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Preface to “Resentment”

VINH NGUYEN
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As much as I’ve tried to, I could never separate my academic writing from what I’d lived, was living, and wanted to live. Life, in all its tangledness, was the structure for my ideas and the materials I put on the page. It took me years to learn that writing is never an abstract exercise divorced from my experiences as a refugee of the Vietnam War, the perceptive capacities I’ve developed living in a white settler nation-state, or the intuition I gained from learning to read closely.

I wrote *Lived Refuge* because I had a hunch that the experience of refuge exceeded the juridical-political framework we had to define it. Refuge, as I felt and knew it, was dynamic and ongoing. Not a static legal designation, but a lived relation that requires continual struggle. Like everything worth having, refuge is a fight. The book is my attempt to understand what refuge means and to reconceptualize what it could become.

Lived Refuge was published in late November 2023, when Israel began bombing refugee camps in Gaza. As months violently passed, Western power brokers like the United States, Canada, the UK, and Germany authorized and abetted genocide, repressing Palestinian solidarity and antiwar activism. And politicians and far-right forces continued to demonize migrants, inciting riots, threatening deportations, building walls. Looking around at my life, at the world, I thought that there was no such thing as refuge. That the category of political refuge, enshrined in human rights and celebrated in humanitarian principles, was crumbling into rubble.

I thought, what good is my “refuge” in the state of Canada if the international community sits on the sideline, unable to protect the refugees who need protection the most. What is the worth of my professorship if higher education and arts institutions in the West turn a blind eye to the total destruction of universities, libraries, schools, and museums in Gaza.

My book entered a world of unprecedented assault on refugees, of reinvigorated Western imperialism, and of American decline into fascism. This context matters because

it transforms the book. How to read such a book now? I have much difficulty answering this question. In the second chapter of *Lived Refuge*, on “resentment,” from which the excerpt below is taken, I explore the notion that refuge can be withheld, denied, and revoked precisely because historical violence and injury are not “past,” but is very much still unfolding in the here and now. Perhaps this is a place to start, to read this book but allow it to turn our full attention to what is happening in the present and witness the limits, and labor for the possibility, of all our interconnected refuge.

My sincerest thanks to the ASA’s International Committee for this incredible honor. I’m so grateful they found something useful in my work, and that the book is honored with the name of Shelly Fisher Fishkin, a scholar I deeply respect for her tireless work to promote transnational American Studies.

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VINH NGUYEN

LIVED

GRATITUDE, RESENTMENT, RESILIENCE

REFUGE



Lived Refuge

Gratitude, Resentment, Resilience

Vinh Nguyen

This chapter is from

***Lived Refuge: Gratitude,
Resentment, Resilience***

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Resentment

OUTLAWED

If gratitude to the nation-state is considered a refugee virtue, then resentment is a vice, an immoral feeling that is incongruous with refuge. Resentment is especially ill-fitting on subjects who have received not just any benefit, but the most precious benefit of all—political protection and the “right” to be “human.” Resentment disrupts the social harmony produced when a community of citizens “welcomes” strangers into the fold of their nation. It is unexpected and unacceptable, indeed inconceivable, coming from those who have pleaded for and been given asylum. As an inappropriate response to benefit or the possibility of benefit, resentment is the ultimate form of ingratitude. To lack appreciation and thankfulness in the face of generosity is to be illogical, undeserving, and dismissible. Even when refuge is withheld or denied, any resentment expressed by asylum-seeking supplicants is interpreted either as an attitude of entitlement or as proof of ineligibility. Resentment, in short, renders refugees *unsuitable* for refuge. It is an “outlawed emotion” marked by an “incompatibility with dominant perceptions and values.”¹ Its emergence, as a social impossibility, is out of sync with the affective flow and the cultural “mood” of society.²

Of course, resentment is not completely foreign to refugees. They have always been *objects* of resentment—nativist, xenophobic, and fascist forces have consistently found in refugees and (im)migrants a ready vehicle, either as threats or burdens, for the expression of their resentment, which blurs into and overlaps with material and existential fear.³ States, too, in their criminalization of asylum seekers and securitization of borders, express a form of resentment toward those whom they see as transgressing the law, cheating the system, and threatening the integrity of sovereign borders. In these instances, refugees are construed as those who impose a kind of injury, a blow, to the nation and its citizens. Understood as “waves” or “influxes” of outsiders invading a bounded territory, refugees impinge

on resources, lands, and rights they have no entitlement to, disrupting an established way of “settled” life.⁴ At best, refugees are a public nuisance, and at worst charges of terrorism mark them as a source of violence against the nation-state. The existence of refugees and migrants is therefore experienced as a loss for the nation and its citizens; their very being activates an anxiety about personal and communal diminishment. A perceived disadvantage or potential injury underpins this national form of resentment.⁵

