Refugeetude

When Does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee?

Vinh Nguyen

> I wasn't rich in America. I was a coolie just like everybody else. . . . Perhaps I returned not only because I wanted to see my parents for the last time, but also because in Vietnam, people could make me feel like I was somebody. They treated me like a foreigner who had money. Didn't everybody want to be somebody? I didn't have an education or any skills, but I had hope that my children would do better than me. I was a boat person, a refugee, and I was still on the boat. Sometimes I wonder where I would be anchored.
> —Nhan T. Le

Nhan T. Le, a former "boat person" who now lives in Manchester, New Hampshire, and works as a board tester for an electronics company, conceives of her life in the United States as a continuation of her asylum-seeking boat journey. Le's impulse to understand her postrefugee life in this way illuminates for us the structural workings of refuge in the United States, as it lingers and continues well beyond a moment of arrival. In identifying how others might misinterpret her return to Vietnam as triumphant—indeed, the very fact that she left the country and can make a return trip is, for many who stayed behind, evidence that she has "made it"—Le is forced to reflect on the reality of her racialized, working-class situation in the United States, leading her to make the powerful confession that, despite having attained a seemingly comfortable life in the world's richest and, presumably, most powerful democracy, she is unanchored, is on the rickety boat, is *still a refugee*.

In this moment, the refugee past punctures the resident present. The privileges of national belonging, such as an American passport, money, and transnational mobility, ostensibly preclude Le from the purview of

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"refugee," but her entry into a capitalist wage labor system that she compares to indentureship ("coolie") as a consequence of American refuge leads her to feel like a refugee and to conceive of her life in the United States as an extension of the refugee experience. The shock of returning to Vietnam reminds Le that she is still a refugee because she has not yet settled into American capitalist success. Refuge in the United States, Le's narrative shows, is deeply structured by capitalism, which functions, in conjunction with other forces like race and gender, to fasten refugee subjects to a neoliberal economy that prolongs their search for asylum and settlement. The work of seeking refuge does not end when refugees are granted political asylum; what begins instead is a life of low-wage labor, with few opportunities for upward mobility, despite the prevalent discourses of "refugee exceptionalism," whereby the refugee's struggle and suffering are cast as provisional, and deliverance into freedom is always just on the horizon.[1]

Through refuge, Le and other refugees like her come to share in the common but incommensurate situations of socioeconomic marginalization that many racialized, (im)migrant, and undocumented individuals face in the United States. While refugees may seem exceptional, as told though some spectacular stories of success, there is nothing singular or unique about the ways in which the state attempts to assimilate them into the nation's capitalist "melting pot." Le's incredible reveal, in its metaphorical turn and literal implications, is fascinating not only because it zeros in on the enduring quality of refugee experience but also because it points to the fragility of refuge's capitalist promise of a "good" life.

Tracked in this article, and exemplified in Le's narrative, are a continued state of being and a mode of relationality that I call *refugeetude*.[2] Broadly, refugeetude describes a coming into consciousness of the forces that produce and structure "refuge" and "refugee." It names the forms of recognition, articulation, and relation that emerge from the experience of refuge(e), as well as the attempts to redefine and live it differently from what the legal framework—as contemporary arbiter of refugee lives—allows.[3] Affixing the suffix *-tude* to the word *refugee*, I invoke past projects of political recuperation—namely, negritude, coolitude, and migritude—that take social experiences of marginalization and oppression and recast them as states of being or agency.[4] Such projects attempt to create new historical consciousness, wherein negative experiences become sources for constructing integral subjectivities and modes of aesthetic and social production.[5] Refugeetude thus marks a critical reorientation, an epistemological shift in how we think about and understand the category refugee. Redirecting dominant perception of refugee as a temporary legal designation and a condition of social abjection toward refugee as an enduring creative force, refugeetude opens up new ways of concep-

tualizing refugee subjects and the relationalities that extend beyond the parameters of refugeeness, generating connections to past, present, and future forms of displacement.

This rethinking of the refugee category challenges conventional understandings that confine refugee to a legal definition, short time frame, and pitiful existence. In doing so, it examines how refugee might signify differently for the contemporary moment, one that has thus far failed to seriously engage refugees as more than a problem. Refugeetude thus clarifies how refugeeness—the psychic quality or condition of embodiment that results from seeking refuge and/or coming into contact with the bureaucratic processes laid out by legal instruments such as the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and other (inter)national refugee policies—is difficult to jettison from the self. Through the concept of refugeetude, we can comprehend refugee not as an irregularity or disruption of political subjecthood—a crisis to be resolved—but as an experiential resource for developing significant and durable ways of being in and moving through the world. Reading Le's story as a particular expression of refugeetude, as well as an experience common to many "boat people" refugees of the Vietnam War, I explore interlinked questions about the temporality of experience, psychic formation, and political possibility.

While my elucidation of refugeetude is primarily anchored in the historical context of the global Vietnam War, it seeks to open up and engage with issues that are immediate and urgent to contemporary politics. Indeed, in a world of ongoing crises around the mass displacement of people, where the number of refugees reaches record highs every year, the necessity of examining and theorizing how refugeeness might engender modes of perceiving, critiquing, and resisting the very structures of violence that produce and continue to press upon refugees is especially acute. To understand, in the concept of refugeetude, that refugeeness is not a cloak that can easily be shed with the coming of refuge but might instead be a catalyst for thinking, feeling, and doing with others—for imagining justice—is politically crucial to the present moment of intensified production and criminalization of refugees. Refugeetude, then, turns away from readily available discourses of victimhood and commonplace knowledge of refugees to highlight how refugee subjects gain awareness, create meaning, and imagine futures. It signifies critical impulses to see, know, and act—ways of being political, even when politics varies in degree and form. The concept is thus not simply a new name for an old condition—refugeetude, as shown below, begins with but significantly departs from refugee—or a humanist move to redeem an abject position. Rather, it is to look at refugee anew, from a different angle, and ask how it can give rise to being and politics.

