



Critical Juxtaposing of War and Migration: A Content Analysis of Southeast Asian Refugee Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

Using critical refugee studies as a theoretical lens, I analyzed Southeast Asian refugee children's literature to identify its pedagogical values and limitations for critical teaching about the Vietnam War. The findings suggest the children's literature can help challenge the dominant narratives of the Vietnam War as exclusively an American tragedy and of the Southeast Asian refugees as simply helpless victims by centering Southeast Asian experiences of the war. Yet the children's literature largely remained silent about the refugees' complex personhood and the U.S. role as a violent aggressor generating the refugee crisis in the first place. The implications for teaching practice are suggested.

KEYWORDS

Critical refugee studies; Vietnam War; children's literature; Southeast Asian refugees

Two poems from *Inside Out & Back Again*

War and Peace

MiSSS SScott
shows the class
photographs
of a burned, naked girl
running, crying
down a dirt road
of people climbing, screaming,
desperate to get on
the last helicopter
out of Saigon
of skeletal refugees,
crammed aboard a
sinking fishing boat,
reaching up to the heavens
for help
...
She's telling the class
where I'm from.
She should have shown
something about
papayas and Tet.
...

American Address

Mother is even more amazed
by the generosity
of the American government
until Brother Quang says
it's to ease the guilt of losing the war.
Mother's face crinkles
like paper on fire.
She tells Brother Quang
to clamp shut his mouth.
...
I inspect our house.
What I love best:
the lotus-pod shower,
where heavy drops
will massage my scalp
as if I were standing
in a monsoon.
What I don't love:
pink sofas, green chairs,
plastic cover on a table,
stained mattresses,
old clothes,
unmatched dishes.
Mother says be grateful.
I 'm trying.

These two poems are from *Inside Out & Back Again*, a semi-autobiographical novel written by Thanhha Lai (2011). Comprising short prose poems, this children's book describes Vietnamese experiences of the Vietnam War through the voice of 10-year-old Hà. As the protagonist and narrator, Hà describes her life in Vietnam before the fall of Saigon, her family's journey fleeing Vietnam, and her new life as a refugee in the United States.

In the poem titled "War and Peace" (Lai, 2011, pp. 194–195), Hà discusses her American teacher Ms. Scott, who introduces her to the class with some photos of Vietnam representing the following: "a burned, naked Vietnamese girl running down a dirt road;" Vietnamese people "climbing, screaming, desperate to get on the last helicopter out of Saigon;" and "skeletal refugees, crammed aboard a sinking fishing boat, reaching up to the heavens for help" (p. 194). Unhappy with these photos, Hà thinks to herself, "She [Ms. Scott] should have shown something about papayas and Tết [the Vietnamese Lunar New Year]" (p. 195). Here, Hà challenges dominant American perceptions that Vietnam is only a place of horror, and the Vietnamese are just helpless people who need to be rescued (DuBois, 1993; Hong, 2016; Nguyen, 2017; Pelaud, 2011).

In another poem titled "American Address" (Lai, 2011, pp. 123–126), Hà describes her family's experience moving into their first apartment in the United States, which their American sponsor paid for the first 3 months' rent. Hà's big brother reminds the family that paying their rent was one way for the U.S. government "to ease the guilt of losing the war [Vietnam War]" (p. 123). Hà's mother immediately "clamps shut his mouth" (p. 123). In the meantime, Hà is disappointed by some of the donated household items such as a stained mattress. When her mother reminds her to "be grateful" for America, Hà replies, "I'm trying" (p. 126). By showing the divergent or ambivalent feelings Hà's family has toward the United States, this poem reveals the complex role the United States played in the Vietnam War. That is, on one hand, the United States created the conditions that forced many Vietnamese to flee their homeland, but on the

other hand, it provided a refuge for the Vietnamese refugees (Espiritu, 2014).

I began this article with the two poems to highlight the pedagogical value of Southeast Asian refugee children's literature—children's books about Southeast Asian refugees—for critical teaching about the Vietnam War. Too often, the Vietnam War is taught and remembered in the United States as exclusively an American tragedy, and Southeast Asian experiences of the war are neglected (Espiritu, 2014; Marciano, 2011; Pelaud, 2011; Vinh et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Southeast Asian refugees, when included in U.S. school curricula, are typically presented as desperate people who fled communism to find freedom and safety in the United States (An, 2016, 2022). In this account, the aggressive role the United States played in generating the refugee exodus in the first place is elided (Espiritu, 2014; Palumbo-Liu, 1999).

Southeast Asian refugee children's literature such as *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011) brings together studies of the Vietnam War and Southeast Asian migration by centering the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees who tell their stories of the Vietnam War. By doing so, this children's literature can help students acquire a more nuanced understanding of the Vietnam War, which includes (a) the war as a main driver of the refugee exodus (Palumbo-Liu, 1999), (b) the war not only as an American tragedy but also as a Southeast Asian one (Pelaud, 2011), (c) the United States not just as a benevolent rescuer but also as a violent aggressor (Sahara, 2012); and (d) Southeast Asians not as helpless victim but as people with complex personhood (Schlund-Vials, 2012).

