

Conclusion

Refugeetude: When Does a Refugee Stop Being a Refugee?

I wasn't rich in America. I was a coolie just like anybody 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 the 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 wondered where I would be anchored.¹

—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 post-refugee life in this way illuminates for us the structural workings of refuge 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 “refugee,” but her existence within a capitalist wage labor system—which 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, with deliverance into freedom always just ahead on the horizon.²

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, the protagonists of 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.

By way of concluding this book, I extend its insights on refuge to a consideration of refugee subjectivity and the possibilities of relational politics. While my analyses of gratitude, resentment, and resilience have been concerned primarily with describing the experiential structure of refuge, they have also been about refugee subjects and their multiple ways of being, of feeling and acting, thinking and inventing. In this conclusion, I more explicitly, and with the same theoretical impulse, reflect on the question of subjectivity—how its politicized and relational forms come into being, and what they might look like or make possible.

What emerges from experiences of refuge? If, as the book’s central argument claims, refuge has a long duration and does not end, then refugee subjectivity is similarly not fixed in position or time, but endures and transforms as ongoing consciousness and relationality. *Lived Refuge* began with a simple question about how refuge is experienced and then proceeded to describe its long and unfinished duration. In showing that refuge might productively be conceptualized through lived experiences, which are experiments in meaning making—to live, be, and relate—I offer an alternative framing to the dominant juridical-political definition. Continuing this exploration, I “end” with a cognate question about time and experience: When does a refugee stop being a refugee?

I take Nhan T. Le’s narrative as a point of departure to address and engage a host of larger concerns surrounding refugee temporality and subjectivity. Exemplified in Le’s narrative is a continued state of being and a mode of relationality that I call *refugeetude*. Broadly, the term 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 experiences of refuge(e), as well as attempts to redefine and live those experiences differently from what the legal framework allows for.³

My conceptualization builds upon Khatharya Um’s foundational term *refugitude*, which provides a rubric for framing refugee agential presence through memory, cultural, and activist work. In the aftermath of revolutionary violence, or more specifically genocide, the often difficult and contradictory process of recounting can enable “every refugee” to “participate in the shaping and memorializing of a collective history, and in so doing find comfort in the assurance of a shared identity.”⁴ While memory reveals the “psychic flux” of refugee-survivors, it also provides a path toward recovering humanity, subjective coherence, and the possibility of justice.⁵ As counter-memories and counter-narratives to the state’s enactment of biopolitics—the practices and discourses of violence that fracture the individual and the social—refugitude underscores the richness and “heroism” of the refugee’s historical, social, and political life.⁶

My discussion of refugeetude takes a cue from and develops Um’s concern with refugee consciousness and agency, and then extends that subjective ontology toward the possibility of relationality and relational politics. While refugitude is a recovery of refugee subjectivity, one that does not follow state definitions and timelines, refugeetude furthers this formation of subjective consciousness to explore the possibilities of affective connections with marginalized others. Although both refugitude and refugeetude zero in on questions of subjectivity, consciousness, and temporality, they do so through different methods and have different aims. That is, refugitude primarily frames the refugee-survivor’s fortitude, the “ability to retain one’s dignity and humanity in the moral abyss” and the capacity for hope via cultural and political enactments, while refugeetude seeks to expand the category “refugee” into a wider social body and a political orientation that might open up participation in the ongoing goal of relational decolonization.⁷ Refugeetude does this through its elaboration of the notions of refugee memory and politics that refugitude makes possible. That is, refugeetude is a relational term firmly situated in the political, one that allows us to contemplate the possibilities of refugeeness as a living and being with others.

By affixing the suffix *-tude* to the word *refugee*, I invoke past projects of political recuperation—namely *Négritude*, *coolitude*, and *migritude*—that take social experiences of marginalization and oppression and recast them as states of being or agency.⁸ Refugeetude marks a critical reorientation, an epistemological shift, in how we think about and understand the category “refugee.” Redirecting dominant perception of this category away from a temporary legal designation and a condition of social abjection and toward an enduring creative force, refugeetude opens up new ways of conceptualizing refugee subjects and the relationalities that extend beyond the parameters of refugeeness, generating connections to past, present, and future forms of displacement.

