

## Introduction: Refugee in the Hyperghetto

### The Refugee

**R**a Pronh tells me that she wants to stay in this apartment for as long as she can, which strikes me as ironic because we have been discussing how often she has moved since her arrival in the Bronx two decades ago, in the spring of 1986. On this May 2009 afternoon, we are sitting in the living room of the apartment she has occupied for almost two years. We are creating a record of the many Bronx residences she and her Cambodian<sup>1</sup> family have occupied since their arrival. By our count, Ra has lived in twelve different homes across the Northwest Bronx—some she describes as mere stops. Ra's twenty-three-year-old son Rith concurs with our findings: Ra's length of stay in each Bronx residence has averaged slightly less than two years, and Rith seems taken aback by this figure. He is certainly cognizant of how difficult his mother's life has been over the past twenty-two years,

FACING PAGE. The Bronx. The darkly shaded areas are the Northwest Bronx neighborhoods where Cambodian refugees were resettled during the 1980s and early 1990s. The lightly shaded areas are South Bronx neighborhoods. The South Bronx was the site of a devastating arson epidemic during the 1970s and early 1980s. Map created by Loraine Ng.

and yet these numbers reveal to him a pattern of unsettledness that even he finds surprising.

Ra is a fifty-year-old survivor of the Cambodian genocide. From April 1975 to January 1979, Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime—run by the communist Khmer Rouge party—subjected Cambodians to execution, starvation, disease, and forced labor. One-fourth of the Cambodian population was killed.<sup>2</sup> During these years, the Khmer Rouge led a revolution that called for cleansing the country of those perceived to be “contaminated” by the West and for the creation of a national program of ultra-agrarian socialism.<sup>3</sup> Ra was only twenty years old when Khmer Rouge cadres took control of her farming village in the northwestern province of Battambang. It was January 1975, just a few months before they took the capital city of Phnom Penh on April 17, inaugurating the era of genocide. From that point forward, Ra became a captive, forced to work in a massive program of indentured servitude that the Khmer Rouge euphemistically described as a cooperative. She was also forced to marry a complete stranger, a man named Heng.

The Cambodian genocide—known to many as the “zero years” or the “killing fields” era—came to an end following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on December 25, 1978. Within a few weeks—by January 7, 1979—Vietnamese forces had overpowered the Khmer Rouge fighters and taken control of Phnom Penh, installing a new government known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Vietnamese leaders claimed that its objectives were twofold: to stop Khmer Rouge offenses in Vietnamese border communities and to liberate Cambodians from a homicidal regime—one that it once considered an ally in the war against U.S. imperialism.

Not all Khmer Rouge captives were immediately released following the events of January 1979. Realizing that his armies did not stand a chance against the Vietnamese, Pol Pot ordered his cadres to retreat into the western border territories and take as many hostages with them as possible.<sup>4</sup> Ra and Heng were among the thousands of villagers taken into the forests of western Cambodia on the Thai border. Held at gunpoint, they remained under Khmer Rouge control for nearly a year before they were finally able to escape.

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At our May 2009 meeting, Ra does not share with me how she and Heng ultimately freed themselves. She only tells me that as time wore on her Khmer Rouge captors, lacking provisions and worn down by illness, eventually lost control of their captives. By December 1979, Ra, her husband, and their newborn daughter Rann crossed into Thailand.

Ra and Heng spent nearly six years in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines before moving to the Northwest Bronx in May 1986 as part of a refugee resettlement program. Now divorced, the couple had seven children together—four sons and three daughters. Rann, their oldest child, was born in October 1979 just before the family crossed into Thailand. She is the only one of their children to have been born in Cambodia. While living in Khao-I-Dang, a United Nations refugee camp in Thailand, Ra gave birth to two sons, Rasmey in 1981 and Rom in 1982, as well as another daughter, Rorth, in 1984. In 1986, in preparation for their departure to the United States, the family was sent to a U.S. refugee processing center in the Philippines where Rith was born. After they arrived in the United States, Ra and Heng had two more children—daughter Sonya, born in 1990, and son Vanna, born in 1992.

