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**Introduction: Critical Refugee Studies and Asian American Studies**

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*I didn't know I was missing it until I had it.* The “it” here refers to the profound intellectual companionship forged with members of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC) as we bring our whole refugee selves—our family secrets, memory gaps, and private grief as well as our creative energy, critical thinking, and improvised practices—to the work of building a field of study for and with displaced human beings. When we launched the CRSC in 2017, I had already spent close to three decades building Asian American studies as a scholar and teacher. And yet, for most of that time, I had deferred, deflected, and decentered my experiences as a refugee from Việt Nam. In truth, I did not know how to tell the story of Vietnamese refugees—how to highlight the ongoing costs of war without reducing us to mere victims, even if our losses have been significant? Having received my doctoral training in sociology, I knew that I did not want to replicate that field's treatment of Vietnamese refugees as a problem of immigrant integration. But I was less clear on how to engage Asian American studies, whose understanding of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees have long been more about Asian America than about Vietnam and its displaced people.

As a Vietnamese refugee scholar, I am disheartened that Vietnamese lives, histories, and politics continue to be peripheral to the field of Asian American studies. It is not that Asian American scholars are disinterested in the Vietnam War; it is **more** that their retelling of the war is more about Asian America than about Vietnam(ese). In these retellings, the Vietnam War

was a pivotal event that radicalized their identities and politics, forging their racial consciousness as “Asian American.” As an Asian American activist declared, “As long as there are U.S. troops in Asia, as long as the U.S. government and the military wage wars of aggression against Asian people . . . racism against them is often racism against us.”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, in her study of the Asian American Movement, Karen L. Ishizuka notes that “it was no accident that Asian America was born at the peak of the Vietnam War.”<sup>2</sup> However inadvertently, the focus on the Vietnam War as an Asian American event—a site for Asian American political awakening—elides the long-lasting costs of the war on Vietnamese bodies and psyches. As Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong poignantly observes, “Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the common reference to the U.S. war in Southeast Asia as the Vietnam War semantically locates that war, and all that it connotes, geographically in **Việt Nam**. By confining the war there, the intertwined yet differing political histories and historical trauma of Cambodia and Laos has also been disappeared.<sup>4</sup>

The inadequate integration of Southeast Asian refugee experiences into Asian American studies also reflects the field’s shift from a Third World liberation frame to a focus on the racialization and internal colonization of Asians in the United States. As Asian American intellectuals and community activists moved to unify diverse Asian ethnicities into one political and cultural bloc, they coalesced around the narrower goal of racial equality. The field’s focus on racial equality confined Asian American issues within a U.S. national framework, which provided little analytical space to meaningfully integrate refugee issues and concerns. As subjects of U.S. militarism and imperialism, Southeast Asian refugee political subjectivity and

practice could not be confined to the U.S. context; their racial formation had to be understood within the more expansive context of U.S. war in and occupation of Southeast Asia.

When Asian American publications and reports include Southeast Asian refugees, it is primarily to counter the myth of the model minority, long a key objective of Asian American studies. It was during the conservative 1980s, when affirmative action and welfare programs were being dismantled and when the model minority myth was aggressively deployed to validate the claim of colorblind meritocracy, that Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the United States. To counter the stereotype of the Asian American overachievers, Asian American scholars and community leaders cited the refugees' economic disadvantages to insist that Asian Americans are "a bona fide minority group deserving remedial aid."<sup>5</sup> Most recently, at the height of the anti-Asian attacks in 2020 and 2021, Asian American leaders, in many news interviews, would spotlight the seldom-mentioned refugees from Myanmar and Bhutan—or more precisely, their poverty rates—to once again distance Asian Americans from the maligned model minority moniker. Yet these mentions seldom translate into a refugee-centered approach to Asian American studies that prioritize refugee experiences, voices, and perspectives.

