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“Deportable-Refugees”: Oral Histories of the Southeast Asian Freedom Network (SEAFN)

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

June Kuoch

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2020

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

“Deportable-Refugees”: Oral Histories of the Southeast Asian Freedom Network (SEAFN)

by

June Kuoch

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, Chair

This project examines the Southeast Asian refugees, specifically Cambodian refugees, as they relate to both the imperial and carceral state. In examining both “oral history” interviews from organizers within the Southeast Asian Freedom Network (SEAFN) and my own auto-ethnographic accounts of organizing, I argue that as a result of emerging neoliberal discourses Southeast Asian are deemed biopolitical formulated to be “Deportable-Refugees”. This thesis, thus, attempts to examine the conditions of Deportable-Refugees in order to explain the current neoliberal order and the hauntings of racial, colonial, and gendered discourses. This project draws from critical refugee studies, Southeast Asian/American Studies, Black Feminism, and queer theory in order to explain the emergence of the imperial carceral state.

The thesis of June Kuoch is approved.

Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi

Grace Kyungwon Hong

Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

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For my គ្រួសារ (kruosaear) blood, chosen, and movement.

Introduction

“There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I and others have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor, both black and white, through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything on a society gone mad on war [...] We encouraged them with our huge financial and military supplies to continue the war even after they had lost the will. Soon we would be paying almost the full costs of this tragic attempt at recolonization. [...] So such thoughts take us beyond Vietnam, but not beyond our calling as sons of the living God.”

□ Martin Luther King Jr. “Beyond Vietnam,” 1967

Introduction

How do we begin to understand and address the issue of Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, Viet, and other Southeast Asian refugee deportations? How does Southeast Asian deportation demarcate a new set of social and political relations? What does possibility of deportation mean for the United States process of refuge? Must our conversations around deportation, justice, and refugees be bound by the law? Or, can we look towards other facets of social life? How do Southeast Asians refugees, specifically Cambodians, comprehend the colonial, gendered, and racial formations of the United States, if they have yet to come to terms with the violence that occurred from French Colonization, US imperial intervention, and Khmer Krahom or Khmer Rouge? In what ways do Southeast Asian refugee youth formulate and negotiate a set of

neoliberal relations that render them as unintelligible subjects? What process do Southeast Asian youth, who are marked as criminals, undertake to resist these regimes of governmentality? This set of questions frame my intellectual entry point within this project.

Deportable-Refugees: Oral Histories of the Southeast Asian Freedom Network (SEAFN) is an ~~inter~~-undisciplined scholarly inquiry on the lives of Southeast Asians refugees, specifically Cambodians, who have been rendered disposable by the state. Through an ethnography and oral history of Southeast Asian refugee prison abolitionist organizers, I hope to unsettle the racial imperial colonial archive and bear witness to how communities on the ground have been resilient in combating the continued haunting of racialized warfare, past and present. Injecting my own memory, I hope to scaffold this work with the material reality of Cambodian refugee life. This thesis at large examines how different facets of the settler-nation-state, particularly the imperial state and the carceral state, intertwine at the site of Cambodian refugee subjectivity. Within the larger body of work, I use the terms “Cambodian refugee” and “Cambodian American” often interchangeably to highlight the ways in which refugee onto-epistemologies continue to haunt and manifest as a result of the unresolved colonial warfare operations (Nguyen, 2019). I also fluctuate with using pan-ethnic terms such as “Southeast Asian refugee”; to highlight the moments in my writing that may apply to the community at large. However, this thesis centers the experiences of Cambodians in hopes that it will add to the developing body of literature around Cambodian/ Cambodian American Studies.

This thesis seeks to explore the contours and contradictions of the US empire in order to find moments of fracture within its neoliberal order. Using the figure of the *Deportable-Refugee* to examine the intersection between the imperial and the neoliberal carceral state within a history

of settler colonialism, I wish to expand the theoretical fields of Southeast Asian/American Studies, Critical Refugee Studies, and Anti-carceral Feminism. *Deportable-Refugees* encounter the socio-poetics of Southeast Asian refugee ontology in order to disturb state sanctioned technologies of power and control by historicizing the on-going processes and desires for refuge. I argue that *Deportable-Refugees* are material, spiritual, and temporal sites in which refugee precarity becomes entwined with racial, gendered, and colonial discourses of the United States, in third world spatiality and geographies. Cambodian subjectivity is interpellated? as *Deportable-Refugees* through an emerging neoliberal prism of power and control, a system which some organizers call the “militarized police state.” Similar to a real prism, light enters the glass and exits as a spectrum of colors allowing for different vantage points. *Deportable-Refugees* is an onto-epistemological prism that shows the spectrum of colonial, imperial, and the neoliberal carceral state relations constituting this very figure of the deportable refugee. Cambodians, and other Southeast Asian refugees enter the United States and must negotiate with a set of colonial, racial, and gendered relations brought on by settler colonial genocide and chattel slavery. For *Deportable-Refugees*, the convergence of the imperial nation-state and neoliberal carceral state within settler colonialism produce forms of epistemic and quotidian violence. This thesis, thus, attempts to examine the conditions of *Deportable-Refugees* in order to explain the current neoliberal order and the hauntings of racial, colonial, and gendered discourses.

Methodology – Critical Refugee Studies and the University

In November 2018, the Critical Refugee Studies Collective, a University of California Multi-campus Initiative, brought activists, artists, and academics from varying racial and ethnic backgrounds to discuss the stakes of innovative radical research pertaining to refugees at UCLA.

The conference, entitled “Land and Water,” sought to conceptualize how land and water are “implicate forces such as settler colonialism, imperial expansion, and military destruction in refugee displacements and resettlements”, and “signify embeddedness, journey, and new cartographies of home-making and belonging” (Critical Refugee Studies Collective, 2019). As a first-year graduate student, I had the opportunity to listen to the work of scholars who were doing within the field of Critical Refugee Studies.

After all the participants presented on how the collective was able to support their intellectual, artistic, and community work, Dr. Yen Le Espiritu facilitated a discussion with all of the grantees about the future directions of the field. As a graduate student grappling with similar political inquiries, one part of the conversation stuck with me: what is a critical refugee studies method? Southeast Asian Critical Refugee Studies moves “toward theories of neoliberalism and renewed sovereignty, circuits of popular culture, haunted memory and trauma, cultural geography, alternative archives, and the political work of feelings.” (Ngô et al., 2012, p. 673). Dr. Grace Hong, when addressing the grantees, addressed the need for interdisciplinarity, specifically, the injection of women of color epistemologies, to trouble the way these researchers were grappling with data. When speaking about the “failure of data” and the epistemophilia of social science disciplines, what methodological praxis should one use to not reproduce the racialized violence of empire? What critical interventions can be made within the field of critical refugee studies to cease the reproduction of the racial and colonial entangled category of the human, while simultaneously fore-fronting the precarity of refugee life that scholars have historically denied? As Moten and Harney write: “it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment.” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 23). If the theoretical field of Critical Refugee Studies “needs to do

more than critique,” in that, “it also needs to integrate sophisticated theoretical rigor with the daily concerns of real people,” then the implication for knowledge within the University is a reproduction of the is a constant circularity and privileging of knowledge itself. As a the University is a site of subjection refugee communities are extracted, damaged, and left behind (Espiritu, 2014, p. 12; Tuck, 2009). I would gesture that Critical Refugee Studies is more than an epistemology; rather, it is an ontological subjectifying mode of constant contradictory negotiations that refugees must contend with from within these multiple regimes of subjectification within empire and the neoliberal carceral state.

A Critical Refugee Studies praxis already occurring outside of the University, as to be critical is not bounded by certifications from the Ivory Tower. Refugees navigate the welfare system, immigration system, criminal legal system, etc.—all of which act as metonymy to clog up the gear of the war machine. As Kao Kalia Yang, a prolific Hmong refugee writer, provocatively opened up at the plenary at the 2019 Asian American Studies Association Conference, “My uncle is a critical refugee.” So too do I say, Chhaya Chhoum is a critical refugee. My mother, mings, ums, and yieys are critical refugees. This meta-framing shapes how I study. As I “the student keeps studying, keeps planning to study, keeps running to study, keeps studying a plan, keeps elaborating a debt. The student does not intend to pay” (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 62). Therefore, I would refrain from articulating my interviewees as subjects, but rather as interlocutors, as they are political beings who are grappling with similar questions, but in venues often not intelligible to those who govern or produce knowledge. A critical refugee is one who “dwell[s] in a different compulsion, in the same debt, a distance, forgetting, remembered again but only after” (Harney & Morten, 2013, p. 68).

This project is not only messy, it is a mess. I stress for any reader, and/or interlocuter, that this thesis is a *hot fucking mess*. I went to advising meetings and I was a *hot fucking mess*. While going to multiple field sites across the United States, I, multiple other people, and organizations were a *hot fucking mess*. I turned in shit late – which is my fault. I am wholeheartedly thankful for my chair, and committee, for putting up with my bull shit. I wish not to mince my words and sound a little chhleuy, which is perfectly fine to me, but I state this not to be disparaging to myself or the people who took the time to sit down with me and talk story about Southeast Asian refugee movement, but to articulate that the mess of this inquiry is not inherently bad, but rather a queer of color critique informs my methodological interventions throughout this project. As Martin F. Manalansan writes; “Mess, therefore, is not always about misery, complete desolation, and abandonment but can also gesture to moments of vitality, pleasure, and fabulousness” (Manalansan, 2014, p. 100). Archives, stories, and people are messy things. Social life and movements cannot be bogged down to simplistic sociological or anthropological accounts. This goes without saying, but the lives of Southeast Asian refugees are entangled with mess because US empire is some messy shit. The settler nation state’s hegemonic imperative is to simply mess up the lives of racialized and gendered people globally. I ask whoever is reading this to dwell and ruminate in this space of the *hot fucking mess* with me. My goal within this project is to revel and reveal the “messy process, which paradoxically interfered with rather than enhanced the immigrants’ claim to full citizenship” (Das Gupta, 2006, p. 30).

I seek to use narrative and memory to reframe our conceptualization of the “refugee.” Narrative and story are integral to the composition of Cambodian American Studies. Cathy Schul-Vials explores in *Cambodian American Memory Work* the cultural production of one-point-five generation Cambodian refugees. Cambodian refugees’ use of art, narrative, and

story, for Schuld-Vials, to “defiantly refuse to occupy the proverbial and political margins.” (Schuld-Vials, 2012, p. 20) Cambodian refugees must contend with state-sanctioned forgetting as the American psyche seeks to structure memory and remembrance through imperial aphasia that disvalue refugee onto-epistemologies. The United States’ political orientation of remembering the American War in Southeast Asia as loss places the settler-nation-state or empire to be the victim of its own warfare technologies. This thesis is full of “[s]tories [which] become spaces where child, parent, and ancestors encounter each other, yet not need to speak. It’s as if language doesn’t have the ability to encompass our interactions. Ancestral connection produces seconds of alterity” (Kuoch, 2018, p. 84). Stories are a diasporic mode of place making and a reorienting toward being. As Um writes; “Diaspora is this site inhabited simultaneously by continuities and discontinuities □ ghosts, memory fragments, interruptions, and contradictions.” (Um, 2015, p. 234). Additionally, pulling from the growing canon of Cambodian American Studies, such as the work of Cathy Schlund-Vials, Khatharya Um, and Jolie Chea, I argue that Cambodian refugees are located at a critical crux of both the imperial and carceral state (Schlund-Vials 2012; Um 2015; Chea 2017).

A tale of two empires: historiographies of Southeast Asia

Within this section, I provide some historical background pertaining to Southeast Asian French colonial occupation and US military intervention that replaced it within the region. It is critical to understand the racial, colonial, and gendered impact of French colonization and how it laid the foundation for US racialized warfare. I illuminate how two major imperial powers, the French and the United States, engage in major biopolitical and necropolitical processes that inform the formation of the prism of *deportable-refugees*. This historical account is critical to grasping the spatiality of Southeast Asian and how it folds within the larger imperial project of

the hegemonic order. The interweaving imperial histories within Southeast Asia recodify refugee subjectivity. While this thesis does not go into depth to tease out the impact of racial, colonial, and gendered hauntings brought by the French and the United States within the region — they are critical to call into question the transnational displacement and movement of refugees and how these discourses lay waste to as well as inform Cambodia as a nation.

French Colonization of Indochina 1887-1954

To understand the sociological significance of Southeast Asian refugeehood, one must understand the historical context of French colonization of the Mekong River, the socio-political context these refugees are fleeing, and the legal immigration system which allows for refugee resettlement. The Southeast Asian peninsula, also known as the Indochina peninsula, under French Colonial rule, was established in 1887 (Brocheux and Hémery, 2011). During this time-period, France controlled modern day Cambodia and Vietnam. Its imperial conquest dates to as early as 1858 with the takeover of Cochinchina, or the southern tip of the peninsula, which is still a highly contested land region between Cambodian and Vietnam today (Brocheux and Hémery, 2011).. The French Empire expanded its power within the region by forcing the Kingdom of Siam, modern day Thailand, to cede Laos with the Franco-Siamese War of 1893. Under French colonial rule, Saigon was set up as the capital of the colonial sub-empire of the region. The French shifted to this region to focus on industries that would benefit the empire's restructuring of the local economies around resources such as: coffee, coal rice, rubber, tea, and tin. The French sought to fold the Mekong Delta into Western modernity with the introduction of Catholicism and "Law and Order".

The disposability of Indo-China's French colonial subject is exemplified with forced conscription of its subjects within the imperial army. With the outbreak of World War I, colonial subjects from French Indochina made up approximately 30% of its colonial battalion: "Orders went out from the Ministry of War to register all French males in residence in Cochinchina as well as in Cambodia, then a French protectorate, with a view to mobilization" (Gunn, 2016, p. 5). Soon after in World War II, the French would swiftly fall to the German Nazis in 1940. For those on the peninsula this would not mean the end to colonial subjugation, rather the Japanese Imperial Army would invade staging a four-day war between September 22nd to 26th, also known as the Battle of Lang Son and ended up occupying large parts of the region, as historian Chizuru Namba writes:

[W]hile Japan and France were still negotiating the stationing of Japanese troops in northern Indochina, a Japanese unit stationed by the border in China decided to enter Indochina on its own authority and decisively defeated the French brigade. Due to this incident, the French saw no other alternative than to seek coexistence with Japan.

(Namba, 2019, p. 77-78)

The international crisis of WWII impacted the conditions of colonial livability within Indochina; for the two empires, France and Japan, to "coexist," the collateral was the lives of colonial subjects of the region. Namba goes on to state, "Many Japanese also considered Indochina 'another heaven,' rich and untouched by the war. In fact, the material wealth enjoyed by the French and Japanese alike was a result of forceful exploitation" (Namba, 2019, p. 80).

As WWII raged on, the Allied powers were begging to turn the tide of war with the 1944 invasion of Axis occupied France. Fearing that the French would strike back at the Japanese

Empire for occupying their colonies in Southeast Asia, Japan began strategizing military operations. The Japanese Empire was especially worried that a resistance effort would be spearheaded locally by existing and former French Indochina colonial authorities within the region. The Japanese Imperial Army began strategizing to overthrow French colonial appointed officials. On March 9th, 1945, Meigo Sakusen (Operation Bright Moon) would be executed by Japan (Namba, 2019). The power vacuum that Meigo Sakusen left would give space for the Viet Minh, a Vietnamese decolonial movement, to rise to power and overthrow Japan in 1945.

I would like to stress that this retelling of French colonial history is very simplistic. There are clear gaps within this historical account. It does not capture or even begin to grapple or articulate the impact of colonial violence; as Aimé Césaire famously writes “colonization = ‘thing-ification’” (Césaire, 1972, p. 6). The geography of Southeast Asia is made into a spatial colonial commodity fought over and formed into an oriental simulacrum called Indochina. If we begin to think about Southeast Asia within a linear model of western history, one can understand that colonization, occupation, and war fundamentally altered the region. Namba concludes; “the beginning of the end of French rule can be traced back to this decisive period of Franco-Japanese coexistence during the Second World War” (Namba, 2019, p. 93). The historical sequencing of attempts by colonial empires to assert hegemonic dominance in turn created colonial collateral of Southeast Asian people, which would prime later international historical events. I would argue that the recirculation of war and violence in mainland Southeast Asia is a result of unfaltering French colonial management that still proliferates within geopolitical neo-colonial relations with the West. These set of socio-political conditions fought by French Colonization allowed for

American imperial intervention to arise. Within the next section I examine the American War in Southeast Asia and its worldmaking impacts.

American War in Southeast Asia (1954-1975)

Starting in 1946, the United States began assisting the French imperial army to take back control of the Indochina colony. The United States provided assistance to the French in order to stop the rise of Vietnamese nationalists and the Viet Minh communist forces. After the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in spring of 1954, Vietnam gained its independence from their colonial overlords. The 1954 Geneva Accords ended the reign of French Colonialism within Southeast Asia; a bipartite state was formed with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and the Republic of Vietnam in the south. Within the schema of Cold/Hot War geopolitics, the North was supported by the Soviet Union and the South by the United States. Under the Truman doctrine which aimed to curb the expansion of communism, the United States became heavily invested within the region. By 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson had formally deployed boots on the ground in Viet Nam to support the South Vietnamese government, which was still grappling with the impact of French colonialism.

Within Laos, the United States began engaging in a large-scale proxy war throughout Southeast Asia, whose operations could be tracked as early as the 1950s with covert CIA operations in Laos colloquially known as the "Secret War" (Vang, 2010; Zhou et al. 2016; Bankston & Hidalgo, 2016; Xiong, 2016). Much information surrounding racialized colonial warfare tactics used by the United States remains unknown and classified. The necropolitical governance of empire remains occluded by redactions and omission in the colonial archive. For Cambodia, the United States' bombing of its southern border from 1965-1973, amounting to 2.7

million tons, killed an estimated 100,000 people and caused an internal migration of two million people which contributed to growing anti-Western sentiment (Owen & Kiernan, 2007). After WWII in 1953, Cambodia would be allowed to self-govern, yet the power vacuum in the former French colony of “Indochina” allowed the Khmer Rouge rise to power as an anti-colonial movement to challenge the West.

Mainland Southeast Asians from the Indochina Peninsula arrived in America after a laundry list of imperial efforts within the region. In the late-1970’s, Southeast Asians were running from policies by as well as wars between newly established socialist states under American economic sanctions and the related genocide partly resulting from a long troubled relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia and partly from earlier American war efforts including covert bombing operations throughout the region. Organizers in the Southeast Asian Freedom Network refuse to spatialize the imperial military violence within the naming of the “Vietnam War,” as the war was not isolated to Vietnam, but rather affected the region as a whole. The terminological shift from “Vietnam War” to “American War in Southeast Asia” is to challenge the militarization memory-making process that is rooted with the imperial project of empire. For community organizers, the term “Vietnam War” does not capture the colonial violence that predates the war. Indeed, the use of the term gestures to a lexicon and grammar of imperial amnesia. Linguistically, it centers, and shifts the responsibility and violence and aggression towards, Vietnam, masking the racial colonial violence that targeted nations/people outside the geographies of Vietnam.

The legacy of colonial occupation and resource extraction under the guise of racial capitalism set these newly “decolonized” nations in impossible situations. These nations became

largely dependent on the West. In addition, former colonial overseers or their American replacements in effect appointed leaders of these newly “decolonized” nations. The economic stratification and colonial taxonomy did not dissipate with the passing over of sovereignty as they were embroiled in the conflict of empires and Southeast Asia became a testing ground for hegemonic domination. These multiple and consecutive wars in Southeast Asia reflect both the haunting and endurance of and the continued desire to subjugate Southeast Asians in the name of imperial conquest. Southeast Asian refugees are embodiments of how racial colonial warfare at the hands of the West defers decolonization within Indochina, as well as all over the Pacific.

