

# **What Is Refugee Resilience? Reframing Survival under Environmental Sacrifice**

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## **Introduction**

When Hurricane Ida struck southeast Louisiana on the sixteenth anniversary of Katrina's landfall, the region was deep in crisis. At the time, both state and community resources were already stretched thin. Severe and consistent COVID-19 spikes, decades of disaster, and a sociopolitical landscape whose bedrock of environmental racism and expendability made it nearly impossible for racialized residents to prepare for, let alone manage, yet another crisis. From my temporary home in Coast Salish territories,<sup>1</sup> itself blanketed in wildfire smoke, I tried to contact the community-based organizations (CBOs) I work with as Ida overwhelmed coast-dependent communities within and outside of the Army Corps' levee system. For four days, I couldn't reach anyone. Forced to watch Bvlbancha<sup>2,3</sup>-based media reports on the storm's violence—tabulating potential fatalities, road closures, and structural losses—I was left to hope that folks I knew and cared about were able to navigate and survive this latest 500-year storm.<sup>4</sup>

In those four days, some vulnerable coastal residents who didn't receive mandatory evacuation orders (e.g., in parts of the West Bank of Plaquemines Parish<sup>5</sup>) were forced to manage a 500-year storm with few resources.<sup>6</sup> Others were struggling to find alternative shelter that was safe and affordable. Some, like many commercial fisherfolk, made themselves acutely vulnerable to save their businesses, staying on their boats and steering into the harsh winds. Their families could not

reach them to determine their safety. As cell service was restored in the days following Ida, I was told by many that, as with Katrina, no one was coming to help in hurricane's immediate aftermath.<sup>7</sup> But even two and three weeks into power and water outages and in intense heat, federal agencies were still mostly silent along the coast. What "help" there was proved aggressively insufficient: a few hundred homes received state help putting tarps on their roofs, and base camps were erected by the National Guard to serve as temporary shelter, but, according to locals, they were used mostly for laundry because most folks didn't want to leave their homes unattended.

Sandy Nguyen, the executive director of Coastal Communities Consulting, Inc. (CCC), an all-women-of-color-run nonprofit that supports Vietnamese and Cambodian American fishing-dependent families, made this clear. On a call, she told me, "The [fisherfolk] know how to deal with hurricanes... We have to do it ourselves—no one else is coming to help." After talking more about how difficult it would be to get damaged boats out of the bayous and what it would take for deckhands to find work when their bosses were dealing with repairs, Sandy got mad. She entreated, "We *are* resilient, Simi. But how much longer can they expect us to be resilient? You can only bend so much before you break." She was pointing to prior conversations where we discussed how the idea of resilience has been weaponized against Southeast Asian American commercial fishing families and their neighbors. If fisherfolk and other racialized residents were expected to be resilient—or to withstand disaster after disaster without reliable, timely, or sufficient support and other infrastructure to make healthy lives—now we knew it didn't just mean that no one was coming now; it meant that no one was coming in the future, either.

I begin with a recent disaster and the dearth of governmental/structural support it garnered to highlight how the term "resilience" is, first, used differently by structurally underserved communities, politicians, and policymakers and, second, how the latter two deploy the term to relegate some communities to the role of "necessary sacrifice" in the *longue durée* disaster that constitutes southeast Louisiana. As a feminist ethnographer, I am interested in how Vietnamese American residents of southeast Louisiana are made structurally expendable at the intersections of race, environmental injustice, and immigration policy. For me, these intersections are productively animated through the racializing formation I call *refugee resilience*, the central conceit and analytic of this article. A deeply violent approach to disaster policy, refugee resilience demands that Vietnamese Americans—seen exclusively as survivors of war and displacement who excelled at being refugees—bootstrap their way through ongoing and compounding disaster while concurrently being made expendable<sup>8</sup> to environmental sacrifice.

Throughout, I argue that the conditions that engender refugee resilience explicitly meet Robert D. Bullard's definition of environmental racism, which is "any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color."<sup>9</sup> In a policy landscape articulated through refugee resilience, some places and, by extension, people are imperative to keep safe and/or rebuild quickly in a disaster timeline—overwhelmingly, spaces dedicated to oil production, shipping, and tourism revenue and economically, racially, and regionally privileged landowners. Others, like coast-dependent fishing communities, however, are interpolated into disaster storytelling as unfortunate but necessary sacrifices in the larger project of protecting southeast Louisiana's economic and physical infrastructure. To be made perpetually resilient in service to state economic interests, which in turn require the environmental expendability of some communities over others, is insidious, blatant, and, critically, political.

In addition to the lack of support that refugees and the community they have established receive, being made expendable under environmental racism looks like Vietnamese Americans and other racialized residents living on the front lines of increasingly devastating hurricanes, oil spills, polluted Mississippi deposits, and warming oceans; having their homes and communities zoned for toxic waste deposits, oil production, and other forms of environmental racism and sacrifice; and being understood as self-sufficient by decision makers and the broader public, storytelling that reinforces their expendability as precedent, present, and future. This reinforces arguments made by Asian Americanists and critical refugee scholars that refugees and their children will never be fully included in the biopolitical project of the nation; instead, they shall remain "forever foreign,"<sup>10</sup> or always consumed as racialized "other," and targeted for blatant environmental racism.<sup>11</sup> Under regionally specific refugee resilience, Vietnamese American residents are always already expendable in service to economic accumulation/environmental extraction.

The racializing and environmental violence of resilience, however, does not happen exclusively to Vietnamese Americans, nor does it happen to them in a vacuum. The fishing-dependent families I learn from share histories, presents, and futures with Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and white folks whose experiences of race, settler colonialism, white supremacy, and class all contribute to heterogeneous and intertwined ways of cohabitating in a sacrifice zone.<sup>12</sup> To think through the Global South–U.S. South transits that make this possible, I bring Asian American studies critiques of structural violence and immigration policy into conversation with Black feminist analyses of disaster and critical environmental justice frameworks of sacrifice and racialized abandonment. I begin with

an abbreviated history of Vietnamese American fishers' experiences of disaster and attendant racialization as well as the community's resettlement in Bvlbancha and the surrounding area. While my inquiry is limited in scope to the experiences of Vietnamese Americans, I believe that to forward a robust analysis of Vietnamese American refugee resilience and environmental expendability, it is imperative to understand how that racializing formation is acutely co-constituted by and with the expendability of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities in the present, historically, and in decision makers' visions for the future.<sup>13</sup> I do this, albeit briefly, by unpacking the ways in which 2005's Hurricane Katrina allowed decision makers to embed anti-Black, settler colonial resilience into disaster policy. This establishes the ways in which anti-Blackness and settler colonial policies are the foundation for and are co-constituted by refugee resilience. After articulating what refugee resilience is, I conclude by turning to what it does, reading its impacts across Vietnamese American fishing families' experiences of disaster and disaster policy. I believe that this work is particularly imperative at such a critical juncture in global and local foci on climate change, environmental policy, and disaster response. While incredibly robust in some areas, much of this scholarship excludes Asian Americans in general and Vietnamese Americans in particular, among other racialized and colonized communities.<sup>14</sup>

