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**Title**

The Refugee Repertoire: Performing and Staging the Postmemories of Violence

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9br1q59w>

**Journal**

MELUS, 41(3)

**ISSN**

0163-755X

**Author**

Bui, Long

**Publication Date**

2016-09-01

**DOI**

10.1093/melus/mlw034

Peer reviewed



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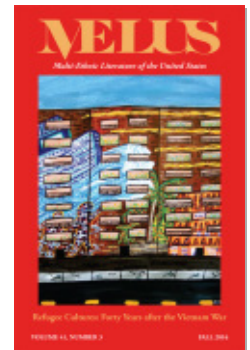
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## The Refugee Repertoire: Performing and Staging the Postmemories of Violence

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MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S., Volume 41, Number 3, Fall 2016,  
pp. 112-132 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



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# The Refugee Repertoire: Performing and Staging the Postmemories of Violence

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Refugee experiences are scripted and performed in a number of inventive ways. Since the end of the Vietnam War, millions of Vietnamese alongside many other Southeast Asian refugees have fled their homelands to resettle in the United States and other host countries. Although decades have passed since the war's end, there remains little critical work about the process of coming of age under military violence. Existing rubrics for refugee studies are limited, more concerned with the refugee as an abject legal body and floating signifier of despair rather than a creative subject able to stage cultural production. By considering artistic responses and adaptations to dominant systems of power, which form through subjugated knowledges emerging within histories of struggle, this essay examines how the children of refugees narrate and perform a violent history to which they feel they belong but which they did not directly experience. Their performative texts offer a necessary intervention into how refugees are being discussed and demonstrate how young people born after war create something new and fresh out of old wounds.

Bringing performance studies to bear on literary and cultural studies serves to reread the refugee experience through alternative cultural forms such as hip-hop music and graphic novels—genres that emphasize psychosomatic accessibility and emotional intimacy. The graphic novel *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (2010) by Gia-Bao (G. B.) Tran and the musical work of hip-hop artists such as Andrew “Nam” Le and Johnny “Vietnam” Nguyen help to conceptually flesh out the *refugee repertoire*—which I define as the aesthetics and arts produced by refugees and their children—and provide some performative framing or reading of the “refugee experience.” Approaching refugees as creators and performers allows us to take stock of how the subjects of war make sense of their histories and determine the representation of their corporeal selves. These texts help navigate the following questions: What representational strategies and signifying practices do artists draw on to map their refugee identity? To what extent do those who came of age after war adopt certain narratives as part of their refugee aesthetics? In what ways do they question what counts as an object or subject of the refugee experience?

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DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlw034

MELUS • Volume 41 • Number 3 • (Fall 2016)

Building a new theoretical model for Southeast Asian American literary and cultural studies, the refugee repertoire is a method through which scholars can study the children of refugees as they craft the texts and scripts needed to represent (and survive) post-war trauma on their own terms. The work of marginalized youth of color point to the significance of reading alternative art forms such as graphic novels and rap music as primal sites of cultural criticism, allowing for speculations of subject-formation that counter the positioning of refugee communities as outside history or victims in need of rescue. Addressing the tension between the desire to give voice to such groups and the denial of their voice, the refugee repertoire builds from Marianne Hirsch's concept of the postmemory generation, which traces the affective and aesthetic dimensions of trauma and loss felt by those who came of age after war. As Hirsch writes, this postmemory generation's connection to the past is not mediated by total recall of the past but steeped in "imaginative investment, projection, and creation . . . dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness . . . to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (107).

Beyond a linear chronological narrative retelling of the past, the postmemory generation strives to concoct new imaginary forms that still directly speak to that muddled past. As Hirsch notes, sometimes those who grew up in survivor families adopt the traumatic experiences of others as part of their own life story, and this process of transference expresses the "curiosity, the urgency, the frustrated *need* to know about a traumatic past" (114). Postmemory work is messy because it is not just derived from ancestors but born out of the connections among the second generation and the horizontal identification among contemporaries who try to understand their unique emergence as a cohort. While many scholars have productively taken up Hirsch's framework of the postmemory generation, few have paid attention to her concerns with what she calls postmemory's performative regime, one shaped by the need to convey something to viewers other than the author-subject's view of things, a regime molded by audience reception, need, spectacle, and bodily affect. Entrenched within a performative regime of refugee trauma and survival, the Vietnamese American postmemory generation adopts creative projects to absorb and articulate the Vietnam War's aftershocks.

### Theorizing Memory Work through the Refugee Body

In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), Diana Taylor distinguishes between the *archive*—documents, files, stories, maps, and letters contained within a locatable space—and the *repertoire*—those reiterative instances of human communication that travel through space and time. While both adhere to a process of mediation and memorialization, the repertoire captures the lived human experience that exceeds the documentary

functions of the archive. Taylor's generative work points to the need to study the performance of minority colonized populations, a call that resonates with the work of Ma Vang, which points to the testimonies, memories, and stories of Hmong refugees not publicly visible in mainstream discourse. Attending to what she calls the *refugee archive*, one comprised of historical artifacts and cultural narratives made by refugees, Vang conceptualizes the failure of nation-states such as the United States to remember the historical struggles of displaced subjects; thus, the refugee archive denotes the rich cache or trove of "secret" knowledge that diasporic communities displaced by war possess and mobilize. Differing from Taylor's traditional idea of the archive as enduring materials, Vang's archive recognizes that refugee stories and texts collide against the authoritative body of official documents and archives, as many refugees bring little with them during their flight from danger or destroy or suppress information from fear of persecution or censorship.

