Refugeography in "Post-Racial" America: Bao Phi's Activist Poetry

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> [P]oetry cannot be reduced to being a mere art for the rich and idle, storytelling is not a luxury or a harmless pastime.
> —Trinh T. Minh-Ha (*Elsewhere* 15)

> My people, we are a song that we can never stop singing against the silence / My people, we are a song that we can never stop singing against the silence
> —Bao Phi ("For Us" 96-97)

In the opening lines of his poem "You Bring Out the Vietnamese in Me" (2011), performance poet Bao Phi intones:

> let me take you for a ride / of my refugeography
> if your mama could cook you know she'd make a batch of me
> nasty catastrophes / Ơi trời ơi / Fatality / See / Bao Phi
> la một người bất lịch sự / Well, excuse me
> I say one for Asian / Two for American / And three for love. (3-7)[1]

After introducing himself through cheeky braggadocio as an ill-mannered bilingual emcee and marking his "territory" with these lines, Phi charts the spatial and psychic terrains of Vietnamese/American refugeehood. The poem evokes the resilience of traversing the open seas on a leaky boat, the ghosts of lives lost during war in Vietnam, and the dangers of growing up in the projects of Minneapolis. It also recalls moments of ordinary pleasure: dancing the night away at the Prom Center, riding motorbikes along Lê Lợi Boulevard, and receiving gifts at Christmas. As the poem moves between the brutal and the beautiful, Vietnam and the United States, what emerges is a fullness of experience, one that is distinctly American *and* Vietnamese but also transnational and borderless in texture. As he describes this multiplicity of life under the refugeography rubric, Phi moves the term *refugee* beyond the confines of the demarcated "camp" to encompass a more capacious field of experience. Refugeography extends the meaning of the refugee concept by describing the refugee's experiential and spatial geographies. It provides an alternate way of understanding a category that, for many, signifies

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emptiness and lack, filling the notion of "refugee" with a plethora of individuals, places, and experiences. In Phi's poetry, refugeography is a poetics—a mode of expression and a politics, a way of perceiving and being in the world—that critically insists on the specificity of embodied experience and quotidian textures and, through them, human subjectivity and agency.

The neologism *refugeography* is a generative frame within which to discuss and apprehend the corpus of Phi's work—his poetry and activism, or his poetry *as* activism.[2] The term also serves as an anchoring concept for my broader argument that in "post-racial" America—which also happens to coincide with a moment of reinvigorated US empire—incarnations of the Asian American cultural nationalist mode find renewed relevance as they seek to make visible everyday injustices and structural oppressions that national politics, global power, and white supremacy attempt to erase from view. Phi's poetry—in its preoccupations, militancy, and urgency—harkens back to the cultural and political forms of Asian America's early formation as a cultural nation and collective consciousness in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in doing so, it addresses both an evolving field of Asian American studies oriented toward the transnational *and* an American society wishing to see itself as beyond race and racism.[3] Phi's work disrupts the narrative of a post-racial society by centering race, racism, and racialized identity. As it speaks in different registers and on different terms to Asian Americans and the American mainstream, Phi's work takes hold of the idea of "progress" and demands that we pause, reflect, and, ultimately, take action. In the way that it calls for personal and social change in the face of the advance of "color-blind" neoliberalism, Phi's voice is an important reminder of the value of coalitional politics and racialized resistance. The force of Phi's work comes from his deployment of the refugee category, one that he resignifies in the term *refugeography* for the purpose of poetic and political expression.

My discussion conceptualizes this important refugee voice and seeks to listen to its ideological timbre, follow its rhythms and flows, and attend to its echoes of losses and lives lived. Like Phi's poetry, the concept of refugeography exists in multiplicity and through specificities; it can be understood simultaneously as a mode of thought and an aesthetic, an artistic approach and a political commitment, an ontological state of being and a geographical "country" in Viet Thanh Nguyen's sense of overlapping geographies and temporalities, both real and symbolic.[4] It is a poet's personal voice and his politicized worldview. The term locates the refugee within and without the nation, in the past and the present, and as formative to an understanding of subjectivities and communities that lie on the horizon. It recalls Giorgio Agamben's hopeful investment in the refugee as "the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come."

Refugeography describes Phi's overarching project, which politicizes the term *refugee* through the notion of "geography." Such a project expands the conceptual

purview of refugee, insisting that racialization on American shores, police brutality, Asian American identity, diasporic consciousness, and social justice activism, along with imperialism, foreign war, and forced migration, are refugee concerns. This wide but interconnected range of issues also opens up the geographic spatiality of Phi's poetry. While he draws on an Asian American cultural nationalist politics, traditionally circumscribed by the borders of the United States, Phi's poetry has a more transnational or global range of reference.[5] It is attuned to the ways Asia figures in the formation of Asian America and how American political and military interventions overseas have shaped our understanding of both "Asia" and "America." In other words, an exploration of Asian America, Phi's poetry demonstrates, must reckon with American histories occurring outside its borders, in places across the Pacific, and how they structure the lived realities of Asian subjects in the United States. Thus, for example, Vietnam is conjured in Phi's work not just to signify a war or even a country, as the oppositional slogan "Vietnam is a country, not a war" would have it, but as part of a complex assemblage of experiences, peoples, and places that give rise to Asian America and Asian American political resistance. The boundaries between the national and the transnational become blurred in Phi's poetry, and the geographies that refugeography gathers destabilize the accepted meanings of "refugee," "America," and "Asian America." As such, refugeography signifies the psychic landscape of refugee subjectivity, the scope of refugee subjects (agents *and* topics), and the physical places of refugee movement and dwelling.

