

Gratitude

A REFUGEE EXPECTATION

To receive refuge is to encounter the weight of gratitude. Often, the first words out of a refugee's mouth upon arrival are *thank you*. Both those who give and those who receive refuge readily recognize that gratitude is the most proper response, the most appropriate affect for refugees to embody. In the duration of refuge, gratitude exists as a psychic and social force of expectation—what refugees ought to feel toward those who have made refuge possible. To be worthy of refuge, refugees must express gratitude to the state and its citizens. This entrenched and normalized expectation to be grateful arises because, in our global political system organized around the capitalist nation-state, refuge is a precious benefit. For those who lack the rights and protection of a national community, this benefit confers the most valuable of possessions: physical safety, political subjecthood, and social life. As such, it is sensible and logical for the recipients of refuge to feel thankful.

On the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War in 2015, for example, refugee subjects gathered on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, the capital city of Canada, carrying banners that read: “Thank You Canada From Vietnamese Canadian Community.”¹ Decades after finding refuge, these refugees continued to pay tribute to the nation-state that had “saved” them. Their gratitude provided them public visibility and a political platform. It rendered them good and worthy beneficiaries of refuge. Or, more precisely, their “goodness” is what allowed them to be “seen” within the national imaginary, and gratitude is key to this recognition of goodness. For refugees, gratitude is an unmitigated virtue. It is through gratitude that refugee subjects are confirmed as good, and it is through gratitude that the good of refuge can be perceived and collectively agreed upon. Articulations of gratitude facilitate the formation of social bonds, connecting the nation-state and refugees in mutual agreement of what has been given and what should be returned.

Gratitude's powerful social pull thus gathers strength through common sense and does not invite critical questioning—to be grateful is, indisputably, good. A relation of gratitude between the nation-state and refugees allows the former to display its moral generosity and the latter to gain legibility as social subjects. Accordingly, gratitude becomes the primary social relation between the nation-state and refugees. Ingratitude in the face of benefit does not make sense and must be dismissed as unthinkable and repugnant. To be recognized, refugees need to fulfill the expectation of gratitude, one that prescribes and produces a certain kind of good subjects—those who are successful and devoted to the nation-state, who are economically mobile, law-abiding, and consciously thankful for the benefit given to them. Gratitude not only expresses goodness but also produces it, and the grateful refugee emerges as representative of the sanctioned way to be in refuge.

While gratitude can make the refugee a sociopolitical subject, it does so through the constricting logic of a benefit that incurs debt and then repayment. To return the benefit of refuge with gratitude is to be good, and to be good is to be limited in subjective capacities, in the kinds of feelings, thoughts, and actions that are possible. Good refugees are thus indebted, locked into a fixed relationship of giving and return between benefactor and beneficiary. This logic of debt repayment has deep ideological significance. A relation of gratitude, as scholars of critical refugee studies have shown, is the most common(sense) way in which refugees become attached, for better or for worse, to the nation-state. Grateful refugees become evidence of war's "appropriateness," demonstrating freedom's power to inspire and justifying past and present neo-imperial interventions overseas.² The expectation of gratitude, as a disciplinary force, can define a successful refugee who subscribes to the ideological tenets of liberal nationalism while also proving them. But such a singular view of gratitude—to equate gratitude with success, assimilation, and nationalist ideology—would flatten the complexity of this important and useful affective experience. While structural critiques of refugee gratitude and how it gets deployed are crucial and urgent, they often cannot account for the nuanced specificities of how refugees "make it," in the broadest sense, in terms of success but also of bringing life into existence.

This chapter explores gratitude as a force of expectation that is both restriction and potential. I focus on what I call gratitude's affordances of intersubjectivity—describing the subjective and relational possibilities it brings into being. How might gratitude be an important affective experience for the very subjects who must re-member—picking up and piecing back together—the fragments of a life that war and displacement have broken? What relationships or solidarities could gratitude establish between refugees and others, especially those who are also searching for refuge? How does gratitude perform critiques of the nation-state even while it pays tribute to it? These questions revolve around gratitude's intersubjective dimension—how it informs a making sense, and an extension in time and form, of refuge.

As an experience of living in refuge, gratitude is important to the meaning of an inchoate self and to understanding how that self might not be the end point. Although it is imperative that refugee subjects step into gratitude, they can inhabit it in ways that make forms of meaningful experience possible. Through considerations of Kim Thúy's autobiographical novel *Ru*, Loung Ung's memoir *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind*, and Tri Nguyen's activist pilgrimage "The Gift of Refuge," I nuance the uses of gratitude as ways to think of the self and its connectedness to others. Following the conceptual logic of gratitude, I discuss the ontology and praxis, or being and doing, of refugee gratitude. This being and doing unfolds as the necessary strategies that refugees call on to live in refuge, which is a living with and a living for others.

DEBT AND INTERSUBJECTIVE AFFORDANCES

Throughout its history in the West—from classical philosophy to contemporary self-help and spirituality—the idea of gratitude is extolled as a personal virtue and civic good.³ Whether connected to God, as in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians, or to society, as in those of Seneca, Thomas Hobbes, and Adam Smith, gratitude is consistently considered a positive affective state that should be cultivated because of its value to both the individual and the collective.⁴ Robert C. Solomon states that it is "an essential emotion of the good life as well as the virtuous life," and Edward J. Harpham adds that "it builds bonds of harmony and community in the world."⁵ As an incontrovertibly positive emotion, gratitude is the glue of social cohesion, promoting ethical exchange among virtuous subjects and creating the foundation for democratic society. This cohesion is produced because gratitude is ontologically defined by a bond of indebtedness between benefactor and beneficiary, requiring cycles of giving and return.

The basic structure of gratitude begins first with a benefit received, followed by a drive for reward, "to recompense, to remunerate, to return good for good received."⁶ This impulse to reciprocation is heightened when gratitude emerges from *undeserved* benefit, when the "grateful person recognizes that he or she did nothing to deserve the gift or benefit; it was freely bestowed."⁷ David Steindl-Rast elaborates: "If what we receive is ours by right, our appreciation will not pick up that special flavor of something *undeserved*, something gratis. But this is essential, as even the stem (*grati*) of the word *gratitude* indicates."⁸ Thus, gratitude carries with it a notion of debt to be repaid, specifically for an undeserved generosity.

Unlike other categories of migrants, refugees are not required to prove that they can contribute to the nation or to demonstrate possession of a valuable asset; they are required principally to prove fear of persecution. Accordingly, admittance of refugees into the nation's borders is primarily construed as an act of humanitarianism. This is what makes "refugee" a unique class of immigration. The offer of refuge is understood to be a result of the state's moral generosity, and not of

its political obligation, self-interest, or complicity in creating the conditions for displacement.⁹ In this way, refuge is a benefit that refugees have done nothing to deserve; rather, it is what has been done *to* them, their suffering and victimization, that determines eligibility. Juridical-political refuge thus points to the nation's fulfillment—voluntarily—of an international moral and legal principle. Although the right to seek asylum, which is also the right to asylum, is enshrined in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a basic tenet of human dignity, it does not occur naturally but depends on bureaucratic authorization to come into existence—the state enters to bestow a human right as an unearned benefit. Gratitude, as a facilitating bond between the state and refugees, arises because refuge is understood precisely as a benefit and not as a natural right.