The refugee repertoire brings these two models of thought together, recognizing the power of the repertoire to establish a base of knowledge in the absence of a formal or refugee archive of knowledge. The robust analytic offered by the refugee repertoire resituates the artistic practices of pastiche through what Marco de Marinis describes as the semiotics of performance, where cultural conventions, rules, and expectations of human behavior are the codes to be deciphered within a text, event, or process. The refugee repertoire points to the rich interplay between private desires and public demand through bodily gestures, a crucial aspect of the refugee condition that is not only about spatial disorientation or dispersal but bodily/spatial reorientations. For instance, many Americanized children of Vietnamese refugees are never free from broader perceptions of the Vietnamese in the United States as "boat people" or "fresh off the boat." As their public image in this country is interlaced with those of their elders, the next generation comes to recognize refugeeness as a central part of their identities as Americans and their performances of cultural citizenship. As Yên Lê Espiritu makes clear in her call for a critical refugee studies, the multidimensionality of the refugee experience, especially the family trauma that percolates and reverberates within later generations, is often subordinated to ahistorical master narratives about refugees as assimilated or saved, such that intergenerational trauma is easily forgotten and perspectives erased. Refugees are frequently construed as helpless beings frozen in stasis, disabled bodies rather than capable and inspired subjects with tales to tell about themselves and what their creative minds and flexible bodies can do. Espiritu advocates for the study of refugees beyond issues of legal asylum and scientific inquiry to probe the affective spaces of memory that refugees occupy and traverse. The refugee repertoire, therefore, marks a reframing of aesthetic practices against the hegemonic social scripts about refugees and their progeny.

The term *repertoire* generally denotes the standard pieces a performer can or is prepared to perform at any given time. It suggests what a performer is capable of,

given their particular skill set, experiences, and the bank of past traditions and accomplishments that capture their talent, abilities, and preparedness for a performance. The refugee repertoire thus acknowledges the refugee condition as a highly embodied staged process, anchored in the motion and movement of the diasporic subject's navigation across different landscapes of belonging or exclusion. Specific to the second generation's project to make sense of a history they themselves did not witness, this repertoire suggests that one never ceases to be a refugee, that one can be circumscribed by the refugee experience even if one was never technically a refugee. It showcases the rehearsal, recitation, and repetition of certain social scripts about displacement, alienation, and survival that individuals construct to endure in the face of post-war violence. It brings the past alive to choreograph the fragmented, mobile meanings of home, history, identity, and family.

This reconstruction of postmemory draws on stories, texts, and images to innovatively understand war trauma and apprehend the particularity of being children of refugees, resisting what Michele Janette describes as the generic empathy toward refugees. The performative repertoire of refugees narrativizes disjointed lives and subjectivities not only to question history and memory but also to communicate the adopted poetic forms of play and pleasure forged by dispossessed youth imprinted with the violence of their communities on their bodies. A refugee repertoire moves to define and refine a developed sense of refugee aesthetics with an appreciation for beauty, art, and hope within the ugly destruction of war, centering the cultural sovereignty of migrant populations by legitimating their worldviews and fluid subject positions.

Vietnamese American artists and writers regularly use bodily idioms and figures of speech to convey their sense of being cast adrift in the world and being forced to perform in certain acceptable ways as refugees in new settings.<sup>1</sup> Such literary interventions cast light on the kinesthetic dimensions of working, living, and translating between the different cultures of a refugee community and a mainstream civil society. A burgeoning corpus of fictional work by young Vietnamese Americans born after the Vietnam War appraises the transitory life-worlds of stateless populations, never fixing on the refugee figure as an assimilable, once-broken subject but as an always unsettled queer figure displaced from geography.

Writing about exile despite not being refugees themselves, many in the post-war/postmemory generation aim to revise and complicate simplistic notions of the refugee or war subject. Insofar as US-born illustrators such as Tran and rappers such as Nguyen appropriate and claim themes of separation, distance, and aimlessness associated with refugees as their own, their work enables an interactive "mode of analysis that reads the structure of perceptions formed across relationships among writer, reader, critic, and text" (Jerng 199), a vital political tool for disrupting the caricature of migrant populations and narrow readings of ethnic literature or minority art. Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson uses a performance studies lens to dissect Asian American culture, identity, and history.

Tracing various modes of performance as they are staged in different venues, such as Cambodian American deportation cases, Chambers-Letson recognizes that the diversity of Asian American performance complicates the processes of racialization in US law, which places certain subjects in juridical categories such as immigrant, internee, and refugee. To reconsider the meaning of performance beyond the scope of theater or dance within literary or audio mediums aids in further evaluating and drawing closer attention to what Ju Yon Kim calls the “racial mundane,” or the ways bodies are socially conditioned.

Approaching graphic novels and rap lyrics through a performance studies lens, as opposed to texts characterized by spectacle such as dance or theater, encourages a more extensive discussion of what counts as performance, who performs, and who gets to witness or watch bodies. Considerations of graphic novels and hip-hop open provocative intersections in ways that deal exclusively with one or the other, as they emphasize the refugee subject as one that must be “staged” within certain constrained settings. The refugee is an actor and agent, one able to move within imaginary landscapes and ideological conventions. As a political project found in the artistic domain, the refugee repertoire views art as providing a different kind of history lesson, one that asks us to mull over those who have been ignored in space and time but whose frames of postmemory endure as a permanent reminder that refugee-ness is not a temporary condition of being.