As subjects of sutured histories of settler colonialism, militarism, and displacement, Asian refugees' subjectivity has to be understood within the more expansive context of overlapping imperialist wars in and occupation of Asian countries. Elsewhere, I have argued that the Vietnam War was also a *transpacific* war that inflicted collateral damage not only on the Vietnamese, but also on Indigenous and (formerly) colonized nations in the circuits of U.S. Empire in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>6</sup> The specificities of Asian refugees' histories thus require an alternate genealogy for Asian American studies—one that begins with the history of U.S. (and other European) military, economic, and political intervention in Asia and that pivots the focus in

the field from East Asia to Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and the Pacific Islands. In the contexts of the Cold War, the War on Terror, colonial rule in the Pacific Islands, and Israeli occupation of Palestine, a Critical Refugee Studies approach to Asian American studies would, in Viet Thanh Nguyen's words, turn "our attention to issues of war, race, and violence and not so much to questions of identity, assimilation and the recuperation of history."<sup>7</sup>

While Asian American studies scholars have launched powerful critiques of U.S. wars and military colonialism,<sup>8</sup> they have largely left the study of refugees—the human costs of wars—to social scientists who have alternated between reducing the refugees to a depoliticized "object of sociological inquiry" and "psychiatric correction."<sup>9</sup> Critical Refugee Studies calls on Asian American studies scholars to conceptualize the refugee not as an object of investigation, a problem to be solved, or an expedient response to the model minority myth, but rather a paradigm "whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems."<sup>10</sup> As someone who inhabits the critical space outside of nations, the refugee radically challenges the solidity and primacy of the nation-state forged by settler colonialism and the promise of inclusion and recognition within it. Critical Refugee Studies thus flips the script, positing that it is the existence of the displaced refugee, rather than the rooted citizen, that provides the clue to a new model of politics. As Jodi Kim argues, the refugee simultaneously is a product of, a witness to, and a site of critique of the gendered and racial violence of U.S. wars.<sup>11</sup> In short, a Critical Refugee Studies approach to Asian American studies re-conceptualizes refugee lifeworlds as a site of social, political, and historical critiques that, when carefully traced, make transparent processes of colonization, war, and displacement.

The hyper-focus on refugee suffering, in academic and popular representations of wars, (re)affirms the “refugee crisis” narrative that obfuscates and even legitimizes state militarism. In addressing the urgently pressing issue of refugees and displacement, as well as of rising anti-refugee hostility, Asian American studies scholars need to move decisively away from conceptualizing the refugee as desperate, abject, and impoverished, and toward addressing and foregrounding their concerns, perspectives, knowledge production, and global imaginings. Senior scholars and editors in the field need to be (re)committed to identifying, developing, and publishing original works, ideally by refugee scholars themselves, that re-conceptualize refugee lifeworlds not as a problem to be solved by global elites but as a site of social, political and historical critiques. Such reconceptualization requires approaches that integrate theoretical rigor and policy concerns with refugees’ rich and complicated lived worlds—approaches that fuse the critical and creative production of knowledge. In particular, Critical Refugee Studies adheres to a feminist refugee epistemology, which takes seriously the intersection between private grief and public violence, and the hidden and overt injuries but also joy that play out in the domain of the intimate.<sup>12</sup> By calling attention to the everydayness and ongoing-ness of war and displacement, Critical Refugee Studies spotlights the always-already incomplete-ness of the resettlement project, where war violence hovers just below the surface of everything.

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According to UNHCR data, across Asia and the Pacific, there are 4.4 million refugees and asylum-seekers, 3.3 million internally displaced people, and 2.3 million stateless persons—10 million in all.<sup>13</sup> These numbers do not include the 7 million official Palestinian refugees now in

the seventh generation of their displacement, and the significant number of displaced Palestinians from ongoing violence in the region. People from Asia, and in particular Southeast Asia, represent the largest refugee group ever to resettle in the U.S. Today, most refugees arriving from Asia come from Myanmar, who constitute the second largest group of refugees to have been resettled in the U.S. in the last decade.<sup>14</sup> With the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021, two decades after U.S.-led forces toppled the Taliban regime in what became the United States' longest war, untold numbers of Afghan refugees will be resettling in the United States. Afghans already comprise the largest protracted refugee population in Asia, and the second largest refugee population in the world.<sup>15</sup> Addressing the still-underrepresentation of refugee studies in Asian American studies, this special issue of *Amerasia Journal* features innovative and provocative papers that center the concerns, perspectives, knowledge production, and global imaginings of refugees from Asia, including West Asia. These works integrate theoretical rigor and policy concerns with refugees' rich and complex lived worlds, the critical and the creative, the local and the global, the cultural and the material, and new and innovative ways of thinking about refugees and refuge.

