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Critical Refugee Studies and Asian American Studies:**Vietnamese Refugees in Asian America**

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***Refugee Story # 1** – In 1975, I arrived in the United States as a refugee from Vietnam, speaking no English. I attended cash-strapped schools, where I encountered under- and mis-education, anti-Asian racism, and language and class discrimination. I did not know at the time that just a few years earlier, Asian American (and other US Third World) students had protested against systemic racism and demanded fundamental changes in higher education: better access for students of color, more inclusive and relevant curricula, and the creation of Asian American studies programs. Although I entered higher education after the Asian American protest movement, I became a direct beneficiary of these struggles—personally, intellectually, and materially. Asian American studies opened up for me the world of critical scholarship and pedagogy. It also helped me secure my first job: an Asian American studies position at UCSD that students had fought for—long and hard. More than thirty years later, I am still at UCSD, teaching, mentoring, writing, ever mindful of the legacy of Asian American student activism that brought me there.*

***Refugee Story # 2** – In the summer of 2019, I was contacted by the campus police with startling news: the mother of one of my students had threatened to physically harm me. According to the police, the mother, a Vietnamese refugee herself, was furious that I had encouraged her daughter to major in Asian American/ethnic studies. Having worked 16-hour days for years to ensure a better future for her children, she felt betrayed that her daughter had chosen a non-STEM major—and she blamed me. I wonder if her fury were further fueled by the fact that I was Vietnamese, and thus, in her opinion, should have known better—that a college education is an investment in your family, and not in yourself. Although I did not fear for my safety, her threat deeply troubled me because of what it implied about the perceived relevance of Asian American studies to the communities that it purports to serve, both materially and ideologically. Materially, what could I say to my student’s mother about the practical usefulness of an Asian*

*American studies major? Ideologically, what could Asian American studies scholars say to refugees who seemingly embrace the “politics of accommodation,”¹ not because they are duped but because they **do** want a better life in the United States for themselves and their family, having risked so much to get here.*

I open this essay with these two refugee stories because they reveal both the promise and limits of Asian American studies. Born out of the 1960s civil rights movements and liberation fronts, Asian American studies forged pan-Asian solidarity by exposing and linking the histories of racial and class discrimination against Asians in the United States. But Asian America’s heterogeneity—its class, ethnic, national, generational, and ideological diversity—has always been there, shaping the trajectory of the field.² As Viet Thanh Nguyen and others have established, Asian America is capable of “promising equality” but also of “practicing hierarchy when it comes to dealing with various Asian ethnic groups with conflicting interests.”³ Some critics have decried the field’s privileging of East Asians over less established Asian groups—an indictment of the suppression of diverse histories, epistemologies, and voices within the pan-Asian framework: “To be merely peripheral subjects, hasty additions to course syllabi, or latecomers at Asian American Studies symposiums does not satisfy.”⁴ In *Asian American Panethnicity*, I critique the intermittent but strategic absorption of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians into the Asian American framework, showing how this “differential inclusion” has benefited the more dominant groups within the panethnic coalition, but left intact the social, political, and economic inequalities within Asian America.⁵ In her 2003 review of the state of the field, Linda Trinh Võ concludes that the inclusion of Vietnamese refugees into the teachings, research, and theories of Asian American studies “remains undeveloped or neglected.”⁶ Even today, Vietnamese lives, histories, and politics continue to be peripheral to the cultural, literary, and political center of the field.

Below, I examine two primary reasons for the inadequate integration of Vietnamese refugees—as objects of critical inquiry as well as subjects—into Asian American studies. The first has to do with the founding premises of the field: its treatment of the Vietnam War as an Asian American event, and its emphasis on racial equality for Asians *within* the United States. As subjects of US war and imperialism, Vietnamese political subjectivity and practice cannot be

exclusively defined within the US; their racial formation also has to be understood within the context of US wars in and occupation of Southeast Asia. The second has to do with the field's investment in "the idea of Asian America as a place of resistance to capitalist exploitation,"⁷ which discounts and dismisses the ideological heterogeneity of Asian America. For some/many Vietnamese, such as my student's mother, the field's critiques of the model minority and assimilation paradigms clash with their deep desire to achieve and revel in the coveted status of the "good refugee."

