



## **DEPARTURES: AN INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL REFUGEE STUDIES**

by the Critical Refugee Studies Collective  
(A Book Review)



Red monarchs made from Chinese funeral paper, tied to long threads of horsehair, fall gently from underneath the spokes of a white umbrella. This detail of *Our Hearts Beat as One* (2016), an art installation by Priscilla Otani, graces the cover art of *Departures*, the freshly released introductory volume to the interdisciplinary field of Critical Refugee Studies, penned by the Critical Refugee

Studies Collective and published by the University of California Press. Otani's statement on this installation is partially quoted in the credits on the back of the book's title page. According to the San Francisco-based media artist, the butterflies nesting under the "fragile shelter" (iv) of the paper umbrella are meant to represent "the shared desire of migrants for survival and regeneration." Intriguingly, however, if one reads the rest of the statement on Otani's website, one will not fail to make an additional connection. The monarchs, she claims, were chosen to draw a parallel to human migration: "Entire generations die [...] but the will to reach a destination is borne by the next generations." Three years after that Otani affixed the last origami butterfly on her installation, Ocean Vuong's rousing prose debut *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) was published

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by Random House to wide critical acclaim. Browsing the pages of Vuong's novel, one will find the very same parallel, this time expressed in words rather than through hand-craft visual art: "The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each *departure*, then, is final. [...] Monarchs that survived the migration passed this message down to their children. The memory of family members lost from the initial winter was woven into their genes" (11; 15; my italics).

Not incidentally, two key passages of *Departures* specifically revolve around Vuong's novel. In fact, Vuong's art as a whole could be seen as a prime example of what the seven scholars that form the collective define as "refugee *re-storying*" (89). That which is, the work of those refugee authors who "revel in beauty and survival, even when refugee lives are edged with precarity," dismantling the tropes and the narratives that "reify condescending and depleted images of refugees" (89). In this respect, *Departures* presses ahead on multiple fronts. Its manifold nature is made explicit by the title itself, intended both as an allusion to the action of leaving and to that of deviating from a regular path. Highly readable and sharp-edged, tailor-made for an audience that includes (and transcends) colleges and universities, this text will likely find its way into many class syllabi and reading lists. Located at the crossroads of theory and resistance, advocacy and academia, *Departures* oozes rage, energy, and optimism, and is unapologetically political. Partly a guide, partly a manifesto, the book dutifully performs its pre-set task of introducing the general reader to the field of Critical Refugee Studies, all the while engaging with larger issues and challenges. CRS, the authors state in the "Introduction," is "a way to seize control of image and narrative, by and for refugees, centered in refugee epistemologies and experiences" (15). As a community-engaged critical field, it postulates the necessity of moving past pre-existing humanitarian narratives and frameworks, exposing the underlying threads that tie militarism and migration, power and memory, empire and race. As one of the founding members of the collective, scholar Yêñ Lê Espiritu, had already put it in her pivotal essay *Body Counts* (2014), CRS as a field "conceptualizes 'the refugee' not as an object of investigation but rather as a *paradigm* [...]" with the premise that the refugee, who inhabits a condition

of statelessness, radically calls into question the established principles of the nation-state and the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it" (10). Refugee lives, as per Espiritu, can thus help illuminate "the interconnections of colonization, war, and global social change" (11).

*Departures* carries out these same tasks, albeit in a radically changed world scenario. In fact, right from the opening lines of the volume, the book is presented as a snapshot of a moment in time. The post-pandemic, post-Trump, post-George Floyd United States, in the process of grappling with newfound social and racial reckonings, are the chaotic backdrop against which the concerns and the approaches explored in the essays are laid out. To get to grips with them, the seven contributors claim to have got rid of the "neoliberal" (8) binds of self-reliance and individualism to embrace "critical, collective energies" (8). Indeed, *Departures* is no mere collection of essays: one will find seven names on the front cover, but no name under the chapter headers, as to emphasize the community-driven nature of CRS as a critical field. The reader is presented with a multi-faceted, multi-voiced array of perspectives that seemingly come at them from all directions, as if they were Otani's paper monarchs dropping smoothly from under the umbrella. For most members of the Collective, war is "not merely a metaphor" (7): there are among them those who sought refuge and experienced displacement as a consequence of the "militaristic and racist enterprises" underpinning America's "empire building." Channeling Somali British and Palestinian poetry, Syrian visual art, and Vietnamese American independent cinematography, the authors call for new methodologies and approaches, as well as for new stories that go beyond the simple "formula of [...] escape, despair, and rescue" (147) embedded in mainstream refugee narratives. CRS' aim is to break that mold, underscoring the "invisible relations of power that broker how we see and consume the refugee subject" (123); that is to say, to radically twist the ways in which the latter is defined by the law, by the arts, and by the collective conscious.