Representations of refugees often focus on refugee plight as an emergency, which freeze-frame the “victims” in time and space, prolonging their pain and agony in perpetuity. Section I, “Emergency/Emergence,” focuses not only on what is lost, but also what *emerges* amidst states of emergency, as refugees move between past, present, and future—in attempts to radically remake their conditions. In the forum “Locating Palestinians at the Intersections: Indigeneity, Critical Refugee Studies, and Decolonization,” Palestinian American scholars Eman Ghanayem, Jennifer Mogannam, and Rana Sharif elucidate the specificities of Palestinians’

encounter with settler colonial violence. At the same time, they reveal how displacement has generated radical kinship with other “removed peoples” across multiple colonial geographies and spawned new practices of caregiving, storytelling, and healing that enable displaced Palestinians, the world’s largest refugee population, to counter the logics of settler colonial violence—nearly 72 years after the *Nakba*. Another constant emergency in U.S. life is anti-Black state violence, crystallized by the brutal 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Writing in the wake of Floyd’s murder, Ma Vang and Kit Myers provide a nuanced analysis of the vexed relationship between Hmong refugees and African Americans, exemplified by Hmong police officer Tou Thao’s troubling complicit behavior in Floyd’s murder *and by* emerging Hmong American/refugee allyship with the Black Lives Matter movement. Finally, in “Warcare Economies: San Diego, Refugees, and CVE,” Yazan Zahzah calls attention to the co-constitutive relationship between humanitarian work and counterinsurgency, elucidating the ways that Muslim refugees in San Diego County (and elsewhere) are simultaneously positioned as racialized targets of the ongoing War on Terror *and* subjects in need of saving. Aware of the surveillance tactics of the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs, Muslim refugees in the county have coalesced to call out and push back the incorporation of CVE initiatives into refugee assistance programs.

Section II, “Refugee World/ing(s),” features five essays that detail refugees’ subjecthood, knowledge, and lifeworlds in the face of ongoing sociospatial displacement. In “BurmAmerican Foodscapes: Refugee Re-settlement and Resilience,” Tamara Ho critically juxtaposes refugee farms and meat-packing employment to elucidate the central role that Karen refugees’ traditional ecological knowledge and mutual aid played in



reimagining the U.S. food economy, creating new avenues of survival, resilience, and independence in the process. At the same time, Cecilia M. Tsu's "Refugee Community Gardens and the Politics of Self-Help" offers an important reminder: Even as community gardens exhibit refugees' creativity and initiative, they are not and should not be a substitute for effective government-sponsored programs to assist newly resettled refugees gain economic security. The next two essays, by Sơn Ca Lâm and Long Bui, illuminate how refugees brilliantly create worlds of their own. Departing from discourses that portray Vietnamese refugee women as victims of their circumstances, Lâm draws on video ethnographic methods to map the audiovisual embodied geographies of home for post-1975 Vietnamese refugee women, capturing both the struggles and resilience that punctuate their everyday lives. Focusing on the life and work of postmillennial singer-songwriter M.I.A., Long Bui introduces the concept of "refugee worlding" to denote the plural dissonant worlds enabled by refugees, highlighting how refugees are simultaneously of *and* out of this world. The last essay in this section centers the lifeworlds of Cham refugees whose Indigenous status and intersectional identity is mis- or non-recognized by Vietnam, Cambodia, the United States, and the United Nations. Marimas Hosan Mostiller insists that when Cham people are not recognized as Indigenous in their ancestral lands (Vietnam or Cambodia), they will likely not be recognized as Indigenous when they are refugees in other settler nations, further contributing to their global vanishment.