The Vietnam War, Asian America, and Critical Refugee Studies

In the United States, public discussions of the Vietnam War often skip over the history of militarized violence inflicted on Vietnam and its people. 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 writings on the war in the United States have involved 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."⁸ As I began my training in Asian American studies, I was surprised to learn that Asian Americanists have also been fixated on the Vietnam War—but as an *Asian American* event. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the Vietnam War raged on, Asian American activists waged an antiwar movement that exposed the racist and imperialist nature of the war. Watching war images on the evening television news, young Asian Americans "realized with a shock that the 'enemy' whom American soldiers were maiming and killing had faces like their own."⁹ Alienated by the US antiwar movement, Asian American protesters rejected the popular slogans "Give Peace a Chance" and "Bring the GIs Home," and touted their own "Stop Killing Our Asian Brothers and Sisters" and "We Don't Want Your Racist War."¹⁰ For these young activists, the slogan "Bring Our Boys Home" clearly privileged American over Asian lives.¹¹ In 1971, the Asian American contingent refused to join the main antiwar march in Washington, DC, because the coordinating committee vetoed the contingent's antiracist statement. When Asian Americans participated in the white-dominated antiwar marches, they passed out their own leaflets denouncing racism and imperialism.¹² The Vietnam War thus politically awakened Asian Americans, forging their racial consciousness as an "Asian people."

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.”¹³

Accordingly, Asian Americanists’ retellings of the Vietnam War have long been more about Asian America than about Vietnam and its people. In a January 1973 article published in *Gidra*, the revolutionary monthly newspaper-magazine founded by a group of Asian American students at UCLA, Bruce Iwasaki explained how the Vietnam War was his generation’s war:

The U.S. involvement in Vietnamese affairs began around the time we were born; stayed hidden from the national consciousness during our years of innocence; escalated as we matured; and has reached climactic proportions while our generation gains the will and seeks the means to end that involvement. Much as we forget, ignore, or grow numb to it, the war has been a constant shadow in our lives.¹⁴

In this excerpt, “we” clearly references Asian Americans; and the Vietnam War was refracted through their, and not Vietnamese, experiences. In subsequent accounts, Asian American studies scholars continued to discuss the Vietnam War primarily in terms of what it did for Asian Americans—that it radicalized Asian American student activists, helping them to refine and redefine their own identities and political goals. As Karen L. Ishizuka notes in her study of the Asian American Movement: “It was no accident that Asian America was born at the peak of the Vietnam War.”¹⁵ Focusing on Asian American lives, these historical accounts treat the Vietnam War and its people as a *derivative* of Asian America—a site for the development of Asian American identity and politics.

Asian Americans’ conceptualization of the Vietnam War primarily as a site for their own political awakening disregards the war’s impact on Vietnamese lives. In *Body Counts*, I argue that we need to think of wars in terms of “militarized violence”—not only epistemic or symbolic violence but the actual physical violence of “guns and bombs” unleashed upon “expendable nonpersons,” those considered to be devoid of names and faces, family and personal histories, dreams and hopes, politics and beliefs.¹⁶ Vietnam was the site of one of the most brutal and destructive wars between Western imperial powers and the people of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. US military policies—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 philosophical “total war.”¹⁷ However inadvertently, Asian Americans’ focus on the Vietnam War as an Asian American event dismisses the horrific violence borne by Vietnamese people. As Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong observes, “Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us.”¹⁸

The inadequate integration of Vietnamese experiences into Asian American studies also reflects the field’s shift from a Third World frame to a focus on the racialization and internal colonization of Asians within the United States. At the height of the Vietnam War, Asian American activists advanced “a notion of united Third World struggle against White/Western racism and imperialism.”¹⁹ However, 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—of establishing that “Asian Americans are a *bona fide* minority group equivalent in status with all other minority groups.”²⁰ The field’s focus on racial equality and inclusion confined Asian American issues within a US national framework, which provided little analytical space to meaningfully and critically integrate refugee issues and concerns. As Vietnamese were subjects of US militarism and imperialism, Vietnamese political subjectivity and practice could not be exclusively defined within and confined to the US context; their racial formation has to be understood within the more expansive context of US wars in and occupation of Southeast Asia. In short, the specificities of Vietnamese refugees’ histories require an alternate genealogy for Asian American studies—one that begins with the history of US military, economic, and political intervention in Asia.²¹