Refugeography and Critical Refugee Studies

Phi's poetics challenge dominant modalities of representation that take refugees as *objects*—of both academic study and humanitarian aid—often casting them as "invisible, speechless, and, above all, nonpolitical" (Nyers 3).[6] These discourses either deny or reduce psychic and spatial "geography" for refugees, keeping them contained within defined epistemological boundaries as a way to achieve specific policy and political ends. In contrast, refugeography elaborates on the critical possibilities of the "refugee" concept—its potential to call into question the stability and legitimacy of borders, sociopolitical categories, and the nation-state. As such, it functions through a "critical refugee paradigm," what Yến Lê Espiritu describes as a mode of analysis that uses the figure of the refugee to highlight and critique "the relationship between war, race, and violence, then and now" ("Toward" 411).

Inspired by Espiritu's timely call for a critical refugee studies, scholars have utilized the refugee figure to examine US militarism and its long afterlife. Mimi Thi Nguyen, for example, has shown how the refugee is the "target" and "instrument" (24) of what she theorizes as "the gift of freedom," the transparent "good" that America confers on others through liberal war and rescue. In her analysis, the

refugee is the nexus through which the workings and intersections of empire, war-making, and freedom are knowable. Relatedly, Viet Thanh Nguyen's conceptualization of "refugee discourse" provides a framework for reading refugee experiences and "the time and spaces that produce such experiences" (934). For him, a refugee discourse orients us "outside the nation and toward a future after the state" (938). In their introduction to the landmark special issue of *positions* on the field of Southeast Asian American studies, editors Fiona I. B. Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam call for continued engagement with the refugee figure beyond descriptive sociological accounts through a "transnational cultural studies analytic" that pushes "new questions about the circulation of, compromise with, and challenges to the knowledge regimes of US empire" (678).

Yet what do these valuable frameworks look like in cultural praxis? How exactly do refugee analytics perform their critiques? What do these optics foreground, clarify, or challenge when they home in on the objects and subjects in question? Refugeography provides a concrete and dynamic example of how the refugee becomes a mode of knowledge production and a critical disruption of hegemonic ideologies, inviting a poetic and political engagement with the forces of power. Mobilized in Phi's poetics is precisely the epistemological and political force generated in critical refugee studies. In other words, Phi's work represents a particularized performance of, and conversation with, the theoretical frameworks—such as "the gift of freedom," "refugee discourse," and "critical refugee paradigm"—that critics delineate in their academic discussions.

I do not wish, however, to set up a simple binary between theory and practice here, equating academic work with "theory" and artistic/activist work with "practice." My interpretive approach takes literature not as a set of objects that simply plays out a script prewritten by theory but rather as interventions that illuminate, alter, and amend the very frameworks that are constructed and used to read them. Indeed, my major underlying claim describes Phi's work as theoretical, particularly in the way it opens up different modalities for apprehending conventional concepts and perceiving the world.[7] Phi's poetry proposes that *the minutia of experience is the frame*—that the force of political resistance and critique lies, first and foremost, in the careful layering and unknotting, the fastidious examination, and the syncretic imaginings of quotidian experiences and lives. In a context where these lives and experiences are denied visibility and articulation by institutional structures, or are swept away by the relentless course of history, the focus on subjective life represents a form of critical memory work that responds to and resists both historical and contemporary forces of denial and erasure.

Phi's poetry fuses (auto)biography with the fictive, the imaginative, and the utopic to craft a voice that does not eschew refugee experiences (or history and the need to witness it) in favor of aesthetics or "literary" technique.[8] Instead, refugee embodiment is central to poetic expression and promise. It is

important to clarify that while refugeography employs a refugee modality as a method of articulation, it does not reduce, essentialize, or confine Asian Americans and their experiences to the refugee category. Instead, for Phi, it is by way of war and empire's human rem(a)inders that larger issues of identity politics, resistance to oppression, panethnic solidarity, and displacement and rootedness come to the foreground and are shown to be ongoing contemporary contestations. Refugeography thus is an enabling concept, one that begins with the figure of the refugee but does not necessarily end there. It is expansive and wide-ranging in the way it explores and sketches out subjectivities, changing positionalities, and physical geographies. Yet it is singular and uncompromising as it celebrates and promotes Asian American community and identity and, with it, the underlying belief that such "identity issues" are real and germane in the contemporary moment, despite seeming political and social progress and changing intellectual interests.

A Poetics of Community

In 2011, Phi published *Sông I Sing: Poems*, a collection of poetry that brings together his most important works in print form for the first time.[9] Constituting an oeuvre of more than two decades of performance, recording, and writing, the book offers seminal pieces that showcase the primary direction and thematic concerns of Phi's poetry. Rather than attempt to survey this comprehensive archive or perform sustained close readings of individual pieces, my analysis attempts to map out the coordinates of Phi's refugeography. While most of the poems in the collection have either been performed live in front of an audience or recorded by the poet, changing the way they could be analyzed, I engage them here as "written oral poetry," which, according to Tyler Hoffman, is poetry "written to be experienced as oral, although read by literate audiences" (5). In other words, I analyze them as I would other kinds of written poetry but with attention to their existence off the page, aurally experienced and constituted by both the speaking poet and his audiences. While not directly central to my discussion here, the form of spoken word, which emphasizes sociality and social transformation, is an important part of Phi's project of identity and community politics.