This article takes Nhan T. Le's narrative as a point of departure to address and engage a host of larger conceptual concerns surrounding refugee temporality and subjectivity. Le's story is a spark for my thinking, and I employ its details as apertures through which to ruminate and offer suppositions on what refugeetude is, could be, or makes possible. I first establish that lived experiences of refuge(e) constitute a form of subjectivity and propose that we expand the boundaries of refugee beyond the legal definition to include a range of times, places, and subjects. I then explore how refugee and refugeeness shift toward refugeetude, a means by which refugee subjects—people who have been touched by the processes of violent displacement and border control—come to understand, articulate, and resist their conditions. As such, and most important, refugeetude is a politics, a kind of antiassimilationist truth telling that Hannah Arendt invests in the vanguard figure of the refugee. Le's insightful description of her life under capitalist refuge, and its links to other histories of racialized labor, particularly in the coolie, animates my discussion, but as the narrative reaches its signifying limit I turn briefly to the story of another refugee from another, more contemporary war, Fadia Jouny, a refugee of the Syrian conflict, to identify and think through intergroup solidarities that refugeetude might enable. Jouny's relations with Indigenous peoples highlight the difficult position that the displaced settler occupies within the context of ongoing settler colonialism. Her recognition that safe arrival in Canada is predicated on the genocide and continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples represents an acknowledgment of violent entanglements, as well as an inchoate relationality that has the potential, without guarantees, to reach for justice. The coming into conscious that refugeetude pinpoints, I suggest, is crucially tied to relational politics—ways of knowing and being with others—that might emerge within and against a global refugee regime that continually produces, manages, and purports to solve the problem of forced migration.

Being in the World

When does a refugee stop being a refugee? This is a question about the temporality or duration of the refugee category, one that is deemed an anomaly in a world system organized around the nation-state and citizenship. The temporality of refugee is conventionally short, an aberration in the otherwise consistent experience of nationality and political rights. Such a condition is not sustainable in the long term, for without protection from a sovereign state refugees are reduced to what Giorgio Agamben calls "naked" or "bare" life, marked for social and literal death.[6] In this framework, the refugee is not a viable political subject. "Unable," or "unwilling" due to fear of persecution, to "avail himself of protec-

tion" of the "country of his nationality" and seeking to acquire protection elsewhere, the refugee occupies the space of in-between, an ontology of interstitiality, where "he" has a breathing body, but that body is without the political markers of the "human."[7] This ontological precarity explains why refugees continue to be persistently represented and understood as figures of lack—homeless specters, abject outsiders, identityless mass, or wastes of globalization. Whether through a politics of humanitarian pity, a theoretical gesture of reclamation, or a point of political critique, refugees are reified as not quite human, and the condition of refugee is not quite tenable as a life to be lived.

At the end of the Second World War, institutions established to address the millions of displaced Europeans in a shifting postwar milieu regarded refugees as a momentary problem, to which a solution would be achieved in a matter of years. These institutions—the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the International Refugee Organization, which culminated in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—were themselves meant to be provisional, dissolved when the final refugees were resettled. The contemporary prominence of the UNHCR as a regime of refugee management, and the record-breaking number of refugees in the world each year, is incontrovertible evidence that refugee displacement is a permanent, constitutive element of late-capitalist modernity, even though, of course, there have always been people fleeing violence and seeking asylum throughout recorded history, before refugee was codified in international law. This should mark for us that the UN model, with its legal implications, is not the only or logical framework for understanding the experience of people seeking refuge; historically, it is relatively nascent.

At the same time, many refugees experience the condition not as an exception but as a rule of existence. As the prolonged nature of refugee situations in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries has shown us, refugee has been and continues to be a way of life for millions of people. In *The State of the World's Refugees: In Search of Solidarity*, published by the office of the UNHCR in 2012, the authors point out that two-thirds of the world's refugees currently live in protracted situations of "long-term exile."[8] Some have been refugees for two or three decades, and many have given birth to and raised children who know no way of life other than that inside refugee camps. This telling statistic demonstrates the material reality of refugee experiences and the limits of internationally agreed upon "solutions" (refoulement, local integration, and resettlement) to forced migration—solutions that rely upon state-protected rights as political teleology.

Put differently and more explicitly, most refugees in the world experience their condition as refugees indefinitely, sometimes for an entire

lifetime. There is thus nothing temporary or short about both the legal designation and the subjective experience of refugee. Moreover, as Eric Tang argues, refuge is a fiction for many refugees who are resettled in neoliberal, late-capitalist Western nations, particularly in the poorest areas targeted for social death, as they continue to exist in a "cycle of uprooting, displacement, and captivity."[9] This recognition that refugee is not a transitory experience and that refuge might remain elusive compels me to inquire into how those who have seemingly acquired asylum continue to relate to the category, and how the experience of refuge(e) continues to stay with an individual, shaping consciousness, cultural identity, and forms of politics.

Below I more thoroughly develop a sense of refugee subjectivity, one that coalesces beyond the temporal and spatial confines of the legal definition of refugee. Drawing attention to the lived realities of refuge(e), subjectivity complicates recourse to legality as the final determinant of what *refugee* means. The textures of subjective experience reveal the deep limitations of the legal definition and gesture to the boundless possibilities for refugee being. There is thus an epistemological gap between the restrictive UNHCR conceptualization of refugee, which many states depend on to develop policy and establish legality, and the embodied experience of refuge. Le's assertion that she still feels like a refugee, that her life in the United States is not a break from but is contiguous with refugeeness, cannot be accounted for in any bureaucratic definition. That the condition of refugee might be long term or long-lasting brings into sharp relief the chasm between a definition and how it is experienced. While the definition influences and determines the experience, the experience unfolds in excess of the definition. Le's repeated attempts to escape Vietnam—to become a refugee—and her continued search for settlement in the United States illustrate how refugee is an immediate shaping force for subjects living within its capacious reach.