## Hip-Hop and Critical Refugee Consciousness

The lyrical works of Southeast Asian American rappers emphasize the collision between the nationalist ideologies of exclusion and the collective desire for refugee inclusion (and rebellion) in the United States. This cathartic release of refugee desire is evident in the work of Seattle-based rapper Andrew “Nam” Le, whose moniker is a shortened version or the slang term for Vietnam that US soldiers used but also means “South” in Vietnamese. In underground progressive albums such as *Exhale* (2008), Le invites listeners to breathe and not dwell on their problems. In songs such as “Ghetto,” he waxes poetic on “reflections of Saigon painted through city avenues and every step is full of gratitude,” musing on the thankfulness of the refugee for being rescued by the United States but who must now dwell in congested urban jungles that are “a little crazy.”

With musical allusions to black soul, funk, and jazz—with hints of Latin Caribbean rhythm and the sounds of Vietnamese pop—Le stays true to his roots in all its cultural hybridity when he intones:

Follow me  
follow me through my native tongues  
on a journey through my home  
I call it my native slums. (“Ghetto”)

With a woman singing the chorus's refrain of "a pain unspoken" over a percolating beat, Le opines on the struggle of migrants that never ends, where in the face of constant violence "no one knows where to run" ("Ghetto"). Refugees run wherever they can, pushed out of their homes by guerilla warfare, mirroring the ways people are pushed out of their residences by the urban wars in America's inner cities. Le's artistic performance reminisces about the past only as it manifests in the present, offering a kind of postmemory of war from the perspective of the post-war generation. Through its capacity to inspire higher forms of critical consciousness, Le's work as a rapper foregrounds moral considerations about refugee communities based on real-life personal observations of struggle. Such work is articulated through a lyricism that bridges symbolic violence and historical violence, where historical violence refers to major events such as war, and symbolic violence relays invisible forms of soft domination that, as Pierre Bourdieu might say, are integrated into the oppression of the lower sectors of society by ruling classes and institutions (128).

The *refugee repertoire* that can be identified in Le's work provides an overture to this celebration of living and surviving against the looming specter of violence found in "his community," which is not restricted to the Vietnamese. His poignant word play makes little distinction between the local and the global, citizen and refugee, where former refugees from war-torn countries live with their kin and many others in the ghetto as "urban refugees," encamped in tightly controlled spaces, compelled to move around, never finding stable homes, fleeing if they can from turf gang war and the forces of gentrification, always looking for better opportunities in a country where they have yet to fully experience the American Dream, given virulent racism, classism, and xenophobia. Dubbing himself the Vietnamese version of African American rapper Jay-Z, Le in "Beats, Rhymes, and Rice" (2008) shatters historical ignorance about countries such as the Philippines, which he describes as "the first Vietnam," listing it with other war zones created by US aggression abroad and domestically: Danang, My Lai, Manila, Chicago, Hanoi, Jersey City, and the San Francisco Bay area.

The rapper easily translates the political into personal terms. Le's parents came to the United States as refugees in 1980, and he was born a few years later in 1985 in South Seattle, growing up in a racially segregated district populated by Latina/os, African Americans, and Southeast Asians in a white majority city. He struggled with speaking two tongues, but Le's closeness to his Vietnamese roots helped him recognize that "we're just one generation removed from harvesting rice" ("Beats"). The sentiments of diasporic subjectivity as intermixed with urban minority life in the United States led one interviewer to observe how this "Vietnamese American howls the blues" (J. Pham), drawing on a decidedly black American medium to distill what it means to be a refugee in the ghetto.

One can read refugeehood then not as the legally determined state of migration or asylum-seeking but as an existential condition of permanent forced relocation



and dislocation, living without a true sense of home and peace. The recurring theme of dislocation in Le's work echoes and resonates with the artistry of fellow 1.5 immigrants (those who migrated as teenagers) or second-generation artists born in the United States, such as Vietnamese Americans Mondega and Tight Eyez, Laotian American G.U.M.B.Y., and Cham American Massiah. Refugee experiences are not reducible to trauma alone, bound up in psychic sadness and pain, but give perceptual depth to the complicated lives and aspirational personhood of people seeking a better life in the face of constant death, poverty, and tragedy. Insofar as ethics and morality are not divorced from politics, Southeast Asians are caught within the intersections of competing memories: American nationalism, Asian American minority discourse, and ethnonationalism. "Absent or misrepresented in all three," Viet Thanh Nguyen observes, "refugees are just as likely to stage their own competing memory" ("Speak" 31).

Like Le, Johnny "Vietnam" Nguyen pays homage to his complex Vietnamese heritage by staging a dissident form of postmemory that does not fit easily into any typical refugee discourse. The youngest son of an Anglo-American Vietnam War vet and a Vietnamese refugee mother, Nguyen was introduced to hip-hop culture at an early age through B-boy break dancing before taking up the mic as a rapper. With his signature staccato rhymes, Nguyen became a well-known fixture in Louder than a Bomb, a national teen poetry slam competition, and through his rhymes, he was able to win a scholarship from the University of Wisconsin's First Wave program, the nation's first university program devoted to spoken word and hip-hop. Always proud of his ethnic heritage, the mixed-race Nguyen took pains to learn Vietnamese from his mother, honoring their close relationship by gaining fluency in the language (Gramling). The emcee even occasionally raps in Vietnamese, albeit with heavy overtures to black American vernacular. Beyond the perception that his performances are relatable only to the Vietnamese refugee experience, one community leader who knew Nguyen says the young man's music provides the soundtrack to "a mass movement of youth from immigrant and refugee families fighting for justice" (Moon).

