BOOK REVIEWS

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South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After.

What does it mean to be “critical” of a prevailing narrative? The Journal of Vietnamese Studies has enabled Vietnamese American scholars to hold critical conversations about refugee studies that seek to examine and dismantle the image of refugees as helpless, traumatized, and grateful to have been rescued from communism. In fact, Yến Lê Espiritu wasted no time in Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugee(es) (University of California Press, 2014) in pointing out that war refugees were actually part of a circuit of US military domination, with the same US planes and officials first bombing the country and destabilizing it, then later removing and resettling displaced peoples within the United States. In his nuanced and well-sourced book, Becoming Refugee American, Phuong Tran Nguyen recognizes, extends, deepens, clarifies, and sometimes corrects this approach, focusing especially on the affective and ideological transformations that have shaped refugee experiences in Southern California’s Little Saigon from 1975 to the present. On the other hand, in South Vietnamese Soldiers, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen neither acknowledges nor refutes any aspect of the ongoing conversations within critical refugee studies, and she says nothing about the massive role of US policy in the installation, backing, and dethroning of key leaders in the Republic of Vietnam. Through oral history
interviews with fifty-four members of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (RVNAF) who found refuge in Australia—including women—she uncritically reinforces the themes of trauma and gratitude. Yet counterpoising the two books is a very worthwhile endeavor that provides the reader a critical, historically well-informed framework within which to consider the heartfelt reflections of South Vietnamese soldiers and the larger diasporic implications of refugee discourse.

Phuong Tran Nguyen is frank and straightforward, using an easily accessible vocabulary and tone. He puts his original scholarly gloss on refugee experiences—putting significant historical events into transnational, national, regional, and local context—often dropping inconvenient truth bombs along the way. For example, “refugee nationalism” (6) is not only a moral identity and a strategy for “working class people with limited English skills” to claim a collective space (14). It is also a “fascist quid pro quo” (14) whereby Vietnamese agree to forget America’s past failures in Vietnam and to ignore current racism or at least feign “indifference to people of color” (14). This author generates ample amounts of sympathy for gut-wrenching expressions of betrayal and grief in poetry and song lyrics without kowtowing to the familiar ideological themes of US democracy and white saviorism in Asia. By showing that the “rise and fall of South Vietnam” was predicated on a patronizing relationship between the CIA and northern-exiles-turned-Saigon-elites, he makes perfectly clear why South Vietnamese felt an “ominous sense of betrayal” (26–32) when the US forces withdrew in 1973.

Little Saigon looks different after reading this book. Once a dilapidated area, the cities of Westminster-Santa Ana-Garden Grove received a make-over as Vietnamese re-energized the local economy and reanimated a familiar story about model minorities bent on perfection. When a 1978 referendum called Proposition 13 passed to limit property taxes, Little Saigon’s business economy filled a gap in revenue and helped to cement a racialized notion of successful refugees. The fact that refugees in Little Saigon sometimes broke the law was submerged by efforts on the part of Little Saigon’s middle-class leaders to create more “responsible” images that catered to American collective guilt and other confused feelings about the past. As the author puts it, “what was the enclave of Little Saigon if not an
homage to nostalgia?” (99). Thus, certain uncomfortable realities have been neglected: people cheating the welfare system to send remittances home; or people purchasing items like small appliances or motorbikes to send to family members in Vietnam so they could sell the items for cash, thus violating the terms of the US trade embargo.

For a brief moment during the 1980s, a militant anticommunist resistance movement raised millions of dollars from within Little Saigon and throughout the Vietnamese diaspora to continue the Vietnam War without the official support of the US government. The movement was often trivialized as a group of wild-eyed zealots, but their efforts to reinstitute war outside legal channels found inspiration in President Ronald Reagan’s so-called low-intensity warfare in El Salvador and throughout Central America. These militants also fomented a reign of fear within their communities, deterring even neutral researchers from probing more deeply; in fact, the author references me as an example of someone who refrained from investigating this topic for fear of my own safety (79n3). Five Vietnamese American journalists and one university professor were killed—and all deaths have been linked to this group. By drawing parallels between Vietnamese militant anticommunists and other paramilitary attempts to reassert a violent, masculine, capitalist, and Christian regime around the world, the author bravely opens a line of inquiry that continues to be relevant today.

Phuong Tran Nguyen implies in Becoming Refugee American that the politics of rescue in Little Saigon created an “assimilationist” upwardly mobile class that benefits from the suffering of its lower classes, who validate and authenticate their cultural status as Refugee Americans. In the 1990s, nearly two hundred thousand ex-political prisoners arrived via the Humanitarian Operation program (HO). Amid what was by then a constantly shifting US position vis-à-vis foreign trade and diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the HO people had “far more incentive to identify as refugees” than the 1975 refugees who had been airlifted to safety. As the author puts it,

... their bodies provided living proof of the horrific fate that the earlier refugees had narrowly avoided. Years of incarceration had left them gaunt, broken, and gray. Inside the camps, they had been trained to confess without equivocation their misguided support of the pre-1975 puppet government,
their disdain for the American empire, and their eternal gratitude for having been liberated by Hồ Chí Minh. (125)

Once US relations with Vietnam were normalized in 1994, reconciliation with Hà Nội became an official US priority and “state capitalism” a goal for Vietnam. This put “HO people” on the defensive (oddly, this time, against Vietnamese capitalism). While their coethnics from earlier waves of migration had more options in terms of jobs, housing, and travel—including the freedom to move out of Little Saigon into richer and whiter suburbs—ex–political prisoners were essentially trapped. Turning their efforts to preserving Little Saigon as the one last place where they could fly the flag and sing the anthem of their nonexistent country, they sought alliance with those few remaining local politicians, usually old-school conservatives, who would embrace them.