Between 1975 and 1994, 150,000 Cambodian refugees were resettled in the United States (since then the Cambodian population in the country has nearly doubled owing to U.S. births and the regular immigration of approximately 1,000 Cambodians per year).<sup>5</sup> These were the years of a major Southeast Asian resettlement program—the largest such program in the nation’s history—which granted asylum to nearly 1 million refugees from the wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. During the 1980s, up to 10,000 Cambodian refugees arrived in the Bronx, according to local leaders and service providers, but the majority stayed in the area for only a short time, quickly leaving in search of better housing and opportunities in other northeastern cities. By the early 1990s, the Bronx Cambodian population had leveled off at approximately 4,000.<sup>6</sup> Virtually all of them were part of the “second wave” of Cambodian refugees who, having survived the genocide and the refugee camps, were granted asylum under the 1980 Refugee Act. By and large, these

second-wave Cambodian refugees were poorer and less formally educated (most came from farming backgrounds) than those of the much smaller first wave that resettled in the United States before 1980.<sup>7</sup> The first-wave refugees had been evacuated from Cambodia immediately after Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge so they had been spared the horrors of the genocide.

Resettlement in the Bronx was supposed to mark a new chapter in Ra's life, but it merely continued her itinerancy. After four years of hard labor under the Khmer Rouge, followed by six years of carving out a meager existence in overcrowded camps where the rations were never enough to feed her family, Ra moved to a Bronx neighborhood beset by poverty, crime, and derelict housing. She survived on welfare and by piecing together odd jobs. This period of her life was also shaped by intertwined personal and structural upheavals: Ra divorced Heng, was convicted of a felony she committed in defense of her daughter Rann, battled multiple times with the city's child welfare agency, and was forced to stay for a time in a city homeless shelter with her youngest child Vanna. All of this instability can be traced back to her several housing displacements.

After reviewing her list of residences, Ra, Rith, and I determine that the family's longest period of continued residency in a single Bronx home—a house she rented in a relatively quiet section of the neighborhood—lasted three years and nine months. This interval was shorter than the four and a half years the family spent in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, where she spent more time than in any single place between 1975 and 2009, when we began our interviews for this book. Despite the camp's popular representation as temporary, it was the most permanent, settled home Ra has had since 1975. Looked at in this way, the camp seems slightly more stable than the Bronx.

Most sociological accounts of immigration depict a transition timeline from immigrant to permanent resident to citizen, with each phase supposedly bringing greater stability. Ra's journey tells a different story. For her, instability persisted as a result of woeful housing conditions, unabated working poverty, punitive welfare regulation, and a justice system that would sooner criminalize poor women than protect them from interpersonal violence. More than half of her dis-

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placements occurred between 2002 and 2007 alone. With each year in the United States, Ra's situation became more and more precarious.

As Ra's story demonstrates, the cycle of uprooting, displacement, and captivity that defines the refugee experience persists long after resettlement. *Unsettled* traces this cycle, documenting the latest stage of Ra's long history of displacement and captivity. In so doing, it demonstrates that the refugee's racialized and gendered fugitive status persists despite U.S. insistence that the refugee condition is temporary and provisional. *Unsettled* troubles political-juridical uses of the term "refugee" as well as the assumed inevitability of refugee crossing, transfiguration, and settlement. It joins "critical refugee studies," an emergent field that, as Yen Le Espiritu states, refuses to locate the refugee as an object to be studied, a problem to be solved, or a legal classification to be dissected.<sup>8</sup> Rather, critical refugee studies deconstruct the refugee concept as an ideological and discursive formation, tracing the forms of power that are reinforced and extended through the "refugee" label. In particular, Espiritu critiques the construction of the "good refugee" who represents the "solution" to the nation-state's failures.<sup>9</sup> She speaks specifically of Vietnamese refugees who were rescued from communism and then delivered into U.S. liberalism, or so it has been said since 1975. For forty years, this good refugee has served as the solution to America's troubled war in Southeast Asia, according to Espiritu—indeed, the only war the United States has ever lost. Throughout *Unsettled*, I argue that Cambodian refugees have also been hailed as a solution, not only to the bad war in Southeast Asia but also to the veritable war against the poorest residents in contemporary urban America.

*Unsettled* is not another portrait of refugee suffering highlighting the failures and hardships of resettlement that only ends in redemption. Rather, it argues that refuge is never found, that discourses on rescue mask a more profound urban reality characterized by racialized geographic enclosure, displacement from formal labor markets, unrelenting poverty, and the criminalization of daily life. I resist the terms of resettlement that require one to first acknowledge that a threshold has been crossed, that the displaced have entered entirely new conditions and matrices of power. If the refugee is never allowed

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to arrive, if refuge is a fiction, then to what extent is crossing itself a mere abstraction? How, instead, does the refugee experience the unclosed sojourn, the open interval? How, in other words, does she remain a captive in late-capitalist urban America?