In this way, *refugeetude* takes up *refugitude's* focus on expanding the time and space of *refugeeness*. Um, via the Critical Refugee Studies Collective website, writes that the “conditions and consciousness of being a refugee . . . often outlast the expiration of the politico-legal status; that very expiration itself is a denial of the persisting challenges facing the refugee individual, families, and communities. Whereas the term ‘refugee’ has been made synonymous with needs, *refugitude* rescues it from reductionist pejorative connotations with equal attention to hope and futurity.”⁹ A rethinking of the refugee category challenges conventional understandings that confine *refugee* to a legal definition, a short time frame, and a pitiful existence.

Such explorations of consciousness point to how *refugee* might signify differently for the contemporary moment, one that has thus far failed to seriously engage refugees as more than a “problem.” Following Um, *refugeetude* 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. We can thus comprehend *refugeetude* 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 Nhan T. 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 anchored primarily in the historical context of the global wars in Southeast Asia, it seeks to engage with issues that are immediate and urgent to contemporary politics. 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 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. This is where *refugeetude* expands on Um’s concept of *refugitude*. In addition to framing the possibility of refugee presence or survival, *refugeetude* explores the connections and actions that constellate refugees in a wider social and political existence. The concept is thus not simply a new name for an old condition or a humanist move to redeem an abject position. *Refugeetude*, as shown below, begins with but significantly moves beyond *refugee*. It is to look at *refugeeness* anew and ask how it can give rise to being and politics.

Le's story is a spark for my thinking, and I employ its details as apertures through which to 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 refugeeness 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 shaped by the processes of violent displacement and border control—come to understand, articulate, and resist their conditions. As such, and most importantly, refugeetude is a politics, a kind of anti-assimilationist 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—in order to 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.¹⁰ The coming into consciousness that refugeetude pinpoints 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 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 the refugee is conventionally short and finite, 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.¹¹ In this framework, the refugee is not a viable political subject. “Unable” or “unwilling,” due to fear of persecution, to “avail himself of protection” by 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.”¹² This ontological precarity explains why refugees continue to be persistently represented and

understood as figures of lack—homeless specters, abject outsiders, identity-less 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 refugeeness 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 United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the International Refugee Organization, which culminated in the United Nations 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 the refugee category was codified in international law. This should mark for us that the UN model, with its legal implications, is not the only framework for understanding the experience of people seeking refuge; historically, it is relatively nascent.¹³

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, the condition of 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.”¹⁴ 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.

The majority of refugees in the world experience their condition as refugees indefinitely, sometimes for an entire lifetime. There is thus nothing temporary or short about either the legal designation or the subjective experience of the 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.”¹⁵ This recognition that refugeeness 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 juridical-political definition 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 epistemological gap between a legal definition and how it is experienced. Le's repeated attempts to escape Vietnam—to become a refugee—and her continued search for settlement in the United States demonstrate how the category of refugee is an immediate shaping force for subjects living within its capacious reach.

Working with and expanding on the ground that Um's discussion of refugitude opens up, the concept of refugeitude allows us to see that refugeeness is 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.¹⁶ This quality of refugeeness is not temporally constrained to singular events such as displacement, asylum seeking, and resettlement; is not spatially tied to specific locations like the boat, the border, or the camp; and is not bound to the letter of the law. Instead, it is psychic and affective, 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 will flare up (as a flash in a moment of danger, to return to Walter Benjamin's metaphor), how and when it will declare its presence, cannot be known in advance.¹⁷

REFUGEE SUBJECTS

Le was a “refugee” before she arrived at a camp, before the UN interviewed her, before the United States granted her entry—or rather she *experienced* refugeeness well before any form of institutional or legal processing. A motivating factor for Le's refuge seeking was her immersion in a postwar social field in which friends and family were becoming refugees every day, as a result of the untenability of life at home. She existed in a world where daily reality forced one to contemplate finding refuge, to “look for a way out.”¹⁸ Political repression, economic insecurity, and social instability drove many to seek asylum elsewhere. 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 that resembled military barracks, where they were indoctrinated in communist ideologies, made to confess their “crimes,” and forced to work. Le would not see her husband again for two years, and one of her relatives would die in

the camp. Chased by the police while at sea on another escape attempt, Le had to hide, disguise herself, and move stealthily to evade capture, effectively becoming a fugitive—a figure that shares a long historical and ontological genealogy with the refugee.¹⁹

Ironically, persecution arising from a failed quest for refuge 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 was a refugee before she became a legal refugee, and she remains, as she tells us, a refugee after gaining legal asylum. The porous temporality of Le's experience shows how difficult it is to determine when refugeeness begins and when it ends. It is perhaps useful to consider the "before" and "after" of legal status as inextricably part of our conceptualization of the refugee, and to expand the experiential purview of refugeeness.

