
Resentment

OUTLAWED

If gratitude to the nation-state is considered a refugee virtue, then resentment is a vice, an immoral feeling that is incongruous with refuge. Resentment is especially ill-fitting on subjects who have received not just any benefit, but the most precious benefit of all—political protection and the “right” to be “human.” Resentment disrupts the social harmony produced when a community of citizens “welcomes” strangers into the fold of their nation. It is unexpected and unacceptable, indeed inconceivable, coming from those who have pleaded for and been given asylum. As an inappropriate response to benefit or the possibility of benefit, resentment is the ultimate form of ingratitude. To lack appreciation and thankfulness in the face of generosity is to be illogical, undeserving, and dismissible. Even when refuge is withheld or denied, any resentment expressed by asylum-seeking supplicants is interpreted either as an attitude of entitlement or as proof of ineligibility. Resentment, in short, renders refugees *unsuitable* for refuge. It is an “outlawed emotion” marked by an “incompatibility with dominant perceptions and values.”¹ Its emergence, as a social impossibility, is out of sync with the affective flow and the cultural “mood” of society.²

Of course, resentment is not completely foreign to refugees. They have always been *objects* of resentment—nativist, xenophobic, and fascist forces have consistently found in refugees and (im)migrants a ready vehicle, either as threats or burdens, for the expression of their resentment, which blurs into and overlaps with material and existential fear.³ States, too, in their criminalization of asylum seekers and securitization of borders, express a form of resentment toward those whom they see as transgressing the law, cheating the system, and threatening the integrity of sovereign borders. In these instances, refugees are construed as those who impose a kind of injury, a blow, to the nation and its citizens. Understood as “waves” or “influxes” of outsiders invading a bounded territory, refugees impinge

on resources, lands, and rights they have no entitlement to, disrupting an established way of “settled” life.⁴ At best, refugees are a public nuisance, and at worst charges of terrorism mark them as a source of violence against the nation-state. The existence of refugees and migrants is therefore experienced as a loss for the nation and its citizens; their very being activates an anxiety about personal and communal diminishment. A perceived disadvantage or potential injury underpins this national form of resentment.⁵

At the same time, the asylum-granting authority encourages refugees to direct resentment toward the nation-states from which they have fled and condemn the governments that have oppressed them. In doing this, they reinscribe the impetus for migration and the injuries that created the need for refuge. This refugee resentment is crucial to the asylum-granting state’s narrative of generosity toward and rescue of refugees, as well as to the legitimation of its sovereign power on the international stage. It bears reminding here that one of the key functions of refuge is to express political values and enact foreign policy. That is, an offer of refuge is a geopolitical maneuver whereby one state criticizes and condemns another state. Refugee resentment aids this international relations work. Vietnamese refugee subjects in the diaspora, for example, who condemn Vietnam’s human rights abuses, evince the exceptionalism of capitalist democracies like the United States and Canada. Their articulations of injustices suffered at the hands of Vietnamese communists produce a clear picture of victimizers and saviors in the international power play of refuge.⁶ Resentment toward the refugee’s home country is as crucial to exalting the asylum-granting nation as is gratitude.

Resentment is thus only incongruent or unacceptable in a specific context and through a specific relation: between refugee subjects and the asylum-granting nation-state. The feeling of resentment and the experience of refuge are seemingly incompatible because resentment, at its core, emerges from an injury or injustice. But if refuge is one of the most coveted and valuable benefits of modern life, then there can be no way for legitimate resentment to develop. When it does develop, resentment must be suppressed—the refugee made illegible or refuge revoked. To put it another way, refugee resentment is *outlawed*—criminalized and socially prohibited. Through this process of outlawing, resentment becomes a transgression of the norms regulating national belonging and sociality.

As a transgression, resentment is most readily tied to criminality and pathology, materializing in expressions of antagonism, anger, and violence. The state, accordingly, considers the subjects of resentment to be “bad” refugees, those who do not uphold their end of the bargain, who fail to make something out of refuge. These are individuals who cannot be reproduced in the image of refuge as success, as gratefulness, as law-abiding and, for one reason or another, cannot be fully assimilated into the neoliberal existence of refuge. They are criminals, gangsters, deportees, dropouts, working poor, outcasts, or underachievers—those who

are generally unsuccessful, who stray from the script of refuge as an unmitigated “good” that also produces goodness.

These “outlaws” are thus the exemplars of refugee resentment. In following subjects who have been deemed “bad” or not good *enough* for refuge, we see how resentment further entangles them in complicated relations with the nation-state and with other subjects in prolonged acts of refuge seeking, in which they enact the meaning of the *re-* prefix—once more, again, turn back—in both fleeing and feeling.⁷ As a form of relationality, resentment allows us to perceive the regulatory mechanisms that determine who the proper subjects of refuge are and the often difficult and unacknowledged ways in which refuge is actually lived, not as successful assimilation and hope but as struggles with historical and ongoing injuries. In these struggles with what are perceived as failures, resentment does not let go of unresolved histories, but rather carves out space for speaking to the lived shortcomings of a political ideal—to seek, again and again, more from refuge.

Attending to the nuances of resentment, we can comprehend not just the incompleteness and limitations of refuge, but also the unremarked struggles to actually achieve it. This chapter tracks how resentment brings into view the injuries that complicate refuge as a finished experience. I examine resentment as an affective experience that addresses a host of past and present injuries—of war, displacement, racism, criminalization, denials, and deportation.⁸ Contemplating stories drawn from Aimee Phan’s *We Should Never Meet*, from the Sacramento hostage crisis of 1991, and from Studio Revolt’s activist videos “My Asian Americana” and “Return to Sender,” I consider how refugee resentment seeps through or surfaces in moments of violence, frustration, desire, and love, against a social prohibition that stunts its possibility. These moments show how resentment is marked by an extended temporality, a long attachment to injury, and a delayed or blocked articulation. Moving through close readings of the gangster’s vengeful violence, the hostage taker’s unassimilated everyday, the compliant refugee’s endeavor to belong, and the deportee’s love for the nation, I present images of resentment that sketch an open and precarious refuge marked by continuous unsettlement. In this way, resentment clarifies the actions and reactions of those who must continue to hold on to the past, who presently live the effects of a past that is not yet past and who attempt to reach the refuge held out to, and also withheld from, them.⁹

INJURY AND (IN)EXPRESSIBILITY

As ways of being that deviate from normative expectation, resentment shows the cracks and ruptures in refuge, one of the most precious of modern political categories. It allows us to see what happens when legal status does not result in a livable life, and how refugee subjects experience and negotiate these realities. While philosophical accounts of resentment differ on its function—ranging from a pathological and destructive disease in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and

Max Scheler to a moral passion with claims to justice in Adam Smith and Joseph Butler—all agree that it arises from conditions of inequality, whether from a natural division between slave and master or from a locatable injury or injustice.¹⁰

The basic constitution of resentment develops from a *wound*, one that sheds light on the organization of power and the critical fissures within a given social structure.¹¹ The refugee's relation of resentment with the asylum-granting state brings to surface past and ongoing injustices obscured by the notion of refuge as a social good. Although the giving of refuge might cover over the hurt of war and displacement, paving the road for gratitude to develop, resentment is an inevitable consequence of histories of war and imperial violence. That is to say, the wounds of war are not always healed through refuge. Moreover, in refuge, these wounds might be further aggravated, picked over and over again.

