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Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương. *Almost Futures: Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Quan Tue Tran\*

As the unsettling affairs of our world unfold in the second quarter of the 21st century, *Almost Futures: Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End* offers timely and invaluable insights. In this simultaneously expansive, complex, and intimate work, Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương meditates on the continual paradoxes and injustices that shape and connect local and global lives. While it centers primarily Vietnamese and diasporic Vietnamese contexts, this unique work also transcends boundaries and links stories beyond Vietnam and the Vietnamese refugee diaspora to reveal the relationality between “people who were barred from humanist sovereignty while subjected to its violence” across epochs and continents (p. 24). Focusing on exploited workers, refugees, and others subjected to different forms of colonial, revolutionary, and state violence and global capitalist dispossession, the book bears witness to the lives, deaths, grief, resistance, and silence of those “who paid the highest price for living in the catastrophes of our modern world” (p. 4). Yet, as Nguyễn-võ also reminds us, “Even while held down to a less-than-human status, the people I follow in this book impossibly marched, grieved, struck, organized, spoke, painted, wrote, remembered or forgot, and sometimes stayed silent” (p. 4). Attending to how they insisted on their humanity, dignity, creativity, relationships, and even silence—however fleeting, opaque, fragmented, illegible—yields critical lessons for how to confront the hauntings, uncertainties, contradictions, and violence of our own time and place.

*Almost Futures* is an unparalleled text in breadth and depth that intricately layers and weaves together rich theoretical insights from critical refugee studies, political economy theories, Vietnamese studies, and feminist, Black, Queer, disability, and Indigenous studies as well as the extraordinary experiences of ordinary people to address various marginalized and intersecting human conditions. The book exposes the inherent violence and limits of humanist sovereignty and insists on poetic, allegorical, iterant, haunted, and untimely ways of knowing that refuse the linear, redemptive, and progressive march toward the future promised by the

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Enlightenment's universalist ideas of the human, sovereignty, and freedom. Nguyễn-võ under-scores, "The history of universalist attainment has thus far been borne by conquest, slavery, dispossession, and mass murder," resulting in the oppression and untimely deaths of many the world over (p. 28). Such patterns of violence make it possible to recognize potential kinship among the global oppressed. To foster such recognition, one must turn to alternative methods of knowing that transcend temporal and geographical boundaries and develop sensibilities that are beholden neither to the false promises of humanist sovereignty nor the trap of false equivalencies. Nguyễn-võ notes the following:

This book, then, attends to those who are from but not of the human, who require alternative ontologies of the human in the ruins of humanist time, and whose acts beside sovereignty require an epistemological openness that allows for slippage in reading that can elude the duality of an identity-based approach to humanity and history, however dialectical. (p. 20)

Throughout the book, Nguyễn-võ models this "epistemological openness" through her sensitive and reflexive engagement with a wide range of stories. In one chapter, she examines Vietnamese responses to land repossessions and evictions in late-socialist Vietnam. She situates this contemporary state-sponsored land-grabbing practice—fueled by speculative capitalism, justified by industrialization, modernization, and development discourses, and made possible through policy and legal maneuvers—as a continuation of the "waves of dispossessions" that enabled Vietnamese polities across many centuries to expand territorially and assert state sovereignty. In their wake, places, communities, and people "experience the end of home, livelihood, loved ones, or an entire social world as they know it, as whole neighborhoods and districts are grazed [*sic*]" (p. 34). However, refusing to relegate the dispossessed to the past, Nguyễn-võ *re*-presents their stories by focusing on what she calls "white marches"—sporadic, fleeting, and haunting instances when small groups of individuals, or *dân oan*, who experienced land dispossession or eviction staged modest protests near sites of power, wearing white attire to mourn their losses and confront the injustices they faced. Viewing the color white as "a particular iconography of absence and grief," Nguyễn-võ shows how these marchers refused to fall in line with the state's and investors' linear temporality of speculative capitalist accumulation. Rather, their resistances disrupted the myth of unified progress, revealing the violence and dispossessions that made such progress possible in the first place. She further notes that the white marchers

produce this poetic knowledge of grief that links violent processes to things that are there and not there, things that are known to things that are felt. They also signal to what was and could be. It is only through this poetic process that these marches constitute a form of collective action. (p. 40)