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 problematic, I muse here on the meanings of *refugee* that are possible but as yet unacceptable, even unthinkable, within the existing juridical-political framework, and, by extension, on the dominant social and cultural understandings. The idea of refugee subjects is a new one, something not yet here, and it is difficult to concretize, but it may yet surface at a future point in time. As I see it, refugee subjects 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. The institutionalized term and legal category *refugee*, with its emphasis on legally recognized persecution and operating under the rubric of human rights, fails to name the diversity of the 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 that 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 or juridical-political form. 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 making legal refugees less unique or obsolete, this definitional imprecision 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 of refugee allows us to think differently about the temporality of refugee experiences, and about the different subjectivities or psychic states that might fall under or relate to them. While this expansion of *refugee* may not be acceptable to policymakers or immigration boards, tasked with positivistic, juridical determinations, it could aid cultural critics, artists, and activists in comprehending 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 a refugee is or could be. What the UN definition gives us is a very historically specific concept that is rooted in the geopolitics of Europe after the Second World War. Moreover, as scholars have pointed out, the definition’s narrow conception, and its fractioning into labels such as *asylum seeker*, *bogus refugees*, and *illegal migrant*, functions to contain migration from the Global South and to advance the interests of Western hegemonic states.²⁰ It is also 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.

Refugee subjects allows for a discussion of refugees that is not circumscribed by legal status; what we know of as *refugees* 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 refugeeeness through immersion in a social field, through stories, memories, and exchange.²¹ 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 refugeeness.²² 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 the self.

To be clear, in claiming that a kind of refugeeness sticks 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. Nor is refugeeness an essence or quality intrinsic to refugee subjects. Rather, I suggest that refugeeness is a substantial experience that can be the basis for the formation and development of subjectivity, or “a certain affective attitude towards the world.”²³ 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, the category of refugee has not yet gained such status. 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.”²⁴ 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 quality of deep interiority that is a 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 REFUGEEETUDE

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 in order 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.”²⁵ 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. Thus, it is not simply 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, political, 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 refugee subjects participate in hunger strikes and practice “self-mutilation”—the stitching together of lips, eyes, and ears—in order to make state violence visible and protest inhumane detention and deportation policies.²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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.²⁸ It is visualized in a hip-hop music video in which refugees move freely, unobstructed by walls, fences, and borders.²⁹ 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* here, in addition to a more sustained analysis of how it manifests for Nhan T. Le, in order to capture the wide-ranging breadth of *refugeetude*, and the various forms that a coming into consciousness may take.

Khatharya Um’s work is again instructive here. She notes that discourses of trauma elide how refugee-survivors “have lived with, transmitted, and even transformed their history of victimization into that of resilience and fortitude.”³⁰ As such, “the different and multiple registers of agency that refugees and refugee communities exhibit, including their political and philanthropic lives, are unnoted.”³¹ This explains why examinations of agency, via *refugitude*, are socially and politically crucial. However, 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 (as well as others’) coming into being.

For Le, *refugeetude* takes shape most strikingly in an anticapitalist critique of American society.³² 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, but more importantly 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 attain opportunity, equity, or justice in the United States.

Describing her first few years in the states, Le says, “This period was the most unproductive, and I changed jobs more than in my whole life in Vietnam.”³³ Arriving in the late 1980s, she entered 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.”³⁴ Such clarity about how capitalism functions is also precise understanding of how refuge creates the situation in which the refugee must struggle and compete in order 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.”³⁵ 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.”³⁶

Importantly, Le invokes the word *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.³⁷ The word refers to a specific form of migrant laborer—namely Chinese and Indian—during the expansion of colonialism and capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and coolies are often understood as lowly workers who were “cast adrift from place, skill and purpose.”³⁸ 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,” coolies were also perceived as threats and targeted for exclusion.³⁹