Auto-genocide, Abjection, and Orientalism

Once you have been to Cambodia, you’ll never stop wanting to beat Henry Kissinger to death with your bare hands.

— Anthony Bourdain, *A Cook's Tour*

Although this thesis is germane to a Southeast Asian refugee political identity and formation, much of the research within the context of this project is grounded with Cambodian refugee social life. Within this section, I seek to provide context to the Cambodian refugee experience. I interrogate the legacy of genocide under the Khmer Krahom, in order to frame the international legal system and notions of justice, specifically how these notions inform Cambodian refugee negotiations with the imperial and neoliberal carceral state. This project at times fluctuates between terminology such as Southeast Asian, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Lao, but I am keen to be clear that the historical process of deportation has been occurring for the Cambodian refugee community within the United States for approximately twenty years.

Much of the organizing, both legal and community work, has been rooted in providing assistance to diasporic Cambodian families. I find it necessary to point out in its own section of this scholarly work an understanding of Cambodian refugee subjectivity to better grapple with continued socio-political questions around deportation. Not to erase the experience of other Southeast Asian refugees suffering from state-sanctioned violence, Cambodians are often forgotten or left out of academic political discussions regarding the violence of empire. As Khatharya Um writes; “Cambodian Americans hover on the margins [...] [A]s compared to other immigrant groups, scholarship on Cambodian Americans is especially scant, and that by Cambodian Americans is even more so” (Um, 2015, p. 17). That being said, the timeliness of this project comes with an utmost importance to me, not only as a second generation queer and trans Cambodian refugee, community organizer, and scholar, but also given the ethical orientation and the need to unmask/challenge recirculating forms of state-sanctioned violence.

On April 17, 1975 – the beginning of “Year Zero” or “Pol Pot Time” – the Khmer Rouge overtook the capital city of Phnom Penh. It is estimated that 1.5 to 3 million people’s lives – 21% of the nation’s population – were lost between April 1975 and April 1979 due to starvation, illness, and mass killings. Fleeing for their lives, Cambodians sought refuge in border camps. Often taking years to resettle to the United States, families would attempt to restart their lives within places like Khao-I-Dang, the largest Cambodian refugee camp situated on the Thai-Cambodian border (Um, 2015). These stateless children whose first upbringing is rooted within a refugee way of being would later face the rhetoric Southeast Asians are facing today.

Terminological debates over Cambodia as a site of genocide versus auto-genocide reflect ongoing violence brought by memorialization. These discursive debates highlight the unique

ways Cambodians must reckon with the haunting of violence in order to seek justice. While Western nations frame Cambodia as a site of “auto-genocide” rather than genocide—locating the responsibility for genocide on the Khmer Rouge rather than on the West and its imposition of colonialism—this framing obscures imperial histories of Cambodia, such that the very “nature of auto-genocide itself complicates” possibilities for redress (Um, 2015, p. 210). This is largely situated in the United Nations’ definition of “genocide”, which arose out of the aftermath of the Holocaust and WWII. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes that the Holocaust represented the “dark side” of modernity, and demonstrates the failure of the institution of the nation-state to protect its people (Bauman, 1989). The Holocaust represents the paradoxical nature inherent to the idea of the Enlightenment humanist subject, wherein European powers were so willing to kill millions of people, after centuries of alleging to be the epitome of civilization. Philosopher Hannah Arendt deepens this examination of the category of human through a deep legal critic of the nation-state and its boundaries. Arendt highlights how Jewish people, and other European ethnic minorities, are excluded from the nation-states category of rights and man, as a result they are made stateless and disposable. As Arendt writes:

The Minority Treaties said in plain language what until then had been only implied in the working system of nation-states, namely, that only nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions, that persons of different nationality needed some law of exception until or unless they were completely assimilated and divorced from their origin. (Arendt, 1951 p. 275)

Through these international treaties minoritized groups were not provided the “rights of man” i.e. citizenship — thus fundamentally excluded from enlightenment’s project. Building off the

work of Arendt, Bauman frames the Holocaust within the larger schema and Western Modernity. For Bauman, the Holocaust represents not an anomaly within Western Modernity, but rather it's Western Modernity par excellence. As Bauman writes; "We know already that the institutions responsible for the Holocaust, even if found criminal, were in no legitimate sociological sense pathological or abnormal." (Bauman, 1989, p. 19). Modernity's praise for technological innovation such as industrialization and new material progress lay the foundation to for the German Nazi's final solution. While the death camp represents advanced civilizations automatization of murder, it was proclaimed that "Never again" shall the international community allow these "crimes against humanity" to occur. Yet, what occurs when mass violence targets individuals who are not situated within the category of the "human" or Cartesian subject? Put differently, how do we begin to understand the ways that genocide operates for colonized subjects?

French journalist Jean Lacouture wrote the term "auto-genocide" in order to discuss how the violence committed by the Khmer Rouge existed outside of current international legal frameworks. Yet, the concept of auto-genocide obscures the existing colonial legacy within Cambodia by placing blame solely on the Khmer Rouge for mass violence (Lacouture, 1977). Lacouture considered Cambodia's tragedy to be an example of "auto-genocide," as opposed to an "ordinary" genocide, because the crimes were perpetrated by the ethnic majority Khmer. Lacouture states:

What Oriental despots or medieval inquisitors ever boasted of having eliminated, in a single year, one quarter of their own population? Ordinary genocide (if one can ever call it ordinary) usually has been carried out against a foreign population or an internal

minority. The new masters of Phnom Penh have invented something original, auto-genocide. (Lacouture, 1977).

Lacouture's account of the violence in Cambodia does not accurately place the events of genocide within largely legacy of European colonization. His lack of understanding the larger racial and colonial project of Indochina constructs genocide as a self-inflicted injury i.e the barbarity of the newly "free" colony. As a result through international law, the term *genocide* was only applicable to ethnic minorities such as the Cham (Muslim in Cambodia), Vietnamese, Khmer-Chan, etc. (Schuld-Vial et al., 2015). While Lacouture is keen to critique Richard Nixon's bombing of the Cambodian countryside, he refuses to acknowledge the rise of the Khmer Rouge as a national liberatory expression as occurring because of the long legacy of Vietnamese conquest of Cambodian territory and Vietnamese colonization of Cambodia during the Nguyễn dynasty, amplified by French colonization, as well as French colonial atrocity itself based on racialized categories of gradations of the human. Thus, the term temporally shifts accountability from the empires of the past and Cold War hegemonic global superpowers that created the conditions for mass violence, onto the postcolonial subjects who must take all judicial and moral responsibility for violence. This similar operation occurs with the deportation of Cambodian refugees. For deportable-refugees, the liberal framings around crime result in refugees taking individualized responsibility for the violence of nation-state. The case of Khmer Rouge questions how the post-colonial state still operates and produces violence on par with the former imperial state.

Indeed, many of the debates surrounding auto-genocide versus genocide continue to reify an Orientalist epistemological gaze. Post-colonial theorist Edward Said writes that Orientalism

“create[s] not only knowledge but also the very reality they [the onlookers] appear to describe” (Said, 1978, p. 94). Under an Orientalist framework, Asian countries are constructed and over-determined by the West. Auto-genocide becomes a simulacrum of Western anxiety pertaining to the barbarity abroad, and obscures what Aimé Césaire calls “the boomerang effect of colonization” (1972, p. 5). The colonial temporality allows a narrative of “self-infliction of the historical injury” (Um, 2015, p. 5). Put simply, Lacouture’s use of the term is not done out of empathy for the suffering of Cambodian people, but rather operates through a racialized psychic anxiety over “Red Asia” (Kim, 2010, p. 40). This is clearly articulated through Lacouture’s anti-communist sentiment: “we are now seeing the suicide of a people in the name of revolution; worse: in the name of socialism” (Lacouture, 1977). Thus, the Cold War becomes a “knowledge project” shifting racialized understandings of difference, modernity, and morality (Kim, 2010). Yet, one constant that remains is that Asians—and communist ones in particular— spatially exist outside of the category of the Cartesian subject or human. Thus, debates regarding whether there was or was not a genocide in Cambodia abject the nation and its people within the global imagery to be the racialized Orient or Red (communist, and thus “enemy”) Asia, through both legal and extrajudicial means. Moreover, the legal becomes a parasitic, paradoxical space in which colonial violence is re-inscribed over terminological debates, and “justice” can never be achieved. This becomes clearly evident through the fact that it has taken over thirty years to prosecute a single member of the Khmer Rouge. In reality, the legal international sphere is not a site of “justice”; instead, it is an epistemological area of colonial subjectification for the conditions of the global South. This project engages within these colonial hauntings pertaining to the search for refuge and justice. As Asian American Studies scholar, Schuld-Vials writes; “This issue of genocide justice — apparent in the belated paucity of successful trails against former

Khmer Rouge leaders more than thirty year after the Killing Fields era — figures keenly in present-day discussion about what to do with the most visceral remnants of that regime,” (Schuld-Vials, p. 53, 2012). While Schuld-Vials is specially referring to the short-lived violent regime of the Khmer Rouge — I would extend her framing of “genocide justice” to larger racial and colonial regimes such as the French and United States Empires. Cambodian people, especially those resettled within the United States, have still yet to find justice. Forty-five years have passed since the fall of the Khmer Rouge and justice is yet to be found. Furthermore the deportation/repatriation of refugees to Cambodia highlights how hegemonic order is not committed to providing meaningful pathways towards “justice”; rather, the United States involvement gestures that paucity, which Schuld-Vials is criticizing, becomes filled with racial colonial and gendered hegemonic interests. Fundamentally, justice for the violence of genocide is not possible in a world in which imperial nation-states dictate right and wrong. The racial and colonial hauntings of genocide inform Cambodian refugee consciousness that envision an abolinisit horizon where refuge is possible. Put differently, Cambodian refugee discourses and ideologies around justice cohere an imagining of refuge.

Carceral Configurations: the formation of the US police state and the refugee camp

Within this section, I seek to provide a literature review of the “carceral state” and its development. Understanding how prison-industrial-complex or, racial capitalism’s rapid expansion and boom of the prison population is critical in tracking the development of anti-black constructs such as criminality. Moreover, the history surrounding the carceral state is necessary in adhering off-shoot or branches such as the current immigration system and its detention centers. This section specifically seeks to answer the question — how is the neoliberal

state's mobilization of colorblindness and carcerality connected to, but not equivalent to or commensurate with, the development of the neoliberal empire which hides its imperial nature through a narrative of benevolence and humanitarianism? Carceral state's lineage, or genealogy, is critical in framing the prism of *deportable-refugee* as it sits at the intersection of neoliberal precarity from both the imperial and carceral nation-state.

The United States prison and policing system operate as systems of neoliberal control. French philosopher Michel Foucault famously writes about the sociological role of the prison apparatus, specifically the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). For Foucault, the prison operates as a biopolitical subject making process. While Foucault's account of the prison misses the racial and colonial violence that Black and Native American population face, his work still provides a critical entry point. Black Feminist scholars such as Angela Davis, Ruth Willson Gilmore, Beth Riche, and Kelly Lytle Hernandez have all written extensively about the formation of the prison system within the United States (Davis, 2003; Gilmore 1999; Richie, 2012; Hernandez, 2015) With the abolition of slavery in the mid-eighteen hundreds came the rise of new anti-black systems of control i.e. the prison. As many scholars within the field of Black studies highlight, the Thirteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution did not truly abolish chattel slavery, rather a "loophole created the legal preconditions for mass imprisonment of the formerly enslaved and of indigenous populations and nonEuropean immigrants on an unprecedented scale." (Hernandez et. al., 2015, p.21). With the field of carceral studies debates rage on about whether the prison-system is or is not a form of modern-day slavery, for me, this project does not touch on these larger debates within the field, but rather understand the prison apparatus as a spatial and geographic site of anti-black violence.

The prison-industrial-complex arises at a critical turning point in the twentieth century in American History. Geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore connects the development of the current prison apparatus to post-WWII economics or in her words, “*military Keynesianism* is giving way to, or complemented by, *carceral Keynesianism*” (Gilmore, 1999, p. 174). Put differently, the military-industrial-complex gives way to the prison-industrial-complex. This historical moment is critical in seeing the interconnections between the US empire abroad and “at home”. Gilmore critically points to racial uprisings within 1967-68’s as a critical turning point within the neoliberal logic of racial capitalism. The “capital class” stopped paying taxes to fund the warfare/welfare state (aka military Keynesianism) in part because activism against racial capitalism apartheid, specifically the 1965 Los Angeles Watts Riots, was hurting their bottom line (Gilmore, 1999, p. 177). Prisons became convenient to maintain the social order by way of addressing “surpluses of finance capital, land, labour and state capacity” (Gilmore, 1999, p. 174). The prison, as we know it today, comes out a neoliberal moment of racial configuration, a reordering of white supremacy, inculcating carcerality. As legal scholar, Michele Alexander writes; “In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don’t. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color “criminals” and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind.” (Alexander, 2010, p. 2). Put simply, the racial apartheid strikes back at the civil rights and Black Power movement through criminalization. Rather than redressing the issues of racial capitalistic violence, the anti-black American nation-state morphs its racial realities into the carceral regime.

Beth Riche deepens our analysis of the carceral state or what she calls the “prison nation” in order to simultaneously interrogate state-sanctioned violence and interpersonal harm, racial

and gendered discourse, and the anti-violence movement (Richie, 2012, p. 102). The anti-violence movement becomes co-opted by neoliberal white feminists which strengthens the power of the carceral regime. Richie is critical in the ways in which the anti-violence movement adopted the larger political narrative of the universal women, as it obscures a set of larger racial, colonial, and gendered operations. Through the universality gratuitous anti-black violence, Black women become erased (Richie, 2014, p. 110). For Black women, neoliberal protections from gender based violence by the state fundamentally misread the nation-state as a benevolent actor. Rather, the 1970's investments within the prison-industrial-complex trade off, or divest, from essential social services, such as welfare, into systems of discipline and punishment that place Black women in sites of precarity (Richie, 2014, p. 106). As a result, the state continued investments in the prison system the idea of "abolition spread as a utopian idea precily because prison and its blistering ideology are so deeply rooted in our contemporary world" (Davis, 2016, p. 6).

While at the same-time as the rise of the prison-industrial-complex occurs Southeast Asian refugee resettlement. Khao-I-Dang was one of the largest Thai-Cambodian border camps. It is a significant spatial-temporal site for Cambodians refugees as it embodies not only the carceral militarized contours of the refugee camps, ther aspirations to seek refuge, but the connectedness of carceral and imperial logics. A historiographic retelling of the Khao-I-Dang provides the material anchor of the militized carceral state. When describing the camp, Puangthong Rungwasdisab writes: "Thai military men in Khao I Dang refugee camp were not just guarding the camp, but commanding Cambodian guerilla forces in fighting the Vietnamese. Refugees were brutally treated. The entire camp population was forced to locate land mines in the surrounding minefields without any efficient tools. Many were killed by mines"

(Rungswasdisab, 2004, p. 99). Khao-I-Dang became a critical steppingstone for refugees as the initial point of entry within the process of relocation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2000, p. 97).

Khao-I-Dang ceased its operations in December of 1986, at the request of the Thai government. Khao-I-Dang was managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Thai Interior Ministry, and a plethora of NGOs. Highlighting the social and legal precarity brought with the closing of the camp, *The New York Times* writes:

The closing of the camp, Khao I Dang, is to take effect Wednesday. It means not only that the camp's more than 26,000 Cambodians will be displaced but also that they will lose their legal status as refugees. Instead, they will become "displaced persons" who can be returned to their war-torn nation when conditions there permit. (Crossette, 1986)

The promise of refuge is stripped from the residents of the Khao-I-Dang at its closing. Stateless and subaltern Cambodian refugees were all collateral to international hegemonic regimes. Unable to find a foreign government or recently resettled family to sponsor them, 26,000 Cambodian refugees were stripped of the protection from their refugee status, which was similar to the closing of other camps such as Bataan, Philippines. Cambodians refugees were stuck at the border materially and symbolically, as the status of these 26,000 refugees signified their unintelligibility towards the international hegemonic order. A larger issue arises which is alluded within the *New York Times* article, "THAI REFUGEE CAMP, DOOR OF HOPE, WILL BE CLOSED"—what occurs to these people now? Where do these war refugees go? Where do they return to? Moreover, what rights do they retain if refugee status can be as easily revoked as their lives?

The fallibility of liberal ideologies of freedom converges upon the corpus of Southeast Asian refugees. The impetus of Cambodian refugee resettlement signifies a long-term imperial national aporia. Khao-I-Dang, and refugee camps at large, becomes “a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations – and above all the very distinction between public and private – are deactivated,” or as Agamben terms it, a “state of exception” (Agamben, 2005, p. 50). The refugee camp becomes a space of inherent contradiction. Within the context of Khao-I-Dang, the camp is supposed to offer up protected sovereign rights by the international order through refugee status, but in reality, what this status signifies is a lack of citizenship and disorder within the liberal nationalist order.

The protection of refugee rights came after the Holocaust and the events of WWII. As Hannah Arendt puts it, “we have to seek refuge; but we committed no acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical political opinion.” She continues, “With us the meaning of the term ‘refugee’ has changed. Now ‘refugees’ are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive to a new country without means and have to be helped by refugee committees” (Arendt, 2007, p. 264). Arendt stresses the humanitarian framing around refugee assistance is legitimized through the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention. The Convention met from July 5 to the 25 in Geneva. There the United Nations outlined a clear international legal definition of refugees. The illusion of freedom within the refugee camp indicates how “liberalism is conceived as a gift of quickened time those who are waiting and wanting” (Nguyen, 2012, p. 45). As the title of the *New York Times* articles alludes to—“DOOR OF HOPE, WILL BE CLOSED”—a temporal colonial chronopolitic that intertwines with in refugee settlement and “the refugee submit[s] to the camp’s management and use of time, to the regularity of certain actions and habits, including work, the camps regime also hold the inchoate promise of her [the refugee’s] freedom” (Nguyen,

2012, p. 73). Not only does the title reference Khao-I-Dang's literal closing, but it also symbolizes the rejection and refusal of Western nations to incorporate refugees within the larger national body politic. Doors of hope can be reframed as doors western modernity, which are scaffolded by racial colonial ideologies. Within this rhetorical sense, if we continue to understand the refugee camp as a biopolitical site of control, the denial of refugee resettlement and closure of Khao-I-Dang is not only a managerial process, but an ontological one – the stripping of status and citizenship is furthermore a dispossession of the sociogenic category of the human.

The dispossession of refugee status results in compounding forms of material violence for Cambodians in Khao-I-Dang. Within the case of Khao-I-Dang, the “refugee committees” or the Thai government were not present at the UN convention, thus, they were not bound by the multilateral treaty. After closing the camp in 1986, refugee illegals resided within 2.3 km² until the 1993 forced closure. The humanitarian site became a contested battle ground for diverging hegemonic interests. Ultimately, “[t]he camp of Khao I Dang was set on fire to prevent its long-lasting occupation by Cambodians” (Taithe & Borton, 2016, p. 214). The closing of Khao-I-Dang violated Article 33 of the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention (rule of non-refoulement) which limits the sovereignty of the nation-state to forcibly return refugees to the nation they are fleeing. While simultaneously attempting to resettle refugees to Western nations, the Thai ministry began a process to forcibly repatriate refugees back to Cambodia in order to close the border camp. Even while it was operating as a refugee processing center, Cambodians suffered human rights abuses, the UN reports: “In June 1979, Thai soldiers rounded up more than 42,000 Cambodian refugees in border camps and pushed them down the steep mountainside at Preah Vihear into Cambodia. At least several hundred people, and possibly several thousand,

were killed in the minefields below” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2000, p. 92).

