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# Critical Refuge(e) Studies

There were things about us Mel never knew or remembered. He didn't remember that we hadn't come running through the door he opened but, rather, had walked, keeping close together and moving very slowly, as people often do when they have no idea what they're walking towards or what they're walking from.

lê thi diem thúy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*

At this moment of reinvigorated U.S. imperialism and globalized militarization, it is important to interrogate anew public recollections of the U.S. war in Vietnam—"the war with the difficult memory."[1] As a "controversial, morally questionable and unsuccessful"[2] war, the Vietnam War has the potential to unsettle the master narratives of World War II—in which the United States rescued desperate people from tyrannical governments and reformed them "into free and advanced citizens of the postwar democratic world."[3] It is this "good war" master narrative of World War II, in which the United States is depicted as triumphant *and* moral, that legitimizes and valorizes U.S. militaristic intervention around the world then and now. This book thus asks: how has the United States dealt with the "difficult memory" of the Vietnam War—a war that left it as neither victor nor liberator? Having lost the Vietnam War, the United States had no "liberated" country or people to showcase, and, as such, the Vietnam War appears to offer an antidote to the "rescue and liberation" myths and memories. Yet, in the absence of a liberated Vietnam and people, the U.S. government, academy, and mainstream

media have produced a substitute: the freed and reformed Vietnamese refugees.

Calling attention to the link between the trope of the "good refugee" and the myth of "the nation of refuge," this book argues that the figure of the Vietnamese refugee, the purported grateful beneficiary of the U.S. "gift of freedom,"[4] has been key to the (re)cuperation of American identities and the shoring up of U.S. militarism in the post–Vietnam War era. As I will show, Vietnamese refugees, whose war sufferings remain unmentionable and unmourned in most U.S. public discussions of Vietnam,[5] have ironically become the featured evidence of the appropriateness of U.S. actions in Vietnam: that the war, no matter the cost, was ultimately necessary, just, and successful. Having been deployed to "rescue" the Vietnam War for Americans, Vietnamese refugees thus constitute a *solution,* rather than a *problem,* for the United States, as often argued. The conjoined term "*refuge(es)*" is meant to encapsulate this symbiotic relationship: that *refuge* and *refugees* are co-constitutive, and that both are the (by)product of U.S. militarism—what I term "militarized refuge(es)."

On the surface, the image of thousands of Vietnamese risking death in order to escape "communism" and resettle in the United States appears to affirm U.S. uncontested status as a nation of refuge. Yet, as Vietnamese American writer lê thi diem thúy reminds us in the epigraph, not all Vietnamese came running through the door that the United States allegedly opened. Rather, many moved very slowly, with much confusion, ambivalence, and even misgivings, uncertain about what they were walking toward or what they were walking from. And a few, in fact, travelled in the opposite direction, away from the United States.[6] In other words, the refugee flight-to-resettlement process was full of detours and snags, characterized "by chaos at the end of the war, confusion, and the stark absence of choice for many of those who had 'evacuated.'"[7] The messiness, contingency, and precarious nature of refugee life means that refugees, like all people, are beset by contradiction: neither damaged victims nor model minorities, they—their stories, actions, and inactions—simultaneously trouble *and* affirm regimes of power.

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. Army employed "body counts"—the number of confirmed Vietnamese kills—to chart U.S. progress in the war.[8] Accordingly, I use this very term, *body counts,* as the book's title in order to expose the war's

costs borne by the Vietnamese and to insist that bodies—Vietnamese bodies—should *count*. Focusing on the politics of war memory and commemoration, *Body Counts* examines the connections between history, memory, and power, and it refashions the fields of American studies, Asian American studies, and refugee studies not around the narratives of American exceptionalism, and immigration, and transnationalism but around the crucial issues of war, race, and violence—and of the history and memories that are forged from the thereafter. Explicitly interdisciplinary, *Body Counts* moves between various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, drawing on historical, ethnographic, cultural, and virtual evidence in order to trace not only what has disappeared but also what has remained—to look for the places where Vietnamese refugees have managed to conjure up social, public, and collective remembering.

Although this book recounts the wounds of social life caused by the violence both before and after the Vietnam War, its primary objective is to reveal the social practices that have emerged to attend to these wounds.[9] *Body Counts* thus moves decisively away from the "damage-centered" approach so prevalent in the field of refugee studies and focuses instead on how first- and second-generation Vietnamese have created alternative memories and epistemologies that unsettle but at times also confirm the established public narratives of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese people. Emphasizing the range of Vietnamese perspectives both before and after the war, it critically examines the relationship between history and memory, not as facts but as narratives. Like other communities in exile, Vietnamese in the United States feel keenly the urgency to forge unified histories, identities, and memories. Against such moral weight of "the community," *Body Counts* asks what happens to events that cannot be narrated. What lies just underneath the surface? Which memories are erased, forgotten, or postponed and archived for future release? Where and how then do these "nonevents" fit into the narration of history?[10] In sum, how would refugees, not as an object of investigation but as a site of social critique, "articulate the incomprehensible or heretofore unspeakable"?[11]

