

NATHALIE HUỠNH CHÂU NGUYỄN, ED.

Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora.

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024. 402 pages. \$250.00 (hardcover), \$63.99 (paperback), \$63.99 (ebook).

I began this essay on April 30, 2025—the fiftieth anniversary of the fall of Sài Gòn. On that milestone day, US mainstream news outlets replayed familiar images of thousands of Vietnamese scampering to “escape communism” and resettle in the United States, ending with some version of the refugee success story and refugee gratitude. Vietnamese diasporic communities hosted their own Black April events to commemorate their losses—of country, friendship, family, and self. But the (hyper)focus on the post-1975 refugees in the United States overshadows other significant Vietnamese migrations during other time periods and to other parts of the world. Indeed, the skewed attention on Vietnamese refugee migration in Vietnamese America reflects the privileging, however inadvertent, of US history and collective memory of the Vietnam War—and the sidelining of other significant modern Vietnamese migrations, as the *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora* so ably reminds us.

In this handbook, editor Nathalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn introduces the range and diversity of modern Vietnamese migrations and diasporas: in chronological order, colonized laborers in France and New Caledonia in the first half of the twentieth century, socialist state-linked migrations to the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War, significant refugee diaspora of the late twentieth century, and international students and migrant workers living and working in 130 countries and territories in the twenty-first century. The

volume also includes a section on literary and cultural production and a section on diasporas and negotiations. The handbook's chapters feature a range of disciplinary approaches to scholarship on Vietnamese diasporas from the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, literary studies, film studies, and cultural studies.

As I read these accounts of modern Vietnamese migrations, I was struck by the fact that they were all instances of forced migration, whose causes can be traced to the reinforcing powers of colonialism, land dispossession, imperialist warfare, and capitalist exploitation. One of the earliest instances of forced migration from Vietnam was the sending of Vietnamese colonial indentured labor to France and New Caledonia during the French colonial period from the late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. In part 1 of the volume, entitled "Colonial Legacies," Alexandra Kurmann and Tess Do draw on historical documentary films of the *lính thợ*, indentured working soldiers in wartime France, and of the *Chân Đàng*, Vietnamese workers in New Caledonia, written and directed by Vietnamese people, to materialize "the immateriality of silenced memories of Vietnamese colonial history" (29). Chizuru Namba recounts the seldom-told history of twenty thousand Vietnamese workers who were transported to France in 1939–1940, immediately before World War II, to fill needed jobs in the war industry. In fact, Indochina was the main supplier of migrant labor to France during World War II. These recruited workers were ostracized by both the metropole and the colonial government. These two chapters confirm that colonial rule leads directly to forced mass migration from the colony to the metropole, and from one colony to another.

Part 2 focuses on the post-1975 diaspora, when more than two million Vietnamese left their country in the twenty years that followed the end of the war. Whereas most studies on Vietnamese refugees focus on resettlement in the United States, the five essays in this section cover a wider range of destinations: the archipelago of refugee camps in Southeast Asia, a divided Germany before 1990 and a united Germany afterward, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia. At the same time, it is important to note that war-generated displacement did not begin with the fall of Sài Gòn on April 30, 1975. Starting in 1954, which marked the formal entry of the United States into the Vietnam War, about ten million people, or one half the

population of South Vietnam, fled their homes for safety. Starting in 1973, as the North Vietnamese moved progressively toward Sài Gòn, many Vietnamese fled their homes by foot, boat, or plane, clogging roads and spreading panic. By the first week of April 1975, hundreds of thousands of people had fled the communist advance, heading south. It is also important to note that not all displaced people in the months leading up to the fall of Sài Gòn were ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh). Members of ethnic minority communities were also displaced, including many Indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands of Vietnam who suffered the highest casualties per capita during the war—a fact that could have been included in the handbook.

Part 3 includes two interesting chapters on another form of war-induced migration: the seldom-mentioned socialist migrations to Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. According to Adéla Souralová, in the early 1950s, the first group of displaced North Vietnamese from the Vietnam War were given refuge in Czechoslovakia; others also came as government-sponsored students. In the 1980s, Vietnamese who migrated to Czechoslovakia came under state agreements, sent by the Vietnamese communist government as indentured workers for subsistence wages, in part as repayment for Czechoslovakia's role as a weapons supplier to the Việt Cộng during the Vietnam War. Jessica Steinman reports that Vietnamese migrated to Moscow as early as the 1950s, as exploited contract workers or via semilegal and illegal routes, often crossing the border illegally from China. In post-Soviet Russia, Vietnamese migrants' lives are constrained by a lack of mobility and reliance on the shadow economy, resulting in social marginalization and vulnerability. Finally, Vietnamese emigration in the twenty-first century has largely comprised the movement of students to Western and Asian countries, reinforcing postcolonial logics in which Vietnam's workforce is best trained by and in "developed" countries.