As such, there is an obligation for recipients of refuge to repay the state and its citizens for the special favor. This obligation is felt and does not necessarily need to be explicitly articulated because it is built into our common understanding of both refuge and gratitude. In this way, the nation-state, whose appropriate motives and intentions are based in altruistic humanitarianism, is established as the proper receiver of gratitude. In turn, the “good” refugees who follow the right path and do the appropriate thing become the proper giver of gratitude. In such a relation, the refugee's personal goodness blossoms into a more universal and shared goodness.

Therefore, according to Adam Smith it is not difficult to sympathize, in the sense of hearts beating in time, with gratitude. He writes: “When we see one man assisted, protected, relieved by another, our sympathy with the joy of the person who receives the benefit serves only to animate our fellow-feeling with his gratitude toward him who bestows it.”¹⁰ The scene of benefit received and gratitude repaid produces good feelings in both the participants and the observers of the interaction. Thus, sympathy for grateful feeling as a response to benefit arises freely. To give a good and to return a good is, without doubt, *good*. Smith's account of gratitude's relational logic describes how it comes to be naturalized in social relations as a virtue: rational-minded individuals can easily perceive and agree upon its inherent goodness.

In this way, gratitude pulls many refugees into a form of grateful relation with the nation-state. And, under the latter's hegemony, refugees are compelled to turn toward gratitude, toward what Sara Ahmed calls the national “happiness duty,” in which migrants are bound to “telling a certain story of [their] arrival as good, or the good of [their] arrival.”¹¹ This “telling” serves a national ideal of integration and likeness, whereby proximity, or the aspiration to proximity, breeds good and correct feeling—and, in turn, national harmony and happiness. The expression of grateful feelings, or the good of refuge, means that unseemly narratives (of racism, colonialism, oppression) or irreconcilable attachments (to the past, homeland, and injury) retreat from the foreground. What surfaces is the preference for and primacy of gratitude over other, less palatable, affective experiences such as anger and melancholia.

While public displays of refugee gratitude are crucial to the formation of social goodness, a more structural—and less explicit—relation of gratitude emerges when refugees appropriately utilize refuge to become good citizens and “succeed” in the neoliberal sense. Their assimilated existence already speaks to what refuge is capable of inspiring. A relation of gratitude is a debt of becoming, which lasts at least as long as a lifetime and then is often transferred to other generations. In her incisive examination of what she calls the “gift of freedom,” Mimi Thi Nguyen demonstrates that refugees can never repay the debt that freedom incurs. As both a “target” and “instrument” of this force, refugees are locked into endless debt, not least because the gift is always contingent and forthcoming.¹² The gift of freedom, which takes refuge as its cornerstone, functions as a coercive “will to subjectivity,” governing the anomalous and anachronistic peoples of the world into modernity, a passing from illiberalism to liberal freedom.¹³

The debt of gratitude, as Nguyen’s analysis illuminates, does not always unfold as the positive social good that Adam Smith and others exalt, but instead can function as a form of subjection to power. For Lisa Yoneyama, indebtedness “disciplines those who are identified as the liberated,” so that they “can never enter into an evenly reciprocal relationship with the liberators.”¹⁴ The bond that gratitude creates can also be viewed as a kind of interminable bondage, whereby benefit chains the beneficiary to the benefactor’s will. The figure of the refugee brings into sharp relief the contradictions of an agreed-upon social virtue such as gratitude, showing how certain subjects who have received a benefit from the state might live in the restrictions it imposes, restrictions that are often not seen as such, because of gratitude’s common sense. The grateful subjects produced through freedom’s subjection are crucial instruments through which the force of freedom—often as liberal war—reproduces itself.¹⁵

The receipt of refuge thus can become a burden, and gratitude is the relation that puts refugees into a bind. These subjects and their gratitude are, moreover, readily appropriated and co-opted to serve the state’s political agendas of consolidating nationhood, launching foreign interventions, and making war, in order to create more freedom and bring about more refuge. This fundamental bind of successful refuge in the Global North is thus an insidious form of repayment. As a moral sentiment, gratitude is not just about living harmoniously with others or about virtuous relationships, but also, and more crucially, about *living under* the weight of power’s governmentality. Social harmony is created precisely because grateful refugees are so important and valuable to the nation-state and its various sovereign operations, whether we understand those to be the propagation of freedom, militarism, war, humanitarianism, race, or refuge.

It cannot be disputed that gratitude restricts and circumscribes forms of refugee subjecthood. Yet we also know that power is never absolute, that any structure, institution, or relation holds within it the means for creative resistance and repetition with a difference.¹⁶ Thus, gratitude also exists as opportunities for refugees to

shape the experience of refuge for themselves and for others. While expressions of gratitude enable the nation-state to further its political ends, and while grateful relations can lock refugees in debt, those expressions and relations can also facilitate the formation of ways of being and relating with others that are in excess of, or that contravene, gratitude's national prescription. If gratitude is produced as an imposition of power, then the "ways of using" it by the very people imposed upon (to follow Michel de Certeau) create productive situations of ambiguity in which the intended outcome is not guaranteed.¹⁷ I argue that gratitude is much more than political fodder or a provider of alibis for the state's national and imperial projects.

If gratitude can be understood through the operation of social bonds, whether as harmony or debt, then we cannot know in advance the exact direction or outcome of these bonds. It is worth stating that the nation-state is not the only object to which gratitude is directed, and that, once expressed, gratitude may serve a range of purposes, often simultaneously and sometimes in contradiction to one another. In the hands of refugees, gratitude is an experiment of refuge. Grateful relations uncover a point in time, a position, in which something is being worked through. These relations open into a space of unresolved experience between refugees and a multitude of others. While the debt of freedom seems determined, it can actually point "toward a different social order, keeping us in contact with alternate collectivities of others who bear the trace of human freedom."¹⁸ Debt may turn into a surprising condition for intersubjectivity, facilitating contacts and relations unintended by the violence of freedom and the promise of refuge. As such, expressions of gratitude are not affixed to a prior politics or a pre-constituted end, and may be experienced by refugees as a way to live with, live for, and live strategically in the interminable duration of refuge.

RELATIONAL SELFHOOD

If gratitude is politically valuable for the nation-state, then it is an equally potent relation for the refugee, who has lived through (and might still be living with) war, who knows intimately the threat and reality of destruction, disappearances, and death. The renewal of life and the attainment of socioeconomic success are significant and profound when physical survival has never been guaranteed. A coherent conception of self (as a biological being and a social subject) still matters for war refugees, despite recent theoretical debates that attempt to move the question of race in the direction of post-identity or post-humanism. In this way, expressing gratitude might be integral to the intertwined processes of physical survival and subject formation for refugees who must make sense of a life's displacements and extreme oscillations. The refugee who has stepped foot onto a small boat, knowing that everything is in danger of being swallowed up by the sea, must somehow hold this experience when she flies across the Pacific Ocean in a first-class cabin later in life—as is the case in Kim Thúy's *Ru*. But how does one live such contradictions,

or create meaning in the face of enormous incongruities? A relation of gratitude, I suggest, is one crucial mechanism for understanding a life that has passed into refuge, made up of radical changes and incompatible fragments.