## SOCIAL SCIENCES: PRODUCTION OF THE "REFUGEE PROBLEM"

In the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, reporters, politicians, and media commentators used the term "refugee" to describe the tens of thousands of storm victims, many of them poor African Americans, who were uprooted from their homes along the Gulf coast and forced to flee in search of refuge. Almost immediately, prominent African American leaders, including Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, charged that the use of *refugee* to refer to Katrina survivors was "racially biased," contending that the term implies second-class citizens—or even non-Americans.[12] For these critics, "refugeeness" connotes "otherness," summoning the image of "people in a Third World country" who "carried the scraps of their lives in plastic trash bags," wore "donated clothes," and slept "on the floor of overpopulated shelters."[13] In this context, calling U.S.-born African Americans *refugees* was tantamount to stripping them of their citizenship—"their right to be part of the national order of things."[14]

As the Katrina controversy reveals, and as the following review makes clear, the term "refugee" triggers associations with highly charged images of Third World poverty, foreignness, and statelessness. These associations reflect the transnationally circulated representations of refugees as incapacitated objects of rescue, fleeing impoverished, war-torn, or corrupt states—an unwanted problem for asylum and resettlement countries. As "refugeeism" has become a prominent feature of our times, Trinh T. Minh-ha urges us to "empty it, get rid of it, or else let it drift"—to prevent the word "refugee" from "being reduced to yet another harmless catchword."[15] Trinh tells us that words have always been effective weapons to assert order and win political combats but that, when we scrutinize their assertions, "they reveal themselves, above all, as awkward posturing, as they often tend to blot out the very reality they purport to convey."[16] This section scrutinizes the assertions of the word "refugee," as propagated in the social sciences, especially in the discipline of sociology, in order to empty it of its power. In reviewing the literature on Vietnamese refugees, I pay close attention to its role in interpellating and producing the Vietnamese subject, in naturalizing certain understandings of their resettlement in the United States, and in reinforcing specific ideologies about the U.S. role before and after the Vietnam War. In particular, I am interested in how and why the term "refugee"—not as a legal

classification but as an *idea*—continues to circumscribe American understanding of the Vietnamese, even when Vietnamese in the United States now constitute multiple migrant categories, from political exiles to immigrants to transmigrants, as well as a large number of native-born.

I initiated this book project in part because I was troubled by what Eve Tuck calls damaging and "damage-centered" social science research that reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of racialized communities as "depleted, ruined, and hopeless."[17] Emphasizing the traumas of war, flight, and exile, social scientists have constructed Vietnamese refugees as "only lives to be saved,"[18] a people "incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care."[19] As a people fleeing from the only war that the United States had lost, Vietnamese refugees have been subject to intense scholarly interest—an "overdocumented" yet ironically un-visible population when compared to other U.S. immigrant groups. Indeed, the 1975 cohort, as state-sponsored refugees, may be the most studied arrival cohort in U.S. immigration history.[20]

Soon after Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States in 1975, the federal government, in collaboration with social scientists, initiated a series of needs assessment surveys to generate knowledge on what was widely touted as a "refugee resettlement crisis." Viewing the newly arrived refugees as coming from "a society so markedly different from that of America," government officials and scholars alike regarded the accumulation of data on Vietnamese economic and sociocultural adaptation essential to "protect[ing] the interests of the American public."[21] Other substantial data sets on Vietnamese refugee adaptation followed: from the Bureau of Social Science Research Survey, the Institute for Social Research Survey, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Developmen (NICHD) funded survey, and other government records, including the 1980 U.S. Census.[22] Constituting the primary data sources on Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians from the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s, these large-scale surveys, which cumulatively portrayed the refugees as a *problem* to be solved, delimited and conceptually underpinned future scholarly studies and popular representations of these communities in the United States. This hyper-focus on the refugees' needs and achievements has located the *problem* within the bodies and

minds of the refugees rather than in the global historical conditions that produce massive displacements and movements of refugees to the United States and elsewhere.

Prescribing assimilation as the solution to the "refugee problem," subsequent studies have imposed a generalized narrative of immigration on Vietnamese refugees, thereby reducing the specificities of their flight to a conventional story of ethnic assimilation.[23] The assimilation narrative constructs Vietnamese as the "good refugee" who enthusiastically and uncritically embrace and live the "American Dream."[24] Christine Finnan's 1981 study of the occupational assimilation of Vietnamese in Santa Clara County provides a telling example. In Finnan's account, the oft-exploitative electronics industry becomes a "symbol of opportunity" in which Vietnamese technicians "are eager to work as many hours of overtime as possible."[25] Even while praising the hardworking and enterprising Vietnamese, Finnan discursively distances them from normative American workers by reporting that "occupations that may seem undesirable to *us* may be perfectly suited to [the refugees'] current needs" and that Vietnamese become technicians "because they are patient and can memorize things easily."[26] Finnan also contends that Vietnamese, even those who were the elite in Vietnam, prefer working as electronics technicians in the United States to working in Vietnam "because there is more potential for advancement here."[27] In the same way, Nathan Caplan and colleagues optimistically characterize Vietnamese economic pursuits as "conspicuously successful" even while reporting that the overwhelming majority (71 percent) held "low-level, low-paying, dead-end jobs" and that slightly more than half (55 percent) were employed in the periphery rather than in the core economic sector.[28]