While Le is obviously not a coolie, her invocation of this classed and racialized figure from the past yokes together the categories of coolie and refugee in the present, connecting similar but incommensurate experiences of marginalization brought about by difficult migrations. Such connections 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 Vietnamese refugee who is a human remainder of neo-imperialist wars that the United States waged in Southeast Asia during the second half of the twentieth century shares a common trajectory, an experience of forced movement and economic exploitation, with workers in 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.”⁴⁰ It is the counterpart to what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls the “refugee condition,” a “discursive, medico-judicial disposition” of “arrested affect or potentiality.”⁴¹ Such a condition names the pathological incapacity and anachronistic temporality of refugees, marking their need for rehabilitation and biopolitical governmentality. If *refugeeness* 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. 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 Hannah 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 amid the resurgence of fascism and nationalist populism—as cruelly optimistic.⁴² 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 to lose a sense of self.⁴³ 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.”⁴⁴ For Arendt, the work of shedding history and identity—here refugeeness and Jewishness—in order 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 contemporary practices of denaturalization and deportation make clear.

This leads Arendt to make her often-quoted claim that “those few refugees who insist upon telling the truth, even to the point of ‘indecent,’ 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.”⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ The “keeping of identity” she refers to is not so much 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.⁴⁷

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 that "my heart was lost. My heart was not the only thing that was lost. I also lost myself somewhere between Vietnam and America."⁴⁸ 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, but is somehow still caught in the search for a place to arrive and call home. Recounting the birth of her second child, Le ends her narrative 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?"⁴⁹

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, which still views refugees as undesirable or relegates them to the working poor. Thus, there is little false optimism in Le's story, and 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."⁵⁰ What she gives us instead is "indecent," the hard truths that underlie the humanitarian virtue of refuge—the feeling and material condition of not being at home and 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 with discourses of American rescue and benevolence, liberalism, 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's work, we can say that refugeehood is 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; more often it is surprising, unexpected, and revealing—what Arendt calls "truth." An inappropriateness to or incongruence with an established epistemological and sociopolitical framework, organized around the naturalization of nation-state, border, and displacement, marks refugeehood's "unpopularity." As Arendt remarks, the keeping of refugeehood affords the refugee a more expansive vision of history and politics. Such a vision 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.

This affective “mapping”—tracing the historicity or sociality of seemingly singular refugee experiences—with marginalized others is one of the advantages that Arendt gestures toward.⁵¹ 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.”⁵² Horizontal assimilation stands in contrast to the false optimism of vertical assimilation, in that 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 to coolies of the past and racialized migrants and workers of the present. These relations are not fully formed or figured, but they hold 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, inter-historical relationality is also articulated by another refugee from another, more contemporary, war in which U.S. neo-imperial 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, Fadia Jouny expresses her desire to learn more about the history of First Nations peoples.⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi calls this the “refugee settler condition,” the “vexed positionality of refugee subjects whose citizenship in a settler colonial state is predicated upon the unjust dispossession of an Indigenous population.”⁵⁵ Yet this condition might also be the site of incipient solidarities. Gandhi states, “Articulated together, refugee modalities of statelessness and Indigenous epistemologies . . . can unsettle settler colonial state violence, pointing us toward more pluralized forms of collective belonging.”⁵⁶

Jouny's statement is thus 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.⁵⁷ But for those like Jouny, refuge means reckoning with the fact that political protection and safety in a settler state like Canada is predicated on more than 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 quite disconnected and removed from one's own experience.

The violent histories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, fought over territory, resources, religion, race, and ideology, tell us that the legal protection—and invitation into a life of rights—that juridical-political refuge offers has an insidious underbelly. Like all liberal democratic privileges or "rights" in an interconnected, globalized capitalist system, refuge is scaffolded by layers of violence toward others.⁵⁸ That is, the "house" of refuge is built on the stilts of violence. 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 settler-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 positioned between the settler and the native.⁵⁹ The force of violence that has brought the refugee to Canada could 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."⁶⁰ While this comparison may seem simplistic at first, 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. According to Sunera Thobani, the nation-state requires Indigenous and migrant "others" in order to exalt itself, which should make clear that their fates are inextricably intertwined within settler formations.⁶¹ This triangulation of Indigenous and migrant subjects with white "nationals" is a form of racial management that seeks to separate and

divide their interests, obscuring the most powerful common interest of all—the dismantling of and freedom from the settler-colonial state.