In all, the *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora* provides a needed overview of the key histories, geographies, and politics of forced population movements in and from Vietnam that range across academic fields, emphasize multiple interpretations and representations, and illuminate the diasporic experience. The overlapping histories that constitute the modern Vietnamese diaspora mean that voluntary and involuntary migration are not opposite categories but exist on a continuum, reflecting the

varying degrees of freedom and constraints under which Vietnamese people over time and across space have made migration decisions. They also mean that economic and forced migrants constitute a continuum rather than a dichotomy, and that it is highly difficult in most cases to differentiate between these categories—as Vietnamese migrants continually redefine and switch between these categories at will and as needed.

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By accident or by design, the publication of the *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora* was well-timed to the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the postwar diaspora. Half-century anniversaries of major conflicts are noteworthy, and this one is no exception. Many refugees are now deceased, and many others were directly involved in the resettlement of refugees. But many are still alive, and they supported or participated in commemorations of this anniversary.

The last fifty years also saw the emergence of two new generations in Vietnam and the diaspora. Among younger Vietnamese, knowledge about the “liberation of the South” or the “fall of Sài Gòn” depends on their exposure to a particular educational curriculum, public narrative, popular culture, and personal records and testimonies of older family members. There is distance to accept the past but also poignancy to keep alive old experiences that help to inform one’s perspective in the present.

Examining the longer history of the Vietnamese diaspora is an objective of this collection. As editor Nathalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn, an Australian American historian, points out in the introductory chapter, the postwar diaspora is only one of “four broad categories of modern Vietnamese diasporas—colonial, socialist, refugee and twenty-first-century labour and

social mobilities” (2). This categorization forms the basis for the book, which includes an introduction and nineteen chapters organized into five parts.

There are genuine merits as well as sizable demerits, making the book uneven in quality. Most meritorious are the eight chapters in part 2 (refugee diasporas) and part 3 (migrant workers, international students, and mobility). These chapters cover Vietnamese in Australia, Czechia, Germany, Japan, Russia, the UK, and refugee camps; they show important variations in experiences of resettlement, labor, societal adaptation, and other issues among migrant communities. Distinct, for example, were Japan’s immigration policies; these allowed Japan to receive thousands of refugees during the 1970s and 1980s yet also expected them to move to other countries later. Distinct, too, were the experiences between two different groups of Vietnamese in Germany during the Cold War that carried differences of historical and political identities among Vietnamese well after German reunification. Chapters on migrant experience in these six countries help to decenter the traditional over-emphasis on Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the United States. Taken together, these chapters may make the most informative collection of scholarship about the diaspora beyond the United States since a special issue on Vietnamese in Central Europe published by the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* in 2017 (volume 12, issue 1).

Somewhat looser in focus, the chapters in part 4 (diasporic literacy and cultural production) nonetheless highlight specific case studies that also allow for broader thematic treatments, mostly of fiction, film, and memoirs. Two women fiction writers figure the most prominently in these chapters: the late French Vietnamese Linda Lê (the subject of a full chapter) and the Vietnamese American lê thị diễm thúy. There are also analyses of Anna Moï, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, Lan Cao, Monique Truong, and Kim Thúy. The chapters in part 4 vary considerably in focus. One chapter, for example, is about “the transdiasporic turn towards multiplicity”; another is about ghosts and spectral relations; still another is about food in narrative cookbooks. Taken together, they illustrate a diversity of experiences of many diasporic Vietnamese, especially among the 1.5 and second generations, even as they suggest important commonalities—such as the trauma of warfare and the challenge of acculturation.

