discourse, resilience supports the survival of a certain kind of subject, organizing life in such a way that compels continual flexibility, which some individuals and communities are *already* more capable of, thanks to the (often invisible) advantages offered by histories of European colonialism and the contemporary global capitalist system it enabled.

Against the lure of resilient life, Evans and Reid advocate for what they call an “art of living,” or *life as a work of art*, where acts of living, affirmations of truth, and expressions of poetry have immense political value, transcending life beyond mere physical, neoliberal survivability. They assert: “we need to focus more clearly on the affirmative and poetic qualities of existence that are by their very nature ‘irreducible to life’ against those strategies which take life in order to render it deducible – hence deductible as a living entity that demands continuous intervention on account of its endless imperfections” (175). Such a provocative imperative invests in the power of experience (poetic and otherwise) to counteract the cold rationality of resilience that governs the thin, unforgiving line between life and death. Expanding on Evans and Reid’s claim, I suggest that *works of art* point to other ways of understanding resilience. That is, an art object can communicate that there “is *more to life* than this ongoing survival” (167), or, more precisely, that ongoing survival exceeds the ideological forces that demand its ongoingness. Resilience, I maintain, is powerful evidence that “disposable” life does and will persist.

The “turn” to resilience in broader political and globalization studies is a useful starting point to understand how the concept is gaining currency as an important contemporary affect. Yet, resilience in the context of war, trauma, and migration is not equivalent or reducible to the kind of resilient imperative in the globalized milieu of the anthropocene. It does not have to be understood *only* in neoliberal terms, however; it can be mobilized in different contexts, and toward different ends. Just as loss is not pathological melancholia for the survivors of war, refugee resilience is not neoliberal agility or advantage; rather, it draws attention to the “bodies” that endure war, to a sense of survival that is both brutal and beautiful, to the improbable and unexpected life that surfaces from the ruins. It makes space for shared vulnerability, for celebration, pleasure, and desire. As such, refugee resilience is to be “found” in the everyday, surging through and between bodies as well as worlds, flickering and flashing beside narratives of loss and grief. In this chapter, I examine a collection of poems *Found* by Lao Canadian poet Souvankham Thammavongsa and a memoir *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* by Hmong American Kao Kalia Yang. Both texts share a historical context of the Secret War in Laos during the War in Viet Nam; they emerge from the remains of war, of catastrophic bombing and upheaval that destroyed a traditional way of life for millions of people, forcing multiple migrations and transformations. Written by 1.5-generation female authors who work with and through the experiences of a previous generation in their texts, *Found* and *The Latehomecomer* are preoccupied with tracing the remnants of life in the wake of loss—that is to say, the poems and the memoir are concerned with the workings of resilience, with understanding, representing, and performing how (former) refugees persist in the time-space of the “post.”

THE ORDINARY OF RESILIENCE, OR SMALL PLEASURES

In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart demonstrates, through experiential ethnography, how affect is all the time around and a part of us. It is “a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact. It’s transpersonal or prepersonal – not about one person’s feelings becoming another’s but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities” (128). Affects are thus ordinary, in the sense that they are commonplace, but also in that they constitute the interactions and experiences of daily life, animating its textured quality. She writes, “Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences” (1-2). Affects are ordinary and they can tell us about the everyday—what it looks like, how it comes into being, and how it is lived. In the way that it attends to the continual and mundane (but powerful) process of survival and living, to the presence of the refugee’s affected and affecting body, resilience, as I show in this chapter, is an “ordinary” affect, moving, sometimes undetected and unrecognized, through and in the quotidian, quietly doing its work.

The ordinary, made up of affective intensities, facilitates and records the many ways in which we are all connected and are, precariously but resiliently, interdependent. Resilience, as an affect of the ordinary, showcases this sense of shared vulnerability. Returning to Butler’s claim that community can be formed through loss, I suggest that similarly, resilience, perhaps counterintuitively, constitutes a kind of “social vulnerability of our bodies” (*Precarious Life* 20). As Butler explains, to exist socially is to be vulnerable, but instead of a threat to the person, such vulnerability ties us to others in recognition of mutual dependence and responsibility. She writes that the body is a “site of desire and physical vulnerability … a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others” (*Precarious Life* 20). If, as scholars such as Kathleen Stewart, Sara Ahmed, and Teresa Brennan claim, affect is the body’s response to exteriority, to the world, then it both constitutes and highlights the individual and collective body’s vulnerability. Vulnerability here is not weakness but strength in connectivity, relatedness, and potentiality. In vulnerability there is resilience, in resilience there is vulnerability. Thammavongsa’s poetry and Yang’s memoir stage this complex relationship between loss, vulnerability, and resilience, focusing on the refugee body’s movement in the everyday. In *Found* and *The Latehomecomer*, resilience does not so much reside in triumphant overcomings of catastrophic change or withstanding devastating assault, but rather in the minor moments of pause, of cracks in the march of time, that take recognition and pleasure in everyday being despite the pressures and threats of obsolescence.

I.

READING CLOSELY

In response to an interview question about the writing of her poetry collection *Found*, Souvankham Thammavongsa says, “I took only one thing and looked at it in bits and pieces” (Barclay n. pag.). This seemingly simple phrase describes the book’s poetic process, methodology, and philosophy. The act of *looking* is privileged here—looking intently, looking closely. Referring to a scrapbook the poet’s father had collected while living in a refugee camp in Thailand, looking becomes a way of engaging the past, of mediating the relation between subject and object, the personal and the historical. Providing context for the collection, Thammavongsa begins: “In 1978, my parents lived in building #48. Nong Khai, Thailand, a Lao refugee camp. My father kept a scrapbook filled with doodles, addresses, postage stamps, maps, measurements. He threw it out and when he did, I took it and found this” (11). The poems that follow meditate on this collection of objects assembled by the poet’s father. They are the results of Thammavongsa’s scrutiny of the scrapbook’s miscellaneous contents. This work of “observation,” I suggest, is akin to the literary praxis of close reading, whereby critics apply attention and care to parse the particular details of a text.

Associated with I.A Richards and William Empson in England and the school of New Criticism in the United States, close reading, at its core, focuses on the words written on the page as opposed to the social and historical context of the text or its author’s biography: “For the New Critics … close, detailed analysis of the text was the main purpose of criticism. They thought of the text as an autonomous object, and their critical approach sought to exclude speculation about its origins and effects” (Matterson 172). This foregrounding of the literary object highlights the *thingness* of the text, the figurative and material workings of language—how it produces meaning, ambiguity, unity, etc. In “The Formalist Critics,” Cleanth Brooks famously declared, the “primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity— the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole” (72). This description of close reading resonates with Thammavongsa’s poetic practice of looking at the “bits and pieces” of one single thing. Yet Thammavongsa’s “looking” practice is also different in that it is not a search for unity or coherence, but is rather a recognition of the physical existence of the object and what it tells, and ultimately cannot and does not tell, of experience and history. Close reading, in this manner, is not about a rejection of the relevance or importance of a wider world outside the “text,” but is concerned with the text’s ontological containment, and its limitation in illuminating or giving way to processes bigger than itself.

My analysis of *Found* follows Thammavongsa’s “close reading” or observation of the scrapbook, which is intimately bound up with the process of writing. Although close reading is generally thought of as a mode of reading and analysis, I take it here also as a practice of *creative* writing, a kind of (close) writing that takes ordinary, personal objects and contemplates their significance in (not to) the world. The critical entanglement of reading and writing—of observation and its recording in words, which discursively produces the object—speaks to the imbrications of the creative act. In *Found*, reading and writing, looking and poetry, are inseparable acts. Likewise, the process of criticism also participates in the recognition, and reproduction, of the scrapbook and poem objects—it is, itself, another iteration of looking. The intimacy of reading, writing, and criticism is testament to the potentiality, the resiliency, of poetry. Looking closely is an exercise that repeats itself around *Found*, keeping the possibility of something vital alive.

Closeness also describes Thammavongsa’s relationship with the subject matter of the book. Explaining why readers have found the poems difficult to read, she divulges,

The hardest question to consider for me was why we should care about this man. It is clear, simple and achingly personal for me. He’s my father. To someone else, he doesn’t mean anything. Men of importance or careful study usually run a country or take it down; they invent or contribute some great thing; they are part of history in some way. My father is an ordinary man. He did the best he could with what was there. But here, he’s not just my father — he means something to someone else too. (“My Father’s Scrapbook” 51)

Although the highly personal context of the collection can present impediments to readers’ investment in the poems, Thammavongsa’s decision to focus on her father, an anonymous and “ordinary man,” insists that he is a “part of history in some way.” The poems in *Found* attest to the everyday living of history—how the personal is always situated in a social and historical context, and how history is woven from the experiences of individuals. This rendering of the ordinary (and its objects) into poetry offers a “narration” of history that is deeply particular, that dwells in textures of the quotidian and the personal; it tells not through progression and chronology, or certainty and truth, but through little nuggets and kernels of detail that gesture to the irreducibility and expanse of history in their very smallness; poetry transforms the everyday into history. If we take the book to be a biography, or a snapshot, however blurry, then it also functions as a point of “entry into a complex and contested ‘official history’” (Norindr 90) of war, migration, and global politics, even when this opening is narrow and filled with obstructions. While not a portrait of a historically important man, *Found* nonetheless shows how an individual is deeply entangled with history, how his personal e/affects speak not only to private emotions but also to—what Raymond Williams might term—a larger Cold War refugee “structure of feeling.”