Not every Southeast Asian refugee children's book, however, may offer such value, and they may have other shortcomings (Chattarji, 2010; Levy, 2000). In this article, I explore the pedagogical values and limitations of Southeast Asian refugee children's literature by providing critical content analysis of it. My goal in doing so is to contribute to critical teaching about war. War is everywhere in social studies. The United States has been at war for all but 11 years since its birth (Torreon & Plagakis, 2018). War has been present in American lives throughout history, and

today the United States has become a nation with 17.4 million war veterans, 800 military bases in more than 70 countries, and \$6.4 trillion spending in the post-9/11 wars (Vine, 2020).

In the dominant discourse, U.S. wars are generally presented as grim but necessary and inevitable events that were undertaken for the best interests of the country (Loewen, 2009; Marciano, 2011). In this discourse, the United States does not choose to go to war but is forced into conflict because there is no other solution except for violence to defend our people or to rescue other people who are suffering from evildoers (Loewen, 2009; Zinn, 2011). This dominant discourse has long been debunked for the inaccuracy (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Immerwahr, 2020; Vine, 2020; Zinn, 2011); yet it has been frequently utilized by some political leaders to justify or continue the status quo of endless U.S. wars and military interventions (Vine, 2020). To challenge the status quo and promote peace, many scholars have called for critical teaching about war so that students can build a more honest and fuller understanding of U.S. wars and consider alternatives to war (Gibbs, 2020; Marciano, 2011; Noddings, 2012; Zinn, 2011).

Responding to this call, this article focuses on the Vietnam War and explores the pedagogical values and limitations of Southeast Asian refugee children's literature as a tool for critically teaching about the war. In what follows, I first explicate the study's theoretical framework and review the relevant literature. I then present the research methodology, findings, and implications.

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by critical refugee studies, a relatively new field of research charted out by Y en L e Espiritu (2006a, 2014). By challenging dominant beliefs of refugees as helpless objects to be rescued (DuBois, 1993), scholars engaging in critical refugee studies reconceptualize the figure of refuge as a site of sociopolitical critique (Espiritu, 2014). Particularly, critical refugee studies employ what Espiritu (2014) terms "critical juxtaposing" (p. 41)—defined as the deliberate bringing together of seemingly disconnected historical events—to identify and challenge what

would otherwise remain invisible, such as imperialism, colonialism, or militarism behind a refugee crisis.

Taking the Vietnam War as an example, a critical refugee study would juxtapose the Vietnam War and the Southeast Asian diaspora to elucidate the formative role the war played in creating the diaspora (Espiritu, 2014; Shigematsu & Camacho, 2010). Indeed, countless numbers of people in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were displaced and forced to leave their homes primarily because of U.S. military actions during the Vietnam War (Lawrence, 2008; Lee, 2016). Furthermore, the U.S. military bases in the Pacific, which provided shelters for the displaced Southeast Asians, were responsible for massive bombing campaigns and the resultant refugee crisis (Espiritu, 2014). The U.S. warplanes that dropped bombs over Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were also the same planes that airlifted and rescued Southeast Asians from the war-torn countries (Espiritu, 2014).

In addition, a critical refugee study on the Vietnam War would juxtapose the U.S. military build-up in the Pacific and the Vietnam War to make visible U.S. colonialism in the Pacific (Espiritu, 2014). For example, U.S. warplanes airlifted 130,000 Vietnamese in the final days before the fall of Saigon and encamped them in U.S. military bases in the Philippines, Guam, or other Pacific colonies (Espiritu, 2014). At these bases, the Vietnamese were processed for resettlement in the United States or elsewhere. This evacuation route was not accidental. The United States colonized the Philippines and Guam after the Spanish–American War of 1898, which made the U.S. military bases built on these islands to be able to handle a large-scale refugee rescue operation (Lutz, 2009; Vine, 2020).

In the juxtapositions, a critical refugee study would center Southeast Asian refugee voices to interrupt some popular narratives about the war and refugees (Espiritu, 2014). For example, one of the popular narratives presents Southeast Asian refugees as helpless victims of communism who were then rescued by the United States and became a successful, grateful minority in the United States (DuBois, 1993; Hong, 2016; Nguyen, 2012; Sahara, 2012). The divergent

voices of Southeast Asian refugees disrupt this narrative. For example, like all people, Vietnamese refugees were people with “complex personhoods” (Gordon, 1997, p. 4), who held different subject positions and political perspectives (Ortner, 1995; Pham, 2003; Schlund-Vials, 2012). In other words, while being grateful for their new lives in the United States, some refugees held feelings of discontent or ambivalence toward the United States (Cavanaugh & Walsh, 2010; Hong, 2016; Lipman, 2012). Also, not all refugees became successful. In fact, most Southeast Asian refugees struggled with racism and poverty, working in unstable, dead-end jobs years after their arrival (Gold & Kibria, 1993; Lee, 2016).

