In a review of Mohsin Hamid’s Booker-nominated novel *Exit West* (2017), *The Atlantic’s* Sophie Gilbert offers that Hamid’s accomplishment is “not putting a human face on refugees so much as putting a refugee face on all of humankind.” Indeed, a major current of *Exit West* is that becoming a refugee could happen to anyone—even to the novel’s protagonists, young aspiring professionals in an unnamed city whose lives, at first, do not seem to be much different from the educated and potentially affluent readers of the book. With over twenty-five million refugees worldwide, becoming a refugee is not an exceptional circumstance in the present moment, and the existence of refugees has become an accepted, common, and possibly even distinguishing feature of our contemporary global landscape. Yet for a long time, the experiences of refugees have been reductively cast as unusual and marginal, used to garner support through pity rather than identification with those afflicted with the refugee condition. By contrast, Hamid submits that refugees are, in many ways, just like the readers themselves, too much so perhaps, for if the readers are not careful they could be turned into refugees in the blink of an eye.

It is telling that in Gilbert’s formulation there is a distinction made between a “human face” and a “refugee face,” as though
the refugee face presents something that is other than, or perhaps beyond, the human. Actual faces of refugees have long been of interest to those working in visual media, including journalists, artists, and nonprofit organizations, as they are seen to forge the intimacy necessary to connect the plight of particular refugee people with humanity at large. Refugees are formed through an interconnected global network but are often read by Western audiences as the product of distinct and separate crises, creating a lacuna between universal humanitarian ethics and the political positions of particular refugee groups. This lacuna conceals the interrelated influences of imperialism, neoliberalism, and global capital, most evident recently by the resurgence of nationalistic discourse and interlaced throughout by attending forms of racism. While visual presentations of the refugee experience can bring attention to otherwise underreported global events, relying on sympathy, pity, and emergency focuses attention on the immediate physical attributes and conditions of refugees themselves, which can actively hide the causal linkages between the socioeconomic acts of empire and the production of refugees. 3 In this light, instead of refugees being recognized as structural attributes of global capital accumulation, images of the refugee and the refugee face present viewers with a type of abject experience that is seen as exceptional and best to be avoided altogether.

Of course, the influence that rhetorical patterns have on the reception of refugees is not limited to visual media and can be found in the commonsense usage of refugee narratives, as well. That is, stories about refugee life are seen as effective devices that can provide the details necessary to provoke sympathy, compassion, and action for non-profit agencies and humanitarian endeavors. Chris George of Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS) summarizes the conventional approach to the use of refugee aesthetics by claiming that “when people learn about the IRIS, when they meet refugees and they are humanized through art, they will support the program.” 4 While instrumentally this approach allows IRIS to continue its excellent work with and for refugee communities, it is worth considering how and in what ways refugees are expected to be “humanized” through art when they, of course, are always already humans.
The assumption behind this presentation of refugee life, then, is that to most audiences, refugees are in fact not fully human—existing instead as life-forms in transition, dwelling in camps that lay on the edges of nation-states, belonging either to the past or the future but never quite fully inhabiting the present space. IRIS’s palatable approach sees art as a way to de-emphasize the differences between the refugees and consumers, presenting refugees as part of a common humanity, but does so at the expense of the complex histories and oppositional politics that refugees can hold and embody. This kind of refugee aesthetic seeks to humanize refugees in ways that counter racially coded political movements that present refugees and other immigrant groups as problematic, damaged, and intrinsically foreign people. But it is worth considering whether these two different rhetorical approaches to refugee life are actually as dichotomous as they first may seem, for both the presentations that evoke sympathy for refugees and the protectionist governmental policies and rhetoric that demonize them seek in the end to eliminate refugees and refugee experience altogether. Instead of actually creating a place for refugees in the present, the hope of “humanizing refugees” is that readers and audiences will drive political transformation to eliminate this condition. However, how does this constant striving to erase the refugee condition place and position those who actually are or are the descendants of refugees? And what does this erasure do to the writing and reception of refugee pasts, presents, and futures? In other words, what imaginative opportunities does one have when writing from the refugee position to a readership that is disturbed by his or her very presence, at least insofar as the writer exists as a refugee?

It is with these questions in mind that I write *The Refugee Aesthetic: Reimagining Southeast Asian America*, a book that in its simplest terms examines how refugees are represented and represent themselves. As the refugee is conventionally considered a powerless figure, eagerly cast aside by both migrant and host communities, this book investigates how and why a number of Southeast Asian American artists have recently embraced the figure of the refugee as a transformative position. In doing so, the book follows how the dominance of a singular refugee
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aesthetic is currently being challenged by a variety of approaches that recognize the power that refugee aesthetics can hold. This move from a monolithic refugee aesthetic constructed mainly by nonrefugees to a collection of refugee aesthetics fronted by refugees or their descendants is, at the moment, best characterized by narratives that foreground interiority, present multiple refugee subject positions, and reflexively comment upon the ways refugee lives are customarily represented and their expressions received. Reading refugee narratives with a close eye to their form and authorial horizons provides a particular aesthetic analytic that reveals and challenges the overdetermination affecting refugee subjects, both within and beyond the Southeast Asian American example.

