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# Reframing the Archive: Vietnamese Refugee Narratives in the Post-9/11 Period

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The final destination of the archive is . . . always situated outside its own materiality, in the story that it makes possible.

—Achille Mbembe (21)

On 31 August 2010, the National Public Radio (NPR) news show *All Things Considered* began airing “The *USS Kirk*: Valor at the Vietnam War’s End,” a three-part special series about “one of the most extraordinary humanitarian missions in the history of the US military” conducted in the South China Sea as Saigon fell.<sup>1</sup> According to NPR, on 29 April 1975, the *Kirk* crew guided the landing of sixteen South Vietnamese helicopters on deck, saving two hundred fleeing refugees. Then, the following day, the *Kirk* entered enemy waters to “rescue” “the remnants of the South Vietnamese navy” (“*USS*”), a ragtag fleet packed with thousands more refugees whom the *Kirk* safely escorted to the Philippines. Although NPR recounts losses along the way, including the death of a refugee baby, the story has a happy ending: most of the rescued refugees safely and gratefully resettle in the United States. The riveting, highly sentimental series and accompanying online exhibit comprise one recent entry in the ongoing drama of national redemption that has swirled around the doubled figures of the American Vietnam War veteran and the South Vietnamese refugee. While both figures entered the American social imaginary as unpopular and tragically unmoored human remnants of a disastrous war, in recent decades they have—often together, as foils to each other—been gradually recuperated through a racialized, post-war archnarrative that emphasizes US rescue of a racial Other, followed by that Other’s gratitude (Espiritu, *Body* 82-83). Tales in this vein proliferate through a variety of popular narrative forms and have been central to what Yén Lê Espiritu incisively terms the “we-win-even-when-we-lose syndrome” (“We-Win” 329): the array of cultural processes by which American public memory of the Vietnam War has gradually transformed from a dominant narrative of failure and loss into one of humanitarian aid and ideological triumph.

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The sentimental rescue-and-gratitude archnarrative is now one of the conditions under which Vietnamese American writers in the twenty-first century convey their work to a mainstream audience. Just months after NPR's popular *Kirk* series aired, Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again* (2011), a children's novel in prose poems about a Vietnamese girl's refugee passage, won the National Book Award for juvenile fiction. NPR hastened to subsume the book under its own aegis: Joseph Shapiro, a producer and narrator for the *Kirk* series, posted an online article, "Book Award Winner's Tale Echoes Those Told by Other Vietnamese Refugees" (2011), suggesting that Lai's own childhood sea voyage was part of the *Kirk* escort and that the author was, in effect, one of the rescued refugees. Shapiro bases his conclusion on a scene in Lai's semiautobiographical book that describes the lowering of the South Vietnamese flag on the protagonist's ship. While Lai has no specific memory of being part of the *Kirk* escort, Jan Herman, a military historian who is writing a book about the *Kirk*, explains to NPR that if the flag was lowered on Lai's ship, "that only happened on that mission with the *Kirk*. . . . That's the giveaway" (Shapiro). In Lai's memory, the disabled ship on which she traveled was towed to Guam by a US navy ship rather than escorted to the Philippines; NPR casts doubt on her account, with Herman calling it "unlikely." Whether or not Lai's remembered voyage was part of the *Kirk* escort, NPR's coverage of Lai's book illustrates the contest for narrative authority that can surround refugee narratives, particularly in mainstream news media: NPR overwrites a former refugee's rendering of her own experience to reinforce and promote its own highly constructed rescue narrative. It privileges the voices of white, male professionals while rendering an Asian female writer's perspective as incomplete—indeed, as needing completion by said professionals—and unindividuated, her tale an "echo" of other tales.

Much more is at stake here than confirming or disproving a possible historical coincidence. The encounter between two very different, contemporary narratives about Vietnamese refugees, NPR's and Lai's, takes place on the ever-shifting imaginative and discursive minefield that comprises American public memory of the Vietnam War. In the years since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as new US military actions have inexorably unfolded, the Vietnam War has been the subject of revitalized interest, carrying renewed emotional and political valences in American public discourses. In this volatile context, NPR explicitly undertakes a project of historical revision that focalizes rescue rather than violence, mining archival footage to recover, as the series puts it, a "forgotten" tale of heroism that was "lost in time and bitterness over the Vietnam War" ("USS"). Lai's text engages in its own forms of revision and reframing from another standpoint. The novel self-consciously enters a media-saturated national social imaginary that has traditionally rendered Vietnamese refugees as speechless objects of mass spectatorship, familiar to Americans through iconic, wrenching photographs of

endangered Vietnamese civilians, particularly children, and “Boat People.” Using the partially naïve perspective of a ten-year-old girl, *Inside Out & Back Again* turns a figurative camera lens back toward the Vietnam War’s habitually objectifying media legacy, which NPR both revises and extends. Like other Vietnamese American writers of the “one-and-a-half” generation (those who came to the United States as children), Lai, as storyteller, must navigate a hegemonic visual culture in which refugees are “seen”—perhaps too much—but seldom “heard” outside the context of the American rescue tale.

By “critically juxtaposing”<sup>2</sup> the two cultural texts, my analysis exposes and challenges the limited social, historical, and legal frameworks in which Vietnamese Americans have been imagined. These frameworks, to use Erving Goffman’s terms, have for decades enabled Americans “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” (21)—in other words, give meaning to—the figure of the Vietnamese refugee. This figure’s salience has only increased in the post-9/11 period amid the new US wars in the Middle East and western Asia. As a growing body of scholarship on Vietnamese refugee narratives has suggested, the sentimental rescue-and-gratitude tale, now a dominant mode of representing refugees, deflects attention from the destructive effects of past US military actions by refiguring the war-torn Vietnamese civilian or refugee as a grateful, rescued subject and the American military as a care apparatus. In doing so, such tales help cultivate public support for new US military interventions abroad that come in the guise of what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls “the gift of freedom”: a questionable gift the United States continues to bestow under the auspices of nation-building, democratization, and global security. As Nguyen makes clear, the figure of the rescued refugee plays a crucial role in bolstering US military supremacy: her grateful testimony ratifies a central proposition of liberal empire—that the gift of freedom is still worth giving and receiving—even as civilian death tolls and collateral damage accumulate (M. Nguyen 5-6).