Resisting the multicultural embrace of the US nation-state to critique the ways the United States manufactures global wars and refugees while denigrating its minorities, the refugee aesthetic and its repertoires of meaning created by Nguyen are the means by which postmemories of violence are reconstituted. As a Vietnamese American dramaturgy of hip-hop, Nguyen's musical performance relies on classic hip-hop scratching techniques and battle speed rapping, bluesy jazz music with a pop sensibility, remixed into a hodgepodge of styles that makes it clear why it is significant to study refugee aesthetics as a form of cultural hybridity. The Americanization and racialization of urban poor Southeast Asian refugees, as Aihwa Ong and Loan Dao both elucidate, is a simplified domestic matter of Southeast Asians acting and trying to be "black" only if they do not historicize the context by which Southeast Asians come to settle within

(and unsettle) the domestic borders of a racist nation-state by the sheer presence of their bodies.

Refugee culture and cultural production then need to be considered beyond narrow definitions of identity politics to show how “the United States is in Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asia is in the United States” (V. Nguyen, “Refugee” 918). While Johnny “Vietnam” Nguyen’s lyrical work does not directly reference culturally or ethnically specific traits, his performance nevertheless plays up South Vietnamese nationalism through his donning of the South Vietnamese flag in his videos and concerts. This performative act of refugee embodiment militates against dominant narratives of the Vietnam War that feature the South Vietnamese as forgettable losers of the war. At the same time, it forgets the military violence the South Vietnamese did to others (for example, Khmer, Cham, Hmong, and Lao). Postmemories themselves can represent both a struggle against violence and the active recycling of violence. As Espiritu argues in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (2014), the question of whose body counts and can be made legible is a challenge for those whose bodies have been rendered disposable and who need to fall back into nationalism as a way to remember. A refugee aesthetic that participates in body awareness nonetheless brings these fraught conditions of “post-refugee” subject-making to the foreground, prompting questions with no easy answers but that still must be asked.

As Nguyen notes, “How could I not represent the flag that tore my family together?” (qtd. in Lima). Nguyen honors the flag of the fallen South Vietnamese nation, recasting its negative image as the symbol of refugee loss or military imperialism into something that “tore them together,” indicating the ways dire geopolitical circumstances can pull scattered familial bodies back into unity. The inherent contradiction in the phrase “tore them together” as opposed to “tore them apart” gives an opportunity for a close reading that treats hip-hop wordplay as literary texts full of meanings that need to be analyzed in terms of style, imagery, point of view, and connotation. The idea of being brought together through war suggests a novel way of thinking about refugeeness, not as dispersed fragmentation but as a playful condition of being sutured together in times of chaos. Amplifying the verbal acrobatics of hip-hop cultural arts, talented rappers such as Nguyen in their songs and battle raps convey the body in motion, asserting their dislocated identity in a manner that also suggests communion with peoples of other war diasporas. In the 2012 music video for “Adam Ivy Cipher Vol. 2,” Nguyen advances what he calls a “refugee flow.” He stands in the distant horizon, moving toward the camera as the song progresses, going from near invisibility to full visibility, wearing a shirt imprinted with the design of the South Vietnam flag. Rapping on a street sidewalk in front of ethnic restaurants, one can discern signs in Chinese, Vietnamese, English, and Khmer. This backdrop interweaves Nguyen’s cultural identification with his mother’s country with

other groups in a polycultural form of politically conscious hip-hop, a broad general subgenre that caters to anything that gives back power to the people.

Scholars such as Mimi Thi Nguyen have touched on the appreciable enduring impact of war on refugees and how war is never an event for nostalgic commemoration but a process for further investigation of power and knowledge. She notes that the “refugee problem” is less a facile matter of assimilation, impoverishment, or violence that appears to be intrinsic and attributable to certain bodies but an issue of *unfreedom* for those subjects not seen as naturally imbued with beauty or the moral aesthetic quality and properties of conventional self-expression and sociality (109). According to Nguyen’s argument, we must attend to refugees not as those who are now made free (by the state) but as those who are supposedly made free and yet remain unfree. This is where refugee aesthetics come into play because the potent forms of desire, play, and beauty found in art give subjective agency to the artist, which cannot be reduced to the ideal singularity of citizenship, law, economics, identity, or politics.

Taking seriously this notion of art as a tool of critical excavation, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials considers the ways in which 1.5-generation Cambodian Americans imagine alternative sites of justice through various forms of remembrance. For Schlund-Vials, cultural performers build important archives of knowledge but are equally compelled to perform and embody that knowledge through “refugee-oriented ruptures” (3). In her case study of Cambodian American rapper praCh, Schlund-Vials observes that the emcee recites stories of genocide heard from his refugee family about the infamous Killing Fields under the Khmer Rouge, blending them with thoughts about US racial politics and Cold War history. Through the use of strict rhymes and limerick, rappers such as Nguyen and praCh mobilize the refugee repertoire as a kind of cypher, the participatory social circle based on freestyling or unscripted rapping where one person raps after the other in a continuous loop. Inside that cypher, the refugee repertoire marks an ever-changing intellectual, emotional, and artistic exploration based on style and the circuitous perspective of the storyteller as a kind of pastiche. In the song “A Day in the Life” (2010), Nguyen asks listeners to pay attention to the subterranean experiences of migrant peoples trying to achieve the American Dream: “What you know about translating dreams?” Alternating between first- and third-person point of view, Nguyen touches on a range of issues such as anger, spirituality, love, friendship, and how “memory’s a battling duality” (“Day”).