For many refugees who have successfully rebuilt another life, present prosperity and past suffering are points of incredible conflict. Segments of experiences may seem to belong to entirely different lives. In *Ru's* impressionistic vignettes, the narrator gestures to the dizzying changes of fortune and the experiential breaks that refuge engenders.¹⁹ Describing how her relatives lead a comfortable life in Canada, especially in comparison to their refugee past, she writes: "Nowadays . . . [t]hey travel first class and have to stick a sign on the back of their seat so the hostesses will stop offering them chocolates and champagne. Thirty years ago, in our Malaysian refugee camp, the same Step-uncle Six crawled more slowly than his eight-month-old daughter because he was suffering from malnutrition. And the same Aunt Six used the one needle she had to sew clothes so she could buy milk for her daughter."²⁰ The negotiation of these seemingly irreconcilable disjunctions—of deprivation and luxury, lack and abundance—that press at the limits of a coherent conception of self is precisely what gratitude makes possible. A grateful relation is a powerful device for explaining the disparate realities that coalesce to form the subject in refuge; it is a way to *examine* a refugee life and its various passages through time and space. *Ru* explores how refugee subjects embody multiple, oftentimes discrepant meanings, narrativizing the difficulty of occupying that interstitial space where the legal designation of refugee has dissolved but refugeeness still lingers.

After recounting a story of war, migration from Vietnam, and resettlement in Canada, Kim Thúy ends her narrative with an image of rebirth and renewal: a phoenix rising from its ashes. The narrator writes that "all those individuals from my past have shaken the grime off their backs in order to spread their wings with plumage of red and gold, before thrusting themselves sharply towards the great blue space, decorating my children's sky, showing them that one horizon always hides another and it goes on like that to infinity, to the unspeakable beauty of renewal, to intangible rapture."²¹ The novel's overarching theme of resilience and triumphant final note strike the perfect pitch as a refugee success story. Indeed, various glowing reviews in national newspapers have hailed the author as "the perfect immigrant" and praised her story as one following the path "from riches to rags to riches."²² In turn, the critical and commercial success of the novel reinforces the image of the author as a model refugee.²³

Less than a decade after its original publication in French, the book has achieved canonical status in Canada, consolidated by its win in the nationwide battle-of-the-books competition Canada Reads in 2015.²⁴ In his defense of the novel, Cameron Bailey, then artistic director and cohead of the Toronto International Film Festival, passionately waved his passport, proclaiming, "This is my Canadian passport. If you're born here it is pretty easy to get one of these, but ask someone who wasn't

born here what it took to get their Canadian passport. My mother, my father, they fought, they worked their asses off to get one of these, and *Ru* brought me back to that, that struggle, what it takes to become a Canadian.”²⁵ Cast in these decidedly nationalistic terms, in a project of identity formation through shared literature and reading publics, *Ru*’s narrative of successful refuge and achievement resonates because it can be interpreted as evincing the immigrant’s struggle and eventual reward (the coveted passport)—thereby shoring up Canada’s benevolence, its mythology as the “peaceable kingdom.”²⁶

A large part of *Ru*’s mainstream success can be attributed to its aesthetic qualities—a poetic style and unconventional form that make for a pleasurable reading experience.²⁷ But the novel’s (inter)national celebration is arguably a reflection of its narration of a success story and, more importantly, its expression of refugee gratitude.²⁸ *Ru* is structured like an inventory of gratitude, unfolding as tributes to the people who have made the narrator’s present a reality. Kim Thúy has said that the novel is an homage to Canada and the heroes of her past. The narrative itself is a testament to the benevolence and generosity of the Canadian nation. How this testimony circulates in Canadian society, while extremely important to understanding the cultural politics of gratitude, is not my primary concern here. Rather, I focus on what gratitude affords the refugee subject—which is nothing less than the capacity to integrate disparate experiences into a conception of the self in refuge.

Ru provides a model of selfhood predicated on grateful relations, one that enables the refugee who has had the stability of meaning pulled from under her to (re)construct a self and to link that self with others. What emerges is a notion of individual subjecthood as relationally constituted. As such, an expression of gratitude toward Canada is a fundamental component of the refugee’s autobiographical narrative of coming into refuge. The narrator accordingly expresses gratitude to the Canadian nation through its nearest representatives, the small Quebec town of Granby and its inhabitants. Granby is described as a “warm belly” and “heaven on earth,” while its people are characterized as “angels” who were sent to care for the refugees: “By the dozen they showed up at our doors to give us warm clothes, toys, invitations, dreams.”²⁹ She depicts the Canadians who guided the refugees in their early days as mothers and caretakers. Marie-France, the narrator’s first teacher in Canada, was “like a mother duck,” walking “ahead of us, asking us to follow her to the haven where we would be children again. . . . She watched over our transplantation with all the sensitivity of a mother for her premature baby.”³⁰ Jeanne, another teacher, “liberated my voice without using words. . . . It was thanks to [her] that I learned how to free my voice from the folds of my body so it could reach my lips.”³¹

This picture of a nurturing and inclusive community aligns neatly with official state discourse, rehearsing the common belief in Canada’s cultivated civility.³² Yet what also surfaces through this narration of gratitude is the narrator’s formative moments of an inchoate self, seedlings for a possible future: Jeanne’s example

taught the silent refugee how to utilize her voice; the sway of Marie-France's full bum gave the angular narrator her "first desire as an immigrant" and the "power to look ahead, to look far ahead"; the kindness of Granby's residents reaffirmed hope for what is to come.³³ While gratitude undoubtedly feeds into a liberal discourse of Canada's "humanitarian exceptionalism," the refugee herself needs to acknowledge that the state and its citizens facilitated her transition into another life, giving her the opportunity to begin anew, because such experiences are real for her and cannot be denied.³⁴ That is, the articulation of gratitude is as much for herself as for the nation-state. The narrator's present conception of a livable, unified self crucially requires an account of these moments in the form of thankfulness, especially because the self was previously in danger of being extinguished. The importance of gratitude, then, must be read in the context of the material and existential uncertainty that threads through her narrative.

For example, the narrator provides a description of her boat journey, relaying in visceral detail the paralyzing fear felt by passengers as they drift in the hold of the boat:

Heaven and Hell embraced in the belly of our boat. Heaven promised a turning point in our lives, a new future, a new history. Hell, though, displayed our fears: fear of pirates, fear of starvation, fear of poisoning by biscuits soaked in motor oil, fear of running out of water, fear of being unable to stand up, fear of having to urinate in the red pot that was passed from hand to hand, fear that the scabies on the baby's head was contagious, fear of never again setting foot on solid ground, fear of never again seeing the faces of our parents, who were sitting in the darkness surrounded by two hundred people. . . . [F]ear was transformed into a hundred-faced monster who sawed off our legs and kept us from feeling the stiffness in our immobilized muscles. We were frozen in fear, by fear. . . . We were numb, imprisoned by the shoulders of some, the legs of others, the fear of everyone. We were paralyzed.³⁵

Fear suspends the refugee subject, and the many threats to life foreclose the future, petrifying the self in a physical, psychic, and affective hold. In an interview, Kim Thúy describes the experience of living in a refugee camp as a life-altering event in which "everything went down to zero" and thus "everything else came as a gift afterwards."³⁶ She says that "after that four months of emptiness, of nothingness, you don't compare with what you have before, you're just, I'd say, thankful that you have a new life, that you have a new beginning. Starting over, you're just thankful."³⁷

Early in the novel, the narrator recalls how this condition of suspended self is exacerbated when the refugee encounters the newness of Canada in another paralyzing moment—the one of arrival. Upon landing in Quebec, she writes, "I was . . . unable to talk or to listen, even though I was neither deaf nor mute. I now had no points of reference, no tools to allow me to dream, to project myself into the future, to be able to experience the present, in the present."³⁸ The gratitude that comes *after* the emptiness of boat, camp, and arrival is thus a profound way for the refugee to experience her life *in the present*—the chance to begin again—and

to fully comprehend its significance. The full affective force of gratitude is brought into relief against a backdrop of absence and impossibility.