The aim of this study, however, is not only to track how a multifarious and flexible refugee aesthetics is challenging the dominance of the singular refugee aesthetic but also to use this emergence to argue that the aesthetic should be a central category in the conceptualization of refugees and refugee thought. Taking no particular type of representation as authentic truth, I instead focus on how refugee aesthetics reveal, produce, and/or dispute the commonalities, disparities, and inequalities that are assumed to exist among refugees and receiving populations. Specifically, The Refugee Aesthetic offers four new ways to study this mobile population, as it theorizes the narrative qualities that comprise the refugee aesthetic, generates a media history of the refugee image, documents the role refugee artistic production plays in forming and negotiating geopolitical identities, and considers why aesthetics matter in a moment when the refugee is not tied to a singular event but instead is a constituent feature of the contemporary global landscape. I turn to the Southeast Asian American population not because they are the initial or necessarily the most important refugee population but because they entered their receiving country’s imagination only as refugees. Due to the intimate visual way viewers in the United States were receiving the Vietnam War and following its refugees, when the real Southeast Asian people arrived American viewers were predisposed to approach this population as if they were the refugee characters who had climbed right out of the television drama.
of the Vietnam War. As viewers had precious little knowledge about this population beyond the singular aesthetic viewpoint that presented these characters as tired, helpless, and needy, the refugee identity came to circumscribe the Southeast Asian migrants when they entered the country. An iconic and enduring case study, the Southeast Asian American example therefore demonstrates how totally the refugee image can affect the cultural, ethnic, and racial positioning of a population, while also offering a wide array of media examples that illuminate how the refugee aesthetic is deployed, battled over, and rewritten.

Of course, the Vietnam War was not just about Vietnam, as all of Southeast Asia was included in the disruption, destruction, and decolonial energy brought forth by the war. Hmong, Cham, Cambodian, and Lao lands and people were heavily involved in wartime operations, creating multiple refugee populations, while Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines were often the first places where refugees landed, in addition to being sites of U.S. military operations. Conceptualizing “Southeast Asia” as a distinct and related group of nations is itself a legacy of imperial intervention, as Fiona Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam Lam opine: “Southeast Asia names a geographic region first conceived of as a geopolitical concern by the post–Second World War development of the military-intellectual complex, and subsequently reimagined by various Cold War and post–Cold War strategies of foreign policy, including catastrophic campaigns of bombings and regime changes that promised to resonate for decades to come.” They add that Southeast Asia serves as “a marketizing economy, a tourist destination, a dream of homeland or sometimes nightmare, a neoliberal state, a war or series of images about war, and more,” recognizing that Southeast Asia exists as a complex object of knowledge, war, and pleasure that far exceeds standard juridical and political borders.

*The Refugee Aesthetic* builds on this insight by taking Southeast Asian America as the physical, psychic, and political figuration created when the complex geographic structure of Southeast Asia is reimagined as a constituent element of various U.S. national spaces. Centering the experiences of Southeast Asian American refugees, who form and continue to redefine
the iconic images of the refugee in the contemporary moment, attends to this imaginative energy, the legacies of colonialism, and the “ongoing renewal” of U.S. empire. Following in Ngô, Nguyễn, and Lam’s footsteps, I see this perspective as a way to further world Asian American and Asian studies while articulating how, instead of responding to received governmental borders, Southeast Asian American artists are actively reimagining Southeast Asian America as an important ground for their U.S. spatial orientation. Moving from the well-worn position of the solitary exile to the collective identity of refugees, Southeast Asian American authors rewrite nostalgic critical characteristics of exilic literature by focusing on the new land as the site of present and future social critique. I propose that this contemporary body of literature both invites and critiques dominant host cultures by historicizing and elongating the refugee condition so that the past provides the material perspective to critically engage with refugees’ current position in the American imagination. This book, then, is a call to revisit situated populations with subjects who express their particular form of belonging through their aesthetic forms.

Examining the aesthetic legacy of the Southeast Asian American refugee experience requires reflecting on how it is deployed to bureaucratically and racially position present-day populations who are seeking entry into the United States and Europe. I concur with Cathy J. Schlund-Vials’s argument that “situated adjacent a contemporary backdrop of war and militarized displacement, Southeast Asian American studies generally, and critical refugee studies specifically, emerge as necessary interdisciplines to more deeply contemplate the current Syrian refugee crisis vis-à-vis history, archive, and methodology.” In The Refugee Aesthetic, taking an interdisciplinary critical refugee studies approach is important for scrutinizing how and when certain groups, populations, and figures move in and out of the refugee position. And indeed, this approach recognizes that the refugee aesthetic has conventionally been used to create refugee positions that signify otherness, positions that are set against and conceptually reinforce the rootedness of national subjects. As opposed to other transnational subjects such as exiles, economic migrants, and
cosmopolitans, the refugee, as an idea, also endows the receiving nation with a sense of benevolence that forces the refugee into a position of endless debt and/or gratitude. However, denaturalizing the relationship between refugee aesthetics and the refugee position recognizes that refugee aesthetics are flexible, created and utilized by refugees, nonrefugees, and institutions alike, and thus hold the potential to create other utopian, or perhaps dystopian, arrangements in the present and future.