### **Reframing War: NPR’s *Kirk* Series and the Sentimental Rescue**

Four decades after the fall of Saigon, America’s “first televised war” lives on in the United States in an extensive archive of visual and multisensory images produced almost entirely by American and European news services. This archive includes a handful of now iconic news photographs along with film and radio recordings of certain moments of the war, and it continues to be reiterated, revised, and augmented in the service of various twenty-first-century social and political exigencies. Among the most famous visual images in this archive are Ron Haerberle’s photographs of the My Lai massacre, including “And Babies?” (1968), which shows dead civilians lying on a country road; Eddie Adams’s “Rough Justice on a Saigon Street” (1968), showing the execution of a Viet Cong soldier; and, perhaps most of all, Hùynh Công “Nick” Ut’s

“Terror of War” (1972), an image of nine-year-old Kim Phúc running down a road, naked and burned by napalm (Chong 76; Griffin 145). The last photograph became the subject of books, films, talk shows, and articles, turning Kim Phúc into a reluctant celebrity in both Vietnam and the United States. The war’s protracted end and aftermath are also emblemized in the United States by certain heavily circulated images, especially Hubert Van Es’s photograph of a Saigon helicopter evacuation during the war’s last hours in 1975 and Adams’s and other journalists’ images of the “Boat People.” Van Es’s picture, taken from a Saigon balcony, shows a Huey helicopter perched atop an apartment building while a long line of evacuees—clearly far more than the aircraft will hold—waits to board; it has been called “the defining image of the fall of Saigon” (Lamb) and “a metaphor for the desperate US withdrawal and its policy failure in Vietnam” (“Photographer”). Sylvia Shin Huey Chong notes that Van Es’s telephoto image of mostly South Vietnamese evacuees has been widely misread as Americans leaving Saigon, feeding a cultural narrative about the war that focalizes American loss and trauma while eliding Vietnamese experiences of the same (6). Some of these famous images of “Vietnam” (the often-conflated war and place) won Pulitzer Prizes or were honored in other conspicuous ways, and all are today readily accessible to Americans through memory or a simple Internet search.

These visual remnants of the Vietnam War—what Michael Griffin calls “the great war photographs”—take on symbolic meanings as they circulate in American culture through a variety of media and changing contexts. Images, as W. J. T. Mitchell reminds us, can be mental, verbal, and visual, encompassing ideas, dreams, metaphors, descriptions, and optical or graphic phenomena (9-10). Often incorporated into other works as visual intertexts, photographs index not only specific historical vistas that happened to be recorded but also the way a community has applied dominant ideologies to the history that lies beneath and the popular consensus as to why and how that history matters. The photographs call to viewers’ minds abstract principles, such as the horror of war, the urgency of individual suffering, or an insistence on shared humanity; historical details “[become] irrelevant and the photograph’s institutional use locks it into particular national, cultural, and professional myths” (Griffin 140). While visibility (principally through photography and film) has been front and center in constructing American public memory of the war, sonic memories have also given texture and poignancy to post-war American imaginings of “Vietnam”—most of all the sounds of helicopter rudders, semiautomatic gunfire, crackling battle-field radios, and newscasters’ grim, masculine voices coming through television and radio broadcasts.

Southeast Asian war refugees, of whom Vietnamese are the largest subset, have been cataloged, filmed, photographed, measured, psychoanalyzed, studied, and otherwise “viewed” through lenses of journalism, Hollywood filmmaking,

anthropology, policy, social work, and more, but generally they have been limited to few roles or subject positions when represented.<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese refugees have appeared in American literature, historiography, and mass media most often as passive, traumatized objects of Western spectatorship, pity, and charity; as reminders (to Americans) of US military failure; or, in more positive but no less problematic cases, as grateful, compliant additions to the American national community. Vietnamese Americans have frequently reinforced such narratives, particularly in mainstream news media and in some life writing by the first generation of refugees who arrived in the United States as adults. Resettled refugees may appear in “model minority” media stories as economically successful, declaring their patriotism and deep gratitude to America and sometimes their forgiveness of past wrongs.<sup>4</sup> In many contemporary narratives, refugees reduced to nameless, stateless desperation are rescued by kindhearted Americans who have retired their machinery of war and assumed the mantle of humanitarian aid. In particular, the retired veteran with a heart of gold, whose primary role in war-making seems to be mainly rescuing refugees, is a popular trope, vividly illustrated in NPR’s *Kirk* series.<sup>5</sup>

NPR displays the great lengths to which it went to rescue the story of the *Kirk* from obscurity: correspondents “studied hundreds of documents, photographs and other records,” interviewed “more than twenty” eyewitnesses, and listened to audiocassettes—never before heard publicly—that the ship’s chief engineer recorded while on the *Kirk* (“USS”). NPR’s “investigative” storytelling is thus explicitly a project of historical revision, the assembly and mining of a new archive capable of producing new historical truths. As Anjali Arondekar points out, such revision is itself historically and politically situated, carried out “within a shifting (and often reactionary) language of political exigency” (4). In her work on the colonial archive in India, Arondekar offers the analytical model of “productively juxtaposing the archive’s fiction effects (the archive as a system of representation) alongside its truth effects (the archive as material with ‘real’ consequences)” (4). The NPR series’ fiction effects arise from the narrative practices that make it culturally legible, including, to borrow Natalie Zemon Davis’s formulation, “choices of language, detail, and order” necessary for a historical account to seem “true, real, meaningful, and/or explanatory” (3). As a journalistic endeavor, the series also has truth effects, consequences for civic discourse about current events, and, at least in theory, an influence on current events themselves.