If, as *Ru's* narrator tells us, war, displacement, and asylum seeking are experienced as disorientation and suspension, then gratitude might provide a compass for the refugee to reorient herself through relational attachments. Gratitude's stickiness, its function as a social binding agent, fastens her to kin, lovers, teachers, benefactors, and strangers in moments of giving and exchange. It is worth remembering that the refugee's gratitude is multidirectional, and that it arrives most impactfully, and profoundly, at the steps of other refugees and survivors. As it celebrates Canada, the novel also makes room for a telling of the quotidian (but extraordinarily so) generosity, wisdoms, and altruisms of other Vietnamese refugees.

For example, she pays tribute to Anh Phi, a family friend who found and returned the lost taels of gold that the narrator's family eventually used to pay for their passage out of Vietnam. His selfless and heroic act during postwar Vietnam's "chaotic peacetime," when "it was the norm for hunger to replace reason, for uncertainty to usurp morality," established the condition of possibility for the narrator's survival and escape.³⁹ Her Aunt Six, who labored in a chicken processing plant in Quebec, enabled the narrator to form her own dreams of the future. By giving the narrator a simple gift of ten pieces of paper, on each of which was written the name of a possible profession, her aunt showed her that there were other options besides medicine, a career that many refugee parents expect their children to enter into because of its prestige, earning potential, and perceived stability. She writes that "it was thanks to that gift . . . that I was allowed to dream my own dreams."⁴⁰

Furthermore, Monsieur An, a survivor of the communist reeducation prisons, taught her about the important notion of nuance. His tale of facing the barrel of the execution gun and surviving through a defiant upward gaze to search for the sky's blueness is a lesson in the importance of life's subtleties and the power of resistance. Monsieur Minh, another reeducation survivor, who had "written" many books in his mind, "always on the one piece of paper he possessed, page by page, chapter by chapter, an unending story," during his incarceration, was "saved . . . by writing."⁴¹ He gave her the "urge to write" and the gift of words, showing the narrator the power of stories and storytelling in the struggle to stay alive.⁴² The narrator's parents, who were "unable to look ahead of themselves" because of the opportunities closed off to them in Canada, "looked ahead of us, for us, their children."⁴³ She emphasizes that "for us, they didn't see the blackboards they wiped clean, the school toilets they scrubbed, the imperial rolls they delivered. They saw only what lay ahead."⁴⁴ The gratitude expressed here acknowledges her parents' hard work and sacrifice as the foundation for the narrator's own success. She renders the "gifts"—material and immaterial—from various individuals as pieces that fit together to create a whole refugee self.

Taken together, these vignettes of gratitude constellate a subject whose boundaries are blurred, and whose presence is built on the sediments of others' dreams, lessons, and sacrifices. The kernel for the self is an assemblage of the "enigmatic traces of others."⁴⁵ And writing catalogues gratitude so that the self might emerge in the duration of refuge, showing us that the gift of refuge is meaningless, indeed impossible, without ordinary generousities and the mundane relations between people. *Ru* gives us a method for creating a refugee self through a relation of living-with. Here, *with* indicates a dependency or a necessary recognition that whatever "success" or life there may be for the individual refugee subject, it is always predicated on the presence of others, on their actions and reactions. Gratitude, then, is a relational device for refugees seeking to understand how they have come to be in the world. What forces, individuals, and capacities have made the existence of a person in refuge possible? This is a crucial question, not so much because it involves a genealogical excavation of the subject, but more because the very possibility of that subject is an incredibility.

The elliptical and fragmentary form of the novel, mimicking memory and everyday storytelling, already lays bare this method of narrating (inter)subjectivity. But the marketing of the book as a novel, even though it was written as a memoir, is a brilliant strategy that both creates authorial distance and draws attention to the literary quality of Kim Thúy's writing, a quality that is often judged as missing from ethnic writing in general, and from life writing by immigrants and refugees in particular. The simple mechanism of a name change—from Kim Thúy to Nguyễn An Tịnh—recalibrates the entire narrative and how it can be read. This is an experimentation, not just in how to tell a refugee story, but also in how to think of the refugee subject in charge of narrating herself into being. Stepping outside the ethnographic frame, while at the same time revealing much ethnographic content, Kim Thúy achieves a speaking voice that does much heavy lifting. This voice holds expectations and demands while carving out a space for individual expression, showing us a beautiful process of self-creation via gratitude.

LIVING FOR OTHERS

Kim Thúy's text demonstrates how gratitude facilitates self-reconstruction in refuge. *With gratitude* is one way for the refugee subject to exist. And to exist is to comprehend that—even though it may be experienced as singular and individual—a life is always a living-with, because without this "with" there cannot be an "I." We could understand gratitude, first and foremost, as a relation of living through—or by way of—what others have built for us. But this relation of gratitude might also mean *living for* others, as an obligation to build what others could not have or never had the chance to have—to be a presence in the place of loss. If living-with allows the subject to receive fragments of the self from others, and to see the self as grafted from these offerings, then living-for adds weight and

meaning to a life, providing impetus to personal experience. In her memoir *Lucky Child*, Loung Ung, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide, comes to the haunting realization that her life, or the very capacity to live, acquires significance because it acts as a vehicle for the dead. She reminds herself: “*You have to live for them because they died.*”⁴⁶ This simple yet infinitely complicated truth deepens and challenges the meaning of an individual life.⁴⁷

This idea is echoed in the opening pages of Kim Thúy’s novel, where the narrator explains that the “purpose” of her birth was to “replace lives that had been lost.”⁴⁸ Because she “came into the world during the Tet Offensive” of 1968, one of the deadliest battles of the Vietnam War, her life and its meaning are inextricably tied to the “blood of the two million soldiers deployed and scattered throughout the villages and cities of a Vietnam that had been ripped in two.”⁴⁹ To view one’s life not as one’s own, but as an extension of the lives that have been lost, is to view living as an experience that is intimately bound up with the deaths of others. In histories of war and genocide, an individual’s life is lived, as Ung and Thúy suggest, on behalf of kin, of fellow countrymen, of those whose lives were cut short.

It is not merely the idea of individual success that is at stake, and the purpose of a life is not only the achievement of self-actualization and personal development. Instead, the intention of a life, its coming-into-being, is to exist for others. It is to counteract the forces of violence (state and otherwise) that continually seek to annihilate life. An individual life is thus never separated from the sociopolitical context, or from what is happening to other people and the unpredictable historical contingencies of the world. It is always already a living-for—but in genocide, this living-for is tethered to an organized catastrophic decimation of a culture, a family, a life.