In short, critical refugee studies provide conceptual, analytical lenses to identify and challenge the militarism, colonialism, and racism behind the Southeast Asian refugee exodus and resettlement. By juxtaposing the war and refugee crisis while centering divergent refugee voices, a critical refugee study would help challenge some popular yet limited narratives, such as that the Vietnam War is only an American tragedy (National Park Service, n.d.), the United States is only a benevolent rescuer (National Public Radio, 2010), and the Southeast Asian refugees are only a desperate-turned-successful minority (Caplan et al., 1989). This study employs a critical refugee study approach and interrogates how the Vietnam War, the United States, and Southeast Asian refugees are depicted in Southeast Asian refugee children’s literature. By doing so, the goal of the study is to identify the possibilities and limitations of this literature as a tool for critical teaching about the Vietnam War.

It is important to note here that there is no consensus on how to remember the Vietnam War in the United States. The U.S. collective memory of the war is a highly contested subject in which dissonant memories and interpretations collide and compete (Lembcke, 2000; Nguyen, 2017; Perlstein, 2015; Wood, 2016). Americans were deeply divided during the war and continue to disagree on whether the war was a noble struggle against communist aggression, a tragic intervention in a civil conflict, an imperialist counterrevolution to crush a movement of national liberation, a failed war, a bad war, or a

good war that was ultimately successful and necessary (Kort, 2017; Lembcke, 2000; Nguyen, 2017; Perlstein, 2015; Wood, 2016). While recognizing divergent memories and narratives of the Vietnam War in American collective memory, critical refugee studies seek to bring too often silenced voices of Southeast Asian refugees to a national conversation about the war (Espiritu, 2014).

Literature review

A brief history of the Vietnam war

Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had been under French colonial rule since the late 1800s (Lawrence, 2008; Nguyen, 2012). During World War II, Japan drove France out and occupied the region. Against this backdrop, the anti-colonial movement began to grow (Dommen, 2001). In 1945, hours after Japan’s surrender in World War II, Vietnamese liberation movement leader Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam’s independence (Lawrence, 2008). Yet France ignored the declaration and sought to recolonize the country. This led to the First Indochina War (1946–1954)—a war in which the United States sided with France, preferring French imperial rule to an independent, communist-led government in Vietnam as well as in the neighboring countries (Young, 1991). After 8 years of fighting, the war ended with a French defeat that resulted in the temporary division of Vietnam into North and South Vietnam while providing Laos and Cambodia independence from France (Lawrence, 2008).

In this context, the United States began to more deeply intervene in the region to contain communism by meddling in national elections and backing anti-communist regimes (Bradely & Young, 2008). In Vietnam, for example, the United States propped up a series of regimes in South Vietnam to fight against the communist forces who sought to reunite Vietnam under an independent communist government (Nguyen, 2012). By the 1960s, the United States had become engaged in a full-blown war against North Vietnamese forces and their allies in South Vietnam, which ended with a U.S. defeat in 1975 (Nguyen, 2012). Over 58,000 Americans and 3,000,000 Vietnamese were killed

in the war. Furthermore, 12,000,000 Vietnamese became refugees, most infrastructure in Vietnam was destroyed, and its land and water were poisoned by defoliating chemicals (Lawrence, 2008).

Worse even, the war spread to neighboring countries (Clymer, 2011). The United States heavily bombed Cambodia and Laos as Vietnamese communist forces moved into the region. The bombings killed tens of thousands of Cambodians and motivated Cambodian civilians to support the Khmer Rouge, a communist group that initiated a brutal genocide upon taking power in 1975 (Chandler, 1991; Schlund-Vials, 2012). The 2,000,000 tons of U.S. bombs dropped over Laos from 1964 to 1973 was equivalent to a planeload of bombs every 8 minutes, 24 hours a day, for 9 years (Chan, 1994). This bombing was intended to support the U.S.-backed Royal Lao government to fight Lao communist forces and to destroy the pathway that North Vietnamese forces used to attack South Vietnam (Stuart-Fox, 1997). To shield such military actions from U.S. public scrutiny and minimize American casualties, the United States recruited the Hmong, an ethnic minority in Laos, to fight for its “secret war” (Kurlantzick, 2017; Sisavath, 2019).

When the Vietnam War ended with a U.S. defeat in 1975, communist governments came to power in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Hunt & Levine, 2012). Those who had supported U.S. military actions during the war or suffered from the new regimes began to flee. Some were airlifted and taken to U.S. military bases in the Pacific by the United States for resettlement processing (Espiritu, 2014). Others fled on foot or by boat. Many died from starvation, thirst, drowning, shipwrecks, or violent pirate attacks (Vo, 2006). Those who survived a perilous journey still had to endure poor conditions in refugee camps, waiting uncertainly—and sometimes indefinitely—to be reviewed and then resettled or repatriated (Robinson, 1998).