The NPR series’ currency—in the dual senses of temporal immediacy and perceived cultural value—as reportage depends on listeners’ ability to relate the Vietnam War to new American wars. In the years since 9/11, the “specter of Vietnam” has been a familiar figure in American discourses on war, particularly as the US war in Afghanistan was escalating (Etheridge; Fernholz). Despite President George H. W. Bush’s declaration in 1991 that the United States had “kicked the Vietnam Syndrome” (Espiritu, “We-Win” 331; Herring 104), new

and contemplated American military actions since 9/11 have routinely drawn charges that they will devolve into “another Vietnam”—shorthand for another costly, high casualty, possibly pointless, and ultimately losing conflict for America.<sup>6</sup> Along with the post-9/11 rhetorical denotations of “Vietnam,” NPR’s coverage also links the Vietnam War era to the contemporary moment by recalling an important historical turning point for journalism itself: *The New York Times*’s 1971 publication of a leaked Department of Defense report known as the Pentagon Papers “established the modern independence of the American press—its willingness to challenge official truth” (Lewis). This willingness has been prominently demonstrated in post-9/11 war reporting by both conventional and new media. On 25 July 2010, a little over a month before the NPR series began, the organization Wikileaks obtained and released 92,000 classified documents grimly detailing day-to-day operations in the Afghanistan war, suggesting government duplicity of the sort revealed by the Pentagon Papers. Following the non-discovery of WMDs in Iraq in 2003 and the revelation of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse photographs in 2004, *The New York Times* could well take for granted that the Wikileaks “archive” (as the newspaper called it, after once again receiving advance access to the leaked documents) would be a site of suspense, capable of producing truths that upend public knowledge (Chivers, et al.).

NPR’s “investigation” of the *Kirk* dramatizes and redeploys this journalistic paradigm of mining the archive to contest dominant narratives. But in contrast to war critics’ catastrophic “other Vietnams,” NPR offers listeners a *better* Vietnam: a pathos-filled human interest story with striking imagery and happier outcomes designed to change perceptions of the war that have haunted all later American wars. Against the backdrop of growing public discontent with the war in Afghanistan, NPR sweeps the human and cultural remnants of the Vietnam War into a new, nationalizing narrative that reaffirms a view of America as a benevolent hegemon and American empire as an orderly rescue from the chaos and dysfunction that Western observers often associate with conflicts in the Global South. NPR’s sentimental story helps construct the *nomos*, or normative universe (Cover 4), in which “another Vietnam” in the Middle East or western Asia might not lead to an irredeemable outcome.

NPR begins the first installment by referencing the visual archive in whose shadow it operates: “When the Vietnam War ended [,] . . . Americans got their enduring impression of the event from television” (“USS”), principally news footage of helicopters evacuating Americans and their South Vietnamese dependents and colleagues from Saigon rooftops in the spectacular airlift dubbed Operation Frequent Wind.<sup>7</sup> This starting point for NPR’s story not only sets the stage for NPR’s revisionist intervention but also aptly (if unwittingly) captures the paradox of refugee rescue: that the humanitarian feat of rescue is enabled by and completely intertwined with the same US imperial endeavors and military violence that helped produce the refugee crisis. As Espiritu observes in her work

on “militarized refuge(es),” the breathtaking logistics and mechanics of spectacular operations such as Operation Frequent Wind rely on the same equipment, personnel, expertise, and geographic circuits and nodes developed over decades of US military expansion in the Pacific (*Body* 26, 30-31). In its own time, television footage of the Saigon evacuation, like Van Es’s famous photograph, represented for many American observers the United States’ failure in Vietnam and, for some, even an abandonment of allies. But NPR, like other media sources in recent decades, calls on a redemption narrative that recasts the failed *military* “mission” as one of successful (if incomplete) caregiving. In three vivid scenes that refigure or newly render visual and sonic images of the war, NPR’s *Kirk* series elicits sentimental responses, or feelings mediated through another’s point of view,<sup>8</sup> that shift the crux of the Vietnam War narrative from lost war to valiant rescue.

The first of these scenes, the helicopter landings, is deeply preoccupied with relative size, as if to downplay the exercise of US economic and military dominance abroad or perhaps, more immediately, to unsettle public memory of small helicopters that could not evacuate enough people from Saigon. As North Vietnamese forces neared Saigon, the *Kirk*, a “small” destroyer escort, was in the South China Sea providing cover for Operation Frequent Wind. The *Kirk* crew then spotted sixteen South Vietnamese army helicopters, low on fuel and filled with people, seeking a place to land. At first, “the helicopters flew past the *Kirk* . . . looking for a larger carrier deck,” but the crew signaled the pilots and coached them to land one by one on a deck that must have “look[ed] very, very small” to army pilots unaccustomed to landing on a moving ship. After each unloading, dozens of men pushed the aircraft into the sea to make room for the next because, according to a crewmember, “humans were much more important than the hardware.”<sup>9</sup> Even when a “huge” Chinook helicopter arrived that was too large to land, the *Kirk* crewmen managed to catch a woman and several children who dropped from the hovering aircraft into “the outstretched arms of the sailors below” (“*USS*”). The helicopter rescue recounted by NPR produces a powerful visual antidote to the many images of helicopters hurriedly leaving Saigon during the war’s final twenty-four hours: instead of helicopters departing Saigon in defeat, these South Vietnamese helicopters land onboard the *Kirk* under the crew’s guidance. Once the South Vietnamese pilots, women, and children are rescued—safely welcomed onto the sovereign US territory of the naval ship—the war machines disappear from view, discarded into neutral international waters.

The *Kirk*’s “heroics,” as NPR puts it, “would continue”: after the rescued were moved to another ship, the *Kirk* was ordered into hostile waters alone. The new mission, the captain notes, was “to rescue the [South] Vietnamese Navy. We forgot ’em, and if we don’t get them or any part of them, they’re all probably going to be killed” (“*USS*”). The American ship retrieved the forgotten fleet, about thirty naval ships plus dozens of fishing and cargo boats carrying between twenty



thousand and thirty thousand South Vietnamese. Over the next week, the *Kirk* led a mournful exodus toward the Philippines, during which the second and third significant scenes emerged: the death of a refugee baby and the transfer of sovereignty of the South Vietnamese ships.