In the wake of American military withdrawal from Southeast Asia, the region succumbed, city by city, to communist regimes. From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, embarked on a totalizing program to forcibly return Cambodia to “year zero”—a revolutionary state based on agricultural economy and the elimination of foreign influence. Through torture, starvation, forced labor, execution, and “disappearances,” the Khmer Rouge killed approximately two million people, a quarter of the total population. When all was done, the country and its people were left in devastating ruins, and the material and psychic effects of the genocide continue to be experienced, at home and abroad.

Ung’s memoir shows that the meaning of a life after genocide is defined not so much by how a subject lives it, but by the loss that motivate its very living. Significantly, she comes to this understanding the moment she recognizes the possibility of putting her experience into words, an experience that she shares with her family and other Cambodians. A note in her first memoir, *First They Killed My Father*, reads: “This is a story of survival: my own and my family’s. Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too.”⁵⁰

As philosophers such as Martin Buber remind us, language and speech are the very mechanisms that link individual subjects, bringing into relation the I and the You. Because linguistic consciousness enables our participation in the social world, language is the primary means of establishing intersubjective relations.⁵¹ The genesis of Ung's two best-selling memoirs can be traced to this moment of intersubjective realization, when she as subject begins to see the significance of her survival and its subsequent narrativization.⁵² Having struggled to make sense of her family members' deaths in Cambodia and her own life in the United States, Ung comes to view her refuge as a continuation of their lives: "*You have to live for them because they died.* This thought suddenly snakes its way on to the white page on my desk. I put down my pen and clasp my hands together. *Did they die for me? Did they die for me?* My mind repeats the question like a dark spell."⁵³ The very question—"Did they die for me?"—bridges the living and the dead. It undoes individual subjectivity to suggest gratitude arising from the ultimate human debt: the benefit of life predicated on the death of others. This benefit is neither a magnanimous sacrifice on one end nor a marker of worthiness on the other; it is but a cruel fact of war and genocide, where many die and some survive. Beyond a psychologizing interpretation of such debt relations as survivor's guilt, I suggest that this difficult knowing is precisely what connects the individual—who cannot explain the discrepancies of fortunes, the random workings of fate, and the disruptions of history—to the social world. It allows the individual subject to see that meaning in her life depends on how she is connected to the lives and deaths of countless others.

In this way, gratitude is a debt that the living "owes" to the dead. Gratitude manifests in the obligation to live or survive *for* others in refuge. This obligation means that one's life is not just one's own, and a grateful relation is not only about thankful expressions or repayment to a benefactor, but is also about the actions that sustain one's life, which is a vessel for holding others. For the refugee who knows loss, gratitude inheres in the acts that make life livable, whatever that may look like. A relation of gratitude, then, allows us to see another method of living, not living to merely fulfill the self, but to understand that doing so is to imbricate and entangle the self with the future of the dead, a future that depends on how the refugee lives.

The consequences of life—what the refugee subject manages to do or achieve—extend to those who are no longer living it, and her actions acquire an aura of multiplicity, buttressed as it is by the dead's propinquity. Instead of public verbalizations, recompense, or correct being, gratitude is the refusal to die because others have died already, and to not be defined by death but to carry the dead in the animate duration of the everyday. The notion of living-for opens up an understanding of gratitude whereby the subject situates the possibility of, and the reason for, living in the deaths that have taken place.

In the beginning of *Lucky Child*, which picks up from *First They Killed My Father's* chronicle of life under the Khmer Rouge, a ten-year-old Loung Ung arrives

in the United States with two siblings after spending time in a Thai refugee camp. She has survived years of mass killings, starvation, and manual labor in postwar Cambodia, which took the lives of her parents and two other siblings. Ung is chosen by her eldest brother to make the journey to the United States because she was “still young enough to go to school, get an education, and make something of herself,” an opportunity that was not offered to other surviving siblings.⁵⁴ Thus begins a life that diverges from those of her family members and from the experiences of the past. Yet the past refuses to let go of the subject. Ung writes, “In my new country, I immersed myself in American culture during the day, but at night the war haunted me with nightmares.”⁵⁵

The difficulty with having two lives is that day and night often bleed into one another. In a chapter titled “Minnie Mouse and Gunfire,” the narrator recalls her first Fourth of July, when the fireworks celebration, with its terrifying “smell of burnt powder, the brightness of the bombs, and the haze of smoke,” hurled the past into the present, blurring war there and peace here: “I am outside of time and space and in a world where Cambodia and America collide, with me stuck somewhere in the middle. A baby screams as the soldiers reach into the bomb shelter and pull out a woman. Her clothes are black and dirty and her face is muddy. She clutches her baby to her breast and begs for mercy, taking me back to the death of Ma [mother] and Geak [sister]. All of a sudden, my world goes red and I am back in America, disoriented and terrified.”⁵⁶ A conventional reading might view this disorientation as the effect of trauma or the consequence of post-traumatic stress disorder, but I suggest that it is a psychic reckoning with the meaning of living for the dead. To live-for is a relationality that is imbued with the dead from the past, such that the past is not past, and the dead are not dead but *live* through what the subject experiences in the present. While it can weigh heavily on the subject, to be haunted in this way is to experience the “for” of living. The intimacy of the dead means that the past and its violence are never far away, and the individual must continue to feel their pulsing contemporaneity.

Instead of articulating gratitude for a new American life, *Lucky Child* focuses on finding a mode and rationale for living in refuge. As Ung comes to terms with being alive, the haunted presence of the dead is emphasized more than anything else. While the narrative depicts the usual difficulties of starting anew in a different country, it is interestingly devoid of conventional gratefulness. In response to an American sponsor who assumes that the newly arrived Cambodian refugees are unfamiliar with common household items, the young Ung blurts out, “These people know nothing! They think we’re backward villagers and peasants!”⁵⁷ This candid reaction prompts her elder brother to remind the narrator to exercise more gratitude, because these people “don’t have to help us at all but they do, so you be grateful.”⁵⁸ In another scene, American charity invokes a deep sense of shame in the refugees as they purchase groceries with food stamps. For Ung, who knows firsthand the desperation to acquire food during years of forced hunger under the

Khmer Rouge, it might seem that receiving food via government assistance would be a small indignity to bear. Yet feelings of shame and embarrassment arise from consciousness of how Americans see the refugees, or of what refuge looks like from the other's resentful eyes: "I turn my gaze from the pineapple to look at the clerk and notice that his once cheerful face is now an unmoving plastic mask and his mouth is a straight line. He keeps his eyes focused on the red numbers of his machine as he takes the food stamps from Meng's [brother] hand. Afterward, he hands Meng and Eang [sister-in-law] our groceries with a thank-you that sounds to me more like 'I am angry you foreigners come here and eat free while I have to work for my food.'"⁵⁹ Through the condescension and bitterness of those who look down upon them, the refugees' benefit—of food stamps and refuge—turns into shame. Ung's brother encourages her to remember this because it will propel her beyond her pitiful situation: "Pay attention. See how he stares at us because of the food stamps," Meng tells me in Khmer. "Be embarrassed and ashamed by this, and don't forget it."⁶⁰ This interplay of "nativist" resentment and "refugee" shame is a real consequence of the giving and receiving of benefit, of what it means to be locked in refuge together. Refuge does not always inspire good feelings, and the refugee is left with a complicated mix of reactions.