These wounds endure in time, becoming the basis from which actions and reactions develop, from which relations are formed and social life is lived. One of the most visible ways we come to know resentment is through outbursts of anger or violence. These outbursts are not resentment itself, however, but are indicative of a more diffuse underlying structure. Thinking about how resentment comes to be conveyed brings us to one of the concept's founding tensions—the question of its (in)expressibility. This tension arises from the fact that the emotion we know of as “resentment” has two distinct intellectual strands that overlap and are often understood interchangeably: *resentment* and *ressentiment*.¹²

Resentment, as a social passion, following the moral sentiment approach of Adam Smith, is understood to be a mechanism for denouncing injustice and making grievance. Resentment names moral norms and seeks to restore the social order disrupted by transgressions of those norms. For Smith, resentment, when moderated and tuned to the right “pitch,” can inspire sympathy in the impartial spectator. The way in which this “unsocial passion” gains sociality is precisely through the participation of others; moral resentment requires an audience to witness and judge its proper channeling into protest and acceptable articulation of injustice. In this way, resentment is crucial to the formation of social bonds and to the maintenance of equilibrium in democratic societies. This “normative” understanding of resentment presupposes not only that resentment can be articulated, but also that these articulations can be shared and recognized.

Ressentiment, on the other hand, is a pathological condition that finds its expression blocked and thwarted. For Nietzsche, resentment lacks ontological integrity. As an inferior reaction that depends on external stimuli to exist, resentment produces a “slave mentality” that skews valuation of the world and slowly poisons the individual so that “his soul *squints*; his mind loves dark corners, secret paths and back-doors, everything secretive appeals to him as being *his* world, *his* security, *his* comfort; he knows all about keeping quiet, not forgetting, waiting, temporarily humbling and abasing himself.”¹³ Ressentiment is a constant and degenerative hidden suffering that indicates a larger social moral decay.

Scheler similarly views resentment as a reactive impulse that is “always preceded by an attack or an injury.”¹⁴ Yet this reaction is marked by an inexpressibility or a blockage to its fulfillment. Resentment is a wound that by definition must fester, simmering below the surface. According to Manfred S. Frings, resentment (here the same as ressentiment) has an extended temporality that clearly differentiates it from an emotion like anger. Describing its emotive structure, he writes: “The constant state of resentment is distinguished sharply from furious reactions or outbursts of anger. Whenever a prosaic resentment-feeling finds satisfaction by way of, say, successful revenge and retaliation, there is no resentment proper at hand.”¹⁵ Resentment proper can, by definition, never be expressed or find fulfillment, except when it becomes something other than itself.

This unresolved tension between the articulated passion of normative resentment and the degenerative festering of Nietzschean resentment is inherited in the contemporary term *resentment*. While it could encompass a range of articulated “negative” emotions such as anger, hatred, and revenge, resentment is not formally any of these emotions. Rather, *resentment* describes a wider sense of dissatisfaction, frustration, and rage that is not necessarily verbalized or acted upon but is nonetheless powerfully constitutive of moments of outward verbalization and action. While, on a purely taxonomic level, Frings’s distinction is useful for understanding the nuances between interrelated emotions that overlap, the imbrication itself is significant, given that brief, reactive “outbursts” of anger can tell us much about underlying resentment. Because it is ontologically defined by a repression or delay, we come to know resentment only indirectly, through more recognizable affective forms. Resentment, then, could be understood as that which propels an emotion like anger, and anger is resentment’s precipitation or residue. Even as resentment is characterized by an inability to act directly or a sublimated expression, it is still accessible through moments when other emotions “flare up” or materialize.

GANGSTER DREAMS

An outburst of refugee resentment can bring the violence the state commits abroad home to roost within the national space. It can be a brutal apparition of the continuing battles that are being, and still need to be, fought in the duration of refuge. Aimee Phan’s “Visitors,” from her cycle of interconnected short stories *We Should Never Meet*, concludes with a gangster, Vinh, brutally attacking an elder, Bac Nguyen, during a home invasion.¹⁶ The gangster, who is an orphaned refugee, views his violent actions as a crucial reminder to law-abiding, upwardly mobile refugee subjects that their endeavors to find economic success in the United States are ultimately futile. Surveying, with resentful satisfaction, the domestic battlefield of overturned cabinets and drawers, broken dishes, and spilled papers that his gang had inflicted on the Nguyen family home, Vinh imagines the destruction as a literal shattering of the American Dream.

For him, the violence of the scene exposes the illusory fiction of belonging that America holds out to refugees and immigrants. In this moment, material violence slips into symbolic violence, bringing with it a sobering insight, that complete and unconditional national inclusion will forever be out of reach: “Vinh convinced himself that they [the gang] were ultimately doing these people a favor. All of them in such a delusion about attaining this material dream of fortune and comfort, but at what expense? Didn’t they realize they’d always be under the thumb of this government? . . . They were fools to believe they could actually live among the Americans and become one of them. They never would. They would never be allowed.”¹⁷ In the gangster’s violence is an explosion of resentment that bitterly condemns the hegemonic nation-state, first for conducting war, and then for failing to provide true refuge. The “expense” of belonging that never arrives, as Vinh attempts to communicate, is a form of subjection, extending from a history of injury to a present of denials, which is far too high a price for only false returns.

Yet, because resentment works through deflection and indirection, the gangster’s violence ironically lands on the lives of other refugees and immigrants. Unable to be directly launched at its target, resentment finds a symbolic substitute in racialized immigrants whose material achievements prove American opportunity. They are, for the disenfranchised gangster, the most proximate representatives of the ideological state. Displaying what Scheler calls resentment’s “value delusion,” or an envious inversion of established order, the gangster reevaluates the “good” of refuge—if he cannot attain refuge, then no one else should, or refuge itself must be shown to be a sham.¹⁸ While the methods of resentment are envy and bitterness, the critique it launches questions sovereign power’s promises and its narrative of refugee uplift. By shattering the material possessions gained through playing the game of capitalist accumulation, and smashing the face of one who believes so ardently in the American Dream, the gangster seeks to show how the game itself is tragically broken.

As Vinh and his gangster “brothers” destroy what Vietnamese refugees have labored to accumulate, they preemptively prevent false inclusion in neoliberal citizenship based on consumption. The gangsters brutally seek to demonstrate that such capitalist accumulations, no matter how vast, are ultimately futile for racialized immigrants and refugees in a nation built on racial hierarchies and the entrenched institutionalization of inequality. Violence, here, cleaves the industrious and hopeful immigrant from the American Dream that requires such subjects in order to sustain itself. The irony of the situation, one that Vinh fails to see, is that Bac Nguyen and the other victims of his violence are survivors who, having already experienced the traumatic impacts of war and state violence, may desire inclusion, no matter how imperfect and illusory, because they have known worse fates and need to stay in this world.

