

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Picturing Bad Refugees: Haiti, Vietnam, and the Racial Politics of Refugee Photography

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Abstract

This essay shows how the United States racialized refugees through photography. American policy makers and news media have deployed photography as a definitive tool in characterizing Haitian “economic migrants” as “bad” refugees in opposition to “good” or “model” refugees from Vietnam. A cluster of black bodies on an unseaworthy boat came to represent an economic and hygienic threat, unlike the Vietnamese who are political victims of an oppressive communist regime. To critique our optical framework regulated by the Cold War racial politics, this essay historicizes how refugees were produced by American warfare and militarism. In the United States, war making, race making, and refugee making are mutually constitutive.

On 18 September 2021, photojournalist Paul Ratje captured United States Border Patrol agents on horseback chasing down Haitian refugees along the Rio Grande (see [Figure 1](#)). Thousands of Haitian asylum seekers had long been camping under and around the International Bridge in Del Rio, Texas, and Ratje captured them attempting to return to the US bank from Mexico with food in their hands. The contrast between the white male officer dressed in army green with a cowboy hat and the Black man being grabbed by the T-shirt with thin plastic bags in his hands was stark. While some found the image shocking, others found it familiar. What the pictures and videos on the news media showed was “beyond an embarrassment,” President Joe Biden commented. “It’s dangerous” because “it sends the wrong message around the world [and] at home; it’s simply not who we are.” Anti-refugee violence is un-American, he meant. But the picture was not only coherent with but also a direct consequence of the Biden administration’s refugee policy. Donald Trump, during his first term, repeatedly evoked the obscure public-health rule Title 42 to rationalize detaining and deporting asylum seekers, and Biden had just extended this rule in the month before the viral photograph was taken, now



Figure 1. A US border patrol agent catching a Haitian refugee. Photograph by Paul Ratje. Reproduced by permission from AFP/AFO.

applying it to Haitians.¹ The photograph displayed American anti-refugee sentiment and, of course, anti-Black violence. Black asylum seekers are “confronted in a violent manner on different levels than what we see happening with migrants that are not Black,” the executive director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration observed.² African American writers and organizations traced the historical origin of the picture further back to slave patrols in the South. The officer’s act was not an exceptional deviation from “who we are,” as Biden believed, but a consistent reiteration of American anti-Black violence abroad, at home, and on borders. Ratje added one photograph to the huge inventory of stock images of US racism.

When situated within the longer history of the visual representation of Haitian refugees in the United States, however, Ratje’s photograph had a new element. Since the mid-1970s, the US media have conventionally represented Haitians as economic migrants, rather than political refugees, illegally entering the United States en masse via Miami, Florida. The swarming black bodies on an overloaded and leaking wooden boat on the Caribbean Sea – often being intercepted by US Coast Guard cutters – became “the most common visual image” of Haitians in the United States (see Figure 2).³ Though these Haitians faced death threats in Haiti, which were in large

¹See Colm Quinn, “Biden Uses Trump-Era Law to Continue Haiti Deportations,” *Foreign Policy*, 22 Sept. 2021, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/22/biden-haiti-trump-title42-deportation-refugee-texas>.

²Quoted in Harmeet Kaur, “US Immigration Policies toward Haitians Have Long Been Racist, Advocates Say,” *CNN*, 3 Oct. 2021, at www.cnn.com/2021/10/03/us/haitian-migrants-us-immigration-policy-racism-ccc/index.html. See also John Edwin Mason, “How One Startling Photo Opens a Viewer’s Mind,” *National Geographic*, 18 Dec. 2021, at www.nationalgeographic.com/newsletters/article/how-one-startling-photo-opens-a-viewers-mind-20211218.

³Alex Stepick, *Pride and Prejudice: Haitians in the United States* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998), 9.