Building on the foundational works that “rethink the history of the United States as a history of empire,”²² the field of critical refugee studies refashions the objects and methods of Asian American studies around the crucial issues of war, race, and violence.²³ As Jodi Kim argues, the refugee is simultaneously a product of, a witness to, and a site of critique of the

gendered and racial violence of US wars.²⁴ Asian American studies scholars thus need to conceptualize the refugee not as an object of investigation but rather a paradigm “whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems.”²⁵ As someone who inhabits the critical space outside nations, the refugee radically challenges the solidity and primacy of the nation-state 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 an example, to situate Vietnamese refugees within the context of US wars in Southeast Asia would return Asian American studies to the Third World frame adopted by Asian American activists at the height of the Vietnam War—one that links the US modern racial state to the US modern empire.

Assimilation, the Model Minority, and the Good Refugees

Since World War II, social citizenship in the United States has been defined as “the civic duty of the individual to reduce his or her burden on society.”²⁶ In the midst of the civil rights movement and race rebellions in cities across the United States, the popular press and social scientists began to publicize the alleged economic success of Asian Americans, lauding them as model minorities who achieve the American dream “through self-reliant pluck rather than agitating for rights.”²⁷ In other words, Asian Americans who heretofore have been conspicuously absent from public racial discourse suddenly became highly visible as the model of successful ethnic assimilation—“as embodying the human capital of diligence, docility, self-sufficiency and productivity.”²⁸ Since then, in mainstream media, political pronouncements, and the social sciences, “model minority” became the face of Asian America. As affirmative action and welfare programs were gradually dismantled in the 1980s, the model minority myth has served as an effective tool for validating the claims of colorblind meritocracy and equal opportunity for all.

Contesting the model minority myth—both its ideology as well as its validity—has been a key objective of Asian American studies. As many Asian American intellectuals have argued, the stereotype of the model minority is harmful because it becomes a testament to the success of the race-neutral incorporative capacities of the United States.²⁹ More so, as Viet Thanh Nguyen has argued, the myth is also insidious because it can and has been internalized by Asian Americans. The possibility and reality of Asian Americans “model minoritizing” themselves

troubles Asian American intellectuals who see their work as having been founded on the idea of political resistance and social change. As Nguyen explains, the insistence on this resistant identity has made it difficult for Asian American intellectuals to meaningfully address the ideological heterogeneity of an increasingly diverse Asian American population in the post-1965 era.³⁰

It was during the conservative 1980s that Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the United States. To dispute the model minority myth, many Asian American studies scholars quickly pointed to the refugees' impoverished conditions as proof of the economic diversity among Asian Americans. In many Asian American studies textbooks and edited collections, Southeast Asian refugees appear only or repeatedly as a strategic counterexample to the model minority—to emphasize that not all Asians have made it.³¹ Given the persistence of the model minority myth in mainstream debates concerning race, the refugees' relative economic disadvantages make it possible for Asian American scholars and community organizers to insist that Asian Americans are “a *bona fide* minority group deserving remedial aid.”³²

While scholars in the various fields of critical war studies, including in Asian American studies, have launched powerful critiques of US military colonialism, they have largely left the study of refugees—the human cost of war—to social scientists who have alternated between reducing the refugees to a depoliticized “object of sociological inquiry and psychiatric correction”³³ and elevating them as the newest 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.”³⁴ Subsequent publications were particularly effusive about the “legendary” academic accomplishments of Vietnamese refugees' children who “came to America as boat people.”³⁵ In short, social scientists actively participated in the construction of the “good refugee” by closely charting Vietnamese economic adaptation and celebrating their alleged successful adjustment as the attainment of the “American dream.”