Accordingly, gratitude toward the U.S. nation-state is superseded by indignation and hatred toward the Khmer Rouge for the life Ung must currently live—even if, and indeed because, she is the "lucky child," lucky to be alive and to have refuge while others are dead or suffering. In her narrative, which also tells the parallel struggle of her sister in Cambodia, Ung is haunted by the terror of genocide that has shattered everything she knows. In refuge, she must find a sense of purpose and come to grips with having a body that breathes here, in the present moment: she "didn't want to die" and had not yet learned "how to live with the ghosts."⁶¹ To live in the wake of genocide is to be haunted, and this haunting is also a living for others. As she comes to the realization that she must exist to honor the dead, that to live a meaningful life she must live it for them, Ung enters a complex relation of gratitude. What this gratitude looks like is survival and, more specifically, a kind of survival that recognizes its condition of possibility in those who have tragically lost their lives. Although Ung does not express or experience gratitude in the conventional way, her relationality with the dead, which impels her to live—"You have to live for them because they died"—is a powerful way in which gratitude develops in refuge.

In this sense of gratitude as living-for, the refugee is highly attuned to the dead and the suffering of others. Ultimately, to live for the dead is to seek justice, because the refugee subject knows that violence will never end. So, as the United States begins its invasion of Iraq during the first Gulf War, for example, Ung relives the destruction of war, the horror of deaths to come: "I want to crawl back into bed, curl into a fetal position, and cry until I am all dried up. For I know that when each one of those lights hits the earth, somebody's mother will lose a child, somebody's

son will no longer have a father, and some daughter will be orphaned.”⁶² When the 1984 drought in Ethiopia “brought daily images of children dying from starvation,” Ung saw her deceased sister and “remembered how all she wanted was to eat.”⁶³ In this way, the “war crossed over from” her “dreamworld to reality.”⁶⁴

For Ung, living-for means that the subject cannot relegate the dead to the past, or the past to the dead. Rather, living gratefully involves a worldly immersion with those who have died, those who might die, and those who will still live. This intersubjective state of being drives the individual to “do something,” to attach her living to a meaningful cause. How else could such an experience be rationalized, but through an affective compulsion for the body and mind to act? Ung thus sought to “work with programs that dealt with issues of war, child soldiers, and genocide” after graduating from college.⁶⁵ This leads her eventually to become involved in various humanitarian projects, first with the Campaign for a Landmine-Free World and then with the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation.

Regardless of the material outcomes or underlying politics of Western humanitarian gestures, which critics have critiqued for their imperialist ramifications, such work offers the refugee survivor a chance to live for others. Ung explains: “As I tell people about genocide, I get the opportunity to redeem myself. I’ve had the chance to do something that is worth my being alive. It’s empowering; it feels right. The more I tell people, the less the nightmares haunt me. The more people listen to me, the less I hate.”⁶⁶ Living-for has a dimension of personal redemption, not for a wrong that was committed, but for making a life worthy. Ung shows us that the worth of a life that survived genocide is its service to others, to stay with the dead so that more deaths, more suffering, more genocide may be prevented. Here, it is to share experience so that the dead acquire value beyond private remembrance.⁶⁷ Ung’s activist and humanitarian work is an engagement with the dead and an acknowledgment that living derives meaning from those who did not survive. This meaning is to extend life so that others may have a chance to continue living. Gratitude in this sense is a complex praxis, a way to live a life that opens to other life forms, material and otherwise.

STRATEGIC GRATITUDE

To live with and to live for is to live strategically, so that the actions of a life acquire purpose and meaning in and beyond the individual self. As Kim Thúy and Loung Ung demonstrate, gratitude affords refugee subjects a way to fulfill a desire. It is a means for them to achieve a particular objective—to reconstruct the self or advocate for others—in the absence of other social and political resources. Because of its uncontested virtue, gratitude enables those who may not have a public voice to be recognized, to be seen and heard. It is a powerful platform, or aesthetic form, through which refugee politics or desire may be delivered to a wider public. In this

way, gratitude crucially facilitates the refugee's various social work, particularly within the confines of the nation-state.

On March 18, 2014, Tri Nguyen, a Baptist pastor, along with three Iranian asylum seekers, set out on a walking pilgrimage from Brunswick, a suburb of Melbourne, to Canberra, the capital city of Australia and the seat of its government. Pulled along on the journey was a miniature replica of the boat on which the pastor and his family fled Vietnam in 1982. Emblazoned on the wooden boat were two words: "Thank You." The plan was to walk the boat across three states and multiple country towns to arrive at their destination on Good Friday and present the boat to the Parliament of Australia as a gesture of gratitude for the "gift of refuge" the Nguyen family received three decades earlier. Nguyen explained that he wanted to thank Australia and its people for welcoming the family. He writes that "[we] were given the most hospitable welcome and care by the people of Australia. We arrived at Midway Hostel, in Maribyrnong in 1982, with nothing in our hands. We were weary and overwhelmed, but the care and generosity of people fill us with great joy. We were free and we were welcome!"⁶⁸ Such generosity inspired Nguyen's eventual entry into the ministry and his lifelong work with underprivileged and marginalized youths, evincing gratitude's long-lasting impact.⁶⁹

Nguyen's pilgrimage, however, was simultaneously a display of appreciation for a past benefit and a condemnation of Australia's current refugee regime, one characterized by restrictive and inhumane practices.⁷⁰ The impetus for the pilgrimage—entitled "The Gift of Refuge"—was sparked when an increasing number of asylum seekers began showing up at Nguyen's church. While seeing many parallels between his experience and those of these contemporary refugee subjects, the pastor also recognized that "their situation is a lot more difficult than mine, coming to an Australia that is not hospitable."⁷¹ He recalled his arrival as a "boat person" decades earlier, saying, "It was an amazing time to be a refugee, cause we were so welcome and care by the community [*sic*]."⁷²

In the intervening thirty years, Australia's political stance on refugees had shifted toward the aim of *deterrence*, effectively declaring "war on asylum seekers."⁷³ The contemporary response to refugees is defined by a discourse of migrant threat and criminality, or what Richard Devetak calls Australia's "politics of fear."⁷⁴ From mandatory detention to the Temporary Protection Visa program, to the Border Protection Act, to attempts to resettle refugees in nearby countries such as Cambodia, Australia's refugee policies of the past several decades display a deep sense of anxiety around racial purity and foreign invasion, one that stretches back to the nation's settler-colonial "founding."

Within this historical moment of intensified xenophobia and assault on asylum seekers—charges of illegal "queue jumping" and detention in "cruel and degrading" offshore processing centers—Nguyen's pilgrimage strategically

conjures up an image of Australia's benevolence to launch a critique of the nation-state. While the politics of refugee gratitude is often understood as assimilationist or nationalist, it can, as Nguyen's project demonstrates, also challenge the nation and its ideological constitution. Indeed, critiques of the nation-state by former refugees become legible precisely through the mechanism of gratitude, which is a strategy in the sense that it is a sanctioned vehicle for social voice, and strategic in the sense that said voice may be utilized for divergent ends. Thus, the purpose of recalling generosity of the past through gratitude is to make stark the ungenerosity of the present.