Through the concept of refugeetude, we see that refugee is a form of subjectivity—an experience, consciousness, and knowledge that lingers even when the legal designation is lifted or one that might be present before the designation comes into effect.[10] This quality of refugeeness is not temporally constrained to singular events (displacement, asylum seeking, resettlement), spatially tied to specific locations (the boat, the border, the camp), or bound to the letter of the law. Instead, it is psychic, affective, and embodied, enduring in time and space, adhering itself in various ways to the bodies, hearts, and minds of refugees, former refugees, and subsequent generations. Where refugeeness flares up (as a flash in a moment of danger, following Walter Benjamin) or how and when it declares its presence cannot be known in advance; this is the viscousness of experience and history, their unpredictable indelibility on the human body.[11]

Refugee Subjects

Le was a refugee before she arrived at a camp, before the United Nations interviewed her, before the United States granted her entry—or, rather, she experienced refugeeness well before any form of institutional processing. A motivating factor for Le's refuge seeking was her immersion in a postwar social field in which friends and family were every day becoming refugees due to the untenability of life. She existed in a world where daily reality necessitated contemplation of finding refuge, to "look for a way out."[12] It took Le and her husband three failed escape attempts before they successfully arrived at Pulau Bidong, a refugee camp in Malaysia, on their fourth try in 1987. After Vietnamese authorities arrested them during their third attempt, Le and her husband were sent to labor camps resembling military barracks, where they were indoctrinated with communist ideologies, made to confess to their "crimes," and forced to work. Le would not see her husband again for two years, and one of her relatives died in the camp. Chased by the police while at sea on another escape attempt, Le had to hide, disguise, and move stealthily to evade capture, effectively becoming a fugitive, a figure that shares a long historical and ontological genealogy with the refugee.[13]

Ironically, persecution arising from failed refuge seeking further exacerbated the refugee's urgent need to flee; the struggle to acquire refuge is itself central to refugee experience and contributes to the making of the refugee subject. Le's experience of failed escape, capture, and imprisonment before she gains the refugee designation already configures her as a refugee. That is to say, Le is a refugee before she becomes a legal refugee, and she remains, as she tells us, a refugee after gaining legal refuge. The porous temporality of Le's experience shows how difficult it is to determine when refugee begins and when it ends. It is perhaps useful to consider the before and after of legal status—artificial demarcations of experience anyway—as inextricably part of our conceptualization of refugee, to expand the experiential purview of the refugee category and refugeeness through the analytic of refugeetude.

We might thus orient our thinking around the idea of "refugee subjects" as opposed to the more commonly used term *refugees*. Taking a cue from Le's particular experience, but moving beyond it to contemplate a more general, abstract problematic, I muse here on the meanings of refugee that are possible but are as yet unacceptable, even unthinkable, within the existing legal framework and, by extension, dominant social and cultural understandings. That is, refugee subjects is an emergent idea, something not yet here, and difficult to concretize, but it could at a future point in time surface, often with and in refugeetude, which functions as an aid to help us recognize it. Refugee subjects, as I see it, can

be a more capacious concept, encompassing those who are legal refugees, those who were at one point in time refugees, those who sought or are seeking refuge, those who have been persecuted and forcibly displaced from their homes but did not (or could not) acquire official refugee status, those who are culturally understood as refugees even though they were never legally refugees, and those who are at the threshold of resident and refugee, living with the imminent threat of being refugeed by the forces of war, capitalism, and globalization.

To think through refugeetude in this way is not to flatten the term *refugee* into a catchall phrase for migrants living in a transnational, globalized world, in which it loses all specificity of meaning; rather, it attempts to reflect the complex and contingent nature of migration, whereby the realities of how and why people move exceed the classifications available to comprehend and manage them. That is, the institutionalized term and legal category *refugee*, with its emphasis on legally recognized persecution, operating under the rubric of human rights, fails to name the diversity of actual experiences of those ushered (or targeted for ushering) into the refugee framework.

Turning to refugee subjects is a strategic obfuscation of the distinctiveness of refugee. The goal is not to offer a better or replacement definition but, rather, to highlight what makes refugees distinct from other migrants under the eyes of the law might also be what constrains them ideologically and what is used to deny many people the right of movement and asylum. I do not wish to do away with the legal definition; I recognize its value for many stakeholders working to address refugee situations and for the people seeking asylum themselves. I wish, however, to consider what is distinctive about refugee without automatically referring back to the parameters of the legal definition. In doing this, what we might find is that it is difficult to distinguish between refugee subjects and other transnational migrants, diasporic individuals, or forcibly displaced groups. Rather than make legal refugees less unique or obsolete, this definitional imprecision or ambiguity points to a dimension of deep arbitrariness in the system: some individuals escaping political turmoil and forms of violence are deemed refugees and others are just migrants, even when there is much experiential overlap. Destabilizing the category "refugee" allows us to think differently about the temporality of refugee and the different subjectivities or psychic states that might fall under or relate to it. While this expansion and imprecision of refugee may not be acceptable to policy makers or immigration boards, tasked with positivistic, legal determinations, it could aid cultural critics, artists, and activists to comprehend refugees more broadly, and perhaps differently, in the social, cultural, and political realms.

