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Displacing Kinship: The Intimacies of Intergenerational Trauma in Vietnamese American Cultural Production

LINH THỦY NGUYỄN

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2024.

For the better part of the last half-century, trauma has been a ubiquitous frame through which we make sense of ourselves and others. While the idea of trauma may encourage empathy as well as exploration into personal and collective histories, it more often than not normalizes historical outcomes, pathologizes reaction to violence, and forces closure. When the framework is used for understanding the behavior of others, it often compresses their lived experiences into well-worn narratives that underwrite projects of settler colonialism, imperialism, and structural racism. Unsurprisingly, trauma has reigned in refugee studies in general and Vietnamese refugee studies in particular. Linh Thủy Nguyễn's *Displacing Kinship: The Intimacies of Intergenerational Trauma in Vietnamese American Cultural Production* makes a vital intervention by prompting us to ask, "Why is the discourse of trauma accessed more readily than the frame of racism or state violence in discussions of U.S. involvement in Vietnam," which "gets lost in the personal narratives of the children of Vietnamese refugees?" (p. 2). In raising this question, Nguyễn makes a very compelling argument based on her reading of documents, sociological research, and refugee cultural productions to redirect how we think about the refugee family in relation to US racial and imperial projects.

The necessity of Nguyễn's question is laid out in the introductory chapter. The exigencies of a racist empire are occluded in stock narratives about trauma at the site of the refugee family. While the Vietnam War consistently shows up as "the source of trauma in second-generation and diasporic cultural productions," Nguyễn argues, its narrativization "elides the overwhelming presence of assimilation as the source of violence and trauma" (p. 4). This elision prevents us from a deeper and wider understanding of refugee family and community. Nguyễn brings in the wider context of empire to situate US racist assimilation. The trauma is explained in terms of not just US intervention in the Vietnam War and the devastation in that violent imperial adventure but also the aftermath of the war. Rightly, Nguyễn lays out the trauma that came as a result of the legacy of US war making, such as the destruction of economic and social infrastructures in both South

and North Vietnam and the lasting effects of tactical defoliants like Agent Orange. Nguyễn points to the US embargo of Vietnam immediately following the North's victory that resulted in hardship and pain not only through the postwar economic costs to Vietnamese but also by keeping families apart due to a communication ban between those in the US and their kin in Vietnam. This account of the source of trauma for Vietnamese and refugees beyond the pat narratives of unexamined war violence is absolutely vital in any conversation about refugee family, community, and politics. In the introduction, which sets up the problem for the book as a whole, this necessary spotlight on US actions overshadows the part that Vietnamese played in that tumultuous history albeit within the global chessboard of empire. Colonized peoples fought for their liberation and state-building projects, all of which also came with serious levels of violence for the people being liberated as well as those doing the liberating. The resulting division and recrimination continue to play a major part in the disaffection of refugee family and community relations in a perilous dialectics with US imperialism and racist assimilation. Readers, however, should not rush to the conclusion that in righting the egregious omission of US violence in narratives of refugee trauma, the book's historical account may render refugees inert in their own history. The author's purpose becomes clear as the argument unfolds in the rest of the book, not necessarily to correct our view of the sources of refugee trauma but to redirect our thinking and reframe our being in the world away from trauma as a constraining mode of identification. It is a complex and satisfying argument.

Chapter 1 compellingly tackles the task of answering the above "Why" question. This chapter shows how narratives about the Vietnamese refugee family were deployed in 1975, right at the beginning of postwar refugee resettlement. Officially released photos and stories to the media began portraying the Vietnamese refugee family as modern, educated and therefore Westernized, and racially Asian. These were the traits that would fix Vietnamese into the heteronormative mold of the Asian model minority, in contradistinction to Black and Latino families caught in the urban and rural racial poverty of the 1970s and 1980s. This distinction became enshrined in sociological research of the era that functioned to extend state power with its Cold War projections abroad and racist configurations of power at home. By presenting Vietnamese refugee families through the "dual global imaginaries" that made intelligible their flight from the repressive regimes of revolution and liberation in the Socialist bloc to the freedom offered by the United States' "educational crusade against Communism," Nguyễn argues, refugee families were cast in "sentimental and sociological inclusion, or a 'feeling of kinship' that African Americans have historically been excluded from" (p. 34). Besides a few exceptions, the bulk of sociological research about Vietnamese refugees validated this state narrative. The US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, for instance, hired a research firm to conduct longitudinal studies of Vietnamese refugee resettlement through quarterly surveys from 1975 to 1984 (p. 38). This was in continuity with prior state-sponsored sociological studies that denigrated the Black family, such as the 1965 Moynihan Report authored by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The stage was set for refugee racialization

as part of the Asian model minority within the restructured anti-Black racism of the post-Civil Rights era. Later sociological studies in the late 1990s and beyond extended this mode of Vietnamese refugee racialization through the valorization of the East Asian culture of hard work, Confucianist centrality of family and education, and community cohesion and resources. These narratives generated by sociological research obscure the very epistemological formation of the refugee family as dependent upon the wages of whiteness.