Although his outburst is misdirected and flawed, the gangster’s violence reveals the unresolved histories that prevent unchecked assimilation into an

unquestioned community. The gangster—a recipient of asylum who becomes a criminal—is perhaps one of the most exemplary figures of refugee resentment, hanging on to the past because the present is a country where he must reexperience the effects of old injuries and the stings of fresh ones. He is a subject who lives out the long temporality of transnational American war in the absence of recompense. As a destabilizing “paradigm of the American Dream,” the gangster sheds light on resentment, not so much because he is in conflict with society, but because his presence activates the anxieties and contradictions at its very core.¹⁹ The refugee gangster is a dreamer who calls into question the dream, indexing the failures of American-style freedom.

Regardless of whether such failures are privatized within the individual or explained structurally, by virtue of “failing” to achieve refuge as neoliberal success, the refugee who is also a gangster complicates the narrative of American rescue and liberation of foreign others. Because the hegemonic liberation narrative is so dependent on “good” refugees of a past war to prove its thesis, the gangster is inconvenient evidence within this logic of intervention and ideological victory—for surely the United States did not save these individuals only for them to turn into violent criminals; that would be a failure of the civilizing mission, of liberalism itself.²⁰ Refugees from the wars in Southeast Asia who become criminals and gangsters pose a significant ideological, symbolic, and political “problem” for the U.S. nation-state, for they threaten to un-script and derail a founding myth of American exceptionalism. In doing so, they complicate the conventional understanding of refuge as a modern political good. Accordingly, they must be forcibly expelled, an issue that I take up later in this chapter.

This “problem” of Southeast Asian gangs in the United States became a mainstream issue in the early 1990s, when rising gang activity across North America, but particularly in places of concentrated refugee settlement such as New York and California, attracted local and national media coverage. A deadly shootout at the funeral of an assassinated gang leader in July 1990 became a “popular news item” and subsequently a “defining event, the moment at which the idea of Vietnamese gangsters in America entered the national consciousness.”²¹ While spectacular events like this shootout contributed to a public profile of Southeast Asian crime, in actuality, gang activity was largely confined to auto and retail theft, home invasions, and extortions, and the targets were almost exclusively Asian refugees and immigrants.²²

Inevitably, investigators and researchers sought explanations for why young male refugees joined gangs. Patrick Du Phuoc Long explains how cultural and socioeconomic conditions—including cultural conflicts, disintegration of the family, alienation at school, peer pressure, and racism and estrangement from American culture—contributed to gang involvement.²³ In addition to these factors, and without fail, journalists, academics, and policymakers returned to the brutality of the Vietnam War and its aftermath to account for present-day violence.²⁴ While

it is imperative to understand the lives and behaviors of criminalized refugees in the context of the war and its legacies, these accounts problematically produce a model of causality that *explains* gang violence through the violence of war. A striking example comes from an article in a criminal justice newsletter in which the authors draw a direct link between criminal activity in Vietnam during wartime and gang activity in North America:

Vietnamese gang membership dates back to the early Vietnam war era. . . . Gang members were usually former military personnel who had learned their tactics during the war. . . . Around 1975, many Asian refugees settled into camps where some were able to renew gang ties. These gang members were young Vietnamese who preyed upon their own people. . . . Aware that many Vietnamese citizens had left their homeland for employment in the United States and Canada, some gang members followed in the hopes of finding an open criminal arena. Gang members working as home invaders in the United States have now been able to recreate the horrors of the refugee camps by actively terrorizing members of the Asian community through criminal activity and violence.²⁵

This chronology neatly locates criminality and violence in Vietnam and in the bodies of the Vietnamese, bypassing larger sociohistorical conditions and American complicity in imposing violence during and after the war. The explanation of gang violence as an inheritance of war naturalizes criminal “character” as a result of personal background and historical experience. In other words, criminality becomes a foreign import that makes its way into the national space via asylum, as opposed to a category created by and within the American nation itself.

This discourse of wartime violence draws attention away from the military intrusions that played a large part in creating the conditions of “Vietnamese violence,” and away from structural marginalizations in the United States that drive gang membership. To emphasize the war in a way that figures it as a source for violence is to pathologize refugees while clearing the United States of moral responsibility. Phan’s discursive intervention, however, recalls the war to elucidate a connection not between war and individual pathology, but between gang violence and U.S. foreign policy, making possible a view of Southeast Asian American gangsters as human consequences of American militarism.²⁶ The gangster’s violence disputes the state’s benevolent giving of refuge by revealing a relation in which refuge is a result of injury, one that is then impeded or offered as contingency to both “good” and “bad” subjects.

Set in California, in Orange County’s Little Saigon district—the heart of Vietnamese America—“Visitors” builds its violent crescendo through a tangle of misinterpretations, assumptions, and incompatible understandings of history. The two central characters—Vinh, an “unaccompanied minor” boat refugee who was placed in the foster care system, and Bac Nguyen, an elderly immigrant recently arrived in the United States—collide when one is out scouting for potential home invasion targets and the other is trying to find his way home from a

trip to the market. After being led to mistake Vinh for an economics student, and assuming that he is part of both a traditional nuclear family unit and the wider Vietnamese American community, Bac Nguyen reveals that his son was gunned down by a communist sniper. When Vinh lies and tells him that his parents also died in Vietnam, the two experience a kind of refugee communion: the old man says, “We’ve lost so many people,” and the young man responds, “They’ve taken so much from us.”²⁷ While one pronoun, *we*, is uncontested, the other, *they*, is a source of confusion and misunderstanding. Bac Nguyen assumes that *they* refers to the communists, while Vinh means the Americans.

This moment of misinterpretation on Bac Nguyen’s end, assuming shared anticommunism, is also a moment of political reorientation as Vinh’s correction changes the site of critique, moving it away from the North Vietnamese to the Americans. The gangster’s resentment opens up the potential for expressing dissatisfaction with and anger at the United States, once South Vietnam’s ally in war and now the largest country of asylum for Vietnamese refugees.²⁸ The “unruly” expression of Vinh’s resentment—not directed at the right government, the right ideology, the right people—is incongruent with sanctioned refugee feelings such as grief, anticommunist hatred, and gratitude that Bac Nguyen, as a survivor of communist persecution and a newcomer to the United States, readily espouses. Resentment disrupts master narratives of the Vietnam War as a liberal project of rights promotion and freedom by forcing the recognition of those who have not benefited from such rights and freedom.

In a subsequent scene, Vinh unequivocally tells Bac Nguyen that the Americans “destroyed our country, then they left. To ease their guilty conscience, they took some of us in. It’s really simple.”²⁹ Bac Nguyen rightly points out that history is not black and white, yet Vinh’s simplified assessment of the war and its aftermath, what Jodi Kim calls his “productive unambiguity,” compels an alternative position to the pervasive narrative of liberal warfare in American historical and political discourse.³⁰ The problem for Vinh, unlike many others in the Vietnamese diaspora, is not that the Americans withdrew militarily and abandoned Vietnam during the final stages of fighting, but that the United States was involved in Vietnam in the first place, whereby an anticolonial war against the French and then a civil war in Vietnam subsequently became a site of proxy war between the U.S. and Sino-Soviet superpowers.³¹

As the title of the story emphasizes, the notion of visiting, whereby the host extends a finite and impermanent reception to refugees, is an apt descriptor for how resentment is experienced. In a poignant moment, Vinh articulates his utter alienation in the United States, telling Bac Nguyen: “Even though I don’t remember much of it [Vietnam], I still feel like it’s my home, and this place [the United States], while nice, isn’t. It’s like I’m visiting, and I’ve overstayed my welcome.”³² Resentment develops because the relation that becomes possible between a nonmodel subject like Vinh and the nation-state is one of overstayed

welcome, of provisionality and impending (r)ejection from the community. As a visitor—a perpetual foreigner—the gangster, who is a refugee and failed adoptee, is unable to form the kinds of traditional bonds that structure belonging and social integration.