Significantly, this project is not mine alone. It is the explicit result of collaboration with Indigenous, Black, and Southeast Asian American community members, leaders, and organizers who have given their time and knowledge to teach me better ways of knowing and doing. For over five years, I have learned from a constellation of regional CBOs and organizers whose generational and cultural expertise of place, people, and structural violence is unparalleled. My closest collaborators in this work are the staff of the aforementioned CCC, a nonprofit and community-based organization that provides business, social, and intergenerational support to thousands of fishing-dependent families, overwhelmingly Vietnamese and Cambodian Americans, in southeast Louisiana. Since I began this work with two years of situated fieldwork (2015–2017), CCC's staff have been my primary teachers in terms of what it means to be coast dependent first-, 1.5-, and second-generation Vietnamese Americans who have been made expendable to environmental sacrifice. In addition to CCC, I have worked with community organizers, including historically Black church-based organizations, Indigenous elders, labor organizers, and educators, and environmentally focused colleagues whose scientific knowledge strengthens my own work on environmental justice. While I am incredibly lucky to benefit from these folks' wisdom, I want to be clear that I do not speak for CCC or any other Louisiana community-based organization in this or any other piece of academic

scholarship I produce.<sup>15</sup>

### **Disaster, Refugeeism, and Commercial Fishing**

Over many years of conversations, almost all the Vietnamese American fishers I have spoken with told me stories that painfully trace how their work and personal lives have been shaped by the constancy of disaster and the environmental expendability that produces and follows it. These stories of disaster follow a fairly prescriptive arc: they always start with hurricanes. List them off: Katrina and Rita (2005), Gustav and Ike (2008), Laura and Delta (2020), and Ida (2021). They almost always talk about the BP oil catastrophe in 2010 next, after which all fishing-dependent workers and business owners lost a full year of income, developed trauma and anxiety responses and, for those exposed to oil dispersant, have terminal health conditions.<sup>16</sup> After telling you that shrimp have been getting smaller and less abundant since their coastline was coated in oil,<sup>17</sup> they'll mention 2019's Mississippi River flooding and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers redirecting the swollen river into their shrimping and oyster grounds, suffocating all marine life with farm runoff—dense fresh water.<sup>18</sup>

Then they will likely tell you about the Mississippi River diversions the state of Louisiana is planning to run into key brown shrimp and oyster grounds in Barataria Bay and Breton Sound starting sometime after 2025. These diversions<sup>19</sup>—quite literally structures that divert the Mississippi's water and sediment from its fixed flow path into saline marsh ecosystems—will bring the same polluted water into similar areas as the 2019 flooding event. In so doing, they will likely cut brown shrimpers' and oyster harvesters' already BP-depleted yields down to nothing for five years or more.<sup>20</sup> While the state has been working on these diversions since 2007, the coastal and fishing communities most likely to suffer under them have not been included in the decision-making process, are often called reactionary, and are otherwise silenced as they watch their futures grow more opaque by the day. I will return to diversions at this article's end but want to mark them as a spectacularly visible and persistent piece of resilience policy that pivots on the racialized expendability of every family with whom CCC works. First conceived of as a response to Katrina, the diversions are two looming disasters that will come in the wake of over two decades of uninterrupted decision maker-produced<sup>21</sup> environmental disaster. Vietnamese American fishers and their coast-dependent neighbors know that they can expect only more and worse when the diversions go into effect alongside ongoing shipping, tourism-related development, and oil extraction and refining.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of such persistent environmental racism, however, the families I work with see not only their towns but also their industry and the ecosystems it relies on as home. This is because commercial fishing has

always been imperative to the community's economic, and thus social, stability. Following a complicated resettlement process by the Catholic Church from 1975 to the early 1980s, many Vietnamese refugees found themselves isolated, under-resourced, and in need of support.<sup>23</sup> As I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>24</sup> Catholic Charities of New Orleans resettled this community differently than others across the United States. Refugees who were brought to Bvlbancha were placed in a single apartment complex in the Michoud neighborhood of New Orleans East, which is cut off from the metro by a shipping canal. The complex, called Versailles Arms, "[was] considered undesirable by most New Orleanians since they were provided with inadequate bus service."<sup>25,26</sup> This isolation was not only physical but social as well—it was difficult to find jobs that didn't require English fluency, setting up lines of credit and getting loans was nearly impossible, and accessing medical and other forms of care was similarly opaque or barriered. In addition to a lack of extant cultural and language-accessible support, Michoud has and continues to face regular advisories to boil water and hosts several production facilities that impact residents' health.<sup>27</sup>

This dearth of infra/structural support, while specific to the region, was rooted in national ideas about the role of Vietnamese refugees in the United States, which scholar Mimi Thi Nguyen articulates through a socioeconomic and political formation called "the gift of freedom." While its domesticating mission failed, producing decades of disruption and violence across Southeast Asia and leading to the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, Nguyen unpacks how the U.S. government saw and still sees itself as a magnanimous benefactor of Vietnamese refugees and their kin. She argues that governmental, nonprofit, and church-run resettlement processes and the subsequent dearth of social services relied on decades of U.S. storytelling about "saving" Vietnamese people from communism and all Southeast Asians from oppression.<sup>28</sup> According to Nguyen, having granted refugees asylum, the federal government believes it bestowed the "gift of freedom" on all Southeast Asian refugees by taking them in after making war in their countries for decades.<sup>29</sup> This, she explains, ensures that refugees will forever be in debt to the United States while, significantly, being marked as perpetual foreigners<sup>30</sup> by decision makers and other residents. Given the presumption of what Nguyen calls refugee debt—or an irreparable, generational debt that refugees owe the United States for "saving" their lives—newly arrived families had to make do, building their own networks of financial, linguistic, and social support.<sup>31</sup> This included children translating for parents in public, more financially secure community members sharing what they had so that others could pay rent or establish new businesses, and folks sharing the bounty of their skills,

from gardening to construction, across local and regional communities. The imperative for and value of such interdependence was particularly visible in southeast Louisiana's commercial shrimping industry, where a whole U.S.-wide network of Vietnamese people in diaspora mobilized funds and other resources to help local Vietnamese families start and maintain fishing businesses.<sup>32</sup>

In a 2018 interview, I asked now-shrimp boat captain Chú Anh<sup>33</sup> about the role that commercial shrimping played in his early life in the United States. After seeking asylum in the United States in 1981, he spent a few months learning English. Anh was quick to explain that he didn't know anything about shrimping but had heard that commercial fishing was one of the few jobs where he didn't need to be fully proficient in English and didn't need to know the business beforehand.<sup>34</sup> With this knowledge, Anh began working as a deckhand to learn the trade. His captain at the time sold Anh an older shrimp boat he wasn't using for a third of the list price. While this was kind, buying a boat was tough for new refugees because "when we come [to the United States] with nothing, that was very hard for us. We don't have no credit [to] buy a car [or] anything."<sup>35</sup> But there was one way around this problem: reach out to a network of other Vietnamese folks who had been living in the United States longer and who, because of this, had more economic stability than recent refugees: "When I came, I had a cousin [in California, and] he knew people.... [Here in Louisiana, to] buy the boat, we ask around, find a friend, [and ask], will you borrow me money?...[We don't talk about when] we'll pay it back, but in our heart, we know we will." As shrimpers and other fishers (oyster, finfish, tuna and swordfish, and crab, among others) established their small businesses, they paid earlier loans forward, lending seed money for friends in Michoud and other small delta towns<sup>36</sup> to establish corner stores, nail salons, restaurants, pharmacies, and myriad other businesses necessary to address community needs.