Nguyen’s virtuoso prose and vivid image-making point to the dramaturgy of underground hip-hop. Often denied opportunity and public recognition as creative authors and performers in their own right, many urban youth learn poetry by employing literary conventions such as simile through speedy verbal flows and mellifluous phrases in compact rhyme schemes, demonstrating the physicality and syncopated cadence of rap and turning memory into the written and spoken

word. The construction and prose of this public language bespeaks the vernacular forms, orality, and performative traditions of marginalized communities of color viewed by the mainstream as illiterate or uneducated—an assumption punctured by rappers such as Nguyen who proclaims in “We are Young Cypher” (2012) that

if I can't play the blues, then the struggle ain't worth it  
I came to earth to paint with words  
pitched with the diction  
my vice is silence.

For this writer-performer, the black American blues tradition is part of his musical heritage and bricolage, pitched with the unique diction of a mix-raced bilingual child of a refugee, one who finds empowerment even though “the apparatus [of] power is belligerent” (Vietnam, “We”).

Mastering if also playing with English rules through his alliterative “metaphors and meta-fives,” the artist refuses to be silent on the US government’s usage of napalm and deadly chemical defoliants such as Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, as evidenced in the lyrics of other songs. Despite such street intellectualism and urban theater, Nguyen admits to knowing little about the war, painting it from his imagination and cultural heritage and yet feels compelled to recover the largely forgotten history of war to remember the harm endured by everyday people. Through overtly political raps, listeners are forced to grapple with a terrible past behind refugee migration; the emotional urgency of the artist’s voice lends gravity to those terrifying experiences that have been denied by mainstream discourse, given the liberal myths of the United States as a country of democracy and peace, an inspiration for developing nations, rather than a purveyor of global violence. As a lyrical performer, Nguyen raises the bar in terms of what must be acknowledged in a culture characterized by historical amnesia or denial about the true causes of refugee flight. Playing with the rules of the English language, Nguyen quips in the song that “now the cypher is complete” (Vietnam, “We”).

A different approach to literary formation, hip-hop lyricism offers an intersubjective medium of expression that validates and valorizes the sensorial experience of deterritorialized persons. The performativity found within textual and literary moments of this medium brings the body to the fore as the means through which one scripts and rescripts multiple states of being and speech acts. Insofar as the refugee figure exists as the figurative kin of other migrant subjects pushed out of proper domains of citizenship, tracks such as “Reality Check” (2012) rail against dominant scripts about refugees: “It’s time to move / I’m just a pawn and product of environment / how can I aspire to reach through the tyrant’s script.”

Even in death, Nguyen’s work continues to inspire others. He died of drowning at the age of nineteen; like so many refugees who perished in the oceans while attempting to save their loved ones, Nguyen’s life was taken too early while trying to rescue his friend from a lake. A well-known community activist for his work in

nonprofit organizations such as Kuumba Lynx and the urban arts Education and Youth Development Organization, Nguyen was honored after his death by becoming the youngest person and first Vietnamese American in the country with a public street named after him. In Chicago's Uptown, Nguyen's presence is stamped in a bustling polyglot place populated with Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Thai, African Americans, and Latina/os. In historic Chinatown, also nicknamed Little Vietnam or Little Saigon, the mural dedicated to Nguyen's performer name is designed with the letter "V," and the colors of the flag of South Vietnam spotlight the creative resilience of South Vietnamese refugees surviving in the urban built environment. The spectacle and spectatorship of graffiti work enacts a form of affect, mourning, and mythologization of a local hero who died too early and tragically. Reproduction of the name "Vietnam" offers "a repetition, a ghosting, a performative reappearance" of the irony, comedy, and tragedy of the rapper but also the Vietnam War itself, a community-based performance by a postmemory community and generation comprised of "undifferentiated multitudes [who] consume grief [as] the recipients, not the agents, of an emotion that is not their own" (Taylor 157).

Staying alive in tough places such as Chicago's Uptown requires a solid repertoire of survival skills and coping mechanisms, and Nguyen deftly mastered these things to deal with the heterogeneous social forces at work in his short life, mobilizing his talents toward the aims of social justice. With attention to audience reception, Nguyen's constant references to war for those who did not go through war express the performativity of an urban warrior, where the refugee history of displacement and survival is wedded to the tough bravado, street-wise lingo, and ethnic masculine posturing of hip-hop to expose the racist social scripts marking nonwhite people as outsiders to US body politics.

Read in this way, the refugee repertoire not only applies to the postmemories of diasporic youth but is also related to the different marginalized art forms that have not constituted the literary canon. In addition to hip-hop, graphic novels also can be used to explore refugee aesthetics and repertoires. While it may not appear as though hip-hop and the graphic novel are interconnected, both genres exemplify sites extremely popular with Asian American youth, especially since they are not situated as examples of elite high art but rather the "pedestrian" work of disenfranchised youth of color. Like hip-hop, graphic novels pose a prime medium for youthful cultural expression, helping to subvert established power hierarchies between the fun and the serious, the real and imaginary, as Monica Chiu notes in her study of Asian American graphic novels. Just as rap addresses the negative representation of the refugee, the graphic novel is a crucial site for showcasing the performance of the oppressed. Through the work of Tran, the tension found in the interplay of postmemory, performance, and embodiment in the refugee experience is revealed.