The achievements, however, reveal some weaknesses of this handbook. While there are five chapters in part 3 and seven in part 4, there are only two chapters in part 1 (colonial legacies). The focus of these two chapters on Vietnamese laborers during late colonialism does not sufficiently demonstrate the editor's claim that "each category displays considerable internal variation depending on the individuals, communities, populations and countries involved" (2). Nor does part 1 show anything of note about resettlement and community formation in France, which, after all, formed the first major Vietnamese diaspora in a Western country. The colonialist diaspora and socialist diaspora also figure very little in part 4. It is also curious that there are no chapters about Vietnamese in the United States in part 2, despite its theme of refugees, histories, and communities. Part 4 discusses a number of US-based writers, but there is no close-up of important popular cultural productions in the refugee and immigrant experiences, such as the enormously popular series *Paris by Night*. While there are other volumes that cover diasporic experience in the United States, such as *Towards a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory*, edited by Linda Ho Peché, Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, and Tuong Vu (Temple University Press, 2023), the lack of coverage here makes the handbook less comprehensive.

Harder to remedy is the virtual lack of voices of older immigrants and refugees who spoke, wrote, and published primarily in Vietnamese. Seven chapters of part 4 examine exclusively works published in English and almost exclusively by 1.5 and second-generation diasporic Vietnamese. There are few mentions, let alone analyses, of refugee and immigrant writers who came of age in Vietnam. An exception is an examination of the writer (and a master of ceremonies for *Paris by Night*) Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, but the focus is on his English-language memoir rather than his many publications in Vietnamese. Readers might get the false impression that there was not much of an ethnic press in any of the diasporas, when in fact many books and periodicals have been published in Vietnamese.

The *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora* is a laudable effort that fleshes out several important topics. Editing a work of this scale is a thankless job; this reviewer is appreciative of the publisher for having initiated this work and to the editor for having accepted such a tall order.

At the same time, the volume illustrates the difficulty of achieving balance in the scholarship about the diaspora—and the ever-growing need for scholars to pursue this equilibrium. This may mean balance in studying Vietnamese in the United States and Vietnamese in smaller countries. Or, balance in examining the cultural production among the 1.5 and second generations and the production by first-generation refugees and immigrants. Or, balance of another kind. The quest for balance may never be achieved because the histories and experiences of the Vietnamese diaspora are complex and multiple. But it must be attempted, exactly because of those very complexities and multiplicities.

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Scholarship related to the Vietnamese diaspora has taken two noticeable turns in recent years. First, the field of critical refugee studies, which partly grew out of Vietnamese American studies in the US context and prioritizes refugee perspectives, interrogates refugee objectification and seeks to understand refugee issues “on refugees’ own terms” (*Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies*, 2019: 12). Second, Vietnamese studies approaches, situated within Southeast Asian area studies, take issue with the US-centric leanings of critical refugee studies. These methods focus more on Vietnamese-language materials and archives to position South Vietnamese contexts and people specifically, and not necessarily refugees more broadly, as agents in regional and world history.

The *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora* both reflects and does not adhere strictly to these two trends. Like critical refugee studies, the volume accents the experiences and voices of displaced Vietnamese. Like Vietnamese studies methods, it also values longer histories rooted in

Vietnamese and Southeast Asian contexts. True to both trajectories, the volume takes Vietnamese migration out of what many contributors refer to as “the shadows” (133, 259, 280, 295) to foreground Vietnamese diasporic histories and narrative cultures. What becomes apparent through the handbook’s twenty essays—whose authors hail from the United States, Canada, and Europe, as well as Australia and Japan—is the heterogeneity of “Vietnamese diasporic journeys, trajectories and communities” (iii). Nathalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn’s volume is an important contribution to understandings of Vietnam’s diasporas and the broader contributions of Vietnamese diasporic scholars and artists to a range of disciplines, including Asian American and critical ethnic studies, migration studies, food studies, philosophies of race, political theory, refugee literature, and world literature and film.

Social scientific pieces in the volume elaborate how Vietnamese subjects have become diasporic through colonial, socialist, postcolonial, and neocolonial infrastructures and suggest why their positionality must be understood through a class lens. Alexandra Kurmann and Tess Do’s analysis of documentary films about *lính thợ*, or “working soldiers” indentured in France and New Caledonia from the late nineteenth century to World War II, unearths the exploitation of these laborers and the complicity of Vietnamese who helped administer labor camps. Chizuru Namba follows the thread of Vietnamese servitude by examining the fate of laborers “offloaded” by France after World War II (59), when repatriation led to precarious situations whereby some Vietnamese returned home while others stayed in France. These essays track a long history of labor and migration that show how Vietnamese workers were shuttled across sites of imperial power, suffering illness and dehumanization that sometimes led to important acts of political protest. A little-known narrative emerges of migrant memory, grievance, and resistance across an earlier diaspora that, the authors submit, must be considered as an input to the evolution of Vietnamese political consciousness over the twentieth century.