As if to set herself up as an example of the dubious relationship of upper-class elites to ex–political prisoners, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen prefaces her book with a fascinating, detailed family lineage going back to the Red River Delta of fifteenth-century Vietnam (2–4). The names of two northern Buddhist ancestors on her father’s side are carved in stone at the Temple of Literature in Hà Nội. On the author’s mother’s side, Buddhist relations migrated from China in the early 1800s and intermarried with Vietnamese. While an uncle served in the RVN air force, her father served as a diplomat for the Republic of Vietnam in England (where he met her mother, who was studying economics at the University of Cambridge), later moving to India, France (where he was present for the 1973 Paris Peace Accords), and finally Japan. After April 30, 1975, her parents sought asylum as political refugees in Australia. Their children, including Nathalie, were all born outside of Vietnam.

For Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen to turn her gaze to South Vietnamese military veterans makes sense at first glance, since “South Vietnam is for the most part absent from the historiography of the Vietnam War” (4) and “the war was largely fought on South Vietnamese soil” (12). Until recently, it has been true that mainstream discourse on the Vietnam War overlooks or disregards Vietnamese refugee perspectives. And the children and grandchildren of South Vietnamese soldiers living in the diaspora often have little to work with when they decide to search for their own histories. But at least
in the United States that gap is increasingly filled by new and exciting
cultural productions; for example, a Google search easily provides
Tu-Uyen Nguyen’s moving poem “Silence,” and the play Vietgone by Qui
Nguyen offers a raunchy hip-hop tale about an RVN military officer and his
journey to America. The last statement of South Vietnamese Soldiers dis-
counts the thousands of tons of bombs and chemical defoliants dropped by
the United States on North Vietnam, an aspect of the war that the author
totally neglects. Perhaps as an Australian she intends to decenter the impe-
rialist hegemony of the United States, but in this case the best way to do so
would be to acknowledge, rather than ignore, the central role played by the
US military in the Vietnam War.

We learn from Becoming Refugee American that assimilationists in Little
Saigon performed a model-minority script that assuages American guilt over
the “failure” in Vietnam and that ex–political prisoners helped to preserve
the anticomunist legacy of Little Saigon. When Nathalie Huynh Chau
Nguyen posits that she is now giving voice to the voiceless soldiers of South
Vietnam in order to validate their service and sacrifice, it raises the question
of how Australian narratives about the Vietnam War compare to US narra-
tives. Presumably they are similar or at least comparable. Do Australians feel
“guilt” about their role in the war? And do they enforce the same quid pro
quo expectations upon refugees, requiring Vietnamese to behave like model
citizens in exchange for keeping silent about Australia’s racism, social
injustices, or complicity with US imperialism? When she claims that soldiers
are “voiceless” even when they have published their stories in military pub-
lications (RVNAF Servicewoman’s Magazine or Rangers Magazine) or refu-
gee newsletters, does she mean that the general Australian public still
disdains them as “losers” or incompetent soldiers?

Although South Vietnamese Soldiers does not pose these questions or
attempt to answer them, the book does have a plethora of detail to offer
when it comes to individual accounts of war, migration, and postwar ex-
periences. The chapter on bonds of friendship and sacrifice forged by South
Vietnamese soldiers in combat contradicts the image of RVNAF as “deser-
ters” and brings to mind the theme of brotherhood common in films and
literature about US soldiers in (South) Vietnam. The chapter on women
presents startling and moving examples of people who follow Vietnamese
tradition to become soldiers-wives-mothers. In one especially gripping post-war story, Thuy and her husband were ordered to “reeducation.” But since their son was only six months old, she was given a deferment while her husband was incarcerated. When he was released, the three of them attempted to cross the border out of Vietnam. They were caught, and she and her son spent nearly two years in prison. Her husband drank and “fooled around,” so she divorced him. She tried to cross the border again with her son, but he ran away, and eventually he died. She ended up alone in Australia, the most traumatized of the women interviewed for this book (105).

These two books signal a new day for critical refugee studies, as scholars are now able to access and analyze the memories/lyrics/feelings/observations of Vietnamese refugees themselves. Becoming Refugee American explains why those memories need to be carefully interpreted and contextualized: refugees from South Vietnam operate within a transnational and local ideological economy that serves to uplift their suffering and provide a sliver of relief. This is something they would not ever have accomplished had they stayed in Vietnam.

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