Through the blurring of boundaries between refugees and other

migrants, the notion of refugee subjects attempts to circumvent the primacy of the UN refugee category, as an instrument of the international refugee regime, to determine who is or is not a genuine refugee. Of course, such determinations are of utmost and critical importance—they are matters of life and death for so many—but they do not provide the definitive, complete, or most illuminating picture of what refugee is or what it could be. What the UN definition gives us is a very historically specific concept that is rooted in the geopolitics of post-WWII Europe. Moreover, as some scholars have pointed out, the definition's narrow conception, and its fractioning into such labels as *asylum seeker*, *economic migrant*, *bogus refugees*, and *illegal migrant*, functions to contain migration from the global South and to advance the interests of Western hegemonic states.[14] It is the ideological grounding, and legal instrument, for the criminalization of refugees. To insist on thinking about refugees primarily through this lens of legal and state-sanctioned definitions, even though they have very real effects and consequences for people, is to limit the epistemological, political, and imaginative breadth of the refugee concept, as well as the depths of refugee experiences.

Refugee subjects allows for a discussion of refugees that is not circumscribed by legal status; what we know of as refugee can be more ontologically fluid, referring not only to subjects who have been accorded official refugee status by either national or international law but also to a range of subjects affected by refugee-making processes and forces. In this way, for example, a descendant of refugees, who has never been displaced, can come to inherit refugeeness through immersion in a social field, through stories, memories, and exchange.[15] An individual packing her suitcase in anticipation of fleeing her home because of encroaching violence enters the structure of feeling—that which has not yet solidified but can be felt—of refugee.[16] Or, a former refugee who has become a citizen of a nation-state can yet retain traces—consciousness, knowledge, and feeling—of refugeeness, traces that are foundational to a present and future conception of self.

To be clear, in claiming that a kind of refugeeness sticks to/with certain refugee bodies or communities, I do not wish to reiterate dominant discourses that mark individuals and groups as perpetually foreign to a national body ("where are you [really] from?"). Nor is refugeeness an essence or quality intrinsic to refugee subjects. Rather, I suggest that refugee is a substantial experience that can be the basis for the formation and development of a way of being in the world or, in Jean-Paul Sartre's words, "a certain affective attitude towards the world."[17] Refugeetude takes refugee experiences as constitutive of a significant subject position, giving rise to or shaping modes of critical existence and politics. Such serious considerations of subjectivity have not traditionally been accorded to

refugees. While other categories of displacement such as "exile" have been imagined as viable, even honorable identities, refugee has not yet gained such status in the cultural imagination. Edward Said, for example, writes, "The word 'refugee' has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas 'exile' carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality."[18] Revealed in Said's distinction between *refugee* and *exile* is a deeply entrenched and pervasive assumption about refugee lack—here a lack of the romantic qualities of deep interiority that is the cornerstone of Western, liberal subjecthood. In viewing refugee in this way, Said reproduces a depoliticization of refugees by characterizing them as an undifferentiated mass of passive and pitiful objects requiring rescue. This understanding underlies much of popular, and objectifying, conceptions of refugees.

The Politics of Refugeetude

Refugeetude shifts critical focus to the issue of refugee subjectivity, taking refugees not as "objects of investigation" but as historical beings living in the midst of geopolitical forces. Yet, refugeetude is not a transhistorical identity that can be ascribed to all refugee subjects. Liisa H. Malkki warns against the intellectual compulsion to make abstract and essentialize the diverse historical and political contexts of refugee migrations to produce a universal "refugee condition." She writes that the "quest for *the* refugee experience . . . reflects a tendency, in many disciplines, to seize upon political or historical processes and then to inscribe aspects of these processes in the bodies and psyches of the people who are undergoing them. In this way, very mobile, unstable social phenomena may be imagined as essential 'traits' and 'characteristics' attached to, or emanating from, individual persons."[19] Instead of a stable internal identity, refugeetude is a politics—it is not *in* a subject, even if it might eventually become experienced as internalized.

That is, refugeetude is not a preexisting quality or ideology that refugee subjects acquire after experiencing some specific event or upon meeting some set criteria (from outside to inside). It is not an interiority that is possessed and sedimented as subjectivity, an inner characteristic that motivates thought and external action. It is not simply, then, that refugee subjects produce refugeetude (from inside to outside) but that both refugee subjects and refugeetude come into being through contacts, attachments, and investments within everyday social and political interactions; they take form in encounters with power, that might prescribe and delimit, as well as in moments of clarity and communion, that might inspire and broaden.

Refugeetude is a coming into consciousness of the social, politi-

cal, and historical forces that situate refugee subjects and the acts that attempt to know, impact, and transcend this situation. It can be grasped, for example, when refugees participate in hunger strikes and practice self-mutilation—the stitching together of lips, eyes, and ears—in order to make visible state violence and protest inhumane detention and deportation policies.[20] It can be perceived in a public art installation—a blue billboard with the text "refugees run the seas / cause we own our own votes"—inviting "viewers to imagine an incalculable future where justice for migrants exists."[21] It is narrated in a short story about smuggled refugees who perish in the back of a truck, a fiction that blurs truth and reality.[22] It is visualized in a hip-hop music video, where refugees move freely, unobstructed by walls, fences, and borders.[23] It is present when a new refugee recognizes that settler colonial violence toward Indigenous peoples undergirds her safe arrival. I provide these little glimmers of refugeetude, in addition to a more sustained analysis of how it manifests for Nhan T. Le below, to capture the wide-ranging breadth of refugeetude and the various forms that a coming into consciousness may take.