In the thirty years leading up to Hurricane Katrina, Vietnamese Americans came to represent a third of Louisiana's commercial shrimping industry,<sup>37</sup> among many other immigrants, migrants, and refugees who shape the Gulf of Mexico's fisheries. With this increased presence along the coast came exposure to coastal environmental injustices. Early in my fieldwork, Happy Vuong,<sup>38</sup> a Vietnamese American shrimping dock owner, told me that no matter how many times his business was blown away by hurricanes and shut down by oil catastrophes, he would rebuild. "We are strong, you know? We come here with nothing and we made a business out here."<sup>39</sup> As Happy said this, his wife—the family accountant and grounding force—stepped out of the office. She told me that they had to keep the business going because they had made it from scratch, and they weren't leaving: "He wanted to give up and buy a corner store

but I said no; this is what we do. This is what we know." At the time of this conversation in 2014, they had rebuilt their dock, nuts to bolts, four times: after hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, and Ike. They had also lost an entire year's income in 2010 when the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, leading to the BP oil catastrophe. Although all of these disasters are typically seen as discrete events with a beginning and an end, the ways that they impact residents are not temporally contained.

Each storm, spill, and other disaster marked as "natural" along the coast builds on the last. Collectively, they produce dense, long-ranging, and overwhelmingly ignored effects, from poor regional health to individuals' economic instability and narcotics dependence. Rob Nixon calls these phenomena and their attendant effects slow violence, or violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction, that is dispersed across time and space." As such, it is "an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."<sup>40</sup> Only the people who are directly impacted by slow violence can name it, which all but erases said violence from public consciousness and policy. This erasure, in turn, gives coast-dependent and other vulnerable communities no recourse but to make their own way through the acute yet invisibilized violences they experience in the best way they know how. This is the foundation of resilience: people like Happy and his wife, whose business employs several dozen people, worked hard to maintain their business for their employees, community, and children,<sup>41</sup> all in spite of the conditions they live with and under. To stay in the place they have made a home, rebuilding over and over was not simply a desire but an imperative.

For many decision makers, extractive industry executives, and developers, this imperative has been doubly useful: stripped of the concern to make conditions better prior to or in the face of disaster and relieved of the responsibility to support people suffering disasters' impacts, they can celebrate residents' survival without sacrificing business as usual. For them, the willingness of families like Happy's to stay even as threats to their ways of life and communities grow has been rearticulated from vulnerability into consent—consent to be extracted from, to be told that disaster's impacts are their own burdens to bear, and to be deliberately excluded from receiving resources as decision maker-produced disasters, from pipeline leaks to warming ocean-induced hurricanes, grow more persistent and constant. This, paired with Nguyen's formulation of gift and debt, ensures that fishing families are particularly environmentally expendable.

The confluence of Vietnamese Americans' histories of being refugees and ongoing slow environmental violence establishes the foundation for refugees resilience in southeast Louisiana. As I briefly articulated above and will explore in more depth later in this article, refugee resilience is the notion that Southeast Asian Americans are

more capable of surviving persistent decision maker–produced disaster because of their experiences of refugeeism from Việt Nam to the United States. This refugee resilience edict is specific to Southeast Asians in that it hews to Nguyen’s gift and debt formulation in another way: not only are resilient refugees presumed to be particularly good at survival, but no matter the conditions of the violence they face, policymakers tacitly believe that they should pull themselves up by their bootstraps and make their way in disaster without economic, social, linguistic, or other forms of governmental aid and support.

Critically, while the next few sections of this paper focus on Bvlbancha, my larger interest is on how resilience policy impacts Vietnamese American residents across southeast Louisiana and particularly those who depend on the coast economically and for work. To understand refugee resilience, it is important to establish the foundation of Louisiana’s resilience policy: anti-Black racism and settler colonial extraction. As many Vietnamese American commercial fisherfolk live in Bvlbancha and in light of this article’s focus on environmental racism and resilience-as-policy, the storm and resulting levee failures are imperative to read closely.

### **Katrina: Refugees and Resilience**

While Indigenous and Black communities’ resilience has been exploited for millennia in what is called Louisiana,<sup>42</sup> the hyper-visible commodification of resilience in state policy emerged in the wake of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina and resulting levee failures. As water subsumed over 85 percent of Bvlbancha following levee failures and areas south of the city were devastated by the hurricane’s water and wind, city planners were already deciding how to build back a better city. This barely coded racial language and the resulting gutting of Bvlbancha’s schools, subsidized housing, intercommunity capital, and other social infrastructure have been parsed by myriad scholars who have concluded that, as Neil Smith emphasized, “disaster reconstruction invariably cuts deeper the ruts and grooves of social oppression and exploitation.”<sup>43</sup>

One of the most complicated examples of this happened immediately following the storm when media outlets began calling displaced residents Katrina “refugees.”<sup>44</sup> Black residents particularly felt that being called refugees discursively stripped them of the right to return and rebuild even as they were evacuating. It did this by marking them as not citizens.<sup>45</sup> Clement Alexander Price explains that “the media actually contributed to the radicalized way in which Americans view black people, especially those in trouble and in need of aid. Early in the crisis, poor blacks were curiously referred to as ‘refugees’ in the media, as if they were from another country.”<sup>46</sup> While this sentiment has been echoed across a great deal of Katrina scholarship, it’s complicated by

the presence of Michoud, the aforementioned refugee-descended Vietnamese American community in so-called New Orleans East. While they did not take on as much water as some sections of Bvlbancha, all Michoud's homes and businesses were devastated by Katrina, displacing residents for weeks and months. For YẾN Lê Espiritu, the post-Katrina reification of a citizen–refugee binary was incredibly dangerous because “the term ‘refugee’ triggers associations with highly charged images of Third World poverty, foreignness, and statelessness. These associations reflect the transnationally circulated representations of refugees as... an unwanted problem for asylum and resettlement countries.”<sup>47</sup> By abstracting “refugee” in this way, press coverage at once alienated Black Bvlbancha residents from inclusion in the body politic of the nation *and* reinforced that the thousands of Vietnamese American refugees of the U.S. war living in Bvlbancha were never going to be fully “American.”

As many have said before me, rather than being a spectacular moment of concerted violence, Katrina simply exposed how much racism, xenophobia, class violence, and white supremacy was already embedded in the sociopolitical landscape of southeast Louisiana. Although neither discrete nor singular, the levee failures amplified and grossly exacerbated the slow violence of life under environmental racism and in an extractive sacrifice zone. The act of distancing Black and other racialized residents from citizenship and the rights it indexes rearticulated a long-cultivated break between those who are meant to survive environmental racism and those who are not. As Katrina's impacts became clearer over time, this exclusionary language shifted tact: no longer refugees, Bvlbancha residents were all, according to Mayor C. Ray Nagin's administration and developers, “resilient” for the foreseeable future.