When I first met Ra in 1999, she had been in the United States for twelve years and I was a community organizer in the Northwest Bronx. I directed the Southeast Asian Youth Leadership Project (YLP), a program that trained refugee teenagers to become community organizers around issues of housing and welfare discrimination. Because of their bilingual and bicultural skills, many young refugees were already advocating for their families. The goal of YLP was to support and enhance their work, to turn their individualized efforts into collective action. Three of Ra's children—Rom, Rorth, and Rith—were YLP members. The program was founded by the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAV), a Manhattan-based group formed in 1986 to address the growing number of racially motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans during the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, the organization had expanded its definition of violence to include the multiple forms of state, economic, and environmental violence that disproportionately affected the immigrant poor. In so doing, it shifted its work from anti-hate crimes advocacy to community and labor organizing. To signify this political shift, the organization changed its name during the late 1990s to CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities.<sup>10</sup>

In the spring of 1995, after learning of the deplorable housing conditions that Southeast Asians in the Northwest Bronx were living in, CAAAV formed a team to learn more about these and other issues facing local refugees. The goal was to determine the viability of a refugee-focused organizing project in the borough. I was an undergraduate at the time, and I joined this team as a volunteer. A year later, in 1996, I was hired to direct YLP's first full-length summer program.

By the time CAAAV began this work, refugees from Cambodia and Vietnam had been living in the Northwest Bronx for well over a decade. The area was at that time home to the largest concentration of Cambodians in New York City (seconded only by a small enclave in Brooklyn),<sup>11</sup> but few New Yorkers outside of those in the immedi-

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ate vicinity knew of the community's existence. The refugees seemed hidden. Save for two small Cambodian grocery stores, there were no visible signs typical of an immigrant enclave—restaurants, beauty salons, clothing shops, and the like. Even the local Cambodian Buddhist temple was merely a nondescript house. Most refugees lived in racially mixed buildings that offered no sign of their presence. One had to search for the public spaces where the refugees congregated: a particular stoop, a distinct corner of a local park, a pool hall. Indeed, the Northwest Bronx's Southeast Asian refugee community was one of the few Asian immigrant enclaves in New York that exhibited absolutely no characteristics of an "ethnic economy"—the term sociologists give to immigrant neighborhoods that produce economic activity through self-capitalization and coethnic employment.<sup>12</sup>

Instead, the overwhelming majority of Cambodians in the Northwest Bronx survived on public assistance, with approximately two-thirds receiving a monthly welfare check during the mid-1990s. Even after enactment of federal welfare policies that sought to drastically cut welfare, YLP found that approximately 80 percent continued to use some form of safety net program to survive—food stamps, Medicaid, or Social Security for the disabled and elderly.<sup>13</sup> To supplement these meager benefits, Cambodians found work in New Jersey factories; as home-based garment workers; or by selling food to fellow residents in the park. All of these supplemental streams of income went unreported because they feared losing their welfare benefits if the state determined that they were "overearning."

Our CAAAV team noticed that the Cambodian community consisted of a very large number of teenagers, most of them born in the refugee camps during the 1980s, a period in which many refugee adults were attempting to make up both for time and for the many children lost to the zero years. This observation led to the creation of YLP.

The youth I worked with spoke of the indignities of poverty, the anonymity of new immigrant life, and the street violence that kept many of them in a constant state of fear. They lived in apartments that were borderline uninhabitable, and their lives were marked by routine trips to local welfare offices, where they watched bureaucrats humiliate their parents. At home, they worked alongside their parents, completing orders for hair accessories, for which their families were

paid only a few cents per piece. Some worked after-school and evening jobs in New Jersey factories, where they packed perfumes, candy, or pet food.

All of the Cambodian youth I worked with believed that society was indifferent to them and their families. “Cambodians walk around here invisible, like a bunch of ghosts,” one said, and whatever attention they did receive was often unwelcome. During the early resettlement years, Black and Latino teenagers saw their Cambodian counterparts as easy marks, to be routinely disrespected and attacked. Some, particularly the young men, responded with their own propensity for violence. Not only did they fight back to earn the respect of their tormentors; they even joined the Black and Latino “sets” that robbed and sold drugs in the neighborhoods. Cambodian teens were not spared the intense monitoring and harassment of local police. Along with African Americans and Latinos, they were routinely “stopped and frisked” on their way to school or work. At times they were caught up in building drug sweeps and taken into custody on charges of possession and selling. During my years directing YLP, I spent countless hours in precincts and courtrooms. Before long, I became adept at writing letters to judges, probation officers, and parole boards, requesting leniency for neighborhood youths who had fallen into trouble. Cambodian youth were not spared the spasms of street violence that seriously injured and occasionally took the lives of their siblings and friends. I recall the deafening silence that routinely followed news that somebody close to our program had been a victim of a stabbing or a shooting.