One of the fundamental premises underlying *The Refugee Aesthetic* is that refugees are not just powerless objects of study and legislation but can also be theorists, critics, and culture makers. Attending to how artists in the Southeast Asian American diaspora face the legacy of empire in the neoliberal present is needed, as a lack of attention to the particularities of their diasporic aesthetic production and sociopolitical experience has allowed for the proliferation of narratives claiming that refugees smoothly assimilate into new lands through education, discipline, and hard work. These narrow representations ignore their economic and academic marginalization, often reinforcing myths of Western exceptionalism, which is disconcerting for the international community at large, as the rhetoric of American hospitality and benevolence is used to validate military, economic, and cultural interventions throughout the globe. Reading refugee narratives in a manner that does not privilege or substantiate American benevolence reveals the ways in which many Southeast Asian American artists scrutinize Western orders of aesthetic judgment while indexing the unfulfilled promises of the democratic capitalist state.

Consequently, this book shows that while the American appetite for palatable difference has compelled refugee authors to include agreeable cultural touchstones in their work, refugee literature in particular appeals to aesthetics in order to reset the terms of transnational cultural contact. As Asian American studies ages, it is imperative to recognize unacknowledged styles and modes, and examining the refugee aesthetic is an opportunity to consider the forms and strategies used in refugee writing that do not always announce themselves as such and thus are not read within a larger body of refugee work. This book, then,
Refugee Aesthetics invites us to revisit the literatures of migration and diaspora more generally to figure out where, how, and by whom refuge is being claimed.

The Aesthetic Tradition

Considering the abundance of pressing material matters central to refugee life, why, then, turn to aesthetics? And what can a focus on aesthetics offer a study of Southeast Asian American refugee life in particular, as modern aesthetics have often been accused of being an important tool in the othering of different people, subjects, and forms of thought. Terry Eagleton, for example, has famously shown that the rise of modern aesthetics codified the middle-class man as the presumed “universal subject” through a series of taste practices and procedures that centered European male personhood, and many postcolonial theorists have long been suspicious of aesthetics and aesthetic theory, as they “see aesthetics as implicated in the canonical marginalization of postcolonial literatures.” Yet despite the contentious development and deployment of aesthetics as an intellectual concept, it is difficult to argue that something like a “postcolonial aesthetic” does not exist, particularly as “the aesthetic” concerns the form, value, and reception of artistic works. Because postcolonial literature draws from a vast range of different countries, people, and subject positions, obviously there is no such thing as a singular postcolonial subject; however, the presentation, marketing, and critique of work that comes from postcolonial nations has created a readership that expects and values certain generic conventions and literary styles from authors who hail from postcolonial parts of the globe.

Similarly, the Southeast Asian American authors and artists examined in this book did not create the refugee aesthetic; rather, they engage a refugee aesthetic that already exists. Refugee authors differ from their postcolonial kin in that refugees are formed through a very specific legal category imbued with qualitative aesthetic parameters that encourage a pattern of storytelling that lingers well past the moment when refugees enter into a country. With the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to
the Status of Refugees stating that refugees have to demonstrate that they have a well-founded fear of persecution, April Shemak argues that “those seeking asylum must become eloquent, persuasive speakers despite the enormous obstacles that can hinder testimony,” as they are required to construct themselves as refugees through a narrative performance. Even though some refugees disassociate themselves from the refugee experience by attempting to assimilate into the general population as quickly as possible, refugees still must define and construct themselves along with, or in contrast to, this legal category that generates visual and verbal styles of storytelling and presentation. Insofar as aesthetics can be considered the deliberate shaping of content into form, this discursive imperative is an aesthetic force, and its navigation creates aesthetic methods. In this light, while refugee aesthetics are usually unacknowledged in favor of more urgent matters of refugee life, aesthetics circumscribe refugee experiences, shaping everyday and artistic interactions that follow the refugees into the new land, providing a presumed standard or basis for how one qualifies as a refugee, and oftentimes displaying the intergenerational forms, prejudices, and legacies of refugee life that bind one refugee generation to the next.