Ten years after Katrina's landfall, community organizer and lawyer Tracie Washington explicated how the term “resilience” had been weaponized against Black community members following Katrina:

I evacuated as a single mom with a 12-year-old and a jacked-up car, and an American Express and a law degree. So that was an awful combination for the evil ones who didn't want Black folk back, cuz that law degree meant that I could get in any court and fight for anybody... I'm sick and tired of people saying “y'all are so resilient”; resilient means you can do something to me. No! I'm not resilient. I have a right not to be resilient.<sup>48</sup>

Washington's resistance to resilience makes clear that Bvlbancha's immediate and long-term use of the term was not just a celebration of residents' survival—when applied to Black residents, it was a biopolitically

disciplinary mechanism. For many, this looked like being subjected to dehumanizing racial violence both in person and in the press—from people seeking lifesaving food and pantry items famously being called looters<sup>49</sup> and being murdered by the New Orleans Police Department<sup>50</sup> to experiencing abject violence as they tried and failed to return to homes that were already slated for redevelopment. Fifteen years after the storm, scholars found that nearly 29 percent of Bvibanacha's Black residents were forced out of the city,<sup>51</sup> most of whom were unable to return, be it because of failed insurance claims, skyrocketing rent, or inaccessible and racist health and education policies.<sup>52</sup> While these examples emerge from a Katrina-specific set of impacts and timelines, it is important to understand that for them to happen, the political and racial landscape had to be such that Black sacrifice was not just expected during disaster but also, under the auspice of resilience, tolerated and even seen as imperative.<sup>53</sup> Abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore offers organized abandonment to articulate how racialized management—in this case, environmental racism—is folded into the structure of U.S. social and political decision making:

organized abandonment has to do with the way that people, households, communities, neighborhoods do not have equal levels of support and protection... [it is] not only abandonment by the state, it's also abandonment by capital... [for example,] tourism capital, that pushes certain kinds of people out of certain areas of the city and only welcomes them in if they work as workers in the service industry, delivering, serving, taking care of and cleaning. There are many, many ways for us to think about organized abandonment, but that thinking should bring us to consider both how capital—large and small—and state—municipal or greater—work together to raise barriers to some kinds of people and lower them for others.<sup>54</sup>

Using this logic, regional policy seized on the usefulness of intercommunal survival and turned it into a political advantage that has reverberated into the present. Converting places like southeast Louisiana into blank slates ripe for exploitation<sup>55</sup> through organized abandonment has allowed Western, neoliberal elites to build back to suit their capital-centric goals.<sup>56</sup> They do this by recycling the violently colonial, terra nullius-dependent policies that produced the notion of property in the first place,<sup>57</sup> forcing people from their homes, their cities, and their lives under the guise of “rebuilding.” Katrina was used by decision makers to, as Naomi Klein says, “engage in radical social and economic engineering”<sup>58</sup> that produced

environmental expendability in a region already understood to be the nation's environmental sacrifice zone.

While organized abandonment is not explicitly racialized, it does, on the whole, impact structurally underserved and excluded communities, their lifeways and mores, and their complex approaches to making life. Following Katrina, Bvlbancha and Louisiana's message to all racialized and economically vulnerable residents was effectively that they were fine because they had survived. This basic survival made them resilient, and resilience made them unnecessary to support, whether at home or in the Katrina-produced diaspora. In this way, Bvlbancha became the regional leader in embedding the resilience of poor and Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American communities into city budgets, disaster rebuilding plans, and development policy,<sup>59</sup> the results of which I explore in the rest of this article. In her meticulous interrogation of resilience and development, Kathleen Tierney corroborates the ways that resilience is imbricated into policy, saying that "resilience discourse frames members of at-risk populations as increasingly pressured to adapt to depredations that are the direct result of the historic and contemporary forces of neoliberalization."<sup>60</sup> This depredation took shape in myriad ways, from an ongoing dearth of reliable infrastructure in Michoud and historically Black neighborhoods to the decline of key industries and spaces of intercommunity labor across southeast Louisiana.

### Refugee Resilience

Southeast Asian American-specific *refugee resilience* emerged alongside the anti-Black resilience I have articulated above and was reified in local discourse at the intersection of post-Katrina urban resilience policy and settler colonial racism.

Within a few months of Katrina and the resulting levee failures, over 92 percent of Vietnamese American Michoud residents had returned home and began rebuilding their neighborhoods.<sup>61</sup> Between a month and a year following the levee failures, 39 percent of Black residents and 63 percent of white residents had returned to their homes throughout Bvlbancha.<sup>62</sup> As I addressed earlier, the spatial and economic isolation that Vietnamese American families were forced to navigate prior to Katrina led them to create interfamily networks that made it possible for the majority of Michoud's families to both come back and share in the process of making home again. This looked like families gutting and cleaning each other's houses, craftspeople sharing skills like roofing and plumbing with neighbors, and everyone using the community church as a support and relief center.<sup>63</sup> As in most disasters, extant mutual aid efforts<sup>64</sup>—most at the scale of interpersonal and family networks—were rendered visible. Community members' insistence on keeping one another alive and at home was not just a kindness but also an imperative under the organized abandonment of refugeeism in the United States.

This “unprecedented” return quickly received media and scholarly attention.<sup>65</sup> It felt as though Bvlbancha suddenly remembered that Vietnamese American families were a part of their community—that Vietnamese Americans were a part of the social and economic fabric of the region. In their fervor to explicate the community’s response to Katrina, scholars of public health leaned heavily on both the mythos of refugee debt and Vietnamese Americans’ perpetual foreignness: these refugees were “resilient” not just because they survived but also because they were actively “better” at navigating disaster given their forced displacement within and from Việt Nam. In a 2015 *New York Times* piece about the tenth anniversary of Katrina, sociologist Mark Vanlandingham draws on pre- and post-Katrina research to argue that the community rebuilt with “grit, self-reliance, and efficiency based on their perseverance following internal and transnational displacement due to US military intervention, self-sufficiency, and Confucian embrace of hierarchy.”<sup>66</sup> A year later, doctor of social work Qingwen Xu simply said, “The Vietnamese community’s resilience is derived from the history of refuge and resettlement.”<sup>67</sup> Rather than understanding that the community had developed the interdependence needed for this kind of rebuilding throughout resettlement, post-Katrina storytelling about Bvlbancha’s Vietnamese American residents focused on their refugee “bootstrap” work ethic and resilience. I call this specific xenophobic and racialized formulation of Vietnamese American perseverance *refugee resilience*. I explicitly use two terms that have already been critiqued in this article—by Espiritu and Washington, respectively—to point to the dangerous ways that post-disaster city and state discourse and policy overwhelmingly produce more, not less, vulnerability for Vietnamese American residents, reinforcing their biopolitical, environmental expendability.