To the chagrin of Asian American intellectuals, Vietnamese themselves have also contributed to the making of the “good refugee” narrative. As an example, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, many Vietnamese American reporters penned news articles and opinion pieces that portrayed Vietnamese refugees as successful, assimilated newcomers to the American “melting pot.”³⁶ My interviews with young Vietnamese Americans³⁷ also revealed an intense desire and will to assimilate and succeed, most often imposed by their parents but also self-imposed. The Vietnamese acceptance of the moniker “good refugee”—and “model minority,” more generally—exposes the ideologically diverse constituency within Asian America and thus the limits of Asian American studies. How do we, as Asian American studies professionals, contend with those who aspire to be the model minority, who prize assimilation and economic mobility, and who view Asian American studies as peripheral or even irrelevant to their everyday lives? To return to my opening refugee story: How do we respond to my student’s mother (and many others like her) who considers a decision to major in Asian American studies/ethnic studies as tantamount to family betrayal? According to Nguyen, “the idea that first-generation Asian Americans sacrifice for their children and that these children are more assimilated and economically better off than their parents” is one of the basic building blocks of mainstream Asian American literature.³⁸ And yet, Asian American studies intellectuals have yet to seriously engage this strong desire—or more accurately, this strong need—for economic mobility, especially palpable among less economically secure Asian refugee groups.

To answer these questions in regard to Vietnamese refugees, we need to return to the Vietnam War—not as an Asian American event, but as a Vietnamese event that entails concrete and long-lasting costs on Vietnamese bodies and psyches. Approaching Vietnamese lives from a critical refugee studies perspective, I have argued that the Vietnam War has become a constant motivator that pushes young Vietnamese Americans to assuage war-induced private grief with public achievements.³⁹ Hyper-aware of the tolls of economic anxiety on their lives, many of the young people we interviewed felt deeply and personally responsible for recuperating what their parents had lost through war, flight, and resettlement in the United States. Their sense of responsibility was palpable: it had cost their parents too much to get here; it was their responsibility to fulfill their parents’ dream of family success via intergenerational mobility. In other words, college and career choices are less, or not only, a sign of Vietnamese assimilation

and social acceptance; they also constitute a complex and strategic response to their and their parents' forcible and "differential inclusion" into US society in the aftermath of the US war in Vietnam. For the majority of the young people I interviewed, their investment in success and money—in intergenerational economic mobility—exhibits the poignant and complex ways in which Vietnamese use public achievements to address the lingering costs of war, to manage intimacy, to negotiate family tensions, and to assure their social position and dignity in the racially and economically stratified United States.

Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?

When I relate to my colleagues that my student's mother had threatened to harm me, they react with shock and disbelief. Yet, while the mother's threat to harm me is extreme, the impetus behind her fury is not. As a refugee, she had to work hard to support her daughter; now, it is her daughter's turn. We sometimes forget that having the option to choose one's college major is often a middle-class privilege. Children of refugee parents, many of whom are first-generation college students, have to approach college and their major as a means to an end: getting a good job. On the one hand, having dedicated my career to teaching and mentoring underrepresented students, I am confident of the quality, seriousness, and import of our curriculum. And intellectually, I know it is important to theorize about critical refugee studies, to insist that scholars engage the Vietnam War as an important historical and discursive site of *Vietnamese* subject formation. Still, as I listen to our students' deep anxieties over career options and parents' expectations, I know we need to do more. As Asian American studies professors, who are comfortably middle class, we need to figure out how to take a different sort of responsibility for our students (and, by extension, their families), whose politics and material concerns can run counter to our idealized versions of Asian American studies. That is, we need to do more than critique the model minority and good refugee, and to recognize instead that our students' intense desire to economically assimilate makes sense. At the minimum, we need to approach career training as seriously as our students do, and build into our curriculum a number of skills sets that would help ease our students' transition between school and professional life.