The scrapbook is, in Ann Cvetkovich’s term, “an archive of feelings,” and the father is its archivist. He is also, according to the poet, a philosopher. Thammavongsa places an epigraph by Ludwig Wittgenstein at the front of the book to illuminate her father’s labor: “The work of the philosopher consists of assembling reminders for a particular purpose.” The philosopher shapes knowledge and memory by gathering things; at the same time, the refugee—in an equally philosophical manner—assembles items with mnemonic significance to a particular end. Whatever that original purpose may be (or may have been), once the father decides to discard the scrapbook, the idea takes on a different substance. The act of throwing away an object might insinuate that the object has lost its significance, it might signify a desire to forget or move on from the past, or that it was just too difficult to hold on to. While we cannot know for certain why the father disposes of the scrapbook—and it is futile to speculate—I suggest that a new purpose arises. The act of throwing away instantiates the emergence of poetry, of the object we know as *Found*. The scrapbook then assumes another life—as a book of poems, a different kind of archive, a new iteration that attests to the resilience of experience.

Yet, an archive does not always uncomplicatedly yield meaning. The scrapbook exists in a language—Laotian—that the poet can speak but cannot read or write, and its contents do not conveniently come with explanatory notes or captions. Looking or close reading, for Thammavongsa, is not an unmediated act, but is rather one marked by refusals and obstructions that highlight the limits of meaning and the desire for textual accessibility. In *Found*, Thammavongsa does not attempt to make sense of her father’s archive in a conventional way. Rather than assign meaning to the objects in the scrapbook, she gives them a different body (that of the poem), in which they retain something of the original but are also originals themselves. These new forms do not necessarily lend themselves to easy interpretation or discernable meaning either, but instead convey a sense of persistence, of continuance and presence that insists on the scrapbook and the father’s embodied relevance. Poetry does not just record the resilient life lived; it is itself participating in the process of resiliency. Because meaning (or more precisely, knowledge of the father’s life) remains elusive in both scrapbook and poems, and I have no wish to “capture” it in my analysis, my critical approach turns to form and physicality. While I explicate the content of individual poems, drawing often on outside historical sources, I resist ascribing an essential or inherent meaning to the piece in question. That is to say, I do not view the poems as translations or transcriptions of the scrapbook (or of the father’s experience), where knowable meaning is transferred from one object to another. Instead, *Found* demonstrates that close reading/writing is not about extracting meaning, of looking that is aimed at searching for specific truths or revelations, but about keeping meaning alive, to generate the very *possibility of meaning*.

In that way, the book of poems exemplifies an understanding of resilience that, while deeply tied to materiality and the body, resists unequivocality and determinacy. Even as Thammavongsa offers to readers highly intimate pieces of writing, they do not perform the work of “fleshing out” the experience of living in a refugee camp or tell of the father’s character—they refuse to initiate intimacy. The poems in *Found* instead witness breathing and thinking life, consciousness itself. This evidence of life, and the possibilities it represents for the future, is of utmost significance given the historical circumstances that drove migration out of Laos and refuge seeking in Thailand. Thammavongsa does not name these conditions of war, destruction, and persecution—part of her refusal to “make sense” of and explain history (personal and collective) for audiences—but they haunt the collection in poems such as “Laos,” where the catastrophic bombing of the country during the War in Viet Nam surfaces to shed light on the collection’s preoccupation with tracking the existence of life and survival. In *Found*, we know that life endured in the refugee camp, despite the many attempts to have it extinguished; which is to say, the poet (and the scrapbook) tell us that life is resilient, but they do not tell us *how* or *what else*. This refusal to explain or elaborate is a refusal to do the work of official history, to fix knowledge of the past into place. Reading and writing closely is thus attuned to contingency, and is untroubled by not knowing. The potentiality of resilience is kept indeterminate—there is no definitive meaning, and so all meaning is possible, alive. For Thammavongsa, her parents’ survival, the fact that they made it through the upheavals that shaped Southeast Asian history in the late twentieth century, is enough, in the sense that the fact of living is monumental in and of itself.

RESILIENT FORM

While it is tempting to search for a narrative that reconstructs the remarkable life story of Thammavongsa’s father in *Found*, focusing instead on the “bodies” of individual poems, or how they occupy space allows for a way to discuss resilience beyond the father (or subject). One of *Found*’s most remarkable and distinctive qualities is its intentional refrain from “filling in” the gaps of personal and collective history. Unlike attempts to (re)create lost, forgotten, or (un)(mis)remembered histories that mark much of Southeast Asian diasporic literary and cultural production, Thammavongsa’s collection sits with these fissures, breaks, and voids, insisting that fragments and absences *do* something important. Likewise, I resist constructing an interpretive narrative that explains “what happened,” that “reveals” a story in the spaces the poet purposefully leaves for us to contemplate. That is, I refuse, with Thammavongsa, to rehearse history in order to “complete” *Found*, and neither do I want to perform an archeology of the father’s life. To be clear, this is not a repudiation of the subject and his experience of resilience or the importance of historical context. Rather, my methodology attempts to bypass an approach that is primarily interested in accessing the subject’s life through poetry. While I do not believe that such a project is without value or is impossible, *Found* moves in a somewhat different direction. Thammavongsa tells us: “The story of my father’s scrapbook is an incredible one. It was easy to just coast on the remarkable story, to hide writing behind it. That’s easy. I wanted, however, to write. To make the act of writing, the choices made in writing, to be the incredible and remarkable story” (“My Father’s Scrapbook” 46).

The poems in *Found* are thus “about” the poet’s father, but they are also “about” the poet’s relationality and engagement with the father’s objects, her process of writing, which becomes another means of refugee persistence. Poetry, here, provides a formal or aesthetic model of resilience. A poem’s inherent ambiguity, or promise, which allows for a multiplicity and proliferation of possible meanings, is its potential to endure as a living form in time. Its open-ended and unfixed quality invites reading and response (or, sociality—an engagement with ideas, with others, with the world), creating affect and meaning anew every time a poem is read or recited, every time contact with words is made. The poems in *Found* are one way the father’s life survives—a way for history to remain resiliently alive. It is by considering the writing itself—its formal characteristics—that the “remarkable story” of refugee resilience is told. Cast in different terms, the way that the poems look on the page, the cluster and arrangement of words, the physical shape that they hold, radiate affective intensities. One place where resilience inheres, then, is within the collection’s formal details.

In making such an argument, I take my cue from Eugenie Brinkema in exploring specific affects residing in textual particularities. In *The Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema diagnoses the tendency of affect theory to trade in generalities and abstract understandings of affect. She claims that “the turn to affect has been deployed almost exclusively in the singular, as the capacity for movement or disturbance in general” (xiii). While such focus on intensities and forces dislodges the reign of semiotics and structure in twentieth-century theory, shifting attention to issues of embodiment and materiality, it sidesteps the lingering problem of textual form and representation. Brinkema declares: “*Affect is not the place where something immediate and automatic and resistant takes place outside of language. The turning to affect in the humanities does not obliterate the problem of form and representation. Affect is not where reading is no longer needed*” (xiv original emphasis). In constructing her argument that affect is not only “felt by moved bodies,” but also “wildly composed in specific cinematic, literary, and critical texts” (xvi), Brinkema returns to a supposedly outmoded practice—that of close reading. She proposes: “The one way out for affect is via a way into its specificities. That approach will be called—unsurprisingly, for historically it was always the way to unlock potentialities—close reading … Treating affects in such a way deforms any coherence to ‘affect’ in the singular, general, universal, and transforms it into something not given in advance, not apprehendable except through the thickets of formalist analysis” (xv).

Close reading then becomes a way of perceiving affect in the “definite particular” (Brinkema xiv); resilience here does not reside only in the refugee body that survives, but also in the discursive constructions, the words and markings that vouch for life’s hereness. That is to say, resilience is not just a subjective, structural, or social issue but also a representational one. In what follows, I analyze the poems in *Found*, paying special attention to form and affect. I close read the collection with a sensitivity for the historical, social, and political conditions that enhance the activity of close reading, allowing us to appreciate the power of textuality. In her work on queer temporality, Elizabeth Freeman describes close reading as a politically situated methodology that facilitates points of historical entries as opposed to one that shuts out the larger world and its processes. She writes:

Reading closely means fixating on that which resists an easy translation into present-tense terms, any ‘progressive’ program for the turning of art into cultural/historical magic bullet or toxin. To close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities can allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm … Close reading is a way into history, not a way out of it, and itself a form of historiography and historical analysis. (xvi-xvii)

As a mode of “historical analysis,” close reading is not about strict formalist confinement to the text; rather, it zeros in on how the text opens up to a more nuanced and informed perspective on phenomena outside its boundaries. Giving the text a “special kind of attention,” marked by “depth, precision, acuity, and patience” (DuBois 4) is precisely the kind of praxis that recognizes its particularities as intertwined with not only an internal context but also various external ones. Such an approach invests in the text-object’s multiplicity, its valences and unpredictabilites, and the complex ways in which it takes its shape. In that vein, summarizing a key feature of thinking on the practice of close reading, Andrew DuBois explains that, “the literary object itself is already doing critical work, that reading is not just what one does *to* a poem, but it is often already happening *inside* the poem” (16).

The text-object is thus actively involved in the work of theorizing its existence and relevance in the world, and as such, can become itself an *epistemological frame* to approach social, political, cultural, and historical events. What then is the work that *Found* performs? The poems in the collection theorize refugee resilience most compellingly through form, and the interplay between form and content. More specifically, resilience inheres in the figure of the *line*—straight and curved, poetry and drawn, physical and metaphorical—that moves through Thammavongsa’s book. The line embodies a kind of resilience that emphasizes *presence* without necessarily demanding the details (how and why) that surround it. It is both a “body” (form) and a reminder of the materiality and corporality that is central to any apprehension of human recovery in the face of devastation. Tracing the various lines that appear in the collection brings us closer to perceiving the affective intensity of resilience, of poems and fleshed bodies, of life in its raw forms.