Resilient refugee discourse was quickly integrated into Bvlbancha’s post-Katrina already resilience-dense rebuilding policies. Unlike primarily white and affluent neighborhoods Uptown or in the French Quarter, Michoud’s largely Vietnamese and Black residents found that the city took longer to repair and rebuild the area’s infrastructure, including water, waste, electric, and social infrastructure.<sup>68</sup> It also led to a yearslong fight between city administrators and Michoud residents, who then-mayor Nagin marked as expendable by designating an area one mile upstream from their groundwater supply as a site of a landfill, which, despite technically being closed, still contains incredibly toxic Katrina debris.<sup>69</sup> Marguerite Nguyen’s work articulated the real threat of such environmental racism: many Michoud residents grow kitchen gardens and thus rely on a healthy and safe water supply to feed their families or supplement other groceries.<sup>70</sup> Poisoning this water supply with the toxic debris of an acute environmental disaster reinforced the fact not only that Michoud residents were resilient but also that, as

such, they were easily sacrificeable to the needs of the city in its own quest for urban infrastructural resilience. In this way, environmental racism and expendability became a secondary condition of Nguyen's original formulation of refugee debt: as perpetual debtors to the nation, Vietnamese Americans must also bear an overdetermination of environmental violence.

Refugee resilience also reinforced the racial divides that were an ongoing part of Michoud's role in the city. Vanlandingham and Xu show us that refugee resilience explicitly relies on U.S. immigration logics that demand Vietnamese Americans' fealty to the myth of the American Dream<sup>71</sup> and attendant gift of freedom rhetoric as well as urban and development resilience policy that requires them to be exemplary survivors of disaster. This is particularly clear given the ways that refugee resilience was used to deny support to Vietnamese Americans. However, refugee resilience was also weaponized against Black, Latinx, and Indigenous residents of the region. If Vietnamese Americans' rebuilding was evidence of their excellence at resilience, then the Black residents who never returned were to blame for their own failure to be properly resilient. Then the Indigenous communities whose homes are first hit and least resourced should reconsider their approach to survival. Then the Central American families who arrived as refugees of other kinds of political and economic disaster should also pull themselves up by their bootstraps and figure out how to live in the United States.

The story here is one of socioeconomic success, historically the mode by which immigrants, migrants, refugees, and other "new" Americans are expected to show achievement—or assimilate—in the United States. This pivots on the model minority myth,<sup>72</sup> which Edith Wen-Chu Chen and Grace J. Yoo explain is predicated on the assumption that Asian Americans are economically and educationally more successful than other marginalized peoples.<sup>73</sup> Historically, the label of "model minority" has been imposed on Asian laborers and immigrants to the United States as a socioeconomic and cultural expectation. For Southeast Asian Americans, the model minority myth is both a condition of their refugee debt—that, as refugees who owe their lives to the nation, they use the gift of survival to become exemplary minorities—and impossible to achieve given the same.<sup>74</sup> In spite of this, governmentally instituted refugee resilience relies on the model minority myth to reinforce distance between Vietnamese Americans, white citizens, and other U.S. residents of color. Briefly, I call the way that Vietnamese American residents are at once made models of resilience and expendable noncitizens *environmental model minoritization*. As environmental model minorities, Vietnamese American residents of southeast Louisiana are racialized as a standard of survival *and* sacrifice to which other environmentally expendable communities must aspire.

This individuation of structural and racialized environmental violence reinforces extant racialized, temporal, and intercommunal divides. As more and more disasters hit Louisiana's racialized and environmentally vulnerable communities, environmental model minoritization, among other technologies of organized abandonment, ensure that regional resistance and interdependence continue to be as difficult as possible.

In the remainder of this article, I examine the disaster-bound experiences of Vietnamese American commercial fishers and their families by focusing on the proposed Mid-Barataria Bay Sediment Diversion. This allows me to show how fishing families' reliance on the state's most vulnerable and disaster-prone ecosystems shapes their refugee resilience and environmental expendability in very particular ways.

### **Infrastructure, Disaster, and "Repair"**

Given the role that commercial fishing plays in southeast Louisiana's Vietnamese American communities, environmental violence, be it oil spills and unhealthy air or disasters like Katrina, BP, and now Ida, devastate them at home and work but also across their communities. When commercial fishing is impacted—as it always is—by wind and water, oil, and extraction, the economic and interpersonal stability of many Vietnamese American families is immediately thrown into question. This looks like small businesses closing within the community after the BP oil disaster, dwindling populations in Vietnamese American neighborhoods along the Mississippi River and Gulf coastline, and intimate partner violence and substance abuse spiking in the months and years following Katrina and BP. By placing the burden of surviving compounding disaster on communities already marked for sacrifice by decades of racism, geographic isolation, and linguistic and social exclusion, policymakers can maintain both settler colonial resource extraction and environmental sacrifice.<sup>75</sup> Such organized abandonment explicitly allows decision makers to cede responsibility for the life *and the death* of resilient refugees: it is up to individuals, not the state, to *not die*.<sup>76</sup> As one historical geographer of the region told me at a conference, resilience is FEMA's promise not to show up first.<sup>77</sup>

Significantly, to invoke Smith and Nixon again, it is rarely just the disaster but more often the disaster policy and "rebuilding" that is devastating already structurally vulnerable communities—the slow violence embedded therein. Just as disaster hyper-visibility community interdependence and mutual aid, it throws just what goes into organized abandonment into sharp relief. In the six years I have been doing this work, I have learned from fishers that it can take up to three years to receive even a portion of disaster mitigation payments—all rebuilding happens at an individual's own expense. However, the cost

of not rebuilding fast enough is incredibly high: more rot, more decay, and more water; higher insurance premiums; and a reduction in the size of insurance claims. It is also incredibly difficult to find language-accessible state or federal support infrastructure; even when FEMA does show up, they don't bring Vietnamese-, Khmer-, Spanish-, Arabic-, or French-language documents, nor do they provide skilled interpreters to help residents whose first language is not English get resourced. This is in addition to the vast and complex disaster aid and loan processes each small business and individual must undergo. Without support from community-based organizations like CCC, which immediately opens its doors for interpretation, translation, and submission support after every disaster, many give up. Add to this the fact that 70 to 80 percent of southeast Louisiana's coastal communities have access to only dial-up internet and have low computer literacy, and it becomes clear how impossible it feels for most coast-dependent residents to get support during disaster. And as each disaster's impacts build on the last over space and time, the next, inevitable disaster feels both temporally closer and materially less easy to prepare for.

One example of how refugee resilience has become embedded in environmental policy is the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, a structural project that fisherfolk across southeast Louisiana have assured me will be catastrophic to the ecosystems and brown shrimp and oysters they depend on. First conceived of in 2007 as a response to the gross land loss coastal Louisiana has experienced since the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers channelized the Mississippi River in 1929, the diversion will reintroduce fresh, toxic Mississippi River water to brackish Barataria Bay. Commercial shrimpers have been fighting Barataria for years. They believe that although it is meant to rebuild imperative coastal land, the diversion's most immediate effect will be to drastically change the salinity and oxygen levels in Barataria Bay,<sup>78</sup> a major shrimping ground that's also highly populated with oyster leases. As planned, the project will create a controlled canal connecting the river to the marsh, allowing Mississippi River water and land-building sediment to be released into Barataria Bay, one of the most critical ecosystems for commercial fishing.