Chapters on the communist bloc also compel us to consider less canonical milieus of Vietnamese migration. Frank Bösch’s study of Vietnamese diasporics defined by both German and Vietnamese partition, Adéla Souralová’s depiction of Vietnamese coming of age in the Czech Republic, and Jessica Steinman’s exploration of Vietnamese constructions of self and

community in Moscow all tell intriguing stories about the daily lives of Vietnamese laborers, students, and professionals whose movements are tied to the history of cooperation among socialist states. The 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and 1991 dissolution of the USSR are placed on par with 1951 (when the UNHCR formally defined “refugee”), 1954, and 1975 to produce a more nuanced timeline of Vietnamese diaspora.

In their studies of the UK and Japan, respectively, Tamsin Barber and Ikuo Kawakami carry issues of class and migration further into the twenty-first century, examining the refugee dispersal policies, discrimination, and insecure economic and social situations that Vietnamese migrants face. The lack of established Vietnamese overseas communities in these locations means that diasporics cannot draw from the knowledge and resources that would come with preexisting Vietnamese populations. Anne-Cécile Delaisse and Tamsin Barber take a more comprehensive view of migration in their study of Vietnamese international students and migrant workers, groups that overlap with but are distinct from the more-studied category of “refugee.” As the authors argue, these groups’ experiences vary depending on mobility regimes—laws of Vietnam, destination countries, and international agencies that regulate and administer migration (209). The above essays exemplify how categories of refugee, international student, and laborer are unequally valued in a postcolonial, neoliberal world, leading Vietnamese diasporics to variously disconnect from and affiliate with Vietnamese heritage in order to adapt to the prevailing value systems where they live.

The volume suggests that attending to under-studied histories results in new narratives of Vietnamese diaspora, but it also illustrates how narrative itself is an agent that shapes historical understanding. US-centric Vietnam War scholarship and culture have so dominated the global imagination that any sustained focus on the Vietnamese diaspora must contend with this hegemonic story. Nathalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn’s oral histories show how Vietnamese Australian experiences of COVID-19 surface through narrative. Nguyễn’s conversations with Vietnamese Australian health professionals reveal how their “negotiations of family histories of trauma” cultivated an “empathy and resilience” that enhanced the care work they performed during the COVID-19 lockdown (141). Relatedly, Jana Lipman unpacks the portrayal

of the refugee camp in Thi Bui's graphic narrative *The Best We Could Do*, suggesting that it both recalls a history of Vietnamese refugee experience and anticipates refugeehood today as defined by both movement and detention.

Other essays speak further to the paradoxes of refugeehood. Elizabeth M. Collins analyzes how Vietnamese diasporic cooking and cookbooks “[give] voice to what is unsayable” (323); Ivan V. Small notices the “central” but “spectral” depictions of Vietnam among younger Vietnamese American writers (253); Catherine H. Nguyen explores the hauntological force of the “spectral brother,” a character who recurs in Vietnamese North American literature; and Leslie Barnes studies Linda Lê as a subject who is and is not a diasporic author. These literary investigations highlight how literature can contain the simultaneous truths of Vietnamese diasporas.

Part of narrative's force also lies in its ability to act meta-narratively, or to self-reflexively scrutinize the premises of accepted stories and potentially give rise to new ones. Alexandra Kurmann interprets Anna Moi's and Viet Thanh Nguyen's writings as attempts to map “transdiasporic” networks (238), whereby asserting refugee identity contests the tokenization of refugees in French and US public discourse. Lan Duong shows how Vietnamese French and Vietnamese Australian film can “restory” (following Chinua Achebe) patriarchal aspects of remembrance to foreground women's spaces as key settings of refugee diasporas (308). Metafiction is the key analytic in H.J. Tam's treatment of plagiarism, cannibalism, and authenticity in Vietnamese diasporic texts; the author describes refugee literature as a form of self-reflexive labor undertaken within a white-dominated literary marketplace. The handbook asks metalevel questions of researchers as well. Anna Vu and Diêu Linh Đào and Julia Behrens study the fraught role of Vietnamese diasporic academics who must build intellectual capital while cultivating community ties, resulting in potentially conflicting desires for these scholars. Narrative emerges in the volume as a hegemonic force that perpetuates stereotypes about refugees and commodifies their stories, but it is also an arena for Vietnamese diasporic reclamation, refuge, and reflection on challenging questions.