Deportable-Refugee seeks to tease out the relationship between the carceral and the imperial, criminalization and immigration, the deportee and the refugee. In investigating both the logic of carcerality and the logic of the imperial we can better understand the development of neoliberalism in the United States. The historical context I have provided within this introduction is critical in understanding how the deportation of Southeast Asian refugees exist within a larger legacy and schema of racial relations, colonization, and warfare. Fundamentally, the intellectual trajectory of this thesis attempts to provide scaffolding for larger conversations about abolitionist imaginings within the Southeast Asian refugee community, but that would not be possible if we do not understand how we are “deeply rooted in our contemporary world” (Davis, 2016, p.6)

Southeast Asian Refugee Social Mo(ve)ments

The Southeast Asian Freedom Network (SEAFN) is a national grassroots consolidation of Southeast Asian lead organizations. The Network originally formed in the early 2000’s in order to address the ways in which state-sanctioned violence at the hands of the US Empire continued to proliferate within the Southeast Asian refugee community, specifically in regards to detention and deportation. This project largely examines the work and political thinking of organizers within the network to highlight both the realities and resistance towards the making of *deportable-refugees*. If my examination of the figure of the deportable-refugee yields a critique at the intersection between the imperial and neoliberal carceral state, exploring Southeast Asian organizing reveals possibilities of abolitionist imaginaries at this very same intersection.

There have been different waves of organizing within the SEAFN marked by different goals and issues that became emergent. Loan Thi Dao's dissertation *We Will Not Be Moved: The Mobilization Against Southeast Asian American Detention and Deportation* is an ethnographic study of SEAFN 1.0. Dao's work argues that anti-deportation organizing signifies a new wave of the Asian American social movement. In addition, it highlights the ideological shifts between diasporic Southeast Asian refugee youths and their parents. Put in a different way, there is a shifting leftist political ideological orientation within the Southeast Asian community which correlates to complex sociological intersections of being a "1.5 and 2nd generation Southeast Asian refugee, working-class, urban youth" (Dao, 2009, p. 2).

Turning to other similar studies, Monisha Das Gupta conducts a participatory observation/ethnography of South Asian queer and feminist immigrant justice organizing from the mid-80s to the early 90s in her monograph *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics within the United States* (2006). Building off the work of feminist scholar such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Asian American Studies scholar Lisa Lowe, Das Gupta argues that anti-violence South Asian organizing is questioning liberal conceptions of citizenship. Das Gupta's framework of the "unruly" South Asian immigrant seeks to unsettle "their struggle for rights in the face of formal/legal and popular codification as noncitizens" (Das Gupta, 2006, p. 4). I agree that Southeast Asian refugees are too *unruly*, but said framing is motivated by the lived histories of wartime displacement. Das Gupta examines how South Asian activists' negotiation of how the nation-state legal framing of immigrants results in a "space-making politics" which "transforms daily life into an area of political contest" by non-reproducing nationalist formations (Das Gupta, 2006, p. 9). Rather than embrace legal and social codification of non-citizen vs. citizen and good vs. bad immigrants, South Asian

anti-violence activists build collective power through locating possibilities within quotidian sites of struggle and difference. Das Gupta's research heavily impacts my framing of our Southeast Asian grassroots social movements, as SEAFN too provides subjunctive spaces or pockets within the US empire that call into question the material realities of ever present racial and colonial warfare.

The study of Asian American social movements within the field of Asian American Studies is both a large yet limited body of research. The field of Asian American activism is rooting within the formation of its scholarship. Many scholars, including but not limited to Karen Umemoto, Yen Le Espiritu, and Diane C. Fujino, pinpoint that the emergence of Asian American activism within the 60's are critical to its formation. The field of American Ethnic Studies, and especially the sub-field of Asian American Studies, is predicated on the legacy of radical movement workers within the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). With all of that being said within the field today, "Asian American activism studies remains less central to the field of Asian American studies" (Fujino and Rodriguez, 2019, p. 112). Moreover, much dialogue is needed to be added around the social histories of Southeast Asian refugees. As a Southeast Asian activist-scholar, I seek to add to this conversation.

I have been organizing with the network in a different level of capacity for the last three years. I first became introduced to the SEAFN through local organizing with the ReleaseMN8, a grassroots campaign which turned into an organization of directly impacted families who collectively fought to stop the separation of Southeast Asian refugee families. I first was invited to officially participate within a SEAFN gathering at the 2018 National Queer Asian Pacific Island Alliance Conference hosted in San Francisco Chinatown. As a queer youth, I jumped at

the opportunity to meet and build with other queer and trans Southeast Asians. Reflecting back upon that time, I was a little apprehensive about meeting everyone, but I relished the chance to have a free trip out of Minnesota. The people whom I met on that trip within SEAFN are some of my closest friends; not just friends – family – to date. A queer Southeast Asian family is a significant point of tension and political possibility. While this was my first official encounter with SEAFN, its members would stay in my life in ways I had yet to know.

Within the scope of this academic project, I conducted 14 semi-structured oral history interviews with grassroots Southeast Asian organizers. Within a normative social science sense, I gather approximately 20 hours' worth of raw data, which I later transcribed and coded. From the period of July 2019 to March 2020, I traveled to a variety of field sites where these organizers mobilized community. I traveled all over the United States. This process of “participatory observation” was quite grounding for me. I had the opportunity to bear witness to life within the diaspora and grasp on the ground how resettlement positioned the Southeast Asian community in these various sites. Before coming to UCLA and moving to Southern California, I had never encountered the pluralities within our community. I was just a Cambodian kid from occupied ancestral lands of the Dakota and Ojibwe people, Minnesota. While accompanying my friends to weekly organizing meetings, political retreats, and celebrations, I began to see the various regional refugee experiences as the geography of resettlement. On a personal level, this project is way more than this academic thesis, as this scholarly work propelled my ability to engage in national movement building, something for which I am grateful.

At the same time that I was interviewing, I was participating in movement work. One example of this was last summer, 2019, while studying Khmer at University of Wisconsin

Madison's Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI), I was organizing with Freedom Inc., a Black and Southeast Asian anti-violence nonprofit organization, where I assisted in supporting the 2nd and 3rd generation Khmer youth, 1.5 generation women and elders, in developing culturally specific LGBTQ curriculum, and participating in their current youth abolitionist campaign such as #NOCOPSINSCHOOLS. These are moments and memories that I will hold dear to my heart. Within these community spaces mings and yieys would praise me for my academic achievements, but it was really them who I was learning from. Although my language study professors at the University of Wisconsin Madison often did not value my time working at Freedom Inc., and often said it was a distraction from my studies, it was there that I learned and grew the most.

I chose to examine SEAFN as they are the largest standing group collectively mobilizing, navigating, and theorizing around the intersection between carcerality and Southeast Asian refugee sociality, which is clear in their organizing principles, or SEAFN's 7 paths:

- 1) Queer Liberation: Heal and liberate our queer, trans, and gender nonconforming family.
- 2) Black Lives Matter: Build Black and Southeast Asian unity, break cycles of racial tension, and support the movement for Black lives.
- 3) Youth Power: Build the power of young people to confront and challenge systems of power.
- 4) Gender Justice: Call upon Southeast Asian men to end gender violence in our communities.

- 5) Healing and Trauma: Build the intersections of healing and organizing through transformative and somatic leadership.
- 6) Anti-Imperialism: Name and call out United States imperialism in our countries and in the world.
- 7) Abolition: Build Southeast Asian resistance to mass incarceration, deportation, and an end to the Prison Industrial Complex.

SEAFN's 7 paths is a critical riff off the Seven Factors of Awakening (Mindfulness, Investigation, Energy, Joy, Relaxation, Concentration, and Equanimity), the guiding principles in Buddhism to help one find enlightenment. SEAFN's 7 paths are collective ideological principles of liberation. The 7 paths is a form of refugee futurity that seeks not only to refuse the flows of neoliberal racial capitalism but ground a world of possibility in which refuge exists. Throughout this examination of Southeast Asian deportation and the social movements that arise in response towards it, I carry this theme of refuge not as a legal category offered up by nation-states, but as a utopian space in which conditions of shelter are not trampled upon and impeded by racial, colonial, and gendered discourses.

For my project, I originally intended on conducting oral history interviews to be able to survey the scope of SEAFN's organizing over fifteen plus years. Yet, after conducting multiple interviews for the project, this seemed quite infeasible. How does one begin to map the vast political life of an organization whose work is often forgotten? While collecting my vast interviews I felt as if my historiographic approach within the University did not adequately contextualize the ebbs and flows of refugee social life, and as such, I pivoted. This is not to say that my interviews did not provide significant socio-historical information and data. Rather, I felt

a need to pivot to my thesis to center on the question: what is a Southeast Asian refugee feminist perspective on abolitionists' anti-deportation organizing? Joining the fields of anti-carceral feminism and critical refugee studies, I seek to use the SEAFN as a case study to explore how people on the ground are contending with tensions resulting from US Empire. This thesis seeks to expand on Yen Le Espiritu and Lan Duong's theory of a Feminist Refugee Epistemology (FRE) that

reconceptualize war-based displacement as being not only about social disorder and interruption but also about social reproduction and innovation [...] Our focus is not on women's lives per se but on the intersection between private grief and public trauma—on the hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic interaction and queer sociality. Invoking the intimate politics of the everyday, FRE does more than critique Western media representation of refugees: it underlines refugees' rich and complicated lives, the ways in which they enact their hopes, beliefs, and politics, even when their lives are militarized (Espiritu and Duong, 2017, p. 588)

Each chapter of the thesis examines the ways in which refugee sociality manifests through mundane hauntings, and provides a means to challenge the flows of US Empire.

Chapter 1: 𑄀𑄁𑄂𑄃 (nirtes): the condition of “Deportable-Refugees” demonstrates that the prism/condition of “deportable-refugees” reflect the emergence and expansion of the carcerality within all facets of the state. I argue that deportation is not a failure of refugee resettlement, but rather a logical extension of the imperial-carceral state's biopolitical management of refugee bodies. I offer up a brief legal history for the US immigration system and argue that immigration law, specifically deportations, operate to normalize white-settlers'

claim to sovereignty and land. Linking the fields of Asian American Settler Colonialism, Critical Refugee Studies, and anti-carceral feminism, I expand on initial framing of *deportable-refugees* as to theoretically frame for analyzing Southeast Asian refugees within a larger context of racial, colonial, and gendered violence. Chapter one focuses on the case study of two different Cambodian deportation cases in order to contextualize the imperial biopolitical operations within refugee deportation. Fundamentally, I argue that within the larger schema of Southeast Asian historiography, the abjection of refugees functions as a continuation of wartime violence.

Chapter 2: មេគង្គ (Mekong): Mapping Queer Southeast Asian Watery Futures examines Southeast Asian social movements' historical place-making practices. While closely analyzing SEAFN's Mekong River pedagogical activity through autobiographical accounts, this chapter attempts to engage the methodological aspects of a refugee feminist epistemology with the practices of memory-making as they intersects with "oral histories." Specifically, it closely examines how a diasporic iconographic site of the Mekong River can provide a heuristic for Southeast Asian critical refugee studies. I argue that the Mekong River examines the hauntings left by French colonization and US racialized warfare technologies. Through connecting self, history, and movement, the Mekong River pedagogical activity attempts to use the allegory of water to create a pan-ethnic refugee identity in order to question neoliberal narratives surrounding refugee resettlement. The work of the SEAFN shows the necessity of a queer ontology as its members create an alternative model of kinship led by women and queer folks against the colonized heteronormativity enforced by the neoliberal carceral state.

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Chapter 1 និរត្ត (nirtes): the condition of “Deportable-Refugees”

Mrs. Gruwell: *How many of you have been in juvenile hall or jail for any length of time?*

Unnamed Student: *Detention don't count.*

Sindy Ngor: *Does a refugee camp count?*

Mrs. Gruwell: *You decide.*

(Sindy proceeded to step towards the line).

Intro: “Freedom Writers” – Sindy Ngor and Cambodian Refugee Captivity

I start this chapter with a clip from the dramatic film *Freedom Writers* (2007), starring academy-award winning actress Hilary Swank, which is based off *The Freedom Writers Diary* (1999), a non-fiction collection of autobiographical stories from predominantly students of color who attended Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. Both the film and the novel's name sake pulls from a larger canon of racial justice organizing alluding to the 1960's Freedom Riders, a group of Black southern activist who rode the bus in order to disrupt and challenge racial segregation laws. The snippet above is an interaction between Swank's character Erin Gruwell, a white first-year ninth grade English teacher, and Sindy Ngor, a Cambodian refugee, played by Filipina actress Jaclyn Ngan. Much of the film centers on a simplistic multicultural white-savior narrative in which Gruwell must rescue these young students of color from the realities of life under racial capitalism and gang violence in Long Beach.¹ Although set

¹ Long Beach has the highest concentration of Cambodians outside of Cambodia, and is hence a critical diasporic site. In a 2011 community-based survey from Khmer Girls in Action, a feminist Southeast Asian youth organizing

in the 1990s the character of Ngor can be read within these material realities. Ngor, a minor side-character within the movie, is emblematic of mainstream depictions of refugees that link them to gang membership and criminality. As Lisa Cacho writes:

Analyzing the logic, laws, and storylines that fuse gang membership to racial masculinity and impoverished spaces helps us to explicate why criminalization as both a disciplinary and regularizing process of devaluation does not just exclude some people from legal “universality” but makes *their inclusion a necessary impossibility*. (Cacho, 2012, p. 64).

Ngor is presumed to be a delinquent “gang member” whose friend dies from heightened racialized violence. Her story is relegated to two axioms: first, refugees as a “damaged demographic,” who need to be saved from the barbarity of the project; second, Southeast Asian refugees are exceptional sites whose status of “criminal” often fluctuates based on the nation-state’s demands (Tuck, 2009; Tang, 2015). Ngor simply exists as a “model minority” foil, while simultaneously she and her Southeast Asians refugee peers are marked as deviant for their social networking. Southeast Asian refugees like Ngor has been captured within the web and stuck into a double bind of the carceral empire; they either play the exceptional “model minority” refugee who is exceptional to the “hyper-ghetto,” or participate in criminalized social relationships and are deemed as a “youth gang member”, a gendered and racialized term. Either way her choices are foreclosed to feed into the state’s anti-black discourse and she begins to embody the practices of empire (Tang, 2015; Lam, 2015). So, Ngor’s dilemma is emblematic of how the U.S. empire preconfigured Southeast Asian refugees to recirculate systems of racial capital.

non-profit in Long Beach, 1 in 3 Cambodian youths “know someone personally who has been deported or at risk of deportation” (Khmer Girls in Action, 2011, p. 2).

Looking back towards the passage above, Ngor's questioning of Mrs. Gruwell's activity signifies the polemic of how to make violence toward Southeast Asian refugees legible for the white registrar. To reiterate Ngor's question, "Does a refugee camp count?" as a carceral containment site? Or, as Mimi Nguyen posits: "the narrative of the camp is scripted both as the scene of the refugee's profound deprivation (in the tautological logic of the condition, at the camp she has no rights because she has no rights) and the scene of her rehabilitation through discipline, regularity, and occupation" (Nguyen, 2012, p. 73). To reframe Ngor's statement, how do categories of citizen/alien/refugee serve as a locus of systems of empire? How does a refugee epistemology shift on-going conversations around incarceration and prison abolition?

The anonymity of the Freedom Writers results in race being both concealed and prevailing. The impetus of the book in itself was for students of color to use writing as catharsis for the violence they encounter in their daily life, which has been occluded as quotidian racial colonial violence. Racialization is the motif that haunts the text. Many times, students are explicit within their own writing to name state-sanctioned violence through a prism of race, class, gender, citizenship, and youth. Moreover, starting with the text from the Freedom Writers contextualizes the political lives and possibilities that youth provides. Critically examining the figure of the Cambodian refugee as it exists within the Freedom Writers bridges the ebbs and flows of empire through the linkage of the spatiality of the camp. As Liisa Malkki writes, "The refugee camp was a vital device of power [...] Through these processes [of the refugee camp], the modern, postwar refugee emerged as a knowable, nameable figure and as an object of social-scientific knowledge." (Malkki, 1995, p. 2) In turn, the space of the Refugee Camp becomes a contested site of Asian American abjection – a space of "bare life." As Naomi Paik posits, "The power relations that create rightless people are not limited to the terrain of the law,

but pervade our social and political culture. The capacity of the state to produce rightlessness extends beyond racial orders and beyond the camp's borders and inmates." (Paik, 2016, p. 8-9). A refugee is not a mere legal category, but an onto-epistemological figuration to maintain the benevolence of U.S. empire. I theorize in tandem with Paik's conceptualization of rightlessness not to say that the Southeast Asian refugee is *rightless*, as statelessness does not inherently mean rightlessness, as within the context of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement, the benevolent humanitarian nation-state is offering up, or gifting, rights and freedoms. However, opposition to Southeast Asian refugee resettlement cite the economic burden of refugees and/or their inability to assimilate. These neoliberal arguments surrounding Southeast Asian refugee resettlement position refugees as an injury to the United States, which mask how their conditions of "bare life" is a result of United States intervention. Neoliberal logic thus reads refugees not as "rightless," but as having an exuberant surplus of rights which they allegedly do not deserve. In an interview with Dylan Rodriguez, Paik states that the epistemic violence of rightlessness is evident when "a lot of times rightless people have to draw on the language of rights to make themselves heard at all" (Rodriguez, 2020). She goes on to state:

Rights regimes—like those recognized by the United States or by the United Nations—enable certain kinds of statements to get heard and prevent other kinds of statements from being heard. This is an epistemological form of violence. Because even using the language of rights, we don't necessarily understand what that refugee or that torture victim is saying about what it means to live under this condition. (Rodriguez, 2020)

Yet, what epistemological possibilities occur when rightless people form lines of flight? In other words, how is the characterization of Sindy Ngor, which is informed by the autobiographic writings of a teenage Cambodian girl, indicative of new approaches for self-determination and justice outside of the imperial-settler-nation-state?

This thesis explores the contours and contradictions of US empire in order to find moments of fracture. *Deportable-Refugees* begins within conversations from Cambodian American youth as to illuminate how “further research might focus on activism for Cambodian deportees, Asian American imprisonment in U.S. prisons and detention centers, and struggles that link the symbol of Japanese American incarceration with protests against immigrant detention” (Fujino and Rodriguez, 2019 p.126). Within this thesis project, I provide new relational inquiries through the lived social histories and realities of Cambodian refugee anti-deportation organizing. Like Ngor, I took a walk to the line to push the limits within our framing of anti-Asian violence. I accompany Ngor’s integration of empire within my work to expand the theoretical fields of Southeast Asian/American Studies, Critical Refugee Studies, and Feminist Prison Abolition. As Jolie Chea writes, “Cambodians are not merely victims; they are survivors, in the past as they are in the present.” (Chea, 2017, p. 14). Ngor gestures to new critical linkages and formations that are occurring in the field of Asian American studies. Ngor as a figure indicative of many socio-political issues with which Cambodian refugees are continuing to grapple with as both haunted by the militarized violence they continue to flee and their disillusionment with American liberal society. *Deportable-Refugees* encounters the socio-poetics of Southeast Asian refugee ontology in order to disturb state sanctioned technologies of power and control by historicizing the on-going processes and desires for refuge.