The recent embrace of writing from the refugee position is an acknowledgment that this particular position provides an opportunity to create artwork that exceeds an immediate humanizing of refugees or a factual retelling of refugee experience. Creating refugee artwork can provide both the distance and the elongation of time necessary to reveal the commonalities, relations, and sensibilities that are obscured by the immediacy of experience and utilitarian information. As Christopher Lee proposes through his reading of Theodor W. Adorno, art and artworks can offer “an alternative to ‘established fact’ due to [their] embattled [and embedded] relationship with society,” providing an important counterpoint to what is perceived to be “the real.” By appearing to stand apart from yet also being a product of everyday life, literary and artistic works provide an illusionary coherence of the world, whereby a different kind of knowledge—an aesthetic knowledge—distinct from empirical fact is produced. This valuable aesthetic knowledge still requires
careful interrogation, however, as aesthetics and aesthetic judgments retain structures that mirror and oftentimes work to reinforce hierarchical orders of any given society. Understanding aesthetic structures as complex and volatile forms, *The Refugee Aesthetic* approaches refugee artwork by keeping in mind Kan-dice Chuh’s definition of aesthetics as “the processes and the structures of value making by which certain sensibilities become common sense and others are disavowed, subjugated, and otherwise obscured.”18 Connecting refugee aesthetics and politics, this book draws its methodological inspiration from the work of Edward Said to argue that aesthetic critique requires detailing how a particular group is narrated into history and, in the same breath, identifying who has the power to do so.19

Upsetting regimes of common sense requires an appeal to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “the emotional-volitional tension of form,”20 whereby Southeast Asian American refugee artworks express something to the reader/viewer that extends beyond the materiality of the artwork itself and its content, creating excessive meanings and mythological structures across different reading/viewing communities. Specifically, I want to consider how these mythological structures create and shape representations of the refugee experience, as these representations are both products and prime fashioners of the relationship between commonsense sensibilities and those that are disavowed. The tension between formal expectations and the desire for more excessive and expressive forms of meaning is a central theme in Sau-Ling Wong’s groundbreaking analyses of Asian American literature and a defining characteristic of what Min Hyoung Song describes as “seemingly conventional” contemporary works of Asian American literature where “one finds a subtle but unmistakable commentary on their own form, a restless relationship to its traditions and a ceaseless search for another order of connection to its possible alternative pasts leading to more open presents.”21 Drawing from the conclusions of Chuh, Wong, and Song, I suggest that Southeast Asian American authors writing from the refugee position attend to the aesthetics and politics involved in representing the refugee experience but do not replace it with another singular refugee aesthetic. Instead, they use conventional narratives,
stereotypes, and histories as platforms for their own aesthetic excursions. Their work actively interferes with reading practices, values, and expectations while simultaneously embracing and rejecting multiculturalism’s pedagogical promise by offering different sensibilities that are not usually expected from refugees. By highlighting and restaging these encounters, refugee literature can reposition, reimagine, and creatively use minor sensibilities to rewrite aesthetic structures and values that produce the relationship drawn between the dominant and minor positions.

Tracking how refugees are presented illuminates the tropes that define and confine the ways that refugees are conventionally imagined. Specifically, through charitable appeals and associated forms of media coverage, refugees are most commonly filmed, photographed, and written about as “those who suffer.” And while this display has been important for agencies and charitable administrators in reaching potential donors, this aesthetic regime has come to shape what refugees are and have to continue to be in order to be accepted and read as refugees. This performance, which is thoroughly embodied and persists long past when the legal refugee designation is made, draws attention to refugees themselves, shifting attention away from the capriciousness through which refugee categories are defined, practiced, and enforced by the state and ignores the geopolitical considerations that determine why refugees from one country are accepted over those from another country. While those seeking asylum come from a wide variety of places and do so for a multiplicity of reasons, refugees become a coherent type of person as they experience and represent the rigorous refugee process. Despite the variety of motivations and circumstances involved in qualifying for refuge, they come to embody refugee subjecthood, both physically and psychically, through the aesthetic, institutional, and interpersonal patterns that coalesce and create the refugee position. As refugees forge narratives about themselves in receiving countries, commonalities across ethnicities are formed through a recognition of the many hardships and the “enduring consciousness of [their] debt,” but by representing these experiences artistically, refugee narratives also produce unique forms of beauty, critical consciousness, and utopian thinking.
As such, while refugee aesthetics brings together (and at times conflates) differing experiences, it also creates the opportunity for two interrelated outcomes. First, it draws a continuous line between otherwise disparate examples of persecution and marginalization, bringing attention to the humanistic need to address underlying structures that place and displace humans in a global world. Second, refugee aesthetics draws attention to the ongoing condition of the refugee experience, where feeling like a refugee and inhabiting the refugee position continue long after the bureaucratic political designation expires. Expressing the ongoing condition of the refugee experience requires a poetic voice, as the contradictions and hardships of refugee life are increasingly held in the body and the psyche, particularly as they linger and transform over years and generations. Yet refugee literature is similar to postcolonial, ethnic American, and women’s literature insofar as it is often read and valued for offering up a way of life rather than artistic innovation, suggesting that it should be “studied in terms of authenticity, racism, and resistance rather than literariness per se.” The contemporary refugee artists studied in this book are fully aware that the commercial value of their artistic output depends on the instrumental routing of their work by other agencies and people. Part of the current refugee aesthetic style is a reflective anticipation of these circuits of literary reception and a subsequent positioning of their work as tools of aesthetic engagement rather than objects served up for aesthetic judgment. Displaying different sensibilities can appeal to a reader’s ethnographic eye and can help in justifying the inclusion of refugee work as a distinct artistic category, but by highlighting the values that particular aesthetics and sensibilities carry, refugee artists can set the tone of this engagement even if, like all artists, they are never entirely sure of the ultimate outcome of this arrangement.