The baby's death unfolds in the documentary through "a series of images meant to trigger emotion," an "anti-rhetoric" (Lassen 310) that relies on feeling and sensory experience, to borrow Henrik Lassen's language to describe child deathbed scenes that are common in sentimental Victorian-era literature. Steven Burwinkel, the *Kirk's* medic, recalls giving a sick one-year-old boy a "massive dose of penicillin, thinking, "Well, it's either going to be right or wrong—and the child was going to die anyway." The child recovered but unexpectedly died two days later:

Shapiro [announcer]: The baby had choked on formula. It was a freakish accident. Mr. Burwinkel: And because of his compromised condition, it was just too much for his system, and he died of cardiac arrest. And I remember we had a [beginning to cry]—excuse me just a minute. We had a funeral for him, a burial at sea. It's very emotional. Still brings back emotions that I'd rather not have.

Shapiro: The crew gathered the child's father and three siblings for a funeral on the *Kirk*. The captain said a prayer; a bugler played "Taps." The child's body was wrapped in a yellow and red South Vietnamese flag and dropped into the ocean. ("USS")

The baby's death stands out for its resistance to human (specifically, American) understanding and influence. Surviving despite the medic's prediction and then dying of "a freakish accident," the baby is a cipher for the will of God: a life taken not by the United States or even by armed conflict but by a mysterious power. Identified only as a South Vietnamese refugee, the baby exemplifies the innocent civilian Other who, it turns out, "was going to die anyway."

The colorful image of the tiny corpse "wrapped in a yellow and red South Vietnamese flag and dropped into the ocean" contrasts sharply with familiar images of children from the Vietnam War. Through Ut's "Terror of War" and Haerberle's "And Babies?" children's overexposed bodies, suffering or dead from US military actions, circulate relentlessly in American culture, made only more somber by newsprint's grainy grayscale. But while those photographs intrude uncomfortably on private terror and loss, wrenching vulnerable bodies into public display, in NPR's story, the lost, and respectfully shrouded, child is meant to be shared. His death, mediated by the tearful testimony of an American veteran, draws all witnesses into a universalizing sadness that enacts what Lauren Berlant calls "the ideology of true feeling" (41). By experiencing this sadness, NPR's listener can reassure herself that despite the divisive, dehumanizing war, she retains the capacity to feel for the racial or national Other who, after all, is also "grievable" (Butler 32). To drive the point home, the baby's death is

counterbalanced by a makeshift maternity ward on the *Kirk*: while death happens regardless of US actions, new life arises under US care and protection.

When the fleet reached Subic Bay, the Philippine government, wary of offending the new Vietnamese government, would not admit the South Vietnamese ships, which one *Kirk* officer calls “the last sovereign territory of the Republic of Vietnam.” A South Vietnamese captain suggests the quasi-legal solution: a *Kirk* officer takes command of each ship, and the South Vietnamese flag is lowered and an American one raised in its place, ostensibly transforming the ships into US territory. Refugees who were part of the *Kirk* escort recall the transition:

Capt. Kiem Do: Thousand of people on the boat start to sing the national anthem when they lower the flag. And they cry, cry, cry . . .

Ms. Thuy Hugo: And we knew that we are—no longer belong to that. And we all cry, singing our national anthem. [Sings a few lines from the South Vietnamese national anthem.] And also stand still to salute and raise up the American flag, which is—that’s the flag that save our life.

Shapiro: The Vietnamese military officers took off their hats, ripped the stripes off their uniforms, and threw them into the sea. (“USS”)

Although the flag ceremony is arguably only symbolic, the belated representation of sovereignty’s decomposition<sup>10</sup> makes visible and narrates the otherwise invisible change that has occurred. NPR restages the war’s chaotic end—the Saigon evacuation, whose spectral images loom over the series—as an orderly annexation that takes place not only with consent but actually at the request of the South Vietnamese. While a diplomatic game proceeds around the seen fiction of transferred sovereignty, the scene’s heavy sentiment invites the American audience to “cry, cry, cry” with the refugees for their lost nation and to renew their own patriotic feelings as the refugees gratefully shift allegiance toward “the flag that save our life.”

Significantly, the story is rendered through interviews with both American sailors and Vietnamese refugees; while the refugees testify to their loss and gratitude, the sailors model sympathetic witness as emotive spectators and listeners, implicitly encouraging NPR listeners to identify with the sailors. The baby’s death draws tears from one stoic old veteran; another declares: “Their country was gone. Our job was to treat it with dignity.” NPR gives listeners a chance to extend the same sympathy when Thuy Hugo suddenly sings the South Vietnamese national anthem on air in a high, delicate voice—a strikingly feminine sound in a story delivered mostly in masculine voices. While the two flags pass each other in the listener’s mind, one falling, the other rising, Hugo’s song conjures the feminized ghost of South Vietnamese nationhood, returns the refugee to the scene of her loss, and places listeners alongside *Kirk* sailors who heard the same anthem sung by Hugo and others in 1975. Still a foil to American sympathy in 2010, Hugo becomes the medium through which an idealized form of

American community is recapitulated. Public radio's progressive listeners, many of whom contribute financially to their "listener-supported member stations," are encouraged to reach toward the stateless Other with a promise of care and inclusion backed by economic largesse—extending an honorary membership, one might say, to refugees who "no longer belong to" South Vietnam. A rapt twenty-first-century "national public" audience can envision its sonic encounter with the refugees as the beginning of a friendship founded on benefaction or redemption rather than as the culmination of questionable military actions carried out in its name.

In this way, the figure of the grateful refugee, exemplified by Thuy Hugo, is reinaugurated as the linchpin of the sentimental rescue narrative. In NPR's story, Hugo credits not only the individual sailors whose lives were on the line and whose actions eased deep suffering but also the flag representing the American state and its entire body politic. The grateful refugee is the only figure who can fully ratify the "gift of freedom," as she appears to do in this case. With her thankful "salute," she affirms that she desired but could not obtain freedom without the giver's aid and absolves the giver of any ill effects freedom may have wrought.<sup>11</sup> As failed war is displaced by successful rescue in a hopeful (and forgetful) American social imaginary, the nation's ethical slate is wiped. The rescue precipitates resettlement, a process with entirely new teleological ends, and new narratives come to the fore.