While refugeetude can be taken to mean agency, it resonates more like a way of being (an ethos) that does not acquiesce to the entrenched global order structured by forms of racial, capital, and mobile inequality. An agential subject may be one actualization of refugeetude, but it is not the only or primary one. Rather, refugeetude describes a consciousness that may lead to a range of expressions. Consciousness here is not an unequivocal, categorical, or fully formed understanding or position. Instead, consciousness can range from an inchoate thought or recognition to forms of purposeful, physical protest. It is, at the core, to see one's situation and identify sources of violence and injustice that have shaped one's (and also others') coming into being.

For Le, refugeetude takes shape most strikingly in an anticapitalist critique of American society.[24] It is consciousness of the material life that the refugee is delivered into, and how capitalist refuge has structured her ability to live. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, refuge in the global North is deeply tied to economic calculations; in particular, the possibility of a new beginning for refugees is determined in large part by opportunities for work and capital accumulation. When Le tells us that she is "still on a boat," is still a refugee in the United States, she specifically means that she must move from one unstable, low-paying job to another in a process of unsettlement marked by economic precarity, labor exploitation, and alienation. It is not simply that Le cannot find a "good" permanent job; more important, it is how this lack of material stability prevents her from gaining a sense of belonging, agency, and settledness. Refuge as freedom from oppression and persecution in Vietnam does not mean freedom to opportunity, equity, or justice in the United States.

Of her first few years in the United States Le says, "This period was the most unproductive, and I changed jobs more than in my whole life in Vietnam."[25] Arriving in the United States in the late 1980s, she entered into a struggling economy that saw her skills—she was trained as a medical lab technician—as inconsequential and her labor as dispensable. After a brief stint at a garment factory, Le quickly realized her place as a worker: "I learned the first lesson in America: no company wanted to care for their workers. It was just a job."[26] Such clarity about how capitalism functions is also precise understanding of how refuge creates the situation in which the refugee must struggle and compete to eke out a living in the free market. Le further explains:

> We made the minimum wage, $4.25 an hour . . . I worked for a few days, then they laid me off. Then they called me back when they had orders. It wasn't stable, and I didn't like it because I felt that I had been used. Since they needed me to work for only a few days, when they ran out of things to do they sent me home. I was a call girl. I felt cheap and cheated.[27]

The feeling of being "cheap and cheated" is far from the expected emotion of gratitude that refuge is supposed to inspire in refugees. A condition of disposability awaits the recipient of humanitarian care, and this is what refuge actually looks like for people like Le. Here, an analysis of refuge in the United States is performed through a critique of its neoliberal economy's dehumanizing practices. If refuge cannot be directly criticized for fear that the refugee seems ungrateful—the most despicable response to a received benefit—then it is forcefully articulated in the working and living conditions that the refugee faces: "Life in America is too stressful and isolated, although material goods are always plentiful."[28]

Importantly, Le invokes the term *coolie* to characterize the refugee's struggle with labor in the United States and in doing so constellates disparate historical experiences of Asian racialization in the Americas.[29] Referring to a specific form of migrant labor—namely, Chinese and Indian—during the expansion of colonialism and capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coolies are often understood as lowly workers who were "cast adrift from place, skill and purpose."[30] Entering into forms of indenture, bondage, and indebtedness with employers, coolies became an underclass of cheap and dispensable human resource for driving colonial economies. Although coolie labor was crucial to colonial capitalism and various nation-building projects in the New World, they were also perceived as threats and targeted for exclusion.[31]

While Le is obviously not a coolie, her invocation of this classed and racialized figure from the past yokes together coolie and refugee in the present, connecting similar but incommensurate experiences of margin-

alization brought about by difficult migrations. Such connections, or refugeetude, make clear that the refugee is first and foremost another wage laborer in the free market, a cog in the capitalist machine, as opposed to a unique recipient of humanitarian aid. To see the continuity between coolie and refugee is to see the forces of colonialism, capitalism, and racialization at play in displacing migrant subjects across time and space. The refugee who is a human remainder of a neoimperialist war that the United States waged in Southeast Asia during the latter decades of the twentieth century shares a common trajectory, an experience of forced movement and economic exploitation, with workers under an earlier context of colonial governmentality. In expressing that refuge does not unfold according to the script of American exceptionalism, Le is not dismissing refuge as a valuable mechanism for those fleeing violence. She does, however, explain what humanitarian benevolence offers to some refugees, what the material consequence of refuge entails, and what freedom looks like on a concrete, everyday level. Le's refugeetude—a making sense of her own experience—points to the failure of the neoliberal nation-state to provide refugeed individuals like her a form of livable refuge.

False Optimism

The politics of refugeetude challenges prevalent objectifications of refugees as abject figures who are "invisible, speechless, and, above all, nonpolitical."[32] It is the counterpart to what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls the "refugee condition," a "discursive, medico-juridical disposition" of "arrested affect or potentiality."[33] Such a condition names the pathological incapacity and anachronistic temporality of refugees, marking their need for rehabilitation and biopolitical governmentality. If refugee is often understood as an aberrant condition, then refugeetude is a condition of possibility, a method of knowing and affecting the world that holds on to the critical potential of refugeeness. As such, there is no natural alignment between refugees and refugeetude. The experience of asylum seeking and refuge does not automatically transform into refugeetude; it is not a politics that can be ascribed to any and all refugees. Indeed, many refugee subjects desire assimilation, and they endeavor to fold themselves into the fabric of citizenship and civil society—the lure of capitalism runs strong. Yet, to covet the privileges and rights associated with national protection when one's life has been upturned, when one faces danger and death, when one languishes in camps is not a yearning to be dismissed as uncritical or politically naive. To want to leave a refugee past behind is not always a betrayal. Such orientations, however, might be better described as a politics of citizenship.