The U.S. public’s response to the arrival of Southeast Asian refugees was mixed (Lee, 2016). A poll taken in 1975 showed that only 36% of Americans were in favor of accepting the refugees (Stern, 1981). Although some refugees were received warmly, many others experienced hostility and discrimination from American neighbors

(Lee, 2016). Most refugees also struggled with poverty, and some refugee youth dropped out of uncaring schools or joined gangs for survival (Lee, 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

In sum, the presence of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States is a reminder of the United States’ complex role in the Vietnam War as a violent aggressor and benevolent rescuer (Espiritu, 2014; Nguyen, 2012). The U.S. operation for the refugee evacuation makes visible the intersection of U.S. colonialism in the Asia-Pacific region and the Vietnam War (Espiritu, 2014; Immerwahr, 2020; Lutz, 2009; Vine, 2020). The resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States reveals the complex reality of both U.S. racism and humanitarianism toward the refugees (Lee, 2016, 2019).

Teaching about the Vietnam war

These complicated stories of the Vietnam War seem to be largely omitted in U.S. history textbooks. Research shows that compared to the textbooks of the past, today’s textbooks tend to focus more on the personal experiences and the suffering of soldiers than on impersonal accounts and glorification of battles (Fleming & Nurse, 1988; Lachmann & Mitchell, 2014; Leahey, 2010; Loewen, 1995; Marciano, 2011). Yet the emphasis in these textbooks is on U.S. soldiers’ suffering and does not extend to the suffering of soldiers or civilians of the United States’ allies or enemies (Lachmann & Mitchell, 2014; Vinh et al., 2018). Meanwhile, research demonstrates that textbook accounts of Southeast Asian migration tend to depict the United States as a safe refuge for desperate people fleeing from communism while neglecting the U.S. role in generating the refugee exodus in the first place (An, 2016, 2022). Such a decoupling of the war and the refugee crisis sends inaccurate messages to students that (a) the Vietnam War was only a moment of American sacrifice and deep loss and not a violent system that also spurred the death and displacement of Southeast Asians; and (b) the United States played no other role than rescuing and welcoming the displaced people (Espiritu, 2014).

Because of the textbooks’ limitations in presenting a more nuanced, critical account of the

Vietnam War, Southeast Asian refugee children's literature may provide an alternative. As many scholars and researchers of children's literature have noted, carefully chosen children's literature can be used to teach difficult histories and controversial topics (Bickford, 2015, 2018; Bickford & Rich, 2015; Rodríguez & Kim, 2018; Tschida & Buchanan, 2017; Vickery & Rodríguez, 2021). By centering refugee voices in telling a story of the war, Southeast Asian refugee children's literature may help students juxtapose the war and refugees' struggles to disrupt dominant narratives that the Vietnam War was only an American tragedy (National Park Service, n.d.), the United States was only a benevolent rescuer (National Public Radio, 2010), and Southeast Asian refugees were simply helpless objects for rescue (DuBois, 1993). The extant research, albeit scant, found such value as well as some limitations in the children's literature.

Levy (2000), for example, analyzed children's picture books and chapter books about Southeast Asian refugees that were published in the 1980s and 1990s. He found that the books shed light on Southeast Asian experiences of the war, yet they generally omitted the war's complex cause and harsh realities. Susina (1991) reviewed children's fiction books published in the 1980s and noted that some books did not shy away from American intolerance toward Vietnamese refugees. However, these books presented the conflict simply as the result of cultural differences and suggested simple solutions such as seeing the common humanity between the Vietnamese and Americans. Chattarji (2010) found a similar trend in informational books for children. While attending to Vietnamese experiences of the war, the informational books depicted the United States solely as a beacon of hope and solace and the Vietnamese refugees as a former victims of communism who eventually became a prosperous, Americanized people.

This study builds on and extends the previous research by analyzing contemporary picture books and chapter books on Southeast Asian refugees that have been published since 2000. By doing so, the study seeks to update previous research findings and further explicate the

benefits and constraints of the children's literature for critical teaching about the Vietnam War.

Methodology

The research question of the study was as follows: How is the Vietnam War presented in the contemporary Southeast Asian refugee children's literature? To answer this question, I conducted a critical content analysis, which according to Short (2017), is the use of "a critical lens to an analysis of a text or group of texts to explore the possible underlying messages within those texts" (p. 6) with a focus on "who gets to speak, whose story is told, and in what ways" (p. 5). Following this definition, I drew on critical refugee studies as a critical lens and analyzed the underlying messages in the books about the Vietnam War, Southeast Asian refugees, and the United States.

Data sources and analysis

The children's literature analyzed in this study met the following criteria: (a) they were books that addressed Southeast Asian refugee experiences of the Vietnam War, (b) have been published in the United States since 2000, (c) was written for elementary students, and (d) were in a picture book or chapter book format with a narrative element. To note, Southeast Asia is a large and diverse region consisting of the countries of Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. This study concentrated on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and the refugees from these countries because they were the ones directly affected by the Vietnam War.