At the same time, the asylum-granting authority encourages refugees to direct resentment toward the nation-states from which they have fled and condemn the governments that have oppressed them. In doing this, they reinscribe the impetus for migration and the injuries that created the need for refuge. This refugee resentment is crucial to the asylum-granting state’s narrative of generosity toward and rescue of refugees, as well as to the legitimation of its sovereign power on the international stage. It bears reminding here that one of the key functions of refuge is to express political values and enact foreign policy. That is, an offer of refuge is a geopolitical maneuver whereby one state criticizes and condemns another state. Refugee resentment aids this international relations work. Vietnamese refugee subjects in the diaspora, for example, who condemn Vietnam’s human rights abuses, evince the exceptionalism of capitalist democracies like the United States and Canada. Their articulations of injustices suffered at the hands of Vietnamese communists produce a clear picture of victimizers and saviors in the international power play of refuge.⁶ Resentment toward the refugee’s home country is as crucial to exalting the asylum-granting nation as is gratitude.

Resentment is thus only incongruent or unacceptable in a specific context and through a specific relation: between refugee subjects and the asylum-granting nation-state. The feeling of resentment and the experience of refuge are seemingly incompatible because resentment, at its core, emerges from an injury or injustice. But if refuge is one of the most coveted and valuable benefits of modern life, then there can be no way for legitimate resentment to develop. When it does develop, resentment must be suppressed—the refugee made illegible or refuge revoked. To put it another way, refugee resentment is *outlawed*—criminalized and socially prohibited. Through this process of outlawing, resentment becomes a transgression of the norms regulating national belonging and sociality.

As a transgression, resentment is most readily tied to criminality and pathology, materializing in expressions of antagonism, anger, and violence. The state, accordingly, considers the subjects of resentment to be “bad” refugees, those who do not uphold their end of the bargain, who fail to make something out of refuge. These are individuals who cannot be reproduced in the image of refuge as success, as gratefulness, as law-abiding and, for one reason or another, cannot be fully assimilated into the neoliberal existence of refuge. They are criminals, gangsters, deportees, dropouts, working poor, outcasts, or underachievers—those who

are generally unsuccessful, who stray from the script of refuge as an unmitigated “good” that also produces goodness.

These “outlaws” are thus the exemplars of refugee resentment. In following subjects who have been deemed “bad” or not good *enough* for refuge, we see how resentment further entangles them in complicated relations with the nation-state and with other subjects in prolonged acts of refuge seeking, in which they enact the meaning of the *re-* prefix—once more, again, turn back—in both fleeing and feeling.⁷ As a form of relationality, resentment allows us to perceive the regulatory mechanisms that determine who the proper subjects of refuge are and the often difficult and unacknowledged ways in which refuge is actually lived, not as successful assimilation and hope but as struggles with historical and ongoing injuries. In these struggles with what are perceived as failures, resentment does not let go of unresolved histories, but rather carves out space for speaking to the lived shortcomings of a political ideal—to seek, again and again, more from refuge.

Attending to the nuances of resentment, we can comprehend not just the incompleteness and limitations of refuge, but also the unremarked struggles to actually achieve it. This chapter tracks how resentment brings into view the injuries that complicate refuge as a finished experience. I examine resentment as an affective experience that addresses a host of past and present injuries—of war, displacement, racism, criminalization, denials, and deportation.⁸ Contemplating stories drawn from Aimee Phan’s *We Should Never Meet*, from the Sacramento hostage crisis of 1991, and from Studio Revolt’s activist videos “My Asian Americana” and “Return to Sender,” I consider how refugee resentment seeps through or surfaces in moments of violence, frustration, desire, and love, against a social prohibition that stunts its possibility. These moments show how resentment is marked by an extended temporality, a long attachment to injury, and a delayed or blocked articulation. Moving through close readings of the gangster’s vengeful violence, the hostage taker’s unassimilated everyday, the compliant refugee’s endeavor to belong, and the deportee’s love for the nation, I present images of resentment that sketch an open and precarious refuge marked by continuous unsettlement. In this way, resentment clarifies the actions and reactions of those who must continue to hold on to the past, who presently live the effects of a past that is not yet past and who attempt to reach the refuge held out to, and also withheld from, them.⁹

INJURY AND (IN)EXPRESSIBILITY

As ways of being that deviate from normative expectation, resentment shows the cracks and ruptures in refuge, one of the most precious of modern political categories. It allows us to see what happens when legal status does not result in a livable life, and how refugee subjects experience and negotiate these realities. While philosophical accounts of resentment differ on its function—ranging from a pathological and destructive disease in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and