CORPOREAL LINES

The book begins with an untitled “establishing” poem that draws attention to the contours of the physical body, to a tangible site of life. Kasim Husain, in his review of *Found*, states that emphasis is placed “on the material life of the body rather than the perceptive realm of the mind, or the means by which human life is made knowable” (1-2). The first half of the poem signals this materiality: “I took only / bone / built half / your face / left / skull and rib / as they came” (13).[[28]](#footnote-28) A body is presented, but it is not an ontological given; rather, materiality remains *in construction* and is thus not a guarantee of life or existence. Even as she directs us to the possibility of life, Thammavongsa complicates its certainty. The poem, then, describes the process of constructing a biography, of piecing together a life with “only bones,” with only the barest structural parts of the body—that which remains when feature and flesh (and accrued meaning) decompose away. What emerges is the out*line* of an individual (likely her father), of life in its skeletal form, one that is at best incomplete. The pieces in *Found* are, in the schematic that the untitled poem sets up, rearranged bones that, together, constellate a body (or more accurately a frame) of experience. This reading understands the volume’s immense brevity and the spareness of individual poems as embodying the brittle quality of bone, of both hardness and fragility. The slender poems and the abundance of open space on the page is also an effect of Thammavongsa’s refusal to “dress up” the scrapbook and her father’s life with definitive meaning and direct explanation.

Husain views the spatial arrangement of *Found* as lending the poems a “quality of presence,” by which he means that “the language of *Found* refocuses our attention on the embodied nature of language over and above the abstraction that takes place in transmitting meaning” (1). It is this focus on the physicality of language, the shape of words and the objects that shape and are shaped by them, which ultimately conveys the presence of a human life. The second half of the poem reads: “If you know / love / these / do not say / but of life / your life / it was small and brief” (13). Skulls and ribs (and scrapbook and poems) cannot tell of the father’s feelings, of his idiosyncratic embodied experience, which is his and his alone. Signaled here are the limits of representation, of the desire to know. The poems are not portals into the father’s life. Instead, their “small and brief” bodies attest only to *the existence of life itself*. While bones are often associated with death, Thammavongsa repurposes them in the poem (and in the whole collection) as undetonated remnants of life, relics from the past that become the scaffolding materials for piecing together a life that endures. In that way, the contents of the scrapbook are bones, and so are the poems in *Found* and the osseous “lines” that comprise them. The poet’s assemblage of bones is not only evidence of a life lived through difficult circumstances, but proof that life emerges out of it, even if its composition remains ungraspable and vague to us.

As such, the poetic methodology of close reading does not result in an accumulation of knowledge and meaning but instead functions through *description*. Poems such as “The Heart” and “The Lung” simply describe the mechanical function of the bodily organs they reference. The heart, “the real / heart, / is ugly / Nothing / here / can break, / or be broken / And nothing / can come / from here / but blood” (16-17). As Husain notes, the traditional poetic metaphor of heartbreak is abandoned here in order to emphasize the heart’s circulatory purpose, that of maintaining life. The lung also supports life by taking “what it has / always taken / what / work it does / it has done / and has been doing / all these years” (18). Foregrounding the vital organs is a way for the poet to convey life in its most basic manifestation, and to make sure the reader is aware that so much—language, poetry, beauty, brutality, consciousness itself—depends upon the breathing body, with blood coursing through its veins. It is crucial for the work of survival illustrated in “The Sun,” where the human body (“you”) “lifted / from the dirt” (20), took each of the sun’s shafts, meant to harm, “and built, to survive” (21). Like a beam of light passing through glass in the poem “Light,” the body must learn to adapt, to bend its shape, in order to come out on the other side, to find a way to exist differently: “Because glass / has not yet / learned / to bend / and because / even now / glass / will not bend / light / must come in bent” (22). The bent ray of light that changes direction or splinters into colored lights as it passes through glass is a radiant visualization of resilience; it is a shape that bends in order to continue moving onward.

Another assemblage of “lines” that points to bodily resilience are those that constitute the shape of written language. In “My Father’s Handwriting,” curved and winding marks demonstrate the body’s attempt to make sense of the world, to create meaning: “He carved / every letter / into / the sound / its / shape made / and every one took / a place / where nothing / stood” (25). Yet, in “What I Can’t Read,” the daughter reveals that she cannot decipher these letters, and so instead describes the body of the Laotian script, which gives rise to the body of her own poem: “Each letter / wound / around itself / drawing / a small dark / hole / an / inner ear / tiny / and landlocked” (26). “What I Can’t Read,” then, is a transcription of the father’s words, attuned to the way the letters physically look while generating a new set of symbolic markings without transmitting content or meaning. In both these poems, language is not so much a system of direct communication (signified and signifier) but rather a visual object that replicates the materiality of language. This process of reproduction (with a difference) keeps the father’s handwriting, his thoughts and feelings, animate even if, like Thammavongsa, the readers cannot comprehend what they mean. The father’s handwriting is a stamp of his actuality, proof that there were hands and fingers that made words on the page in the precarious time-space of the refugee camp.

REPETITION AND TENSION

The notion that resilience functions through reproduction or repetition is also evident in what can be referred to as the “tonal structure” of the poems in *Found*. Mimicking the tonal quality of the Laotian language, Thammavongsa writes:

Each poem begins by using a small set of words, and then the rest of the poem shuffles those words—repeating some, contrasting others, and sometimes reversing their order. These arrangements give each small set of words the power to do more, to pull out a bit more meaning from themselves, each other, or the space around them. They do this within a very small space. That tiny space gives them very little room to move and the room they do take draws out their power. (“My Father’s Scrapbook” 51)

This use of words to extract their full signifying potential by paying attention to how they can be re(used) throughout the poem and how they interact with other elements on the page creates a kind of resonance and reverberation that suggests the resilient power of a single word or phrase. Take, for instance, “International Rescue Committee,” which reads: “The exact address of / the International Rescue Committee / He wrote it down twice / the exact address / The first time in pencil / at the front / The second time in pen / in the middle / The second time in pen / he draws a box around it” (34). The repetition of the phrase “the exact address” in the first four lines, and “the second time in pen” in the last four lines simulates the double copy of the address in the scrapbook, and the father’s need to write it down twice. Emphasis on the “exact” address and a box drawn around it relays the importance of the information, which must be highlighted, reiterated in permanent ink rather than fleeting lead. From the poem, we do not know what the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian aid organization, did for the refugees of Laos or the father, but the *urgency*—of contacting them, of knowing they exist, of keeping their address—is felt through the poem. The almost mechanical recurring of elements in the poem (“the first time … the second time…”) produces a matter-of-fact tone that, while austere, draws out the affective tension that lurks within it: human agency, the desire to do something, and the passing of time.

Similarly, the poem “Laos” builds its emotional core through tension and opposition, referencing, most explicitly in the entire collection, the historical context that occasioned dislocation and asylum seeking. Consisting of twenty-one words divided into six couplets, spaced out evenly in a slender vertical column on the page, it reads: “When bombs / dropped / here / we buried / the dead / then took / the metal / for stilts / to lift / our homes / above / the ground” (33). The internal narrative of the poem depicts people performing ordinary but life-affirming tasks (burying loved ones and rebuilding their homes) in the wake of bombing raids, while its external structure mimics the all-important *stilt* that supports shelter and thus life itself. Together internal and external logics convey a sense of resilience against the terror of the bomb; that is, despite the intent to destroy, life overcomes.

Placed in the middle of the collection, “Laos” functions like an unexploded landmine, most explicitly calling to the history of bombing, and opening up the other poems to the war that haunts them. In a period of nine years, from 1965 to 1973, 2.1 million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos. This was “equivalent to the entire tonnage the United States dropped on industrialized Germany and Japan during the whole of World War II” (McCoy xii), or, averaged out to “the astonishing rate of one bombing mission every eight minutes, twenty-four hours a day, for nine years” (Khamvongsa and Russell 282). The air war—one of history’s largest, and mostly conducted in secret by the CIA—mainly targeted villagers, in particular the densely populated and historic region called the Plain of Jars. Fred Branfman writes that, “American bombers killed and wounded tens of thousands of Laotians. Countless people were buried alive by high explosives, burnt alive by napalm and white phosphorous, or riddled by antipersonnel bomb pellets” (4-5). Its legacy continues to this day: “U.S. leaders have cleaned up only 0.28 percent of the 80 million unexploded cluster bombs they left behind in Laos. As a result, there are probably no people on earth who have been tormented for so long by U.S. war-making—as of 2013 it will be forty-nine years and counting” (Branfman 30).

It is within this historical—and ongoing because of its long lasting legacy of Unexploded Ordnances (UXOs)—context of catastrophic assault by bomb that Thammavongsa’s poem takes shape. The downward trajectory of the bomb and the upward rise of the stilt create a line that joins the poem into a whole. Building through tension—the “dropping” of the bomb and the “lift” of the stilts, the “buried” dead and the homes “above the ground”—“Laos” relies upon forces and counterforces to generate resilience; and crucial to the sense of resilience in the poem is the idea of repurposing—making use of that which was meant to destroy in order to further life, subverting the original intent to annihilate. Survival is not just to live in spite of but also to live *because of* destruction. The bomb kills; yet in coming into contact with human life, its metal transforms into a structure that supports the sheltering of life. This example of human resourcefulness and ingenuity is a minor triumph over the impersonal rationality of antipersonnel air warfare. Repurposing also resonates with the poet’s project of taking her father’s scrapbook and making poems out of its contents, of finding a different purpose for something that was disposed of.