In another chapter, the author highlights the plight of Vietnamese women factory workers and interrogates how global capitalist modes of production in post-economic renovation Vietnam have reduced these workers' bodies to disposable fragments in order to extract their labor. Nguyễn-võ shows that the workers' predicaments resonate with those of Vietnamese refugees who resettled in the United States between the late 1970s and the 1990s. Due to their transnational displacement as well as their racialized and gendered positions in the United States, these refugees were entrapped in the low-wage garment and electronic assembly works that fueled the American capitalist economy before the latter moved production overseas in search of even cheaper labor. The global restructuring of manufacturing, socialist Vietnam's pivot toward the market economy, land dispossession in the countryside, and the financialization of capitalism in Vietnam converged to generate a surplus and vulnerable labor force. Vietnamese state repression of dissent, labor organizing crackdowns, and state-sanctioned unions' abandonment further limit the platforms for workers to seek recourse and voice their grievances. Yet, through her allegorical reading of Phạm Thị Hoài's short story "The Saigon Tailor Shop," Nguyễn-võ urges us to view young Vietnamese female factory workers as more than just disposable and abject figures, to recognize that amid state and global capitalist fragmentation and dismembering, these young women also contest the devaluation of their bodies. She observes that they "try to reassemble themselves into new incarnations as they undress and dress, open and close their thighs, modeling each other's latest urban middle-class fashion imitations" (p. 75). Here, Nguyễn-võ treats "bodily remainders as emblematic and allegorical, not of the human, but of parts and potentials thereof" (p. 82). This reading refuses the redemptive impulse, recognizing that the workers offer "no epistemological guarantee, they show us not how to be human, but fragments thereof in possible assemblages of the now- and the yet-to-be-known" (p. 85).

Throughout *Almost Futures*, an open-ended interpretive lens allows Nguyễn-võ to render visible ghostly matters and hauntings that sovereign states seek to disavow and erase. Inviting us to further linger on seemingly irrational ways of knowing, which disrupt the neat, rational, and linear statist history of humanist sovereignty, she turns to the writings of several Vietnamese refugees and the ways in which Vietnamese refugees must "self-bear" their own history, mourning, and memory:

The death of the South [the Republic of Vietnam] becomes the catastrophic horizon from which emerge the hauntings in the South Vietnamese and refugee texts examined here. What this haunted writing offers are alternative temporalities and modes of existence therein as South Vietnamese and refugees confront the end of their nation and racist exclusion in their place of refuge. (p. 126)

Indeed, it is through their acts of writing, mourning, memorializing, and telling that Vietnamese refugees eke out alternative and emergent sites where they can attend to their ghosts and assert claims to (un)belonging. However, even in these potential spaces of refuge, “the dangers of constraining our political imaginings in an assimilation of others into ourselves” also lurk (p. 180).

*Almost Futures* is a capacious and generative book. It carves out alternative spaces and temporalities for us to accompany those who are condemned to the margins and/or death by sovereignty. It learns from the latter—in their own words, actions, and creations—lessons on how to navigate and negotiate catastrophic circumstances amid the enormity and violence of the external structures and systems that seek to other, alienate, and destroy them in the name of humanist progress. Nguyễn-võ’s inclusion of her own personal stories and struggles as a witness to the many events that she narrates further grounds this deeply empathetic text. Through her sensibility as a Vietnamese refugee, a Vietnamese American, a scholar, a writer, a translator, a mother, and a daughter, Nguyễn-võ invites us to think, see, feel, and imagine with her and her interlocutors what it means to seek refuge at the many worlds’ ends and what it means to bear witness. Looking “not at but from the threshold of catastrophes,” *Almost Futures* is a hopeful book despite the hopeless conditions that it examines. The hope that the book offers is not the “cruel hope” that blindly sees linear progress as the road to liberation, but one that quietly lingers with and sustains the many possible futures that have not yet been accounted for, even if only in memory. Like the book’s cover image, a map that helped a Vietnamese boat refugee chart his escape from Vietnam, *Almost Futures* provides an essential navigation tool as we must constantly reorient and recalibrate ourselves amid shifting and pending futures.