Figure 2. Haitian refugees on a boat, 1981. Reproduced by permission from Duke University Libraries.

part due to the United States' preceding political and military interventions in the island, and therefore were political refugees by definition, the United States selectively defined Haitians as illegal migrants and systematically deterred, detained, and deported them. Since then, the US media have reproduced and cemented a racialized visual stereotype of Haitian refugees: people from the poorest country in the northern hemisphere; violators of US immigration laws; a threat to American economy and security; dirty, stinky, and bringing the AIDS virus into the United States.⁴ Haitian asylum seekers came to be recognized as "bad" refugees at best, and the US media, especially photography, played a decisive role in producing this racist perception. By individualizing Haitian refugees as targeted by US border patrol agents, the 2021 photograph at least succeeded in representing Haitian refugees as victims of American racial violence.

The bad refugee had its counterpart. In the week after President Jimmy Carter signed the Refugee Act into law with Vietnamese refugees in mind, the *New York Times* reported on the dangerous surge of Haitian asylum seekers and questioned their politico-legal status. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, US policy makers began deploying the figure of Southeast Asian refugees as a cultural icon to stage the United States as a humanitarian refuge provider for victims escaping oppressive regimes. In inaugurating critical refugee studies, Y  n L   Espiritu critiqued the "good-refugee" narrative to reconsider refugee discourses. "The production of the

⁴The association of Haitians and AIDS emerged at the same time as the uprise in Haitian refugees' visibility. See Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

assimilated and grateful refugee – the ‘good refugee,’” she writes, “enables a potent narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam’s ‘runaways,’ which powerfully remakes the case for the rightness of the US war in Vietnam.”⁵ In recasting the “containment” narrative to justify the Vietnam War, the United States revised the narrative of the political and economic devastation in Vietnam that was giving rise to refugees, a phenomenon caused by American neocolonial military intervention, as an urgent situation for which the United States was willing to offer humanitarian aid. Though Carter’s Refugee Act eliminated references to communism, the United States has since selectively accepted asylum seekers from communist countries, above all Vietnam and Cuba.⁶ “The dominant telling of migration crises featuring ‘boat people’” did not merely differentiate welcome Vietnamese and unwelcome Haitians, as Jenna Loyd and Alison Mountz argue, but also invited us to recognize and remember them “as unrelated events.”⁷ Vietnamese “good refugees” were strategically invented in opposition to Haitian “bad refugees,” and it was photographic representations in the US media that provided a racialized optics through which to perceive refugees.

This essay shows how US news photographs racialize refugees. American policy makers and the American news media, I argue, have strategically deployed visual representations of refugees as a definitive tool in categorizing, evaluating, and hierarchizing Haitian and Vietnamese asylum seekers as “bad” economic migrants and “good” political refugees respectively. It was through these visual representations of refugees, especially photography, that American, as well as global, audiences came to believe that a cluster of Black bodies on a small boat constituted an economic and hygienic threat to the United States and beyond, whereas Vietnamese are portrayed as political victims of an oppressive communist regime for whom the United States, an arbiter of humanitarian democracy, is obligated to offer refuge.⁸ Scholars have shown how photography has the power to violently draw lines between humans and less-than-humans, worthy and unworthy, and grievable and ungrievable.⁹ Building on these insights, I offer a critique of the racializing effect of US news photographs

⁵Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 7.

⁶The Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat’s memoir *Brother, I’m Dying* documents how Haitians were treated differently from Cubans. See Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I’m Dying* (New York: Vintage, 2008). For literary representations of Haitians see Marlene L. Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789–1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Mary Grace Albanese, *Black Women and Energies of Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Haitian and American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

⁷Jenna M. Loyd and Alison Mountz, *Boat, Borders, and Bases: Race, the Cold War, and the Rise of Migration Detention in the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 33.