THE RECEDING OF LANGUAGE

As the collection progresses, a calendar from the scrapbook becomes the object of focus. Comprising the last third of *Found* is a series of poems with dates as titles. Beginning with “January, 1978” and ending in “December, 1979,” the roughly two year period marks a kind of refugee temporality that is characterized by the passage of time, of waiting that is not necessarily empty. We know that time was experienced because it was marked by horizontal, angled, and crisscrossing lines, and *this is all we know*. “January, 1978” reads: “This month / has / X / This / the mark / of / a hurried hand” (43). “February, 1978” begins with three parallel flat lines that “cross out / 7 days / then **/** / placed / on / the number / of / each day” (44). In “January, 1979,” “The first day / here / is / circled / then / **/ /** takes out / the month” (48). Then the next seven poems, from February to August 1979, contain a single hand-drawn slash (/), the same one that adorns the cover of the book. The reproduction of enigmatic slashes, employed by the father to count time, as poems do not convey how that time was spent; that is, they tell nothing of what the father did in the camp, what he thought or felt, whether the days and months dragged on or sped by. Rather, they simply signify that he was alive, that his heart pumped blood and his lungs brought in air, and this is itself an important piece of information.

The date poems, like “My Father’s Handwriting” and “What I can’t Read,” in which Thammavongsa describes the shape of the letters and words drawn by her father, ones that she, as the latter poem announces, cannot “read,” concentrate on the physicality of both the father and his markings. In “November, 1978,” the poet is attentive to the quality of the ink, and the force of the hand, that makes an impression on paper: “In / this month / the blue ink / runs out / The metal ball / digs / a pit / into paper” (47). The texture of the imprint, the look of the imperfect lines made over the numbered days of the calendar, tells something crucial, and Thammavongsa relays this indeterminate immediacy in her poems through a reliance on drawn figures over language. Although the poet and the reader cannot access the father through the slashes, the certainty that he dug his pen into paper might disclose a number of possible things: impatience, frustration, boredom, determination. The father applying pressure to extract the last of the pen’s blue ink, however, displays a powerful, verifiable moment of living—he existed in this particular moment in space-time. In *Found*, the slash is a sign of life and resilience; it signifies that day to day living endured in the refugee camp by asking readers to *look* at the slanted line, to witness living, without reading it in the ways we are conditioned to “read” for definitive comprehension.

In “September, 1979,” Thammavongsa writes, “This / is the first / month / left unmarked / The ones after / are / the same” (56). For the next three poems, from October to December 1979, the page is left blank, nothing but an expanse of white space. If the slashes and crossed lines represent the presence of life, then the lack of markings is a significant culmination to the calendar and the date poem series. Again, the poet presents for the reader an unknowability: why were these last four months of the year left unmarked? The blank space that Thammavongsa reproduces in *Found* suggests that she herself does not have the answer to this question. Like the throwing away of the scrapbook, the cessation of counting/collecting time is an ambiguous act, one that does not necessarily reveal an end, defeat, or diminishing need to acknowledge time, but instead suspends the examiner’s desire for analysis. The blank page halts analytic and scopic progression; it forces a recognition of the vulnerability of life, especially in relation to the affirmative markings on previous pages. The slash disappearing from one page to the next demonstrates the thin line between presence and absence, life and death. Indeed, the final poem of the collection is a brutal reminder of the violence that can be enacted on the body, how easy it is to take a life. Entitled “Warning,” it reads: “My father took / a pigeon / broke / its hard neck / cut open / its chest / dug out / a handful / and threw back / its body / warning” (60). This graphic concluding image of disembowelment and death stands in sharp contrast to the quiet avowal of life in the rest of the collection, the piecing together of the body that begins *Found*. “Warning” is a jolt that electrifies a realization of the precarity that always attends the work of resilience.

The gradual movement from words to symbols to, finally, blank space, in the collection traces Thammavongsa’s awareness of the unrepresentablity of her father’s experience. She asks her readers to contemplate “emptiness” along with her to arrive at a different “truth”—that the truth of living cannot be captured in words, that language inevitably fails. Although the blank pages at the end of the collection might be interpreted as an abandonment, a leaving behind, of language, one that is risky for a poet who trades in words, it is also a statement of fidelity to the father. Leaving the page blank rather than filling it with speculation or imaginings stays close to the father’s experience, closer to him. As opposed to other immigrant and minority second-generation artists who creatively fill in the gaps of history and identity inherited from the previous generation and from society itself, Thammavongsa choses restraint as a form of engagement. To refrain from asking and telling, from revealing a way into history, is not a shying away from representation, even if it is inadequate; rather, it is a performance of possibility, a declaration of resilience.

CONCLUSION

My discussion of *Found* follows Thammavongsa’s lead in deliberately sidestepping a history lesson, or recounting history as an easy frame to better understand the poems. Yet, my analysis works on the premise that the collection is so clearly steeped in a history of war and migration, that it has historical relevance beyond a personal meditation of an individual’s time in a refugee camp. What, then, does the collection say about history? As I have demonstrated, *Found* does not provide an easy or accessible route into the complex historical forces and events that affected millions of people in Laos and in the rest of Southeast Asia. In fact, it avoids these major events as it attempts to convey trauma and resilience. As a poet, Thammavongsa does not function as a cultural insider or native informant, narrating a misunderstood or elided history for uninformed readers. That is, one does not read the collection to learn about history, but in reading it one *recognizes that history happened*—that a man spent time in a refugee camp, that he wrote and collected, and tallied time, waited and felt something, and he survived. The collection imparts to the reader the importance of engagement without dictating how to engage.

I conclude this section with Thammavongsa’s powerful story of her own birth in the refugee camp, one that brings us back to the resilience of body, and reassures us life is stubborn, that it will find its ways to prevail:

I was born in 1978 in a refugee camp. Earlier that year, my parents built a raft made of bamboo stalks to get from Laos to Thailand by way of the Mekong River. My mother was pregnant then. When I was born, I weighed less than two pounds. My mother put the umbilical cord between her teeth and tore it to cut us loose from each other. The doctor told my parents that I was premature and for $2.50 U.S. they could take me to a hospital and put me in an incubator or I wouldn’t survive. My parents did not have the money. My father took off his shirt and wrapped me up. They took me home and put me in a hammock. My body was the size of a pop can. They could see all my insides. They were afraid to touch me. They knew a heart and lungs were in there working and beating against my chest. They left me in the hammock for several days and looked in on me to check if the doctor was right. He wasn’t. (“My Father’s Scrapbook” 48)

II.

VISCOUS RESILIENCE: WRITING HMONG HISTORY

At the end of the introduction to her landmark edited collection of Hmong American literature, *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*, Mai Neng Moua writes: “Although the Hmong have not had a tradition of written literature, we are building one. We are the creators of our own history from this point on” (15). Moua’s momentous declaration points to an interrelated set of issues that face the Hmong diaspora in the wake of the War in Viet Nam: the necessity of remembering and documenting history, especially within a context of past and ongoing “secrecy” and denials; the importance of narrative control, agential voice, and self-determination in this process of documentation; and the shifting means of recording life, from an oral-based culture to a written one. While, as Moua reminds us, there is a long and rich tradition of Hmong cultural expression in artistic objects such as story cloths (*paj ntaub*) as well as tools, instruments, and other everyday items, the reality is, in Western contemporary society, “without written texts, Hmong voices are over-looked or non-existent” (6).

In their discussion of the anthology, Vincent K. Her and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner describe writing as a creative process through which a new generation of Hmong negotiates the tensions of memory, history, and identity:

For young Hmong Americans, finding meaningful ways to merge their memories

with those of their elders is essential, both for their psychological health and

developmental growth. Writing is one of the means through which they can

explore their innermost thoughts, feelings, and emotions and accomplish that task.

By putting their cultural experiences on paper, they help to create a shared

narrative, establish a common ground with others in the community, and engage in the process of cultural renewal. (39)

Along similar lines, John M. Duffy writes in his study of Hmong American literacy that personal, “self-directed writings” make possible new Hmong identities and social positions. In what he calls a “rhetoric of testimony,” Hmong Americans fashion themselves as “participant[s] in history” whereby “the writer is both witness and actor, observer and agent” (153). In these often unpublished, first-person life narratives, “writers rejected the identities so frequently offered to them in writings about the Hmong, of bystanders and victims, helplessly swept along by the ineluctable forces of historical events” (153). Instead, what gets stressed is the agency and resilience of both individual lives as well as the Hmong people. Duffy observes that “Literacy was seen as an aid to memory, a means by which writers could remember lost family, friends, ritual, places, and times. The memoirs function in this sense as a kind of archive, preserving stories, beliefs, and rituals that might otherwise disappear” (159).

It seems, then, that at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-firs, century, *writing* has become an important tool of cultural representation and preservation for the Hmong in diaspora. The mnemonic, subjectively and historically generative function of writing, identified by Moua, Her and Buley-Meissner, and Duffy, provides a crucial means of establishing presence as well as relevance. This is an interesting development, considering that the written language was a relatively recent introduction into Hmong culture, one that coincided with a colonial project of missionary work in the 1950s. Moreover, learning of the English language—in which many, but not all, of these self-accounts are written—only occurred on a large scale when Hmong refugees began arriving in the US in 1975, after the end of the War in Viet Nam. Despite the Hmong’s recent engagement with the written word, the practice of writing—particularly life writing—has been taken up as a prime vehicle for the exploration of not only individual subjectivity, but also the possibility of suturing the ruptures of migration, generational gaps, and scattered communities. In this way, auto/biography, as many critics such as Paul John Eakin and Carolyn Ellis have pointed out, can function to link the individual to the social, to locate the personal within a larger field of politics and sociality. That is, to analyze a single life is inevitably to consider the social, cultural, and political networks and contexts that bind the individual together. If writing is a method of self-creation through self-representation, then it is necessarily relational, intersubjective, and historically placed for the Hmong in diaspora.

Hmong American auto/biography, in particular, is crucially situated in a context of secret war fought in Laos between 1955 and 1974. In the wake of French colonialism, the Geneva Convention of 1954 established Laos as a neutral sovereign state, prohibiting foreign military activity in the country and keeping it out of the hot war—an extension of Cold War geopolitics—that was being waged in Viet Nam. Situated close to North Vietnam and the Chinese border, Laos was seen as a “key domino” in the American containment of communism. Jane Hamilton-Merritt writes, “To keep the Lao domino from falling, the Eisenhower administration initiated a large-scale military, economic, and political strategy in that country” (69). American intervention in Laos, including massive bombing campaigns, military support, and economic aid, occurred without authorization from the US congress and without American public knowledge. The “secret” did not come to light until 1971, and “details did not become known until State Department memorandums were declassified years after the war ended” (Khamvongsa and Russell 282).