### **Reframing the Rescue: Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again***

Resettlement consists of complex individual and relational transformations that in America are often, and reductively, narrated through idioms of friendship, hospitality, and charity. While these idioms are consonant with the sentimental rescue, they tend to decontextualize the refugee's "new beginning." Official depictions of the United States' "Indochinese" refugee program emphasize the nation's magnanimity toward the refugees, who seem to come from nowhere, inexplicably war-torn and penniless, without drawing a connection between the refugee crisis and American policies toward Vietnam before, during, and after the war (Tollefson 273).<sup>12</sup> The dominant resettlement narrative for Southeast Asian refugees begins with putatively "third-world" violence, proceeds through heroic rescue by Western humanitarians, and eventually reaches one of two outcomes: successful assimilation into American society, which entails economic success and expressions of gratitude to "America" or, less often, descent into social disorder (gangs or multi-generational poverty) understood as a consequence of trauma and cultural displacement. In particular, mass-media stories about resettled Vietnamese Americans continue to foreground American humanitarianism and the refugees' gratitude even when the story could easily be told in other ways.

To give one example, a story that has gained near mythic status concerns the multibillion-dollar nail salon industry largely created, and today dominated, by Vietnamese refugees and immigrants. As told by NPR in 2012—and previously by the *Los Angeles Times* (Tran), CNN (“How”), and other media outlets—the entire industry owes its start to Tippi Hedren, “an elegant blond[e] who starred in several of Alfred Hitchcock’s movies.” Hedren was volunteering in a refugee camp when several Vietnamese women “admired her long, glossy nails,” leading her to arrange for their training and licensure in manicure (Bates). CNN’s version, which aired in 2011, opens with a clip from Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) featuring Hedren’s immaculate nails, followed by the voice of a Vietnamese nail salon owner: “She gave me so much.” Later, CNN cuts to a shot of a roomful of young Vietnamese American women hunched over manicure stations, students at a local beauty school that trains nail technicians. The Vietnamese American man who runs the school explains: “Everything [Hedren] did back in 1975 paved the way for what I do” (“How”).

The link is attenuated, to say the least, between Hedren’s encounter with a few Vietnamese women in the 1970s and the industry’s dramatic growth in the decades since. Yet this story remains primarily one of benefaction about a beautiful, white “Hollywood star” who trained a dutiful “legion of Vietnamese” to work in the beauty industry (“How”), enabling their economic success, rather than how a refugee community with few resources grew a tiny niche market into a seven-billion-dollar-per-year industry, or the growing ethnic and gender stratification of service sector jobs, to name some other narrative possibilities that might arise from Vietnamese Americans’ cornering of the manicure market. Like NPR’s *Kirk* series, the Tippi Hedren stories demonstrate an editorial preference for refugee narratives that reify dominant beliefs in American generosity and opportunity, not to mention racial and gender hierarchies that place immigrant and refugee women (and feminized men) of color perpetually in subservient roles for which they are very grateful.

The sentimental rescue narrative is reinforced by the unusual administrative structure of refugee resettlement in the United States, in which the federal government delegates much of the work of resettlement to private actors rather than providing most or all services directly through government agencies, as is more commonly the case among nations that accept large numbers of refugees (Committee of the Judiciary 18-19). In the US system, the private actors consist of a diffuse network of “sponsors,” or individuals and local nonprofit organizations, coordinated by designated federally funded voluntary agencies, sometimes called VOLAGs (28, 35; Fein 49). Sponsorship, in which individuals, churches, and other small, local organizations assumed responsibility for a particular refugee or refugee family, became a popular way that some Americans helped alleviate the heavily reported refugee crisis. Because sponsors acted privately and voluntarily, the relationships between refugees and sponsors were often

understood through idioms of hospitality, friendship, and “altruistic choice” (Fein 17), transforming a complex international crisis into “a specific question of responding to a particular person or family here and now” (49). Thus divorced from the prevalent and highly contested discourses surrounding US foreign policy and military actions, private sponsorship easily gave rise to and helped normalize racialized “grateful refugee” narratives. But in recent years, some younger Vietnamese refugee writers have eschewed, or at least navigated around, the rescue and gratitude narratives that subtend so many refugee stories; they have staked out narrative possibilities outside the teleology of the grateful refugee, often crossing or mixing genres and media to do so.

Lai’s children’s book *Inside Out & Back Again* appeared a few months after the *Kirk* series aired. The largely autobiographical novel is comprised of short prose poems written in the persona of ten-year-old Hà, who escapes Vietnam by navy ship with her mother and brothers just before the fall of Saigon. A brief middle section details the voyage while most of the book recounts the before and after in Vietnam and Alabama. Marketed by its publisher to eight- to twelve-year-old readers, *Inside Out & Back Again* contains simple, spare language, most lines two to five words long. Lai suggests her concise poetic language operates through a kind of iconographic process, that is, by “express[ing] emotions through pictures, not words,” which suits a child narrator who “feels just as much as any adult but can’t express the emotions yet” (Wolff 18). In an interview included in the book’s paperback edition, she describes her poems as filled with “phrases choked with visuals” (Lai, “Back” 5). While the work chronologically relates one year in the protagonist’s life, the many brief prose poems offer the account as a series of snapshots, each with its own title and internal coherence. The prose poems give the novel a montage-like quality, revealing carefully edited glimpses of the protagonist’s emotional life, rendered through movement, image, and sound, often made meaningful through juxtaposition or accretion.

As Hà’s focus darts, like a handheld camera, from one scene to another, the reader must make meaning of the order, performing a kind of historical reconstruction along with the protagonist. The flag-lowering scene, for example, unfolds in crisp, startling gestures observed by Hà:

One woman tries to throw  
herself overboard,  
screaming that without a country  
she cannot live.  
As they wrestle her down,  
a man stabs his heart  
with a toothbrush.