All told, YLP members described a life that was anything but the peaceful future their parents had hoped for when they left the refugee camps. The repose and stability portended by the refugee resettlement program was a fantasy. Most were too young to have their own memories of the war their parents had lived through, but they now claimed to be living through a war of their own. Over my nine years of working in the refugee neighborhoods of the Northwest Bronx, I came to realize that this invocation of war was not metaphorical but real; although new immigrants from around the world had resettled in working-class and poor communities throughout New York City



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during the 1980s and 1990s, only Southeast Asian refugees had arrived en masse in the “hyperghetto.”

### The Hyperghetto

According to historian Sucheng Chan, approximately 55 percent of the 150,000 Cambodians resettled in the United States between 1975 and 1994 were sent to inner cities beset by extreme poverty, joblessness, and crime.<sup>14</sup> Along with the Hmong, Cambodians are among the poorest ethnic groups in the United States. According to 2000 census data, 42.8 percent of Bronx Cambodians were living in poverty, 23.9 percent were unemployed, and 62 percent had less than a high school education.<sup>15</sup>

These statistics were evident in the urban landscape. There were few if any immigrant communities in the urban United States that exhibited the economic homogeneity found in the Cambodian community of the Northwest Bronx. Bronx Cambodians were overwhelmingly impoverished; their welfare participation rates, as mentioned, were as high as 80 percent; and the community did not include capitalized entrepreneurs or professionals. These realities were rooted not just in decades of Southeast Asian warfare but also in the specific tragedy of the Cambodian genocide, in which the majority of the country’s middle class—businesspeople, teachers, cultural workers, physicians, technicians, and other professionals—were destroyed. In this sense, to speak of “Southeast Asian refugees in the United States” as a common category is somewhat misleading (to say nothing of lumping Cambodians under the broader Asian American rubric). Indeed, the economic, political, and geographic trajectories of Cambodian refugees are distinct from those of Vietnamese refugees, whose ethnic economies and professional classes are prevalent. This is not to say that Vietnamese refugees do not share the hyperghetto status with Cambodians; on the contrary, the Northwest Bronx is home to a significant number of Vietnamese refugees whose struggles are almost identical to those of Cambodians—most are on welfare, and working poverty is still the rule. However, their economic heterogeneity remains far greater than that of their Cambodian counterparts.<sup>16</sup> The

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overwhelming presence of the Cambodian working poor and unemployed in the Bronx and other cities, and the concomitant *absence* of a Cambodian middle/entrepreneurial class elsewhere in these cities, is what makes the Cambodian experience in urban America unique. Few if any other immigrant and refugee groups resettled so exclusively and in such large numbers in the poorest urban areas during the era of post-1965 new immigration.

The two largest Cambodian communities in the United States are in Long Beach, California, and Lowell, Massachusetts, with populations of approximately 20,000 and 14,000, respectively. However, the majority of Cambodians are spread out among much smaller and homogenously poorer enclaves—some numbering only a thousand. In addition to the Northwest Bronx, enclaves can be found in the poorest sections of northeastern cities such as Providence, Danbury, Camden, and Philadelphia.<sup>17</sup> On the surface, these neighborhoods appear to conform to the common, troubling images of the twentieth-century inner city: blight, infrastructural decay, economic divestment, crime, and joblessness. Since the late 1960s, however, they have also been sites of a distinct form of low-intensity warfare that represents the conversion of the traditional ghetto into what sociologist Loïc Wacquant terms the “hyperghetto.”

The hyperghetto names not only the intensification of intractable inner city problems but also the way in which the traditional ghetto has become what Wacquant refers to as a space of “naked relegation.” It is reserved for the isolation and enclosure of the poorest urban residents who are no longer regarded as those to be recruited and disciplined into the lowest rungs of the workforce; rather, they are seen as subjects to be warehoused.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the hyperghetto has functioned as a site of captivity for a decidedly post-Civil Rights and, more significantly, *postinsurrectionist* Black subproletariat.<sup>19</sup>

The origins of the hyperghetto can be traced to the wave of urban unrest in the late 1960s, a period in which Black urban communities engaged in hundreds of insurrections protesting the failure of Civil Rights legislation to address segregation, poverty, and relentless police brutality. The U.S. state and private capital responded to urban unrest not with social, economic, or police reform but with strategies aimed at dispersing Black communities to prevent future rebellions and en-