The closest he comes to forging kinship ties, beyond his gang and on-again-off-again girlfriend Kim, is in his meeting with Bac Nguyen, who, at one point, hands him a family heirloom.³³ Such a gift, usually imparted to one's descendants as a sign of inheritance, symbolically pulls Vinh into Bac Nguyen's lineage.³⁴ It is a gesture of generosity on the old man's part that holds within it the possibilities of familial connections and intimacies. But later that same evening, while burglarizing his home, Vinh smashes Bac Nguyen's face, in loyalty to his gang, the moment the old man calls out his name. As Bac Nguyen is left bleeding on the ground, Vinh is again at the precipice of belonging—his “brothers” angry at him for divulging personal information that could compromise the gang—and the fleeting promise of connection is foreclosed.

Deeply flawed as it is, Vinh's resentment manifested as violence makes spectacular and nameable the insidious and everyday violence that the state enacts on its subjects of refuge, fixing them in place within the order of capitalist, white supremacy—to have refugees, as Vinh says, “under the thumb” of American governance. The extraordinary violence of the home invasion marks the refugee gangster's attachment to the past and its persistent apparitions, although not through the usual means of the “melancholic migrant”—in grief and backward glances that obstruct assimilation—but through the bitterness of resentment exploding in violence.³⁵ Such violence, the gangster shows, is an inevitable response to being subjects of and subjected to national governmentality in refuge, where resentment seethes and seeks forms of release that often come with tragic consequences for the very people eking out a life under the nation-state's thumb.

HOSTAGE TAKERS

Violence, protests, and vengeful lashing out are rightly considered primary manifestations of resentment. However, the sometimes dramatic visibility of explicit grievances often diverts attention away from another, more mundane yet perhaps more common, form of resentment found among refugees. This is the resentment of simply existing in a way that does not live up to what refuge *should* inspire and make possible. Often invisibilized, it takes root within the quotidian struggle to eke out a life within structural incapacities that make it unlikely or impossible for some to (re)produce the right kind of neoliberal subjectivity under contemporary capitalism. To live unexceptionally or with fallibility in the face of incredible benefit—to be poor and criminalized, to not get into the best school, to find it difficult to integrate or assimilate, to hold on to past traumas, to fail to thrive, to

not capitalize on refuge—pulls many refugee subjects into a relation of resentment with the nation-state. This much quieter resentment often goes unacknowledged or unrecognized and is therefore difficult to access.

On April 4, 1991, four young Vietnamese American men—brothers Loi Khac Nguyen, Pham Khac Nguyen, and Long Khac Nguyen and their friend Cuong Tran—entered a Good Guys electronics store in Sacramento, California, and took thirty-nine people hostage for eight and a half hours. When it was over, these refugees had killed three hostages and wounded ten others. The situation came to a conclusion when SWAT teams and sheriff's deputies stormed into the store, shooting at the four men. The only one to survive was Loi Khac Nguyen, who was wearing a bulletproof vest at the time.

The presence of resentment is not particularly apparent or tellingly embodied in the violence of this explosive, spectacular event, which made headlines across the nation in major media outlets.³⁶ Instead, the relation of resentment that the situation indexes is located in how the refugees had led (or were unable to lead) their lives. That is, resentment is most poignantly lived in the buildup to the hostage taking, in what the refugees did or rather “failed” to do with the refuge given to them, and not in the moment of their tragic deaths. This is revealed through accounts of their lives, which we can access only through an amalgamation, a reconstruction of media reports, of truths and interpretations. While I do not claim to “know” the lives of these young refugee subjects, I find in the narration of their lives by others, and in posthumous attempts to explain their actions, a significant indication of how resentment might be found and accessed outside of the violent event itself.

Brandishing 9mm pistols and a handgun, the group made a list of demands: \$4 million in cash, bulletproof vests, a helicopter, and thousand-year-old ginseng root. The motivation for this act of hostage taking has never become entirely clear, but the media wrongly identified the men as “gangsters” looking for attention. Sheriff Glen Craig claimed that the men did not intend to rob the store, that instead they wanted to make a statement and were attempting to gain “notoriety.”³⁷ If this had been the case, they had succeeded: the incident—broadcast live on national television—gained public attention and went down in history as one of the largest hostage rescue operations in the United States.

Reportedly, the group wanted to fly to Thailand to fight the Viet Cong in Vietnam. Their desire to continue to fight a war that was supposedly “over,” that had officially ended fifteen years earlier, may seem odd to the general public, but it is part and parcel of Vietnamese diasporic anticommunism in the late 1970s and '80s. In the years following the end of the Vietnam War, when many fled the country, the idea of “homeland restoration”—a conviction that the nation of South Vietnam could be restored by overthrowing the communist regime—fueled Vietnamese refugee politics. Within refugee communities, “the task of restoring the homeland was seen as a duty, a necessity.”³⁸

While it waned in prominence, and was eventually replaced by a form of “human rights” anticommunism in subsequent decades, homeland restoration was an organized and animating force for a whole generation of refugees. Anticommunism through homeland restoration insisted that the war’s battles were still ongoing, and that a return to the lost nation was possible. The young men’s demands for ammunition and passage to Thailand was not a wild, incomprehensible request, but a historically mediated articulation of refugee resentment. It arose from and expresses their community’s sense of loss and its refusal to accept the war’s outcome. The hostage situation made publicly visible, in spectacular fashion, the visceral resentment of an ethnic community on the national stage, and in doing so it dramatized a living legacy of the Vietnam War.

In making sense of the incident, commentators have zeroed in on this link to wartime. In particular, they pointed to the Nguyen patriarch’s staunch patriotism and his past in the South Vietnamese army. Andrew Lam has written movingly about how the brothers inherited their “father’s passion.”³⁹ Without class mobility in the United States, they were animated by the memories and stories of the previous generation. Lam suggests that the brothers “tried to bring dignity to their father by fighting his war. They wanted to be good Vietnamese sons: to assuage the old man’s grief, the young man must defeat his old man’s enemy.”⁴⁰ Such an explanation connects present violence and past war, blurring distinctions between here and there, beginnings and endings.

Yet intergenerational dynamics, anticommunism, and the legacies of war go only so far in explaining what has come to be known as the Sacramento hostage crisis. Reports of the incident reiterated, over and over again, how the four young men had experienced deep dissatisfaction with life in the United States—they had “problems with school, employment, and language.”⁴¹ The Nguyen family had been on welfare, struggling to get by in a shared two-bedroom apartment. Loi Khac Nguyen, in an audiotape of negotiations with the police, could be heard saying, “I hate the fucking U.S.A. I want to get back to my country.”⁴² Another lens through which to view this incident is that of failed assimilation, the inability of these war refugees to integrate into American society. The violence of the hostage taking becomes a symptom of the refugees’ personal shortcomings, their inability to become productive American subjects. To quote Sheriff Craig again, “They were very, very unhappy people.”⁴³ This view privatizes the “problem” of immigration, reinscribing deficiency and pathology in the refugee body.