I don’t know them,  
so their pain seems unreal  
next to Brother Khôi’s,

whose eyes are as wild  
as those of his broken chick. (Lai, *Inside* 85)

As Hà watches the adults' performances of grief, she notices that she feels different levels of sympathy for the Vietnamese who are known to her and those who are not. Challenging the dominant image of refugees as an undifferentiated mass of humanity, Hà creates a scene, but not quite a community, out of "a woman," "a man," "I," and "Brother Khôi." Indeed, it is evident that she prefers the circulation of emotion within an intimate network (herself and her brother) over sentimental images of suffering offered for public display and consumption (the unnamed woman and man). The toothbrush stabbing remains an "unreal" gesture empty of affect and effect. The sharing of grief is reserved for Khôi, who is distraught over a different loss: a chick he sneaked onboard has died, but Khôi conceals it in his pocket until the stench exposes his secret.

In an episode reminiscent of the baby's funeral on the *Kirk* (and reflective of the high incidence of burials at sea in "Boat People" narratives), Hà takes Khôi to the back of the ship, where they enact their own child-scale mourning. She wraps her "mouse-bitten doll," with its arms folded around the chick's "limp fuzzy body," in a white handkerchief, and the children drop their play companions overboard. Hà confesses:

I smile  
but I regret  
not having my doll  
as soon as the white bundle  
sinks into the sea. (86)

While the scene makes use of sentimental tropes, it subverts the conventional child deathbed and distinguishes between two very different manifestations of grief. On one hand, the adults' public outpourings border on absurd when seen through Hà's eyes; on the other hand, Hà's sacrifice of her doll models for the reader not the tearful sympathy of an outsider but a quiet, immediate empathy based on tangible losses shared in real time. Lai's "pictures, not words" draw emotions from the reader but not without bracketing and implicitly critiquing the sentimentalism that sympathy can engender.

Lai's emotional yet antisentimental pictures challenge the "Vietnam" Americans know from Western photojournalism. Photography, the reader learns early on, is a volatile medium, as its promised reality effect bears both treasured memories and danger, threatening exposure to voyeurs and state surveillance. While preparing to leave Vietnam, the family sorts through photographs, keeping some and burning the rest; because Hà's father is missing in action, they "cannot leave / evidence of Father's life / that might hurt him" (59). They keep "baby pictures, / where you can't tell whose bottom / is exposed for all the world to see" (58), introducing a modicum of privacy into a medium characterized by exposure

of various kinds, including global press circulation. Unlike the widely published “Boat People” images seen (and pitied) thousands of miles away, these anonymous pictures are selected to safeguard individual, private subjectivity from the eyes of “all the world.”

Later, in a poem titled “War and Peace,” the text explicitly calls out images from the Vietnam War’s dominant iconography. These exposures of Vietnamese suffering mean less to Hà than to her teacher in Alabama, who shows the class photographs

of a burned, naked girl  
running, crying  
down a dirt road

of people climbing, screaming,  
desperate to get on  
the last helicopter  
out of Saigon

of skeletal refugees,  
crammed aboard a  
sinking fishing boat,  
reaching up to the heavens  
for help . . .

She’s telling the class  
where I’m from. (194)

Hà’s anaphoric “of” mimics the limited social framework through which these iconic photographs were composed, selected, and circulated in the 1970s and through which they are passed down to new generations of American viewers. The photographs reproduce a narrative of decontextualized trauma and desperation into which Americans are taught (literally, in a classroom) to place the figure of the Vietnamese refugee. Hà suggests an alternative frame for visualizing Vietnam when she observes that instead of those photographs, her teacher “should have shown / something about / papayas and Tết [the Vietnamese lunar new year holiday]” (195), referring readers to earlier scenes in the book. By indexing her previously rendered memories of Vietnam to the keywords “papayas” and “Tết,” Hà activates an alternate iconography of “where I’m from” that can introduce a Vietnamese child to her classmates and to Lai’s child readers, likely around Hà’s age.

Among the nonjournalistic images offered by the text are generative papayas Hà literally and figuratively planted in an earlier poem:

Two green thumbs  
that will grow into

orange-yellow delights  
smelling of summer. (21)

Papayas also reappear when a kind neighbor shows Hà photographs that her son, an American soldier who was killed in action, sent home from Vietnam:

I suck in my breath:  
a photograph of  
a papaya tree  
swaying broad  
fanlike leaves. (201)

This unexpected proffer of friendship from Mrs. Washington, the only neighbor who does not shun Hà's family, shores up Hà's personal visual archive against "the great war photographs," to use Griffin's term, helping her claim a counter-hegemonic visuality along the lines of what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls "the right to look"—the right to interpret one's visual field, which is inseparable from claims of autonomy, authority, and political agency (23-25). This friendship between a refugee and the mother of a dead GI also emphasizes the productive empathy that can flow between those most affected by war. From the allegorically named Mrs. Washington, Hà also learns a linguistic trick she later uses against a pink-faced bully who has made fun of her "pancake" face: she calls him "*Đu-Đũ* face" ("papaya face") and says,

It's not my fault  
if his friends hear  
Doo-doo Face  
and are laughing  
right at him. (220)

For better or worse, Hà uses the iconized papaya, now her symbol of resistance to xenophobia, to momentarily redirect her classmates' objectifying gaze from herself to the bully. After school, she learns martial arts to defend herself against classmates, whose taunting causes her to hide in the bathroom during lunch; crouching in position, she says, "I'm practicing / to be seen" (161)—that is, seen anew, self-possessed and physically secure.

In the adult world, too, the Vietnamese and Americans in Lai's text struggle to see and understand one another outside prevalent cultural frames, beginning with the first encounter between Lai's family and the man who will become their sponsor. Hà's family waits for a sponsor in a refugee camp in Florida, a place of absurd spectatorship "where alligators are shown / as entertainment" (107). Hà's mother learns sponsors are more likely to choose refugees who self-identify as Christian, and "[j]ust like that / Mother amends our faith" (108) to better fit the profile of the ideal refugee. When a man arrives and selects Hà's oldest brother to train as a



mechanic, indicating he can take only one, Hà's mother calls forth the available rescue narrative:

Mother doesn't care  
what the man  
came looking for.