By the late 1980s, scholars, along with the mass media and policy makers, had begun to depict the Vietnamese as the newest Asian American "model minority." Published in 1989, *The Boat People and Achievement in America,* which recounts the economic and educational success of the first-wave refugees who came to the United States during the 1970s, was among the first and most influential texts to document Vietnamese "success," likening it to the larger Asian American process of assimilation: "The refugees have now begun to share in the Asian American

success stories we have become accustomed to find reported in the news media," and "The success of the Indochinese refugees are, in a broad framework, also part of the overall achievement of Asian Americans."[29] Subsequent publications were particularly effusive about the "legendary" academic accomplishments of Vietnamese refugees' children who "came to America as boat people . . . survived perilous escapes and lost one to three years in refugee camps."[30]

Together, these studies present the United States as self-evidently *the* land of opportunity, which then allow the authors to conclude that, even when Vietnamese are underemployed and barely eking out a living, they are still better off in the United States than if they had remained in Vietnam. Because the word "refugee" conjures up images of a desperate people fleeing a desperate country, Vietnamese workers are presumed to be naturally suited and even grateful to work in boring, repetitive, monotonous, low-paying, and insecure jobs. Such tidy conclusions dispense with questions about U.S. power structures that continue to consign a significant number of Vietnamese Americans to unstable, minimum-wage employment, welfare dependency, and participation in the informal economy years after their arrival.[31] Moreover, this ahistorical juxtaposition of opportunities in Vietnam and in the United States naturalizes the great economic disparity between the two countries, depicting the two economies as unconnected rather than mutually constituted. As I will elaborate in chapter 4, the production of the assimilated and grateful refugee—the "good refugee"—enables a potent narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam's "runaways," which powerfully remakes the case for the rightness of the U.S. war in Vietnam.

## REFUGEES AS A SOCIO-LEGAL OBJECT OF KNOWLEDGE

Departing from the emphasis on refugee resettlement in sociology, some scholars in the interdisplinary field of international relations have stressed the significance of the "refugee" category, especially in the twentieth century, for the practice of statecraft.[32] This scholarship thus conceptualizes the refugees not as a problem but, in a sense, as a *solution* for resettlement countries. As Nevzat Soguk muses, for all that states denounce refugee outflows as a problem, the precarious condition of

"refugeeness" in fact provides "affirmative resources for statist practices," fostering a better appreciation of what it means to enjoy state protection.[33] In Susan Carruthers's words, the refugees' insecurity is "at once a rebuke and a reminder that there's 'no place like home.'"[34] As reviewed below, the more critical and interdisciplinary scholarship in the field of international relations undercuts the traditional social science conceptualization of refugees as a problem to be solved and scrutinizes instead the economic, cultural, and political foundations of the modern nation-state.

In her generative book on the cultural politics of international encounter, international affairs scholar Melani McAlister urges us to bring "the cultural analysis of empire into the heart of U.S. foreign policy studies."[35] Emphasizing the complex connections between cultural and political narratives, McAlister contends that foreign policy itself is a meaning-making activity that has helped to define the nation and its interests.[36] The more critical international relations literature on refugee policies reveals that the provision of asylum has constituted an important foreign policy tool to tout the appeal of the U.S. brand of "freedom."[37] As such, refugee policies are active producers of meaning—a site for consolidating ideas not only about the desperate refugees but also about the desirability of the place of refuge.[38]

The figure of the refugee, as a socio-legal object of knowledge, has been metaphorically central in the construction of U.S. global power. According to Randy Lippert, during the Cold War years, "*refugeeness* became a moral-political tactic," demarcating the difference between the supposed uncivilized East and the civilized West, and fostering "cohesion of the Western Alliance nations."[39] In 1951, prodded by the United States, whose paradigmatic refugee was the East European and Soviet escapee, the U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees officially defined "refugee" as a person who "is outside the country of his nationality" and who harbors a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."[40] Although this definition focused on the plight of individuals rather than groups and emphasized the causes of flight, it unduly privileged victims of

*political* oppression above victims of natural disaster or other types of oppression.[41]

During the Cold War, the term "refugee" became interchangeable with "defector," as the "provision of asylum became a foreign policy tool" awarded by Western countries primarily to European anticommunists who fled or refused to be repatriated to Communist countries.[42] The propaganda value of accepting refugees fleeing communism—deemed the living symbols of communism's failure—was central to U.S. foreign policy goals, providing the nation with an alleged advantage over the Soviet Union. Historian Carl J. Bon Tempo reports that, in 1948, following the admission of more than 250,000 displaced Europeans, Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, which provided for the admission of an additional 400,000 European refugees. Reflecting the anticommunist imperative of the time, subsequent refugee laws granted admission primarily to persons escaping from Communist governments, largely from Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, Korea, and China, and in the 1960s from Cuba.[43] Until the mid-1980s, more than 90 percent of the refugees admitted to the United States came mainly from countries in the Communist Eastern bloc.[44] Tempo thus concludes, "It is little wonder, then, that for much of the post–World War II era, Americans, from presidents to the public, associated refugees with anticommunism."[45]