The four essays in Section III, "Just Between Us," bring everything back home, highlighting the tender yet vexed emotions that surface as refugees negotiate what it means to be "family" with and for each other under conditions not of their own choosing. In the collection of essays "Conflict and Care: Vietnamese American Women and the Dynamics of

Social Justice Work,” Thúy Võ Đăng, Thảo Hà, and Tú-Uyên Nguyễn share examples of the gendered and generational disciplining they endured while doing social and racial justice work in support of Black Lives Matter. Their nuanced and principled responses to these pressures impart critical lessons for the next generation of Vietnamese American activists as they navigate their own gendered and generational tensions. Centering the memories and lives of first-generation refugees who have often been relegated to the margins, Jennifer Tran’s “On Becoming Tender: Conversations with My father” calls on us to enact intergenerational refugee futurity by practicing an ethic of care for family members with whom we might disagree. The next two pieces, Dena Al Adeeb’s “An Archive of Future Memories: A Letter to My Daughter” and Amira Noeuv’s “Girl with the *Sak Yon* Tattoo,” deploy creative writing to recover for future generations the history, traditions, and legends that have largely been discarded or distorted due to wars and forced displacements. Together, the pieces in this section underscore the fact that for many refugees, U.S. wars in Asia have been a shifting specter that hovers over (inter)personal heartaches and family tensions and dissolution. In many ways, they tell of refugee efforts to engage the “ghosts” in their family life—those whom they may have been separated from or never met due to war and displacement, as well as those whom they live with but may never fully know due to the many ghosts in their lives.

In all, the essays in this special Critical Refugee Studies issue respond to the organized forgetting of refugees by offering rich and varied depictions of the conflicting, ironic, and ambiguous nature of refugee life—of lives that could or would have been, as well as lives that did emerge and out of the ruins of war and “peace.” In the end, the refugee constitutes a creative

subject who marks both the broken trajectories as well as the moments of action and creation as refugees search for and insist on their rights to *more*.

## <sup>1</sup>Notes

Evelyn Yoshimura, "How I Became an Activist and What It All Means to Me." *Amerasia Journal* 15, no. 1 (1989): 29.

<sup>2</sup> Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (New York: Verso, 2016), 97.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyễn-Vo Thu Huong, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?," *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): 170.

<sup>4</sup> Khatharya Um, "The 'Vietnam War': What's in a Name?" *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2): 134-39.

<sup>5</sup> Claire Kim, "Playing the Racial Trump Card: Asian Americans in Contemporary U.S. Politics," *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 3 (2000): 44.

<sup>6</sup> Yến Lê Espiritu, "Critical Refugee Studies and Native Pacific Studies: A Transpacific Critique," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique," *positions* 20 (2012), 930.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Lutz, "Introduction: Bases, Empire, and Global Response," in *Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle Against U.S. Military Posts*, ed. Catherine Lutz (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho, "Introduction: Militarized Currents, Decolonizing Futures," in *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Setsu Shigematsu and Keith Camacho (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Simeon Man, *Soldiering Through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Fiona I.B. Ngô., Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam, "Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue: Guest Editors' Introduction," *positions* 20 (2012) 677.

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “What Is a Paradigm?” Lecture at European Graduate School, August 20, 2002, [www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html).

<sup>11</sup> Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>12</sup> Yen Le Espiritu and Lan Duong, “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art,” *Signs* 14, no. 3 (2018): 587-615.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/asia-and-the-pacific.html>

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, “In Their Own Words: Celebrating, but Not Feeling Celebrated, During Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month,” <https://www.unhcr.org/spotlight/2021/05/asian-american-refugees-us-resettlement/>. See also The Southeast Asia Resource Center (SEARAC). *Southeast Asian American Journeys: A National Snapshot of Our Communities*, 2020, [https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SEARAC\\_NationalSnapshot\\_PrinterFriendly.pdf](https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SEARAC_NationalSnapshot_PrinterFriendly.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, “Afghanistan,” <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/afghanistan.html>.