As explanations for the refugees’ actions, both the war and failed assimilation are unsatisfactory—arresting them in a melancholic past on the one hand, and in individual inadequacies on the other. The hostage situation can only be understood in these terms as a consequence of war manifested in the actions of aberrant, unhappy individuals. The war and difficult resettlement are, admittedly, important contexts for understanding the event, but the structuring field of American refuge in which the young men lived and died seems to recede into the

background. American war making helped create, first, the military “defeat” that fueled anticommunism and, second, the refuge that fostered a sense of desperation and suffering.

More significant than why these individuals committed this hostage taking are other crucial questions: What might their actions tell us about the realities they had traversed or were trapped in? What might refuge have meant for the Nguyen brothers and their friend? The *Chicago Tribune* wrote that the men were “fed up with life in America and desperate for attention,” while the Associated Press reported that they were “unhappy with life in the United States.”⁴⁴ We know that by all accounts they did not “fit in,” but such struggles do not provide an explanation for their actions. Instead, the struggles reveal how a relation of resentment—in the sense that the refugee subjects were who they were in a country like the United States—clarifies the violence and bloodshed. What resentment shows is that if the young men’s resettlement was difficult, that was not due to their personal failings or their history, but is attributable to the kind of life in the United States that was available to them, their “refuge” in the present.

We see again here how resentment’s expression is oblique. Although the young men’s articulation of resentment was directed at anticommunist Vietnam, and their violence was enacted on the bodies of innocent civilians, their “message” was directed at the U.S. nation-state. A “statement” was indeed made, and it decried how the United States did not afford these young and wounded refugees a chance to live. Teeming with resentment is not the eight and a half hours of intense hostage-taking, but rather the years and years of having “problems” at school and working unfulfilling jobs, of not becoming happy and productive because the enabling social conditions were absent. I do not mean that the refugee subjects simply resented the United States, though this does seem to be the case. Rather, their very being—the shape of their lives, their actions of seeming failures, their *doing* in the everyday—already discloses a relation of resentment between the refugee and the nation-state. Such a relation arises because of the ideals of success and neoliberal subjecthood embedded in the concept of refuge, which refugees are then explicitly or implicitly expected to live out. To be gifted a coveted opportunity in the form of refuge and then to squander that opportunity in the seemingly unfruitful life one leads is a relation of resentment. The Sacramento hostage crisis shows us the lived stakes of success and failure, and how resentment resides intensely in the duration of refuge, embodied in the struggles of refugee subjects in the United States.

WAIT-LISTED

It would be misleading, however, to designate resentment as belonging exclusively to those who are deemed “bad” in the eyes of the nation-state. For the Nguyen brothers and their friend, a resentful relation plays out in the personal and

structural incapacities to achieve, or more precisely in what might be seen as their *failure to try hard enough*, to help themselves in the individual, entrepreneurial way that would make something out of refuge. Theirs is a failure of proper desire, for surely they would have turned out all right had they gone to school, gotten jobs, and been content with their station in life.

Yet resentment can also be seen in the refugee's yearning, in playing by the rules and doing the right things to gain the prize of success—especially when these actions continue to suspend one in uncertainty or in further yearning. Trying too hard can be a cause and sign of resentment. As demonstrated by Mai, an honor student in “Emancipation,” another story in Aimee Phan’s book, “good” refugees are also within the scope of resentment. The criminal and the honor student may occupy disparate social positions, but resentment tells us how they are both subjected, to different degrees, to the same disciplinary forces “under the thumb” of freedom.

Resentment blurs the line between the binary figures of Asian America, the good and bad, the model and failure. In a radical reversal—a clear indication of resentment—the gangster Vinh in Phan’s “Visitors” claims that the unwanted or rejected like himself are “better off” in comparison to model minorities because there is no ambiguity as to their relationship with the nation-state. He is convinced that “selling out to the Americans wasn’t worth it”: “Look what happened to those who did. The orphans adopted by American families didn’t even think they were Vietnamese anymore. And those who were left behind, unwanted, forgotten, had to suffer in foster homes. For a long time Vinh was angry about it, but now he realized they were better off. They knew where they stood with the Americans. The golden children didn’t.”⁴⁵ Being “better off” is being “free” of American patronage, and free of the privileges and successes that such patronage supposedly makes available. With outright rejection comes a kind of clarity that is missing for those “golden children” who continue to pay the price, selling out for the prospect of admission.

Mai, Vinh’s counterpart in the story collection, is one of the golden children who covet national belonging, who diligently work for upward mobility and social inclusion. While she is also an adoptee, one of those children evacuated from Vietnam during Operation Babylift, unlike Vinh, she grew up comfortably in a traditional foster family unit, and ardently pursues a better life through the path of higher education. Mai invests in the American Dream’s attainability and exemplifies what Emily Cheng calls a “model orphan,” a figure of assimilation and reconciliation.⁴⁶ In “Emancipation,” the narrative tension hangs on an admissions decision Mai is anxiously awaiting from her top-choice school, Wellesley College. Even though she perfectly fits the Ivy League profile, she is placed on the wait list, which aptly symbolizes her semi-secure but also precarious positioning with(in) the U.S. nation-state.

In her college admissions essay, Mai strategically engages in “refugee performativity, or ‘playing’ the refugee by ‘playing it up.’”⁴⁷ That is, she embellishes her story and exaggerates her emotions to elicit sympathies from decision makers. Despite playing the part by offering a narrative of grief, struggle, and triumph that makes for a compelling personal statement, and despite having “worked to ensure a future other children already inherited,” Mai is not guaranteed a spot at the prestigious college.⁴⁸ Condensed in this central conflict is the perpetual uncertainty that Vinh identifies as characterizing the “good” refugees who desire assimilation.

The events of the narrative unfold on Mai’s eighteenth birthday, the day she becomes an adult in the eyes of the state and is thus “emancipated” from its legal guardianship. The term *emancipation* is weighted in U.S. history, evoking abolition, the women’s rights movements, and moments of legal freedom that open up to long social struggles. The refugee subject’s legal freedom is ironically her entry into a lack of protection, to be thrown onto a neoliberal stage where she must fend for herself, relying on her own wits and abilities. There is no guarantee of success, and refuge must be found once again. It is on this day of major transition, when Mai is pushed to contemplate her future, that the contingencies of her situation become most pronounced. As she is released from the custody of one social institution, that of the nuclear family, she has yet to gain entrance into another, that of the academy.

The trope of the *wait list*, of being made to wait, evokes institutional power’s capacity to decide on the fates of individuals, to keep them suspended in limbo, within and simultaneously without. To “make wait” is a technology of power that selects and manages bodies, deferring their becoming, sometimes indefinitely, holding them between recognition and disposability. This is precisely the trade-off for “selling out” to the United States that Vinh pinpoints and critiques—to be locked into desire and then ambivalence. Resentment arises not only from a direct attack or injury, but also from disciplinary measures like wait-listing and bureaucratic processing.