The association of refugees with anticommunism influenced U.S. policies on refugees from Southeast Asia. Soon after the 1975 "Fall of Saigon,"[46] Congress, at the urging of President Gerald Ford, passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, granting refugees from South Vietnam and Cambodia unprecedented large-scale entry to, and resettlement in, the United States. Between 1975 and the mid-1980s, some 360,000 refugees from Southeast Asia entered the United States through a series of parole authorizations by the president. In the face of continuing outflows of refugees from Southeast Asia as well as from the Soviet Union and Cuba, Congress passed the landmark Refugee Act of 1980, which adopted the 1951 United Nations' definition of "refugee" and established for the first time a uniform procedure for the admission and resettlement of refugees of "special concern" to the United States. Although the purported goal of the 1980 act was to drop any reference to communism and

eliminate the previous geographic restrictions on granting of refugee status to only Europeans, the actual admissions proposals for fiscal-year 1980 continued to prioritize refugees who had "close ties to the United States," whose resettlement would further U.S. foreign policy objectives, and for whom the "United States has stood uniquely as a symbol of freedom from oppression."[47] In other words, the 1980 act remained most hospitable to refugees fleeing communism, which resonated with then-president Ronald Reagan's ardent anticommunist foreign policy.[48]

According to Ambassador Victor H. Palmieri, U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Acts, refugees from Southeast Asia were the main beneficiaries of the 1980 act. Characterizing the Southeast Asian refugee outflows as "a human tragedy of staggering dimensions," the United States proposed to admit a total of 168,000 refugees from "Indochina" in fiscal-year 1980, in comparison to the proposed 33,000 from the Soviet Union and 19,500 from Cuba.[49] Palmieri espoused that these refugee admissions constituted a "major commitment by [the U.S.] government and by the American people" to help "these persecuted and uprooted persons begin new lives in our country."[50] Senator Ted Kennedy likewise praised the legislation: "In the Refugee Act of 1980, Congress gave new statutory authority to the United States' longstanding commitment to human rights and its traditional humanitarian concern for the plight of refugees."[51] Palmieri's and Kennedy's statements encapsulate the argument of this section: that U.S. refugee policy constitutes a key site for the production of Vietnamese refugees as grief-stricken objects marked for rescue and the United States as the ideal refuge for the "persecuted and uprooted" refugees. This representation of the conjoined refuge(es) "write[s] out the specificities of forced migration and the legacy of the Vietnam War," enabling Americans to remake themselves from military aggressors into magnanimous rescuers.[52]

## CRITICAL REFUGEE STUDIES

Though distinct in purpose and methodology, the scholarship on refugee resettlement and on refugee policies construct the refugees as out-of-place victims

and the nation-state as the ultimate provider of human welfare. In these studies, the rooted citizen constitutes both the norm and the ideal, whereas the refugee is described as uprooted, dislocated, and displaced from the national community.[53] These studies thus treat state borders as geographical givens rather than territorial boundaries constructed by law and regulated by force. In this section, I chart an interdisciplinary field of *critical refugee study,* which conceptualizes "the refugee" not as an object of investigation but rather as a *paradigm* "whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems."[54] 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. Yet I also argue that critical refugee studies scholars need to do more than critique; we need to be attentive to refugees as "intentionalized beings"[55] who possess and enact their *own* politics as they emerge out of the ruins of war and its afermath. As T. Fujitani and colleagues argue in an influential volume on Asia-Pacific War(s), it is important "to move beyond a strictly deconstructive mode, to intervene positively in the recovery and reinterpretation of events, experiences, and sentiments that have been pushed to the margins of the past."[56] In short, critical refugee study scholarship conceptualizes the "refugee" as a critical idea but also as a social actor whose life, when traced, illuminates the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change.

### *Political Philosophy Critique of the Citizen/Nation/State Hierarchy*

A place to begin would be Hannah Arendt's brief but important 1943 essay, "We Refugees," in which she proposes that the condition of being a refugee, which brings into serious question the assumption of rights, constitutes the paradigm of a new historical consciousness.[57] Refugees, as those who have lost all rights, are the anomalies that expose the contradiction at the heart of the liberal democratic

nation-state: the principle of national sovereignty implies the right to exclude anyone from citizenship or entry, but such exclusion from rights is at odds with the professed commitment of the liberal democratic state to universal individual rights. Extending Arendt's insight, Giorgio Agamben considers the displaced refugee to be the central figure of our political history: the "one and only figure" that exposes most deeply the "original fiction" of modern national sovereignty.[58] Indeed, the three primary solutions to the "refugee crisis"—repatriation, integration into the first-asylum countries, or resettlement in a third country—all affirm that the refugees represent an aberration of categories in the national order of things.

Arrendt's and Agamben's theoretizations of the refugee reveal the limits of the liberal effort to assimilate refugees to the nation-state and thus of the social science studies that focus on refugee resettlement reviewed above. For these political philosophers and their followers, a normative theory of global justice fails to grasp that the reform of existing institutions can only reinforce the system of nation-states that produces refugees in the first place.[59] For example, Robyn Liu warns that the desire to provide a durable solution to the "refugee problem"—"to create or restore the bond between a person as a citizen and a state as her legal protector"—ends up affirming the status of the nation-state as the ultimate protector and provider of human welfare.[60] In the same way, Soguk maintains that humanitarian interventions on behalf of refugees—represented as "citizens gone aberrant"—"enforce intergovernmental regimentation that reinscribes the statist hierarchy of citizen-nation-state."[61] As Viet Thanh Nguyen succinctly states: although immigrant studies affirm the nation-states the immigrant comes from and settles into, critical refugee studies challenge the very viability of the nation-state.[62]