The diversion's environmental impact statement (EIS), which is being finalized by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) at the time of this writing, details how Mid-Barataria will directly impact commercial fisheries. Therein, USACE identified likely impacts of the project, including sunny day flooding in areas outside of levee protection, changes to river infrastructure, and, most important to fisherfolk, clear evidence that the diversion will drastically deplete the brown shrimp and oysters they rely on. These findings come fourteen years after the project was first forwarded in the 2007 Coastal Master Plan for a Sustainable Coast, which explicitly explained that "possibly within just 25 years, the habitat

may deteriorate to the point that important fisheries are no longer viable. In a very real sense therefore, we must accept that fishing locations will need to change in order to provide a sustainable landscape over the long-term."<sup>79</sup>

From its earliest iteration, the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), the state agency in charge of the diversion, knew that it would sacrifice key fisheries and, thus, fisherfolk. As the project moves closer to approval—during a global pandemic that closed restaurants, fisheries' key market, following two massively destructive hurricane seasons, and in the middle of a diesel price hike that has forced many boats to stay off the water, no less—residents are worried. Unlike hurricanes and oil spills, they know that this disaster is coming. It has a timeline and robust blueprints, and contractors are being vetted. And like other decision maker-produced disasters, fisherfolk and other residents effectively have no way to prepare for the diversion unless the state itself produces the provisions of their survival. This is refugee resilience policy in practice.

I developed a better sense of how Mid-Barataria demands environmental expendability at several online public meetings held by the USACE and the CPRA in April 2021. After they logged on to Microsoft Teams, representatives from both agencies explained the value of the project—largely its ability to maintain land as a storm barrier. Following their presentation, the meeting was opened for Q&A. Stakeholders used both the chat feature and the option to unmute and speak to voice their support of or opposition to the project. In the two meetings I was present for, most speakers were residents highlighting their concerns about the diversion's impacts on their homes, businesses, and futures along the Birdfoot Delta. One resident of Myrtle Grove, a town outside the federal levee system and thus particularly vulnerable, articulated the fear that many were feeling: "When I built [my house] down here I accepted the fact that we... would be affected by 'natural disasters.' I cannot accept the fact that my investment and way of life will be totally altered for a 'man-made project.'"<sup>80</sup> She was followed by a white shrimp boat captain who knew that the draft EIS reported that the project would have "a major, adverse permanent impact on the brown shrimp resource... [and] a moderate to major permanent adverse impact to the commercial shrimp fishery."<sup>81</sup>

In addition, "the EIS identified the potential for the Project to result in disproportionate impacts to some low income and minority shrimp fishers."<sup>82</sup> This is because many of the Southeast Asian American, Black, and Indigenous shrimpers in the region depend on brown shrimp, a species that is found much closer to Louisiana's coastline than more saltwater-dependent white shrimp. Brown shrimp grow to full adults in the protection of Barataria's brackish water, so close to land that small

changes in salinity directly impact their numbers and size. One must have U.S. citizenship to shrimp farther than three miles from shore (or in federal versus state waters),<sup>83</sup> where white shrimp are more abundant and robust. In addition to these barriers to keeping the industry healthy, the cost of taking a large boat out to shrimp for weeks at a time—from purchasing fuel to paying several deckhands—is incredibly prohibitive, even for shrimpers with citizenship. Add to this that it is currently impossible to get the permit required to shrimp in federal waters because of a decades-long moratorium,<sup>84</sup> and it becomes clear that the diversion does not promise to end commercial shrimping but rather ensures that racialized and low-income fishers will be eliminated from the industry and, for many, the coast altogether.

In light of this, the captain said, “Given the permanent adverse impacts and collateral injuries of this project, the few long-term benefits do not justify the costs of construction, nor the economic loss to the fisheries, low-income families, and flooding of coastal communities affected.”<sup>85</sup> The subtext of these comments was that coast-dependent residents understood their compulsory sacrifice under the diversion. This sentiment was beautifully articulated by Katharine Ecole-Poole, a climate scientist, at the second meeting I attended:

If your EIS states that Black and low-income communities will be highly and disproportionately impacted by a project, that is where exploration should end, full stop.

If your EIS states that dolphins will be harmed via this project, more than were killed in the oil spill that it was designed to rectify, that is where it should end.

If your EIS states that flooding will increase in areas that are already highly vulnerable and underserved as a result, that is where it should end.

If your EIS states that wildlife will have their habitats destroyed on an expedited timeline, hurting not only the animals, but the ecosystems and people who depend on them for their livelihood, that is where it should end.

If your EIS doesn’t properly address the implications of diverting one of the most toxic and polluted rivers in the world into another ecosystem, that is where exploration should end.<sup>86</sup>

Ecole-Poole’s explicit tracing of the environmental sacrifices embedded in the project put a spotlight on the fact that in addition to sacrificing small-scale fishers, residents’ resilience—refugee and otherwise—is tacitly incorporated into Louisiana’s approach to

the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion. The message this has and continues to send to the fishing families I work with is thus: to build land, some critters and communities will just have to figure out a new and different way to survive. That the same communities have lived under environmental racism—determined organized abandonment for decades and generations shows just how little imagination Louisiana has; not just ongoing disaster, but the responses thereto—which fisherfolk confidently identify as disasters unto themselves—begin from the idea that Vietnamese American, Cambodian American, Black, Central American, Indigenous, and poor white and Cajun fisherfolk are expendable. That it proceeds to place the neoliberal burden for survival on already abandoned people, a preponderance of whom are Southeast Asian American, makes clear just how pervasively refugee resilience is naturalized in state disaster response: it no longer needs to be said to be invoked.

And fisherfolk know this. The problem with knowing that one is being subjected to a slate of racist, xenophobic, and extractive policies is that it does not change their material circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

As I have shown above, for Vietnamese American commercial fisherfolk, survival is not a personal undertaking but the result of an interdependent network of families that collectively build and maintain their communities. The diversion promises to strain and likely break the places and lives made by Vietnamese Americans and commercial fisheries.

To conclude, I would like to very briefly address one likely outcome of the diversion—family displacement. When shrimp and oysters die, southeast Louisiana’s commercial fisherfolk will be forced to compete with their neighbors (both in state and in Mississippi and Texas) for fewer and fewer resources in a crumbling yet reviving ecosystem. Like so much other structural violence, the diversion’s operation will pit struggling communities against one another where they otherwise might find common cause. In ten to fifteen years, many Southeast Asian American fisherfolk will be forced to leave the industry altogether. Walking away from a business they built from scratch is one thing; making home elsewhere is another. As diversions go live and storms continue to devastate the oil refinery-rich coast, commercial fishing families are told by parish, state, and federal officials that they can “voluntarily” relocate<sup>87</sup> to higher ground.