Refugeetude, on the other hand, does not subscribe to what Arendt

calls a "false" or "insane" optimism, in which refugees hold out hope for total assimilation into a national body politic. In a contemporary context, Lauren Berlant might describe this attachment to national belonging, especially with the resurgence of fascism and nationalist populism, as cruelly optimistic.[34] Writing about Jewish refugees of the Second World War, Arendt explains that to assimilate, through recourse to extreme forms of patriotism, is to "adjust in principle to everything and everybody," and in the process lose a sense of self.[35] She writes, "A man who wants to lose his self discovers, indeed, the possibilities of human existence, which are infinite, as infinite as is creation. But the recovering of a new personality is as difficult—and as hopeless—as a new creation of the world. . . . We don't succeed and we can't succeed; under the cover of our 'optimism' you can easily detect the hopeless sadness of assimilationists."[36] For Arendt, the work of shedding history and identity—here refugeeness and Jewishness—to assume nationality is ultimately a futile aspiration, for the refugee comes up against a system that has the power to reverse the recovering of self, to repeat the search for belonging and repeal nationality. This does not mean that self-reinvention is not possible but that such acts are subject to the inevitable capriciousness and contingencies of history and, importantly, the will of the state, as past and current practices of denaturalizations and deportations make clear.

This then leads Arendt to make her often-quoted claim that "those refugees who insist upon telling the truth, even to the point of 'indecency,' get in exchange for their unpopularity one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of the Gentiles. . . . Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples—if they keep their identity."[37] The conditional "if they keep their identity" is key to the possibilities of history and politics being available to refugees, to their potential to be at the forefront of forging new formations of political existence and community.[38] The "keeping of identity" she refers to is not a holding on to an immutable identity but, rather, a refusal to exchange the past for acceptance into a "topsy-turvy world" that allows "its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted." To keep an identity is to embrace the role of the pariah, whose presence throws into sharp relief the crises that mark our categories of political organization.[39]

Le's narrative details how difficult it is to "recover the self" (assimilate) or to "keep identity" (resist) in the wake of forced migration, when refuge is still yet to come—if it ever will. After a return trip to Vietnam Le suffers a crisis of both conscience and identity, unable to reconcile who she has become with who her kin are, who she used to be, and who she could have been. It is as if her new American self—the self of refuge—crumbles when confronted with a past life, one that is also someone else's

present. Le poignantly reflects: "My heart was lost. My heart was not the only thing that was lost. I also lost myself somewhere between Vietnam and America."[40] This "somewhere between" is the passage, both physical and psychic, that the refugee is in the midst of navigating, that is not yet over and done with. A sense of being "lost" means that she cannot settle, is somehow still caught in the search for a place to arrive to and call home. Recounting the birth of her second child, Le's narrative ends with these lines: "I asked myself, where is my boy coming from and where is he going? Home, I guess. But is it really his or is it really mine? Where is home?"[41]

This simple and powerful question, Where is home?, unravels the force of false optimism, revealing that there is ultimately no home in the national community of the United States, especially one that views refugees as undesirable or relegates them to the working poor. Thus, there is little false optimism in Le's story, no blind faith in the nation's interest or ability to uplift the refugee; it is clear that absorption into nationality has no guarantees. The absence of false optimism does not mean that the refugee is hopeless, however. Indeed, she wants more for herself, and particularly for her children to "do better than me."[42] What she gives us instead is indecency, the hard truths that underlie the humanitarian virtue of refuge—the feeling and material condition of not being at home, of socioeconomic and affective precarity. A refugee story like Le's, which is not one of successful integration and gratefulness toward the nation-state, is indecent because it is incongruent to discourses of American rescue and benevolence, liberalism and its values, and the American Dream. While it may be tempting to interpret Le's story as one of struggle and hardship, circling back to notions of refugee pity, it must be emphasized that Le's narration displays a woman profoundly aware of her everyday life and the social, political, and historical forces that shape it. In this way, history and politics, as Arendt claims, are truly open to this ordinary individual.

Being with Others

Building on Arendt, refugeetude is thus thinking, feeling, and acting that might be described as indecent within the prevailing social, cultural, and political milieu. Indecency is not necessarily oppositional, radical, or controversial but is more so surprising, unexpected, and revealing—what Arendt calls truth. The inappropriateness or incongruence to an established epistemological and sociopolitical framework organized around the naturalization of nation-state, border, and displacement marks refugeetude's unpopularity. As Arendt remarks, the keeping of refugeeness affords the refugee a more expansive vision of history and politics. Such a vision—or refugeetude—means that refugee subjects can begin to make

crucial linkages between themselves and others who have undergone and are undergoing similar experiences within the "national order of things," including migrant, undocumented, racialized, and Indigenous groups.[43]

This affective mapping—tracing the historicity or sociality of seemingly singular refugee experiences—with marginalized others, I suggest, is one of the advantages that Arendt gestures to.[44] In this way, the world opens up for refugee subjects, for they are no longer just individual pariahs or outsiders but people who could come to share in the collective struggle of those deemed problems for the nation-state and the international community to contain and manage. Vijay Prashad writes of a kind of assimilation different from the nationalistic type, a "horizontal assimilation engineered by migrants as they smile at each other, knowing quite well what is carried on each other's backs."[45] Horizontal assimilation stands in contrast to the false optimism of vertical assimilation, as it looks to other modalities of connection, affiliation, and commitment. Refugeetude could become shared intimacies between refugee subjects and cultivated affinities with others. In its most potent form, refugeetude is refugee subjects recognizing who they are, how they have come to be, and who they might become with others.

