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## Book Review

Nguyen, Phuong Tran. 2017. *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press. xvi, 236 pp. \$28.00.

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Phuong Tran Nguyen's history of Little Saigon, the Vietnamese community in southern California, offers a genealogy of refugee survival strategies and refugee identity, which, we learn, are intertwined. *Becoming Refugee American* contributes to the study of migration a granular account of how one group of refugees cultivated resources, acceptance, and new social identities in resettlement. Six chapters examine the evolving ways resettled Vietnamese defined their place in America: from grateful assimilation to militant conspiracy to scholarly critique. Nguyen accesses resettlement's cultural politics through an expansive archive that includes (among other things) Vietnamese-language popular music, literature, and refugee camp newsletters, which reveal refugee affect and motivations in a way seldom seen. This is a much-needed history of Vietnamese refugees "from below" that contrasts with the many objectifying and sentimental representations of Vietnamese refugees by non-Vietnamese.

To "become Refugee American" is to engage in a strategic self-positioning constrained by necessity and politics: "refugee identity, while partly a tribute to old ways, served as a survival mechanism in new places" (9). From 1975 onwards, Vietnamese refugees arrived in an America that was "scarred by the Vietnam War," and that sought to sublimate its guilt over having abandoned South Vietnam (10). Humanitarian righteousness, enacted through the putative rescue of Vietnamese refugees, became key to America's self-recuperation, as scholars from the emerging field of critical refugee studies (most notably, Yen Lê Espiritu and Mimi Thi Nguyen) have argued. Building and sometimes pushing back on these scholars' analyses, Nguyen reveals how refugees were both pawns and agents, "test[ing] the limits of American guilt, creating spaces and opportunities for themselves through a refugee cultural identity" (11). Nguyen pinpoints "refugee nationalism," Vietnamese Americans' loyalty to an extinct South Vietnam, as the paradoxical key to their acceptance in America (10). Vietnamese refugees relied on "moral belonging," the idea that America was atoning for past failures and continuing a righteous fight by

admitting them (5). The moral belonging narrative spurred legislation admitting hundreds of thousands of anticommunist Vietnamese, despite popular opposition. This narrative had other consequences, too: first, the Vietnamese were embraced by conservative politicians, placing them opposite progressive antiwar and civil-rights activists (and, therefore, opposite most Asian American studies scholars); and second, conspicuous performances of gratitude were required to maintain their limited privilege relative to other minorities. The first generation—South Vietnamese military personnel, reeducation camp survivors, and their families—appeared a peculiar model minority: grateful, compliant, capitalistic, and hawkish.

Nguyen is nuanced and empathetic in describing this generation, whose stories are in danger of being lost. His premise is that their rescue politics were strategic and, anyway, refugees had few options. By engaging with rescue, Vietnamese refugees encouraged America's admission of more refugees and government assistance for the resettled. If the Vietnamese chose conservative, don't-rock-the-boat politics over, say, civil-rights activism, it was partly because "[t]he ability of working-class people with limited English skills to extract concessions from a guilt-ridden public proved effective enough" (13-14). Indeed, Nguyen even notes "the role of gratitude as a form of social control" (34). Nguyen also observes that unlike many Cuban refugees, most Vietnamese had little economic or social capital and were further disadvantaged by being nonwhite.

Isolated by the American embargo on Vietnam and by refugees' reliance on co-ethnic support, Little Saigon incubated an exile identity completely different from other Asian Americans or postwar Vietnamese in Vietnam. Nguyen's research is often eye-opening: the fourth chapter, "The Anticommunist Việt-Cộng: Freedom Fighters and the New Politics of Rescue," recounts the rise and fall of a diaspora-based militant resistance aimed at restoring South Vietnam. It reads like a historiographical companion to Viet Thanh Nguyen's spy thriller *The Sympathizer*, brimming with conspiracies, paranoia, and murder. Although the movement fizzled, its radical politics offer a compelling alternate narrative to that of rescue.

Nguyen's translations of songs, poems, and headlines importantly preserve Vietnamese refugees' expressions for a wider audience. He takes some liberties for clarity and aesthetics, for instance, when a song title is translated from "1954 Cha Bỏ Quê—1979 Con Bỏ Nước" to "The Exiles of a Father and His Son" (75), or when the newspaper *Trắng Đen* (literally "white black," similar to "black and white") becomes "The Truth" (77).

At times I wished for more attention to gender; I wondered, for instance, whether women and men played similar roles as diasporic cultural producers and political actors. Given Vietnam's feminization in the American cultural imaginary, plus gender differentiation of traumas endured by Vietnamese refugees (e.g., sexual violence, reeducation camps), questions of gender may offer fruitful avenues for further research. Overall, the book was lucidly written and meticulously documented. For this postwar-born Vietnamese American reviewer, the sensitive portrayal of rescue politics rang true and inspired sympathy for an older generation whose Refugee Americanness reflected grief and need as much as culture or ideology.