The experience of waiting deeply marks the refugee, who is often understood as existing in a time-space of “in-between.” In Mai’s predicament, we can perceive the overlap between the refugee waiting for citizenship, the orphan waiting for adoption, and the model minority waiting for college admission. This condition of being held at the will of the nation-state imposes itself on categories that seem wholly incommensurate. The ostensibly “successful” immigrant is thus not so far removed from the pitiful refugee, because both are pegged to the determinations and caprice of American authority.

The drama of uncertain waiting is also compellingly played out in Mai’s domestic life. While the Reynoldses, a white American couple, gave her a safe home, Mai was never formally adopted as part of the family. She was “allowed a childhood, unlike her former foster brothers and sisters,” but never became a permanent family member:⁴⁹ “There were times she thought she could change their minds. She did

everything to demonstrate she'd make a nice daughter. She listened to them, never disobeyed house rules, and always respected curfew. The Reynoldses talked about how proud they were of Mai, what a fine person she was. That was where their admiration ended. They had so many years to make her a legitimate part of their family, but the possibility was never even discussed."⁵⁰ Again, Mai performs the role of the "good" refugee—here a dutiful daughter—but to no avail, as permanent integration into the family structure remains an impossibility. Mai's predicament proves Vinh's thesis regarding the golden children—that they do not know where they stand with the Americans, strung along in a game of desire, tantalization, and pursuit. While Mai dismisses Vinh as a "nobody," she does not realize that the two of them tragically occupy similar positions, that they are two sides of the same coin. In an antagonistic encounter between the two, Vinh tells her, "You may be smart, little girl. But don't think you're any better. Today, you've been released into the world, just like the rest of us."⁵¹ Mai's "emancipation" ends the state's responsibility toward her, and "freedom" means that the "good" refugee now has to fend for herself without the aid of the state, much like the unwanted orphans.

Vinh's blunt aggression fractures the fiction of Mai's refugee performance and the belief that such acting will result in permission, validation, and acceptance. He forces her to confront the failure of her efforts: "Don't you ever wonder why those hippies never adopted you? Why no one ever wanted to have you?"⁵² According to Vinh, Mai got her "American dream family" by selling out her former foster brother and sister, by maneuvering, or "playing it up," so that *she* was the one who was saved, the one who got placed in a good home, rather than Vinh or Kim.⁵³ Yet, as he makes brutally clear, in the end she never received what she desired, rendering the performance ultimately ineffectual, and the betrayal pointless. Referring to the sexual abuse that Kim experienced throughout her stays in foster homes, abuse that Kim often protected Mai from, Vinh queries, "Do you think it's fair what happened to Kim and never to you?"⁵⁴ He points out that she was not simply lucky or special, but that her good fortune was gained at the expense of others.

"Emancipation" demonstrates that the pursuit of the American Dream itself can become a source of resentment, especially when the pursuit is, from the beginning, coded with restrictions and limitations for the aspiring subject—or, worse yet, rigged for failure. At the story's end, when Mai arrives home visibly upset after the aforementioned devastating encounter with Vinh, she gets into a quarrel with her foster father. Seemingly about her late return, but actually about Mai's resentment at his lack of commitment to her as a "real" daughter, the fight takes a treacherous turn when he tries to help her up from her slumped position on the ground. As he goes to lift her, Mai screams at him: "Don't touch me! Don't you ever touch me like that."⁵⁵

At the moment when she is able to express her anger at the Reynoldses, and her frustration with the entire social system, Mai also voices the sexual trauma that her close friend and older foster sister Kim has endured. This dramatic

“taking on” or internalization of Kim’s injuries could be read as a result of Mai’s guilty conscience or as, once again, her playing it up for gain. It could also be interpreted as an incredible display of resentment, in which the model minority collapses into the bad subject, exposing how the discourse of American freedom—and the Dream—grinds all its subjects, good and bad, down.

In the story, failure to be a part of the loving nuclear family, the prestigious university, and the prosperous nation-state is intensified by the effort invested in its cause. Mai is resentful, frustrated, and hurt precisely because she tried in the first place, because she has worked so hard in a bid to earn her place. The climactic emotional outburst that concludes Phan’s story dramatizes the often invisible denials and slights that fasten the model minority into her place, aspiring for the always yet-to-come, the prize hung out for immigrants and refugees to covet. When Mai finally notices the large envelope from Wellesley on the kitchen counter, containing her acceptance letter, it has already become tragically clear that the enterprise is insurmountably stacked against her, and that admission does not, indeed cannot, guarantee refuge.

DEARLY DEPORTED

Yet admission—to be allowed (back) in—remains a coveted goal for many refugees, especially deportees, who have had refuge taken away from them. It is not only compliant, upstanding subjects like Mai, but also criminalized deportees who seek admission to, and inclusion in, the body politic. One of the “solutions” the state has adopted in response to the “problem” of Southeast Asian refugee criminality is detention and deportation. This practice, which physically expels from the nation the human remainders of American violence overseas, is perhaps the ultimate disavowal of war and its legacies. The forced return of subjects who have journeyed to America as war refugees is an example of what Peter Nyers calls a *deportspora*.⁵⁶ In such a formation, refuge is revoked and an “abject” class of stateless individuals, shuttled from one place to another, marks a global biopolitical process of migration management, drawing and redrawing the lines of citizenship and social life, reminding us of the tenuousness of political protection and the continuous and circuitous trajectory of the asylum seeker.⁵⁷

Deportation finds rationalization through *criminalization*, which is the ideological extension of crime. Indeed, many Southeast Asian American deportees are deported for minor misdemeanors like shoplifting, public urination, or bouncing a check, and have often already served prison terms for their behavior. The additional punishment of deportation is a “double jeopardy” that designates these refugee subjects as criminal and foreign—“criminal aliens”—ineligible and underserving of citizenship. Thy Phu calls this the United States’ “inhospitable politics of repatriation,” wherein criminalization functions to remove the claims for refuge, and the refugee subject not only loses the rights of citizenship, but also,

retroactively, the right to seek the rights of citizenship.⁵⁸ Criminalization effectively erases any compassion, sympathy, or pity that might have bolstered the refugee's attainment of refuge. This rendering of deportees as ineligible for rights, or what A. Naomi Paik calls the production of "rightlessness," occasions a resentful relation into being.⁵⁹

But for deportees seeking reentry into the nation, resentment often manifests in supplications and desires for reconciliation. Mai's act of waiting demonstrates that not all relations of resentment are resistant or adversarial—such relations may also exist as prolonged coexistence or intimacy with the arbiter, the wrongdoer, the state. While her outburst of hurt at the end of the narrative may be interpreted as anger, expressions of resentment can precipitate as resignation, hope, desire, or reconciliation. This is the expressive diversity of an affect that is often simply conflated with anger and easily dismissed. Resentment is sometimes most potent in articulations of love and friendship. Because it is marked by a repression, Scheler writes that resentment "bursts across the threshold of consciousness whenever the repressive forces happen to relax their vigilance," betraying "itself through a smile, a seemingly meaningless gesture, or a passing remark, in the midst of friendship and sympathy."⁶⁰ We might thus find resentment in a refugee's "benign" or "positive" feelings—for example, in the desire for inclusion and protection or in love for the nation.