By the time  
she is done  
staring, blinking,  
wiping away tears,  
all without speaking English,  
our entire family  
has a sponsor  
to Alabama. (109-10)

Hà's mother performs the pitiable refugee who is bereft of language to elicit sympathy from a potential sponsor, knowing the relationship between sponsor and refugee is mediated by a visual culture in which the refugee's helplessness is more legible than her autonomy or self-expression. Like many Americans moved to action by news images, the sponsor in Lai's novel is susceptible to the silent sight of a refugee mother "staring, blinking, / wiping away tears, / all without speaking English." In a revealing study of American sponsors of Vietnamese refugees, Helen Fein notes that non-Vietnamese-speaking sponsors did not believe refugees' lack of English was a significant problem, but bilingual Vietnamese refugees, who often served as translators, believed it was (89). When one sponsor was asked how she communicated with those she sponsors, she replied, "I don't know. . . . It was lots of fun. . . . It's not hard to communicate as long as you have eyes" (89). For this sponsor, seeing a refugee was tantamount to understanding her.

But sponsors, too, had a predetermined, media-shaped role to play. Hà, a fan of American film Westerns, is thrilled with the man she calls "our cowboy": he "looks just like / an American should"—tall, blond, with cowboy hat and boots—and she says,

I love him  
immediately  
and imagine him  
to be good-hearted and loud  
and the owner of a horse. (Lai, *Inside* 111)

Months later, Hà is disappointed to learn their sponsor, a suburbanite, does not own a horse. Misunderstandings between the refugee family and their sponsor are recounted in a straightforward, often humorous way, although, as with the photographs shown in class, they bear some relation to more troubling encounters.

These include when the sponsor's wife resentfully insists that Hà's family "keep out of / her neighbors' eyes" (116) and when a brick and racist note are thrown through the family's window, literally shattering their view of their American neighbors (162).

*Inside Out & Back Again* hints at how political and economic considerations pervade the personal relationships and affective states of resettling refugees. Hà's family oscillates anxiously between bewilderment, wariness, and gratitude in their interactions with the cowboy, whose surprise food gifts are alternately delightful (beef jerky) and gag-inducing (fried chicken). Meanwhile, his wife's hostility leads Hà to "wonder if he's so friendly / because his wife is so mean" (119). When the family moves out of the sponsor's house into an apartment, for which the cowboy pays three months' rent, Hà's mother marvels at "his generosity" until her eldest son Quang explains that "the American government / gives sponsors money"; when Hà's mother "is even more amazed / by the generosity / of the American government," Quang responds that "it's to ease the guilt / of losing the war" (124). At that point, she tells him

to clamp shut his mouth.

*People living on  
others' goodwill  
cannot afford  
political opinions.* (124-25)

The exchange between the single mother and her son, who is now employed by the cowboy as a mechanic, highlights the corporate overtones of the cowboy's "sponsorship," reminding the reader that the relationship is laced with material interests on both sides and political inequalities. A tricky concept, "goodwill" can mean good intentions, "benevolence," or "kindly regard"; or it can refer to the "ready-formed 'connection' of customers, considered as an element in the saleable value of a business"—an asset that is both crucial and difficult to appraise because it is based in affective relationships ("goodwill, n."). Goodwill belies a crossover between private emotions (for example, Hà's "love" for the cowboy) and a market economy in which the vulnerable trade political agency for food.

Because Hà is a child, she skirts to some extent the social expectations that compel adult refugees to profess gratitude and suppress critical opinions; her youth gives her—and therefore the text—room to maneuver around the normative figure of the grateful refugee who must protect "goodwill" in order to "afford" the necessities of life. A "pouty girl" (Lai, *Inside* 107), she sets out to "inspect" (125) their new government-funded home and is pleased with some of their donated belongings but unhappy with others: "Mother says be grateful. / I'm trying" (125-26). Lai's text does not advocate solutions to, or even overtly criticize, the structural dilemmas its characters face. But it does enable the reader to observe, with Hà's critical gaze, the intersecting social, political, and economic

pressures that contour refugee experiences. In doing so, the text gently disrupts the dominant narratives of rescue, gratitude, and private hospitality that frequently structure popular narratives about Vietnamese refugees that are told from non-Vietnamese perspectives.

### **Conclusion: Old Frames, New Refugees**

The Vietnam War's still growing archive of visual and multisensory images is recognizable in how Americans see, imagine, and understand all later wars. Under the shadow of the war's media legacy, the war's human remnants in the United States — Southeast Asian refugees and American veterans — have been (re)incorporated into the post-war imagined community partly via hegemonic and resistive practices of visual and sonic representation and spectatorship. These practices continue in the post-9/11 period, recapitulating and challenging familiar sentimental rescue narratives. Meanwhile, new refugees created by new US-involved wars reach America's borders.

In 2007, as the Iraq War peaked with a US "troop surge," CNN broadcast a story about a young Iraqi boy who was set on fire by masked insurgents, causing horrific burns over much of his face and body. Once again, graphic images of a burned child came to represent the "terror of war," but in a story about American medical, not military, intervention, an American team quickly brought the boy, "Youssif," to the United States for cutting-edge treatment. The heartrending story drew monetary donations from viewers so fast that the next day a follow-up segment announced the parents' gratitude: "I was so happy I didn't know what to do with myself," said Youssif's mother, while his father stated, "We just want to thank everyone who came forward. We knew there was kindness out there" (Damon, "Boy"). Over the next several years, Youssif's image acquired mythic dimensions while the historical details of his story faded. In 2011, when public attention to Iraq had waned, CNN ran an update under the blunt headline "Burned Iraqi Boy's Road to Recovery," in accordance with his function as a mostly nameless icon of Western humanitarian rescue. Moreover, as Youssif's shocking scars were gradually ameliorated by time and numerous surgeries (a progression tracked by CNN's film and still images), his story, too, was being resculpted for an amnesiac audience. By 2013, another "Burned Iraqi Boy" update begins, "Unimaginable cruelty marked the beginning of Youssif's story" (Dellorto). With the US war in Iraq supposedly finished, CNN made Youssif's Iraqi assailants the unequivocal starting point of "Youssif's story." In doing so, it left on the cutting room floor the United States' earlier, unilateral deposing of a stable regime that, for all its egregious faults, had largely prevented lawless attacks such as the one Youssif suffered. Youssif's story memorialized itself as one about American care that saved a boy from indigenous Iraqi "cruelty."