As refugees, the demand to explain one’s presence began when Southeast Asian bodies were carefully documented in a series of refugee camps and continued as these migrants settled in the United States, making this group of refugees well skilled in constructing aesthetic styles that explained both their presence and where they wanted to go. Because of the political valence
of the Vietnam War and the suspicion that followed the physical reminder of this Western imperial failure, Southeast Asian American refugees continually had to explain why their bodies had entered these new spaces, leaving present-day Southeast Asian American artists well prepared to tell their unique refugee histories. Born into an aesthetic tradition where institutions produce more narratives of refugee life than refugees themselves do, these refugee artists are used to aesthetic regimes that often work around, if not against, their individual interests. Due to the repeated presentation of differing refugee groups as downtrodden, tired, and helpless, viewers are apt to read refugees themselves as interchangeable, and whether through the persistent mother-child dyad or as an overflowing mass of people, refugee artists must continually fight being presented as symbols of abstract humanity by inventing the platforms, themes, and narrative techniques required to present their individual concerns.

Conventionally, the audience’s perspective is centered and their interests are appealed to, luring them into thinking that they are responsible for the evaluation of asylum seekers—that it is they who must pass judgment on these situations, images, and people—when instead the decisions about refugees are made by immigration agents and diplomatic state interests. This misplaced belief in their own power to decide is generated in part by the portrayal of the refugee as “a victim whose judgment and reason had been compromised by his or her experiences,” who therefore has to be spoken for by professionals, such as doctors, academics, and outreach agents, who are seen as being outside the situation and therefore not infected by the horrific experiences that make refugee testimony seemingly unrepresentable and unreliable. When considering that refugees come from a seemingly out-of-control environment, viewers/readers can feel as if they must constantly be on guard for misinformation and that they bear some responsible in guiding the refugee narrative into a “rational” setting. As Liisa Malkki argues, because of the roles created by these viewing structures, when refugees present as calm and rational actors, they are often seen as less “worthy” of assistance—in short, they are read as not real refugees.
In response, Southeast Asian American refugee authors have remained unyielding and recalcitrant in documenting the contradictions faced in their everyday lives. Expressing these contradictions can be read not only as registering unheard complaints but also as a way to detail refugees’ societal roles, possibilities, and responsibilities, demonstrating their extensive knowledge of the U.S. context that they inhabit. This iteration of refugee aesthetics is remarkably rooted, often telling tales of marginalization but with the force and urgency of someone who understands that they are here to stay. Phuong Tran Nguyen describes this statement of “staying” as the product of a “refugee nationalism,” which in the U.S. setting “has represented not so much a refusal to assimilate but rather a particular mode of becoming American—becoming Refugee American.” Becoming “Refugee American” articulates a sense of patriotic pride toward the United States but does so by highlighting the act of becoming—the unfinished process of being a refugee and an American. That is, even though the legal definition of a refugee describes a provisional status, the refugee subjectivity stays active by producing narratives that continually detail the qualities, thoughts, and social values of refugees across differing classes, genders, and generations.

Phuong Tran Nguyen contends that “good refugees” are supposed to look to a future where they will become unmarked Americans, standing as emblems of U.S. benevolence and its “victory” over communism. However, there are also the “bad refugees” who are unable to “get over” the past and dwell on the politics of the former land and/or cannot move on from the refugee passage. The difference between these two categories is directly related to the usefulness that refugee stories and positions have for the receiving state, where “good refugees” will ultimately assimilate and be held up as successes, while the “bad” ones will “fail” because they are “stuck in the past.” That refugee subjectivity is read through such a stark bifurcation of two rigid categories indicates that refugees have a lack of control over the stories being told about them, as Viet Thanh Nguyen relates: “If you are not in power in your society because you’re marginalized in some way, the terms of your representation are not up to
you. And, as always, the terms of your representation are always going to be polarized into ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ Because you always have to prove that you’re ‘good,’ and being good means being exceptional.”

In this light, the everyday-life material offered by authors such as Angie Chau, Bich Minh Nguyen, and Lac Su are important incursions into refugee aesthetics, as they contribute to the narrative plenitude needed to nuance and pluralize the bifurcated refugee subjectivity while showing how both the good and bad of refugee life often expresses itself in mundane ways rather than having to always be exceptional. Locating refugee life on this micropolitical level identifies common ground and intergenerational ties that exist between differing refugee groups, which are not always concerned with or directly created by state interests.