While the hip-hop projects of Nguyen and Le are largely focused on the “collateral damage” of war’s aftermath, damage that Eric Tang has shown to impinge on the present lives of refugee communities, they point to postmemory work as not simply a matter of remembering the war to make peace with it but also contending with the force and violence of such remembrance, especially since war, as Isabelle Thuy Pelaud argues, can never be dissociated from the contemporary Vietnamese diasporic experience. This immediate focus on war’s effects on the present day differs from the work of Tran in *Vietnamerica: A Family’s Journey*. The novel’s sprawling timeline spans the first Indochina War (1945-1954) between the French imperialists and Vietnamese nationalists and the Second Indochina War (1955-1975) involving the US fight against North Vietnamese Communists with South Vietnam as an ally. This novel then deals with the legacy of multiple wars and how to cope with them.

### The Representation of Graphic Violence in Comics

Born in South Carolina in 1976, a year after the fall of Saigon, Tran learned early on that his privileged life in the United States differed from that of his parents and older siblings who escaped from South Vietnam. The autobiographical story of Tran’s graphic novel commences with the author’s trip to Vietnam to attend the funerals of his grandparents. Tran grew up fully immersed in American society, indifferent to his family’s background, and it was not until his first trip in 2001 that he decided to learn more about his clan’s tormented past. But instead of presenting a typical coming-of-age story of finding roots, *Vietnamerica* places Tran’s story in the background and emphasizes his family’s unfolding collectively told history.

In her reading of the novel, Caroline Kyungah Hong situates the text within the long tradition of the Asian American graphic memoir, placing it in the artistic tradition of the postmemory generation, characterized by a transhistorical and transnational layering of texts with traces of one another, braided together in a circular, repetitious, and fragmentary structure that distillates how the graphic narrative “can be a powerful analogue for memory” while enacting irregular patterns of uncovering and framing family genealogies (13-14). Hong’s observations about graphic aesthetics reveal how postmemory work takes on performative qualities; indeed, Tran’s work offers a highly performative graphic memoir, a form far too often dismissed as the low-brow stepchild of the purely written novel (Gabilliet 2010).

The performative dimensions of *Vietnamerica*’s refugee narrative are evident from the outset with the introduction of Tran’s family members as “the cast.” Told through extended flashbacks, the novel is a testament to the painful process of recovering history, boldfacing the gap in performance between the author and narrator. Tran is unable to communicate with his taciturn, emotionally



unavailable father, who is reminded of horrors he encountered as a refugee everywhere he goes. It is then up to Tran's mother to recount the migration story of the family, retelling stories told to her by the boy's father and other family members. Having the mother as conarrator epitomizes the central if gendered role of women in transmitting memory. The challenge of reclaiming and reconstructing the past for Vietnamese American youth such as Tran stems from the fact that splintered histories of refugees are not easily reducible to a neat, clear narrative exposition of characters and conflicts, owing to the second generation's ignorance about events. Inversely, this ignorance establishes the basis for artistic and critical intervention.

Many nonrefugee Americans fail to fully appreciate the multiplicity of the refugee experience, something best demonstrated by David L. Ulin, a *Los Angeles Times* book review critic who points to the various storylines of *Vietnamerica* that bleed into one another and its open-ended narrative structure as a flaw—despite acknowledging that Vietnam is a country where “resolution remains elusive.” Ulin categorizes the work as pastiche, something derivative, “one as fluid as memory itself,” but is confused as to why Tran intermixed his story with that of his family in Vietnam, a hybrid multi-speaker account of events that is neither “specific enough for memory nor expansive enough for myth.” Ulin points out how *Vietnamerica* follows other works, such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2000), to blend memoir with comics but is not as successful. The reviewer's accusations of artistic failure open up a different venue for evaluating the term *pastiche*, which can be distinguished from the more common term *parody* used in performance studies to suggest mockery or satire. While *pastiche* can refer to a literary or artistic work that is a stylistic imitation of a previous work, post-war Vietnamese youth who draw on the memories of their families to create artwork (and thus new imaginings of war) do not rely on specific memories or cultural myths but on an aesthetics germane to the postmemory generation itself. Ulin admits that the lack of narrative closure and singular voice results from the immigration process and Tran's alienation as a man “torn between cultures,” but not the aesthetic choices of its author. Indeed, the novel's fragmented style draws inspiration from the uniqueness of being part of a splintered refugee family, and, barring this knowledge, the reviewer fails to understand how Tran actually addresses the “challenge, the necessity, of personal history, to fill gaps of time and distance with imagination.”

Beyond the trope of the refugee as an object of sympathy or derision for the West, the book's moving artwork is attuned to the social scripts that drive certain personal choices or human conduct during times of crisis. From escaping military violence to coping with prison torture, the predicaments of war involve some kind of personal “choice.” On the very first page, a plane takes off into a crimson sky filled with black smoke, and Tran's mother is in the foreground, saying, “You know what your father was doing at your age? He . . . We left Vietnam.” In this

moment, the story of the author's coming into maturity as an adult is comparable to the refugee story of Tran's father and family.

Because Tran is unable to communicate with his taciturn father, it is up to his mother to give background information and recount the past for the author. Her narration directs readers to the key role of women in transmitting memory, which is then translated by Tran's creative lens and artistic interpretation as a postmemory child and son. Her image placed in the midground of a page featuring war tanks, his mother says, "I tell you these things but you'll never understand. We left Vietnam so you would NEVER have to know what it's like. What it's like to struggle to stay alive every day." According to his mother, the family escaped Vietnam so the next generation could have a better life, but this hope for the future generation intersects with the mother's prodding for Tran to comprehend their journey, even though she claims he will *never* understand the horrors of that journey.