- ¹ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford U. Press, 2002)
- ² Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press, 1992).
- ³ Nguyen, *Race and Resistance* (above, n. 1), 15.
- ⁴ Russell Leong, “De-centering and Transforming the Asian American Subject,” *Amerasia Journal* vol. 19, no. 3 (1993): v. South Asian American scholars have likewise asked why they are a part of, yet apart from, Asian America, “admitted, but not acknowledged?” Rajiv Shankar, “Foreword: South Asian Identity in Asian America,” in *A Part Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, eds. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press, 1998), ix-xv.
- ⁵ Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity* (above, n. 2).
- ⁶ Linda Trinh Vo, “Vietnamese Americans: Diaspora & Dimensions,” *Amerasia Journal* vol. 29, no. 1 (2003): ix.
- ⁷ Nguyen, *Race and Resistance* (above, n. 1), 5.
- ⁸ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 1997), 62.
- ⁹ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 174.
- ¹⁰ Paul Wong, “The Emergence of the Asian American Movement,” *Bridge* vol. 2, no. 1 (1972): 35–36.
- ¹¹ *Bridge*, “Editorial: What Price ‘Peace with Honor,’” vol. 2, no. 4 (1973): 3.
- ¹² Wong, “The Emergence” (above, n. 10), 34–36.
- ¹³ Evelyn Yoshimura, “How I Became an Activist and What It All Means to Me,” *Amerasia Journal* vol. 15, no. 1 (1989): 29.
- ¹⁴ Bruce Iwasaki, “You May Be a Lover, But You Ain’t No Dancer,” *Gidra* vol. V, no. 1 (Jan. 1973), 16–17.
- ¹⁵ Karen L. Ishizuga, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (London: Verso, 2016), 97.
- ¹⁶ Yen Le Espiritu. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Berkeley, U. California Press, 2014).
- ¹⁷ Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2006).
- ¹⁸ Nguyêñ-Vo Thu Huong, “Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?” *Amerasia Journal* vol. 31 (2005), 170.

¹⁹ Claire Kim, "Playing the Racial Trump Card: Asian Americans in Contemporary U.S. Politics," *Amerasia Journal* vol. 26 (2000/01), 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Cathy Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2012).

²² Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke U. Press, 1998), 86. See also Amy Kaplan, "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, N.C.: Duke U. Press, 1993).

²³ Espiritu, *Body Counts* (above, n. 16).

²⁴ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2010), 6.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, "What Is a Paradigm?" Lecture at European Graduate School, Aug. 20, 2002. www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html.

²⁶ Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2003), 12.

²⁷ Victor Bascara, *Model-Minority Imperialism* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2006), 4. In a widely publicized 1966 article published in the *New York Times Magazine*, anthropologist William Petersen coined the term *model minority* to refer to Japanese Americans who, despite being a minority group that suffered wartime incarceration, still managed to gain upward mobility, "leading generally affluent, and for the most part, highly Americanized life ... there is no parallel to their success story." See William Petersen, "Success Story: Japanese-American Style," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 6, 1996), 38.

²⁸ Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding* (above, n. 26), 77.

²⁹ Bascara, *Model-Minority Imperialism* (above, n. 27), 5.

³⁰ Nguyen, *Race and Resistance* (above, n. 1), 144.

³¹ An example from Sucheng Chan's classic text on Asian American history: "Other groups of Asian Americans do not share the improved economic standing achieved by Japanese and Chinese Americans ... Vietnamese in California, where some 40 percent of the refugees now live, about half of them remain on public assistance." See Chan, *Asian Americans* (above, n. 9), 170.

³² Kim, "Playing the Racial Trump Card" (above, n. 19), 44.

³³ Fiona I.B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam, “Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue: Guest Editors’ Introduction” *Positions* vol. 20 (2012), 677.

³⁴ Nathan Caplan, John K. Whitmore, and Quang L. Bui, *The Boat People and Achievement in America: A Study of Family Life, Hard Work, and Cultural Values* (Ann Arbor: U. Michigan Press, 1989), 136.

³⁵ See Nathan Caplan, Marcella H. Choy, and John K. Whitmore, *Children of the Boat People: A Study of Educational Success* (Ann Arbor: U. Michigan Press, 1991); James M. Freeman, *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975–1995* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson), 69; Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III, *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage, 1998).

³⁶ The *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *San Diego Union* had no Vietnamese American writers. In contrast, about 30–40 percent of the articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Orange County Register*, and *San Jose Mercury News* were authored or co-authored by Vietnamese American writers.

³⁷ Thuy Vo Dang and I conducted interviews with 60 Vietnamese Americans—30 men and 30 women—in Southern California between 2005 and 2010.

³⁸ Nguyen, *Race and Resistance* (above, n. 1), 148.

³⁹ Espiritu, *Body Counts* (above, n. 16), chap. 6.