This chapter traces the emergence of the figure of the deportable-refugee, or the deportability of refugees that connect imperialism to the domestic racial taxonomy past and present. To do so, I begin with Ngor to address refugee criminalization connecting it to crimmigration and the history of Asian racialization by examining court cases relating to the Chinese Exclusion Act, and return to how Cambodian refugees have been rendered deportable by the neoliberal carceral state whose logic also traces back to imperialism and settler colonialism. Refugee activism in such organizations as the SEAFN shows a refugee epistemological intervention into this state formation. Ironically in a film about empowering youths of color through storytelling/writing, Ngor is ultimately rendered passive and voiceless. This critique is not about having narratives that center Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities, but rather it questions how whiteness operates as a means of legibility and coherence. We as viewers can only understand Ngor's sociological complexities as who she is becomes relationally constructed with her classmates and teacher. Ngor's character is a plot device used to create tunnel vision for the audiences to focus on inter-racial gang violence in Long Beach rather than to explore how state sanctioned violence over determines these polemics of power.

Crimmigration, the 1996 Immigration Law, and Refugee Negotiations

Entering the United States after fleeing the aftermath of the American War in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Southeast Asians are historically the largest resettled refugee community in the United States. The American War in Southeast Asia resulted in a manufactured international humanitarian crisis of refugees. The ideological motivation as highlighted within the introduction, or battle over capitalism vs. communism sets the stage for US military intervention, for “the Cold War *between* capitalism and communism is actually a “civil war” within the

selfsame Western modernity.” (Kim, 2010, p. 24). The wartime violence committed with Southeast Asia was never about the self-determination of the Vietnamese people as proclaimed against the backdrop of old European colonialism, but rather an United State hegemonic ploy for dominance in the context of the Cold War. To reiterate what I have stated within the introduction, Southeast Asian refugees are collateral of American international dominance. In order for the United States to recuperate from Vietnam, the imperial nation-state discursive engages in a narrative strategy of “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome”, which frames the United States as a pinnacle Western modernity. In looking at the archival news reports surrounding Vietnam Yen Le Espiritu writes; “reporters (re)deployed a racial lexicon that produced Vietnam as a global region to which freedom is a foreign principle, and the United States as that to which freedom is an indigenous property.” (Espiritu, 2006, p. 344). The United States is a white knight, or savior, to the savage Southeast Asian people — these reports obscure that fact that the American military were more in fact crusaders — pillaging the region. In order to recuperate the US empire’s image as a benevolent democracy they passed the two Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 and the Refugee Act of 1980. The modern day deportation of said refugee population unveils the discursive facades of the undercurrent of imperial logics — as the United States is not a benevolent democracy — it is a racial, colonial, and gender project that seeks to maintain a system of control for profit.

Entering the United States after fleeing the aftermath of the American War in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Southeast Asians are historically the largest resettled community. In response to the manufactured international humanitarian crisis, the United States passed the Refugee Act of 1980. By 1981, there were over 38,000 Cambodian refugees in America, resettled to places struggling with over-policing like the Bronx (NY), Long Beach (CA), Seattle

(WA), Lowell (MA), and Minneapolis (MN) (Zhou et al. 2016; Bankston & Hidalgo, 2016). Given the restrictive immigration acts that followed, however, the Refugee Act of 1980 neglected to meet its own goal to “provide comprehensive and uniform provisions for the effective resettlement and absorption of those refugees who are admitted” (94 U.S.C. § 102, 1980). With the passage of expansive xenophobic immigration laws in the 1990’s, the carceral system became more entrenched in immigrants’ lives. The 1996 Immigration Laws Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) criminalized immigrant and refugee populations. Thus, Southeast Asian refugee deportations reflect the antithesis of comprehensive and effective resettlement. For Southeast Asian non-citizens, a criminal sentence would not be isolated to the punishment issued by the state but could also result in a life in exile which force them back to traumatic geographies of war and genocide in which they fled. Simply put, your criminal record could inadvertently affect your immigration status within the United States.

Many Southeast Asians entered the United States while fleeing the aftermath of the American War in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and domestic unrest brought by the rise of the violent authoritarian Pol Pot regime. In light of this legacy, deportations of Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees, in particular, reveal the socio-political complexities of “cimmigration.” Legal scholar Julia Stumpf states that the concept of cimmigration “illuminate[s] how and why these two areas of law have converged, and why that convergence may be troubling” (Stumpf, 2006, p. 377). She also says, “[Cimmigration] operates in this new area [of theory and law] to define an ever-expanding group of immigrants and ex-offenders who are denied badges of membership in society” (Stumpf, 2006, p. 377-378). The passing of the AEDPA and the IIRIRA streamlined a process of deportation of permanent residents in the

United States, and expanded the intersections of the criminal legal system and the immigration system. Through these laws, offenses categorized as misdemeanors in criminal law, are viewed as felonies for immigration purposes (Hill, 2005). Specifically, re-categorizing misdemeanors as “aggravated felonies” under immigration law opened the door for mandatory detentions, deportations, and limiting immigration judges’ individual discretion in adjudicating (INA §101(a)(43)).

The laws and policies pertaining to the current mass deportation of Southeast Asian occur over a span of twenty years. The AEDPA and IIRIRA also allow for the retroactive detention and deportation of non-citizens convicted of a crime. These laws retroactively reclassify Southeast Asian refugees and other immigrant groups as aggravated felons. Non-citizens who served time for lesser offenses before 1996, then, can lose their refugee or immigrant status overnight. As a result, there are currently over 17,000 Southeast Asian refugees in the United States with final orders of removal (Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, 2018). Southeast Asian deportations have been occurring since 2002, when the Bush Administration strong-armed the nation of Cambodia, a country still recuperating from a century of French colonization, American imperial war, genocide, and war with Vietnam, into signing a Memorandum of Understanding and Agreement (MoU) to accept deportees. Cambodian refugees are the longest-standing refugee population facing deportation. Under the Obama Administration expanded the crimmigration practices set up by the Bush Administration. While President Obama signed a repatriation agreement with Viet Nam in 2008, preventing the deportation of pre-1995 refugees, an unprecedented 3.2 million people were deported under his “felons, not families” deportation policies. Since the election of President Trump in 2016, there have been fewer deportations overall, but a drastic increase of Cambodian deportations to approximately

200 per year (an increase of 279 percent) (U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement, 2018). The MoU with Viet Nam has also been reinterpreted to include detention and deportation of pre-1995 refugees, a group the agreement originally sought to protect (U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement, 2018). Thus far, Laos is the only nation among those affected by the American War in Southeast Asia that does not have a formal agreement with regards to deportation. However, as of 2020, the Trump administration is attempting to streamline a deportation process with Laos. Absent an MoU, a “gentlemen's agreement” between Laos and the U.S. has allowed up to 40 deportations per year (a 300 percent increase) (Southeast Asian Deportation Defense Network, 2020). In total, 2149 Southeast Asians have been deported from the U.S. since 1998 (1033 to Cambodia, 879 to Viet Nam, and 219 to Laos) (TRAC Immigration, 2019). Although the absolute numbers are relatively small, the economic and psychological impact of these deportations is strongly felt within the larger Southeast Asian-American community.

Southeast Asian deportation operates on a contested battleground of hegemonic racialized colonial practices. Within the national domestic schema of the United States, there is an erasure of Southeast Asian refugees. Yet for our communities Southeast Asians are facing an immigration crisis that stems from what organizer Chhaya Choum calls “a failed refugee resettlement policy”. The Southeast Asian Freedom Network’s (SEAFN) originated to grapple with reiterations of state-sanctioned violence within the mid-90’s to early 2000’s. In an interview, Choum states: “That was how the Southeast Asian Freedom Network started was to address all the failed policies after the refugee resettlement programs. 1996 was insane. We had to basically try to stabilize our community policies after policies. Really the deportations of our people became the ultimate failure for us in the refugee resettlement program.” Thus, to truly

examine the social-political formation of the SEAFN one must historicize or conduct a genealogical reading of what I call the *deportable-refugee*, and oxymoronic figure, and site, of inherent contradiction. Within this chapter, I theoretically engage with ephemeral traces of imperial violence to grasp how deportation is possible. I argue the inverse to Chhaya's proclamation that rather than being "the ultimate failure" of refugee policy, deportation is in fact the US Empire's ultimate end goal to displace, exile, and deport. Although the settler-racial project is perceived as a failure resulting in deportation within the Southeast Asian refugee community, I argue it is actually an accumulation of settler-nation-state violence.

Linking the carceral capital turn of the 1980's and the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the US, neoliberal racial capitalist forces imposed punitive means of control. During the time of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement within the United States, mass incarceration, the prison-industrial-complex, New Jim-Crow, the prison nation, anti-black policies were instilled (Davis, 2003; Alexander 2010; Riche 2014). The systemic forms of controlling Black people expanded with the prison industrial complex, which is highlighted within the introduction, impact spill over to these newly resettled refugees. In an interview, Kabzuag Vaj, founder and executive director of Freedom Inc., connects the racial historic conditions to present day deportation orders. As Kabzuag Vaj frames it:

Southeast Asians we're poor, we always saw police presence, but it wasn't until I got into my late teens that I saw the impact of the war on drugs in the poor communities. Specifically, policies that were enacted and created to control Black populations or people. Because we lived in those neighborhoods, it automatically also controlled and

was used disproportionately against Southeast Asians who lived in that neighborhood too.

I remember the war on drugs became a war on Southeast Asians.

Vaj's framing of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement within Madison, and the Midwest overall, mulls over the centrality of war. Resettlement sites placed Southeast Asians to be on socio-economically on par with urban Black communities through criminalization via the Reagan Administration. The war on Southeast Asians within the frame of refugees extends into the War on Drugs. Although there are material and discursive differences epistemologically for refugees it reads as a temporal continuation of racial and colonial warfare technologies. While Southeast Asian do not face the same gratuitous violence that Black individuals face, as they understand the events of the War on Drugs distinctly, it's critical to interrogate the necropolitical regime structuring the US empire and its reach. As sociologist Orlando Patterson describes, natal alienation is a fabric of chattel slavery and moreover the American racial project (Patterson, 1982). For Black people, generations of anti-black racism by the white slave master created one's inability to locate home/kin (Patterson, 1982). This sentiment's incommensurable relation is shared by Chhaya Choum:

I know I can talk about how imperialism, how when we were during the war in Vietnam for example, you saw black and brown folks on the front line, and in the refugee camps you see all the white fucking saviors come from the NGO saving you. Then you come to the Bronx, you get robbed by black and brown people because they're also living in the ghetto and being displaced and coming at a time where there was a war on drugs. There was a war on them as well.

Through a pathologization and criminalization of refugee communities, Southeast Asian deportees signify biopolitical processes of racialized colonial subjects' inability to integrate into the larger national body politic. This relationally connects the settler-state's domestic racial apartheid practices of the mid-twentieth century to form the rightless condition of deportable refugees. As for Vaj and Choum, warfare technologies proliferate not only within Southeast Asia and histories of United States imperialism, but also interconnect with the operations of anti-blackness within the US. Vaj and Choum reveal how a practice like deportation "consistently disavows the material continuities between state-formed technologies of warmaking across historical moments and geographies, while re-forming the US 'Homeland'" (Rodríguez, 2009, p. 152).

Yet, deportability is reliant on the "cimmigration" legal system, or the nation-state's intersecting criminal justice and immigration systems' subjectifying operations. Choum goes on to state:

I mean, to not exaggerate, but to give the context that you move from one war zone to another. That's always been our community experience in the United States. For me, it reaffirms that we have to talk about anti-blackness in our community because of that refugee experience. You're constantly being shown that white people are our saviors and our leaders, and that you never see yourself as a leader and fighter in that process, and other black and brown people. It gives me a strong conviction to fight for racial and economic justices because of my experience as a refugee and in the Bronx, and

understanding they were bombing us in 1960s, and the ghettos were being burnt down in the 1960s as well.

Anti-black racism is interpolated by Southeast Asian refugees, symbolically altering how imperialism operates domestically. This connects with Eric Tang's concept of "refugee exceptionalism," or how refugees are in the hyper-ghetto, not of the ghetto. Southeast Asian refugees are positioned as being in black and brown spaces from whence they need intervention (Tang, 2015). Rather than looking at the historical conditions of racial capitalism and its impact on black and brown communities, "refugee exceptionalism" highlights the symbolic foil that the Southeast Asian refugee represents, given that blackness is positioned as deviant and inhuman. Choum's analysis of refugee life within the US seeks to challenge this exceptionalism. Choum and Vaj both gesture to modes of Afro-Asian solidarity and relational moves within the category of refugee. As Mimi Thi Nguyen posits, "the refugee condition as a disorientation in time and space might compound a latent criminality" (Nguyen, 2012, pp. 162). Central to the analysis of deportability within the condition of deportable refugees is proximity to alleged black criminality.

Transitioning from the crimmigration system as it relates to the rebounding of the nation-state through imperial and carceral boundaries, I move on to engage in a deeper genealogical examination of United States immigration systems. In the next section, I examine Chinese Exclusion and the racializing legal precedent it sets to further a conversation about the national imaginary. Engaging in a close reading of two major Chinese Exclusion legal cases, that of Chae Chan Ping and Fong Yue Ting, provides context in which carceral and imperial states embody settler-colonial processes. Put differently, I look at Chinese Exclusion as it formulates

today's modern immigrant system. Conversations pertaining to deportable-refugee which lack such historical grounding reproduces the epistemological basis with which the nation-state reorders itself.

Asian Racialization, Settler-Colonialism, and the Emergence of Deportation

America in the 19th century had sweeping racializing policies that would fundamentally shape the imperial project of the United States. Three major coinciding events occurred within the historical period: 1) the abolition of the slavery 2) west-ward expansion 3) Asian labor. Black criminality, Indigenous genocide, and Asian exclusion are racial rhetoric that would cohere the imperial project of the United States. As Lisa Lowe writes: “it is necessary to conceive settler colonialism, slavery, indenture, imperial war, and trade together, as braided parts of a world process that involved Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas, permitting an optic on early nineteenth-century liberalism and empire, which might be otherwise unavailable” (Lowe, 2015, p. 76-77). In order to understand the formation of the western liberal modernity one must be able to cohere the incoherent. The dissecting historical disjuncture of Black criminality, Indigenous genocide, and Asian exclusion give texture to the rise of the necropolitical means of control. Lowe focuses in her work *Intimacies of Four Continents* on the emergence of western liberalism via a relational archival reading of Asian “coolie” laborers. I too find it necessary to contextualize the systematic rootedness of “deportable-refugees” within larger processes of conquest and racialization. For without the rise of what Beth Riche calls the “prison-nation” or what Saidiya Hartman calls “the after-life of slavery,” the displacement of Southeast Asian refugees within narratives of salvation even while they become racialized in criminality would not be possible (Riche 2012; Hartman, 2007). So, how do the logics of black criminality and

white settlement map on to Asian labor? Through the state's power to criminalize which becomes germane to Asian racializing, we can begin to understand the collision and cohesion of US empire. My reading does not dive into the depths of relations of conquest that forms genocide and racial capitalism, but highlights the need to comprehend the how—or as Kim points out, “settler colonialism and military empire as an ensemble of relations that continually need to re-create and renovate themselves, for they are incomplete and unexhausted projects” (2018, p. 43). To begin a genealogically excavation of the remnants and detritus of the US empire within the context of Southeast Asian refugees, it is critical to grasp what binds the settler nation state together.

The United States judicial power to exile one from its national territory arises from anti-Chinese sentiment in the newly settled western frontier. The fictions of “yellow peril” and “alien invasions” would mark a larger racial legacy for the Asian American community. Nineteenth century xenophobia would lay the ideological and legal framework for the deportation of Southeast Asian refugees in the twenty-first century. On May 6th, 1882, the United States passed legislation that would fundamentally alter the racial makings of America: the Geary Act colloquially known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. It “marks a watershed in United States history. Not only was it the country's first significant restrictive immigration law; it was also the first to restrict a group of immigrants based on their race and class, and it thus helped to shape twentieth-century United States race-based immigration policy” (Lee, 2002, p. 36). Anti-Chinese rhetoric would reconfigure the settler-nation state after the Civil War through nativism and xenophobia. Using the settler-nation's execution of necropolitical modes of sovereignty, the US government sought to exclude, police, and surveil Asian American communities. These ideological processes of abjection would mark Chinese people, and

racialized immigrant populations at large, to be considered “dirty,” “savage,” and threats to the white hegemonic order (Shah, 2001).

Chinese laborers migrated to the United States to supplement the labor shortages resulting from the abolition of chattel slavery and to escape the horrid economic conditions brought by British imperialism. As Manu Karuka puts it: “To be a Chinese worker on the Central Pacific was definitively not to be a slave, the property of another. It was, however, a reduction to the status of a tool for grading earth and drilling a mountain. It was to be expendable, interchangeable, replaceable” (Karuka, 2019, p. 85). Chinese labor signals a new shift within the racial capitalist formation of the United States, insofar as “Chinese labor allegorizes the commensurating function of abstract labor that propels capitalism forward” (Day, 2016, p. 47). Yellow peril propaganda and Sinophobia produce and legitimize a framework of gendered racial hierarchies, as Chinese labor is critical to the settlement and “taming” of the Western frontier. During this time period within California “according to settler laws, whites could rob, harm, kidnap, rape and even murder blacks, Natives and Chinese immigrants without legal consequences” (Hernandez, 2017, p. 66). The assemblage of whiteness begins to cohere itself through white labor’s opposition towards newly emancipated Black folks and Chinese laborers. For European settlers, “‘whiteness’ became both a source of solidarity holding together many different immigrants and settlers and a powerful fetter to an effective working-class challenge to capitalism” (Kelley, 1999, p. 46).

With all that stated, there were a constellation of legal cases from Chinese laborers that sought to challenge xenophobic anti-Chinese laws. One critical case, *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* (1889), sought to litigate and challenge new anti-Chinese legislations, specifically the

Scott Act of 1888. Chae Chan Ping was a Chinese laborer who immigrated to the San Francisco, California in 1875. During his twelve-year-period within the United States, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, pushed by anti-Chinese sentiment rooted in the pathologization, dehumanization, and emasculation of Chinese laborers. Ping left the United States in 1887, departing on the steamship *Belgic* to Hong Kong. Before Ping returned to China, he got the proper documentation that complied with the Chinese Exclusion Act to ensure that his reentry to the United States would be successful, yet, in 1888 after a month-long voyage on the *Belgic* he was denied entry. While Ping was away in China, the United States passed the Scott Act of 1888. The act amended the Geary Act of 1882 that tightened restrictions on Chinese laborers by eliminating “Certificates of Return.” Ping and 20,000 Chinese laborers were placed in a state of legal ambiguity as the law passed while they were not in the United States. In 1887, Ping left the United States with a legal pathway of return, but in 1888 to his own surprise he too now was arbitrarily excluded. Ping ultimately lost his case within the Supreme Court. The court upheld that it is within the sovereign power of the settler-nation state to exclude, stating:

To preserve its independence, and give security against foreign aggression and encroachment, is the highest duty of every nation, and to attain these ends nearly all other considerations are to be subordinated. It matters not in what form such aggression and encroachment come, whether from the foreign nation acting in its national character, or from vast hordes of its people crowding in upon us. *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* 130 U.S. 581 (1889)

The Supreme Court goes on to state:

The power of exclusion of foreigners being an incident of sovereignty belonging to the government of the United States as a part of those sovereign powers delegated by the constitution, the right to its exercise at any time when, in the judgment of the government, the interests of the country require it, cannot be granted away or restrained on behalf of anyone. *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* 130 U.S. 581 (1889)

Exhibited in the ruling is a link between military empire and the immigration control. The Ping ruling highlights both the condition of Chinese, and more broadly Asian, racialization. It calls to attention the tensions of the settler-nation state and racial capitalism as ascribed upon Asian labor (Lowe, 1996). In a similar case, *Fong Yue Ting v. United States (1893)* sought to challenge the legality and expansion of necropolitical state within the Chinese Exclusion Act. Ting and two others sought to challenge the arrest and detainment as they argued it violated the United States constitution. In a split ruling, the court decided with immigrant detention and deportation, citing the fifth amendment of the constitution is not applicable. Justice Horace Gray wrote in the majority opinion that: “The order of deportation is not a punishment for crime. It is not a banishment, in the sense in which that word is often applied to the expulsion of a citizen from his country by way of punishment. It is but a method of enforcing the return” *Fong Yue Ting v. United States*, 149 U.S. 698 (1893). These two legal cases set the legal precedent for all immigration proceedings within the United States. We must be keen to point out the inherent racial and gendered dynamics within these proceedings. Fears of “yellow peril” are apparent within the decisions, thus, cementing de jure racial ideologies into law. It is the exclusion of these Chinese labors that continue to haunt U.S. immigration law today. As Historian Kelly Lytle-Hernandez writes:

It marked a crucial moment in the expansion of federal power and the assertion of settler sovereignty, enabling federal officials to forcibly remove noncitizens from the lands claimed by the United States. It puts an extraordinary portion power in the hands of white settlers in the U.S. west. (Hernandez, 2017, p. 79)

Settlement, conquest, and deportation all became interconnected process in which the settler-nation sought to naturalize itself. These discursive and material practices flourished with the more recent travel bans, mass deportations, and border wall construction. The non-citizen, more aptly racialized conceptions of the Asian immigrant such as the “forever foreign,” thus marks an abject foil to the white settlerhood, as to deny the Asian alien and allows for settlers to deepen their colonial claims to land, space, and place.