Agency, Audience, and Authenticity

In her 1943 essay “We Refugees,” Hannah Arendt relates that refugees have trouble finding receptive audiences for their stories because “nobody likes to listen to all that; hell is no longer a religious belief of a fantasy, but something as real as houses and stones and trees. Apparently nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends.” Even when audiences are willing to listen, the refugees’ stories are not read merely as personal autobiographical sketches and instead take on broad, often contentious, political meanings in new cultural climates. Positioned as tellers of unwelcome truths, refugees are conditioned to internalize their “real” stories and tell comfortable or comforting ones in their place, as extensively detailing their experiences and expressing the variety of feelings that they may have about refugee life can compromise their ability to discreetly live in new lands. The uncertainty surrounding their reception, then, compels refugees to heavily tailor their stories to the needs and desires of their audience, with contextual demands requiring that these accounts be marked by stylized patterns of authenticity.
Yet in a provocative response to this conservative structure of refugee storytelling, decorated Vietnamese American author Monique Truong offers that Bình, the unreliable narrator in her masterwork *The Book of Salt*, is “a fuck you” to a reader who is “coming to the work thinking that you’re going to find authenticity and a vessel of racial pain. [Instead] you’re going to encounter a narrator who is lying all the time, and it serves him to tell you what he wants to tell you.” This literary interjection resists the lure of trading off of marketable difference and instead attends to the complex narrative decisions that Bình (and, by proxy, Truong) are compelled to make by having him “lie” to the reader, foregrounding the right of refusal and highlighting discursive agency. She introduces, or rather selectively offers, the reader of Southeast Asian American refugee literature a character who does not authentically display himself so that his experiences can be consumed and added to the cultural cache of the reader but instead strategically releases information for his own benefit.

This act of taking control of a narrative is significant for Southeast Asian American refugee writers and actors who have a long history of their narratives being used by colonial institutions, refugee organizations, and/or collaborative autobiographies cowritten by white authors. Truong has argued that these “organizing texts depended and thrived upon the ‘authority’ and/or ‘authenticity’ of the Vietnamese American voices/texts to bolster their own textual arguments,” while the “different truth-content” offered by these voices is positioned to be in service of institutional narratives, usurping the intentions of “the respondent’s original speech/narrative act.” In this light, the Vietnamese American voices that audiences receive are heavily shrouded by the cowriters’ decision-making process and/or the needs of outside institutions. Included for “what they say” and not “how they say it,” these kinds of refugee stories impede the development of a Vietnamese American literary voice, and, more broadly, the creation of a coherent Vietnamese American aesthetic vision.

Overwhelmingly entering the United States as a population of refugees, the initial wave of Southeast Asian immigrants did not have certainty about which country they would go to and hence were provided only a limited amount of linguistic training in...
new languages, resulting in a limited number of books written in English by Vietnamese American authors. The first generation, then, was left to construct oral narratives, and despite their initial dispersal to various parts of the United States, a distinct style was able to emerge. As Nhi T. Lieu notes, with this group there was a conscious decision made to fight the image of the refugee, the nameless hoard of boat people that filled the pages of Time and Reader’s Digest in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as it was important for many Vietnamese migrants to assert their material and communal success to both Americans and Vietnamese populations. The 1.5-generation authors, by contrast, have grown up in the United States and are equipped with the language skills and cultural capital to tell stories of refuge and refugee life in a manner that earlier generations could not. The burden and opportunity for this new generation of writers, though, is to construct new identities and communities in ways that deal seriously with the material and psychic effects of the traumatic passage and conditions of their immigration without reducing all Vietnamese American experience to this one event. Indeed, the first book-length study of Vietnamese American literature, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud’s This is All I Choose to Tell (2010), highlights strategic acts of disclosure as an important practice and style for refugee speakers: some information is kept private and away from rote interpretive practices but in such a way that the refugee does not have to perform absolute silence. Translating the encounter between the interviewer and respondent into audience and artist, refugee experience is no longer something to be surrendered to an aggressive and coercive interlocutor, and the act of negotiating the release of information can be reconsidered as a political and aesthetic act that the refugee consistently performs.

Centralizing refuge, on their own terms, is an important tactic for authors who want to assert their difference, or at the very least their particularity, from the population they left behind, a fact that is often obscured when their work is being promoted or reviewed. Indeed, Pelaud notes that reviewers “often blur the distinction between being Vietnamese American and Vietnamese,” ignoring details of cultural dislocation in favor of marketing authors’ experiences as beguilingly exotic. Southeast Asian
American writers also face an abundance of narratives produced about the Vietnam War that revolve around the concerns of American war veterans and state agencies, leaving little space for Southeast Asian American voices. Michele Janette contends that “Vietnamese American literature engages this erasure both in writing about Vietnamese perspectives on that war, and by expanding the signification of ‘Vietnam’ beyond being a synonym for a war.” Refuge, then, provides a place where Southeast Asian American authors can assert their different experiences and form a position where they are not just voices from Vietnam but are also rooted subjects who can critique different ideological systems and forms of representation that position them as perpetual foreign threats. While these refugees were created by a war, refugee aesthetics offers Southeast Asian American writers the opportunity to edit, explain, and contest their place both within and beyond the wartime narrative.