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closing and criminalizing those who remained in the ghetto. These strategies were carried out in several ways: local and federal governments refused to rebuild and reinvest in destroyed areas and engaged in “planned shrinkage”—the removal of key public institutions and services such as firehouses, schools, and garbage collection—to drive residents away. Those who remained were isolated and monitored by an increasingly militarized police force that saw little difference between extreme poverty and criminal behavior. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these sites became hyperghettos, areas reserved for the “hard-core” urban poor, who, in the wake of urban unrest, were viewed as a population to be criminalized, detained, and punished. According to Wacquant, these punitive measures were carried out by the state’s fusing of its social welfare and penal arms. Indeed, he calls attention to how “welfare and criminal justice are two modalities of public policy toward the poor [that] must imperatively be analyzed—and reformed—together.”<sup>20</sup> He shows how this marriage of welfare and penalty has been apotheosized by “workfare” programs: no-wage worksites that compel the labor of welfare recipients.<sup>21</sup>

In Wacquant’s rendering, the hyperghetto is formed as a hybrid of the impoverished and racially segregated neighborhood and the hypertrophic expansion of the prison system, one that includes jails, juvenile facilities, probation, parole, and criminal databases. In this way, the neighborhood serves as a gateway (and then as a revolving door) for hyperincarceration, particularly Black incarceration. For more than four decades, it has steadily fed the prisons, contributing to the United States becoming home to the largest prison population on earth.<sup>22</sup> To say that African Americans are disproportionately incarcerated is a gross understatement. As legal scholar Michelle Alexander states, there were more Black adults under correctional control in 2010 than there were enslaved in 1850.<sup>23</sup> Alexander is one of a diverse group of contemporary scholars who have proven that mass incarceration is the primary mode through which white supremacist governance and the forms of captivity and punishment endemic to slavery and Jim Crow are revisited on the Black population during an age in which state and civil society avow statutory racial equality. The difference between the hyperghetto and the traditional ghetto is not a matter of varying “degrees” of racial oppression between two periods in U.S.

history; rather, it marks the celebration of the ongoing capture and punishment of Black bodies as an act of “colorblindness.” In sum, the hyperghetto signifies the failures of racial liberalism to resolve white supremacist rule.

It follows that Wacquant conceives of the hyperghetto as slavery’s fourth iteration, preceded by slavery itself, Jim Crow, and the segregated ghettos of the industrial North.<sup>24</sup> In this, he echoes Hortense Spillers, who has long maintained that the “time of slavery” is unending and always pervasive. According to Spillers, slavery did not end with abolition, but has carried forth as that irrevocable “American grammar” through which the U.S. citizenry continues to understand its value—both metaphorically and literally—against the captive and violated Black body.<sup>25</sup>

The challenge for the scholar in studying the hyperghetto is to recognize slavery’s permutations without representing its residents as monolithically abject and isolated—as those who are unable to engage complex and meaningful political and economic practices. As anthropologist Steven Gregory reminds us, to the extent that terms such as “Black ghetto” and “inner city” have been useful in “heightening recognition of the ferocity of racial segregation and urban poverty,” they can also “obscure far more than they reveal.”<sup>26</sup> This is certainly true if such terms are deployed as tropes characterizing those who reside in these communities—that is, to mark their false autonomy or separation from the rest of society. Throughout *Unsettled*, I use the term *hyperghetto* to identify the workings of the regime, not of those who are subjected to that regime’s violences. I demonstrate that Cambodian refugees who are held captive in the hyperghetto engage in complex forms of survival and resistance that evince their centrality to (as opposed to their separation from) the main currents and contradictions of the state and its economies.

## The Convergence

*Unsettled* poses several overarching questions: What does it mean for the Cambodian refugee to resettle in this distinct time and space of slavery’s continuance?<sup>27</sup> How do we understand her movement from one space of captivity to the next? And how does the racial and gen-

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dered project of the hyperghetto come together with the racial and gendered project of asylum and refugee resettlement, particularly for Cambodian refugees in the Northwest Bronx?

If we begin by viewing the Cambodian refugee as merely a subject of humanitarianism, we might conclude that her presence in the hyperghetto marks a major programmatic failure, as if something went terribly awry in the resettlement process. However, my first objective is to reveal the refugee as the subject of a long, unresolved colonial and imperial project carried out by the United States in Southeast Asia, a white supremacist project that wrought unprecedented death and destruction on Vietnam and turned Cambodia into the most heavily bombed country in history. Refugee resettlement in the hyperghetto, I argue, represented not the end of this project but its continuance. Specifically, I demonstrate that Northwest Bronx Cambodians were routinely enlisted as figures to be “saved” from a new theater of war: liberal warfare in the hyperghetto. And just as these refugees were once “incidentally” violated by the destruction wrought by their ostensible saviors, so they continue to function as collateral damage in the war against the hyperghetto’s long-standing residents, specifically African Americans and Puerto Ricans.