In "The Gift of Refuge," gratitude to the Australian nation-state is prompted not by an obligation of debt, but rather—and more significantly—by a feeling of dissonance, an unease with political discourse and government policies. Public gratitude here is a reminder that the nation is capable of better, rehearsing a version of national conduct more in line with its stated commitment to liberal democracy. It is, to borrow a phrase from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, used for a "scrupulously visible political interest."⁷⁵ Nguyen's retelling of his past through gratitude illustrates what the present and the future could be, providing an alternative possibility—one that has been—to the hostile and inhumane treatment of migrants that is. The pilgrimage, in the end, is one refugee's affective instruction in compassion.

A strategic gratitude is deployed for a particular purpose, by one conscious of its usefulness as a means to a political end. This is not to say that such an expression of gratitude is insincere or false. On the contrary, the heartfelt genuineness of gratitude is precisely the quality that resonates affectively, that draws others in and opens up their capacity to be affected. Sincerity is, indeed, a core strategic marker of gratitude. As such, Nguyen's pilgrimage discursively embarks with a highly personal and emotional story of his family's boat migration. In one early post on the pilgrimage's official website, dated Friday October 18, 2013, Nguyen re-narrates experiences common to many Vietnamese "boat people": "My family made several traumatic attempts to escaped Vietnam after the war. . . . We then endured four days in a raging storm, which almost swallow us to the deep. . . . Before we could rejoice that we were alive, we were surrounded by pirates, who took anything that was of valued. We were then caged, tortured and some were harmed for a few days, before they gave us up to United Nations Troops, who took us to a refugee camp on an Island call Pulau Bidong [*sic*]."⁷⁶ Calling attention to the perils of seeking refuge on a boat, Nguyen's autobiographical story establishes context for gratitude, emphasizing how the difficulty and danger involved in finding refuge make it so coveted. When he ends his note with "Thank you for giving my family this gift of refuge and freedom and thank you for your extraordinary hospitality and care. You have model[ed] to me what life can be and what is worth working for," the expression of gratitude clearly testifies to the importance of both providing and receiving asylum.⁷⁷ Nguyen's story of suffering and trauma is compelling and comprehensible because it aligns with the common notion of refugee pity. Of course, this

is not to say that such public telling is not meaningful, authentic, and generative for the refugee himself. This tension, of stereotype and authenticity, is at the crux of how gratitude becomes strategic.

If gratitude is easily recognized and digested, then the note, which provides a rationale for the pilgrimage, makes Nguyen and his cause legible to the nation-state. It exalts the nation for the refugee subject to emerge into public consciousness. In Nguyen's gratitude, Australia functions as a "model" of generosity and goodness, one that has fostered the grateful refugee's own sense of altruism and justice. For Nguyen, advocacy for and compassion toward asylum seekers is a quintessentially Australian characteristic, intrinsic to the country's national constitution, even if laws and policies of the day may not reflect such principles. The practice of "modeling," then, is central to Nguyen's performance of gratitude. The emphatic and headline-grabbing act of pulling a boat across the country is a form of repayment for a benefit received, yet it "repays" the nation by mimicking what it has done and could do—but refuses to do—by simply *showing* hospitality to asylum seekers.

The pilgrim's radical act of solidarity was to extend the invitation to three Iranian asylum seekers, whose claims were pending at the time. The inclusion of Majid, Mohammad (Daniel), and Linda in the pilgrimage was an opportunity for Nguyen to model what hospitality looks like for the nation, and, more importantly, for the three asylum seekers themselves. Through advertisements on social media and through church networks, Nguyen was able to secure accommodation for his team from ordinary citizens in small towns along the pilgrimage route. Australians—individuals and groups—opened their homes to the pilgrims, providing them food, shelter, and conversation, repeating the warmth and generosity that was given to the Nguyen family thirty years ago. In this way, the Iranian asylum seekers, who have known Australia primarily through detention centers, gain a different "view" of the country and its people as they "tour" the countryside.

Reflecting on the efficacy of the pilgrimage, Nguyen says, "in a sense it might not make much difference, but for us it's made a difference, it's made a difference for the guys who are coming on this journey because they have been welcome, their experience of being welcome means the world to them."⁷⁸ For the pilgrims, the walk itself is a consequential end as they seek to forge a reality different from what currently exists. "The Gift of Refuge" is a grassroots intervention in the sense that it focuses on social change by affecting how individuals feel, think, and experience the world. The scale of Nguyen's project may be small, but the intent is grand and symbolic: anyone, from ordinary folks to politicians to the nation-state itself, could provide the necessary welcome to transform the lives of a few or a multitude of people seeking asylum. It is through human relationships that refuge can be built and understood.

As such, the presence of Majid, Mohammad, and Linda in small Australian towns *instructs* the larger national community in the ordinary humanity of

asylum seekers, as an alternative to the populist constructions of them as terrorists and corrupt “queue jumpers.” At stops along the pilgrimage, the three individuals were able to interact and engage with locals through public events, discussion panels, concerts, and school and church visits. These forums allowed them to tell their stories and for people to learn more about how and why asylum seekers seek refuge. It is these kinds of personal contacts, the project suggests, that open new avenues of thinking, feeling, and action—“touching” people, affecting their worlds and worldviews.

Through the bodies of refugees, the pilgrimage gathered bodies in modes of action and participation to counteract the state’s dehumanizing regulation and administration of asylum seekers. The physicality of the pilgrimage aimed to arouse the capacity and involvement of Australian citizens, asking them to join in and contribute what they could, whether it was time, resources, or physical presence.⁷⁹ A promotional video, with an accompanying song by Kim Beales, was also produced as a call for participation.⁸⁰ The video features footage of people from all walks of life pulling the replica boat around Brunswick and Melbourne. The point was to gain visibility, spark curiosity, and make the sight of the boat a part of the Australian landscape. By rallying the participation of ordinary Australians across the country in support of asylum seekers, Nguyen’s pilgrimage attempted to show that gratitude is not just a feeling that refugees and immigrants feel for the nation, but a shared affect that all subjects, familiar and strange, can partake in together.

The act of walking together is a way of orienting bodies, hearts, and minds in a common direction, moving away from fear. Moreover, the pilgrimage draws on protest methods of the American civil rights movement, particularly Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s brand of civil disobedience, to articulate its critique of the government. For Nguyen, it is a citizen’s duty to condemn the government’s moral and political failure. In a series of tweets on the pilgrimage’s Twitter account, Nguyen documents the injustices meted out to asylum seekers by the government, linking to news articles with titles such as “Perverse Migration Bill Shreds the Rule of Law,” “Silence on Missing Asylum Seeker Boat a Disgrace to the Nation,” “Tony Abbott [the prime minister] Fails Another Leadership Test,” and “Ethics All at Sea: Stopping the Boats and Corrupting the State.” The tweets paint a picture of a nation in moral crisis, in the midst of a campaign to “stop the boats” that disregards both law and human dignity.