It goes without saying that such stakes are high. In the first two chapters of *Departures*, the Collective grab the wolf by the ears by advocating nothing less than a complete rethinking of the legal

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definition of refugees as per the “limited and limiting language” (72) of the 1951 UN Convention. CRS’ redefinition of ‘refugee’ notably omits the “double-edged” vocabulary of fear “embedded in a legal structure in which states expect refugees to demonstrate fear to gain entry but also regard them as those who are to be feared” (57). Moreover, the Collective argues that the UN’s outdated definition of a refugee as ‘someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted’ does not consider the ever-increasingly complex circumstances that produce modern global mass displacement—for one, climate change. Such requests are reiterated in the “Epilogue,” an open letter to the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Human Rights, addressed in English, Vietnamese, Somali, French, and German, in which the authors ask the UN to “[k]eep the lens caps on [the] cameras [...] and find new ways to envision [...] policies [...] that better value and emphasize refugee knowledge” (148).

In Chapter 3, the conversation turns to humanitarianism and rescue narratives. The chapter shows how refugees, in such narratives, are at once invisible *and* hypervisible, infantilized and exoticized, pitied and dehumanized, and generally expected to always *perform* gratitude. This last aspect is one of the cruxes of *Departures* and of CRS as a field of study—the notion of “*refugee refusal*” (96). Which is to say, the act, on the part of the forcibly displaced, of opting out of the frame of the redundant ‘crisis-rescue-gratitude’ storyline so prevalent in mainstream depictions of mass displacement. This implies the rejection, as Dina Nayeri would put it, of “sugary success stories” (98) meant to please the receiving countries—in the name of what Mimi Thi Nguyen defines as the “gift of freedom,” that is, “the name for liberalism’s difference from coloniality, but also its linkage to it—through which freedom as a ‘thing, force, and gaze’ re-creates modern racial governmentality for a new age” (22). This very much applies to the diasporas resulted from the war in Vietnam, from which several members of the Collective directly stem. Such diasporas were born under the auspices of a “Cold War logic” that guaranteed protection “only to those fleeing left-wing [...] persecution,”

to show America's "moral obligation as the perceived leader of the free world" (44). The gift of freedom, indeed.

As per the Collective, televised images of orphans and caravans reminiscent of biblical iconography, and of threatening masses of brown bodies stacked along fences and borders, equally strip the forcibly displaced of their humanity and agency, actively vitiating the public discourse on refugees. The center of attention, they argue, must be shifted away from the statistics to focus on the stories. Refugee desires, instead of refugee needs; words, instead of pictures of corpses; refugee agency, instead of 'trauma porn' and victimization—must all concur to a new paradigm. The seven scholars call for a reimagining of archival practices and for the formation of a "new critical community" (143) armed with fresh methodology lenses. But above all, what they do hope for is that "economy of narrative plenitude" advocated by Viet Thanh Nguyen regarding the "ethnic and racial others" (203) squeezed to the fringes of the American literary market. The underlying idea, as YẾN Lê Espiritu once put it in a public lecture, is that "refugee stories [themselves can constitute] a site of theory-making" (2021). Refugee re-storying, the Collective argues, is the one tool that can dismantle the "hyperobjectification" (106) of the forcibly displaced, effectively turning the objectified individual into a producer of knowledge. Similarly, the Collective postulates the need to engage in a brand-new mode of analysis called Feminist Refugee Epistemology, or FRE. FRE is a means to "examining the intersections between private grief and public commemoration [...] and the looking for the hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic and familial interaction" (23), gravitating towards refugee art focused on "private moments of grief, interiority, and reflection" (112), rather than around (white) savior narratives of rescue, or around the revanchist rhetoric of "refugee nationalism" (Nguyen 2017, 135) prevalent in some diasporic communities. By way of example, Chapter 4 examines three instances of visual refugee art—among which stands out Lan Duong's analysis of *Nước*, an experimental short film by Vietnamese American filmmaker Quyên Nguyen-Le focused on the bond between a genderqueer teen and their refugee mother.

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In conclusion, *Departures* works on many levels and can be read in as many ways. As a compendium/introduction to CRS, it lets the general reader get a firm grasp on the subject, dropping breadcrumbs along its way to better help them navigate the field. Similarly, it proves to be an excellent starting point for students and undergraduates engaging in literary studies or in community-driven memory-work. As an academic text, the book does not fail to provide original points of discussion—one needs to look no further than the juxtaposition, attempted in Chapter 3, between a passage from Ocean Vuong’s novel and the notion of ‘strategic performativity.’ Ultimately, however, *Departures* works best as a critical manifesto “by and for refugees.” Bold and provocative, it will not fail to spark conversations in the coming years. At its core, to use an apt—if unpleasant—metaphor, lies a call to arms. “Let us be clear,” the authors state, “we are asking for those plentiful stories that would constitute an arsenal to decolonize and wrest power from the powerful” (140). Not an easy task to achieve; but looking at the state of the world and appreciating the growing “narrative plenitude” of refugee storytelling and refugee critique it produces, there is no doubt that such a call will be soon answered by many.

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