One pivotal component of the Secret War was the CIA-led recruitment of the Hmong ethnic minority of Laos to join the fighting against communist Pathet Lao forces in the North. Sucheng Chan observes that, “At its peak in 1969, the Hmong secret army numbered about forty thousand men. Until 1973, it was the main force holding back the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese advance, providing exactly the kind of frontline defense that the United Sates desired in its effort to ‘contain’ the spread of communism” (“Introduction: The Hmong Experience” 32). Yet, the Hmong “paid an extraordinarily high price for their valor. According to one estimate, 25 percent of the Hmong who enlisted were killed. According to another estimate, seventeen thousand Hmong troops and fifty thousand Hmong civilians perished during the war” (“Introduction: The Hmong Experience” 40). The majority of those who survived experienced life-altering disruptions and dangers, particularly the victorious Pathet Lao’s program of extermination against their former enemies, which made life untenable. Consequently, many fled to neighboring Thailand to seek asylum before a large majority of those who fled were resettled in the US. Kou Yang states that, “The end of the U.S. secret war in 1975 gradually pushed more than ten percent of the population of Laos to become refugees abroad. More than one-third of these refugees are Hmong” (165).

The narrative of Hmong transpacific movement to the United States is therefore littered with the loss of lives and places, the grief of separation and starting over—features it shares with other groups also displaced by the War in Viet Nam. This section considers the most well-known and successful Hmong American memoir, Kao Kalia Yang’s *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*. Recounting her extended family’s escape into the jungles of Laos at the end of the Secret War, their difficult life in Thai refugee camps, and the struggle of resettling in the US, Yang’s text demonstrates that writing Hmong autobiography necessarily involves (re)constructing not only a family history but also the story of an entire people. The inextricability of subject and sociality, of narrative and historicity, points to a *viscous resilience*—slow, sticky, and subtle—that reveals itself through the act of writing. While my discussion of Thammavongsa’s poetry foregrounds the method of close reading, I trace resilience in my analysis of Yang’s memoir via writing, itself a resilient practice. In *The Latehomecomer*, writing transcends temporality, preserves memory, and proclaims the presence of life. In such a manner, writing has a powerfully declarative function as it signals the materiality of stubborn existence, the major and minor triumphs of “simply” staying alive. Moreover, it is about *(re)attachments*, whereby relations and linkages are (re)made and strengthened, and a communal dimension is enacted, further substantiating the *feeling* of resilience, which is not an individual emotion, but one that must be felt collectively. Although the physical and cultural survival of a group of people marked for dislocation and extermination in their recent history is itself an incredible instance of resilience, I suggest that *The Latehomecomer* touchingly recalls the moments of joy and pleasure lodged within, and necessarily a part of, a narrative of loss and refuge. It is these joyous moments, in which struggle is *not* categorically overcome, stability restored, or trauma forgotten, that resilience is most “thick,” most tenaciously potent. Put differently, Yang’s text occasions an understanding of resilience that manifests in the everyday, that oozes in between the crevices of grief and delight.

FAMILY MEMOIR AND THE INTERSUBJECTIVE FUNCTION

As the first nationally distributed Hmong memoir in the US, Yang’s book “traces the course of many Hmong lives through the story of one family” (Hansen 1). The subtitle “family memoir” aptly describes the project of chronicling three generations of one Hmong family; it also, however, gestures to a more socially and historically expansive definition of relations and kin, which extends here to include the displaced Hmong people. Rocío G Davis’s description of “family memoir” as a form of “historical narrative” is highly instructive for thinking through the critical work that *The Latehomecomer* does:

Family memoirs focus as much on members of one’s family as on oneself, typically blurring the boundaries we tend to draw between autobiography and biography… These texts negotiate personal identity through a relational narrative that also engages cultural and collective processes of community formation. Generally written by one person, the stories that make up the text display both an inter- and intra-generational collective voice that connects with readers in important ways, evincing a cultural project that resonates with current issues of self-representation in ethnic discourse. The relational approach to auto/biographical identity in these family memoirs functions on two levels: first, within the text itself, as the author draws upon the stories of family members to complete her own, and second, as these texts deliberately interpellate a historical past and a present audience. (491)

The relational approach that Davis delineates is a function of intersubjectivity, in which, as she writes, the discursive auto/biographical subject is constituted with and through the presence of others, especially those who share common familial, cultural, and historical experiences. In this way, there can be no subject without family, history, and community, no personal narrative without sociality.

Yang’s family memoir is acutely attuned to this intersubjective dimension of autobiographical writing; beginning with the stories of her family in the mountains of Laos and ending her narrative by centering the tales of the Yang family matriarch, *The Latehomecomer* dislodges the individual writing subject as the central focus and narrative teleology. Rather, Yang-the-writer emerges only tangentially in relation to a plurality of voices, a polyphony, in Bakhtin’s terms, that inhabit the text. This conscious foregrounding of others demonstrates an awareness of the responsibility to tell a collective story, not only of a family but also of a people who have rarely been given the platform to narrate themselves. The ethnic “burden of representation,” to speak on behalf of one’s own group, is embraced here not as onerous exercise (though it does present dangers that the author cannot control) but as an opportunity for dialogue, for the meeting of voices and perspectives that collaboratively produce a story and a shared history.

Writing on the phenomenology of perception Maurice Merleau-Ponty identifies language as an important cultural object that facilitates contact by “introducing the impersonal into the heart of subjectivity and eliminating the individuality of perspectives” (414). He writes:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are inter-woven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other and we coexist through a common world. (413)

For Merleau-Ponty, language can become a technology through which intersubjectivity occurs, where the lines of individual perception are blurred and permeated. I suggest that Yang’s written memoir represents a kind of dialogue between the writer, her family members, and other Hmong in which a larger historical “fabric” of Hmong/American life is “woven.” It is precisely this auto/biographical dialogue that instantiates a more expansive collective beyond the singular author.

It is also, in the Hmong context, a form of nation-building. Chia Youyee Vang writes that, “Although they have never had a nation as we know nation-states today, Hmong nation-building efforts have been an integral part of their modern history” (150). The most widely accepted version of Hmong historical origins locates their migration from South China, due to political events, to mainland Southeast Asia in the 18th and 19th centuries.[[29]](#footnote-29) Settling mostly in the mountainous areas of Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, the Hmong have always operated as a nation with nation(s). Migration to different geographical and/or political landscapes, such as the US, does not necessarily erase this sense of distinct peoplehood and nationhood. Because Hmong history has been marked by multiple migrations and displacements and the lack of autonomous sovereignty over a geographical area, we must turn to different sites for understanding the establishment of cultural and national community. I suggest that a family memoir such as Yang’s—in its production, circulation, and reception—offers an imaginative forum for negotiating and forging the past, present, and future of the Hmong people. As the book demonstrates, intersubjectivity is thus not only about how the individual subject is constituted by others but also how a larger sense of peoplehood and cultural nationality cohere through groups of individuals. As Yang puts it, “I wanted the world to know how it was to be Hmong long ago, how it was to be Hmong in America, and how it was to die Hmong in America” (215).

THE REFUGE OF WRITING

*The Latehomecomer’s* dedication signals the memoir’s dual preoccupation with the generational family and acts of writing: “For my grandmother, Youa Lee, who never learned how to write. To my baby brother, Maxwell Hwm Yang, who will read the things she never wrote.” The two subjects named represent the bookends of the large Yang family: the late matriarch from the mountains of Laos and her young, American-born descendant. Sketched out here is a familial lineage, and somewhere in the vast distance between these two members is the emergence of writing and the narrator herself. Writing was not a component of the grandmother’s life, it was not the thing that shaped her world; yet, her grandchild will read “the things she never wrote.” How does one read something that was never written? This oxymoron seems to present a metaphysical impossibility that brings it into the realm of spirituality and shamanism that scholars have highlighted as being central to Yang’s narrative. I suggest, however, that the contradiction posed in the dedication is a self-referential declaration of the historical and archival function of Yang’s memoir. The things that were never written exist in *The Latehomecomer*; the granddaughter, situated in between the grandmother and her younger brother takes up the task of writing, first to preserve the former’s stories, and second to transmit them to the latter. The book’s objective, then, is to link the generations, to enact family through memoir. Writing thus becomes a form of discursive resilience that transcends strict spatio-temporal confines.

In the vignette that follows the dedication, Yang recounts a Hmong belief in which babies live happily in the clouds, observing the “course of human lives.” It was difficult to call them down to earth, but once they descended, the babies chose their own lives. She writes, “the people who we would become we had inside of us from the beginning, and the people whose worlds we share, whose memories we hold strong inside of us, we have always known. From the sky I would come again.” The non-linear, cyclical temporality of this understanding, which posits that one is born with knowledge of the past and its people, and will once again be a part of the future, provides another register of meaning to Maxwell’s “reading” of his grandmother’s stories—they have always resiliently been *in* him. The vignette also importantly establishes the *agency* of Hmong people, emphasizing the choice they possess in living and leading their lives, and the environments they inhabit. This underscoring of agency directly subverts the discourse of “perpetual refugees” that has been attached to the Hmong, seen as a stateless people without a home, forced to wander from place to place—the postwar transpacific migration is the latest in a line of displacement stretching back to the 1800s—and also as perpetually foreign and unassimilable to the American national body. Embedded in this tale is a politics of redefinition, recasting the role of the Hmong people in their history not as helpless, fearful, and subject to the mercy of others—people and nation-states—but as a community of individuals imbued with history as they continue to create their own history. This impulse, one that Moua makes clear in her introduction to *Bamboo Oak*, to write a Hmong version of history reverberates throughout *The Latehomecomer*.