To identify books meeting the criteria, I conducted an online search of a community library catalogue using the keywords: Vietnam War, Southeast Asian American/refugee/migrant, Vietnamese American/migrant/refugees, Hmong American/migrant/refugees, Lao American/migrant/refugees, and Cambodian American/immigrant/refugees. I then searched the websites of Amazon, Scholastic, and Barnes and Noble to find books that are easily accessible to the public. Additionally, I used WorldCat and Google searches with the above terms to ensure that no

books were overlooked. Through this process, 21 books were identified and included in the study (see Appendix A).

For analysis, I read the books multiple times to fully immerse myself in them. Then, I began two cycles of coding (see Appendix B). First, I used descriptive and in vivo coding to summarize the main topic of a passage with a word or short phrase from the texts as the code (Saldaña, 2016). Second, I applied focused coding (Saldaña, 2016), for which I explicitly used the theoretical lens and research question as a guide to group the frequently occurring and significant codes. Third, I analyzed how the categories from the previous cycle related to one another (Saldaña, 2016). The result of the data analysis is presented in the findings.

Researcher positionality

I am an Asian American teacher educator and researcher of elementary social studies education. I entered the study with a belief that teaching a nationalistic account of war prevents children from becoming informed, engaged citizens for a more peaceful and just world (Espiritu, 2014; Gibbs, 2020; Noddings, 2012; Vine, 2020; Zinn, 2011). To maintain researcher reflexivity, I wrote reflective memos about the effects of my positionality on the research process (Saldaña, 2016). I also conversed with critical friends to read the books from new perspectives. Nonetheless, I am keenly aware of the impossibility of disentangling my positionalities from my interpretations. I concur with Freire (1970) and Denzin (2011) that all research is political and always conducted according to the subjective stance of the researcher. I hope my analysis presented below to be considered as a thought-provoking story without a definite meaning that would foreclose other different readings.

Findings

Emergent themes from the data analysis include the Vietnam War as a Southeast Asian tragedy, a war that just happened, the United States as a benevolent savior, and Southeast Asians as resilient, grateful refugees.

Vietnam war as a southeast Asian tragedy

One of the salient themes across the books was the Vietnam War as a Southeast Asian tragedy. Unlike U.S. collective memory and textbook accounts of the Vietnam War that focus on what happened to Americans (Lachmann & Mitchell, 2014; Sturken, 1997), the children's books analyzed in this study focused on what happened to Southeast Asians and presented the war as a Southeast Asian tragedy. Most books indeed did not shy away from describing the tragic results of the war for Southeast Asians, which included death, destruction, displacement, family separation, imprisonment, poverty, and being orphaned.

Adrift at Sea (Skrypuch, 2016), for example, is a picture book based on the true story of Tuan Ho. As the book's narrator, Tuan, then a 6-year-old in Vietnam, describes his family's journey to flee the country. Leaving behind loved ones, Tuan and his family become boat people, starving at sea in a broken boat. In *A Path of Stars* (O'Brien, 2012), a historical fiction picture book, a Cambodian American girl Dara listens to her grandmother's accounts of the war. In Cambodia, the grandmother had lost her husband and other family members during the war and had to walk for many days to escape. In *Always with You* (Zee, 2008), a historical fiction picture book, Kim, a 4-year-old girl in Vietnam, witnesses her village being bombed and her mother dying because of it. Then, a soldier cracks a gun across Kim's head, causing her to blackout. Kim becomes one of the countless orphans because of the war. The rest of the books were similar in presenting the Vietnam War as a Southeast Asian tragedy by centering the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees when telling the story of the war.

A war that just happened!

Although they poignantly described the tragic results of the war on Southeast Asians, most books remained silent on who was responsible for the tragedy. According to the books, the war just happened. That is, a terrible thing happened,

but why it happened and who was responsible were left unsaid.

In *A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017), a semi-autobiographical picture book, a young Vietnamese American boy, Bao, goes fishing with his father, who “tells me [Bao] about the war, but only sometimes. He and his brother fought side by side. One day, his brother didn’t come home.” The story ends there. The father does not say more, and the son does not probe for further details. Similarly, in *Grandfather’s Story Cloth* (Gerdner & Langford, 2009), a historical fiction picture book, a 10-year-old Hmong American boy, Chersheng, listens to his grandfather, who tells him “life was peaceful and good” in Laos until “the soldiers came and burned our houses and destroyed our crops ... Many families and friends died, including my brothers Ger and Fong.” In telling the story, the grandfather does not specify who the soldiers were and why they attacked the Hmong. The grandson does not probe by asking his grandfather for the details.

Such silence can be partially explained by a general trend in the cross-generational transmission of historical trauma (Hirsch, 2008; Oikawa, 2012; Um, 2012). Research shows silence tends to prevail in many families that survive war or genocide, and the children of survivors tend not to probe about the past to shield family members from its painful grip (Espiritu, 2014; Nguyen, 2008). Meanwhile, the books’ general omission of the details of the war can be also partially explained by the nature of children’s literature. That is because children are the target audience, children’s literature tends to simplify or omit content that may seem too complex or difficult for young readers (Levy, 2000; Schwebel, 2011; Tuon, 2014).