Max Scheler to a moral passion with claims to justice in Adam Smith and Joseph Butler—all agree that it arises from conditions of inequality, whether from a natural division between slave and master or from a locatable injury or injustice.¹⁰

The basic constitution of resentment develops from a *wound*, one that sheds light on the organization of power and the critical fissures within a given social structure.¹¹ The refugee's relation of resentment with the asylum-granting state brings to surface past and ongoing injustices obscured by the notion of refuge as a social good. Although the giving of refuge might cover over the hurt of war and displacement, paving the road for gratitude to develop, resentment is an inevitable consequence of histories of war and imperial violence. That is to say, the wounds of war are not always healed through refuge. Moreover, in refuge, these wounds might be further aggravated, picked over and over again.

These wounds endure in time, becoming the basis from which actions and reactions develop, from which relations are formed and social life is lived. One of the most visible ways we come to know resentment is through outbursts of anger or violence. These outbursts are not resentment itself, however, but are indicative of a more diffuse underlying structure. Thinking about how resentment comes to be conveyed brings us to one of the concept's founding tensions—the question of its (in)expressibility. This tension arises from the fact that the emotion we know of as “resentment” has two distinct intellectual strands that overlap and are often understood interchangeably: *resentment* and *ressentiment*.¹²

Resentment, as a social passion, following the moral sentiment approach of Adam Smith, is understood to be a mechanism for denouncing injustice and making grievance. Resentment names moral norms and seeks to restore the social order disrupted by transgressions of those norms. For Smith, resentment, when moderated and tuned to the right “pitch,” can inspire sympathy in the impartial spectator. The way in which this “unsocial passion” gains sociality is precisely through the participation of others; moral resentment requires an audience to witness and judge its proper channeling into protest and acceptable articulation of injustice. In this way, resentment is crucial to the formation of social bonds and to the maintenance of equilibrium in democratic societies. This “normative” understanding of resentment presupposes not only that resentment can be articulated, but also that these articulations can be shared and recognized.

Ressentiment, on the other hand, is a pathological condition that finds its expression blocked and thwarted. For Nietzsche, resentment lacks ontological integrity. As an inferior reaction that depends on external stimuli to exist, resentment produces a “slave mentality” that skews valuation of the world and slowly poisons the individual so that “his soul *squints*; his mind loves dark corners, secret paths and back-doors, everything secretive appeals to him as being *his* world, *his* security, *his* comfort; he knows all about keeping quiet, not forgetting, waiting, temporarily humbling and abasing himself.”¹³ Ressentiment is a constant and degenerative hidden suffering that indicates a larger social moral decay.

Scheler similarly views resentment as a reactive impulse that is “always preceded by an attack or an injury.”¹⁴ Yet this reaction is marked by an inexpressibility or a blockage to its fulfillment. Resentment is a wound that by definition must fester, simmering below the surface. According to Manfred S. Frings, resentment (here the same as resentment) has an extended temporality that clearly differentiates it from an emotion like anger. Describing its emotive structure, he writes: “The constant state of resentment is distinguished sharply from furious reactions or outbursts of anger. Whenever a prosaic resentment-feeling finds satisfaction by way of, say, successful revenge and retaliation, there is no resentment proper at hand.”¹⁵ Resentment proper can, by definition, never be expressed or find fulfillment, except when it becomes something other than itself.

This unresolved tension between the articulated passion of normative resentment and the degenerative festering of Nietzschean resentment is inherited in the contemporary term *resentment*. While it could encompass a range of articulated “negative” emotions such as anger, hatred, and revenge, resentment is not formally any of these emotions. Rather, *resentment* describes a wider sense of dissatisfaction, frustration, and rage that is not necessarily verbalized or acted upon but is nonetheless powerfully constitutive of moments of outward verbalization and action. While, on a purely taxonomic level, Frings’s distinction is useful for understanding the nuances between interrelated emotions that overlap, the imbrication itself is significant, given that brief, reactive “outbursts” of anger can tell us much about underlying resentment. Because it is ontologically defined by a repression or delay, we come to know resentment only indirectly, through more recognizable affective forms. Resentment, then, could be understood as that which propels an emotion like anger, and anger is resentment’s precipitation or residue. Even as resentment is characterized by an inability to act directly or a sublimated expression, it is still accessible through moments when other emotions “flare up” or materialize.