On April 20, 2014, when Nguyen and his team reached Canberra, they were greeted by a crowd of supporters. The pilgrimage came to a successful completion, having gained wide coverage in mainstream media outlets.⁸¹ Having begun the journey with a note of thanks, Nguyen ended it with another. After reiterating his gratitude to Australia and to various individuals who made the journey possible, Nguyen borrowed Dr. King’s famous line, “I have a dream,” to make a concluding appeal for a humanitarian approach to asylum: “I too have a dream! That in thirty two years time, your [asylum seekers’] children will walk from towns and cities to

Canberra to thank the Australian people and the Australian parliament for giving their parents the gift of refuge. I too have a dream, that Australia will continue to be a nation that welcomes the strangers, that cares for the vulnerable and gives fair go to all who are seeking refuge. That's the Australia to be proud of. Thank you Australia!"⁸² Nguyen thus projects the reproduction of grateful feeling, which is intimately tied to the gift of refuge. A generous nation, he declares, will continue to be celebrated, inspiring gratitude as the primary modality of social exchange. Yet the idea that Australia should be a nation that "continues" to welcome asylum seekers is not a statement about the factual present, but an aspiration for the future.

The pilgrimage's optimism is a "utopian promise" that performs possible futures, assembling people and communities in social relation.⁸³ Narrating the past, pulling a boat from town to town, expressing profuse thanks, and criticizing state policies all function coterminously to enact a more hospitable nation, a refuge to come. Through a personal expression of gratitude, the pilgrimage directs "itself to the broader sociopolitical context, to seek affirmation, understanding and acceptance and/or protest."⁸⁴ Such a refugee performance, of critique via gratitude, as Michael Balfour and Nina Woodrow would contend, "seeks to insert unfamiliar narratives into familiar bureaucratized or mediatized stories," and thereby resist "bureaucratic, dehumanizing portrayals of refugee[s]."⁸⁵

The expression of gratitude strategically undermines the mainstream discourse of fear by foregrounding refugees as thankful, even if this image risks confining them to a liberal, essentializing stereotype of "goodness." It is through such a "non-threatening" figure that Nguyen is able to petition others to join his cause, and to understand the need for change. Nguyen strategically utilizes the rhetoric of gratitude to gain visibility, however conflicted, for the specific purpose of advocacy. Yet, if the pilgrimage was Nguyen's gesture of refuge, then the Australian government's response was an unambiguous rejection: No boats allowed! A January 6 post on Facebook reads: "I just learned that Parliament won't received the boat as a gift of gratitude [*frown emoticon*] / so after doing the rounds in PM's offices—We may have to bring it home [*frown emoticon*] / maybe we can make it a permanent display on Sydney Rd. / Or take it on the road again, until it is receive [*sic*]."⁸⁶ In refusing the gift, the government explicitly commits to its hardline, "fortress Australia" stance on immigration, unwilling to even accept the refugee's gratitude or make a symbolic commitment to refuge.

The refugee subject is thus denied the opportunity to be generous or to repay a debt, and his advocacy work remains officially "unheard" and "unrecognized" by the state. The Parliament's decision can be interpreted as a move to maintain a power dynamic, reserving agency and executive judgment solely for the state. Meanwhile, asylum seekers coming to Australia continue to be detained, sent to offshore centers, and denied basic human rights. While the government's refusal of the boat might signify a kind of failure for Nguyen, it is powerful justification for, and bittersweet affirmation of, the importance of his pilgrimage in the name

of asylum seekers suffering in inaccessible places “unknown” to Australia and the rest of the world. Nguyen’s activism shows that refugee subjects need, again and again, to instruct the nation-state in the lesson of compassion. This lesson is perhaps one of the most virtuous and meaningful recompenses for the gift of refuge, a magnanimous gratitude that the nation-state may not yet be ready for.⁸⁷

RETHINKING OBLIGATIONS

Discussions of refugees and gratitude inevitably lead to the question of obligation. Because refuge is conceived as a special benefit, it always places some expectation or responsibility on the refugee. Jason D’Cruz, for example, argues that gratitude is the principle that best explains the political obligations that refugees owe to the “host” nation-state, namely to obey its rules and laws. He further elaborates that gratitude requires “that one refrain from acting so as to undermine one’s benefactor’s interests. It is the disregard for the state’s needs that warrants the charge of *ingratitude*.”⁸⁸ In other words, gratitude compels compliance and correct behavior—it is to bend oneself to the interests and needs of the benefactor and maintain the status quo. This account, which attempts to determine and define the refugee’s duty, exemplifies the logic of gratitude as a force of expectation, a debt that binds refugees to the political community that has provided refuge. Such conceptualizations of gratitude—which are pervasive as common sense—begin and end with the unquestioned premise that refuge carries with it an unshirkable duty.

In her essay “The Ungrateful Refugee,” Dina Nayeri describes the insidious ways in which this duty, not just a political obligation but also a social one, comes to envelop the refugee subject’s world. Through overheard “chatter” and offhand remarks of sympathy, the refugee is made to believe that “if I failed to stir up in myself enough gratefulness, or if I failed to properly display it, I would lose all that I had gained, this Western freedom.”⁸⁹ The expectation of gratitude stays with her as she assimilates, becomes a citizen, and emigrates from the United States. In the process, it asks for her “salvation story as a talisman” while simultaneously requiring the shedding of her “old skin” and “former identities.”⁹⁰ The demand for gratitude, she shows us, incurs great costs for the refugee. Nayeri consequently turns the expectation back on the state and its citizens, suggesting that the obligation is not the refugee’s gratitude but the state’s protection: “It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks. It is your duty to answer us, even if we don’t give you sugary success stories.”⁹¹ She insists that refuge is not contingent on gratitude, and gratitude should not be exchanged for refuge. Published in *The Guardian* in 2017, amid daily headlines announcing that refugees were crossing the Mediterranean, Nayeri’s widely read essay attempts to shift the discourse of duty and obligation away from the refugee’s

gratitude toward the state's obligation of providing asylum in an unstable, interconnected world.

Nayeri's reflections point us to the international community's obligations to refugees, assented to in documents such as the UN's Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and contained in liberal-democratic principles such as humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism. To focus on the state's moral and political responsibilities is to take the weight off the refugee's shoulders and move away from requiring gratitude. This chapter, however, has stayed with gratitude to contemplate its existence, asking what it does to and for refugee subjects, and how and why it becomes established as an appropriate and desired relation between the nation-state and refugees. While gratitude can confine refugee subjects to an ideal of "goodness" and is used to ideologically buttress both the nation-state and its war making, it can be the means through which other forms of subjective and intersubjective relations are developed in refuge. My analysis has explored obligations to live with and live for, to make something else out of refuge, in ways that are not solely for or directed at the nation-state. The close readings suggest an understanding of gratitude not just as constraint or debt, which of course it is, but also as experiences of living on after war and displacement with one's self and with others. What they seek to describe are the obligations of gratitude that piece back together a being in refuge that feels and knows itself to be more than singular, more than just the immediacy of the here and now. The kinds of relational being that gratitude might make possible for refugee subjects gesture to obligations that tether one to history, to people, to the fates of those who did not have a chance to seek refuge or for whom refuge has not yet arrived.