As Viet Thanh Nguyen enjoys the privileges of being a lauded professor and Pulitzer Prize–winning writer, when he takes the position of the refugee it is a matter of choice. Recognizing that the convergence of legal, visual, and temporal signifiers work together to define “a refugee,” his success makes it possible for him to put on and discard this status when he chooses:

I was once a refugee, although no one would mistake me for a refugee now. Because of this, I insist on being called a refugee, since the temptation to pretend that I am not a refugee is strong. It would be so much easier to call myself an immigrant, to pass myself off as belonging to a category of migratory humanity that is less controversial, less demanding, and less threatening than the refugee.

While the refugee is an immigrant, Nguyen identifies the emotional valence and complexity that the term “refugee” carries when compared to other migratory characters—much like Arendt recognized seventy-five years prior. The very appearance of refugees can disrupt the relationships, privileges, and
comforting ideologies of rooted life, and therefore the refugee condition is expected to exist as an exceptional and temporary phenomenon: a blip, where both those in the receiving country and refugees themselves will agree to forget the past in order to allow refugees to exist “just” as immigrants. While the broader refugee community may at times be amenable to this deal, the refugee writer is tasked with remembering and reintroducing the refugee into the collective consciousness, again and again, so that the complex patterns, structures, and contradictions of refugee life remain present.

However, the 1.5-generation refugee writer who can tell stories without the problematic coauthoring mediation that Truong deplores oftentimes has little memory of the actual event of refuge and therefore must seek creative ways to present this experience. Having arrived in the United States at four years old himself, for Nguyen being a “refugee writer” requires representing events that he can barely remember at all, a task further complicated by the fact that he cannot access “the voices of all the refugees who shared the exodus with me and did not make it, or did not survive.” In this light, even relying on the stories told to him by those elders who actively experienced refuge is not sufficient to produce a complete or “authentic” story, as it omits the experiences of the many who died and were left behind. Nguyen approaches this quandary by appealing to minor aesthetic sensibilities and relational positions, musing “if I can imagine them, then maybe I can hear them. That is the writers’ dream, that if only we can hear these people that no one else wants to hear, then perhaps we can make you hear them, too.” Making an audience hear voices they do not want to hear and making them hear these voices in a manner that may make the audience uncomfortable demands a deft aesthetic touch, a forcefulness, and indeed a will that is uncompromising about what and how refugee stories are told. This stylistic approach suggests that Nguyen’s choice to be a refugee writer is a call to actively and imaginatively restage refugee life, leveraging his 1.5-generation Vietnamese American voice to reveal the power imbalances embedded in conventional images of refugees, publish stories
without white coauthoring, and appeal to audiences without foregrounding authentic experiences.

While some refugee writers prefer to be “invisible” or see themselves as belonging to populations of “good refugees” who uniquely deserved refuge, Nguyen and many other refugee authors are drawn to the position because they believe in their “human kinship to Syrian refugees and the 65.6 million people that the United Nations classifies as displaced people.” Few capture the deep sense of responsibility that comes from the refugee position as elegantly as Vu Tran:

I had moved on from the circumstances that brought me to America and into the life it had given me and continues to give me. But America itself never quite moves on. The country of refuge never does, regularly stirred by new conflicts that remind it of the old ones. It keeps remembering your tragic origins, no matter how successfully you’ve embraced and achieved the promises it initially offered. On the street, it might no longer recognize the refugee in you, but the tide of American history continually washes new versions of you onto these shores, and their shadow is your shadow too.

For Tran, feeling like a refugee is tough to shake because the structures that create and react to refugee people endure. Understanding that he shares a “shadow” with other refugees, Tran imparts that being a refugee has “informed how I see myself, how I see others see me, and how I want to be seen.” This recognition—and the receiving country’s inability to move on—continually produces new refugee ties across national, racial, and ethnic lines, and the global political system ensures that the production of new refugees will continue. Embracing the refugee position, for Tran, provides the “personal fluidity” necessary to be outward-looking and inclusive when writing and pulling together the disparate elements of the refugee experience to create his own stories of refugee life.

Refugee life in the contemporary moment is anything but a state of exception and as such has its own styles, patterns, and
energy. To distinguish the role that refugee aesthetics plays during the twenty-first century, I have identified four key forces that shape how refugees are represented and received—the refugee image, the refugee position, refugee space, and the refugee personality—and have divided the book accordingly. In Chapter 1, “The Refugee Image,” I examine the visual legacy of the Southeast Asian refugee experience, taking music videos, graphic novels, and refugee artwork as points of departure to investigate how cultural documents aestheticize detention, boats, bodies, waiting, and resettlement and how these depictions cumulatively mark which groups of people qualify as refugees in the global imagination. This chapter reviews the aesthetic connotations that fashion each designation, considers the potential outcomes and consequences of various approaches to visual representation, and theorizes how the refugee aesthetic is deployed to bureaucratically and racially position present-day refugee populations seeking entry into the United States and Europe.