GANGSTER DREAMS

An outburst of refugee resentment can bring the violence the state commits abroad home to roost within the national space. It can be a brutal apparition of the continuing battles that are being, and still need to be, fought in the duration of refuge. Aimee Phan’s “Visitors,” from her cycle of interconnected short stories *We Should Never Meet*, concludes with a gangster, Vinh, brutally attacking an elder, Bac Nguyen, during a home invasion.¹⁶ The gangster, who is an orphaned refugee, views his violent actions as a crucial reminder to law-abiding, upwardly mobile refugee subjects that their endeavors to find economic success in the United States are ultimately futile. Surveying, with resentful satisfaction, the domestic battlefield of overturned cabinets and drawers, broken dishes, and spilled papers that his gang had inflicted on the Nguyen family home, Vinh imagines the destruction as a literal shattering of the American Dream.

For him, the violence of the scene exposes the illusory fiction of belonging that America holds out to refugees and immigrants. In this moment, material violence slips into symbolic violence, bringing with it a sobering insight, that complete and unconditional national inclusion will forever be out of reach: “Vinh convinced himself that they [the gang] were ultimately doing these people a favor. All of them in such a delusion about attaining this material dream of fortune and comfort, but at what expense? Didn’t they realize they’d always be under the thumb of this government? . . . They were fools to believe they could actually live among the Americans and become one of them. They never would. They would never be allowed.”¹⁷ In the gangster’s violence is an explosion of resentment that bitterly condemns the hegemonic nation-state, first for conducting war, and then for failing to provide true refuge. The “expense” of belonging that never arrives, as Vinh attempts to communicate, is a form of subjection, extending from a history of injury to a present of denials, which is far too high a price for only false returns.

Yet, because resentment works through deflection and indirection, the gangster’s violence ironically lands on the lives of other refugees and immigrants. Unable to be directly launched at its target, resentment finds a symbolic substitute in racialized immigrants whose material achievements prove American opportunity. They are, for the disenfranchised gangster, the most proximate representatives of the ideological state. Displaying what Scheler calls resentment’s “value delusion,” or an envious inversion of established order, the gangster reevaluates the “good” of refuge—if he cannot attain refuge, then no one else should, or refuge itself must be shown to be a sham.¹⁸ While the methods of resentment are envy and bitterness, the critique it launches questions sovereign power’s promises and its narrative of refugee uplift. By shattering the material possessions gained through playing the game of capitalist accumulation, and smashing the face of one who believes so ardently in the American Dream, the gangster seeks to show how the game itself is tragically broken.

As Vinh and his gangster “brothers” destroy what Vietnamese refugees have labored to accumulate, they preemptively prevent false inclusion in neoliberal citizenship based on consumption. The gangsters brutally seek to demonstrate that such capitalist accumulations, no matter how vast, are ultimately futile for racialized immigrants and refugees in a nation built on racial hierarchies and the entrenched institutionalization of inequality. Violence, here, cleaves the industrious and hopeful immigrant from the American Dream that requires such subjects in order to sustain itself. The irony of the situation, one that Vinh fails to see, is that Bac Nguyen and the other victims of his violence are survivors who, having already experienced the traumatic impacts of war and state violence, may desire inclusion, no matter how imperfect and illusory, because they have known worse fates and need to stay in this world.

Although his outburst is misdirected and flawed, the gangster’s violence reveals the unresolved histories that prevent unchecked assimilation into an

unquestioned community. The gangster—a recipient of asylum who becomes a criminal—is perhaps one of the most exemplary figures of refugee resentment, hanging on to the past because the present is a country where he must reexperience the effects of old injuries and the stings of fresh ones. He is a subject who lives out the long temporality of transnational American war in the absence of recompense. As a destabilizing “paradigm of the American Dream,” the gangster sheds light on resentment, not so much because he is in conflict with society, but because his presence activates the anxieties and contradictions at its very core.¹⁹ The refugee gangster is a dreamer who calls into question the dream, indexing the failures of American-style freedom.

Regardless of whether such failures are privatized within the individual or explained structurally, by virtue of “failing” to achieve refuge as neoliberal success, the refugee who is also a gangster complicates the narrative of American rescue and liberation of foreign others. Because the hegemonic liberation narrative is so dependent on “good” refugees of a past war to prove its thesis, the gangster is inconvenient evidence within this logic of intervention and ideological victory—for surely the United States did not save these individuals only for them to turn into violent criminals; that would be a failure of the civilizing mission, of liberalism itself.²⁰ Refugees from the wars in Southeast Asia who become criminals and gangsters pose a significant ideological, symbolic, and political “problem” for the U.S. nation-state, for they threaten to un-script and derail a founding myth of American exceptionalism. In doing so, they complicate the conventional understanding of refuge as a modern political good. Accordingly, they must be forcibly expelled, an issue that I take up later in this chapter.