In calling attention to the specific role that Cambodians have been enlisted to play in the hyperghetto, I argue against two overly simplified and diametrically opposed readings of the racialization and gendering of Southeast Asian refugees. First, I challenge the notion promulgated by the mainstream media and some policy makers that Southeast Asian refugees, following other Asian Americans, were “model-minority” figures who achieved economic success despite having arrived penniless in the United States. The model-minority argument is rather easy to dispense with because there is very little evidence to support it. Cambodians and other Southeast Asian refugees never achieved the levels of ostensible economic success associated with Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, and Indian American groups in the United States. Suffice it to say that model-minority tropes never effectively applied to most Southeast Asian refugees; indeed, Asian Americans who sought to challenge such stereotyping often invoked the economic and educational struggles of refugees as their first line of rebuttal.

Second, I challenge the opposite notion postulated by some scholars that impoverished Cambodians have been racialized and gendered as a new “underclass.”<sup>28</sup> The term underclass is a pejorative one—coined by academics but wielded in a wide discursive field—that refers to those whose poverty is said to be the result of cultural and behavioral deviance and dysfunction, not structural inequality. As historian Michael Katz and others argue, underclass has been used as shorthand for “undeserving” Black urban poverty—poverty that should be either neglected or met with punitive public policy.<sup>29</sup>

In *Unsettled*, I demonstrate how Bronx Cambodians were discursively removed from underclass status by policy makers, landlords, social workers, and researchers. I show how these agents routinely cast refugees as those who would eventually achieve the successes portended by liberalism even as all empirical evidence pointed to the contrary. I term this discursive removal *refugee exceptionalism*—the ideologies and discursive practices that figure refugees as necessarily *in* the hyperghetto but never *of* it. It is the process whereby refugees are resettled into and then recurrently “saved” from the hyperghetto and its attendant modalities of captivity: uninhabitable housing stock, permanent exclusion from the labor market, and punitive social policy. However, refugee exceptionalism never actually removes the refugee from hyperghetto spaces and institutions (certainly not in any material sense); on the contrary, it requires that she be held in perpetual captivity so that she can be used over and over again.

The goals of refugee exceptionalism are twofold. First, it masks the systemic inequalities and violences of a refugee resettlement program that, as an extension of the U.S. colonial and imperial project in Southeast Asia, proclaimed Cambodians and other Southeast Asian refugees to be the beneficiaries of American liberal freedoms that the United States could not successfully deliver through its acts of warfare. By casting refugees as subsisting in an unending state of arrival at liberalism, whose struggles with poverty in the urban United States are deemed perpetually temporary and “adaptive,” refugee exceptionalism preserves and extends the narrative of the Southeast Asian subject’s salvation through U.S. intervention. Second, by insisting that refugees be saved from the grips of the underclass, it reinforces the

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terms that produce African Americans (and to varying degrees Latinos) as the undeserving poor, “domestic minorities” for whom the underclass concept was formulated. In other words, refugee exceptionalism preserves and extends the justification for punishment of certain populations in the hyperghetto. We might say that, taken together, the Cambodian refugee presence in the hyperghetto, mediated through refugee exceptionalism, represents the convergence of two distinct yet *relational* genealogies of white supremacist governance: colonialism and slavery. Ra’s presence here elucidates the hyperghetto as slavery’s afterlife. In turn, the hyperghetto reveals the contours of an unfinished colonialism.

In Chapter 1, I draw out the connections between the refugee’s life as a subject of imperialist warfare and her life as a subject of the hyperghetto. I begin by reviewing the United States’ role in enabling the rise of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, drawing briefly on Ra’s experiences under this genocidal regime. Despite this history, the United States publicly positioned itself as the champion of displaced Cambodians, passing the 1980 Refugee Act and casting it as a global freedom project and Cambodian refugees as needing rescue by U.S. liberalism. In this way, refugees were persistently called on to perform as rescued victims of an unending war—what some have termed “liberal warfare.” I conclude the chapter by demonstrating how Ra understood the nature of ongoing warfare; that is, she read her movement from the Cambodian war zone to the Thai camps and eventually to the Bronx hyperghetto not as moments of transition and transfiguration but as one long and unbroken state of captivity.

This continuity between past and present warfares is elucidated in Chapter 2, where I discuss how the Bronx hyperghetto served as the new site of liberal warfare from which Cambodian refugees were to be saved. I begin by tracing the origins of the hyperghetto to the urban insurrections of the late 1960s and the Bronx arsons of the 1970s. I then demonstrate that this warfare continued to play out in the poor housing conditions and many housing displacements to which Ra and other Cambodian refugee tenants were subjected. I draw on the recollections of housing organizer Blanca Ramirez, who organized in refugee neighborhoods several years before Ra’s arrival

in 1986. I note the landlords and social workers in the hyperghetto who confined refugees to substandard housing units, simultaneously insisting that these newcomers did not belong among their stigmatized neighbors.