Another important question posed in the volume concerns how Vietnamese diasporic communities can replicate social hierarchies in such a way as not to recognize commonalities with each other or with

other displaced groups (see the essays in parts 2 and 3). Traumatic and underrepresented experiences of Vietnamese migration can result in durable diasporic ties, yet current political polarization evident across Vietnamese diasporic communities in the United States, for example, exposes the fragility of those bonds—especially as they shift according to class, generation, and mobility regime. These differences may partly be due to the diaspora’s internal demographic diversity. The volume notes that 75 percent of the diaspora today is rooted in migrations related to the Vietnam War, whereas since 2000, the demographic has shifted to students and migrant workers, all of whom may conceive of the diaspora and what ties it together in quite different ways.

Refugeetude, or the practice of, as Vinh Nguyen has written, “generating connections to past, present, and future forms of displacement” (“Refugeetude,” *Social Text*, 2019: 110–111), can be difficult to practice on the ground. This conundrum raises questions concerning what makes Vietnamese diasporics connect with or distance themselves from, and even denigrate, other migrants. What obligation do Vietnamese diasporic studies scholars have to issues that are not only analytical but also ethical, and interlocked with other histories of migration? These inquiries will become more important as increasing millions are on the move today, negotiating multi-sited identities and cultures in places where policies and borders are hardening and myths of settled populations and histories have taken stronger root. The *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora* marks an important step in the scholarly pursuit of these questions.

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The year 2025 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War—as it is referred to in the United States, from where we write.

At this anniversary, the *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora*, edited by Nathalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn, invites readers to reflect on experiences of the war outside of the dominant US refugee context: experiences that predate the war, such as the migration of Vietnamese to colonial France, and experiences in more recent memory, such as those of Vietnamese international students. The volume offers a sweeping interdisciplinary scope, with contributors drawing on field observations and interviews as well as analyses of films, novels, surveys, and cookbooks. Some threads that run through the volume include instances of statelessness in the Vietnamese diaspora (in refugee camps and in Japan), little-known examples of migration during the colonial era (to New Caledonia), and experiences of legal limbo and criminalization (in Germany and the United Kingdom).

To draw out some of these and other insights about a range of Vietnamese experiences, as well as to explore the pedagogical possibilities of a handbook such as this, we sample a few chapters that students in a sociology seminar were each responsible for analyzing.¹ Because most of the students had never read about the concept of diaspora, they approached their individual chapters equipped solely with Nguyễn's description from the introduction: "Diasporas involve leaving one's homeland, creating new lives and communities in host countries overseas, remembering and reimagining home and the homeland, rethinking and crafting connections with the homeland, and forging links with other new communities overseas" (1).

Leaving one's homeland, a precursor to diaspora, often involves loss and mourning. This is the focus of Catherine H. Nguyen's "Ghostly Brothers and Spectral Relations in Vietnamese Diasporic Literature." Nguyen analyzes the novel *the gangster we are all looking for* by Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, the poem *Two Shores / Deux rives* by Thuong Vuong-Riddick, and the Vietnamese-language story "Florence" by Phạm Thị Ngọc. These all explore instances in which a sister must grapple with the loss of an elder brother whose death is not directly tied to the Vietnam War or militarized displacement. Nguyen argues that the specter of the deceased brother stands in for the loss of a homeland, haunting the everyday life of the sister who survives in exile.

Yet not all Vietnamese in the diaspora left under conditions of exile. Historian Frank Bösch highlights this in his chapter, "The Vietnamese Diaspora in Germany: Refugees, Contract Workers, and Migrants."

By comparing two groups of Vietnamese that migrated to Germany, he shows the heterogeneity of the Vietnamese diaspora in one destination. The first group he discusses is refugees who, arriving in the late 1970s, received generous support from the government and acceptance in German society at large. They contrast sharply with a second group, Vietnamese contract workers arriving in East Germany during the 1980s—who were discouraged from integrating into mainstream society, received limited support from the government, and were left scrambling to secure legal status after Germany reunified. His chapter reveals that Vietnamese migrants “creat[e] new lives and communities in host countries overseas” (1) with unequal resources and that they face uneven obstacles in doing so.