This “problem” of Southeast Asian gangs in the United States became a mainstream issue in the early 1990s, when rising gang activity across North America, but particularly in places of concentrated refugee settlement such as New York and California, attracted local and national media coverage. A deadly shootout at the funeral of an assassinated gang leader in July 1990 became a “popular news item” and subsequently a “defining event, the moment at which the idea of Vietnamese gangsters in America entered the national consciousness.”²¹ While spectacular events like this shootout contributed to a public profile of Southeast Asian crime, in actuality, gang activity was largely confined to auto and retail theft, home invasions, and extortions, and the targets were almost exclusively Asian refugees and immigrants.²²

Inevitably, investigators and researchers sought explanations for why young male refugees joined gangs. Patrick Du Phuoc Long explains how cultural and socioeconomic conditions—including cultural conflicts, disintegration of the family, alienation at school, peer pressure, and racism and estrangement from American culture—contributed to gang involvement.²³ In addition to these factors, and without fail, journalists, academics, and policymakers returned to the brutality of the Vietnam War and its aftermath to account for present-day violence.²⁴ While

it is imperative to understand the lives and behaviors of criminalized refugees in the context of the war and its legacies, these accounts problematically produce a model of causality that *explains* gang violence through the violence of war. A striking example comes from an article in a criminal justice newsletter in which the authors draw a direct link between criminal activity in Vietnam during wartime and gang activity in North America:

Vietnamese gang membership dates back to the early Vietnam war era. . . . Gang members were usually former military personnel who had learned their tactics during the war. . . . Around 1975, many Asian refugees settled into camps where some were able to renew gang ties. These gang members were young Vietnamese who preyed upon their own people. . . . Aware that many Vietnamese citizens had left their homeland for employment in the United States and Canada, some gang members followed in the hopes of finding an open criminal arena. Gang members working as home invaders in the United States have now been able to recreate the horrors of the refugee camps by actively terrorizing members of the Asian community through criminal activity and violence.²⁵

This chronology neatly locates criminality and violence in Vietnam and in the bodies of the Vietnamese, bypassing larger sociohistorical conditions and American complicity in imposing violence during and after the war. The explanation of gang violence as an inheritance of war naturalizes criminal “character” as a result of personal background and historical experience. In other words, criminality becomes a foreign import that makes its way into the national space via asylum, as opposed to a category created by and within the American nation itself.

This discourse of wartime violence draws attention away from the military intrusions that played a large part in creating the conditions of “Vietnamese violence,” and away from structural marginalizations in the United States that drive gang membership. To emphasize the war in a way that figures it as a source for violence is to pathologize refugees while clearing the United States of moral responsibility. Phan’s discursive intervention, however, recalls the war to elucidate a connection not between war and individual pathology, but between gang violence and U.S. foreign policy, making possible a view of Southeast Asian American gangsters as human consequences of American militarism.²⁶ The gangster’s violence disputes the state’s benevolent giving of refuge by revealing a relation in which refuge is a result of injury, one that is then impeded or offered as contingency to both “good” and “bad” subjects.

Set in California, in Orange County’s Little Saigon district—the heart of Vietnamese America—“Visitors” builds its violent crescendo through a tangle of misinterpretations, assumptions, and incompatible understandings of history. The two central characters—Vinh, an “unaccompanied minor” boat refugee who was placed in the foster care system, and Bac Nguyen, an elderly immigrant recently arrived in the United States—collide when one is out scouting for potential home invasion targets and the other is trying to find his way home from a

trip to the market. After being led to mistake Vinh for an economics student, and assuming that he is part of both a traditional nuclear family unit and the wider Vietnamese American community, Bac Nguyen reveals that his son was gunned down by a communist sniper. When Vinh lies and tells him that his parents also died in Vietnam, the two experience a kind of refugee communion: the old man says, “We’ve lost so many people,” and the young man responds, “They’ve taken so much from us.”²⁷ While one pronoun, *we*, is uncontested, the other, *they*, is a source of confusion and misunderstanding. Bac Nguyen assumes that *they* refers to the communists, while Vinh means the Americans.

This moment of misinterpretation on Bac Nguyen’s end, assuming shared anticommunism, is also a moment of political reorientation as Vinh’s correction changes the site of critique, moving it away from the North Vietnamese to the Americans. The gangster’s resentment opens up the potential for expressing dissatisfaction with and anger at the United States, once South Vietnam’s ally in war and now the largest country of asylum for Vietnamese refugees.²⁸ The “unruly” expression of Vinh’s resentment—not directed at the right government, the right ideology, the right people—is incongruent with sanctioned refugee feelings such as grief, anticommunist hatred, and gratitude that Bac Nguyen, as a survivor of communist persecution and a newcomer to the United States, readily espouses. Resentment disrupts master narratives of the Vietnam War as a liberal project of rights promotion and freedom by forcing the recognition of those who have not benefited from such rights and freedom.