⁸While the gender aspect is beyond the scope of my discussion, it is obvious that there are more men than women in Haitian refugee images. The threat of Haitian refugees is a stereotype not just racialized but gendered and sexualized as well. For the gendered construction of visual rhetoric regarding human rights see Wendy Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognition, Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁹See John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Reli Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009); T. J. Demos, *The*

as well as a comparative approach to unlearn our racialized way of looking at refugee photography. To critique racist stereotypes that constantly resurface in the US media – especially after earthquakes in Haiti – we need “new narratives,” in Gina Athena Ulysse’s words,¹⁰ both verbal and visual. Our optical framework for viewing refugees has long been regulated by Cold War politics, even when we feel humanitarian indignation at the injustice that Ratje captured. Both Vietnamese and Haitian refugees were forced to become refugees because of US militarism, and we need to critique not only how American racist wars have produced refugees all over the world but also how those refugees are deployed to be racialized again at US borders. American warfare makes refugees, and the refugees are then strategically media-tized in the United States in ways that disavow the historical fact that they were produced by American warfare in the first place. In the United States, war making, race making, and refugee making are closely intertwined and mutually constitutive.

First, I briefly map out the historical background of asylum seekers who attempted to take refuge in the United States during the long Cold War era to show how the US media and refugee policies defined refugees by drawing and redrawing arbitrary color lines across and within the traditional categorization of the races. Second, by looking at some iconic refugee photographs publicized in some US media since the 1970s, and the conservative cartoonist Michael Ramirez’s recent drawings, I demonstrate how the “good” Vietnamese refugees – whom I term *model refugees* – were constructed as opposed to “bad” Haitian refugees (or non-refugees). In broadening the historical perspective, I then attempt to bring together Vietnamese and Haitian refugees and the representations thereof to show how these seemingly unrelated phenomena have both been produced by US imperialism and its aggressive wars in Vietnam and Haiti – or elsewhere. In conclusion, I briefly touch on the second Donald Trump administration’s racist refugee/migration policies. As I am working on the present article, Trump’s despotic regime is exercising its racist jurisdiction not only over refugees, but also over legal migrants in the United States. When situated within the historical context, however, Trump’s seemingly abnormal racism turns out to be not an exception to, but the norm of, American refugee policies.

The racial politics of refugees in Cold War America

The racialization of US refugee policies emerged with the beginning of the Cold War.¹¹ Since then the United States has, as Jana Lipman observes, “viewed the

Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁰See Gina Athena Ulysse, *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-quake Chronicle*, trans. Nadève Ménard and Evelyne Trouillot (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015).

¹¹For an earlier history of refugees (or “displaced persons”) from Europe, see Harry S. Truman, “Statement and Directive by the President on Immigration to the United States of Certain Displaced Persons and Refugees in Europe,” *American Presidency Project*, 22 Dec. 1945, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-and-directive-the-president-immigration-the-united-states-certain-displaced; Lisa Lowe, *The Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Gerald Daniel Cohen, *In War’s Wake: Europe’s Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

politics of refugees almost exclusively through the lens of the Cold War.”¹² In 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Refugee Relief Act into law, which allowed 109,000 people to take refuge on US soil. The Refugee Relief Act was specifically intended to accept Europeans fleeing communist countries; before that, the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, or the McCarran-Walter Act, had prevented them from entering the United States. The Hungarian Revolution took place only three years later, and the United States accepted 38,000 Hungarian “escapees” in 1956 and 1957. During this period, the American imagination of refugees was established at the intersection of Cold War policies and the logic of race: they were white people escaping from the communist world. Before long, the US-backed government of Fulgencio Batista was overthrown in Cuba and the Eisenhower administration began to accommodate Cubans after the 1959 Revolution. President John F. Kennedy enacted the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962 to authorize assistance to Cubans, and Congress passed the Cuban Adjustment Act in 1966 to provide them with the right to permanent residence. Moreover, the US and Cuban governments cooperated in transporting Cubans to the United States. Between 1965 and 1973, Pan American World Airways flew two flights per day, which were called “Freedom Flights,” and over 300,000 Cubans fled to Miami, Florida.¹³ During this period, most Cuban refugees were from the upper classes and, therefore, disproportionately white.¹⁴ From the early 1950s to the early 1970s, thus, the refugees arriving were not in conflict with Cold War America’s definitions of who and what refugees should be: they were white victims escaping from oppressive communist regimes to take refuge in a liberal and democratic haven, and it was the obligation of the United States to accept and protect them. American refugee policies were already racialized at that time, but its racial and racist aspect did not come to the fore until Vietnamese and Haitian refugees began flowing in.