Emerging from Phi's poetic archive is a distinct Asian American framework of cultural representation and critique. Phi dedicates *Sông I Sing* to "my Asian American people," and in the opening poem, titled "For Us," he sets the tone of inclusivity, first by drawing a large geographical map:

> From the mud of the Mekong to the bones of the Mississippi
> From the dusty winds of Manzanar to the glowing scars of Hiroshima
> From the sun in Bombay to the moon in Alaska
> From the mists of the Himalayas to the ash of Volcano
> From the hills of Laos to the openmouthed mic in St. Paul

From the streets of Seoul to the sidewalks of Tehrangeles
From California shores to New York corner stores. (1-7)

Having determined the coordinates of this transnational and intersectional space, he then casts a wide net, addressing, among others, refugees of war, victims of racialization and racism, the economically underprivileged, model minorities, those who seek white validation, and the consciously politicized, ending with this stanza:

This is for you,
For your yellow-brown skin
This is for you
For your black hair
This is for that beautiful mirror
I see in your eyes
This is for you
This is for you
My people
This
Is for
Us. (117-28)

This establishing poem, and the way that it transitions from a "you" to an "us" in the closing stanza, signals an unequivocal investment in the collective—even if that collective, like all communities, may be uneven and internally discordant—and the transformative possibilities of an Asian American community formation.

Phi emphasizes the multiplicity and heterogeneity of this community. Implicitly referencing Lisa Lowe's influential declaration of Asian American difference, Phi gives an account of this still misrecognized and misrepresented population.[10] Whether he is imagining a group of Vietnamese people who are all perceived to have the same ubiquitous surname "Nguyễn" or responding to racism from public figures, such as politician John McCain and pop star Gwen Stefani, or decrying and eulogizing the death of people such as Fong Lee and Thiên Minh Lý, who were victims of police brutality or hate crimes, Phi's poetry challenges monolithic, one-dimensional, and stereotypical understandings of Asian Americans. For example, in the poem "Untitled," dedicated to Thiên Minh Lý—a Vietnamese American who was beaten and stabbed to death by two white men looking for a random "Jap" to harass in celebration of the Dallas Cowboys' Super Bowl victory in 1996—Phi laments:

You could have been
the good-looking older brother that everyone liked,
the tennis player and scholar
who loved your awkward younger brother,
sneaking me champagne at Đà Vũ's,
singing along with the beautiful Ca Sĩ's as they crooned,

making your suit snap in a cha cha or tango,
giving me quarters for Ms. Pac Man. (9-16)

After this fanciful conjuring of the could-have-been, Phi recites an inventory of embodied facts:

Thiên Minh Lý, Vietnamese American, honor student,
double major in English and biology, UCLA,
masters in physiology and biophysics in one year at Georgetown,
handsome Vietnamese Student Association leader,
poet who started a Vietnamese newsletter.
Dead. (33-38)

In the way that it paints a portrait of the dead, full of lost potential and material individuality, the poem powerfully seeks to rectify the racist logic that led to Lý's tragic murder in the first place. In contrast to the white men's indiscriminate Asian "Jap," Phi presents a human subject with a story and context. Interestingly, he highlights not only Lý's role as a community organizer and an Asian American in the leftist, "politically correct" sense but also his model minority status. Lý seemingly fits the profile of the high-achieving, well-adapted, successful Asian subject, which makes his violent murder even more jarring, or perhaps disturbingly unsurprising, within the schema of American race politics. Phi shows us that despite becoming the kind of racial citizen that the nation-state vaunts, Lý was *still* murdered. The blunt suggestion here is that Lý lost his life *because* of his perceived "success." (It must be remembered that, like another politically galvanizing killing—that of Vincent Chin in 1982—Lý's murder occurred within the context of Japanese economic ascendency in the global economy, seen as a major "yellow peril" threat to American capitalist hegemony.) In the poem, Phi brings up the figure of the model minority not to celebrate or to deny its existence but rather to point out the painful irony of "success" and "assimilation" in white America. In "Untitled," the tragic killing is also a concrete occasion for us to pinpoint and seriously consider the often implicit message that a fundamentally racist society sends out to its racialized Others: that they do not belong, that no matter how much they try to "fit in," this (anxiously white) space will forever deny them complete, unconditional acceptance.

The dead do not necessarily "speak" in Phi's poetry but rather become illuminated—understood, remembered, and represented in ways that were not accorded to them in life by mainstream culture. Elsewhere in the collection, Phi queries: "can somebody tell me / How our culture can be hip / And yet our people remain invisible?" ("For Us" 38-40). It is this invisibility, or rather distorted constellation of images that straddle visibility and invisibility, that his work vehemently challenges. While racist sentiment is deeply embedded in American society and is much larger than the single act of two individual white murderers, Phi's small sketch of subjectivity is the kind of cultural intervention that troubles

the long-standing stereotype that Asian Americans are homogeneous and interchangeable and, thus, killable without regard for their individual humanity. As an elegy, the poem mourns Lý's death; it makes grievance *through* grief, as in Anne Anlin Cheng's classic formulation of racial melancholia. The complaint is the poem itself, which is also a lamentation, rendering grief social and extending its reach beyond an understanding that privileges individualized and privatized meanings.

The poet's "I" that appears near the end of the poem to lament the lost opportunity for intimacy between him and the dead is therefore not the traditional "I" of lyric poetry but a speaking subject that embodies something more akin to a plural "we"; it resembles what Xiaojing Zhou sees as the destabilizing and relational speaking subject of Asian American poetry, "an enabling subject position that entails multiple possibilities for colonized peoples" (5). According to Marc Smith, the democratic ethos of the spoken word form, where focus is not directed at the poet's uniqueness or individual talent but instead on "the community and the audience," renders "the poet as the servant of the people" (qtd. in Hoffman 200). The poet's responsibility then, in both the aesthetic and social senses, is to write in multitude with and to his or her community. This production and consumption of poetry within a collective—poet, listener, reader, interlocutor, and so forth—make possible a shared sociality of poetics and experience that blurs the "I" in order to clarify the "we." Through poetry, Phi's personal "I" becomes the basis for collective mourning that is deeply conscious of the social and political dimensions of one individual death.