Le's story is, of course, incomplete. What refuge will look like in the future for her and her family is yet to be determined. Her candid reflections, however, constellate her, a refugee of the Vietnam War, relationally with coolies of the past and racialized migrants and workers of the present. These relations are not fully formed or figured; they are incipient potential for horizontal assimilations as an alternative to false optimism. They demonstrate different ways of existing within, but not solely with and of, the nation-state. This form of cross-group, interhistorical relationality is also articulated by another refugee from another, more contemporary, war in which US neoimperial intervention played a hand in producing displacement—the war in Syria. Fadia Jouny, a Syrian refugee who recently arrived in Canada, declares solidarity with Indigenous peoples who have been displaced and dispossessed by the Canadian nation-state. Although Le and Jouny are separated in time and space by different wars, different migrations, and arrivals in different settler colonial states, their voicing of refugeetude shares a consciousness of the state violence that attends refuge, as well as an attunement to connections with those others affected by such violence.

In a *National Observer* article published in March 2017, Jouny expresses her desire to learn more about the history of First Nations peoples.[46] She articulates the bind whereby refugees who find safe haven in settler colonial states like Canada come to occupy stolen Indigenous territory: "I feel very bad. We are on their land."[47] Evyn Lê Espiritu calls this the "refugee settler condition," a conjuncture in which the refugee's polit-

ical legibility is dependent on dispossession of Indigenous populations.[48] Jouny's statement, however, is also the beginning of a different kind of recognition, one in which the Canadian state is not the only (willing or unwilling) host to refugees, or the primary point of reference. In refuge, refugees come into contact with many others, including Indigenous communities, who are the original inhabitants and protectors of the land upon which political asylum is based. Indeed, contact does not automatically produce solidarity; tensions, antagonism, and conflict can and do arise, as different groups are pitted against one another for a place in the Canadian multicultural mosaic. But, for those like Jouny refuge means reckoning with the fact that political protection and safety in a nation-state like Canada is predicated on over a century of ongoing genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. This initiates a more complicated understanding of how to be in refuge and how to be with others who may seem so disconnected and removed from one's experience.

The refugee's physical presence in Canada (and her asylum claim, which reaffirms Canadian political sovereignty) renders her a complicit beneficiary in a system that operates on colonial violence. Yet, how do we move forward from this indisputable fact? What other relations between refugees and Indigenous peoples are possible?

Given that the refugee's arrival in settler states transits through, as Jodi A. Byrd would say, imperial genocide of Indigenous peoples, how she arrives matters in this calculus, in being triangulated between the settler and the native.[49] The force of violence that has brought the refugee to Canada might be the very thing that prompts her to see the forces of violence, where such violence is historically and culturally erased and forgotten, that have been and continue to be enacted on others and to reorient herself relationally to those whom the state has targeted for removal and extermination.

Jouny continues, "I feel I am the same as them, in some way. . . . The First Nations were removed from their land. I know what that is like."[50] While this comparison might at first seem simplistic, it gestures to the complex ways in which migrant and Indigenous populations are displaced and dispossessed by the logics of empire and capital, if not in the same way or to the same degree. Jouny's statement leads to the question, if refugees and Indigenous groups share a history of displacement, then what forces have played a role in these displacements, and how do these pasts of uprooting come to bind them in the present moment? Furthermore, how does what Harsha Walia has described as "border imperialism"—the uprooting of people through war, capitalism, and neoimperialism in developing countries and the simultaneous tightening of Western borders—relate to settler colonialism, the project of facilitating the "*dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority"?[51] How

might knowing what it is like to be removed from one's home, however different in context and magnitude, be the beginning of an inchoate solidarity between refugees and Indigenous peoples?

In his examination of the intersection between Indigeneity and diaspora, Daniel Coleman writes that the two cultural formations share "in common the experiences of displacement from a homeland and marginalization in the metropolitan settler state."[52] Yet, they have tended to "set very different, even opposed, political and social objectives."[53] If, as Audra Simpson argues, Indigenous enactments of sovereignty begin with refusals of setter citizenship and the gifts of the state, then refugees are at the opposite end, coveting the "gift" of political recognition in order to survive.[54] The desire for state recognition seemingly distances refugees from Indigenous groups and their political aims. While this problem seems irreconcilable, Jouny's comments demonstrate to us that refuge in Canada also facilitates the refugee's attunement to Indigenous histories, opening her eyes to the continuing struggles of Indigenous peoples for self-determination: "Since arriving in Canada in 2015, Jouny has been busy learning not just the English language, but also about Canadian culture, and Indigenous colonization, missing and murdered Indigenous women."[55] She has also begun the work of raising awareness among youth groups in her own community.

In this work of learning, the possibility of some other desire, some other attachment, and some other way of relating can be felt, if not formalized or instituted. What this does for the larger project of decolonization, how it effects social action and social change, is still to be determined, but the refugee gains a deeper sense of the violence that undergirds her precious refuge, a more complex understanding of what it means to find safe haven in a settler state and the work that might be involved in reconciliation. In refugeetude, to "be with," following Jean-Luc Nancy and others, is to be entangled in plurality and coexistence, to hold on to the many tensions that bind refugee and Indigeneity in likeness and incommensurability.[56] It is a continual and constant form of awareness, critique, and being that develops with an impetus to understand the threads that link past, present, and future forms of displacement.

Conclusion

Like Jouny's recognition of the colonial displacement of Indigenous peoples that make possible her safe protection in Canada, Nhan T. Le's story exposes the capitalist exploitation behind the good of refuge in the United States. Understood as a coveted gift of political subjecthood for stateless individuals, refuge is also employed by the state to legitimize its nationalist projects of violence—of colonial and capitalist accumulation—at home

and abroad. This is the insidious underbelly of refuge in the global North. For a refugee subject like Le, refugeetude is an understanding that the exalted success stories of "good" refugees—almost always coded through upward mobility and economic success—are indeed exceptional. Refugee exceptionality, as scholars of the Vietnam War diaspora have pointed out, can be produced, circulated, and appropriated to inscribe revisionist histories and justify past and future foreign wars.[57] Refugeetude, then, manifests as an understanding of how refuge engenders ongoing complicated entanglements with the state and its mechanisms as opposed to being a final point of destination, an end to rightlessness; it intertwines safety and violence, hope and limitation, past, present, and future.