In a world imagined to be composed of mutually exclusive, territorially bound spaces, refugees, lacking the qualities of the citizen, do not properly belong anywhere because they "constantly remind others of the arbitrariness and contingence of identity borders and boundaries."[63] Since refugees represent an aberration in the national order of things, nations tend to externalize refugees ideologically, constituting them as objects of state suspicion, threats to security,

and a *problem* in need of therapeutic intervention—thus the overemphasis on refugee resettlement outcomes discussed above.[64] In other words, as critical refugee studies scholars point out, refugees are a "problem" not because they are pathetic victims who drain the state's resources but because they make visible "a transgression of the social contract between a state and its citizen."[65] As someone "out of place"—that is, without the protection of the state—a refugee is an anomaly whose status needs to be brought back into place by either naturalization or repatriation. When these options do not materialize, as I discuss in chapter 3, refugees are held in detention camps for an indeterminate amount of time, their liberty suspended "for no other reason than having arrived within a territory which is not their own."[66]

### *"Complex Personhood" and "Intentionalized Beings"*

The political philosophy literature, which calls into question the fiction of modern sovereignty, provides an effective epistemological critique of the discourse on refugee resettlement by pointing out that liberal resettlement programs are a form of "geopolitical humanitarianism" that end up affirming the state-citizen hierarchy.[67]

Still, epistemological critiques, however powerful, risk rendering the refugee "only as a lack."[68] I am more persuaded by Patricia Owens's argument that political philosophy critiques of the modern nation-state can appear both "arrogant and irrelevant" to the lives of real refugees who are often seeking, above all, the right to belong to a political community.[69] I argue that an engaged critical refugee studies project needs to do more than critique; it also needs to integrate sophisticated theoretical rigor with the daily concerns of real people as they navigate their social worlds. To be clear, I am not privileging resistance or agency; I am aware of the pitfalls of analyses that romanticize and reify marginalized subjects while eliding the complexity and multiplicity of their lives. I am also cognizant of the poststructuralist insistence that social beings are always culturally and politically constructed. As Sherry Ortner ruminates on what she terms "the crisis of representation in the human sciences":

> When Edward Said says in effect that the discourse of Orientalism renders it virtually impossible to know anything real about the Orient (1979); when Gayatri Spivak tells us that the "subaltern cannot speak" (1988); when James Clifford informs us that all ethnographies are "fictions" (1986:7); and when of course in some sense all of these things are true—then the effect is a powerful inhibition on . . . seeking to understand other people in other times and places, especially those people who are not in dominant positions.[70]

Yet, as Ortner also eloquently argues, it is possible to acknowledge that subjects are constructed and that oppression is damaging, and *still* recognize the ability "of social beings to weave alternative, and sometimes brilliantly creative, forms of coherence across the damages."[71] Tuck calls this recognition "desire-based" research, which "accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities."[72]

With some notable exceptions, the literature on forced displacement has ignored the refugees' rich and complicated lived worlds, the ways in which they labor to have resilient, productive, and even heroic lives in displacement.[73] I agree with Ortner that dominated subjects do more than simply oppose or react to domination, that "they have their *own* politics," which has been forged through the logic of their "own locally and historically evolved bricolage."[74] In other words, even when refugees are reduced to an "aberration of categories" or "a zone of pollution,"[75] they are, to cite Avery Gordon, never, never just that.[76] In Tuck's eloquent words: "Even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression."[77] What I hope to show is that Vietnamese refugees are "intentionalized beings" who enact their hopes, beliefs, and politics, even when they live militarized lives.[78] My intent is not to valorize Vietnamese refugees but to note their "complex personhood,"[79] to be attentive to how they manage their lives, and to take seriously, rather than dismissively, their differing and different subject positions and political perspectives. I also hope to show, as Trinh notes, that "the state of indeterminateness and of indefinite unsettlement" that characterizes the refugees' life in transit *persists* in resettlement, even when the "happily resettled" tout their feelings of gratitude or flaunt their material success.[80] In short, the aspiration of the book is to call attention to lives that

have been ravaged by war: to mark the broken trajectories as well as the moments of action as refugees search for and insist on their right to *more*.

## VIETNAMESE AMERICAN STUDIES: ABOUT MILITARIZED REFUGE(ES)

"For general western spectatorship, Vietnam does not exist outside of the war," observes Trinh.[81] Concerned that Vietnam exists only as a spectacle for the West, many Vietnamese proclaim that Vietnam is a country, not a war. Tired of being associated "only with *that* war" in which Vietnamese are represented most often as pathetic and passive victims, some Vietnamese American studies scholars have insisted that we move the field beyond the parameter of the war in order to study Vietnamese in all their complexities.[82] The past four decades have seen a proliferation of articles and books that cover Vietnamese lives from more complex and critical perspectives. Nazli Kibria's ethnographic study of Vietnamese families in Philadelphia in the early 1980s remains the richest study of the changing family dynamics within the Vietnamese American community.[83] Following Kibria's example, subsequent studies began to conceptualize Vietnamese not as a refugee group in transit but as a new racial or ethnic group that is deliberately and gradually embedding themselves in their new communities.[84] Moving beyond demographic and needs assessment studies, an emerging generation of Vietnamese American scholars shifted the focus of study to the linguistic, cultural, and literary expressions of the Vietnamese diasporic communities.[85] As an example, a 2003 *Amerasia Journal* special issue on Vietnamese Americans emphasized the transnational dimensions of their experience, including studies on transnational cultural flows and forms of collaboration between Vietnamese American and Vietnamese music makers, transnational marriages between women in Vietnam and overseas Vietnamese men who live in Western countries, and transnational assembly work.[86]