To note, a few books (five out of 21) included some information—albeit not much—on why the war was fought, how the United States became entangled in it, and who was responsible for the war atrocities in the author’s notes, forewords, or end pages. For example, *Mali Under the Night Sky* (Landowne, 2010), a picture book based on the true story of a Lao refugee family, has an end page that states the following:

A country much bigger than Laos was conducting a secret war in our country to build a defense against our neighboring country of Vietnam. That big country was

America. For nine years, bombs were dropped on my country, one bombing mission every eight minutes.

In *Half Spoon of Rice* (Smith, 2010), a historical fiction picture book, the author’s note includes information about the U.S. bombing of Cambodia and how it fueled the Cambodian civilians’ support for the Khmer Rouge. However, in the main storylines, the reasons why the war was fought and who was responsible remained largely unsaid across the books.

The United States as a benevolent savior

Related to the books’ general silence about what caused the war atrocities and who was responsible, the United States, when it appears, was portrayed almost exclusively as a benevolent rescuer or a good refuge for the displaced people. In *Adrift at Sea* (Skrypuch, 2016), for example, the United States is mentioned only when Tuan’s family and other boat people are rescued. The text and illustration of the rescue scene featured a “massive” U.S. aircraft carrier that rescues the desperate refugees from a tiny, wrecked boat and a U.S. sailor who “gives me [Tuan] a tall glass filled with milk. I gulp it down. I hold up my glass, hoping for more. The sailor beams. He gives me another and another. I smile. We are safe.”

Similarly, the United States appears only as a benevolent savior in *Always with You* (Zee, 2008). Kim, the 4-year-old girl who blacked out because she was threatened with a gun, is rescued by U.S. soldiers who take her to an orphanage run by an American couple. There, the kind Americans love Kim and take good care of her. In *A Song for Cambodia* (Lord, 2015), a picture book based on the true story of Arn Chorn-Pond, Arn escapes the cruelty of the Khmer Rouge and finally reaches a Thai refugee camp. There, Arn meets an American volunteer who later saves him from a flood, adopts him, and takes him to the United States, where “Arn was safe and had enough to eat ... and went to school in a large building for the first time.”

Only a few books (five out of 21) provided a more nuanced portrayal of the U.S. role in the Vietnam War. In *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), Hà’s big brother is critical because the

United States created the condition for the refugee exodus, stating that the U.S. rescue of Vietnamese refugees was to “ease the guilt of losing the war” (p. 124). The book also vividly describes the racism, bullying, and hostility that Hà and her family encounter from American neighbors and classmates. Similarly, *When Everything Was Everything* (Vongsay, 2018), a semi-autobiographical picture book narrated by a Lao refugee child, does not paint a rosy picture of the United States. The refugee girl is raised on food stamps, continuously shuttled from one public housing address to the next, forced into ESL classes, and ridiculed by her classmates. These books unsettle the dominant narrative that the United States was exclusively a benevolent rescuer or a safe haven for the displaced people.

Southeast Asians as resilient, grateful refugees

Across the books, Southeast Asian refugees were generally portrayed as people with agency and resilience. As the books’ protagonists, Southeast Asians make their own decisions and take action in face of the insurmountable challenges caused by the war. They were indeed subjects with the agency rather than helpless objects for rescue (DuBois, 1993). In *Mali Under the Night Sky* (Landowne, 2010), for example, the family members discuss whether, how, or when to leave their home and search for a refuge. After making the decision to leave, the family undertakes a perilous journey through jungles and across rivers. Kim, the 4-year-old girl in *Always with You* (Zee, 2008), demonstrates resilience as she follows her mother’s dying words— “Don’t be afraid. I will always be with you”—and perseveres after the tragic loss.

Along with resilience and agency, gratitude was another characteristic of Southeast Asian refugees across the books. In *A Long Journey to Safety* (Nguyen & Crawford, 2019), a semi-autobiographical picture book, 5-year-old Hiep arrived in the United States after a long journey escaping from Vietnam, suffering at sea in a small fishing boat, and waiting many years in a refugee camp. Despite the cultural differences and language barriers, “all in all Hiep was thankful to be in America. Through everything he had endured, he realized this had been a long journey to safety.” In *Grandfather’s*

Story Cloth (Gerdner & Langford, 2009), the grandfather misses his homeland, Laos, but is grateful for his life in the United States because “my true home is with my family ... and you are all here. As long as you are safe, I am happy.”

Only a few books (five out of 21) presented their protagonists as having more complex personhood than simply being a grateful or successful refugee. In *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), Hà’s big brother is critical of the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War and its role as a violent aggressor that caused many deaths, including his father’s. A 10-year-old Hà is unhappy that she had to leave her beloved home in Vietnam and now has to deal with bullying and racism in America. Hà’s mother is grateful for the United States’ support for her family’s resettlement. Yet she mourns the death of her husband in the war and has uneasy feelings about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In *A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017), Bao’s family struggles with poverty. Bao’s father wakes up early and fishes for the family dinner, not for sport. Bao’s parents need to work during the weekend to support the family. At school, Bao hears his classmates make fun of his father’s broken English.