For Youssif, now an asylee, resettlement's "new beginning" rebooted history: it diverted public attention from a morally ambiguous or unresolved war narrative to a pleurably sentimental rescue-and-gratitude tale that vaunted rather than challenged nationalist assumptions about American foreign policy. Such diversions are never entirely successful, however, necessitating that rescue narratives be repeated over and over, almost, but not quite, keeping pace with the global production of new refugees whose experiences might challenge them. Today, the United States accepts over half of refugees who resettle under the United Nations' auspices (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Like *Kirk* sailors waving at desperate helicopter pilots urging them to land on a tiny deck, many Americans yearn to be of use to others in a world whose continual violence confounds them, but they are haunted by a suspicion that the violence is not entirely indigenous to the refugee Other. New literature by Vietnamese American writers meets America's hegemonic, but uncertain, gaze in a variety of forms—poetic, narrative, visual, sonic, and performative—and offers a revealing look at the heart and mind of American empire.

## Notes

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1. The entire series, follow-up articles, and multimedia materials (including an interactive timeline, photographs, articles, and videos) are available on NPR's website.
2. I take a cue here from Y n L  Espiritu, who, in her pathbreaking study *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (2014), delineates a technique she calls "critical juxtaposing": the joint analysis of "seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces, in order to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about the contours, contents, and afterlives of war and empire" (21).
3. For discussions of the limited ways Vietnamese refugees have been represented by non-Vietnamese scholars, writers, journalists, and editors, see Espiritu ("Toward") and Monique Thuy-Dung Truong.
4. For examples, see Viet Thanh Nguyen's analyses of Le Ly Hayslip's memoirs (4) and Mimi Thi Nguyen's analysis of Madelenna Lai's Rose Bowl Parade float bearing the message "Thank You America and the World" and her chapter on H y nh C ng "Nick" Ut's "Terror of War" (1972) (1-2; 83-132). In addition, Truong has written of the ways sociological accounts and oral histories published in the late 1970s and early 1980s molded stories about newly arrived Vietnamese to fit existing cultural narratives about Asian Americans, holding them up as a "model minority" in implicit contrast to other minority groups (31). Truong reads an

- array of oral-history-based texts about Vietnamese Americans for the ways they reinforce existing cultural narratives about either US involvement in the Vietnam War or Asian Americans more generally.
5. As a more recent example, Rory Kennedy's acclaimed documentary *Last Days in Vietnam* (2014) relies heavily on interviews with American men who served in the military, CIA, or State Department and a few former South Vietnamese military service members who are now resettled in the United States, to narrate a harrowing story of both successful rescues and regretted abandonments. As one of its subplots, *Last Days* retells NPR's story of the *Kirk*, emphasizing the successful rescue with dramatic visuals and extending the radio series' revision of the war's end. More generally, the film remixes a vast assemblage of archival video footage and photographs into a stream of montages that reconstruct the US government's April 1975 evacuation of its personnel and some South Vietnamese allies. The Vietnamese are, for the most part, an undifferentiated, fleeing mass of distressed people: as Kennedy's American interviewees put it, "a wave of humanity, rolling, rolling south toward Saigon" and, later, a crowd in "out of control panic" trying to escape the city. Even as the film garners sympathy for the South Vietnamese, *Last Days* reproduces the usual racialized power dynamic. Many South Vietnamese civilians are shown, but Kennedy's favored montage/voice-over technique renders them as mostly visual objects, nameless and voiceless; the story is told almost entirely in the voices of American men who tried to save them.
  6. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong examines the rhetorical meanings of "Vietnam syndrome," "specter of Vietnam," and "another Vietnam" during the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. Use of these expressions, Chong writes, "not only imagines the US nation-state as wounded like the soldiers it sent to war, but also calls upon the discourses of forgiveness and redemption to heal the nation of its psychological malaise" (2). Comparisons to Vietnam have also been a mainstay of criticism of the second Iraq War, with one observer even positing a new "Iraq syndrome" as a "mutated" form of the Vietnam syndrome; see George C. Herring and William Schneider.
  7. In the war's final twenty-four hours, US Air Force and Marine helicopters flew 662 sorties between Saigon and aircraft carriers in the South China Sea, transporting over seven thousand Americans, South Vietnamese, and third-country nationals (Tobin, Laehr, and Hilgenberg 122-23). The operation included the clearing of the US Embassy in Saigon, where approximately two thousand American and South Vietnamese people were flown out, but thousands more South Vietnamese seeking refuge were stopped at the embassy gates by armed US Marines (Isaacs 59; Moore).
  8. James Chandler usefully defines sentiment as "distributed feeling": "emotion that results from social circulation, passion that has been mediated by a sympathetic

- passage through a virtual point of view. It involves a structure of vicariousness” (11-12).
9. South Vietnamese helicopters also were pushed overboard on other ships (including the *USS Blue Ridge* and *USS Midway*), where in similar fashion aircraft landed, unloaded passengers, and then were discarded to make room for more landings (Tobin 118).
  10. See Robin E. Wagner-Pacifici’s *The Art of Surrender: Decomposing Sovereignty at Conflict’s End* (2005), which examines rituals and imagery associated with surrender.
  11. Gratitude is an affect, but its expression is also a performative speech act that reifies unequal power relationships. William McDougall notes that when we thank someone, we agree that the one thanked “is able to do for us something that we cannot do for ourselves” (qtd. in Emmons 8). For McDougall, gratitude is a kind of “negative self-feeling” whose “cornerstone . . . is the notion of *undeserved merit*,” the idea that “The grateful person . . . did nothing to deserve the gift or benefit” (qtd. in Emmons 5).
  12. James W. Tollefson, critiquing US State Department documents describing the Vietnam War, writes that “[T]he official version of history—that communists create refugees while Americans save them—disguises the US role in creating and sustaining the ongoing refugee crisis” (263).

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