Phi reminds us that Lý is not the first, nor will he be the last, Asian American to lose his (or her) life as a result of racism:

> You didn't die for us to learn,
> we've learned this lesson many times before.
> And no one is talking about you.
> They want to bury you twice.
>
> You were my brother, one of many
> that I will never meet.
> A family of ghosts. (41-47)

He then invokes the names of other Asian Americans who were victims of racial violence: "Thanh Mai, Naoki Kamijima, Tony Pham, Won Joon Yoon, / Mukesh and Kanu Patel, Thung Phetakoune" (48-49). Connecting this murder of one Vietnamese American "brother" to a spectral "family" of Asian Americans killed because of their skin tone contextualizes these fatal acts of hate in a larger historical and structural system of entrenched racism and reveals how this racism is not being addressed in the present day, as more young brown men continue to die. He then further enlarges this family of victims to include "Asian women raped and murdered by American GIs in Okinawa, Korea, / by good ole American

boys in Spokane, Chicago, Cornell" (54-55), drawing transnational connections between American imperialist militarism overseas, with its sexual underpinnings, and domestic racist violence.

Similarly, in "8 (9)," about the killing of Fong Lee, a Hmong American teenager, by a white policeman, Phi juxtaposes the terror of facing the "protective" state's gun barrel as an unarmed, racialized youth in ostensibly peaceful and free urban American streets with the civilian fear of soldiers and bombs in a past war on a faraway continent. He writes:

> All our lives, men with guns.
> Chased, in the womb, in the arms
> Of our parents.
>
> Our parents
> Chased, all our lives,
> By men with guns.
>
> In the womb, in our parents' arms
> We've run
> Chased by men with guns. (57-65)

The syntactic rearrangement of words and phrases in the above passage tangles past and present, here and there. As Espiritu points out, Phi's poetry suggests that "U.S. wars in Southeast Asia, haphazard resettlement policies and practices, and neglect of urban neighborhoods are *linked*, and that it is this cumulative violence that has profoundly affected 'colored boys' in urban America[,] . . . both the living and the dead, as well as the living dead" (*Body* 186). Drawing a link between American foreign policy and domestic governance is not new. During the civil rights and Vietnam War eras, activists and cultural workers stressed the understanding that ideologies and logics undergirding American imperialism overseas and those that order racial hierarchies in the homeland are one and the same. The model of "internal colonialism" that arose to explain the plight of racialized subjects in the United States during a tumultuous time in American history, Phi's poems argue, remains topical to an understanding of lived racial realities for those without the privileges that accompany hegemonic whiteness in postcolonial and post-racial times.

As they express outrage—outrage that is foremost about raising consciousness—the poetic memorialization of Lý's and Lee's deaths perform a critique of American empire. Phi joins a chorus of scholars and activists who make clear that migrant Others are "here" in the United States because Americans were "over there" in the first place; more specifically, they argue that Asian Americans are the "living proof" (Bascara 8) of American imperial ambitions overseas.[11] Phi's poems open up a less myopic view of history, in which the presence of the Hmong teenager and Vietnamese honor student in America is understood as

the direct result of violent displacements brought on by American imperial expansion via war. Their deaths must be viewed as occurring under the same racist system that "brought them over." In this way, Phi demonstrates how state violence is not static or isolated; it travels and reaches all corners of the world, manifesting perhaps most insidiously within the national body itself. Like "Untitled," "8 (9)" ends by recalling other racialized "ghosts" (here, not exclusively Asian American) of state violence to further demonstrate the varied targets of empire:

> Michael Cho. Cau Thi Bich Tran. John T. Williams.
> Tycel Nelson. Oscar Grant. Fong Lee.
> May your names be the hymn
> wind that sways
> police bullets to miss. (66-70)

The poem becomes a collective "song" that resists the trajectory of American imperial violence, mourning and memorializing its victims in order to deflect the persistent, linear force of its destructive logic.

"Untitled" and "8 (9)" are but two examples of how Phi's work utilizes individual subjectivity in order to take up the social and political concerns of a larger panethnic formation of Asian Americans. The poems illustrate how a refugeography framework is not circumscribed by traditional understandings of refugee, refugee concerns, or ethnic and national boundaries. While it might seem strange to focus on two poems that deal with murder to discuss Phi's commitment to Asian American identity, the poetic renderings of these deaths function as rallying calls, celebrations of life, and grievances that *affirm* identity in the collective sense. In the deaths of these two young men—and those who tragically preceded them and those who will inevitably follow—the ideological and discursive becomes material and concrete, and the opportunity arises for those who continue to breathe—for Asian America—to define and locate itself in and against a system of domestic and global violence.

(De)Centering Asian America

Yet the panethnic Asian America of the early twenty-first century looks different from the one that emerged during the Third World Liberation Front strikes of the late 1960s. As Greg Choy notes, "*Sông I Sing* focuses on Asian Americans who are for the most part absent from the movement years—Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, Himalayan, Tibetan, Korean, South Asian, Arab Americans—and whose stories unfold in what would have been unimaginable places to those movement writers." The community that Phi conjures in his poetry reflects the changing face of Asian America, due not only to unabated American militarism overseas during and beyond the Cold War era but also to shifting (im)migration and reproduction patterns.