Central to Yang’s project is grappling with the meaning of the word “Hmong.” She tells us that, contrary to the definition of Hmong as “free,” growing up in the refugee camp, her reference to Hmong was that it meant “contained.” Further, it wasn’t until the Yang family started preparing to leave for America that she began to grasp the meaning of Hmong, which became for her a sense of unhomeliness, a continual searching for a place to call home. Adding to the difficulty of understanding Hmong was the lack of historical narratives on and about them as people. Speaking about herself in the third person in the prologue, a technique that further emphasizes the narrator as one among many, she writes:

In the books on the American shelves, the young woman noticed how Hmong was not a footnote in the history of the world. How Vietnam was for the Vietnamese. How Laos belonged to the Laotians, and how the war was only American. She saw how the world only knew skin-deep the reaches of Hmong … She saw how the children, born in America, lived life like Americans. She saw the diminishing memories of her mother and father on the hard road to remembering the strings of words and the new food in America. (4)

Thus, “on sheets of white paper,” “The young woman slowly unleashed the flood of Hmong into language, seeking refuge not for a name or a gender, but a people” (4).

This metaphor of writing as refuge-seeking is key to understanding the critical intervention that the memoir attempts to make, first as an archive of family memories, and second as alternative or counter history. Both Aline Lo and Asha Sen have discussed how Yang’s text models a way of finding “home.” Sen claims that Yang turns writing into a form of hybrid “spiritual witnessing” in which words “become a ‘refuge’ for the Hmong, a way to tell their stories, and Kalia Yang uses Hmong epistemology and language to create an English story cloth for their lives on paper in the U.S. Documenting their lives on paper is a way of providing the community with ‘marked graves’ that provide them with a home in the world” (87). This notion of home-in-writing is echoed by Lo, who argues that “Yang encourages her audience [to believe] that a group can write their way into belonging” (13), one that is based on self-identification and family continuity as opposed to national inclusion and political citizenship. Indeed, Yang is fully aware of, and utilizes, writing’s potential to provide sanctuary. She concludes her memoir with a hopeful rallying call: “Our dreams are coming true, my Hmong brothers and sisters … We, seekers of refuge, will find it: if not in the world, then in each other. If not in life, then surely in books” (274). For her, this dream of a home, so elusive for many Hmong for so long, is beginning to be realized within textuality, between the covers of a book, and the *Latehomecomer* is one particular realization of its promise.

THE RESILIENCE OF SELF-WRITING

What are the ramifications of this promise of asylum in books? What does it mean to document the Hmong on paper and in words? What kind of narrative “home” emerges? Like so much of the literary and cultural production that has come from Southeast Asian diasporas in the aftermath of the War, Yang’s memoir is a testimony to loss, to the hardship and grief experienced by people uprooted by conflict and transformed by migration. Accordingly, loss is the touchstone of experience, as well as a fitting and viable lens through which to represent and detail both life and death. Yet, embedded in the narrative are the joys and pleasures that inevitably accompany the articulation of loss. As she records loss in words, Yang also inscribes moments of felt happiness into her narrative. In other words, by foregrounding loss what also comes into view are the things that make it less devastating, that create the conditions of possibility for it to be expressed and registered.

While *The Latehomecomer* narrates the ostensibly insurmountable obstacles that stand in the Yang family’s path to freedom, it simultaneously follows the standard trajectory of “successful” postwar Southeast Asian refugee migration: displacement as a result of war in the home country, arrival in refugee camps before resettlement in Western nations, and integration and upward mobility in the new home. In many ways, it is a narrative that evinces the survival and resilience of a family, and in turn, expresses how the Hmong people have overcome incredible struggles to thrive in life. Yang openly announces this intention when she says that she “wanted to be a writer and tell the stories of a people trying at life, to look for all the reasons that called life from the clouds” (210). The emphasis here on “trying at life,” or moments of “ordinary” living, and the quotidian reasons that make life worth fighting for, reveals the backbone of what I call viscous resilience: affirmation without spectacularity, celebrating life when it seems to be withering, pleasure within struggle.

At one point in the memoir, Yang observes: “I looked at our lives, and how could I not believe? Beyond all the wishes a dream had even come true: eight years into America and we owned a house of our own” (201). Although this statement might seem assimilationist, she is careful, on the very same page, to give it context by enumerating the socio-economic precarity that prevents her extended family from reuniting, that places vulnerable members, such as her aging grandmother, outside the security of political protection: “But we were refugees in this country, not citizens. It was not our home, only an asylum. All this came crashing down” (201). Earlier in the narrative she poignantly states, “for me, the hardness of life began in America. We are so lucky to be in this country, the adults said. Watching them struggle belied this fact. We are so fortunate to be young, new lives opening before us, they believed. And yet the life in school that opened before me made me feel old in a world that was struggling to be young. A silence grew inside of me because I couldn’t say that it was sometimes sad to be Hmong, even in America” (151). The precious chance simply to live, one that many first generations who experienced war and exile could not have imagined in prior times, comes with its own “hardness,” its own challenges, particularly for the 1.5 and second generations; the American Dream, as so many immigrants have discovered, does not unfold exactly as hoped.

Life in America—what was supposed to be a *dream*—is complexly marked by both triumphs and failures, hope and sadness, healing and trauma. Even as the Yang family found work, achieved education, and grew, the lack of money and material resources became “the nightmare that kept love apart in America” (135). Initially scattered across the US, a result of the government’s sponsorship and resettlement program, the biggest challenge the Yang clan faced was how to “survive in America and still love each other as we had in Laos” (136). Reestablishing the collective unit, becoming a family again, was an imperative, for as Aline Lo points out, “the Yang family is most successful at obtaining autonomy when they act collectively and pull on the resources of their (extended) familial unit” (10). At its core, the book advances a notion of resilience built around *togetherness,* for, there is hope, and there is joy and love to experience, when bodies gather close to one another and aid each other in the process of living. The separation that characterized much of the early years in America stands in sharp contrast to Yang’s description of existence in the Ban Vinai refugee camp. Her retelling of those years is a luminous example of resilience.

The family’s arrival at the refugee camp in Thailand (before Yang’s birth) was a painful reminder of how the world saw Hmong people. She recounts her parent’s memory of “An expression on one man’s face,” as they walked towards a fenced compound, that said “we were not human, too poor to walk on the earth” (43) This dehumanizing gaze directed at the family is indicative of how the refugee system, and officials, perceived them in the camps. Yang writes, “There were Thai men in uniforms with guns that surrounded us. Hmong men and women were beaten, raped, and killed when they ventured too far from the safety of their families and friends” (66). At the same time, she proclaims that “For us, in many ways, the life we had in the camp was ideal. We were surrounded by people who loved us” (67). After years of separation in the jungle, hiding from and escaping Pathet Lao persecution, the entire extended family was reunited in the Thai refugee camp, ironically as they were being processed to become “officially stateless”—a family without a home. Despite their interpellation and confinement within the space of the camp, life was affectively full in the presence of loved ones: “Grandma enjoyed the time in Thailand. Her sons were poor because there was no way for them to work. But she did not mind their poverty because her family was together and alive. The war was in the past, and for her that was enough to make the future a busy one, filled with living” (68-9).

This “living” in the camp was infused with storytelling. Yang recalls, “Like so many other children, in other parts of the world, in a time of nothing, we heard stories of what was before. There were always people to tell me stories in the camp. Through them, I could go places that I had never been, to worlds that were very different from the camp” 71-2). For her, a sense of love and community, of living life in the immediate present as well as beyond, is tied to acts of storytelling. Through these experiences of sharing in Ban Vinai, the narrator “discovered the shape of stories, how to remember them, and how to tell them” (72). She would later employ this knowledge to craft *The Latehomecomer*, enacting another kind of resilience in togetherness, pleasure in telling. The inscription of quotidian life on paper, in the memoir’s pages, directly counters the fact that, “For many of the Hmongs, their lives on paper began on the day the UN registered them as refugees of war” (46). By telling of how her grandmother ran a little shop selling yams and herbal medicine in the camp, of how her aunts, uncles, and older cousins doted on and protected her, of how they all “ate from the same white enamel-covered bowls, with little cracks where the metal peaked through, used the same steel spoons, wore the same brands of cockatoo flip-flops, dreamed the same dream” (61), Yang alters the cold, impersonal registration numbers that began Hmong life on paper with the details and textures of rich, fully lived life. The camp becomes the backdrop for scenes of ordinary living that proved Hmong humanity, and their resilience. Even when they came to the realization that “safety in the camp was an illusion” (80), the joyous memories created there had already imprinted themselves onto a place conventionally perceived as dire and bleak. For the narrator, the “containment” that the refugee camp offers is simultaneously imprisonment and freedom, suspension and security, it “is people I love living around me. The world of our lives was contained in a way that life would never be again” (77).