In 2011, a group of deportees in Cambodia collaborated with Studio Revolt, an independent, artist-run media lab helmed by Anida Yoeu Ali and Masahiro Sugano, to produce a public service announcement, "My Asian Americana," which was submitted to the "What's Your Story?" Video Challenge sponsored by the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (IAAPI).⁶¹ When the video won the challenge by popular vote but its creators did not receive an invitation to the White House, Studio Revolt made another video, "Return to Sender" (2012), as an appeal. Both videos feature exiled Khmer Americans exerting their essential "Americanness"—their ties to family, immersion in American culture, and allegiance to the United States—and imploring the nation-state to reconcile with them by rescinding extradition orders and allowing them to return. The video makers utilize the confessional form and appeal to human experience to construct a public "speaking voice," targeted at lawmakers and the general population. It is not an angry voice, and the videos do not directly criticize the United States. Indeed, the affective *tone* of the videos is loving and beseeching—pleading for mercy, pledging allegiance to the nation-state, and claiming a belonging to the American way of life. For the deported "speakers," American citizenship is a coveted political benefit that they earnestly desire to regain.

The deportee's display of patriotism, however, also seethes with resentment. It is precisely through expressions of love and desire that the contradictions and failures of American freedom are brought to the fore. Coming from the mouths of deported subjects, already marked for total exclusion from the nation-state,

professions of national allegiance underscore the injustice that the state has enacted on individuals to whom it had previously promised refuge. As they convey love for the United States, the speakers in the videos also lay bare the conditions of injustice that prompted the display of desire and devotion. This subtle incongruence between speaking subject and articulated feeling—a wronged subject who feels love for the wrongdoer—creates an affective dislodgement that allows resentment to seep through. To return injury with expressions of love may be one of the most damning indictments—the most vitriolic expression of resentment. In Studio Revolt’s activist videos, love is not a ruse for the articulation of resentment, nor is resentment somehow disguised as love in order to be heard or felt. Rather, the messiness of affective experience tells us that love and resentment can coexist or overlap, where the expression of love is simultaneously the utterance of resentment.

“My Asian Americana” begins with a medium-shot sequence of individual speakers, flanked by the star-spangled banner, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Then each speaker describes their own version of “Asian Americana,” emphasizing their claim to belonging. What follows is a litany of popular culture references, American holidays, and personal memories. Two-thirds of the way through, they all converge on white steps, to stand, once again, with hands over their hearts under a single fluttering American flag. In the next series of shots, each speaker reveals their citizenship status, which determines their ability to go “home.” Finally, the screen fades to black and the following text appears: “Featured Khmer Exiled Americans (KEAs) served their time for mistakes they made in their youth. Upon release, they were additionally detained by U.S. Immigration then deported to Cambodia, a country they had never seen.”

The video petitions the administration to overturn extradition orders and admit deportees back into the fold of American society, because the United States is the only “home” they have ever known. The reappearance of exiled refugee subjects knocking at America’s front gates, seeking refuge once more, proves not only the continual need and want of American intervention, past and present, but also the value of the nation-state’s political protection. Yet, in re-seeking refuge, the deportees evidence how an injustice has put them in this situation, forcing them to find it again. Thus, when Anida Yoeu Ali emphasizes the words *justice for all* in the video by drawing out the syllables, the fact that justice has been denied to the very people who appear on screen renders the Pledge of Allegiance rhetorically hollow. Sentiments of loyalty and love flowing from the mouths of those who have been excised from the supposedly “indivisible nation” point out a failure to fulfill the ideals enshrined in the pledge. The image of the United States as torchbearer of freedom and land of opportunity falls short precisely at the moment when deportees avow love that comes from political grievance.

The irony that arises between deported body and patriotic speech underscores the deep injury of exile, where “virtually no relief from deportation is available from an immigration judge. . . . Issues of rehabilitation, remorse, family support, and employment opportunities are irrelevant.”⁶² The mercilessness of deporting refugee subjects betrays the seeming generosity of harboring them from the horrors of war and genocide just a few decades earlier. The worthy recipient of refuge quickly becomes the abject criminal who must be expelled from the body politic. A subtext of historical violence and suffering emerges to implicate the United States as an agent of displacement, not just during “foreign” wars in Southeast Asia but also in American “refuge.” This strategic invocation of the Pledge of Allegiance by deportees, then, both reinscribes American exceptionalism and exposes its fault lines.

The deported refugee’s continued loyalty in spite of the nation-state’s failed hospitality, moreover, shifts the quality of generosity away from the nation-state’s exclusive proprietorship. Embodying the capacity to give love (and to forgive), especially when the state commits a wrong against them by rescinding an offer of asylum, the deportees here occupy the role of benefactor, returning injury with undeserved devotion. In “Return to Sender,” Kosal Khiev, a deportee and spoken-word artist, defiantly declares: “No matter what decision you [the state] make, I still love you.” Unconditional patriotic love establishes those who have been rendered obsolete as feeling subjects and social agents that the nation-state cannot easily renounce. Here, the abject castoff refuses separation, lingering in stubborn attachment to the nation-state.

The speakers’ self-generated label “Khmer Exiled *Americans*” leaves open the possibility of return by retaining the specter of U.S. citizenship. In exile, deportees are still locked in a form of association with the nation-state, even if that state wants nothing to do with them. Each speaker in the video wears a black t-shirt on which is printed the Seal of the President of the United States encircled by the phrase “The United States of Exiled America.” While the stars and stripes of the flag appear in virtually every frame, visually reiterating the spoken contents of the pledge, the t-shirts cue an alternate “nation,” an abject shadow of the tolerant, inclusive America. This appropriation of the symbol of state power to illustrate how it has literally created another exiled “nation,” undeniably a part of, but involuntarily separated from, the motherland, calls into question policies designed to control migrant populations that are “the consequence of its decades-old imperial ambitions.”⁶³

While subversive, these expressions of loyalty-resentment also re-center the U.S. state as the site of politics, by aspiring to national belonging and trusting in its authority to confer social and political rights. Yet if we were to understand deportation, as Cathy Schlund-Vials does, through “a transnational set of amnesiac politics” that implicates American culpability in war and genocide, then beseeching the U.S. state to provide refuge (again) is a call for accountability, to demand what

is owed.⁶⁴ Y-Dang Troeung argues that such expressions are counterforces that reveal the “iterations of war—the historical repetition or continuity of state violence.”⁶⁵ Troeung further argues that “deportation represents another temporality of transition marked by traumatic upheaval, family separation, homesickness, and economic precarity in which Cambodian Americans have had to negotiate complex strategies of survival.”⁶⁶ The debilitation of this system manifests in what she calls “refugee aphasia”—the difficulty of speaking and imagining, in the case of Cambodian American deportees, a futurity outside of the circuits of U.S. carceral capitalism. As testimonials—a form common to refugee narratives, whether in the processing center, the adjudication board, or the media—the videos, and their deported speakers, evince a past of American violence that has created this current moment of deportation.