As Vietnamese migrants and their children forge new lives in the diaspora, their relationships to the homeland also change. This is highlighted by Adéla Souralová’s chapter “Vietnamese Migrants in the Czech Republic,” which discusses the two cultural worlds of Vietnamese immigrant parents and their Czech-born or -raised children. Vietnamese entrepreneurial parents often hire Czech nannies to care for their children. Souralová argues that these intimate caregiving relationships influenced the two generations’ divergent integration, occupational paths, and future plans: Whereas the second generation has tended to assimilate into Czech society, their parents dream of a return to Vietnam.

Finally, the volume addresses how Vietnamese connect to different nodes in the diaspora—“forging links with other new communities overseas” (1). This comes through in Alexandra Kurmann’s “The Transdiasporic Turn Towards Multiplicity in Contemporary Francophone and American Việt Kiều Literature.” Kurmann offers a literary analysis of the postcolonial novel *Le Venin du papillon* by Anna Moi alongside the multi-genre novels *The Sympathizer* and *The Committed* by Viet Thanh Nguyen to demonstrate “transdiasporic literary connections” in which authors write about diasporic communities in places other than where they live. By highlighting the importance of connections among diasporic Vietnamese communities, Kurmann’s chapter speaks to a difference between migration—living somewhere other than where one is born—and (trans)diaspora—connecting with other communities of migrants from the same homeland.

Because the students in our sociology seminar largely had no prior conception of diaspora, they grappled with cobbling together a definition across

the individual chapters they read. Some chapters mentioned the concept of diaspora, but did not elaborate on it. As a result, some students came away unclear about how they should understand and apply the term. By contrast, some chapters seemed to treat diaspora in ways that directly went against the “original articulation of diaspora . . . [as] a forced migration associated with trauma and exile” (2). The volume extends the concept to, for example, labor and undocumented migrations. Therefore, our class’s composite reading did not yield clear takeaways about diaspora as a term.

On the one hand, then, our class struggled with the volume’s expansive treatment of diaspora and what that expansiveness obscures. For example, some chapters put ideas and practices of diaspora in conversation with related frameworks such as transnationalism and mobilities, while not resolving whether or how they differ. Other chapters seemed to take diaspora as synonymous with migration. But we wondered about what it would mean to take a more dynamic approach to defining “diaspora.” For example, what would it mean to take diasporas not as the outcome of dispersal from a country of origin, but as something that must be actively created and maintained?

On the other hand, we see the *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora* as a useful pedagogical tool precisely because of its capacious treatment of diaspora. It contributes to diversifying perspectives on the Vietnamese diaspora and to expanding the content and analysis that are typically brought to conversations on this topic, not only by including emerging case studies but also by featuring a range of time periods and methods of inquiry. Suralová’s chapter, for example, reveals a level of economic privilege among Vietnamese immigrant entrepreneurs who hire Czech nannies. This invites us, as US-based readers, to think beyond Vietnameseness as associated with forced migration and abjection. In this way, the volume fulfills its stated goal of “highlight[ing] the variety of Vietnamese diaspora journeys, trajectories and communities as well as the richness and depth of Vietnamese literary and cultural production” (16–17). The (understandable) asymmetry in contributors’ treatment of diaspora as background, concept, or practice makes the volume one that can be mined for comparisons across disciplines, spaces, and times.

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Note

1. Student coauthors' names appear in the order of their chapter discussions. We gratefully acknowledge the intellectual contributions of other students in the course: Ana Bozzi-Mackay, Dylan Fulcher-Melendy, Zara Haider, Nichole Kim, Jared Lambright, Brandon Niola, Logan Spaleta, and Jayden Tran.

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The *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora*, edited by Natalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn, is an ambitious, carefully crafted, and timely collection, which pushes the contemporary scholarship on the Vietnamese diaspora to expand its geographical and temporal imagination. The volume makes three important contributions. Geographically, it maps a dispersed Vietnamese population whose histories neither begin nor end with 1975. In so doing, the authors challenge the tendency of scholars to equate the “Vietnamese diaspora” with a US-centered narrative of postwar refugeeism. Nguyễn’s introduction and the individual chapters invite readers to see the refugee journey as but one chapter in a much more complex and multifaceted story of dispersal. While Anglophone and Francophone literary works predominate in the cultural analysis of authors in the handbook, the work, nevertheless, intervenes by calling attention to the experiences of those Vietnamese who are often left out of contemporary scholarly conceptualizations of the diaspora. The volume patiently accumulates geographies, temporalities, and epistemologies—colonial trajectories, Cold

War agreements, contract labor, student mobilities, refugee passage, and contemporary negotiations of identity and knowledge—so that what we call “diaspora” appears less as a defined community than as an ever-evolving pastiche of histories, experiences, and identities that culturally and politically (re)negotiate the definition of “Vietnameseness.”