There is, however, another critical project at play beyond mere reflection of sociological and demographic data. Operating in Phi's work is a decentering of Asian America that functions to expand its sites and meanings. In *Sông I Sing*, the dominant Asian American ethnic groups—Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and, to a lesser extent, Filipino Americans—do not receive sustained attention, and the dominant centers of Asian American settlement—California and New York—are bypassed in favor of Minneapolis-Saint Paul, where Phi grew up and where there is a sizable population of Southeast Asian refugees. In poems such as "Giving My Neighbor a Ride to Her Job," "For Colored Boys in Danger of . . .," and "Race," the textures of life in Midwestern cities are offered up as experiences that speak to what it means to be Asian American.[12] Such experiences go beyond readily available understandings, filling in the narrative gaps of Asian America's cultural and geographical archive. This emphasis in Phi's poetry, however, stems from material situatedness and, while purposeful, is not driven by a desire to exclude or marginalize these prominent groups or centers. Rather, it could be viewed as a critical redefining of the Asian American category, an understanding of the intricacies and internal politics that mark the umbrella identification and the field of study. This shift toward those ethnic communities absent from the early Asian American movement years, and the places outside its centers, is thus an attempt to make the field of inquiry broader and to explore the complexity of a contested and ever-changing category.

Yet, as it recognizes the dynamic quality of the Asian American formation, Phi's poetry also invests and "roots" itself in the aims and ideals of the founding movement. In his review of *Sông I Sing*, Choy writes that Bao Phi's poetry "is unabashedly and unwaveringly all about being Asian American in the old activist sense of the term." Employing George Uba's concept of "tribalism," Choy reads Phi's work as "an ethnographic signifier of resistance to an oppressive and dominant culture, as anti-assimilationist, as privileging the oral over the written, and as more embracing of the polemic than the poetic." Choy's analysis situates Phi's work in the vein of early cultural nationalist activists and cultural workers, especially their concern with various kinds of "claiming"—of space, representation, and identity. Yet, as Choy explains, this mode of "tribalism" or cultural nationalism fell out of fashion in the 1980s and early part of the 1990s. This is due to a variety of factors but perhaps largely because of the progress and progressions that the movement brought about. In the current moment, where an established field of Asian American cultural production and criticism is oriented toward the transnational and diasporic, where larger numbers of Asian Americans are entering social, political, and cultural public life than ever before, where, ostensibly, the problem of the color line is no longer a problem in the United States, Phi's work might seem somewhat like an anomaly, somewhat out of time and place.

If, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it seems as if questions about identity, especially identity bound by national or geographic borders, are

outdated and increasingly less germane to our understanding of the porous, globalized world, what is the critical edge, the social relevance of Phi's poetics of Asian American identity? I am reminded of the important point made by Sau-ling C. Wong in her controversial essay "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads" (1995). Expressing her reservations about the trend she calls "denationalization," which encompasses the easing of cultural nationalist concerns, the collapsing of distinctions between "Asian" and "Asian American," and the focus on diaspora, Wong argues against an understanding of Asian America through the terms of progress and teleology. She writes: "It would be far more useful to conceive of *modes* rather than *phases* of Asian American subjectivity: an indigenizing mode can coexist and alternate with a diasporic or transnational mode, but the latter is not to be lauded as the culmination of the former, a stage more advanced or more capacious" (17).

For Wong, an "indigenizing mode" of production and critique, where local and national issues do not give way to transnational ones, remains relevant to the globalized contemporary moment. Phi's work performs this idea of an "indigenizing mode" in a way that does not deny other sets of concerns, for, as I have discussed earlier, his work does not eschew diasporic, transnational, or international connections as it insists on the urgency of more domestically located issues, such as the necessity of Asian American identity or the fight against systemic racism endemic to American society. Rather, refugeography shows their imbrication—that racism within US borders is a transnational matter and American foreign policy is a local issue. In highlighting early Asian American concerns as still pertinent in the present moment, refugeography reveals how the work of the movement is a constant, ongoing process. Phi's poetry is not, however, simply an emulation of a style or a rehashing of themes. Rather, he practices what I would like to call a *throwback poetics* that evokes a time when revolution, liberation, and change were not ideals but imminent possibilities for Asian Americans to articulate the challenges of the present in a way that envisioned a less oppressive future.

As it recalls the spirit of the past, Phi's intertwining of politics and aesthetics (aesthetics *is* political and vice versa) enacts what Jill Dolan terms "utopian performatives," making "palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better" (6). In her discussion of performance poetry—particularly Def Poetry Jam performances, in which Phi has participated—she describes the poet as a social prophet, heralding "the possibility of an elsewhere where generosity graces vulnerability, where pride replaces pain, where the stuff of daily life becomes transformative rather than constraining" (107). Spoken word performance calls provisional communities into being to imagine, negotiate, and rehearse possible futures more desirable than the unsatisfying present. Thus a throwback poetics is simultaneously a propulsion forward, whereby turning back

or "returning"—not in a nostalgic or melancholic sense—to moments of political galvanization, identity consciousness, and activist organizing gives inspiration and fuel to similar contemporary projects such as the ones Phi outlines in his poetry and embodies in his everyday life. In drawing together disparate experiences and espousing an unambiguous politics of anti-assimilationist resistance, refugeography is a "style" that is in fact also a *lifestyle*, a particular way of perceiving and being in the world. Phi's extensive community organizing and activist work, including those through The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis and his many protests against the staging of the racist *Miss Saigon* musical, for example, are not mutually exclusive from the poems in *Sông I Sing*; they inform and are informed by the force of his poetic conviction. An aesthetic appreciation of the poet's words is simultaneously a recognition of his political work extending off the page, outside of the "text."