For boat owners over fifty years old, relocation does not feel like an option. In public comments submitted to CPRA about the diversion, many middle-aged and older Vietnamese Americans effectively said that they do not have other skills and that starting again in a new industry would

be particularly difficult at their age. More prohibitive than age, however, is language; training and exams for construction, shipbuilding, and electric work are almost exclusively offered in English. What's more, even folks who are proficient in English find such tests overwhelming. Examples of these complex barriers to access can be found in the responses to a survey distributed by CPRA to so-called environmental justice fisherfolk (or members of racially and economically disadvantaged communities, as defined by the Environmental Protection Agency<sup>88</sup>) at the end of 2021. The survey asked questions about fisherfolks' futures in the Birdfoot Delta.<sup>89</sup> To a particularly pointed question that asked whether or not fisherfolk would move—"If flooding gets worse because of the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, would you stay or move?"—one Vietnamese American shrimper wrote in their answer, "No. I don't know where to go. I do not know English, so who will hire us?" The survey's last question was also complicated for respondents; following a series of potential mitigation methods ranging from elevating homes to providing loans, CPRA asked, "Are there any other ways CPRA can help you and your community with flooding that may result from the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion." One shrimper responded, "Yes, do not build the diversion," while another wrote, "As of now, no. But when it happens, I will let you know." The exasperation running through these survey results highlights the true frustration shrimpers and oyster-dependent fishers feel when being asked about how they will survive a project that is scientifically likely to drastically change their access to work and, by extension, homes.

In draft EIS public comments and the above fishery survey responses, many fishers argued that their only hope of surviving on the coast was for the state to buy them out. Historically, home and business buyouts following disaster have been incredibly inadequate, using the language of "fair market price," but in truth, only giving owners a meager percentage of what they paid to purchase. This process overwhelmingly benefits wealthy home owners on "good" land, not low-income, already expendable families who don't want to leave home in the first place.<sup>90</sup> These barriers render "voluntary" movement more coercive than choiceful; make it structural, not personal. Make movement—in addition to the things that produce its necessity—the purview of the state.

In this way, the violence of refugee resilience will initiate another forced displacement at the hands of the United States, another move that Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian Americans will not choose, another elsewhere where they will be forced to make do. And there, in that elsewhere, they will also be storied as environmentally expendable resilient refugees. As I continue to engage in this work, I believe that the imposition of resilience is one of the more insidious ways that already expendable communities are sacrificed to climate change, itself

produced by the gross extraction and capital accumulation that typifies U.S. politics and policy. That forced movement is a very likely outcome of refugee resilience speaks to just how much violence institutions are willing to place on structurally vulnerable communities and, in turn, how much those same institutions believe in their own primacy and longevity. As Sandy said, “You can only bend so much before you break.”

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### Notes

1. Called Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
2. “Place of many tongues” in Choctaw and the original name of the city now called New Orleans. The revival of Bvlbancha as the city’s proper name by Indigenous organizers has encouraged me to use it in my writing.
3. Bentley and Darensbourg (2018).
4. Or a storm that, under current modeling, should only happen once every 500 years. One-hundred- and 500-year storms are now near-annual events in the Gulf of Mexico; this requires a reassessment of what qualifies as a “bad” storm.
5. Childs (2021).
6. The concept of mandatory evacuation orders is incredibly complex; on the one hand, they ensure that residents are able to make insurance claims much more easily given that they were forced to leave home. On the other hand, mandatory evacuation orders require a great deal of state resources to manage and support, from managing roadways for evacuation to, ideally, helping evacuees find safe shelter in the interim. Over a year after Ida’s landfall, many people who did not receive mandatory evacuation orders are struggling to rebuild their homes, receive insurance money, and otherwise return to “normal.”

7. Adams (2013); Casselman (2015); Rivlin (2016); Shelton and Coleman (2009).

8. I use “expendable” versus “residents of sacrifice zones” here, following David Pellow’s (2017, 17–18) theorization of critical environmental justice. This allows me to think more expansively about systems of environmental injustice and sacrifice rather than drawing boundaries around particularly violent places of sacrifice, which Pellow argues linguistically implies that sacrifice can be “left.”

9. Bullard (1996, 495).

10. Scholars who have influenced my thinking about the double bind of perpetual foreignness and the model minority myth include Day (2016), Espiritu (2006a), Lowe (1996), Lye (2009), Ong (2006), and Tang (2015).

11. For more foundational and critical work on environmental racism, see Bullard (1993), Checker (2005), Park and Pellow (2019), Pulido (2017), and Taylor (2014).

12. Kang (2021).

13. Given the limits of space and my own research and analysis, I do not highlight the ways that governance has and continues to make specific Central American communities vulnerable in coastal Louisiana, nor do I offer a critical analysis of how individual Indigenous communities are inordinately sacrificed to oil extraction and environmental degradation. This is not because Honduran, Mexican, Houma, Atakapa, and Choctaw people do not experience the same degree of environmental harm as Vietnamese American coast-dependent communities; they inordinately do. Rather, it is a limit of the work I present here, one I wish to push the boundaries of as I continue engaging with southeast Louisiana communities into the future.

14. Some notable exceptions include Bahng (2018), Chan (2018), Nishime and Williams (2018), Park (2005), Park and Pellow (2019), Pellow (2017), and Sze (2020).

15. In addition, my own identity as a queer, mixed white and Jatt Sikh settler who was raised on unceded Dakota lands and waters in the upper Midwest, is the grandchild of Partition refugees, holds a PhD, and occupies a tenure-track academic position on stolen Lekwungen land, deeply colors my analysis.

16. Dang (2011), Houck (2015); Whitty (2010).

17. Southern Shrimp Alliance (2019); Parker (2021).

18. Fernandez and Schwartz (2019); McCormack (2019).

19. I have written about the Mid-Barataria Bay Sediment Diversion elsewhere in Kang (2018).

20. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (2017); US Army Corps of Engineers and G.E.C., Inc. (2021).

21. I use the term “decision maker–produced” to modify “disaster” throughout this article to highlight the fact that, 323 years after European settlement and 192 more since the Trail of Tears was initiated, five generations since the peak of coastal cypress logging across the coast, twelve decades into the extractive industry’s hold on the Gulf of Mexico, over ninety years after the US Army Corps of Engineers channelized and began infrastructurally managing the lower Mississippi River in

earnest, and in the ongoingness of natural and gas exploration–induced coastal marsh subsidence, all in addition to violent federal and international policies on emissions, oceanic warming and acidification, and so much else, no disaster in present-day coastal Louisiana even remotely qualifies as “natural.”

22. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (2016); Fears (2017); Dlouhy (2021); Groom (2020); The White House (2021).

23. For detailed histories on the resettlement process in Bvlbancha as managed by Catholic Charities of New Orleans, see *A Village Called Versailles* (2014), Campanella (2006), Bankston (1998), and Nguyen (2015).

24. Kang (2019).

25. Bankston (1998).

26. While I am not conducting a comparative ethnic studies analysis in this article, it is critical to note that several community elders I spoke with throughout my fieldwork explained that prior to Vietnamese resettlement, Versailles Arms was an overwhelmingly Black complex; the families who lived there prior to resettlement were displaced by Vietnamese families being moved in. While refugees did not choose where they were resettled, this added to the vexed dynamic between Vietnamese refugees and some Black residents in New Orleans East and city-wide. In addition to being resettled into a space where many residents themselves felt underserved and under supported by New Orleans, this decision making on the part of Catholic Charities ensured Black/Vietnamese tension. This early and persistent racial divide would be amplified by media and community members alike during Hurricane Katrina (2005) and has been a consistent point of tension across narratives of refugeeism in diaspora and disaster, which I do take up later.