In a subsequent scene, Vinh unequivocally tells Bac Nguyen that the Americans “destroyed our country, then they left. To ease their guilty conscience, they took some of us in. It’s really simple.”²⁹ Bac Nguyen rightly points out that history is not black and white, yet Vinh’s simplified assessment of the war and its aftermath, what Jodi Kim calls his “productive unambiguity,” compels an alternative position to the pervasive narrative of liberal warfare in American historical and political discourse.³⁰ The problem for Vinh, unlike many others in the Vietnamese diaspora, is not that the Americans withdrew militarily and abandoned Vietnam during the final stages of fighting, but that the United States was involved in Vietnam in the first place, whereby an anticolonial war against the French and then a civil war in Vietnam subsequently became a site of proxy war between the U.S. and Sino-Soviet superpowers.³¹

As the title of the story emphasizes, the notion of visiting, whereby the host extends a finite and impermanent reception to refugees, is an apt descriptor for how resentment is experienced. In a poignant moment, Vinh articulates his utter alienation in the United States, telling Bac Nguyen: “Even though I don’t remember much of it [Vietnam], I still feel like it’s my home, and this place [the United States], while nice, isn’t. It’s like I’m visiting, and I’ve overstayed my welcome.”³² Resentment develops because the relation that becomes possible between a nonmodel subject like Vinh and the nation-state is one of overstayed

welcome, of provisionality and impending (r)ejection from the community. As a visitor—a perpetual foreigner—the gangster, who is a refugee and failed adoptee, is unable to form the kinds of traditional bonds that structure belonging and social integration.

The closest he comes to forging kinship ties, beyond his gang and on-again-off-again girlfriend Kim, is in his meeting with Bac Nguyen, who, at one point, hands him a family heirloom.³³ Such a gift, usually imparted to one's descendants as a sign of inheritance, symbolically pulls Vinh into Bac Nguyen's lineage.³⁴ It is a gesture of generosity on the old man's part that holds within it the possibilities of familial connections and intimacies. But later that same evening, while burglarizing his home, Vinh smashes Bac Nguyen's face, in loyalty to his gang, the moment the old man calls out his name. As Bac Nguyen is left bleeding on the ground, Vinh is again at the precipice of belonging—his "brothers" angry at him for divulging personal information that could compromise the gang—and the fleeting promise of connection is foreclosed.

Deeply flawed as it is, Vinh's resentment manifested as violence makes spectacular and nameable the insidious and everyday violence that the state enacts on its subjects of refuge, fixing them in place within the order of capitalist, white supremacy—to have refugees, as Vinh says, "under the thumb" of American governance. The extraordinary violence of the home invasion marks the refugee gangster's attachment to the past and its persistent apparitions, although not through the usual means of the "melancholic migrant"—in grief and backward glances that obstruct assimilation—but through the bitterness of resentment exploding in violence.³⁵ Such violence, the gangster shows, is an inevitable response to being subjects of and subjected to national governmentality in refuge, where resentment seethes and seeks forms of release that often come with tragic consequences for the very people eking out a life under the nation-state's thumb.

HOSTAGE TAKERS

Violence, protests, and vengeful lashing out are rightly considered primary manifestations of resentment. However, the sometimes dramatic visibility of explicit grievances often diverts attention away from another, more mundane yet perhaps more common, form of resentment found among refugees. This is the resentment of simply existing in a way that does not live up to what refuge *should* inspire and make possible. Often invisibilized, it takes root within the quotidian struggle to eke out a life within structural incapacities that make it unlikely or impossible for some to (re)produce the right kind of neoliberal subjectivity under contemporary capitalism. To live unexceptionally or with fallibility in the face of incredible benefit—to be poor and criminalized, to not get into the best school, to find it difficult to integrate or assimilate, to hold on to past traumas, to fail to thrive, to

Caroline Lambert, "Deterrence: Australia's Refugee Policy," *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 14, no. 1 (2002): 65–86.

74. Devetak, "In Fear of Refugees," 101.

75. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge, 1995), 214.

76. Tri Nguyen, *The Gift of Refuge*, official website.

77. Tri Nguyen, *The Gift of Refuge*, official website.

78. "The Walker," *The Feed: News, Culture, Technology*, April 25, 2014.

79. The official site states: "You can help bring this positive message to Australia by walking or running with the boat, or contributing to the fund of Baptcare Sanctuary. For those wanting to help in the pilgrimage itself, Tri is looking for support vehicles and drivers, walker/runners, accommodation along the way, and local media opportunities." See Tri Nguyen, *The Gift of Refuge*, official website.