Jouny's statement begs 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 describes as "border imperialism"—the uprooting of people through war, capitalism, and neo-imperialism 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"?⁶² 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?⁶³

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."⁶⁴ Yet they have tended to "set very different, even opposed, political and social objectives."⁶⁵ If, as Audra Simpson argues, Indigenous enactments of sovereignty begin with refusals of settler citizenship and the gifts of the state, then refugees are at the opposite end, coveting the "gift" of political recognition in order to survive.⁶⁶ 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, [and] missing and murdered Indigenous women."⁶⁷ 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 meaningful reconciliation.

Another refugee subject, Ali Abukar, who works for a resettlement organization in Saskatoon, writes that "reconciliation will only work if we acknowledge the truth of the past, build meaningful relationships, and stand with one another against injustices and inequities."⁶⁸ He notes that "being aware of my privileges" as a newcomer to Canada "makes me question the ongoing inequities and injustices perpetrated against our Indigenous sisters and brothers."⁶⁹ Serving new immigrants and refugees, then, means that "bridges" are built between them and

Indigenous communities through engagement and collaboration, so that Canada's colonial history is not covered over as it "welcomes" refugees into its fold.

In the summer of 2018, for example, the Kurdish Initiative for Refugees (KIFR) summer program visited the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation in an effort for not only cultural exchange but education. Nour Ali, founder of KIFR, says, "We lost our land also, so it is very important to know, respect and feel their struggles and what happened with the indigenous people."⁷⁰ Indigenous leaders, too, have reached out and stood in solidarity with refugees. In a 2018 open letter to President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau regarding the "immigrant and refugee children being torn from their families and jailed south of the medicine line," the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs draws a connection between the current situation and their past: "For many of us, this is reminiscent of U.S. and Canadian policies of Indian Residential School and Indian Boarding Schools, where Indigenous children were kidnapped and forcibly separated from their families and communities."⁷¹

The making of these historical linkages—of loss of (home)land, family separation, and incarceration—identifies shared experiential commonalities that might be the basis for future coalitions. While their function and power remain largely discursive and symbolic at present, such work has the potential to plant the seeds for what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls "constellations of co-resistance," which is "working together toward a radical alternative present based on deep reciprocity and the gorgeous generative refusal of colonial recognition."⁷² The kind of decolonial movement building that Simpson imagines has its foundations in allyship, in people and communities on "Turtle Island and beyond that are struggling in their own localities against these same forces, building movements that contain the alternatives."⁷³ Kim TallBear has articulated these alliances as "caretaking relations" that resist the "American Dreaming" of the progressive, extractive, and developmental narratives of settler-colonial states.⁷⁴ Rejecting such dreams of a more inclusive or liberal state requires kin making, or "making people into familiars in order to relate."⁷⁵ Doing so might "inspire change, new ways of organizing and standing together in the face of state violence against both humans and the land."⁷⁶ Refugeetude can be the politics through which refugee subjects participate in these forms of relationalities in the settler state. To "be with" is to be entangled in plurality and coexistence, to hold on to the many tensions that bind refugee and indigeneity in likeness and incommensurability.⁷⁷ 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.

. . .

Like Jouny's recognition of the colonial displacement of Indigenous peoples that makes 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 rights and 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.⁷⁸ Refugeetude, then, manifests as an understanding of how refuge engenders ongoing, complicated entanglements with the state and its mechanism, as opposed to being a final destination or an end to rightlessness; it intertwines safety and violence, hope and limitation, past, present, and future.

But refuge 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) with these other “others,” and the kinds of connections and coalitional politics that are possible. On World Refugee Day 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the worldwide protests in the wake of George Floyd’s brutal murder at the hands of the Minneapolis police, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), a civil rights advocacy organization, used the hashtag #RefugeesForBlackLives as a declaration of commitment and solidarity, acknowledging that “our lives are interconnected.”⁷⁹ In an earlier statement, Quyen Dinh, the executive director of SEARAC, wrote: “As refugees and descendents [*sic*] of refugees, as survivors of war and genocide, our communities also know the devastating impacts of police force. It is incumbent on us as Southeast Asian Americans to show up for the Black community.”⁸⁰ Dinh mobilizes the experiences of being a refugee—of *knowing* the violence that the state enacts—to “show up” or stand with people whose lives are being threatened and assaulted by white supremacy. Such a move represents the beginning of subjective consciousness developing into coalition building—the politics of refugeetude. It shows how the the conventionally abject position of refugee might 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.