Tran comes to adult consciousness and returns to his ancestral home when he is thirty years old, the same age as when his father underwent a rite of passage into adulthood as a refugee leaving Vietnam. Refugeeeness is not expressed as a singular event after war but the decisive point where different temporal moments and subject formations intersect. Tran's return to his homeland serves as an extension and metonym of his refugee father leaving as a Vietnamese exile to America. As his mother later states, "In wartime, families did what they needed to survive." She recounts the decision of Tran's grandmother to marry a Frenchman after her husband left the family to fight for the Vietminh. While the grandfather was performing what he believed was his national duty, abandoning his parental responsibilities, this single grandmother made sure her children survived during the French and Japanese occupation of Vietnam. Survival mechanisms take on gendered performative hues as men serve the nation while women are compelled to do what they have to do for the family.

The political drama of war filters through the emotional theater of the family, where individuals either follow, refute, or improvise their proscribed roles as faithful mother/wife, protective father/husband, dutiful sons/daughters, or (dis)loyal citizen-subject. Individuals exert their performative agency in all types of ways as their personal decisions are made according to certain societal impulses. As Tran's mother says, moving onward sometimes "means leaving things behind." This statement transmits the idea that a refugee must do what is just or necessary to save the family by shedding attachments to the old life. This relinquishing of the past creates a problem for postmemory work since it hampers a total recall of events, which then obliges the postmemory subject to also draw conclusions on their own about what happened in the past. At the same time, the amnesiac politics that happens in post-war times is upset by the artists' memorialization of the loss of homelands, family members, and the profound communal injury of a community "in need of recognition and justice,"



performing the act of memorialization through art forms that recuperate “refugee selfhood” (Schlund-Vials 186-87) and honor what Rocío G. Davis describes as the “graphic embodiment” of history.

This recognition of the unrecognized plays out in Tran’s artistic choices. The book’s pages are not numbered, and this non-sequencing meshes together different parts related to wartime and post-war life, effectively blurring that division. The few pages that are numbered are left blank, awash in solid colors to demonstrate major transitions such as death or migration. They also connote the blank canvas and fecund spaces of postmemory, signifying the limited base of knowledge Tran possesses as a child born after the Vietnam War, a state that also allows him free rein to construct his own refugee story.

In his interviews with the media, Tran says he chose the graphic novel as a medium to capture his family’s refugee performativity “to understand the weight of their decisions” while maximizing the power of the comic form to tell an untidy human drama in a way that “could never work in another medium” (Tran, “Vietnamerica”). *Vietnamerica* follows earlier usage of comics as a genre of memoir, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (1991), a story about a son interviewing his father about the Holocaust. Often compared to *Maus* by reviewers, it is easy to overlook the distinctiveness of Tran’s *Vietnamerica*, which is noticeably messier than Spiegelman’s gritty black-and-white magnum opus. More than a copy or derivative of Spiegelman’s work, Tran’s piece is a testament to the difficulties of honoring the true heroes and legacy of the Vietnam War, which, as Marita Sturken notes, stands as the most controversial war in US history, especially given the conflicted cultural memory produced about it.

*Vietnamerica* stands as a nuanced text responding to the author’s own personal desires to remember his family’s braided history, but it also responds to a Western audience unable to cope with the Vietnam War and its scripting as a difficult memory or national tragedy. While American graphic novels such as Will Eisner’s *Last Day in Vietnam: A Memory* (2000) give a stark portrait of US soldiers’ experiences in Southeast Asia, Tran’s novel foregrounds the glossed-over stories of Vietnamese refugees in the US popular memory and historiography of the Vietnam War. Graphic novels found great popularity in the post-Vietnam era as a malleable literary form able to communicate darker themes and stories of alienation reflective of postmodern times, conveying gritty stories related to groups typically occluded from the mainstream. Timothy Keeyen Choy analyzes the Asian American comic book by way of ethnography, a method of observer-participation usually associated with cultural anthropology. Choy finds that graphic novels are not flat two-dimensional representations of social reality but construct three-dimensional environments that immediately and viscerally draw in the reader because the graphic illustrations alongside speech represented

as visual dialogue help to relay the tactility of human behavior. Thus, reading an illustrated book almost can be as explosively live and palpable as watching a play.

By engaging readers' imaginary and ocular senses, *Vietnamerica* turns them into spectators of historical violence without forcing them to necessarily absorb the visual impact of human destruction as they would from photography. The affective nature of hand drawings and the visual flow of panel designs enable a careful curation of text. Always mindful of audience reception, graphic artists make aesthetic choices that include putting images off-center to create tension in time and space. Tran's etchings expose the ferocity of war's effects: generous splashes of bright red across the pages suggest the bloodiness of fighting without offending human sensibilities. Cartoons do more than attenuate or make palatable the brutal physical memory of war; they stretch the reader's imagination toward new psychosomatic horizons by depicting human bodies in an elastic manner. Tran's characters are often drawn with exaggerated facial or physical expressions to create a satirical effect, turning the violence of the real into the surreal in their experimental play with the human form and respatializing the refugee body through a jumbled collage of performative gestures.