In these books, Southeast Asian refugees were not simply desperate-turned-successful or grateful refugees. Instead, they held critical, ambivalent, or mixed feelings toward the United States. They also struggled with poverty and racism in their new country.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings suggest both the pedagogical values and limitations of Southeast Asian refugee children’s literature.

Limited critical juxtaposition of war and refugees

First, an important value of Southeast Asian refugee children’s literature seems to be in the centering of Southeast Asian experiences in telling the story of the Vietnam War. Unlike U.S. popular memory and textbook accounts (DuBois, 1993; Lachmann & Mitchell, 2014), the children’s literature analyzed in this study focused on what happened to Southeast Asians, thus making visible

what has been neglected in the mainstream discourse about the Vietnam War. By juxtaposing the war and the refugee crisis in particular, the children's literature drew attention to the war as a main driver of forced migration. Doing so, the books help not to blame the problem of the refugee crisis on the refugees but to interrogate the larger forces behind the refugee crisis, such as war and militarism (Espiritu, 2014; Palumbo-Liu, 1999; Shigematsu & Camacho, 2010).

Yet most books were limited in explicating who was responsible for the war and war atrocities. Like their counterparts published in the past (Levy, 2000; Susina, 1991), the contemporary children's literature reviewed for this study was largely silent about the U.S. role as a violent aggressor. When featuring the United States, most books depicted it as a benevolent rescuer or a good refuge for the displaced people. The message from the books was that the war or terrible thing just happened, and the United States had no other role than to serve as a heroic, benevolent savior.

Besides being inaccurate, this message is dangerous. Depiction of the U.S. role during the Vietnam War as a benevolent rescuer strengthens a national myth that the United States is a protector of oppressed people in the world (Espiritu, 2014; Sahara, 2012). History shows this myth has allowed, justified, and promoted endless U.S. wars, causing more suffering and violence than promoting peace and justice (Vine, 2020; Zinn, 2011).

Limited representations of complex personhood

Second, another value of Southeast Asian refugee children's literature seems to be in the reconceptualization of refugees as subjects with the agency. In some popular memories and textbook accounts in the United States, Southeast Asian refugees are generally illustrated as helpless victims or objects for rescue (An, 2016; DuBois, 1993; Espiritu, 2014; Hong, 2016; Trinh, 1991). The books analyzed in this study challenged this image by positioning the refugees as protagonists who make decisions and navigate insurmountable challenges caused by the war.

Yet most books were limited in presenting divergent subject positions or political perspectives

of the refugees. Confirming previous research findings (Levy, 2000), criticism or ambivalence about the U.S. role in the war was absent among Southeast Asian refugees featured in most books. The books were also generally silent about refugees' struggles with racism, discrimination, or poverty in the United States.

These depictions are not just inaccurate but dangerous (Hong, 2016; Nguyen, 2012; Schlund-Vials, 2012; Trinh, 2010). According to Espiritu (2014), a portrayal of Southeast Asian refugees as a grateful, successful minority can recast the Vietnam War—a “controversial, morally questionable and unsuccessful” war (Wagner-Pacifi & Schwartz, 1991, p. 381)—as a good war by sending the message that regardless of the costs, the Vietnam War ultimately rescued and freed persecuted, desperate Southeast Asians from communism. This remaking produces what Espiritu (2006b) terms the “we-win-even-when-we-lose” syndrome, which has promoted and justified U.S. military excursions as operations for rescuing and liberating people, as was evident in the discourse about the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Vine, 2020).

Missed juxtaposition of U.S. Colonialism and war

Third, the books missed an opportunity to juxtapose U.S. colonialism in the Pacific and the Vietnam War. Since the Spanish–American War of 1898, the United States colonized many islands in the Pacific, including Guam, Wake Island, Hawaii, and the Philippines, and transformed them into strategic sites for advancing its military and economic interests (Immerwahr, 2020; Lutz, 2009; Vine, 2020). During the Vietnam War, the U.S. military bases built on these islands became the primary sites from which the United States waged war on Vietnam. The bases also functioned as refuge shelters, where Southeast Asian refugees were cared for and processed for resettlement.

No books except one included the U.S. military bases in the Pacific in their storylines. This can be partially explained by the fact that the books focused on refugees whose journeys did not involve stopping at a U.S. military base in the Pacific or refugee experiences before or after their escaping journey. *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai,

2011) was the only book that featured a U.S. military base in the storyline. After a perilous journey at sea, Hà's family arrives at a refugee shelter in Guam, where Hà and other refugees get food and medical care from aid workers at the U.S. military base. The refugees also receive help filling out paperwork for resettlement.

Omitted in this description is the fact that the refugee shelter and military base were built on a land the United States colonized by dispossessing the Indigenous Chamorro population from its native land (Espiritu, 2014). By presenting the U.S. military base as an ahistorical, depoliticized, and humanitarian space, the book misses an opportunity to invite students for interrogating how U.S. colonialism in the Pacific and the Vietnam War intersected and shaped Indigenous Chamorros' and Vietnamese refugees' lives in complicated ways (Espiritu, 2014; Phung, 2019).