In Chapter 3, I turn to another front of hyperghetto warfare: the punitive U.S. welfare state. Since the 1980s, the Bronx welfare bureaucracy has thoroughly and arbitrarily governed the lives of Ra and other Cambodian refugees. This chapter explores how they understood the notion of welfare “rights” in relation to such arbitrary rule. Here I pay particular attention to how welfare regulation took a decidedly punitive turn in 1996, with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Euphemistically described as “welfare reform,” this law completely overhauled the modern welfare state by setting a time limit on cash assistance, requiring mandatory workfare, removing noncitizens from key programs, and tightening verification requirements. To community organizers, the new law epitomized U.S. social welfare policy’s “neoliberal turn.” By removing welfare recipients (or compelling their self-removal) from the rolls, welfare reform pushed the poorest of the poor into the precarious low-to-no wage work that defined late twentieth-century capitalism. However, Cambodian refugees in the Bronx experienced this not as something new but rather as a continuation of a previous form of arbitrary rule and entrapment. I discuss a distinct form of refugee knowledge about the welfare state and how it interrupts not only the dominant story of neoliberal capitalism but also the discourse of “rights” that was central to the community and labor organizing that sought to challenge welfare reform.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how workfare played out in the lives of Bronx Cambodian refugees. Workfare was a mandatory no-wage work program that welfare recipients were compelled to attend in exchange for their monthly welfare check. Departing from Ra’s story, I describe the travails of another Cambodian single mother, Kun Thea, who was trapped between workfare and low-wage factory work. There were few organizing strategies that could free Kun Thea from her entrapment—that is, without reinscribing her captivity. From here, I turn to the work of Chhaya Chhoum, a young Cambodian community organizer, who proposed alternative ways of



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thinking about resistance beyond the narrow purview of community organizers' strategies and tactics.

Such alternative forms of resistance were grounded in the daily survival tactics of refugees. In Chapter 5, I turn to these practices by exploring Ra's labor as a low-wage home worker in the global garment industry. From one of her many Bronx apartments, she and her family were plugged into an assembly line that stretched from the free trade zones of the Third World to the hyperghettos of the United States. Here I discuss the fact that the hyperghetto is too often left out of globalization discussions, and I locate the "neoplantation," described as such by geographer and Black studies scholar Clyde Woods, as ineludibly inscribed in the global economy.

The hyperghetto is a distinctly gendered space of captivity, and in Chapter 6 I analyze the unbroken line of gendered violence that held Ra captive from her days under the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s through her days in the Bronx in the mid-2000s. This gendered violence took many forms: forced marriage, a felony charge for defending her daughter, run-ins with the child welfare agency, and eviction from her home. Ra's experiences, though certainly tethered to her colonial past, also resonated powerfully with the gendered violence shaping poor Black women's lives in the hyperghetto. In the 1980s and 1990s, Cambodian refugee women were depicted in political, economic, and cultural discourses as maintaining relative privilege over refugee men—seemingly the same depiction that demonized Black women through the figure of the Black matriarch. However, I argue that Cambodian refugee women were not subjected to the matriarchal trope but rather to the discourse of refugee exceptionalism that cast them as foreign subjects to be saved by liberalism, specifically by liberal feminism. Here, again, refugee exceptionalism was mobilized to separate Cambodian refugee women from other women in the hyperghetto—a move that at once obscured the realities of the former while normalizing violence against the latter.

In the Conclusion, I argue that, through her constant spatial and temporal movements, Ra rejected stasis. Like many other Cambodian refugees in the hyperghetto, she used movement as a strategy to resist final captivity. In her escape to Thailand, her migration through the refugee camps, her many Bronx relocations, and her maneuverings

within welfare and work confines, Ra's constant movement kept open the possibility of future redemption. Movement is how she sustained what Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best describe as the "interval between 'the no longer and the not yet,' between the destruction of the old world and the awaited hour of deliverance."<sup>30</sup> Lastly, I discuss Ra's children's adoption of their mother's penchant for movement.

## Methodology

As an ethnographic study, *Unsettled* draws on two main sources: notes from my years as a community organizer in the Northwest Bronx's refugee neighborhoods (1995–2004) and extensive interviews with Ra Pronh conducted from February 2009 through December 2012, with several follow-up interviews conducted in 2014.<sup>31</sup> The former, which include participant-observer reflections and unstructured interviews with refugee community members and community advocates, provide valuable information on the political and economic contradictions defining the hyperghetto as well as the responses of various activists and advocates to those conditions. The latter serve as the empirical evidence that allows me to conceptualize refugee temporality. In this sense, they critique my earlier notes. Ra's understandings and representations of her long captivity correct established political and economic analyses as well as my own and other activists' rendering of it.