These studies also open up the category "Vietnamese American" by addressing the gender, sexual, class, political, religious, cultural, and generational diversity of the population and by articulating the localistic, familial, national, and

transnational linkages of Vietnamese lives. As a group, these works on the Vietnamese diaspora integrate isolated studies of the "Vietnamese experience" into the larger field of migration studies and enable Vietnamese studies scholars to join postmodern theorists and others in cultural studies in the larger discourse about diaspora, exile, transnationalism, ethnicity, and identity.[87] In sum, these promising developments in the field of Vietnamese studies provide us a rare glimpse into how Vietnamese have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves—and in so doing, to restore, in Amitava Kumar's words, "a certain weight of experience, a stubborn density, a *life* to what we encounter in newspaper columns as abstract, often faceless, figures without histories."[88]

Although I am certainly sympathetic with this desire to move beyond the war, I worry that such a decoupling of Vietnamese Americans from the Vietnam War risks assimilating Vietnamese into the apolitical and ahistorical category of "cultural diversity," in which Vietnamese become represented as just one more marker of cultural difference in the U.S. multicultural landscape. I am also concerned that, even some forty years after its "end," a "determined incomprehension" remains the dominant U.S. public stance on the history and legacy of the Vietnam War.[89] Despite the profusion of text and talk on the Vietnam War in Vietnam(ese) studies, I contend that the field has yet to critically engage the war as an important historical and discursive site of Vietnamese subject formation and of the shaping and articulation of U.S. nationhood. This book thus asks us to return once again to *that* war and its "refugees." Although I recognize that Vietnam is a country and not a war, and that Vietnamese lives do not begin and end with the Vietnam War, I agree with Viet Thanh Nguyen that its/our "history still demands an ongoing engagement with what that war meant, if we are not to concede its meaning to revisionist, nationalist agendas in the United States."[90] Accordingly, I suggest that, rather than doing away with the term "refugee," we imbue it with social and political critiques that call into question the relationships between war, race, and violence, then and now.



## *Militarized Refuge(es)*

Since the 1993 publication of the landmark collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism,* in which Amy Kaplan called out the glaring conceptual and ideological "absence of empire from the study of American culture,"[91] studies of colonialism and imperialism have proliferated as American studies scholars shifted attention away from nationalist paradigms and foregrounded America's embeddedness within transnational and hemispheric cultures and histories.[92] Included in this critical scholarship is a growing body of work that examines the ways in which empire and war, especially the Cold War, have intersected in American culture.[93] Moving away from the voluminous military and diplomatic histories that focused on war's political leaders, military planners, and policymakers, these newer studies conceptualize war as a cultural phenomenon, paying particular attention to how "policy-making, intelligence-gathering, war-making, and mainstream politics might be profoundly shaped by a social and cultural world beyond the conference table or battlefield."[94] Most provocative are studies that reveal how colonial histories and cultures constitute the conditions of possibility for ongoing forms of militarization.[95]

I recognize the value of conceptualizing war as a "knowledge project or epistemology,"[96] but I also believe that we need to continue to think of war in terms of "militarized violence"—not only epistemic or symbolic violence but the actual physical violence of "guns and bombs" unleashed on "expendable nonpersons," those devoid of names and faces, family and personal histories, dreams and hopes, politics and beliefs. According to U.S. Department of Defense statistics, close to six million U.S. troops served in Southeast Asia and/or South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The number of U.S. troops in Vietnam peaked at 543,000 in April 1969.[97] The My Lai Massacre, in which U.S. forces massacred about 400 unarmed women, children, and elderly men in the village of My Lai in South Vietnam, is widely considered "the most shocking episode of the Vietnam War."[98] U.S. military policies (e.g., search-and-destroy missions in the South, carpet-bombing raids in the North, free-fire zones, and chemical defoliation) cost Vietnam at least three million lives, the maiming of countless bodies, the poisoning of its water, land, and air, the razing of its countryside, and the devastation of most of its infrastructure. Indeed, more explosives were dropped on

Vietnam, a country two-thirds the size of California, than in all of World War II. According to Heonik Kwon, the war in Vietnam was a culmination of technological advancement in the weapons of mass destruction and was a philosophical "total war." Whereas the war in North Vietnam was a "conventional war" with a clear division of labor between armed combatants and unarmed civilians, the war in the South was an unconventional one in which villagers had to fight as hard as any armed soldiers—not necessarily to win the war, but just to survive. In the southern context, war death could be the death of anyone.[99]

U.S. scholarship has largely separated war studies and refugee studies into different fields of study. This decoupling obscures the formative role that U.S. wars play in structuring the displacements, dispersions, and migrations of refugees to the United States and elsewhere. As Setsu Shigematsu and Keith Camacho contend, "U.S. war waging has become an integral, if not naturalized, part of the grammar of . . . (im)migration narratives."[100] And yet, in the U.S. academy, popular media, and published autobiographies and memoirs, Vietnamese flight to the United States is most often portrayed as a matter of desperate individuals fleeing political persecution and/or economic depression, or simply fleeing "the Communists," completely discounting the aggressive roles that the U.S. government, military, and corporations have played in generating this exodus in the first place. It is not that the history of U.S. military, economic, and political intervention in Vietnam is excluded in studies on Vietnamese Americans; rather, it is often included only as background information—as the events that *precede* the refugee flight rather than as the actions that *produce* this very exodus, the refugee subject, and the U.S. nation-state.