As soon as Saigon “fell” – or was liberated – on 30 April 1975, American policy makers began striving to accept Vietnamese refugees. It was on 23 May of the same year that the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act was passed under the Ford administration to accommodate Vietnamese and Cambodian asylum seekers. The year 1975 witnessed over 130,000 Vietnamese people being admitted into the United States, mostly from US-backed South Vietnam. Institutions called refugee reception centers were established one after another at US military facilities, such as Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania.¹⁵ The so-called “boat people” were guided to what the United States termed “safe havens,” which meant the Philippines and Guam, by US Navy ships.¹⁶ The Ford administration established the Inter-Agency Task Force to arrange the transfer and resettlement of the first generation of Vietnamese refugees. In terms of the racial politics of Cold War

¹²Jana K. Lipman, “War, Persecution, and Displacement: U.S. Refugee Policy since 1945,” in David Kieran and Edwin A. Martini, eds., *At War: The Military and American Culture in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 147–67, 151.

¹³“Freedom Tower, Florida,” *National Park Service*, at www.nps.gov/places/freedom-tower.htm#:~:text=Many%20arrived%20via%20Pan%20American,became%20known%20as%20Freedom%20Flights.

¹⁴Lipman, 155.

¹⁵Lloyd and Mountz, 38.

¹⁶Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 30.

America, Vietnamese refugees had two new aspects: they were the first decisively nonwhite refugees who had sought asylum on US soil,¹⁷ and they embodied the American defeat in the war against communism. But the United States to some extent succeeded in turning those living reminders of the miserable failure of an American war of aggression in Southeast Asia into a way to revise history and its consequences. In constructing the liberal image of US empire in the decolonizing Cold War world, as many scholars of Asian American studies have shown, the United States targeted and instrumentalized Vietnamese refugees to demonstrate through them how the United States was successfully rescuing and caring for those suffering from unfreedom.¹⁸ After being abandoned in their homeland, the South Vietnamese were molded into the figure of the refugee, an instrument for the United States to sustain its neocolonial activities disguised as a liberal and humanitarian mission.

While Haitian refugees first captured US media attention around 1980, the phenomenon had begun a little earlier. When François “Papa Doc” Duvalier was elected President in 1957 and his despotic regime began engaging in human-rights abuses, President Kennedy called for Haitians to take refuge in the United States.¹⁹ When Lyndon Johnson took office in 1963, he advanced a policy of prioritizing anticommunism over anti-human-rights violations. He cooperated with Duvalier in an effort to contain Fidel Castro’s communist Cuba, in return conniving with Duvalier’s violent dictatorship in Haiti. It was against this historical background that Haitians began to immigrate en masse to the United States in the 1970s and detention became the primary tool of immigration control.²⁰ Throughout the history of American refugee policy and its racial politics, 1980 marked perhaps the most important watershed moment due to the 1980 Refugee Act, as well as the so-called Mariel boatlift during the Carter administration.²¹ In April, Castro decided to let Cubans who wanted to leave Cuba, whom he called “scum,” do so, which resulted in over 125,000 Cubans arriving in south Florida. When asked in May of that year what to do with these refugees, or “Marielitos,” as they came to be called, Carter answered, “we’ll provide

¹⁷Jewish migrants to the United States had long been “racialized” since the nineteenth century. See Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2006); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019). For the Holocaust and photography see Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁸See Espiritu; Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Thy Phu, *Warring Visions: Vietnam and Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020); Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Joseph Darda, *How White Men Won the Culture Wars: A History of Veteran America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

¹⁹For a detailed historiography of the Duvaliers see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti: State against Nation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990).

²⁰See Carl Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World’s Largest Immigration Detention System* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018).