GRANDMOTHER, A LATE HOMECOMING

Dedicating the entire final section of the book to her grandmother, Yang opens up the space for Youa Lee’s testimonies to dwell within its pages. This focus on the figure of the grandmother—of recording her stories, knowledge, and character for posterity—is initiated by the recognition of an older generation’s passing, and the need to commemorate their lives. Monica Chiu points out that “The memoir begins with stories of her parents but concludes with those of her grandmother, a trajectory from younger to older generation that runs against the grain of Hmong autobiography in which the younger generation is often the concluding hope of the older one” (265). While its “backward” course is counter to forward-looking immigrant autobiography, Yang’s return to the older generation actually configures it as *the* site of hope and futurity. The impetus for return is initiated by the classic Asian American trope of “split subjectivity” the narrator experiences in America, caught between worlds and cultures, haunted by the past and propelled into the future. Yang explains that during her time away from home in college, one in which she learned about the wider world, thought about issues of identity, and grew as an individual, a chasm developed between her and her family: “I could not translate all the things I was discovering at college to my mom and dad, to my home” (214). Returning to the grandmother and her stories became a way for the narrator to come to terms with her Hmong-American cultural identity, and break out of her silence and solitude that are the results of American racialization. Here, the younger generation finds her distinct voice through the “past,” through the familial holder of tradition. She writes,

This was when I started collecting my grandma’s stories. I began to realize how our lives in America would be *our* stories. I started to understand one of the many truths that governed life: by documenting our deaths, we were documenting our lives. The Hmong had died too many times, and each time, their deaths had gone unwritten. There were no testimonies. The witnesses grew old, and they died, and life continued, as if they had never lived. I didn’t want this happen to my grandma, to this woman I adored, whom I could not imagine not loving forever. (241-15)

The memoir is an effort not to let death go unwritten, and the urge and inspiration to write comes from the love and respect Yang feels for her grandmother’s life. The stories—of jealous witches, of women who turn into tigers, of struggles to raise orphan siblings, of marriages, births, and deaths—told through the grandmother’s voice are inheritances of resilience that unequivocally exude the pleasures derived from a life that has passed through heartbreak, suffering, and upheaval. For Yang, to hear them recollected by the grandmother—as she does for readers of the memoir—is a poignant assertion of storytelling, writing, and Hmong persistence. She lovingly recalls, “As I sat at her feet, Grandma would tell me the stories of her life from long ago. I had heard them many times. When I listened to the cadence of her voice, the rhythm of her speech, I stopped hearing the words. Her stories were like music, like the words of a timeless classic, a love ballad played again and again. If I had not thought it disobedient, I could have recited her stories, along with her, in tune with her voice” (217).[[30]](#footnote-30)

The most affectively charged moment in *The Latehomecomer* occurs when Yang’s uncle shows a commemorative video at the grandmother’s funeral. Yang describes the episode:

I was not ready for the sight of airplanes zooming across the sky, bombs being dropped. Uncle Eng had spliced the images from a documentary of the Vietnam War in Laos. I was less prepared for the sight of my grandmother, alive on the screen. She is sitting on a big porch swing with my little cousin Peter on one side and Great Aunt Yer on the other. The swing was located in a small park a block away from Uncle Eng’s house. My cousins Sabrina and Lisa are pushing the swing. The late afternoon sunshine in their eyes, and they are all squinting except for Great Aunt Yer who is nearly blind. She looks scared; she’s holding on tight to the rail by her side with both hands. My grandmother is not smiling, but she is looking at the camera directly. She has an arm around Peter’s small body. He’s smiling joyfully. I could tell the footage was recent.

There was no weight on her face—her eyes peeked out from heavy lids. And her dimples were deep in her wrinkled cheeks. She had on her black sweater and her black shoes, the ‘cool’ pair Dwab and I had gotten her during the summer. The footage was taken in August of 2002. Everything swam out of my sight, voices rose around me. The last thing I saw was my grandmother’s back moving away from my field of vision. I could tell it was her because the gait was uneven, lopsided. On her back, she carried a makeshift basket. Her flip-flops kicked up dust from the dirt path. I cried from my stomach. (260-1)

The video is remarkable for its juxtaposition of life and destruction, the spectacular and the ordinary. The splicing together of documentary footage of the War and home videos of the grandmother’s life displays the intertwining of large geopolitical events and the minutia of personal life. It is also a perfect crystallization of viscous resilience. What emerges from the dropped bombs is a Hmong grandmother sitting on a porch swing with her descendant. The image of Yang’s grandmother with her arm around a smiling grandchild, squinting at the brightness of the sun, the sight of her walking down a dirt path with a basket at her hip, are small everyday moments that neutralize the power of the bomb, the terror of war. There is annihilation, there is death, there is loss, but in their midst life also lives on, surely, quietly, resiliently.

CONCLUSION

In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith point out how the “memoir boom” of the latter decades of the twentieth century occurred during a time of global transformations, both cataclysmic and gradual. There is a confluence, they argue, between the establishment of human rights as the “privileged mode of addressing human suffering and the rise in popularity of published life narratives” (2). For them, it is storytelling’s potential to produce new identities that makes it so crucial in a time of catastrophe and suffering. Thus, “In the midst of dislocations and relocations personal and collective storytelling can become one way in which people claim new identities and assert their participation in the public sphere” (19). Yang’s *The Latehomecomer* is an attempt at both claiming identity and participating in the American public sphere, and it does so by writing a collective Hmong (his)story, providing, as a starting point, the tale of one particular family. The memoir, as an object, is proof of Hmong “sticky” resilience—their stories and lives will endure in the home carved out by the written word.

**CONCLUSION**

This project had its beginning in a moment of intense emotion, of affective disconnect: It is April 30, 2011, the 36th anniversary of the end of the War in Viet Nam, and I am at home in Calgary with my mother, watching on television a commemoration ceremony happening in California. The screen was awash with the red, white, and blue of the Star-Spangled Banner and the South Vietnamese flag of three red horizontal lines against a yellow background, the symbol of the world’s most powerful nation alongside a no-longer-existing one, former allies in war. The mood was unabashedly nationalistic and patriotic, and clearly anticommunist. Vietnamese (former) refugees were profusely thanking America for giving them a second chance at life. Here was evidence that life was flourishing—freedom achieved. I remember a naval officer recalling in an interview how he was rescued at sea by an American ship and, as a result, felt compelled to repay such a gift of generosity by “serving his country.”

As an academic, such seemingly unadulterated expressions of nationalism and celebration of American “rescue and liberation” made me *cringe.* Having read Yen Le Espiritu’s important article “The We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose Syndrome,” which outlines how the US rewrites history through the citation of these “good” and grateful refugees, I understood that the refugee’s thankfulness could be dangerously appropriated to justify American neo-imperial ambitions in the past, present, and future. These grateful expressions and their linkages to power were precisely the kinds of ideological relationships that we intellectuals make visible and critique in our work. Yet, as a former refugee, seeing other refugees express thanks made me *cry*. I too felt thankful, lucky to have the comfortable life that I do, knowing that things could so easily have been different. This pull between cringing and crying was an affective experience that demanded reflection, that put me on the path to an examination of (post) refugee affective politics. I began by asking: what do (former) refugees feel, and why do they feel what they feel? This seemingly simple question led me to think about the kinds of relations refugees have with the nation(s) that granted them asylum, the different affects that refugees gravitate towards (or gather around them), and the ways that community and identity are formed through shared or divergent feelings. I was guided throughout by the emotions that I felt, sparked on that April day, and I was most interested in understanding refugee subjects’ embodied experiences.

My affective response that day was a recognition that gratitude cannot be denied, that my work as an academic was not simply to critique a kind of gratitude that seems to shore up nationalist and interventionist projects. I realized that gratitude is a powerful affect for coming to terms with what many refugees have been through and what they have lost. And so, while refugee gratitude has the potential to be appropriated, to be used for various ideological ends, it is also crucial *for the very people who feel it*. I began to think about how gratitude allows the former refugee to make sense of the many incongruities of postwar, post-refugee life. It is a way of understanding the refugee self, its experiences, and its relation with others. It can account for past traumas and present survival, for a diasporic community formed through war and loss. In short, I began to understand gratitude as a complex affect—that its articulation can *do* many things and have a variety of consequences. My discussion of gratitude, resentment, and resilience in *Our Hearts and Minds* has attempted to be sensitive to this affective complexity, to critique and understand without preconception.

Fast-forward now to April, 2015: I am in the final stages of writing my dissertation when I find out that an important ceremony commemorating the 40th anniversary of the “Fall of Saigon” will take place on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. In addition to marking an important temporal milestone, the ceremony will also celebrate the recent passage of Bill S-219, tabled by senator Thanh Hai Ngo, officially designating April 30th the “Journey to Freedom Day” in Canada. In Ngo’s words, the day will become an occasion for Vietnamese refugees to “thank Canada for saving our lives” (Ngo, T.H. n. pag.)

The sun is shining bright as I make my way from Toronto to the nation’s capital, joining hundreds of people gathered at the future site of the Memorial to the Victims of Communism, positioned between the Supreme Court and the Library and Archives of Canada, between justice and memory. South Vietnamese flags flutter next to the red Canadian maple leaf. As expected, gratitude surged through the ceremony. Shouts and signs of “thank you Canada” abounded. This event was not dissimilar to the one I witnessed on television four years ago. While occurring in different national contexts and at different points in time, the affective tenor of the two commemoration ceremonies was the same. Here, again was a display of gratitude, one equally complex and deeply contextual. So much was happening.

The ceremony was a display of Cold War solidarities: in attendance to mark the anniversary were not only Vietnamese Canadians but also Canadians of Polish and Hungarian descent.[[31]](#footnote-31) This was a larger occasion to condemn the human rights abuses of former and current communist regimes. Produced through such condemnations is the exaltation of Canada as the torchbearer of rights, freedom, and democracy. Moreover, government officials appearing at the event suggested that the kind of freedom Canada promises to these victims of communism could only be offered through a conservative, right wing government. A cabinet minister who spoke at the event reminded the crowd that the Liberal and New Democrat parties did not want the “Journey to Freedom Day” bill to pass nor did they want the Victims of Communism memorial to be built. The message was clear: Stephen Harper’s conservative government made memory of their past suffering, and their present gratitude, possible. The government thus used the commemoration as a way to garner political favor and election votes.

The event, however, was also an occasion to display a collective Vietnamese identity. It showed how the Vietnamese in diaspora attempt to hang on to memory. A community of people gathered. Stories of escape were shared between those in the crowd. People smiled for pictures taken on smartphones and tablets. Some cried. Reunions were had and new ties were made. Gratitude for Canada, but also for each other, bound these people together. The commemoration demonstrates the complexity of an affect such as gratitude: its expression is a convergence of interests and discourses, ones that may collude or diverge, but gratitude itself eludes easy capture.