80. Kim Beales, "The Gift of Refuge," Bandcamp, January 27, 2014, <https://kimbeales.bandcamp.com/track/gift-of-refuge>.

81. The project's Facebook page, which had close to 1,300 followers, and official website continue to remain active. To date, over \$12,000 (from more than seventy donors) has been raised for Baptcare, an organization that currently supports approximately seventy asylum seekers.

82. Tri Nguyen, *The Gift of Refuge*, official website.

83. Jill Dolan, *Geographies of Learning: Theory and Practice, Activism and Performance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 16.

84. Michael Balfour and Nina Woodrow, "On Stitches," in *Refugee Performance: Practical Encounters*, ed. Michael Balfour (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2013), 19.

85. Balfour and Woodrow, "On Stitches," 19, 28.

86. The Gift of Refuge, "I just found out that Parliament won't receive the boat as a gift of gratitude," Facebook, January 6, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/pg/giftofrefuge/posts/?ref=page_internal.

87. As of 2023, the "Gift of Refuge" campaign remains active, and the boat continues to float from one parliamentary office to another.

88. Jason D'Cruz, "Displacement and Gratitude: Accounting for the Political Obligation of Refugees," *Ethics & Global Politics* 7, no. 1 (2014): 14.

89. Dina Nayeri, "The Ungrateful Refugee," in *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, ed. Viet Thanh Nguyen (New York: Abrams Press, 2018), 140.

90. Nayeri, "The Ungrateful Refugee," 141, 142.

91. Nayeri, "The Ungrateful Refugee," 148.

2. RESENTMENT

1. Alison M. Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge," *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 160.

2. Arlie Russell Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979): 551–75.

3. According to Zygmunt Bauman, refugees need to either be absorbed into rights or kept at bay and outside of view, because they remind the "settled" of a foundational

existential anxiety, that their precarious “settledness” could at any moment become upturned. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

4. These lands and resources, for settler nation-states like the United States, Canada, and Australia, are stolen and violently possessed. See the conclusion of this book for an engagement with settler colonialism.

5. Sara Ahmed’s thinking on proximity, borders, and the production of fear in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* is instructive here for understanding the relationship between resentment and threat. She writes that “the language of fear involves the intensification of ‘threats’, which works to create a distinction between those who are ‘under threat’ and those who threaten. Fear is an effect of this process, rather than its origin.” We might similarly think of fear as an effect of national resentment. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 20.

6. This anticommunism, however, is also an important means of community building and identity formation, giving Vietnamese a sense of purpose and an explanation for their existence. See Thuy Vo Dang, “The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community,” *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): 65–86; Lan Duong and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, “Vietnamese American Art and Community Politics: An Engaged Feminist Perspective,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 15, no. 3 (2012): 241–69; Caroline Kieu Linh Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

7. Both *refugee* and *resentment* share the prefix *re-*, which marks their relationship to time and space, an attachment to the past.

8. For more on resentment as protest arising from injury, see Marc Ferro, *Resentment in History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); Dolores Martin Moruno, “Introduction: On Resentment: Past and Present of an Emotion,” in *On Resentment: Past and Present*, ed. Fantini Bernardino, Dolores Martin Moruno, and Javier Moscoso (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 1–22.

9. The phrasing “the past that is not yet or even past” is inspired by Faulkner. See William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun: A Play*, adapt. Ruth Ford (New York: Random House, 1959).

10. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. Louis A. Coser (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1994); Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759 (São Paulo, Brazil: MetaLibri Press, 2006); Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel, 1726* (New York: Dodo Press, 2009).

11. See Marlia E. Banning, “The Politics of Resentment,” *JAC* 26, no. 1–2 (2006): 67–101.

12. See Michael Ure, “Resentment/*Ressentiment*,” *Constellations* 22, no. 4 (2015): 599–613.

13. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 21.

14. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 29.

15. Manfred S. Frings, “Introduction,” in Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 7.

16. For a discussion of the story-cycle form and its narration of transnational tensions, see Long Le-Khac, “Narrating the Transnational: Refugee Routes, Communities of Shared Fate, and Transnarrative Form,” *MELUS* 43, no. 2 (2018): 106–28.