Juxtaposing refugee/immigration studies and war/international studies, I contend in this book that it is the presence of the refugees—Vietnam's runaways—that enables the United States to recast its aggressive military strategy as a benevolent intervention. 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.[101] I thus situate my discussion of refuge(es) within a specific frame of reference: the long, long durée of U.S. colonial expansion and war making in Asia. In chapter 2, I coin the term "*militarized* refuge(es)"—with its intended

jarring juxtaposition—in order to expose the hidden violence behind the humanitarian term "refuge," thereby challenging the powerful narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam's discarded that erases the role that U.S. foreign policy and war played in inducing the "refugee crisis" in the first place.

*History and Memory*

In the United States, public discussions of the Vietnam War often skip over the history of militarized violence inflicted on Vietnam and its people. It is not that the Vietnam War has been forgotten. Partly due to the lack of a national resolution, the Vietnam War "is the most chronicled, documented, reported, filmed, taped, and—in all likelihood—narrated war in [U.S.] history."[102] But, as Ralph Ellison reminds us, the highly visible can actually be a type of invisibility such that the profusion of text and talk on the Vietnam War actually conceals the costs borne by the Vietnamese[103]—the lifelong costs that turn the "Fall of Saigon" and the exodus from Vietnam into "the endings that are not over."[104] As scholars, public historians, and the media have repeatedly documented, Americans have been obsessed with the Vietnam War as an *American* tragedy. As a result, most American writings on the war involve the highly organized and strategic forgetting of the Vietnamese people: "They are conspicuously absent in their roles as collaborators, victims, enemies, or simply the people whose land and over whom (supposedly) this war was fought."[105] As an example, the highly controversial Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the very site where U.S. cultural memory of the Vietnam War is represented and debated, disallows any acknowledgment of the war's effects on the Vietnamese. As Nguyên-Vo Thu Huong observes, "Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us."[106]

The nonrecognition of Vietnamese losses raises the question: what makes for a grievable life? As Judith Butler asks, how does mourning take place for those who never "were," who "fit no dominant frame for the human," and whose lives do not count as lives?[107] Butler is not simply talking about the process of

dehumanization, where humans are not regarded as humans; rather, she asks us to be attentive to the "racial differential that undergirds the culturally viable notions of the human"—notionsthat open up questions at the level of ontology: "What is real? Whose lives are real? . . . What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered as 'unreal'?"[108] Butler argues that this failure of recognition—the insistence that there was no event, no loss—"is mandated through an identification with those who identify with the perpetrators of the violence."[109] Relatedly, in a book on the boom in testimonies, autobiographies, and memoirs emanating from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan, Gillian Whitlock notes that some life narratives move quickly into and within Western media, whereas others are "epistemologically disabled" and remain "trapped" within the immediate community that has suffered the pain; he argues that this disparity has everything to do with "whose lives count, and under what circumstances."[110] To have traction, Whitlock contends, the refugee narrative needs "national history on its side" and must become linked to "civic virtue and the national good."[111]

As a consequence of "the masculinist hypervisibility of American representations of the Vietnam War"[112] and the concomitant discounting of Vietnamese (especially of South Vietnamese) accounts of the war, the most that we have are fragmented "flashes" of memory, of partial and imperfect recollections. Looking for and calling attention to the lost and missing subjects of history are critical to any political project. In a different context, Toni Morrison has instructed us to be mindful that "*invisible things are not necessarily not-there*."[113] How do we write about absences? How do we compel others to look for the things that are seemingly not there? How do we imagine beyond the limits of what is already stated to be understandable? To engage in war and refugee studies, then, is to look for the things that are barely there and to listen to "fragmentary testimonies, to barely distinguishable testimonies, to testimonies that never reach us"[114]—that is, to write ghost stories.

Attentive to "the ghostly" and "the afterlives" of Vietnamese refugees,[115] this book gathers accounts of Vietnamese exilic remembrance and re-presents them as events that disrupt what Khatharya Um calls "the too-early foreclosure upon the wounds of war and dispersal."[116] Amid so much organized forgetting, I feel

keenly the need to note Vietnamese American presence, rather than its absence, and to find different ways of knowing and writing about history outside of the realm of state-sanctioned commemorative discourses and practices. I also pay more attention to strategic and self-imposed silence than to the power-laden process of silencing, to the ways that subjugated histories are told "quietly" or told without words or sometimes safeguarded for future tellings, whether or not I grasp the reasons behind these decisions.[117] At the end of the day, I concur with Grace Cho that "there is as much power in uncertainty as in knowing the truth," and I am grateful for what I have been able to glimpse and learn from these gaps and empty spaces.[118]

## BOOK OVERVIEW

As a critical refugee studies project, *Body Counts* examines the ways in which the mutually constituted processes of remembering and forgetting work in the production of official discourses about empire, war, and violence as well as in the construction of refugee subjectivities. Throughout, I grapple with the difficulties and risks inherent in the methods and techniques of reading, writing, and sharing "ghost stories"—or "truths" that are unspoken or unspeakable. By paying special attention to Vietnamese American histories whose traumatic consequences are still actively evolving in today's space and time, *Body Counts* "is looking not so much for answers as for new *enabling questions*, questions that would open new directions for research and new conceptual spaces for the yet unborn answers."[119]