The early chapters push the field temporally backward and spatially outward, relocating Vietnamese mobilities within European colonial labor circuits to reassemble “silenced” colonial itineraries into public memory and visual historiography by chronicling indentured labor in France and New Caledonia (Alexandra Kurmann and Tess Do) and repatriations of Vietnamese workers after World War II (Chizuru Namba). These accounts insist that colonial formations produced distinct Vietnamese worlds in European spaces—worlds marked by coercion and agency, as well as the improvisations of those who migrated and those who inherited their legacies.

When the volume turns to the most familiar arc of Vietnamese dispersion, it refuses to take the refugee as a universal template. Divergent local policy regimes, Cold War alignments, and shifting legal structures make legible (and illegible) various forms of Vietnamese mobilities. The chapters in part 2, “Refugees, Histories, and Communities,” chronicle an “archipelago of camps” across Southeast Asia (Jana K. Lipman); the different experiences of refugees in the Federal Republic of Germany versus contract workers in the German Democratic Republic (Frank Bösch); waves of migration to Japan that have produced layered uncertainties around citizenship and belonging (Ikuo Kawakami); the educational and professional ascent of a second generation in the United Kingdom in the midst of ongoing undocumented migration and human trafficking (Tamsin Barber).

If the refugee frame is decentered, it is not discarded; the familiar refugee narrative is put in conversation with other modes of dispersal, especially the political economy of labor and education. Vietnamese entrepreneurs who have built an ethnic economy in Czechia outsource childrearing to Czech nannies (Adéla Souralová), while Vietnamese women traders stage “nostalgic consumption” through food practices in Moscow (Jessica Steinman). These essays re-narrate Eastern Europe as a thickly layered Vietnamese world unto its own, animated by the legacies of the Soviet Union, entrepreneurialism, and generational transition, rather than as a mere footnote to the

dominant US-Canada-Australia framework. Meanwhile, across Asia, state policy and neoliberal market forces produce divergent temporalities of settlement and profoundly unequal horizons of possibility that promote cosmopolitan self-fashioning for Vietnamese students, but constrain contract laborers through debt, surveillance, and legal status (Anne-Cécile Delaisse and Tamsin Barber).

The cultural and literary chapters contribute to this reconceptualization by demonstrating how form, language, and audience mediate diasporic self-understanding. Leslie Barnes rereads Linda Lê's oeuvre as "literature as exile," a space that refuses tidy identitarian assignments and instead builds a transnational, transtemporal, and transtextual conversation with readers. Alexandra Kurmann points to a "transdiasporic turn" in which contemporary Francophone and Anglophone Việt Kiều literatures—evident in works of Anna Moï and Viet Thanh Nguyen—construct stories and characters which embody and place in dialogue a "globalised" diaspora. Ivan V. Small tracks "memory moments" across generational cohorts, observing a drift toward nonlinear and sensory forms as the immediacy of war recedes, while Lan Duong's reading of films and Elizabeth Collins's analysis of "narrative cookbooks" expand the archive beyond novels to modalities where taste, sound, and image do the work of memory. Catherine H. Nguyen's contribution is especially notable for its deep analysis of Phạm Thị Ngọc's Vietnamese-language story "Florence" alongside Thuong Vuong-Riddick's bilingual *Two Shores / Deux rives* and lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Howie Tam underscores the "ethical, historical and moral intricacies of representing refugee literatures" and shows how literary regimes (publishers, prize committees, creative writing programs, and the expectations of cosmopolitan readerships) shape which characters and themes are intelligible and marketable to the wider public (304).