Studio Revolt’s video submission to the IAAPI “What’s Your Story” Video Challenge and subsequent epistolary piece addressing the state are examples of “abject cosmopolitanism,” whereby deportees return to demand, first and foremost, political speech, to “interrupt the dominant political (speaking) order not just to be heard, but to be recognised as a speaking being as such.”⁶⁷ This unwelcomed “participation” pushes at the limits of the political itself, asking anew who can and cannot speak, who is and is not a political subject. The pageantry of the White House’s IAAPI contest to showcase “good” model minority voices—of honorable community leaders and respected organizations—was disrupted, even if momentarily, by deportees insisting to be heard, testing whether “we” can “accept that our community includes an ‘unwanted’ group of forgotten voices.”⁶⁸

To seek participation in a state-sponsored project is not simply capitulating to a politics of belonging and inclusion. Rather, for the outlaw to refuse to be refuse(d) is to call into question the terms of the game, or the very premise of belonging and inclusion. The fact that the state must continue to censor and reject—which are, of course, still forms of engagement—those whom they have already made “bare,” those to whom they have renounced all responsibility, means that its monopoly on the political is not uncontested, that regardless of the outcome, agency is not its exclusive property. Here the state experiences a political haunting—the deported subjects cannot be completely shaken off or silenced.

Understanding the videos as acts of citizenship, as articulations of politics that attempt to change political processes, clarifies the contradictory coexistence of both patriotism and resentment in them. The case of Cambodian returnees shows that to claim citizenship is to make visible injustice and injury, and to express resentment is to hold the nation to a higher standard of accountability. The telling absence of an invitation to the White House and the lack of recognition in the face of success indicate not just a silencing, as the videos’ producers have pointed out, but effectively an outlawing—a placement outside the law, protection, and consideration. The lack of response from the IAAPI organizers is a refusal to register, not the outward love and longing for America

that deportees describe in the videos, but the deep resentment that oozes as they recount their exiled existences. While dismissed by those in power, these voices and their resentful registers continue to linger at the threshold of nationality and political recognizability.

EXPERIENCING WOUNDS

The decades-long U.S. program to criminalize and deport Southeast Asian refugees is incontrovertible proof that the receipt of refuge is never final. If refuge is something to be found, then it can certainly be lost or taken away. Since the mid-1990s, when the passing of a trio of immigration acts created the legal infrastructure for the detention and removal of “criminal aliens,” at least sixteen thousand Southeast Asians from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have received final orders of deportation.⁶⁹ Many of these individuals were born in refugee camps and came to the United States as young children. Their removal to a “home” country they have never known is but one punishment in a much longer timeline of injury. Recent anti-deportation activism has made sure that this injurious past—of war and political turmoil, of refuge seeking and difficult resettlements—is foregrounded in campaigns for clemency and policy reversals.⁷⁰

Deportee claims to political protection are thus primarily founded on individual and historical injuries. This politics of injury, as Wendy Brown has reminded us, is a politics of resentment. Brown has, moreover, warned us of the dangers in staking politicized identity on “wounded attachments,” whereby injury becomes an identity and that identity becomes an “impulse to inscribe in the law and other political registers its historical and present pain rather than conjure an imagined future of power to make itself.”⁷¹ That is, identity politics’ protest against exclusion via *ressentiment* is an investment “in its own subjection,” which “reinstalls” liberalism’s structures of governmentality.⁷² A politics premised on injurious identities seeks recognition and rights in ways that reinscribe and leave intact the (neo) liberal state and its “humanist ideal” of “inclusive/universalist community.”⁷³ In its drive for recognition, resentment re-entrenches the capitalist and disciplinary terms of liberalism.

While pain and injury, through the mechanism of *ressentiment*, may become an identity (an “I am” as Brown would say) and a way of enacting politics, they are also experiences that are currently being lived, that are not yet incorporated because they are in the process of being negotiated. Resentment, as my close readings indicate, is injury experienced in a drawn-out and unconcluded duration, and to understand such experiences as an “identity,” as “politics,” or as “identity politics” may be premature. Brown contends, building on Nietzsche, that politicized identity is attached to its own exclusion or subjection, implicitly relying on a melancholic orientation to past injury. For identity politics to “enunciate itself,” it must be unwilling or unable let go of an injury, to be stuck in the wound.

My exploration of refugee resentment as relations of outlawing, repressions, and denials reveals how resentment is not just an attachment to past injuries, but is more crucially a continuous living of old and new ones in the present. In this way, it does not necessarily facilitate a foregone identity or politics but demonstrates the difficulty of receiving or acquiring the desired kinds of recognition or protection (as rights and status) from the state; if it makes any claim, resentment indicts refuge, a cherished and vaunted political “good.”

Glenn Coulthard’s discussion of a “righteous” Indigenous resentment, which is a recuperation of resentment for politicized identity, is an illuminating argument about the ongoingness of injury. Because the politics of recognition has not led to any form of meaningful reconciliation, Indigenous resentment is “entirely appropriate.”⁷⁴ Coulthard writes that resentment is “a politicized expression of Indigenous anger and outrage directed at a structural and symbolic violence that still structures our lives, our relations with others, and our relationships with land.”⁷⁵ For him, Indigenous resentment is legitimate because the injury is still occurring, and forms of settler-state recognition have not been able to register this experience. Following Frantz Fanon, Coulthard understands resentment as making possible the kinds of Indigenous subjectivities and “decolonial forms of life” that recognition and reconciliation have not been able to produce. Resentment, or an attachment to injury, insists that the state has not done and cannot do the work of repairing colonial relationships.

Coulthard’s account is useful for us in thinking about refugee resentment as experiences of ongoing injury—as racialization, criminalization, suspension, or deportation. Although it might appear that refuge is a repair for refugees, resentment exposes how enfoldment into rights and legal protection does not resolve relations of pain and injury, past and present, but further extends them. Similar to, but obviously not commensurate with, Indigenous resentment, refugee resentment is a continuing relationship of wounding with the nation-state—it is injury being lived in the here and now.

Yet, unlike Indigenous resentment, refugee resentment is rendered illegitimate. Because refuge is considered a benefit that is understood as repairing or healing over injury, resentment cannot be viewed as an appropriate response. Refugee subjects are not supposed to feel resentful because there is seemingly no injury—or, if there were injuries in the past, they have already been redressed by present refuge. And so resentment’s expression is stunted and deflected. It must find different ways to enunciate itself in love, desire, and violence. The ontological lacuna between “refuge” and “resentment” gives rise to a blocked articulation as well as a “bad” subjectivity that refugee subjects must traverse as they seek ways to exist in the duration of refuge.

For the nation-state, resentment makes refugees “bad,” evidencing their failure to receive or capitalize on the benefit of refuge. This failure is located in the bodies and psyches of refugee subjects who become criminals, gangsters, hostage takers,

or unsuccessful supplicants. As this chapter has endeavored to describe, however, the refugee's resentment is a relation that provides insight into the shortcomings of juridical-political refuge. It gives a view of how its protection is limited or contingent. Resentment is what arises when history is an open wound, when the present is still experiencing its pain, when refugee subjects are made to seek again and again the protection of refuge. Refugee resentment is to live historical injury in the present and to have expressions of such injuries blocked or prohibited by the logic of refuge as cherished social benefit. The refugee's resentment, then, is not (only or yet) the basis for political claims, but more a pointing to the ongoing relationships of seeking the "protection" that refuge promises.