But, refuge in the global North also places refugee subjects in proximity to millions of racialized, migrant, and Indigenous groups, groups that have their own complicated histories and relationships to the nation-state. One way that a refugee does not cease being a refugee is through the consciousness of her relatedness (although, of course, there may be disavowals and rejections instead) with these other "others" and the kinds of connections and coalitional politics that are possible. How might the conventionally abject position of refugee signify not just a desire for legal recognition but also a political yearning for forms of forthcoming justice? Refugeetude is sensing, feeling, thinking, knowing, and doing that finds a way to be human within a world order that often fails to be humane to the millions of people moving through the world in search of refuge.

Notes

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1. See Tang, *Unsettled*, 14.

2. Khatharya Um briefly used the term "refugitude" in her book *From the Land of Shadows*. It was subsequently defined on the Critical Refugee Studies Collective website, after a version of this paper was presented in San Diego. See Um, *From the Land of Shadows*, 213. See also Critical Refugee Studies Collective, "Critical Vocabularies."

3. I borrow the wording *refuge(e)* to signal the coconstitution of refuge and refugee from Yến Lê Espiritu. See Espiritu, *Body Counts*.

4. See Césaire, *Notebook of a Return*; Senghor, *Anthologie*; Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*; and Patel, *Migritude*.

5. See Gatrell, "Refugees." Peter Gatrell's concept of "refugeedom"—"a matrix involving administrative practices, legal norms, social relations and refugees'

experiences, and how these have been represented in cultural terms" (170)—also raises the question of refugee subjectivity.

6. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

7. This sentence plays with the United Nations' definition of *refugee*, a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." See UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Convention and Protocol*. See also Arendt, "Decline of the Nation-State."

8. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *State of the World's Refugees*, 18.

9. Tang, *Unsettled*, 5.

10. In taking this line of argument, I am influenced by scholars in the field of diaspora studies like Steven Vertovec and Lily Cho, who have articulated the concept of diaspora as a "type of consciousness" and a "condition of subjectivity," respectively. Their work demonstrates how concepts that refer to social or political formations, like diaspora and refugee, can be approached or resignified through psychic, affective, or embodied lens. See Vertovec, "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora'"; and Cho, "Turn to Diaspora."

11. See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

12. Le, "Coolie in America," 132.

13. See Schuster, "Asylum and the Lessons of History"; and Khanna, "On Asylum and Genealogy."

14. See Zetter, "More Labels, Fewer Refugees"; and Chimni "Birth of a 'Discipline.'"

15. I am thinking here also of Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory." See Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory."

16. See Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128–35.

17. Sartre, "Black Orpheus," 36.

18. Said, "Reflections on Exile," 144.

19. Malkki, "Refugees and Exile," 511.

20. For over three decades refuge seekers and migrants have resorted to self-mutilation as a last resort to beseech different liberal-democratic nation-states around the world to reverse decisions to close borders, detain refugees, and deport asylum seekers. See Jeffers, *Refugees, Theater, and Crisis*; and Soguk, "Splinters of Hegemony."

21. See Granados, "Refugees Run the Seas."

22. See Blasim, "Truck to Berlin."

23. See M.I.A., "Borders."

24. This critique, though, is not ideological but reflects an embodied experience. Le is equally critical of communism in Vietnam: "Everyone was free now, free of having a job and free of thinking also because the government did the thinking for the people." Le, "Coolie in America," 137.

25. Le, "Coolie in America," 142.

26. Le, "Coolie in America," 142.

27. Le, "Coolie in America," 142.

28. Le, "Coolie in America," 142.

29. Coolie labor was also an element of French Indochina, providing another historical layer to Le's usage of the term. See Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*.

30. Breman and Daniel, "Conclusion," 283.

31. Lisa Yun writes, "Coolie history and its attendant narratives become a conundrum of contradictions: hypermobile yet immobilized, owned by one and owned by many, fluid yet enslaved." Yun, *Coolie Speaks*, xx. See also Junn, "From Coolie to Model Minority."

32. Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, 3.

33. Nguyen, *Gift of Freedom*, 53.

34. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

35. Arendt, "We Refugees," 117.

36. Arendt, "We Refugees," 117.

37. Arendt, "We Refugees," 119.

38. Agamben takes Arendt's claim further, arguing that "the refugee is the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come." Agamben, "We Refugees," 114.

39. Arendt, "We Refugees," 119.

40. Le, "Coolie in America," 150.

41. Le, "Coolie in America," 150.

42. Le, "Coolie in America," 146.

43. I borrow the phrase "the national order of things" from Malkki, "Refugees and Exile."

44. See Flatley, *Affective Mapping.*

45. Prashad, "Foreword," iv.

46. Uechi, "This Syrian Refugee."

47. Uechi, "This Syrian Refugee."

48. See Espiritu, "Vexed Solidarities."

49. See Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, xxi; and Sharma and Wright "Decolonizing Resistance."

50. Uechi, "This Syrian Refugee."

51. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 7. See, also, Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*, 37–78.

52. Coleman, "Indigenous Place and Diaspora Space," 73.

53. Coleman, "Indigenous Place and Diaspora Space," 62.

54. See Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 1–35.

55. Uechi, "This Syrian Refugee."

56. Chuh et al., "Being with José."

57. See Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 1–23; and Nguyen, *Gift of Freedom*, 1–32.

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