Chapter 2, “The Refugee Position,” turns more substantively to the cultural interventions that refugee artists make by examining how and why recent Southeast Asian American writers look to the refugee position to disentangle their complicated aesthetic legacy. Unlike refugees eager to leave the unsavory prejudicial connotations of the refugee image behind, these Southeast Asian American artists revisit the material pressures experienced by the first wave and reposition the critical dispositions found in exilic literature. This chapter proposes that new refugee aesthetic styles respond to the demand to explain one’s presence, gesture toward social identities, and articulate a future for all refugee communities that acknowledges the lasting qualities engendered by the refugee experience.

Chapter 3, “Refugee Space,” reorients the diasporic trajectory back out from the American continent to consider how refugees map and transform space. This chapter identifies new forms of refugee geography and recognizes how the imaginative force of places, such as the boat, oceans, and refugee camps, position Southeast Asian American lives in the global imagination. Through a close examination of Aimee Phan’s novel *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong* (2012), I review Phan’s unique projection
of “Asian America” as a stylized Asian American suburban-style development built in Vietnam, to contemplate the existence of refugee space in everyday contexts. While Phan’s imaginative construction proposes another future for refugee space and reminds us that new spaces are inevitable, it also describes a settler colonial impulse that discursively creates empty space at the expense of native inhabitants.

Chapter 4, “The Refugee Personality,” explores Viet Thanh Nguyen’s strategic deployment and refashioning of the refugee position into a subversive intellectual stance by analyzing the success of his Pulitzer Prize–winning book The Sympathizer. Paying close attention to Nguyen’s own performance as a visible Vietnamese American author and academic, I track how he is positioned in reviews of his book while also noting how he negotiates his dual role during interviews and publicity tours. I argue that as a doggedly reflexive writer, Nguyen actively bleeds the material conditions of literary creation into the book itself by mapping patterns of taste, representational histories, and the perils of strategic exoticism, educating readers, editors, and interviewers through his creative craftwork.

The book concludes with “Refugee Futures,” a reflection that considers what happens to refugee aesthetics now that it has also grown into a literary and artistic style that is identifiable and usable by nonrefugee artists. I explore in what ways this proliferation of refugee aesthetics both empowers and displaces refugee authors, and I query what this artistic attention will mean for refugees in the future, particularly since refugee populations will seemingly continue to increase in number and diversify in ethnic makeup.

The Refugee Aesthetic argues that the close examination of refugee aesthetics is necessary to track how the refugee category functions as fodder for political polemics. Refugee designation and admission is limited to particular groups, and therefore the refugee project “remains not so much a wholesale humanitarian endeavor” as an exercise in state construction that selects incoming people on the basis of ideology, political affiliation, and race. Drawing from sociologist Randy Lippert, Yến Lê Espiritu contends that “during the Cold War years, ‘refugeeness became
Refugee Aesthetics / 23

a moral-political tactic,’ demarcating the difference between the supposed uncivilized East and the civilized West and fostering a ‘cohesion of Western Alliance nations’ where the “paradigmatic refugee was the East European and Soviet escapee.” The Southeast Asian American refugee population thus signaled a dramatic turn in the image of who refugees were, recoding this category with racial connotations that mixed together war, communism, and Asianness. In this light, the aestheticized pattern of contemporary refugee reformation should be read as a racial drama in addition to a political one. As Mimi Thi Nguyen notes, the refugee narrative is one of “progress” that “target[s] the subject of freedom—the new friend who becomes the new arrival—through the concatenation of evolutionary and given times, developmental stages and universal humanity, and a temporalizing strategy,” allowing for warmongering countries to point to “positive” outcomes and assert their benevolence through these endeavors. This powerful narrative posits that the refugee is brought forth from a dystopian past (which was in part fashioned by wars and systems of empire) before they are brought into “Western modernity.” This dominant narrative framework positions the refugee as a renewable resource and a remarkably durable technology, telling a tale that provides a teleology of racial progress, reframes wars of aggression as humanitarian endeavors, and delivers the rhetorical infrastructure necessary for empire to pursue further wars.

This book, then, is about the politics of the refugee aesthetic, understanding that refugee expression has been cloaked in and produced by grand geopolitical narratives that focus on the refugee’s reformation, a perspective that provides an alibi and a distraction for the continuation of imperial endeavors. Liberating refugee narratives and aesthetics from these confines does not produce social critique in and of itself but instead allows scholarly inquiry to examine refugee production on its own terms whether it challenges, avoids, or even reinforces these common geopolitical narratives. Recognizing the ways that refugee experiences are aestheticized should change the ways that refugees are conventionally thought of and can demonstrate how a greater flexibility of address, multiple subject positions, and an
emphasis on interiority are currently shifting the focus from a singular refugee aesthetic to the complexity offered by refugee aesthetics. Refugee aesthetics is not a problem to be solved, in other words, but instead is a generative force that elongates the temporal coordinates of refugee life to reimagine the past, present, and future of this population in the world.