To be reminded on the 40th anniversary of the “Fall of Saigon” of what gratitude does and can do for the very people who experience it felt like I had come full circle with my dissertation. The ceremony on Parliament Hill impressed on me, once again, the full and complex range of affective experience; the chance to observe and participate in it was affirmation of the utter importance of taking seriously the affects that comprise (former) refugees’ hearts and minds.

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1. See Richard A. Hunt’s *The American Struggle for Vietnam’s Hearts and Minds* and Martin Bell’s “Winning hearts and minds in Vietnam.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Geneva Convention of 1954 divided Viet Nam into two. North Vietnam, headed by Ho Chi Minh, was a Marxist-Leninist state, while South Vietnam became a pro-democracy nation supported by the US. The Viet Cong, a communist insurgency group in South Vietnam, served as a fighting frontline for the Northern government. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a theoretical framework that links bodily sensations and sensory experience to affect, see Brian Massumi’s *Parable for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The formulation of these questions is inspired by theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Ann Cvetkovich, and Jonathan Flatley, who, in their work, beautifully articulate how affect stages the important interplay between the personal and the social. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. While I focus on post-war Southeast Asian refugee movements to demonstrate my argument, other refugee contexts might as productively be employed to discuss the notion of refugee subjectivity. For example, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta’s edited collection of essays *The Trauma and the* *Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* explores the large transfers of population in Bengal, looking at “the negotiation, often physical, in everyday struggles of survival, the challenge of the workplace and that of politically establishing one’s discovery of civil existence in a changed setting” (9). In particular, because the partition of Bengal is a “continuing process,” “an inescapable part of our reality, as the most recent exodus following post-election violence in Bangladesh in October 2001 illustrates” (2), the experience of refuge, or refugeeness, is very much an ongoing subjective—affective and material—negotiation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. While forced migrations and mass exiles have occurred around the world for centuries, it was not until the twentieth century that the term “refugee” was legally defined and institutionalized in the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. The Convention and the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, created specifically to deal with post-war Europe’s displaced populations, were meant to be temporary apparatuses, but as further crises required their continual existence, a protocol was initiated in 1967 to expand the definition of refugee beyond the scope of Europe and the Second World War. The dominant perspective of the UNHCR has been to approach mass displacements as short-term “crises” and “refugee” as a temporary category. This has changed in recent years. In *The State of the World’s Refugees 2012: In Search of Solidarity*, published by the office of the UNHRC in 2012, the authors point out that two-thirds of the world’s refugees currently live in protracted situations of “long-term exile” (18). Some have been refugees for close to two or three decades, and many have given birth to and raised children who know no other way of life other than those inside the camps. This telling statistic pushes us to reconsider “refugee” as something beyond a “temporary problem,” in which solutions, whether they include repatriation, resettlement, or local integration, all rely on re-absorption into a viable nation-state. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, call it “the American War.” Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini note that this name “places the war against the United States during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in a longer line of wars fought for Vietnamese independence against China, Japan, and France. It situates the United States as the latest in a long line of aggressors and would-be colonizers that attempted unsuccessfully to impose their will on the Vietnamese people” (1-2). As with the name “the Vietnam War,” they see “the American War” as too reliant on “nation-states—the United States and Viet Nam—as the primary reference points for who fought in this war and why” (2). Instead, they prefer “The Second Indochina War” as a more expansive signifier. While I agree with the points they raise, I also take issue with using the term “Indochina,” which refers to a no-longer-existing geographic formation, and carrying with it the weight of French colonial control. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See W. Courtland Robinson’s *Terms of Refuge* and Sucheng Chan’s *The Vietnamese 1.5 Generation*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Despite the designation “Southeast Asian American studies,” the field is decidedly diasporic and transnational in research interest and approach. While a term like “Southeast Asian Diaspora studies” might better describe this project, no such field exists, and thus I locate my research, for the time being, within a field that centers “America” but is still developing to better accommodate work that is not nationally bound. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some of the studies Malkki refers to include: B.N. Stein’s “The Refugee Experience: defining the parameters of a field of study,” S. Keller’s *Uprooting and Social Change: The Role of Refugees in Development*, and P. DeVoe’s edited collection *Selected Papers on Refugee Issues*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Canadian government has also recently begun the process of “streamlining” the removal of its “foreign criminals.” This is part of a larger trend of increased border control and intensified migration restrictions in the name of the global war on “terrorism.” See the *Removal of Serious Foreign Criminals Act*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The “Southeast Asian Americans and Deportation Policy” report, produced by the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, states: “Since 1998, over 13,000 Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans have received final deportation orders, including many legal permanent residents. In most of these cases, individuals came to the U.S. as infants and toddlers, fleeing the conflicts in Southeast Asia as refugees with their families. Deportation in these and other immigrant communities soared after 1996, when Congress passed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). The laws were made to be retroactive, meaning that noncitizens could be deported for certain crimes even if they were committed before the passage of the law. In addition, the laws severely restricted the ability of immigration judges to consider the individual circumstances of a person before ordering deportation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Article 14 of the Declaration reads: (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. (2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s influential book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* for a prime example of this appropriation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Price argues that Canada “actively encouraged” US intervention in Southeast Asia, and that, “[i]n an era of decolonization, the Canadian government aligned the country with American imperialism” (804). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The term model minority first emerged in the late 1960s in reference to Japanese Americans who managed to “recover” from the ravages of internment, and was later used to refer to other Asian groups and the privatized, ethnic/cultural ways they “overcame” racial discrimination. It gained traction during a time of racial conflict, in which Asian “success” was positioned punitively against African Americans and Latinos. See Osajima. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Daniel Coleman uses this term to refer to a British derived gentility that defines a normative, white Canadian identity as progressively and superiorly civil. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In claiming that Canada did not pursue overseas empire in the same manner as the US, I am not suggesting that it is without a colonial history. On the contrary, scholars in the fields of Indigenous and Postcolonial studies, among others, have demonstrated the colonial relationship the country had and continues to have in its dealing with and treatment of the First Nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Canada took in 200,000 Indochinese refugees from 1975-1992, behind the US and China, who took in 1.4 million and 260,000 refugees respectively. See Nghia M. Vo*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This contradiction also emerges interpersonally in the “successful” refugee’s relation to those who stayed behind in war torn spaces. The kind of “guilt” that many express for luckily escaping a fate that others *live* back home is one affective manifestation of the (former) refugee’s disjuncture. See Nhan T. Le’s compelling oral history in *Voices of the Boat People: Nineteen Narratives of Escape and Survival*, edited by Mary Terrell Cargill and Jade Quang Huynh. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “**On** Sông I Sing**: A Conversation between Bao Phi and Jane Kim.”** [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. In their treatment, Scheler and Nietzsche employ the French term “*ressentiment*,” which closely resembles the English term in meaning. Frings notes that the French term carries an intensity and duration that the English word does not. For my purposes here, however, I take *ressentiment* as corresponding with resentment. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Vietnam signed a similar repatriation agreement in 2008; to date Laos has not entered into any such agreement with the US to receive deportees. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Liisa Malkki’s essay, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See “filmmakers ‘appalled’ by process in White House video contest” by Paloma Esquivel in the *Los Angeles Times*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Troeung makes this argument in a paper entitled “Verses in Exile: Kosal Kiev’s Poetics of Revolt” delivered at the Association for Asian American Studies conference in 2013. A version of this paper, “Iterations of War and its Literary Counterforces: Vaddey Ratner’s *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and Kosal Khiev’s *Why I Write*,” is forthcoming from *MELUS*. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. While in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud characterizes melancholia as a kind of failed mourning, where the object-cathexis is unable to be withdrawn and the libido remains in a perpetual state of investment/attachment to the lost object, it becomes, in “The Ego and the Id” (1924), constitutive to “normal” or “healthy” ego formation. Through a process of identification, internalization, and incorporation, the lost object becomes “an essential contribution toward building what is called its [the ego’s] character” (“Ego and Id” 18). He concludes: “the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices” (“Ego and Id” 19). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler interprets Freud’s theoretical modification as making “room for the notion that melancholic identification may be a *prerequisite* for letting the object go” (*Psychic Life* 134); instead, “one might conclude that melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to preserve the object as part of the ego and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss. Here we see letting the object go means, paradoxically, not full abandonment of the object but transferring the status of the object from external to internal” (*Psychic Life* 134). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The slashes in my quoting of Thammavongsa’s poems indicate line breaks, but they do not convey the spacing and arrangement of words. Due to the unique visual aspects of the poems, I am unable to reproduce them here as they appear on the pages of *Found*. In some poems Thammavongsa employs printed slashes; in such cases, her printed slash will appear between my two slashes indicating line breaks. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Gary Yia Lee’s “Diaspora and the Predicament of Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *The Latehomecomer*, as with many other Asian diasporic “autobiographical,” coming-of-age texts by female writers, owes a great deal to (and recalls) the prototypical Asian American “memoir,” Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Yang’s memoir touches on many of the issues, and employs narrative techniques, first explored by Kingston: the difficulties of navigating between the immigrant home and mainstream society, silence as a response to racial grief, the use of mythology to make sense of diasporic experience, the difficult gender dynamics of the family, and, in the passage quoted, the second generation’s engagement with (and retelling of) the stories of the first generation. In “Blurring Boundaries: Asian American Literature as Theory,” Donald Goellnicht discusses *The Woman Warrior* as a theoretically informed and informing text that challenges autobiographical generic conventions by writing a group or communal identity as opposed to single biographical figure. Such collective storytelling, as I have shown, is a distinct feature of Yang’s text. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Conspicuously absent from the proceedings were Cambodian and Laotian Canadians. Such elisions demonstrate how official and unofficial acts of commemoration continue to erase the many victims and survivors of the War in Viet Nam. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)