From this critique, the author launches an “anti-romantic approach to family” (p. 15). What is meant, however, is not a trajectory devoid of sentiments. The rest of the book takes readers on a journey of “engagement with the affective and relational resonances of assimilation as read through the lens of family” (p. 26), culminating in calls for alternative forms of intimacy and relations holding together community not premised upon identities like Vietnamese, Asian, and American, as these are tied to ethnic or national political formations through the heteronormative family.

Chapter 2 analyzes two graphic novels, G. B. Tran’s *Vietnamerica* and Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*, for the way they also recontextualize Vietnamese family affect in geographical Southeast Asia and the longer view of history. Instead of depicting refugees as being “saved” by the US, these works reveal shifting parental relations and uneven refugee experiences of war, integration, and racialized poverty in the US. Nguyễn reads these works for the feminist ambivalence displayed by Tran and Bui, in their witnessing of “their parents’ lives before them as they step into roles of child, mother, or partner,” and the necessity of “constructing a relational practice of kinship that opens possibilities for relationships yet to be” (p. 90). Chapter 3 focuses on intergenerational and queer traumas through an examination of Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* and the music, interviews, and documentary film by Thao Nguyen of the indie band Thao & The Get Down Stay Down. This chapter finds these texts suggesting a “bodily memory of something other than trauma,” in a “public feeling opened to political possibilities and ways of being that keep open the meanings, affects, and experiences of being ‘queer’ or ‘Vietnamese’ or ‘Vietnamese American’” without consolidating them as “identities, nationalities, and allegiances” (p. 120).

Chapter 4 arrives at the author’s concept of displacing kinship through revisitation of the texts covered in previous chapters as well as the work of the visual artist Trinh Mai. This chapter starts with Miss Hannah Peace, the woman who inspired Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, as an embodiment of a memory accessible only through a state of *being with* her lived experience and that of her community, rather than a capturing in research and representation. As such, Nguyễn goes beyond Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory that bounds traumatic events in time and space. Instead, Nguyễn proposes a women of color feminist approach that opens up alternative politics of intimacy and presence to call for a letting go of trauma as the primary mode of identification and knowledge and a move toward being with others that forges new relations. This “being with” is nonverbal and nonnarrative, resisting the reification of relations into sociological knowledge and representational politics. The epilogue reiterates the disconnection at the site of the family as revealing the

violence of empire and racist assimilation. Such disconnection calls out for alternative intimacies that do not rely on familial reproduction of trauma nor identitarian forms of being and belonging.

This book makes a necessary intervention in Critical Refugee Studies, reorienting the field toward future configurations of intimacies. It should be included in undergraduate and graduate curricula addressing refugees, empire, racialization, kinship, and feminist/queer studies.

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Colonial Law Making: Cambodia under the French

SALLY FRANCES LOW

Singapore: NUS Press, 2024.

Anyone who has stepped into the former Palais de Justice, opposite the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, will feel the air of France's colonial heritage in Cambodia. Inaugurated in 1925 and more recently housing the offices of Cambodia's Ministry of Justice and the Appeal Court, the compound represented the heyday of colonial law in this former protectorate of France (1863–1953). It is therefore fitting that Sally Frances Low opens her fascinating monograph *Colonial Law Making: Cambodia under the French* with a description of this symbol of colonial rule. The book is a sensitive and thoughtful analysis of how colonial law was conceived and practiced under the French. It is meticulously put together, based on many years of archival research, especially in the National Archives of Cambodia and the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in France. Patiently and rigorously, Low has unearthed a vast amount of archival sources and combined these in a lucid narrative that brings to life an important aspect of colonial rule. Interweaving accounts of the structural conditions of colonial Cambodia with personal stories of the colonizers and colonized, the author has produced an engaging legal history that reveals law both as a tool of a colonial civilizing mission and as a means of domination. In essence, Low posits that “colonial law justified, established, authorised, ordered and influenced colonial rule” (p. 3).

The book makes an original and well-researched contribution to the scholarship on colonial law (Merry 2003; Dezalay and Garth 2010) and fills an important gap in our understanding of French colonial rule in Cambodia (Forest 1979; Edwards 2007). Yet, Low is attentive also to both the connections and the variations in the ways in which the law is imagined and practiced across different colonial contexts and empires. As someone who is neither a historian nor an expert in the literature on colonial law, I have focused in this review more on the socio-legal legacy of colonial law making in Cambodia. I highlight in the following some key themes that transcend the book's