In addition to referencing the student movement of the late 1960s and early Asian American political and cultural activism, Phi describes his poetics as growing out of the "golden age of hip hop, in the late '80s and early '90s, when hip hop was really getting a lot of attention" (qtd. in Chen). Hip-hop is a major influence in Phi's writing, and while he is not a hip-hop artist per se, the thrust of his work closely aligns with what Cathy J. Schlund-Vials describes as a "hip-hop constant": "a politically conscious message that remembers profound acts of state violence, histories of systemic inequality, biopolitical regulation, and necropolitical socioeconomic oppression." In her discussion of Southeast Asian hip-hop artists, Schlund-Vials delineates another kind of "throwback," where emcees, "[s]ituated amid a self-deterministic milieu of anti-imperial protest," "repeatedly return to the historical (and transnational) circumstances of orchestrated mass loss and state-authorized violence" (158) to perform their critiques. As I have shown, this return to the past, to injury and loss, to violence that is not yet "over," is an integral feature of Phi's poetry, and while hip-hop may not be the medium through which he articulates his vision, it is nonetheless a significant inspiration for his poetics/politics.[13]

Race and Racism in Post-Racial Times

As refugeography seeks to forge a just world, vehemently challenging racism and making legible the intersections between racist logics and sexism, homophobia, classism, and other forms of discrimination, it refuses and refutes post-racial discourses, which have been circulating in the United States for some time and gained public ascendancy after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008.[14] Driven by a color-blind ideology that proclaims the body politic as beyond race and racism, post-racial discourses imagine race as a category that is no longer significant or relevant. That is to say, no one thinks about race anymore because the United States has put its racist past behind it through progressive

judicial, political, and social reforms. According to this rationale, the playing field is now leveled, and people are able to see one another as "individuals."[15] In such a context of false racial progress, Phi's voice represents a crucial reminder that the violent lessons of history have not yet been fully learned, that race and racism remain material and real for those who must live it daily, or die because of it.[16]

Refugeography is a poetics that exposes the *lie* of post-racial America—it directs our attention to race as a category that still organizes social life (and death), and in doing so, runs against the grain of the "color-blind" present. Phi's poetry is an oppositional response to a cultural moment marked by an unwillingness to see the effects of race and racism. His critique is all the more powerful because it operates precisely within this contemporary condition of seeming color-blindness, where the slate is supposedly wiped clean of inequalities, where claims of white injury gain popular traction, displacing the historical and contemporary victims of state racism. In "Reverse Racism," Phi employs a billingsgate tone common in slam poetry to satirize and mock the discourse of "reverse racism" that views the dominant white group as having become disadvantaged in post-racial times, accusing the actual victims of racism of being racist for fighting racism. In a series of scenario inversions, Phi cites instances of racism against Asian Americans that have attended the building and continual maintenance of the United States, but he instead reverses the roles of white Americans and Asian Americans. He begins:

> I'm gonna take every white man from his job and force him to construct light rail transit systems for fifty cents an hour. When they're done I'll make sure they are moved to a special little section of town that we'll call Whiteyville, where tourists can come to shop for curios and eat exotic hot dish . . . (1-5)

Then he notes:

> I'm going to teach nothing but Asian American history in every classroom, and when little Morty Crackerman raises his hand and asks *teacher, teacher, we don't study any white people*, I will have him branded as a troublemaker and suspend him from school . . . (23-26)

The mistreatment of white people Phi describes is not merely a revenge fantasy but rather an occasion to name actual racist events and material conditions that have shaped Asian American lives. The fact that racism is "done" to white people in the poem serves to emphasize its absurdity. Readers are meant to realize, however, that the preposterousness of the situations lies in the fact that racist acts and discrimination are directed at *any* group of people at all—here, the absurd is real and tragic. The cumulative effect of the poem's hyperbole is a kind of twisted humor that exposes the coexistence of race and power. The impossibility of the scenarios, of statements such as "Asian Americans are gonna have it all,

and white people are going to / hate themselves and love us for it . . ." (113-14) that conclude the poem, illustrate the unequal dynamics that are firmly in place *outside* the fantasy of the poem.

On the other hand, one of the most subtle and poignant ways in which Phi attempts to counteract post-racial ideology is through his series of persona poems in a section titled "The Nguyễns." In these poems, he employs the most ubiquitous Vietnamese surname as a vehicle to engage the markers of difference that prevent uncomplicated color-blindness and to demonstrate the complex diversity that constitutes seeming ethnic uniformity. The series begins with the juxtaposition of short but detailed life fragments of a group of Vietnamese Americans in the first poem, also titled "The Nguyễns." It then goes on to reveal how the members of this group are connected:

> Last name, Nguyễn, all of them
> they're not related
> but they're more related than any of them will ever know.
>
> Their last name is not Nguyễn,
> it's Trần, it's Bùi, Phan, Đoàn, Huỳnh,
> and they are pissed off that this poem suggests they are not Vietnamese
> just cuz their last name is not Nguyễn. (60-66)

The ambiguity that Phi plays on here—that his motley characters are Nguyễns and are not Nguyễns at the same time—illuminates the racialized way that Vietnamese Americans are blanketed as a group of homogenous Nguyễns or a mass of "boat people". The poems provocatively pose a question for the reader/public: what does it mean to actually see someone as an "individual," not without *race* but without the screens of *racism*? Race, thus, becomes a necessary lens to read the poems, a lens that requires an understanding that these subjects are indeed "related," not by blood but through a history of racialized violence that includes war, refuge-seeking, and racialization on (and beyond) American shores.