The closing chapters critically consider the volume's central question of knowledge production: Who speaks for this Vietnamese diaspora and under what conditions? Anna Vu theorizes the "diasporic intellectual self-concept," mapping how Vietnamese American intellectuals maneuver expectations within communities structured by enduring anticommunist/communist binaries, gendered policing, and memory politics. Diêu Linh Đào and Julia Behrens write from within German contexts to argue for

“in-between” spaces and for research practices that surface power relations while diversifying forms of knowledge.

The handbook aims to broaden the universe of Vietnamese experiences by expanding the geography of Vietnamese diaspora studies, insisting on multiple modes of “Vietnameseness” beyond the refugee, and unsettling the assumption that “diaspora” equals Western resettlement. But this ambition also brings into sharp relief the volume’s most significant weakness: the limited engagement with Vietnamese-language literature and community media outside the academy and major presses. With the exception of the chapters by Catherine H. Nguyen and Lan Duong, the cultural section largely consolidates the Anglophone and Francophone corpus. The handbook’s explicit acknowledgment of this emphasis sits uneasily alongside the ethnographic and historical chapters that document communities for whom Vietnamese remains a core practice of identity, care, and representation. The stakes here are not merely bibliographic. Audience matters. Vietnamese texts written for Vietnamese diasporic readers—serialized on community websites, printed by Vietnamese-language publishers, sold in the bookstores of Little Saigons, or circulated through Vietnamese-language newspapers—conduct different representational work than texts crafted for Anglophone or Francophone publics. Howie Tam’s chapter argues that works by Ocean Vuong and Nam Le reflect the economy of visibility in which certain forms of trauma, intimacy, and mobility become legible to Anglophone and Francophone publics. This is not an indictment of the authors so much as an analysis of the field in which they (and we) work. The asymmetry of linguistic capital, training, and gatekeeping between celebrated writers and the preceding non-English-speaking generation determines which refugee imaginaries are consecrated as “world literature” and which remain silenced.

To privilege Western-language texts is to risk reproducing an internal power imbalance in which some voices become, in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s words, “preferably unheard” in the academic canon (245; originally cited in Timothy K. August, “Spies Like Us: A Professor Undercover in the Literary Marketplace,” *LIET: Literature Interpretation Theory* 29, no. 1 [2018], 69). It elevates those with the social and educational capital to write “outward,” and sidelines those whose voices are audible primarily in Vietnamese, within intra-diasporic circuits. But it is precisely on Vietnamese-language websites,

in community-based bookstores, on the pages of weekend newspapers, and in chapbooks and pamphlets from undistinguished ethnic presses that diaspora speaks to itself most directly. A volume that otherwise so effectively expands what counts as Vietnamese migration thus implicitly invites a parallel expansion of what counts as Vietnamese cultural production.

That critique should be read less as a rebuke than as an agenda. The handbook opens the conceptual door to seriously take and critically reexamine the community-produced cultural oeuvres in the same analytic frame and literary weight that we offer prizewinning novels and productions. A case in point is the collection of translated works by Hữu Phương, Nguyễn Mộng Giác, Nhã Ca, and Duyên Anh in the recent special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, edited by Trinh M. Luu and Nu-Anh Tran. The issue prioritizes South Vietnamese who became refugees after 1975, but it paves the way for literary works and other forms of cultural production by Vietnamese who became diasporic through different journeys.

For scholars, the volume compels us to re-situate the familiar post-1975 refugee narrative among other archives of movement, labor, study, marriage, and entrepreneurial life. For those of us in the diaspora, the intervention is also ethical. As a member of this community, I read the handbook as an invitation to center those Vietnamese worlds and experiences that have remained marginal in our collective imagination. The book recasts “diaspora” not as a stable identity but as an evolving formation and shared field of belonging—uneven, contested, and deserving of being taken seriously in scholarship and analysis. The point is not to replace one center with another; it is to make the field itself polycentric, with room for voices that speak different forms of Vietnamese temporalities, geographies, and belongings.

By dislodging the equation of “Vietnamese diaspora” with refugee exceptionalism in the United States, by insisting on diasporic multiplicity, and by foregrounding power within and between communities, the *Routledge Handbook of the Vietnamese Diaspora* models a transregional and translingual approach that the field urgently needs. It names the needed task of integrating those “preferably unheard” into our scholarly and communal conversations, on their own terms and through the venues that already

contain their voices. In taking up that task, we move closer to the expanded diasporic imagination the handbook sketches—an imagination capacious enough to hold the many Vietnamese worlds that are in our orbit of knowledge, and the ones not yet fully visible to us.

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