The constellation of these Chinese exclusion court cases creates the conditions of immigrant impossibilities within the settler-colonial imaginary. Asian American Studies scholars, more aptly those within the field of Southeast Asian/American Studies, need to begin conversations and inquires that question not only the US empire’s racialized and colonial war, but the settler-colonial formation from which it arises. Writing in response to indigenous feminist Haunani-Kay Trask within Hawai‘i, Candance Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura sought to tease out Asian American positionality and allyship in the occupied archipelago:

“Informed by the work of [Haunani-Kay] Trask and other Native scholars who critique the U.S. settler state, the contributors to Asian Settler Colonialism work collectively to examine Asian settler colonialism as a constellation of the colonial ideologies and practices of Asian settlers who currently support the broader structure of the U.S. settler state.” (Fujikane and Okamura, 2009, p. 6)

Asian Settler Colonialism pivots existing conversations within the field of Asian American Studies to call into question our participation within indigenous genocide. The historic Chinese exclusion court cases of Chae Chan Ping and Fong Yue Ting establish a legal precedent for settler law, but moreover the American immigration system, as Asian abjection is stationed within a larger colonial and racial master plan of the settler nation-state. In turn, within the larger scope of this project, how does the logic of settler colonialism discursively evolve and morph within the context of Southeast Asian refugees? The haunting of Chae Chan Ping and Fong Yue Ting lay the groundwork for the context of modern day Southeast Asian deportation. Statelessness is compounded by racialized violence which is crafted by the white-settler-state. Ewyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi calls this the “‘refugee settler’ condition, negotiating the vexed relationship between refugees absorbed into a settler colonial state and native peoples” (Lê Espiritu, 2019, p. 9). The settler body politic of assimilation/incorporation of Southeast Asian refugees under the guise of liberal humanitarianism denies native sovereignty through the naturalization of settler-law. For Southeast Asian refugees, the illiberalism in liberalism of white neoliberal governmentality subjectification would not be possible without their deportability (Das Gupta, 2019; Lytle-Hernandez, 2017). Deportability exists at the confluence of a “vexed relationship” of the imperial and carceral logics which propel the undercurrents of the US empire. Through immigration law, or settler claims for sovereignty, “The United States claims this space for itself to decide whom to settle on it and whom to expunge.” And as such, “[d]eportation needs to be understood as settler colonialism at work” (Das Gupta, 2019, p. 20).

What would Justice Horace Gray’s call for “return” look like when refugees have nowhere to return to? These conditions of racialized labor upholding the white body politic of the settler-state manifest with Southeast Asian refugees. Settler sovereignty and the rights they

offer to Southeast Asian “narrate indebtedness into imperial might” as the framework surrounding the rehabilitation of rights are red herrings, or movements towards “settler innocence,” which deny indigenous people claims of self-determination and sovereign mobility (Kim, 2018, p. 56; Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 3; Trask, 2000; Goeman, 2013; Trask, 2000). The settler-nations state static formulation of space through the commodification of land as property results in a continuation of colonial domination through the denial of relationalities and subjectivity. Within the next section, I examine two different Cambodian legal battles and provide context for refugee deportations. If settler logic formulates the materiality of the immigration law, the next section looks to highlight “the expansion of prisons as the self-preparation of power” (Walia, 2013 p. 60).

Cambodians, Courts, and the Carceral Regime

Among the impacted communities, Cambodian refugees are the longest-standing refugee population facing deportation from the United States. The deportation of Cambodians with minor criminal records was streamlined in 2002 when the Bush Administration convinced the nation of Cambodia to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), by which Cambodia agreed to accept deportees from the U.S. Motivated by post-9/11 calls to nation security, the Bush Administration sought to solidify the domestic sphere by eliminating threats. Hegemonic revitalization was marked by existing racial, class, and gendered boundaries. Bush’s “war on terror” rebound the nation-state through its newfound investment in its biopolitical panoptic potential to consolidate efforts to racialized others as deviant through the legal apparatus. Hegemonic reconfigurations of the nation resulted in what Genova calls the “Deportation regime” or, the militarized reordering of the settler-nation state on the bases of sovereignty,

security, and most importantly illegality, as it is the law that renders these discursive fictions into a material reality (Genova and Peutz, 2010).

Prior to 2002, Cambodian non-citizens were subjected to indefinite detention until paperwork with Cambodia could be finalized, as seen in *Kim Ho Ma vs. Ashcroft*. Kim Ho Ma was released from federal prison on good behavior on April 1, 1997, after serving a twenty-six-month prison sentence. Upon his release, Ma was detained by the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) in order to begin deportation proceedings to Cambodia. In Ma's case file, his lawyers write:

...the INS has been unable to remove him, and hundreds of others like him, because Cambodia does not have a repatriation agreement with the United States and therefore will not permit Ma's return. The question before us is whether, in light of the absence of such an agreement, the Attorney General has the legal authority to hold Ma, who is now twenty-two, in detention indefinitely, perhaps for the remainder of his life. [*Kim Ho Ma v. Ashcroft*, 257 F.3d 1095 (9th Cir. 2001)]

Ma's ninth circuit legal case challenged INS practices of indefinite detention all the way to the Supreme Court. At the same time, a similar battle was fought in a fifth circuit court case, *Zadvydas v. Davis* (533 U.S. 678 [2001]). As a result of *Zadvydas v. Davis*, the INS practice of indefinite detention was deemed in violation of the 14th Amendment. Since then, immigrant officials must provide documentation within the first 90 days of detainment to show that an individual's deportation is possible. As Lisa Cacho writes: "Ma's case would not be compelling at all if he could not be represented as rehabilitated, if gang membership was his present and not his past, if he had entered illegally rather than lawfully, or if his family had not fled Cambodia

under Pol Pot's regime" (Cacho, 2012, p. 63). In response to both the criminalization of communities of color and anti-Asian violence that targets Southeast Asian refugee youth, within the mid-80 and early 90's during the 2nd wave of refugee resettlement, refugee youth sought to band together through "gangs." Scholar Kevin Lam "critically examine[s] the dialectical relationship between large-scale forces like empire, immigration, war, and geopolitics with the particularities of youth gang formation" (Lam, 2015, p. 10). Lam finds there is a high causal relationship with post-traumatic stress disorder and urban schooling for racialized youth. The school operates through "proliferating warfare technologies" to criminalized and subjectify youth of color, as they have not been situated with the zone of universality, i.e. whiteness (Rodríguez, 2010, p. 152). Southeast Asian youth who are still coping with war-time trauma are faced with forms of quotidian violence in that "schools and streets are highly contentious and dangerous spaces" that youth must navigate (Lam, 2011 p. 11). For Southeast Asian refugee youth, specifically Vietnamese youth, "[g]ang formation also has diasporic and national effects" they disrupt our understanding of what it means to be a gang, as a criminalized figure, through its counter-hegemonic kinship (Lam, 2012, p. 4; Lam, 2014). All this to say that within the study of youth criminalization, Asian American gangs offer a different kinship structure than those of Latinx and Black youth. This is not to say that "youth gangs" do not commit harm, but rather it calls for a deeper sociological investigation rather than an essentialized criminal figure. Simply put, gangs offer up a space of belonging and structure to process the enduring system of white supremacy. Gangs are neither inherently bad nor good, but rather offer up a form of non-normative kinship.

In the summer of 2001, critical consciousness around Southeast Asian deportation began to hit a critical mass with the news of Kim Ho Ma. A need to contextualize the social, political,

and economic issues of Southeast Asian within the larger landscape arose; as a result, a national formation was critical. Chhaya Choum a youth organizers within the Bronx remembers:

At that time we started hearing about the deportations of our people and then Kim Ho Ma winning the case, and then the secret patrician agreement [...] For us, that shifted our entire thinking around what we needed to do because we were like, "Damn, we can't fight this alone in the Bronx. This must be happening everywhere around the country." So, we called folks and they came. We met for four days in the Bronx in that church, that nunnery, that building that CAAAV bought, and then committed to continue building with each other. That's the birth of Southeast Asian Freedom Network.

The post-9/11 environment facilitated the United States' ability to sign what Choum calls "the secret repatriation agreement" between the US and Cambodia. In response, during the summer 2002, YLP sent out letters to fellow youth organizers to form a national response to Cambodian deportations. The only people to answer this call were Cambodian and Hmong folks from across the United States who met the Bronx at CAAAV for a "Freedom Training." The initial formations of today's largely established Southeast Asian grassroots organizations participated within said "Freedom Trainings." This brought people with final orders of removal, youth, women, and queer folks to discuss collectively issues pertaining to the Southeast Asian community. The meeting would result in the formation of the SEAFN which "led to the centrality of their leadership in their local communities and in larger coalitional formations" (Dao, 2012, p. 8). Kabzuag Vaj spoke about the major political interventions that occurred at the Freedom Training:

You got to be an organizing entity, you got to be Southeast Asians, you got to be young. And at that time, we already had queer folks, and so like you have to be from the

community most impacted. I remember students, Cambodian students or Southeast Asian students who wanted to be a part of it and were like, "No, you've got to be grassroots and you got to be community based." That's how basically like these principles of who we are and what we would focus on and deportation has been always front and center.

Three major united principles guided the formation of SEAFN: 1) the lived experiences of Southeast Asian refugees 2) the political power of youth of color 3) grassroots organizing. Vaj continues:

Yeah, so I think that the deportation issues, the welfare reform stuff has always been part of the moments of why do we need a SEAFN? Why do we need a SEAFN when we already had a SEARAC [Southeast Asian Resource Action Center]? I think this is the question that people don't know. Because we saw the SEARAC as a MA [Mutual Assistance Agency] and not as radical and the SEAFN was like we're organizers, and you have to organize to be part of this membership.

Through the radical efforts of Southeast Asian refugee youth, a critical integration of citizenship and liberal democratic institutions occurs. As a result of these early meetings the first national day of action in response to Southeast deportation was organized in 2002 for August 3rd to 5th. Within the early 2000's there was a need to shift the political conversation within the Southeast Asian community to go beyond the reliance of narratives that were spewed out and disconnected from non-profit agencies.

The formation of SEAFN thus provides a significant addition to the field of critical youth studies. The field of critical youth studies examines how young people shape and interact with the sociopolitical world. It particularly focuses on youth resistance towards hegemonic structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For scholars within the field of youth studies, the category

of youth becomes as salient as other identity categories. As Kwon writes, youth “were deemed an important category of care as future leaders and as subjects of state benevolence; but in exercising their political power, they held little sway” (Kwon, 2012, p. 739). Kwon tracks the work of one of the earlier SEAFN organizations, Asian/Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL), located within San Francisco. Southeast Asian youth, particularly the 1.5 generation Cambodians in the early 2000’s, ban together and question the limits of legality, citizenship, and nation-states. Southeast Asian youth within AYPAL and other SEAFN organizations witness the carceral configurations of both schools and the state. Critical connections develop through the lived realities of the school-to-prison-pipeline (STPP). Kabzuag Vaj states:

[I]t was like a pipeline of you're gangbangers at school now, but it really started as a fight and then it went on to being profiled in the streets. I remember having just doing this, how Freedom, Inc started, it was really collecting 100 racial profiling testimonies of Southeast Asian young people.

Southeast Asian youth organizers could not push for the end of the STPP without simultaneously organizing around final orders of removal, as deportations lay at the end in the near future.

For Vaj, non-profits such as SEARAC and other MA’s who served the Southeast Asian community lacked an understanding about the realities that youth of color faced within America.

Vaj continues:

I think that our framing because we were more radical than the AMAs, from a very early on and even now in the deportation movement or the immigration movement, we were the very first. I remember because I was part of that to say" Fuck that, it don't matter what your crime is, deportation is a double jeopardy punishment. On top of that, we will not let

you SEARAC or any of the other organizations talk about deportation, talk about the good immigrant and the bad immigrant."

The constant erasure of youth within these deeply ingrained political conversations resulted in the stagnation and development of social possibilities. This recalls one of the critical pillars of SEAFN's 7 paths, briefly mentioned within the intro, of "Youth Power": to "[b]uild the power of young people to confront and challenge systems of power". In SEAFN's perspective, youth of color are critical to build refugee futurist orientation.

Crimmigration practices also have a gendered component in that Southeast Asian women who are at risk of deportation often face compounding forms of violence. Campaigns by advocacy groups Asian Americans Advancing Justice and Survived+Punished to free Cambodian refugee Ny Nourn (#FreeNy!) illustrate this dynamic:

[When] Ny turned 18, her boyfriend killed the boss at her after-school job in a fit of jealousy. The murder went unsolved for three years until Ny went to the police. After providing a confession, Ny was arrested and charged with aiding and abetting murder. A judge sentenced Ny to life without the possibility of parole. (Survived + Punished, 2018)

Nourn survived a long-term relationship with an abusive partner. The court, however, refused to see her as either a victim or survivor, judging her instead as a criminal, an "aggravated felon" (Richie, 2015: 271). Nourn was fortunate to have the support of a community of organizers who fought alongside her for her freedom. On November 9, 2017, after serving sixteen years in prison and ten months in ICE detention, Nourn was released on bond. For the past three years, Nourn has been a major advocate for survivors, formerly incarcerated people, and people impacted by deportation. She was awarded the 2018 Yuri Kochiyama Fellowship at the Asian Law Caucus

and continues to work as an anti-deportation advocate with the Caucus. Nourn's case highlights how different forms of violence are compounded through crimmigration practices. Not only did she endure the physical violence of her abuser, she was made responsible for his violence, sentenced to jail for it, served time, and was then threatened with deportation. Each step added additional trauma to that of being subjected to the original violence of her abuser.

Southeast Asians deportation and detainment is a form of gender violence. Gendered and racialized captures by the carceral state forge the pathways for removal. The operation of the carceral state is rooted in an anti-black gendered process that dates back to enslavement; as Hartman points out, the law and criminality is constructed through the schema and fungibility of black women (Hartman, 1997). As Southeast Asian refugees are thrust into a larger American phenomenon such as Black urban poverty, criminality becomes relationally constructed. As Richie writes: "Our work needs to be reframed as a movement against the patriarchal carceral state that is so dangerous to so many people. It needs to include tearing down the architecture of racism and the related forms of oppression upon which that carceral state is built" (Richie, 2015, p. 272). With conversations surrounding deportation, the conversation is dominated by men of color erasing the experience of women of color who are detained. An abolitionist feminist approach shifts the conversation to larger discussions of economic, gender, racial, and social justice. Highlighting and centering stories like Nourn begins to unsettle the opaque process of the patriarchal carceral state.

The deportation of refugees is a fundamental violation of human rights and constitutional law. International refugee law premises that refugees cannot be forcibly sent back to the country they are fleeing; this is known as "non-refoulement" (Southeast Asian Resource Action Center,

2018). In addition, many of these deportees were born stateless. They were born in refugee camps, not the nation-states they are “returned” to. As political scientist Khatharya Um writes, “While the idea of ‘repatriation’ is rooted in the dual concepts of ‘return to ‘one’s natal source,’ these embedded notions are problematized by the fact that most of the young deportees were born in cross-border refugee camps... ‘return’ is, in fact, exile” (2012 p. 845). Their lives are rooted in a refugee identity and legal status.

Specifically, the disjunctures within the crimmigration system, especially surrounding the term “aggravated felony,” highlight the unconstitutionality of the 1996 immigration laws. Many deportees are transferred immediately from prison to ICE detention centers. The case of Ny Nourn serves as an example of this. She was paroled by former California Governor Jerry Brown. As far as the criminal legal system was concerned, then, she had served her time. Yet, instead of being allowed to reenter civil society, she was detained by immigration officials. As a result of the initial crime, the state had the right to revoke Ny’s status as Long-term Permanent Resident (LPR), and to label her a criminal alien. Under AEDPA and IIRIRA, serving a criminal sentence constitutes a basis for deportability. Thus, the deportation places the individual in “double jeopardy.” The Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits an individual from being punished for the same crime twice. Nourn and other Southeast Asian refugees are punished, first, by incarceration, and then by deportation. They endure punitive measures both by the criminal justice system and the immigration system. To counter Judge Gray’s antiquated argument, deportation is undeniably a form of punishment in this context (Hing, 2005). A life-sentence into exile may be described as “cruel and unusual punishment,” but for refugees, who are already in exile from their birth country, deportation becomes an instance of double

exile, for the post-colonial state and the settler-state, recirculating the normalcy of state-sanctioned violence.

“Deportable-Refugees” Conditions of Disposability

Southeast Asian refugee-deportation as a political site represents imperial traces of an on-going tautology of freedom. This thesis seeks to relationally examine what I call a condition of “deportable-refugees.” As examined above, Kim Ho Ma and Ny Nourn’s deportability stems from the expansion and entwining of systems that make up the deportation regime. Pulling back further from these individual cases, I ask: how do we begin to grapple with these new forms of social precarity? I argue that the condition of “deportable-refugees” is in fact germane to the ways in which neoliberal policies have manufactured/formulated the precariousness of Southeast Asian refugees’ sociality. The figure of “deportable-refugee” coheres to the racialized colonial genocidal project that is the American nation-state through a symbolic militarized-imperial-amnesia insofar as the condition of deportability exceptionalizes and displaces the nation-state’s responsibility for the American War in Southeast Asia/Second Indochina War upon post-colonial subjects. Within this section, I engage with critical immigration studies scholars in order to contextualize the “deportability” of refugees as a larger condition of neoliberal disposability brought by US empire. Refugees are made deportable or abjected as they are not meeting their necropolitical function within the racial and colonial taxonomy within US empire. I argue that all Southeast Asian refugees can be made disposable if they become the “bad refugee” or begin to refuse the debts of empire.