A sense of relatedness, however, does not function to reduce these individuals. The poems that follow in the series contain a host of individual Nguyễn characters speaking widely about racism in the media and in everyday life, cultural appropriation in the fusion food trend, national invisibility in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, queerness and homophobia, war, military service, and romantic love, among other subjects. Collectively they draw the contours of Vietnamese American contemporary life. According to Phi, this is a life unequivocally marked by the category of race in both its structural and situational iterations. In "Vu Nguyễn's Revenge," Phi writes about how racial grief can

> pummel you into a shape
> you
> never
> wanted to become. (84-87)

While it describes the unbearable weight of racism, the poem also importantly makes room for the expression of anger that victims of racism harbor, sometimes for an entire lifetime. Addressed to a school bully (Chavis Johnson), the piece touches on the race, class, and cultural privileges that enable a white boy to call an Asian boy a "gook" while beating him and later winning the heart of the desired Asian girl. This resentment leads Vu Nguyễn to seek retribution in its many mutated forms in adult life, asking "why the world is always ready for your kind of hate / but never mine?" (70-71). Similarly, in "Cleats Crowned by Soil," Unity Nguyễn, a politically minded young woman, endures hateful taunts as she moves through life: "*gook, chink bitch, butch, dyke, communist, / feminazi*" (42-43). Yet she has a multi-ethnic community of "Chicano/as, Indigenous, Africans, African Americans, Indians, Arabs, / Chinese, Hmong" (26-27) who are "busboys, artists-activists, community workers, / nonprofit hustlers, investment bankers," (28-29) to call "friends and neighbors" (31). Once again, Phi offers community and politicization not merely as antidotes to racism but as a way of coping, living, surviving, and thriving in post-racial times.

These poetic personas convey the complexity of personhood, where individuals are inconsistent, remember and forget, and must navigate the various power relations that structure everyday life.[17] This sense of personhood gestures toward the larger social and political spheres. To "see" individuals without race is not to see them at all, and to read them with race is to see the racism that undergirds the details of their daily lives. "The Nguyễns" series is a direct response to a racist mainstream that considers Vietnamese people (and all Asian Americans) as homogenous hordes. In providing his personas with voices, ones that are deeply politicized in their individuality, Phi is also performing a model of possibility. The poems do not just lament the relative lack of "Vietnamese progressives" ("You" 48); rather, they perform these subjects into being because, as Phi never fails to remind us, Asian Americans are still outside mainstream representation, invisible when it matters despite seeming hypervisibility or overrepresentation.

The poems in "The Nguyễns" section have an ambitious goal: to provide "one story for every Việt body" ("Nguyễns" 82). And while Phi is able to craft a variety of idiosyncratic lives in the poems, the aim remains, as he is well aware, an ideal. What the exercise underscores, however, is that the intention of such a project—to break stereotypes and thus by indirection disrupt a discourse that denies that such stereotypes and their discursive and material implications are redundant—complicates celebrations of the post-racial. In the poems, Phi employs the ostensibly generic surname Nguyễn in the same way that he uses the concept of refugee: as an occasion and a frame to express aspects of subjectivity, to illustrate heterogeneity, and to disrupt misconceptions. In this way, the series, and the collection by extension, forcefully challenges the strategies of reversals, denials, and deflections that David Theo Goldberg identifies as hallmarks of contemporary post-racial discourses by placing the issue of race front and center. Phi's poetic

practice, as exemplified in *Sông I Sing*, is a form of anti-racist work, which remains a constant struggle for the poet and the larger Asian American community. With poems such as those in "The Nguyễns" section, Phi assumes the role of the refugee cartographer, mapping out a capacious geography of experience and social alternatives to the post-racial present.

"Poetry is Not a Luxury"

As Phi responds to the racist stereotypes about Asian Americans that circulate in the American mainstream, he must also negotiate his positionality as someone with a "voice" or platform, vis-à-vis racialized communities. In "Called (An Open Letter to Myself)," Phi describes growing up on "Twenty-Sixth and Bloomington" (4) in Minneapolis, "talking shit" (18), "hangin" (25), and "surviving" (27). The poem narrates the poet's formative years within a community that was often hard-edged and unforgiving but, at the same time, filled with camaraderie, knowledge, and inspiration. By the poem's end, however, we learn that the poet-speaker is no longer an unmediated part of this community, having gone off to college and made the decision to pursue a writing life. Such a life of comparative "luxury" creates a kind of disjuncture between the present and the past, or the multiple, divergent "lives" that make up a single life. To write professionally, or to have the opportunity to write—especially for minoritized or marginalized subjects—is sometimes to break away from a community, to lose connection with a group of people who must face very different social, economic, and cultural circumstances; that is, to be distanced from the very people and material reality one writes about. Cognizant of this rift, Phi pens a reminder note to himself:

> So when you get out of your fancy college
> learning about postracial postmodernist deconstructionist
> while still not knowing how to fix your own car
> when you're sitting in some Uptown coffee shop
> with a poetry book and borrowed powerbook trying to act
> like you're not a joke
>
> When you can no longer tell
> if you're liberating yourself through expression
> or selling your oppression
>
> When they pretend
> to listen to you
> but still wish you would just
> go away
> quietly

Remember
there were those of us
living here
who call you
friend. (59-77)

Here, he spells out the potential dangers of a boy from the "hood" transforming into a recognized poet: having a sense of alienation, being out of touch with lived realities, selling out to the mainstream, and becoming a parody of oneself. The poem is a call to the poet to remember to stay grounded, to not forget the past and its peoples and how they have crucially shaped the present, as he moves forward. It is a call to be vigilant and conscious of the work he performs, a cry that stresses the importance of relating the poet's voice, his platform, to a larger community of others.

