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Refugee studies meets environmental justice in new special journal issue

As humanitarian crises and climate change intensify, a special issue of Amerasia Journal asks readers to rethink a familiar word: refuge.

Co-edited by Heidi Amin-Hong, assistant professor of English at UC Santa Barbara, the issue draws on filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha's idea of looking at the space between "refuge," "refuse" (to reject) and "refuse" (waste). Co-editors Amin-Hong, Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi (UCLA) and Emily Hue (UC Riverside) build on that idea to explore how systems of colonialism, militarism and global capitalism create displacement and treat people and environments as disposable.

"It's about thinking through how refuges are created as sanctuaries for displaced human populations or endangered wildlife, " Amin-Hong said, "but also are shaped by geopolitics and ideas about who is deserving of refuge."

Twenty-four authors contributed to the special issue, "Between Refuge and Refuse: New Mediums/Methods for Theorizing Refuge(e) Environments." In the introduction, the co-editors write, they "refuse the colonial and imperial logics that produce refugees — both human and nonhuman — as worthless refuse." What gets treated as disposable, they assert, reveals the overlapping forces of militarization, racial capitalism and climate change. Placing humanitarian refuge for displaced people

alongside wildlife refuge for endangered species, the co-editors probe their entanglements as well as their limits.

Rather than reinforcing familiar narratives of rescue and recovery, the co-editors articulate an expansive definition of refuge grounded in solidarity and self-determination. They separate spaces of refuge from spaces of carcerality and enclosure — conditions that have shaped refugee resettlement and violently removed Indigenous communities from ancestral lands. Refuge, they argue, must be remapped as both geographic space and ideological imaginary, attentive to how humanitarian resettlement overlaps with militarized occupation and wildlife conservation.

“It’s quite ambitious compared to other editorial projects I’ve worked on because of the methodological scope,” Amin-Hong said. “We’re bringing together scholars, poets, artists, and other cultural practitioners working across different fields, geographies and histories of refuge.” The issue features an interview with filmmaker Tuan Andrew Nguyễn, whose films examine unexploded ordnance in Vietnam, as well as poetry by Hmong American writer Mai Der Vang. Essays by scholars working on Korea, Palestine and Vietnam draw connections across distinct but overlapping refugee geographies.

“We consider refuse (noun) as medium and material through which artists build towards a horizon of ‘refuge,’” state the co-editors, “a future-oriented ontology that isn’t mired in contemporary state and humanitarian border enforcement around land, air and water.”

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