*Vietnamerica* relays the political strategies by which refugee bodily agency can be exercised in social spaces. A recurring theme that permeates *Vietnamerica* is the lack of full ownership over one's body, something that galvanizes subjects to shape the outcome of their own precarious lives through inspired or improvised actions, caught up in the whirlwind of external conditions and warring forces out of their control. Once an aspiring artist, Tran's father, Tri Huu Tran, was held in captivity after fleeing from French occupation, interrogated daily by soldiers asking about his political affiliations. Tran does not know the whereabouts of his activist father, but the captors read his silence as a performance of resistance, one that stands out as an act of bodily endurance that can be read, according to Sandra Ruiz, in the colonial context as a performance. To make the point clear that social actions made under duress can be considered performances, certain verbal statements and action sequences are replicated within montages to illustrate the ritualistic cycle of torture and abuse within military prisons and the sheer spectacle of it all.

Such performances of loyalties and betrayal, according to Lan P. Duong, are always assumed to be the work of potential "collaborators" (8). Collaboration connotes both a working relationship among intellectuals and artists but also political allies. In this example, son and father are assumed to be acting as collaborators, acting out certain roles produced in captivity. As a refugee who escaped the hands of death, Tri Huu Tran wants his youngest son to know about the family's history but never to be nostalgic. Tran's father's new lucrative position as a painter and artist does not stop him from making public jokes about war or recalling the harrowing ordeal of war (which influences his son's own sarcastic humor). "How much to cut off your own arm or for a parent to abandon their

child?” Tri Huu Tran quips during his art exhibits, playing the part of a comedian who uses humor to ward off any sentiments about the past. At the same time, the serious father constantly tells Tran: “You can’t look at our family in a vacuum and apply your myopic contemporary Western filter to them. Our family wasn’t alone. We weren’t a special case. Everyone suffered.” All refugees did what they needed to survive, the father opines, every decision a reaction to circumstances and optimism “for the future.” Performing the dual roles of comedian and patriarch, Tran’s father chides the author for trying to judge things in Vietnam from a vantage of Western ignorance, thinking of refugees as passive players or victims of war. Unable to see what actually happened, Tran imagines what his father went through. Familial experiences serve a vital function in the author’s narrative although Tran finally admits that his parents’ full experiences of the war offer “another story” completely separate from his own scripted postmemory narrative.

The novel concludes with Tran worrying about making a living after college. He is in his apartment reflecting on his future, wondering whether he should accompany his parents on their trip to Vietnam for his grandparents’ funerals. The protagonist is inspired to go after he finds the book his father gave him as a graduation gift, one about the Vietnam War that helps Tran realize “customs and shared history were being lost.” Thus begins a journey of rediscovery tied not only to nostalgia but also to the call to narrate an intergenerational story moored in a *refugee repertoire* of knowledge, aesthetics, and performance. Recognizing the refugee condition as a general metaphor of modern displacement, *Vietnamerica* displays bodies acting out particular scenes of subjection, considering the force of the repetition of human behavior and the reiteration of certain scripts of domination, engaging refugeeeness as an artistic process by marginalized social actors to “scrutinize and investigate the forms, dispositions, and constraints of action and the disfigured and liminal status of the agents of such actors” (Hartman 54).

## Conclusion

The refugee aesthetics and repertoires of Southeast Asians speak to a broader condition of displacement, survival, and alienation in the modern world, resonating with the plight of Cubans, Haitians, Central Americans, and Palestinians. The refugee exodus from the Vietnam War brought global attention to the humanitarian crisis and social problems that define our current age as one characterized by state violence and forced movements of people. The exodus of millions from Syria, displaced due to civil war since 2011, is considered the largest refugee crisis since the Vietnam War. Similar to the humanitarian discourse for Vietnam War refugees, the tropes used to describe these people as lost and needing to be saved delimits the public enterprise to make sense of the refugee, one seemingly without unique character or presence. Through these tropes, the narrative structures and artistic play found in refugee repertoires can break hegemonic representations of the refugee.

An emergent body of refugee art produced by second-generation Southeast Asian American youth is foregrounding the performative aspects of being the children of refugees. Disparate genres such as graphic memoirs and hip-hop illuminate the fact that, in the discontinuities and misunderstandings that distinguish refugee life, there are common thematic threads found in the narratives of representation. The reframing of refugee subjectivity through the refugee repertoire adds another critical dimension to what Lisa Lowe describes as the heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity of Asian American culture, concentrating on the specificity of the Southeast Asian *refugee* experience in the predominantly *immigrant* focus in the study of East Asians in America. Parsing the alternative forms of performance and embodiment found within second-generation Vietnamese American artwork emphasizes the embodied aspects of postmemory work and what has been made invisible because of what Taylor calls *percepticide* or the narrowed perspectives produced from the minimization of violent situations such as war. Recognizing the complexity of refugee subjectivity and bodies within diverse cultural forms affords critical insights about subjects placed outside history and literary canons. At stake is a forceful recognition of the different forms and styles of storytelling that are able to refract the multiple standpoints of stateless peoples. Countering the assimilationist script that the life of the refugee concludes with resettlement and all pain vanishes with time, the refugee repertoire underscores the resilient power of communities to transmit violent memories of the past through future generations, but it also displays the creativity of those born after war to stage their own production of memory.

## Notes

1. Such works include lê thi diem thúý's *The Gangster We are All to Looking For* (2003), Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt: A Novel* (2003), Aimee Phan's *We Should Never Meet: Stories* (2004) and *The Reeducation of Cherrie Truong* (2012), Truong Tran's *Placing the Accents* (1999), and Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* (2000). In terms of visual art, see artists such as Viet Le and Ann Phong, whose fine art projects can be considered performative.

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