As a participant-observer study, *Unsettled* is part of a rich tradition in Southeast Asian American refugee studies that have adopted ethnographic methods to study impoverished, urban-based refugees. Aihwa Ong's *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, Sucheng Chan's *Not Just Victims: Conversations with Cambodian Community Leaders in the United States*, Nazli Kibria's *Family Tight Rope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*, and Lynn Fujiwara's *Mothers without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant Families and the Consequences of Welfare Reform* are but a few works that draw on interviews (unstructured and structured), conversations, and, most significantly, shared experiences with the refugees being studied. Across each one, refugees' viewpoints come across with a breadth, complexity, and heterogeneity worthy of their struggles.

## Excerpt • Temple University Press

*Unsettled* departs from these ethnographic works in one crucial respect, however: it centers on the story of a single individual, Ra Pronh. My interviews with Ra began in the winter of 2009. At the time I was beginning the first phase of research on a book about refugee exceptionalism, which I envisioned as demonstrating how this concept played out in the U.S. settings in which Cambodian refugees found themselves: the housing market, the welfare state, the helping professions (including social work and counseling agencies), and community organizations. I wanted to analyze how the organizing work I was involved in during the late 1990s and early 2000s both challenged and contributed to refugee exceptionalism. For there were certainly moments when, in working to address the myriad ways in which the resettlement program had failed Bronx Cambodians, I was guided by the notion that something else should have awaited them on their arrival to the United States. In this way, I discussed refugee resettlement as a broken promise as opposed to an impossible one, contributing to the notion that refugees were somehow misplaced in the hyperghetto, that their resettlement in urban abjection represented the exceptional circumstance.

Among the first community residents I interviewed for this project was Ra. We first met in 1999 when I helped her and her family with their welfare troubles. At the time, her daughter Rorth and son Rom were members of YLP. Her son Rith joined the group two years later. Ra made an immediate impression on me. She was talkative and quick-witted and possessed a bold sense of humor. She held strong opinions on why the welfare state was mistreating her and other recipients, and she often challenged my framing of the state's actions. Ra's personality allowed us to develop a quick rapport; I found it challenging yet engaging to advocate for someone who not only excoriated those in power but also questioned the remedies proposed by those who sought to help her. At the same time, Ra brought levity to our relationship. She often joked about her predicament and occasionally ribbed me about my life choices: Why did I spend so much time working on welfare cases and hanging out with teenagers in the neighborhood? When was I going to start a family of my own?

I fell out of contact with Ra after I left community organizing and moved out of the Northwest Bronx in 2004. As I explain, Ra lived

nomadically during the first half of the 2000s, moving from one friend's or family member's apartment to the next, and this made it difficult for me to locate her when I returned to the refugee neighborhoods for routine visits. For a time she even lived in a homeless shelter. Still, I remained in regular contact with her son Rith, with whom I often talked about his ongoing political commitments as he continued as a YLP youth organizer while branching out to citywide organizing efforts. We also talked of his decision to either stay in college or pursue a career as a hairstylist (he eventually chose the latter). In the summer of 2007, Rith told me that Ra had finally secured an apartment of her own.

I paid a visit to Ra approximately a year after she moved into her new apartment, and was quickly reminded of our dynamic. By then I was a sleep-deprived father of a three-year-old daughter. I marveled as Ra gave verbal instructions to her two-year-old granddaughter to take a nap. Without any assistance, the toddler climbed onto a bed in the corner of the living room, covered herself with a blanket, and fell asleep. Perhaps picking up on my disbelief, Ra asked me how I was enjoying fatherhood. I confessed to her that my daughter still did not sleep through the night, much less put herself to bed. It seemed like years since I had enjoyed a full night's rest. Ra feigned a lack of sympathy as she chided me for being a pushover: "Train them early."

Several months after our reunion, I asked Ra if she would allow me to interview her for my book project. I explained my objectives and why I believed she would be an important informant. I told her that my questions would focus on her perception of those who were responsible for her resettlement from the camps to the Bronx and the years that followed. Ra agreed, and we held our first session in February 2009. Because I do not speak Khmer, I asked Rith to interpret when needed, believing that he could also share his own perspective on his family's struggles with housing, welfare, and low-wage work. However, Ra was quick to point out that for the previous three years she had made a steady commitment to improving her English—she took classes and made sure to "go here and there, talk to new people." She would speak in English during the interviews as much as she could.