In *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989), Trinh T. Minh-Ha describes how minoritized writers assume social justice causes as a way of reconciling themselves with a working-class or marginalized community. Writing that has a social function moves beyond the personal (while deeply situated in the personal) to speak with (not for) a multitude, a larger collective of voices and issues. Phi's activist poetry seeks to serve the people he writes about and thus provide connection, a way back, not to an origin but a forged community, not a fixed identity but a politics. Trinh's epigraph that begins this essay gestures to poetry's critical potential: that it can be an agent of sociality, that it is not dormant or inactive but dangerous, and that for those who struggle, it can become an important tool of empowerment. The voice and tenor of *Sông I Sing*—its refugeography—unequivocally invests in this definition of poetry and storytelling.

Audre Lorde's description of poetry as "carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives," which then "forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into the nameless so it can be thought" (37), aptly resonates with Phi's work. As it draws on the disparate fragments of daily life, of individual subjectivity, refugeography becomes a "light" that allows us to see, sing, and initiate change. It becomes the illuminated "country" that welcomes refugees. The conjoining of "refuge/e" and "geography" in the neologism poignantly evokes a place of safety, shelter, and home. In *Sông I Sing*, poetry houses the sorrows and hopes of those subjects for whom home is and has always been elusive, vexed, and forthcoming.

Notes

I would like to thank Donald Goellnicht, Y-Dang Troeung, Catherine Fung, Marguerite Nguyen, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on pervious drafts of this essay.

1. Roughly translated, the Vietnamese lines read, "oh my god" and "is a person without manners," respectively.
2. Poetry is integral to the kind of community organizing and anti-racist cultural activism that Phi practices in his personal and professional life. Phi has stated in an interview: "I feel like poetry is a platform through which people listen to me. Poetry has given me an opportunity to reach a lot of people, and that's part of my activism" ("Song"). His official biography on the Coffee House Press website states that Phi "acts as an Asian American community organizer, and works at the Loft Literary Center, where he creates and operates programs for artists and audiences of color. His series, *Equilibrium*, recently won the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits Anti-Racism Initiative Award" ("Bao").
3. While Phi's cultural nationalism might *resemble* the masculinist bent of early writers such as Frank Chin, I contend that he is much more aware of intersectional identity and gender and sexuality issues. Phi's uncompromising stance—his anger—might be interpreted as traditionally "masculinist," but his worldview is inclusive and attuned to the multiple positionalities that make up Asian America.
4. See Viet Thanh Nguyen's "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique" (2012).
5. While domestic events such as the Third World Liberation Front strikes and the Civil Rights Movement galvanized the Asian American movement, scholars have pointed out the international roots of Asian America, in particular the Vietnam War. Sucheta Mazumdar writes that there is a need to conceptualize "the history of Asian Americans within the twentieth-century global history of imperialism, of colonialism, and of capitalism. To isolate Asian American history from its international underpinnings, to abstract it from the global context of capital and labor migration, is to distort this history" (41).
6. For critiques of these academic and popular discourses, see Liisa H. Malkki's "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things" (1995), Peter Nyers's *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (2006), and Yến Lê Espiritu's *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (2014).
7. For discussions of literature as theory, see Donald Goellnicht's "Blurring Boundaries: Asian American Literature as Theory" (1997) and Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory" (1987).
8. Phi's poetry compels us to consider a foundational tension between ethnographic content and aesthetic style that has framed and continues to frame the development of Vietnamese American literature and literary studies. See Monique T. D. Truong's "Vietnamese American Literature" (1997), Michele Janette's "Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1963-1994" (2003) and introduction to *My Viet: Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1962–Present*

(2011), and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (2011).

9. The word "song" contains multiple levels of meaning. To conceive of Phi's poems as "songs" is to recognize the aural and musical qualities of his work and acknowledge that his words find their most powerful expression through sound and performance. In the Vietnamese language, "sông" means river, which evokes the word "nước"—meaning both "water" and "a country, homeland, and nation." The concept of water/country is central to Vietnamese cultural history and resonates deeply with the post-war diaspora. For more on this cultural idea of water see Sanh Thong's Huynh's "Live By Water, Die For Water: Metaphors of Vietnamese Culture and History" (1996). "Sông" is also the name of Phi's daughter, which makes the collection a kind of politicized lullaby "sung" for the next generation.
10. See Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996) (60-83).
11. See also Lowe's "The International within the National: American Studies and Asian American Critique" (1998).
12. "For Colored Boys in Danger of . . ." (2011) is inspired by Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), and "You Bring Out the Vietnamese in Me" (2011) is inspired by Sandra Cisneros's "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me" (1975). In drawing from these black and Chicana feminist writers, Phi is pointing to Asian America's affiliations with and inspiration from other ethnic groups (and their struggles). The suggestion is that Asian America's composition needs to be understood as intersectional, in relation with other cultural nations within the United States.
13. While Phi describes himself as a "ghetto nerd who grew up in hip hop" ("Yellow" 295), he has also been highly critical of the appropriation, commodification, and fetishization of Asian culture simultaneous with the invisibility of Asian Americans in hip-hop culture. Although Phi mobilizes its forms and forces in his work, hip-hop remains, for him, a vexed cultural form.
14. See Gregory S. Parks and Matthew W. Hughey's *The Obamas and a (Post)Racial America?* (2011). The editors of the collection state that "the rise of Barack Obama and the ascension of the Obama family as the all-American, if not quintessentially American, family has evoked the word 'post-racial' in the American lexicon" (xix).
15. See Howard McGary's *The Post-Racial Ideal* (2012).
16. The 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin and subsequent court trial has perhaps become the most tragic illumination of the lie behind post-racial rhetoric. The incident, if anything, reveals how America continues to grapple with what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the "problem of the color-line" (3).
17. See Avery F. Gordon's concept of "complex personhood" in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008).

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