*Body Counts* critically engages the social science literature on refugees through an interdisciplinary and intersectional perspective that "deliberately unravel[s] seemingly stable distinctions among identificatory categories and disciplinary divisions."[120] Placing various critical fields in conversation with each other, I aim to open up new avenues for critical investigation of structures of violence, power, and identity as well as new means of seeing and charting what Neferti Tadiar terms "alternative ways of becoming human":

> The tangential, fugitive, and insurrectionary creative social capacities that, despite being continuously impeded, and made illegible by dominant ways of being human, are exercised and invented by those slipping beyond the bounds of valued humanity in their very effort of living, in their making of forms of viable life.[121]

Although not explicitly about women's lives, *Body Counts* adopts a feminist approach to the study of militarized refuge(es): it examines the intersection between private grief and public commemoration, listens for unsaid things by relying on other senses such as feelings and emotions, and looks for the hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic and familial interaction. In all, *Body Counts* engages in what I term "critical juxtaposing": the bringing together of seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces

in order to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about the contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire. Whereas the traditional comparative approach conceptualizes the groups, events, and places to be compared as already-constituted and discrete entities, the critical juxtaposing method posits that they are fluid rather than static and need to be understood in *relation* to each other and within the context of a flexible field of political discourses. I argue that it is through the methodology of critical juxtaposing that we can best see that Vietnamese commemorative practices occur not in a vacuum but at the intersection of familial, local, national, international, and transnational dynamics.

Focusing on refugee camps in Southeast Asia, the very site of the construction of Vietnamese as "passive, immobilized and pathetic,"[122] chapter 2 views the refugee flight—from Vietnam to the Philippines to Guam and then to California, all of which routed the refugees through U.S. military bases—as a critical lens through which to map, both discursively and materially, the legacy of U.S. military expansion into the Asia Pacific region and the military's heavy hand in the purportedly benevolent resettlement process. I make two related arguments: the first about military colonialism, which contends that it was (neo)colonial dependence on the United States that turned the Philippines and Guam into the receiving centers of the U.S. rescuing project; the second about militarized refuge, which emphasizes the mutually constitutive nature of the concepts "refugees" and "refuge" and shows how both emerge out of and in turn bolster U.S. militarism. Following chapter 2's investigation of the militarized nature of refugee camps, chapter 3 focuses on the social life that refugees forged and nurtured in the camps. The first part of the chapter shows how Vietnamese lives were subsumed into the biopolitical and necropolitical logics of organized camp life, and the second half details how Vietnamese refugees created new lifeworlds within the camp, not only to survive but to claim a life within it.

Chapters 4 and 5, as tandem chapters, examine the narrative of the "good refugee"—the successful, assimilated, and anticommunist newcomers. Chapter 4 argues that it is the narrative of the "good refugee," deployed by refugee studies scholars, mainstream U.S. media, and Vietnamese Americans themselves, that has been key in enabling the United States to turn the Vietnam War into a "good

war." Chapter 5 tells the Vietnamese refugee version of this story, explaining how and why South Vietnam's war dead and anticommunism had become so central to the refugees' retellings of their war losses in the United States. Moving beyond the exclusionary commemorative sites, it focuses on two quotidian memory places—Internet memorials and commemorative street names—that Vietnamese Americans have improvised in order to remember their dead.

Chapter 6 focuses on the postwar generation, detailing how their experiences are mediated by their own "postmemory" of the Vietnam War, by their parents' direct experiences with the war, and by the politics of war commemoration practiced by both Vietnam and the United States. In chapter 7, the book's conclusion, I emphasize the war's irreconcilability and ongoingness, insisting that we pay attention to the living effects of what seems to be over and done with.

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Given that the American public continues to perceive Vietnamese in the United States principally as war *refugees,* many Vietnamese Americans understandably bristle at the pigeonholing of their community as perpetual foreigner. While I agree that it is politically important to insist that Vietnamese have always been inside of and played absolutely crucial roles in the building and sustaining of the U.S. nation-state, I also believe that it is equally important to claim the critical space outside of the nation—to inhabit that space between countries from which we can articulate the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions of the promise of citizenship and belongingness for those on the social margins. This "space between" also enables us to interrupt existing notions of "rescue and liberation" as it calls attention to the discarded who emerge from the brutal dislocations produced by war, colonization, and globalization as well as by the persistence of racialized discourses and practices in the United States.[123] Yet this critical stance of refusing incorporation is not necessarily the same as denying the need for refuge. Following Trinh, *Body Counts* thus asks: what is involved in maintaining this balance between "refuse and refuge"?[124]

lê thi diem thúy writes that Vietnamese refugees are a "people larger than their life situation."[125] To take seriously Vietnamese evolving perspectives of the war is to remember Vietnam as a historical site, Vietnamese people as genuine subjects, and the Vietnam War as having its own integrity that is internal to the history and politics of Vietnam. In all, *Body Counts* interrupts and disrupts the mutually constituted notions of "rescue and liberation" and the "good refugee" by calling attention to the lives that could or would have been, as well as the lives that did emerge from and out of the ruins of war, and "peace"—all the while insisting that we become tellers of *ghost stories,* that we pay attention to what modern history has rendered ghostly, and to write into being the seething presence of the things that appear to be not there.[126]

*Amid the organized forgetting of the Vietnam War and its people, this book is an act of remembering—and remembrance.*