17. Aimee Phan, *We Should Never Meet: Stories* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 108.

18. See Scheler, *Ressentiment*.
19. Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979), 3.
20. Yến Lê Espiritu points out that two strategic narratives—the innocent Vietnam Veteran and the good Vietnamese refugee—converged twenty-five years after the war’s end to “conjure triumph from defeat,” “enabling ‘patriotic’ Americans to push military intervention as key in America’s self-appointed role as liberators” in new neo-imperial endeavors in other parts of the world (330). This, what she calls “the ‘we-win-even-when-we-lose’ syndrome,” “has energized and emboldened the perpetuation of U.S. militarism” (330). See Yến Lê Espiritu, “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Fall of Saigon,’” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 329–52.
21. T. J. English, *Born to Kill: The Rise and Fall of America’s Bloodiest Asian Gang* (New York: Harper, 2009), 8.
22. See Sam Quinones, “The New Breed of Gangs,” *Sacramento Magazine* (1991): 22–29, 89.
23. Patrick Du Phuoc Long (with Laura Richard), *The Dream Shattered: Vietnamese Gangs in America* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996).
24. James Diego Vigil, for example, writes, “To assess the rise of Vietnamese gangs, we need to look back to the Vietnam War and understand some of its ramifications” (99). T. J. English declares that “there was little doubt that the war’s legacy of violence, inhumanity, and abandonment had played a formative role in shaping the lives and actions of these young gangsters” (280). James Dubro describes gangsters as “tough and cynical young men who had come through the horrors of life in Vietnam, Communist re-education camps, then the bleak refugee camps” (224).
25. Tod W. Burke, Charles O’Rear, and Al Lotz, “A New Look at Asian Gangs: Home Invaders,” *CJ: The Americas* 4, no. 4 (1991): 16.
26. Jodi Kim provides an astute reading of Vinh. She argues that this gangster figure provides “a critical political diagnosis of the American War in Vietnam and the contradictions of the so-called American Dream” (220). See Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
27. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 94.
28. This anger and frustration toward the United States was able to be expressed in Vietnamese language publications, but not in the American public sphere. See Qui-Phiet Tran, “Contemporary Vietnamese American Feminine Writing: Exile and Home,” *Amerasia Journal* 19, no. 3 (1993): 71–83.
29. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 96.
30. Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 222.
31. Echoed in his critique is the deceptively simple but powerfully resonant war-era refrain—“Why are we in Vietnam?”—that, according to Marilyn Young, continues to haunt American historical memory (ix). See Marilyn B. Young, *Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
32. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 97.
33. For a discussion of family and an “aesthetics of kinship” in Phan’s stories, see Crystal Parikh, “Conclusion: An Aesthetics of Kin and the Rights of the Child,” in *Writing Human Rights: The Political Imaginaries of Writers of Color* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 227–42.

34. For a discussion of gift giving in Phan's stories, see Jungha Kim, "The Affects and Ethics of the Gift in Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet*," *Contemporary Literature* 57, no. 1 (2016): 56–78.
35. See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
36. See Jane Gross, "6 Are Killed as 8-Hour Siege by Gang Ends in California," *New York Times*, April 6, 1991; Richard C. Paddock and Lily Dizon, "3 Vietnamese Brothers in Shoot-Out Led Troubled Lives," *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 1991; Jill Walker, "Hostage Takers Wanted to Leave Country," *Washington Post*, April 6, 1991.
37. Jill Walker, "Hostage Takers Wanted to Leave Country."
38. Y Thien Nguyen, "(Re)making the South Vietnamese Past in America," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 74.
39. Andrew Lam, *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2005), 62.
40. Lam, *Perfume Dreams*, 65–66.
41. Michael Peter Smith and Bernadette Tarallo, "Who Are the 'Good Guys'? The Social Construction of the Vietnamese 'Other,'" in *The Bubbling Cauldron: Race, Ethnicity, and the Urban Crisis*, ed. Michael Peter Smith and Joe R. Feagin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 62.
42. Jim Doyle, "Good Guys Siege Leader Guilty / Death Penalty Possible Though He Didn't Shoot," *SFGate*, February 9, 1995.
43. Paddock and Dizon, "3 Vietnamese Brothers in Shoot-Out."
44. Jorge Casuso, "Hostage Takers Were Fed Up with America," *Chicago Tribune*, April 6, 1991; Steve Geissinger, "Gunmen—Members of an Asian Gang—Were Unhappy in United States," Associated Press, April 6, 1991.
45. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 103.
46. Emily Cheng, "The Vietnamese American 'Model Orphan' in Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet*," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 49, no. 3 (2016): 109–24.
47. Kim, *Ends of Empire*, 222.
48. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 147.
49. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 147.
50. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 158.
51. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 166–67.
52. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 166.
53. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 165.
54. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 166.
55. Phan, *We Should Never Meet*, 169.
56. Peter Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism: The Politics of Protection in the Anti-deportation Movement," *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 1070.
57. See Soo Ah Kwon, "Deporting Cambodian Refugees: Youth Activism, State Reform, and Imperial Statecraft," *Positions: East Asia Critique* 20, no. 3 (2012): 737–62; Rachel Ida Buff, "The Deportation Terror," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2008): 523–51.
58. Thy Phu, *Picturing Model Citizens: Civility in Asian American Visual Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 152.
59. See A. Naomi Paik, *Rightlessness: Testimony and Redress in U.S. Prison Camps since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).