27. *A Village Called Versailles* (2014).

28. Nguyen (2012), 51.

29. Which I choose not to trace here not because they aren't important but because incredible scholars have traced and theorized a great deal of these stories, their imbrication in the US imperial and settler colonial project, and the ongoing violence of US framings of war in Southeast Asia and its orientation to refugeeism. They include but are not limited to Espiritu (2006b, 2014); Ngô Nguyen, and Lam (2012); Nguyen (2012); Ong (2003); Schlund-Vials (2011); and Schlund-Vials, Võ, and Wong (2015).

30. Espiritu (2006a); Schlund-Vials (2011); Tang (2015); Vang (2021).

31. Airriess et al. (2008); Nguyen (2015).

32. While many of the fisherfolk I work with were resettled in southeast Louisiana between 1975 and 1990 by the US government and the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, a smaller percentage came to Louisiana after living elsewhere in the United States, overwhelmingly to work in commercial fishing.

33. All names of fishing interviewees have been changed.

34. It is important to note that while some new refugees came to Louisiana with prior commercial or subsistence fishing knowledge, that was not true of a significant portion of those who entered the industry between 1970 and 1985.

Once a few early businesses were established, it became easier for Vietnamese speakers to establish the skills needed to work on and possibly own a boat in the future.

35. Anh, interview with Chú Anh, March 11, 2018.

36. Since the late 1970s, over half of Vietnamese American commercial fishers in southeast Louisiana have maintained homes in and near Michoud, commuting anywhere from one to three hours to where their boat is docked closer to the Gulf of Mexico. Others elected to create small neighborhoods in more immediately coastal areas like Port Sulphur, Empire, Buras, Golden Meadow, Grand Isle, and Dulac. Regardless of where they live, commercial shrimping and fishing remains central to local economies' stability and health.

37. Louisiana Sea Grant (2015), 5.

38. Name has been changed for privacy.

39. Vuong, interview with Happy Vuong, July 2014.

40. Nixon (2011), 13.

41. I have written more about Happy's interdependent employee family structure in Kang (2020).

42. For excellent critiques of historical and ongoing violence against diverse Indigenous communities and the descendants of African and Caribbean peoples enslaved in Louisiana, see Bvlbancha Collective (2020), Coleman (2019), Comardelle (2020), McDowell (2016), Robinson (2020), and Verdin (2020).

43. Smith (2006).

44. For pieces grappling with this language, see Pesca (2005) and Associated Press (2005).

45. Chia-Chen et al. (2007); Shelton and Coleman (2009).

46. Price (2007), 71.

47. Espiritu (2014), 4.

48. Washington (2015).

49. Cacho (2012).

50. Grimm (2015); Robertson (2016).

51. Gelinias (2020).

52. *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* (2010).

53. Work on this topic includes Clark (2018); Flaherty, Goodman, and Washington (2010); Lawrence and Lawless (2018); Pellow (2016); and Wright (2018).

54. Gilmore and Crispino (2021).

55. Agyeman (2020); Tuck, Guess, and Sultan (2014); Whyte, Talley, and Gibson (2019).

56. Klein (2008).

57. Bosworth (2021); Lowe (2015); Simpson (2014); Tuck, Guess, and Sultan (2014); Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein (2016).

58. Klein (2008), 9.

59. Gotham and Greenberg (2014).

60. Tierney (2015, 1333).

61. Airriess et al. (2008).

62. Alvarez (2015).

63. Nguyen (2013).

64. For a comprehensive overview of the uses and application of mutual aid, see Spade (2020), and for examples of mutual aid in the Gulf of Mexico, see Mancall-Bitel (2020), Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (2021), and Another Gulf Is Possible (2021).

65. Significantly, Vietnamese American Bvlbancha residents were not displaced by Katrina in the same way that Black residents were, nor were they subjected to nearly the amount of hyper-visible post-storm racism. Work on these violences includes Adams (2013), Allen (2007), Bullard and Wright (2009), Cacho (2012), Casselman (2015), and Troutt (2006).

66. Vanlandingham (2015).

67. Xu (2017, 56).

68. Importantly, refugee resilience was and is also weaponized against Black and Central American residents of New Orleans East who did not return in the same numbers and thus were told that they too did not need to be resourced post-storm because they hadn't tried as hard as Vietnamese American residents. For more on this, see Allen (2007), Casselman (2015), Chia-Chen et al. (2007), and Tang (2011).

69. For more on this environmental injustice and residents' resistance thereto, see *A Village Called Versailles* (2014), Hua (2014), and Nguyen (2013).

70. Nguyen (2015).

71. Ninh (2021); Park (2005).

72. Ninh (2011, 2021); Park (2008); Suzuki (1977).

73. Xu and Lee (2013).

74. Tang and Patel (2016); Yang (2004).

75. For excellent scholarship on settler colonial extraction and environmental racism and sacrifice, see Ahuja (2021), Ekanem et al. (2010), Gómez-Barris (2017), Park and Pellow (2011), and Walia (2013, 2021).

76. Foucault (1990).

77. It is important to note that this kind of temporal violence—where no agency or other structural support system shows up until far too late—is the experience of tens of thousands of racialized coast-dependent residents, not just Vietnamese Americans. A non-comprehensive list of resources on the experience of non-Vietnamese American southeast Louisiana residents (particularly Indigenous coast-dependent communities) in disaster includes McFarlan Miller (2021), Maldonado et al. (2014), Davenport and Robertson (2016), Verdin (2020), and Whitty (2010).

78. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (2017); Louisiana Trustee Implementation Group (2021); US Army Corps of Engineers and G.E.C., Inc. (2021).

79. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (2007, 22–23).

80. "Transcript of the Testimony of Public Meeting—Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion Project—April

6th" (2021, 145).

81. Oysters, additionally, are "expected to experience major, permanent, adverse impacts under the Project.... The potential impacts of fecal coliform contamination from introduced Mississippi River water could also have a major, adverse impact on beneficial uses related to oyster harvest." As with brown shrimp, these impacts will disproportionately affect low-income and commercial oyster fishers. US Army Corps of Engineers and G.E.C., Inc. (2021, 25).

82. US Army Corps of Engineers and G.E.C., Inc. (2021, 26–27).

83. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (2001).

84. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration (2016).

85. "Transcript of the Testimony of Public Meeting—Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion Project—April 6th" (2021, 50–51).

86. "Transcript of the Testimony of Public Meeting—Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion Project—April 7, 2021" (2021, 32–33).

87. Black et al. (2011); Braam and Kumar (2020); Georgetown Climate Center (2020); Hino, Field, and Mach (2017).

88. United States Environmental Protection Agency (2015).

89. Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (2020).

90. Cusick and E&E News (2020); Elliott, Brown, and Loughran (2020); KATC News (2019).

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