Deportation reflects the socio-legal process of the settler-nation’s hegemonic mastery over legal/illegal, immigrant/settler, and citizen/non-citizen, yet how do we tease out the textured

complexities of Southeast Asian refugee deportability? Going back to the title of this chapter, *nirtes* or the Khmer word to describe the phenomenon of deportation can provide lingo-epistemological insight into the discursive conditions of deportation. While seemingly mundane, the process of translation here provides a glimmer of Feminist Refugee Epistemologies (FRE) possibilities, as FRE examines the opaque undercurrent of refugee social life. Translation as a methodological practice gives way to socio-poetics within the human condition. As Walter Benjamin writes, “Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to our answer. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 255). Translation provides onto-epistemological undercurrent modes of relation. Translation is a linguistic space of intimacy and hybridity. Thus, the translation of the Khmer word *nirtes* holds Cambodian diasporic possibilities. *Nirtes* or *Nirteih* are different English phonetic spellings of the word used by the Cambodian community to describe deportation. The word *nirtes* in its literal translation means 1) exile, banishment; 2) to exile, banish. *Nirtes* is both a verb and a noun; it is a process and state of being. The father of postcolonial thought Edward Said teases out critical distinctions and boundaries between the terms of exile and refugees within his essay “Reflections on Exile.” Said in this essay centrally examines the experiences of displaced Palestine people by the Zionist movement, which stems from his own lived experiences as a Palestinian in exile. He writes:

Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word "refugee" has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent

international assistance, whereas "exile" carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality. (Said, 2000, p. 144)

Said's delineations between "exile" and "refugee" illuminates the socio-poetics interplaying within the lived conditions of people like Kim Ho Ma and Ny Nourn. "Exile" invokes a pre-modern punitive practice of shunning, while in contrast, "refugee" signifies the hegemonic orderings of liberal modernity, specifically international law and human rights. For Said, to be in exile is to be marked by "a disorientation loss by creating a new world to rule" (Said, 2000, p. 144). This linguist space of translation, i.e the transference of nirtes to deportation, reveals the banishment-as-punishment logic of how the US treats refugees; and therefore, it gives way to new political horizons. Thus, to critically-juxtapose the term "deportable" and "refugee" within a Southeast Asian context is to grasp the incommensurable processes of militarized empire building. As Yen Le Espiritu defines critical juxtaposition as "the bringing together of seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and space in order to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about that contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire" (Espiritu, 2014, p. 22). Henceforth, the critical-juxtaposing of "deportable-refugee" is a gesture that seeks to fracture the the logic of illiberalism in liberalism through an inquiry into the US empire's disparate "relations of conquest" (King, 2019, p. 8). Moreover, the "deportable-refugee" interrogates liberalism and freedom as mere facades of racial and colonial governance. The figure and condition of the deportable-refugee is emblematic of new critical scholarship that is being produced within feminist abolitionist thought, critical refugee studies, and Asian Americans.

The phenomenon of deportable refugees is not only isolated to Southeast Asian communities but extends to indigenous Central American refugees seeking asylum at the US-Mexico border, Pacific Island communities fleeing militarized fabrication of environmental catastrophes, and Haitians grappling with colonial indebtedness in the Caribbean. Similar yet distinct to the Southeast Asian experience would be East African refugees fleeing from countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan, whose crisis has resulted from failed imperial foreign policy efforts at the hand of the United States.

The “deportable-refugee” is situated at the point of impossibility made coherent through the contradictions of liberal western modernity. The condition of “the deportable-refugee” reflects the incommensurability of empire, relations of conquest, and the intimacies of four continents in that the site of refugees shows not a static legal category but rather a sociogenic condition always in fluctuation at the whims of empire. Speaking about deportations, Chuoms states:

We know how to create roots, but we know how to also develop the practice of being uprooted. Even the deportation work, our folks prepare to be separated. I actually know how to do it really well and that fucking freaks me out, because even when we go to court and see family members going through that mourning and crying process, and then I see amazing resiliency, and I'm like, "Shit. Our people have been practicing to be separated." It's always to be ready for loss and tragedy.

Here, loss and tragedy signify the rerouted dreams of decolonization that was shifted by United States military intervention and the false promise of refuge (Man, 2016; Nguyen 2019). The loss

or ontological condition of refugees manifest a colonial “lack — homeless specters, abject outsiders, identityless mass, or wastes of globalization” (Nguyen, 2019, p. 113). Her response to the significance of Southeast Asian refugee deportation mediates on the question: “When does a refugee stop being a refugee?” (Nguyen, 2019, p. 112). Choum critically questions the settler-nation state’s multicultural practices. For Southeast Asian refugees, separation, and the threat of separation, loom. Deportability or the imminent threat and risk of deportation is at the core of the militarized deportation regime. As Genova writes in the context of migrant labor from Latin America, “It is deportability, and not deportation per se, that has historically rendered undocumented migrant labor a distinctly disposable commodity” (Genova, 2003, p. 438). In turn, Choum’s questioning of the promises of multicultural liberalism provides a path “to engage politically and theoretically in renewed ways with questions of freedom, in one of its most basic and meaningful senses: the freedom to traverse space and to make a place for oneself in the world” (Peutz and Genova, 2010, p. 3). Refugees never have the ability to find refuge as they are always unsettled by the need to flee from both the carceral and imperial apparatus. Deportability embodies the condition of limbo that 17,000 Southeast Asian refugees with final orders of removal embody. People with final orders must appear for routine checks without knowing whether or not on that day they will leave the I.C.E building. The process of check-in with I.C.E. marks the nation-state’s panoptic control upon immigrant/refugees’ lives. If the legal threat of deportation looms upon the figure of Southeast Asian refugees “there is thus an epistemological gap between the restrictive UNHCR conceptualization of refugee, which many states depend on to develop policy and establish legality, and the embodied experience of refuge” (Nguyen, 2019,

p. 114). For refuge as a spatial condition collides with the legal framings, thus denying the lived reality of decolonial possibilities for refugees.

The deportability of Southeast Asian refugees marks an unsettled, lingering, and unresolved loss that stems from the necropolitical formation of the category of refugee. It is operationalized in that the nation-state's maintenance of Cambodian refugees operates as an aphasic response to the American War in Southeast Asia, but also doubles as move towards "settler- innocence." As Harsha Walia writes, "By invoking the [settler] state itself as a victim, migrants them-selves are cast as illegals and criminals who are committing an act of assault on the state" (Walia, 2013, p. 54). For Cambodian refugees, war had severed ancestral connections with space and people; yet, it is through both the forever foreigner status and legal precarity of the 1.5 generation that figures Southeast Asians refugees as "impossible subject[s]" (Ngai, 2004). Cambodian refugees are deportable because their existence is an uncanny reminder of the imperial violence in Southeast Asia that delegitimizes the nation-state project of liberal democracy. For Cambodian refugees to harm the sanctity of the illusion of the settler-state, they are outcast and incarcerated within new systems of discipline and punishment i.e. immigration detention facilities, or the newest expansion within the carceral empire.

Operationalized through "imperial statecraft," the US settler-state makes refugee memories, and moreover social life, illegible and unintelligible to deliberately deny citizenship and humanity, to disavow the haunting brought by American intervention (Kwon, 2012, p. 752). The Southeast Asian, or more specifically Cambodian "deportable-refugee," is only made possible through a diasporic figuration that traces empire. The Cambodian deportee in turn articulates an Asian as a forever foreigner, but more critically, this figure highlights how the

hegemonic operations of the national reorder are intertwined with sovereignty, (im)migration, and diaspora. The US-Cambodia Repatriation Agreement or MOU reframes deportation as mutuality and foreign policy, for its goal is to “enhance cooperative and friendly relations between the two states on the basis of respect for each State's sovereignty, and on the basis of equality and mutual interest.” Yet, the hegemonic national order’s “primary objective of effecting the return of each other's nationals to their home state” overwrites the question of where the “home” for refugees might be. Home can not be determined by hegemonic actors. Refugees continue to be a collateral subaltern group as their interests are never counted. Rather, they are being subsumed under larger hegemonic interests of the nation-state.

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Chapter 2: មេគង្គ (Mekong): Mapping Queer Southeast Asian Watery Futures

Intro: “Militarized Currents” and the Mekong

To be a writer of ghost stories, to fight for a past that has been repressed to make this past come alive in the present, my task □ our task □ is in Gordon’s words “to follow the scrambled trail that the ghost leaves, picking up its pieces, and setting them down else were.”

□ Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts*

[T]ransgenerational haunting demonstrates how a silenced trauma can become a dynamic force □ one that produces “countermemory,” disruptions, articulations, visibilities, assemblages, and new configurations of kinships.

□ Grace Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*

We all split into small groups, shifting into different areas of the large room within the church. Each group of varying ages, genders, and class has been tasked with mapping out and conceptualizing our place within the Mekong. Elders who spoke minimal English worked with youths who lacked their ancestral language. Yet within this space, diasporic openings allowed for interconnection and intimacy across generations. With our old Crayola markers, we began to place and write ourselves into history. Each group was given a different particular sub-section of the river. While helping to facilitate the logistics for the “family reunion” I also wished to participate within a small group. After a bit of waddling around, checking in with folks, and cleaning, I joined a random group.

Pulling from both my own experiences as an organizer within the SEAFN and archival material I have collected such as photos, documents, and oral hxstories, I seek to theorize the Mekong River exercise. No matter where SEAFN meets, whether it is at the yearly family

reunion, formerly known as a freedom school, or a national convening such as the National Queer Asian Pacific Island Association conference, we hold space for those who have come before us through the Mekong River. This chapter seeks to map out the political efforts of the SEAFN within the United States. First, I engaged in a discussion around oral history and critical refugee studies to understand how history is a placemaking process. Second, I elaborate on the Mekong River as a water-based analytic for remapping forms of refuge outside of the nation-state structure. Mulling over the fields of queer theory and critical refugee studies I argue that SEAFN's heuristic of the Mekong River produces queer Southeast Asian futurities. Third, I connect SEAFN's Mekong River exercise to Vietnamese refugee Bao Phi's story in *A Different Pond* in order to further situate this analytic within the Twin Cities, the space in which I organize and write. Pulling from the fields of black geography, critical indigenous studies, and critical refugee studies, this chapter explores how the SEAFN Mekong River exercise is a (re)mapping and counter-hegemonic practice of refugee subject making. As indigenous feminist Mishuana Goeman's close reading of Native American literary texts reveals the erasures and violence of settler-colonialism within Turtle Island, I am interested in how practices of mapping can surface the haunting undercurrent of colonization. Although focusing on two very distinct groups, Southeast Asian refugees and Native American communities, my aim with exploring Southeast Asian historiographies is to locate moments of relational possibility through a critique of settler-geographies, the nation-state, and borders. As Goeman writes; "(Re)mapping, as a powerful discursive discourse with material groundings, rose as the principal method in which I would address the unsettling of imperial and colonial geographies" (Goeman, 2013, p. 3). (Re)mapping and the demarcation of "spatial subjectivities" within the Mekong River facilities rupture within US empire as a temporal site of refuge (Goeman, 2013, p. 11). To (re)map the

Mekong is to imagine futures for Southeast Asian refugees through intimacies that cross racial and gendered boundaries. The said remapping process signifies the Mekong as a utopian spatiality of refuge. Although this project might seem very cumbersome and tumultuous, much of this archival work was already compiled by organizers on the ground.

Returning to the story above, I was met with smiles seeing old friends as I sat on the cold hardwood floor of the church. As I was the last to join the group while they were just finished getting settled, I was chosen to share first. Our sections of the river were about Khmer Krahom (Khmer Rouge Killing Fields) and refugee resettlement. I was a bit at a loss for words so early in the morning to find an adequate answer. I wanted to be both authentic and not sound stupid. Second generation refugees, like myself, often spoke about different exercises than the mings, pou, yiey, and tas' (older folks). So, I, like my other second gen folks within the group, retold stories and memories that our elders and ancestors told us. Although we did not personally experience the violence of war firsthand, empire runs in our blood. Stories evoked the memories and spirits of loved ones who we did not know. A form of vulnerability and kinship flourished through a shared collective history, memory, and trauma. While sharing, people did not have to qualify their stories. Individuals did not have to wade through whiteness and the baggage it brings, but rather sit within their truths. This form of radical vulnerability allowed for more grounded and generative political conversations pertaining to the Southeast Asian refugee community.

When it came to my turn to share and place my family upon the Mekong, I spoke about my great grandmother. I personally do not know much about her. In my faint memory she was a fun-loving grey-haired Khmer woman. Many of the stories I know about her is filtered through other people as she passed away in 2000 when I was still a toddler. I reiterated what I was told.

My family not only suffered from the “American War” in Southeast Asia, but Vietnamese and French colonization itself, sought to sever her connection with home. I told the group about how my yieys fled the most Southern region of Cambodia, Takeo, to escape Japanese occupation of the region.

I said, “She was, is, Khmer Krom... but we aren’t anymore”.

Other folks began speaking about their own life experiences. Khao-I-Dang recirculated within many of the conversations. Some even went as far as wearing apparel representative of where they are from. Pos and Bongs wore shirts and hats embroidered with “Cambodia” and “Made in Khao-I-Dang.” Whether we physically passed through the refugee camp, were born there, or had ancestor rest there upon searching for refuge, Khao-I-Dang was present within our story. Khao-I-Dang was the largest Cambodian refugee camp on the border between Northern Cambodia and Thailand. Khao-I-Dang, which was overseen by both the United Nations and the Thai government, was a processing camp in which stateless people waited to be gifted asylum, or state sanctioned life.

The one-point-five generation refugees spoke about being born on the border. They spoke about what it meant to have a stateless childhood. For them, the routined surveillance of the refugee camp was normal. It was neither inherently good nor bad. They remembered the heat of the harsh sun on their brown skin. They felt the dry dusty dirt on their tiny feet, remembered memories of laughter, playing with swollen buddha bellies, and climbing on trees while lice did the same within the jungles of their hair. One person within my group, Akra² said, “I was born in Khao-I-Dang. The children played. It was fun. It was all I knew.” We all continued to write on the river. In a thick midwestern accent, Akra wrote, “I was born in neither Thailand nor

² (name was changed for confidential reasons)

Cambodia. Khao-I-Dang. And, they tried to send me back. How can I return to a place I have never been?" Akra's case was not an isolated one. There are tens of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees (Cambodians, Lao, and Vietnamese) born within Thai-border camps after the end of the American War.

Nearing the end of the activity we were offered up post-it notes to place upon the river to transition from our small groups to a larger discussion. A small ten-minute break was offered up to folks to decompress and reflect in private. People went to the bathroom. Parents and baby enthusiasts ran over to the childcare area to peek into the elementary-age youths (10 and below). Even while we were approaching very heavy topics, we offered up movements of lightness, as a critical aspect of the family reunion and SEAFN is finding a sense of joy and hope within precarity. Statelessness does not inherently equate to suffering. While Cambodian refugees suffered from imperial and bureaucratic violence, there was still agency and life within the camps. We continued to exercise. People began writing down their individual history within the larger historical arc of the river. They wrote down their babies' birth, college graduations, and

passing of loved ones. Like the real river, the Mekong became full of foliage and life.



Figure 1: Photo of 9th SEAFN family reunion in 2018, hosted by Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM) in Providence Rhode Island. “Movement OG’s” writing themselves into history upon the Mekong River. On the floor left to right is Kazbauj Vaj, Chhaya Choum, and Sarath Soung. Photo courtesy of Kaleb Hawj Queer Justice Coordinator at Freedom Inc.

Our ancestors and ourselves are in the river. This is our family’s hxstory. Our hxstory.



Figure 2: Photo from SEAFN’s 10th family reunion in 2019, hosted by Khmer Girls in Action (KGA) in Long Beach California. SEAFN during their family reunion is conducting their

“Mekong River ” exercises, which highlight Southeast Asian Hxstory, political organizing, and storytelling.

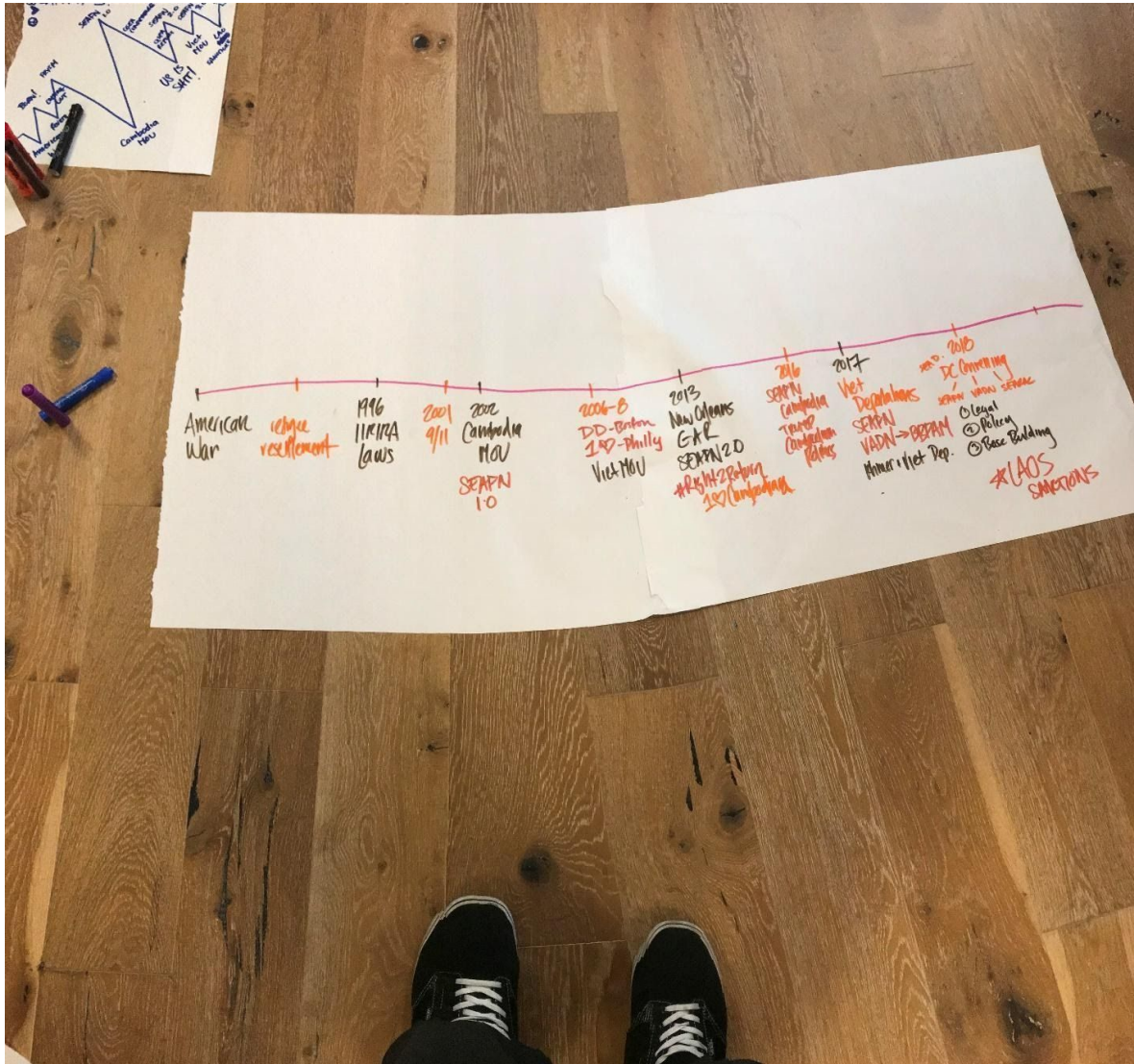


Figure 3: Photo of SEAFN’s Mekong River at NQAPIA 2018.

This chapter fluctuates between historiographic and auto-ethnographic methods of inquiry. The ebbs and flows in which the Mekong River conveys sociological life is more than representational, but rather is a diasporic demarcation of space through water. Within the

pan-ethnic heterogeneous category of Southeast Asian refugees, the Mekong River and its water hold different semiotic understandings but provides a grounding and symbolic heuristic space of interconnection, interaction, and intimacy for Southeast Asian refugees to begin a demilitarization of empire. The SEAFN Mekong River mapping activity “signals how militarization operates across temporal and spatial boundaries, as contemporary military technologies are informed by past and projected imperialist imperatives” (Shigematsu and Camacho, 2010, p. xv).