Implications

The study findings suggest a critical selection and use of Southeast Asian refugee children's literature with its values and limitations in mind. The books analyzed in this study are appropriate for use in classrooms from upper elementary and beyond. Teachers, for example, can use the books, either as a single text or as a group of texts, to take advantage of their values. Specifically, teachers can have students read a book(s) and see the Vietnam War through the eyes of Southeast Asian refugees, recognize Southeast Asian refugees as subjects with an agency, and understand the relationship between the war and refugee exodus. In the meantime, teachers can move beyond the limitations of the children's books by guiding students to critically read the book(s) with the following questions: According to the book(s),

- What was the cause of the Vietnam War?
- Who were responsible for the war and war atrocities?
- What roles did the United States play in the war?
- How did the refugees think about the United States and its role in the war?
- How did Americans treat the refugees?

To facilitate students' critical reading and excavating the gaps in the book(s), teachers would need to provide students with counter-narratives that explain the United States' complex roles during the war, the mixed reality of U.S. racism and humanitarianism toward the refugees, and the complex personhood of Southeast Asian refugees. Such counternarratives in the digitized forms of photographs, memoirs, letters, drawings, or audio/video clips can be accessed through websites such as the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California-Irvine (lib.uci.edu/sites/all/exhibits/seaexhibit), the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota (cla.umn.edu/ihr/immigrant-stories/story-collections/southeast-asian-refugee-stories), or the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (searac.org/our-voices/community-stories/), to name a few.

In order to successfully complete the lesson, upper elementary students should be taught how to analyze primary sources and critically read children's books. As many scholars have demonstrated, elementary students are capable of these analyses when provided with appropriate scaffolding and support (Alarcón et al., 2017; An, 2021a, 2021b; Bickford & Calbough 2020; Craps & Thacker, 2016; Rodríguez, 2015, 2017). Not only does this lesson offer explicit instruction about the Vietnam War, as mandated by elementary social studies standards in states such as Alabama Department of Education (2010), Georgia Department of Education (2016), or South Carolina Department of Education (2019), but it offers all upper elementary students an opportunity to engage in a meaningful learning experience and practice inquiry skills.

Meanwhile, middle school or high school teachers may use the lesson suggested above as a springboard for student-led inquiry projects. For example, after critical analysis of children's literature on Cambodian refugees such as *A Song for Cambodia* (Lord, 2015) or *Half Spoon of Rice* (Smith, 2010), secondary students may conduct research on Cambodian refugee communities' struggle with harsh deportation policies and the anti-deportation movement (Constante, 2019; Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, n.d.). Based on the research findings, students may

create an e-book or an infographic for young learners to learn about this issue, which is rarely addressed in the extant children's literature. For another example, secondary students might first read a children's book on Vietnamese refugees such as *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011) and then research how the Chamorro people of Guam experienced and viewed the U.S. rescue operation of Vietnam War refugees, which occurred on their native land (Diaz, 2001; Gandhi, forthcoming). Based on the inquiry, students may write a passage or a chapter that can be added to the storyline of *Inside Out & Back Again* (Lai, 2011), which is otherwise silent on this aspect of the Vietnam War.

Critical use of Southeast Asian refugee children's literature as suggested above would encourage students to examine varied viewpoints and experiences and make their own decisions on how to remember the Vietnam War. Such independent and critical thinking is crucial for students to become informed and engaged citizens. A more nuanced and fuller understanding of the Vietnam War would help students critically read a dominant narrative of U.S. wars as rescue and liberation missions; make informed decisions about whether, why, how the United States should go to war; and ultimately take action to prevent future wars and suffering at home and abroad (Gibbs, 2020; Noddings, 2012; Percy, 2016; Vine, 2020; Zinn, 2011). I agree with Espiritu (2014) wholeheartedly that a critical juxtaposition of studies of war and forced migration is instrumental for creating a less violent world. Southeast Asian refugee children's literature can be a means to support students to begin the juxtaposing.

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 6. Lam, T. (2020). *The paper boat*. Owlkids Books Inc.
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 14. Phi, B. (2017). *A different pond*. Capstone Publishing.
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 16. Skrypuch, M. (2012). *Last airlift*. Pajama Press.
 17. Skrypuch, M. (2016). *Adrift at sea*. Pajama Press.
 18. Smith, I. (2010). *Half spoon of rice*. East West Discovery Press.
 19. Vongsay, S. D. (2018). *When everything was everything*. Full Circle Publishing.
 20. Yang, K. (2021). *Yang warriors*. University of Minnesota Press.
 21. Zee, R. (2008). *Always with you*. Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.

Appendix A. Books analyzed in the study

1. Chu, T. (2016). *Escaping Vietnam*. Khaleesi.
2. Gerdner, L., & Langford, S. (2009). *Grandfather's story cloth*. Shen's Books.