Organizing, Storytelling, and Placemaking

As an organizer, I find oral histories act as a device to facilitate Southeast Asian refugee (re)memberance: the ability to narrate and (re)-write themselves into history. I want to emphasize that I am not a historian. I am not trained in the discipline of history. I do not know shit about historical methods. What I am is an organizer, who moves and builds bases of people. I am someone who grew up in movements and formed my political orientation on the ground with women, elders, and youths. I am what some folks in the Southeast Asian Freedom Network like to call a “movement-scholar.” I understand myself as someone occupying space within the University in the fleeting present, but it is not my future as my heart beats with the movement. Here within this project, while sorting through the stories, I seek to “organize” the mess of the archive; this is not to say I “straighten” the archive, but to frame what is occurring within. These distinctions are critical in forming, framing, and articulating my scholarly work. While looking through my own journals, that have now become auto-ethnographic notes, my methodological practice seeks to build on the existing theoretical experimentation within the Mekong River exercises. I seek to interject myself not only as a scholar, but as an individual who is participating within a larger political project. Narcissistic it may sound, my own

auto-ethnographic account provides additional sociological scaffolding to the inner workings of SEAFN. Although this chapter intends to narrate Southeast Asian refugee political organizing, within it exists an inherent dialectics brought on by the Mekong River exercises. Put differently, this chapter is both of and not of the Mekong River itself.

In *Bodies of Evidence*, Alamilla Body and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez call this practice of oral histories one of “body based knowing.” It is a relational erotic encounter to conduct, as they write, “a bond, friendship, or political commitment[...]it adds a level of intimacy-as-trust, with both narrator and research being more to one another than is the case during an exchange between two oral history collaborators who simply do not understand what it means to occupy similar positions” (Boyd & Ramirez, 2012, p. 9). Southeast Asian refugee precarity and resistance provide the grounding in which the oral hxstory formaltes erotic spaces. Oral hxstories provide an avenue to embrace the inherent erotic space that is liberation work. As Audre Lorde writes, “For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings” (Lorde, 2007, p. 56). Thus, I use the term hxstory instead of history as a simple gesture to think about the placemaking process within the Mekong River. Hxstory alludes to how central cis-hetero-patriarchy is to the larger cannon of social science. Hxstory is meant to be more than a liberal representative iconographic gesture. Analyzing my own auto-ethnographic accounts as an organizer within the network and oral hxstory interviews I conducted with members from SEAFN, I examine the role of women, femmes, queers, and trans people within Southeast anti-deportation organizing, specially feminized stories relegated to silence. Through teasing out the sociological texture within an interview with Chhaya I engage in a “feminist refugee

epistemology” by “seek[ing] out the stories and lives that are not publicized but are nevertheless there” (Espirtu and Duong, 2018, p. 611). I am not attempting to essentialize all oral histories as a decolonial counter-hegemonic practice, but rather *my* oral histories reflect more than data.

These oral histories are place-making processes in pedagogically parallel with the practice of the Mekong River.

I remember sitting at the dark wood-stained dining room table on the third floor of a New York row house. Sounds from the bustling city were oozing into the apartment. Upstairs we could hear Chhaya’s other family members cooking and chatting with the children. We had just come back to Chhaya’s apartment in the Bronx after a long three day working-planning retreat in Queens for Mekong NYC, the organization she leads. Kaylee, Chhaya’s 19 year old Puerto-Rican-Cambodian daughter, and my good friend, was rushing all over the house. She was freaking out as she did not know what to wear! Not in a superficial way, but in a diasporic stressful way. My visit to the Bronx over the 2019 Halloween weekend was not only stressful for the Black and Brown children of the neighborhood attempting to maximize their candy yields, but it marked a week before a mass three week long Cambodian American activist trip to the Srok Khmer. It would be Kaylee’s first time going to Cambodia. Her anxiety of not knowing what to pack was very understandable! Chhaya attempted to calm her down the way only a loved one could. There was laughter in the air. I remember being kind of envious as I was supposed to be on that trip! But, I was not able to swing it with my teaching schedule at UCLA. After finally getting settled a little past noon, I was able to conduct an oral history interview with Chhaya Chhoum. In order to articulate deeper conversations on how narrative provides a place making process for racialized refugees. For the field of public history, oral histories provide a coveted space in which language articulates the “narratives of the past” (Portelli, 2017, p. 23). As Italian

Historian Alessandro Portelli writes; “Though oral history may avail itself of all other recognized and unrecognized genres of oral discourse, from the proverb to the epic poem, yet it is distinct from them all, both for its composite internal structure (a genre of genres), and for its peculiar cultural positioning.” (Portelli, 2017, p. 25). Through Southeast Asians narration of personhood and place, refugees realize “their potential to be at the forefront of forging new formations of political existence and community” (Nguyen, 2019, p. 122).

Chhaya alludes to the significance of narrative and storytelling and its political power within my interview. When describing her childhood in the refugee camp(s), she recalls:

So, my parents would go every day to a hutted office to see if your name, if you got sponsored, they'll list all your names and then you would get excited. People waited years and years because sometimes they didn't pass the interview, because you said something wrong. You know, you said your name wrong or your birthday was wrong. Practicing your story was also something that we did often. I just thought it was normal.

In order to achieve the promises of liberal democratic freedom and escape from the geography of the refugee camp, children and their families had to make subjectivities legible to the international hegemonic order and its regime of refugee management. Chhoum and her family traveled both through Khao-I-Dang and the Philippines Refugee Processing Center in order to seek refuge within the United States. For Chhaya, life in the refugee camp revolved around the ability to express one’s intelligibly of personhood for empire. The poetics of personhood is mediated by a convergence of the settler-nation-state and racial capitalism, necessitating a conscious investment in the rendering of one’s familial archive. To receive the “gift of freedom” is to be subjected by liberal empire; a process which is not only a historical revision, but an

onto-epistemological recuperation into the racial colonial category of the human. This is indicative at the start of the interview, when stating mundane biographic facts, Chhaya goes, “I am 41 years old on paper, but 40 in real life”. Liberal empire creates and formulates a fiction of refugees as “becoming human is the struggle of life practices, the struggle for the living” (Tadiar, 2006, p. 96). The materiality and the texture of the deportable-refugee is expressed through its extraction of value and life from refugees. Chhaya’s distinction between “on paper” and “real life” offers up a space/moment in which the fictions of liberal empire can be fractured through refugee remembrance. Refugee stories are embodiments of what empire attempts to erase. The psyche of the imperial project then is one of inherent contradiction, hypocrisy, and denial. As Khatharya Um writes: “No longer just a geographical location, the Southeast Asia in America, both in its tragedies and in its valiance, becomes a signifier for the living legacies of war, genocide, forced severance, and, not the least, the indomitable human capacity for resilience.” (Um, 2012, p. 837). These negotiations of personhood requires constant contestation with both the imperial and carceral state. Southeast Asian refugees temporally and spatially become corporeal manifestations of realities and aftermath of the US empire in the neoliberal era. Chhoum’s individual story reflects a larger arc within Southeast Asian refugee counter-narratives, through an injection of self and memory.

Queering the Mekong: Mapping out refugee futures

The Southeast Asian Freedom Network (SEAFN) has been conducting grassroots organizing for around twenty years within the United States. As highlighted in the last chapter, SEAFN’s formation was brought by Southeast Asian youth who were grappling with the incommensurabilities of the imperial and carceral state. Organizers move with the tides of political moments. SEAFN was originally a collection of Southeast Asian youths who were

organizing within their own respective communities to discuss the looming threat of Cambodian deportation. As Loan Thi Dao writes, SEAFN political tactics signify, it is “a new generation of organizations and movement leaders who enter these sites out of the historical legacy of the Asian American movement” (Dao, 2009, p. 216). Dao’s focus is what I would deem as the first wave or iteration of the social justice organizing network. Like Dao’s work, this chapter is not focused on dictating whether community organizing or social movements were a success or a failure, but rather it documents and examines the systems of knowledge that lay the groundwork for these political movements. This section explicitly looks back towards my auto-ethnographic accounts of the Mekong River heuristic in order to frame SEAFN’s political imaginary rooted in a queer Southeast Asian refugee ontology. Put differently, refuge is only made possible through the queer of color epistemological approach which SEAFN utilizes in kinship-making that goes hand in hand with mapping. To map the Mekong River is to reimagine the racial and colonial warfare hauntings of the past to new futures, particularly it queer ontologies towards water that make abolitionist refuges.

Within the field of queer theory, Lee Edelman, Lauren Berlant, and Jack Halberstam articulate a theory of queer pessimism in which “queer” is a refusal of reproductive capitalist heteronormativity. In *No Future* by Edelman, he applies psychoanalytic theory to which he argues queerness is antithetical to “reproductive futurism that perpetuates as reality a fantasy frame intended to secure the survival of the social in the Imaginary form of the Child.” (Edelman, 2004, p. 14). Berlant expounds on Edelman’s theorization of reproductive futurism by calling to attention relations of attachment. Berlant writes; “Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss” (Berlant, 2006, p. 21). Queer investments within reproducing the capitalist heteronormative nuclear family serves as liberal

instruments within hegemonic systems of domination. Within the context of Southeast Asian refugees, performative investments within US empires through configuration of citizenship only serves to bolster both the imperial and carceral state, which is highlighted in chapter 1. As Queer studies scholar provocatively asked; “What does queer studies tell us about immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning, and human rights?” (Eng et al. 2005, p. 2). Queer critic opens up possibilities to reframe understanding of modernity, social-political relations, and notions of subjectivity through queering or messing up normativity. For Halberstam queer refusals through failure seek to sever ones temporal and epistemological investments within the reproduction of white hegemonic heteronormative capitalism. For Halberstam queerness challenges and unsettles these capitalist logics as “failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent” (Halberstam, 2012, p. 88). Failure is to sever ties to the material and aesthetic attachments that formulate the circulatory of cruel futures. Within the context of Southeast Asian refugees, critical refugee studies, and queer theory these fields have not often been placed in conversation. Failure is not afforded to refugees. As Ethnic Studies scholar Ly Thuy Nguyen points out, for refugees, to fail is to die: “For racialized refugees, ‘failure’ is never symbolic: it means to die in war, go missing in the refugee passage, or to succumb under racist violence after resettlement. There will literally be no future. How does one “carry on” such historical traumas, and still dream of radical queer politics that divest from upholding hegemonic futures?” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 219).

Thinking more and more about the Mekong River exercise we begin to understand how queer refusals or failure are not afforded for refugees. While coming back together to discuss what we shared within our small groups, one of the facilitators, Chee³, had a critical reflection

³ (name was changed for confidential reasons)

which I felt to be emblematic of the SEAFN's exercise. Speaking to a group of around 100 Southeast Asian organizers from across the United States, Chee said: "I think we must be critical of all of our different relationships with the Mekong River. For Hmong folks, the river is remembered as a tragedy. It is a journey of mothers carrying their children on their backs. The river holds forgotten stories of children, elders, women, and queer folk who were swept away by the current." As to drown within the Mekong is to fail the passage of refuge. Chee's rumination on journeys of displacement unsettle a masculinized narrative and image of survival. As masculinist representations of war and survival privileged iconographic images of the Fall of Saigon. Nguyen is critical to point out that for Southeast Asian refugees to engage in "reproductive futurism" they must first traverse and survive racialized and colonial biopolitical wartime displacement. Nguyen is moved to theorize queer Vietnamese refugee dis/ inheritance or how refugee is in a constant negotiation with the "paradox between inheritance and dispossession beyond masculinist discourses of gains and losses, forwarding an intricate understanding of queer(ing) legacy" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 222). Queer dis/ inheritance Messiness is an unintelligible counter hegemonic practice. Messiness is an attempt to rectify the existing temporal order and new worlds of refugee that queer ontology allows. For the mess of refugee traumas and relations "creat[e] disorder and disruptive commotion within the normative arrangements of bodies, things, spaces and institutions" (Manalansan, 2015, p. 567). It is through the situation of one subjectivity within the larger narrative of loss that one is able to refuse the cruel optimism of the nation-state which attempts to articulate the recuperation of loss vis-a-vis false citizenship. The relationalities within the Mekong River challenge narratives of assimilation into Western Modernity, as alter relationships of debt, by refusing empire, and embracing a debt with the dead, kin, and the past. SEAFN's Mekong River is a "a mode of

relationality” with itself that “marks a critical reorientation, an epistemological shift in how we think about and understand the category refugee” (Nguyen, 2019, p. 110). This particular queer refugee relation “gestures to an alternative social relation and economy and refuses quid pro quo calculations of reciprocity” and “perform[s] a social autopsy, to encounter the mortuary of the already dead and the living dead, all the while apprehending that what remains and awaits our embrace are those stubborn refusals” (Kim, 2017, p. 56-57).

Moreover, the heuristics of the exercise seek to examine the ebbs and flows of colonial and militarized currents that foreclose and allude to the possibilities of refuge. Both silence and stories are held and weighted equally within the space as the activity touched on deeply personal material realities that survivors of war, genocide, colonization face. Within mass gatherings of radical Southeast Asian leftists, it is critical to have interactive accessible dialogue around lives and legacies. The activity gives space to the ways in which Southeast Asian refugee resistance and resilience continue in America, which will be explored further below. As militarized and manufactured silences linger to maintain epistemological voids, the Mekong River provides “a mode of accessibility” to self, history, and culture (Halberstam, 2011, p. 16). Whereas the refusal to speak and the refusal to silence are not diametrically opposed. Both modes of engagement are held as valid avenues for embodied experience. Yet, these “freedoms” and choices surrounding the war are foreclosed by the American empire and its domestic racializing criminalization when these formations render both the refusal to speak and refusal to silence either illegible or threatening. The history-making process of the Mekong River truly seeks to “illustrate the gendered dimensions of refugeehood and make visible the psychic and material realities of refugee precarity” (Espiritu and Duong, 2017, p. 611). More aptly a horizontal model of organizing is recognized in which refuge is understood and constitutively produced through said

queer ontologies. Jose Muñoz writes about possibilities that queerness, specifically queer of color futurity, holds in *Cruising Utopia*, “The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*,” (Muñoz, 2010, p. 1). As queers of color, our insurrections are weighed down by the structures of the present; carcerality, homonormativity, neoliberalism, and etc. all impede our possibilities for change, so we hold out hope for the future. It through queer refugee social relations that the possible of refuge in a emerging world is possible.

Water, and the Mekong River, are socio-cultural signifiers which hold varying meanings for peninsular Southeast Asians. Within this diasporic analysis, water holds an unfixed and fluid futuristic plurality. While each different ethnic group (Khmer, Viet, Lao, Hmong, and etc.) holds distinct racial and colonial histories, these tributaries are bounded by a larger materiality of refugeehood which is anchored by the Mekong. Queer refugee ontology is signified through a diaspora resignification of the Mekong River and water. During the rainy season (May to October) in Cambodia the Mekong River fills with water, as the swells and swells its orientation and shifts. The Mekong moves in reserve. The river returns to flood the land instead of escaping at sea. The Mekong is the only known river within the modern world to engage in bi-directional flows. Similarly, these metaphors of water SEAFN turn to the past to mark a new future. The futurity of water and its significant socio-cultural properties mark a queer spatial and temporal site. As SEAFN organizers move with and like water the Mekong River remaps Southeast Asian refugeehood through mediation on memory and trauma. Its transnational approach of the personal, political, spatial and temporal challenges imperial amnesiac memorialization through a

critical questioning and imaging of both French Colonialism and US hegemonic dominance. As queer Black Feminist Alexis Pauline Gumbs uses the analytic of shoreline to “engage the topic of Black feminist literary historiography,” I also wish to think of the analytic of the Mekong River as a spatial anti-imperial intimate place of multiplicity, in which Southeast Asian people’s heuristic, as it uses a social movement teaching too, that questions counter the legacies and limitations of citizenship, refuge, and resettlement (Gumbs, 2010, p. 10). The memory working with the Mekong River marks how remembrance is a “way in which we can recover our histories which intersect, rather than coincide, with American nationalist history,” for the metaphor of the Mekong River is a historical queering, or new onto-epistemological framings (Nguyen-Vo, 2005, p. 159).

The Mekong River is a metaphor I wish to extend within this thesis, to demarcate both the material and discursive geographies that are ever apparent within Southeast Asian refugeehood. The Mekong River holds the political potential and precariousness of the past. As a scholar and an organizer, I both witness the river’s waves from the shoreline and feel the pull of the current. As a diasporic encounter, the water “is the contested limit of the nation-state, the place where the refugee stands, where the land erodes, where elements live, where the wind howls the loudest” (Gumbs, 2010, p. 10). The Mekong River is emblematic to what queer theorist Jack Halberstam conceptualizes as “Low Theory.” Halberstam writes:

Low theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop. But it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a

counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal.

(Halberstam, 2011, p. 2)

Rather than reproduce liberal linear narratives of racial capitalist process, the Mekong River project seeks to critique this Western paradigm of binaristic frames that animate assimilation, citizenship, and the (un)deserving. By tracking the “progress” of Western modernity, or linear hetero-time and its imposition upon South Asian refugee communities within the larger schema of the SEAFN exercise, we begin to see the failure and limits of the nation-state. The current of the river highlights the circuit of warfare technologies through abject memory. As Nguyen-Vo points out, the universalizing and essentializing power of the US empire marks value within the official commemoration against the memory of refugees to the degree in which “empire builders are constructing a new universalism by historical amnesia” (Nguyen-Vo, 2005, p. 165). Empire thus becomes a psycho-discursive process in which the nation-state, both carceral and imperial, dams up and denies both the collective and individual memories of refugees to adhere to the liberal democratic “freedoms” of the US settler-nation state. The Mekong River as a critical refugee heuristic becomes a queer living archive, an affective capture, of both the intimacies within socio-political space of SEAFN, but also the material precarity of refugeehood. The Mekong River provides a grounding to Southeast Asian historiographies, and “can help reorient activist and political discourses about time, space, and value — unfolding new vistas for what is significant and (im)possible for building new coalitions around immigration and queer issues” (Manalansan, 2014, p. 105). While I recognize that my high theoretical approach to articulate these exercises collides with a lived low theory approach of organizing, my role as a scholar-activist is to attempt to hybridize both approaches in order to make sense of our social reality. In truth, the Mekong River opens up a transnational intergenerational space “that flies

below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 16). As Vinh Nguyen writes, the queer potentiality of “refuge(e) constitute a form of subjectivity,” and proposes that “expand[s] the boundaries of refugee beyond the legal definition to include a range of times, places, and subjects” (Nguyen, 2019, p. 112). Thus, the SEAFN political project surrounding refuge(es) is a futuristic queer Southeast Asian refugee utopian orientation where the search for refuge has not ceased. Rather, SEAFN’s work seeks to map out pockets of refugee possibilities within the fractures of liberalism and US empire. In effect, SEAFN’s Mekong River questions

the power of cartography, revealing it to be a colonial and imperial enterprise in the organization of history and the construction of meaning. It is these acts of tracing and interlinking that also underlie an FRE [Feminist Refugee Epistemology] line of inquiry, one that engages with the question of convergence and synchronicity in refugee histories at the same time that it remains alert to the differences that exist between refugee populations in both time and space.(Espiritu and Duong, 2017, p. 670).

Water and the Mekong provide a queer space to collectively map out refugeehood and the mess of empire. SEAFN maps out refugee spatialities to imagine and enact alternative (queer) modes of relationality and community through diasporic memory which is all entangled upon the Mekong River. In the next section, I expand on different Southeast Asian relations to water. Looking at the work of Minneapolis writer Bao Phi, I argue water provides new modes of refugee relationality to erode or wear down the settler-nation state.

"A Different Pond": Watery Ontology and Refugee Futurities

A Different Pond is an auto-biographical account of Phi's childhood growing up in a poor working-class neighborhood as a Vietnamese refugee who is "resettled" in Minnesota. The title of the book comes from Phi's childhood interactions with the Mississippi River to be a *different pond* akin to those in Viet Nam. In the story, a young boy wakes before dawn. Both are quiet and meticulous as they move through their quaint South Minneapolis home. They do not wish to disrupt the rest of the many residents within their family, the young boy's sleep mother slumbering next to him after a long night shift, and the father's many adolescent children. Fishing is not an act of leisure; rather it is a mode of survival. For the boy's father, fishing is a cultural practice that he aims to pass down for them to prosper in a new unknown land.

A Different Pond's setting of Minneapolis becomes discursively significant not only for Phi's life but also for disparate encounters. Phi is very explicit to highlight his South Minneapolis roots in all his literary works as it means to negotiate SEA refugee entry into the settler-colonial anti-black racial project that is America. In interviews about his adolescence and the book, he states; "You know, the American Indian Movement started in my neighborhood." (Chow, 2017). A simplistic telling of the American Indian Movement is that they were a radical indigenous justice movement founded by NeeGawNwayWeeDun and Clyde H. Bellecourt was to combat the state sanctioned violence at the hands of the police. Phi continues:

I had the fortune of having an African American teacher in high school teach African American studies ... he also happened to be the gym teacher. ... But I wasn't learning

about Asian and Asian-American people. ... I was learning about these different movements, but I was like, so what does that make me? (Chow, 2017)

In doing so within the narrative of his work, Phi grapples with the incommensurable realities and experiences of the intimacies of four continents. Phi's literary poetics is then an attempt to find modes of solidarity within inscribed racial/colonial intimacies that position communities of color against each other, and undo the erasure of conquest by locating SEA refugees positionally within the larger radical tradition such as the spatiality of Midwestern United States. The formation of Minnesota hence communicates the symbolic and discursive interconnections of settler-colonialism and militarism. Fort Snelling shows that the key element driving the settler modernity of the United States is militarism. For Snelling and the geography of the Twin Cities highlight the meeting of settler, carceral, and imperial states. As Jodi Kim argues, "militarism emerges at the very founding" of the United States through the American Revolution and which is intertwined with militarism and settler-colonialism (Kim, 2017, p. 44). The elimination of the native is only possible through abjection and the identification of otherness.

Wakantana (The Great Mystery) had many children. He passed on qualities of himself to each of his children. Strength to the buffalo. Swiftiness to the deer. Majesty to the eagle. Every animal, tree, plant, and bean has a small part of Wakantana within them. One day Wakantana was sad and his wife Ina Maka (Earth Mother) pondered her husband's depression. Wakantana was depressed that none of his children looked towards him for care. Wakantana wanted his children to look towards him when they were in need. Ina Maka wanted to give a gift to her husband and attempted to craft a gift out of a piece of her body. She asked the water and the wind for their help in creating a gift for her husband Wakantana. The wind was reluctant to help

Ina Maka; they did not want to hurt her. So, the water at first worked alone. The water was unsuccessful in cutting open the Earth; a river began to form in Ina Maka's body, the Mississippi. Seeing her determination, the wind and water worked together to expose Ina Maka's body. She then called her husband Wakantana to recreate his image upon her. Using the red clay from the Earth, the first human was born. This place where human creation began would be called Bdote, where two sacred bodies of water meet – the Minnesota and the Mississippi River. Bdote Mni Sota Makoce is the Dakota name of their ancestral land. Mni Sota Makoce's literal translation to English means "Land Where the Water Reflect the Clouds" which European settlers would later co-opt to formulate the settler cartographic term, "Minnesota" (Waziyatawin, 2008).⁴

The words and story above are not mine. Rather, this creation story is a reflection of indigenous Dakota survival. As Dakota feminist scholar Waziyatawin because it is crucial for a place-based analysis to understand indigenous cosmology toward the land (Waziyatawin, 2008). As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues, stories "bear witness" to the reality of indigenous life (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, p. 7). I start with Dakota cosmologies and a historical portion of this paper to understand the significance of land and water to the Dakota people. Specifically, for Minnesota, the state that has the highest refugee population per capita in the nation, this is important, because refugees, whose relationship with ancestral land is severed by war, genocide,

⁴ I want to be quite clear that this a paraphrasing of the Dakota creation story. As a non-native scholar, it is the works of artist, community members, native feminist, and elders that give life to these cultural practices. I would suggest readers towards Dakota scholar Waziyatawin does a comprehensive contemporary analysis of Dakota social life in *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland* (2008). Additionally, Dakota educator Gwen Westerman. Westerman with the help of historian Bruce White writes a wonderful book about Dakota cultural practices called, *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota* (2012).

and environmental catastrophe, try and reproduce their ancestral land practices. As Leeanna Simpson writes: “The land must once again become the pedagogy” (Simpson, 2014, p. 14). The birth of Bdote gives pedogeological insight into Dakota relationalities with land and the environment before “manifest density”. Waters offers up solidarities for Dakota and Vietnamese people. Water moves with fluidity; it provides life and connections. Through an exploration of orientations towards land and water we too can begin to intersect to distant cartographies of Southeast Asians refugees and Indigenous people. As the Mekong and Mississippi intersect the conflux provide a mode of relationality and decolonial possibility.

The War of 1862 in Minnesota or the US-Dakota War exemplifies white settlement of the land through indigenous genocide. Following Patrick Wolfe’s definition of settler-colonialism as “a structure rather than an event,” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 390) the denaturalization of indigenous people through miscegenation, land theft, and assimilation into Western modernity operates through the “logic of elimination” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 393). The project of settler-colonialism goes so far as it attempts to indigenize the settler. This process begins by defining the order of modern life. In 1851, Minnesota governor Alexander Ramsey attempted to coerce the local indigenous Dakota people, into signing peace treaties. Like with so many other indigenous communities, Ramsey however was never going to allow for possibilities of Dakota sovereignty. These treaties were formulated with the frame of westward expansion – turning land into property – through “Manifest Destiny” west of the Mississippi river. Ramsey would be successful in wearing down the Dakota in signing the treaties on July 23, 1851. The Minnesota State government promised land, food, and money for the Dakota people. Yet, the United States refused to ratify the treaties, because they did not want to give Dakota people land by the

Mississippi River. Forced into precarity, the Dakota signed a water down treaty under violent coercion, giving them a lease to the land for five years. It is through these treaties, that the United States begins to sever or eliminate Dakota epistemologies towards land through its commodification. Treaties as such begin the habitualization of “US debt imperialism” or a haunting of indigenous people (Kim, 2018. p. 2018).

Moreover, after the “war,” we see how militarism is articulated discursively as a driver for settlement. Settler-colonialism is the underworking structure for US empire building, or as Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, “colonialism is but one expression of imperialism” (Smith, 2012, p. 96). Fort Snelling became a major strategic stronghold for both the U.S. military but also for white settlement of Dakota land. As Kathryn Jeanne Sutton writes: “By placing Fort Snelling on this confluence of rivers, the U.S. military established a literal higher ground from which to overpower the Dakota and the Ojibwe/Anishanaabe” (Sutton, 2012, p. 9). On top of that, the spatiality of Fort Snelling is an attempt to impose a colonial nationalist memory upon the land by desecrating the Bodte or the sacred place where the two rivers meet. All said things produce Fort Snelling to exist as a ghostly site. After the “war” in the fall of 1862, the Fort became a prison and a concentration camp for over 1,600 Dakota and Ho-Chunk people. Settler cartographies are carceral contours that uphold and stabilize the racialized project of modernity. Indigenous people were housed in unsanitary dismal conditions where it’s estimated 300 people died of starvation, but the number is still uncertain. Fort Snelling tells a story of those who have “been made killable, once and future ghosts”. As Avery Gordon puts it, “haunting is a constituent element of modern social life” (Gordon, 1997, p. 7). The memory of Fort Snelling becomes a discursive site of national-building and highlights how ingrained the project of settler-colonialism is to the racial

project called the United States. Simply put, the ghosts of the Dakota still haunt settlers to this day. Fort Snelling is both a site of symbolic, metaphoric, and literal haunting of indigenous ghost. Yet, the memorization of the Fort has not come without push back. Waziyatawin demands that we “Take Down the Fort” which is both a decolonial decree and a restorative justice call. For Waziyatawin, the taking down of the fort is twofold 1) literally destruction and 2) a paradigm shift that centers the Dakota people (Waziyatawin, 2008).

The Dakota creation story and the Fort offer up socio-historical context to Minnesota refugees for decolonial moves towards solidarity. As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang argue, decolonization is not the changing of the mind, but materially returning land, life, and resources to native peoples legally, spiritually, and physically (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Yet, Linda Smith stresses that decolonization must be contextual to space, histories, peoples, and ontologies. Furthermore, Smith writes, “Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels” (Smith, 2012, 94). Thus, Asian Americans must initiate their decolonial methodologies from a contextual anti-imperial lens. Additionally, the gift of freedom formulates a new form of imperial debt that seeks to justify existing hierarchy. The queer refugee holds within a model of relational possibilities through an anti-imperial critic of the liberal nation-state.

Through difference and memory, Phi expands the confluence of Bdote beyond the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers with the insertion of SEA refugees to meet with geographies abroad in the Mekong or the various ponds of the Mekong Delta. Phi’s family subverts the settler-city by fishing at the Mississippi River, a place Phi deems “a different pond”. Through Bui’s coloring, the story depicts the layering of Vietnamese memory. Their journey to fish is a

subversion of settlers' claim to land as private property as the father and son challenge the "No Trespassing" sign on their way to the edge of the water. Phi's family's arrival to Minnesota was inherently trespassing against settler governmentality through the Refugee Act of 1980, which allows them to be on land resulting from Dakota/Lakota dispossession. As they illegally cross through an overpass to fish, Phi's moves towards water not only as geographic space, but also home, as water or "nước" in Vietnamese is synonymous with homeland. These gestures towards the river conjure memories of displacement or trekking through the jungles of Southeast Asia. Bui's depiction of Phi's family going towards the river reveals Vietnamese refugees' practice of fishing as a relational site with nature and moreover as a witnessing of Dakota/Lakota ontology. As at the "different pond," Phi's family establishes non-human relations with nature, both in Dakota/Lakota occupied territory and militarized Asia. As such, we can begin to conceptualize the category of "refugee" which exists as a relational site to embrace difference. Refugees are a figuration of the relations of conquest in that conquest/war/empire are an amalgamation of disvalue. The settler-state uses refugees to propagate a liberal multicultural narrative of white savior hood through the denial of conquest and difference.

Thus, Phi calls the Mississippi River "a different pond" as it becomes a signifier that seeks to unsettle the operations of the empire. Water offers up solidarities for Dakota and SEA refugees' people. Water moves with fluidity; it provides life and connections. Through an exploration of orientations towards land and water, we too can begin to intersect distant cartographies of Southeast Asians refugees and Indigenous people. As the Mekong and Mississippi intersect, the confluence provides a mode of relationality and decolonial possibility. Put simply, the Mississippi River unlocks and disrupts the way in which imperialism flows on

global and local levels. *A Different Pond* therefore becomes a narrative about refugee relationality with indigeneity through land and water and the embracement of ghosts. As Mishuana Goeman writes about the epistemological significance of land: “Our representations of land and socioscapas that are produced as a result inform everyday realities, yet within tribally situated stories the possibilities for change abound. Narrative brings into being meanings around the concept of land, and it is the meaning we choose to believe that affects changes communally and individually on the ground” (Goeman, 2015, p. 78). The pond, rives, and water all become a signifier of a continual tending to the land through queer refugee epistemology. Within the context of Phi’s, work his childhood longing for a different pond is a refusal towards commodification of Dakota land and water through one’s relational memory work. Different ponds are spatialized Southeast Asian cartographies within stolen land which hold interior meaning for refugees. Ponds or “nước” as Asian American Studies scholar Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi describes, “opens up space for conceiving of water as a homeland, indexing vexed belonging in a pluralized space of travel, exile, and fluidity” (Lê Espiritu, 2018, p. 22). Thus, the faraway ponds Phi is dreaming of are not in the space of Vietnam but are a manifestation of the decolonial futures where refugees and indigenous folks can swim and fish freely. I wish to end this chapter with a chant that articulates these different interconnections of water and Southeast Asian refugee queer mapping:

From the Mississippi, to the Mekong.

Southeast Asians are the BOMB.

We are ready... liberation is coming!

From the Mississippi, to the Mekong.

Southeast Asians are the BOMB.

We are ready... liberation is coming!

From the Mississippi, to the Mekong.

Southeast Asians are the BOMB.

We are ready... liberation is coming!

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Conclusion:

“In this sunken place, slavery is the thematic ground, although not explicitly mentioned. Held by capital, in a manner of speaking, he is confronted with his origins and pricked by the realization, the uncanny feeling of an equivalence or doubling between the gold in the trunk and the Negro in the vault, a state a philosopher has described as a pieza framework, the awareness of one’s existence as a thing, as a commodity, a ratio of value (and the refusal to accept this).”

— Saidiya Hartman, *The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance*

“In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods, to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginations of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school [...] For, if we are lucky, we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen. If we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world. And we might use these ways of being in the wake in our responses to terror and the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation. ”

— Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

On Monday, May 25th 2020, Memorial Day, within the city of Minneapolis, 46 year old George Floyd was murdered at the hands of Minneapolis Police Department (MPD). Floyd was lynched at the intersection of 38th street and Chicago Avenue in South Minneapolis also known

as the Prospect Park Neighborhood. Within hours after his murder video circulated across the internet of the white police officer Derek Chauvin performing a choke hold by kneeling on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, while Floyd was pleading for life, while three other police officers stood by and did not intervene. Personally, I am going to spare as many details of Floyd's state-sanctioned murder as possible, as not to diminish his life to only his death. To this day, I have yet to watch the video of what occurred for Floyd, but that is not necessary for me to know that he did not deserve to die. Black life is something that should not be debated, but rather defended. As someone from Minneapolis, I know that Floyd's murder at the hands of the MPD is not an isolated incident. High profile cases of police violence within the Twin Cities have erupted across the nation for the past five years within a post-Ferguson era. Forgotten names such as Philando Castile, Marcus Golden, Jamar Clarke, and Fong Lee only touch the surface of the events. Mr. Floyd's murder happened are critical injunction for systems of racial capitalism. The backdrop of Chicago and 38th is the global pandemic of COVID-19, which has resulted in one the worst public health and economic crisis of all of the 21st century. The conditions of racial capitalism were exacerbated by existing disparities within wealth, housing, health access, and overall social-political life.

Mr. Floyd's death would fundamentally alter the trajectory of racial politics in not only the United States, but around the globe. These conditions of both racial and economic precarity set kindling to the burning of MPD's third precinct. I walked around the remains of MPD. Cars burned within the streets. Businesses were boarded up. Spray painted atop the pale unfinished plywood read: Justice For George Floyd! Black Owned! Children live above here. Women of Color Owned. Fuck 12! The scent of toxic metals permeated the area. It was heavy to breath. It

was not hard to breathe because of the fumes that swarmed around us like riot police and the National Guard looking for those who broke curfew. It was hard to breathe because the thin white veil of “Minnesota Nice” was revealed again to the world as systematic racial and colonial domination. People were gathering all over. Yet, the community was all together. This was a sight that was not new for Minneapolis, but the feeling was ever special. While absorbing the whole sight I thought to myself “Octavia’s vision is rain true,” but where do we go? Where? Earthseed is not here. And, little fires lit uprisings across the globe in calls for an end to systems of white supremacy and the regime of US empire. George Floyd’s death reminds us the police are the pandemic, and abolition is the cure.

For me the state-sanctioned lynching of George Floyd and the protest brought forth abolitionist possibilities that were is quite profound. While attempting to work, write, and mull over this intellectual project, I could not help but let grief overcome me in my parents’ Minnesota home. As a non-black person of color from the area, I could not just sit and write about abolition as my home, and my city, were burning, in both traumatic and dramatic ways, around me. So, I began supporting mutual aid efforts. I ran around the Twin Cities buying all the supplies that I was permitted to buy during the pandemic, to provide for community members in need.

As a non-black person, I too do not know the mourning that Black folks from Minneapolis feel in the wake of George Floyd, but what I did know is that I had to get my Southeast Asian community out there to support — and engage in solidarity — as this thesis has attempted to show the liberation of Southeast Asian people is directly tied to Black folks. Such actions inform questions like how then do we begin to forge possibilities of resilience and relationality? Put

differently, what does Black-Southeast Asian solidarity look like given this relationality? It is because of urgent questions like this that I must trace the criminalization of refugees in relation to other devalued groups within neoliberalism while these refugees bring into view the connections between imperialism abroad and carcerality at home. I ask these questions and highlight what is occurring in Minneapolis not to be a voyeuristic parasitic academic, but rather show what's really occurring within my community, as this project has never been only about the writing, but the practice abolitionist organizing throughout the United States.

For the last few weeks, my brain has gotten lost within a fog. To the zoom meetings, the direct actions, and mutual aid work, I have begun to feel fried. As someone who calls themselves a Southeast Asian abolitionist, I and SEAFN as a collective have been grappling with our larger national responses as a movement. I sat outside in the humid midwestern summer air after running all over town attempting to provide friends in need with uprising essentials. In winter of 2014, SEAFN wrote a political visioning statement after the lack of indictment for the murder of Mike Brown. The letter was entitled an “Open Letter to Our Southeast Asian Community On Black Solidarity”. Beginning the call with comrades and movement family members, we had to reflect on our past; did we fulfill the work that we were entitled to do? If we redact the names of locations, what does the statement mean within a time of COVID-19, Trump, and rampant anti-black violence? What does it mean to continue to be “WITNESS TO SEVERE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST THE BLACK COMMUNITY” (Soloman, 2014)? The letter from winter 2014, in the wake of Eric Garner and Mike Brown, called for “SOUTHEAST ASIAN COMMUNITY, LET US REMEMBER OUR DEEP RESILIENCE AND COLLECTIVE HEALING THROUGH OUR OWN STRUGGLES, AND OFFER

OURSELVES, OUR LOVE, AND OUR SOLIDARITY TO THE BLACK COMMUNITY” (Soloman, 2014). Much of the words written within the five year old letter still ring true today. As a Southeast Asian movement we must ask ourselves, did we fulfill the promises within this statement of solidarity? Or, have we failed to circumvent systems of anti-blackness? These are not questions that I have answers to, but rather collective ruminations need to occur. Something I do know is that we need to continue to educate ourselves and community so that they could see that refuge is still possible. As a result of the slightly disconnected, yet, connected operations of SEAFN we engaged in a week long digital organizing strategy, which discussed the need for [Insert Southeast Asian Refugee Group] to be in “Defense of Black Life”. The practice of solidarity needs to go beyond the words of writing, but fleshed out within the everyday.

An abolitionist future is coming. While walking through the memorial for Floyd at Chicago and 38th, people placed flowers and signs at the intersection. There I saw the community, myself included, mourn together. You can hear hip-hop music playing. People were grilling. Elders were passing out water to kids. Spouses were applying sunscreen on each other so as to not burn. There I saw a sign that struck me. Beneath all of the flowers on a brown piece of cardboard read a quote from South Asian writer Arundhati Roy. The quote



went as follows “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her BREATHing.” Abolition is a way to that world. And, I too hear her breathing. In the week after Floyd’s murder, Minneapolis has undergone a massive abolitionist reconfiguration. Both the Minneapolis Public School District and the Park Board voted to stop contracting out the police. Nine members of the Minneapolis City Council has come out stating they will move to support a no-veto vote to #DefundMPD. All of these things would not have been made possible without the efforts of radical leftist organizing from groups like MPD150, ReclaimTheBlock, and Black Visions Collective. An abolitionist world is real. For an abolitionist world is one of new set rules and relationships, not bound by racial capitalism, but by people, kin, land, and water. It is a world in which deportations do not occur as we are free to move where we please, as borders cease to exist. And, she is coming. I hear her breathe. It may be now more of a snore, but we will awake her soon; soon as within my lifetime.

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