²¹See David W. Engstrom, *Presidential Decision Making Adrift: The Carter Administration and the Mariel Boatlift* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

an open heart and open arms to refugees seeking freedom from Communist domination and from economic deprivation brought about primarily by Fidel Castro and his government.”²² In contrast to the Cubans who took refuge in the United States in the 1960s, Marielitos included a much higher proportion of Black Cubans, which, in November, led Carter to categorize them together with Haitians as “Cuban–Haitian entrants (status pending),” because both were Black.²³ While the nebulous term “Cuban–Haitian,” coined by US refugee policy, only adumbrated the zone between refugees and illegal migrants, in October 1980, when the Cuban–Haitian Task Force was established, *only* Haitian nationals came to be redefined as “illegal aliens,” not entrants, and selectively relocated to US military bases. In late May 1981, under the Reagan administration, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service in south Florida began detaining Haitians seeking entry without authorization at the Krome Detention Center in Florida.²⁴ On 29 September 1981, Reagan issued Executive Order 12324, “authorizing the Coast Guard to intercept boats suspected of transporting Haitians who intended to enter the United States without authorization and return them to Port au Prince,” in accordance with Haitian President Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s authorization and assurance that no one would be harmed upon return.²⁵ Thus US refugee policy gradually differentiated Cubans and Haitians, thereby drawing a line among Black asylum seekers.

It is true that US refugee policies have discriminated against Haitians to a greater degree than Southeast Asians and Black Cubans. Does this indicate, then, that the US refugee policy is more about nationality than about race? Is this more a question of anticommunism than one of racism? And did Haitians unfortunately fall into the worst category? As shown by scholars of critical race studies, including Michael Omi, Howard Winant, Nikhil Pal Singh, and Jodi Melamed, among others, race in the United States is a dynamic apparatus that constantly rearranges social and political hierarchies, thereby determining those to be discriminated against. Race is a “master category”; that is, the “*template* of both difference and inequality.”²⁶ After World War II, Melamed argues, white supremacy came to be “replaced by a formally antiracist, liberal-capitalist modernity” and it “extended racialization procedures beyond color lines.” Now, Melamed continues, “racialized privilege and stigma need not reference phenotype,” and “traditionally recognized racial identities – Black, Asian, white, Arab – occupy both sides of the privilege/stigma divide.”²⁷ The color lines are constantly redrawn across and within “races,” and every time this race-making process draws a line it invents a new racial category *not* in the name of race

²² Jimmy Carter, “League of Women Voters Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the League’s Biennial National Convention,” *American Presidency Project*, 5 May 1980, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/league-women-voters-remarks-and-question-and-answer-session-the-leagues-biennial-national.

²³ Jimmy Carter, “Executive Order 12251 – Cuban and Haitian Entrants,” *American Presidency Project*, 15 Nov. 1980, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-12251-cuban-and-haitian-entrants.

²⁴ Loyd and Mountz, 72.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd edn (New York: Routledge, 2015), 106, original emphasis.

²⁷ Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011), 3, 13.

or phenotype. The history of how the United States defined refugees *in opposition* to other similar but essentially distinct categories across and within races exposes not only the arbitrary nature of refugee making but also, I argue, how refugees have been at the core of the race-making process throughout the long Cold War. What the difference between Black Cubans and Haitians shows is not the color-blind nature of US refugee policies but the fact that the figure of the refugee has been deployed to create new racial categories. Terms such as “illegal aliens” or “economic migrants” used to describe Haitian refugees are formally color-blind but definitely racial labels that allow American policy makers to implement and normalize racism while arguing that their immigration policies are not racist.

The point I would like to foreground is how the differentiation and hierarchization of refugees in the US discursive arena – “good” versus “bad” refugees, political refugees versus economic migrants, or refugees versus non-refugees – has been constructed and popularized primarily through their visual representation. As Anna Pegler-Gordon argues, it is photography that regulates American immigration policies. This fact has been underplayed because the scholarship on immigration regulation has primarily focussed on Europeans; that is, white immigrants. Still, “as the federal government introduced a series of racialized immigration restrictions, visual systems of observation and documentation became essential to their implementation and explanation,” and, moreover, these processes “helped reinforce popular and official understandings of different immigrant groups, as well as their differential treatment under immigration law.”²⁸ It is not that policy makers institute laws first and then the media capture what transpires thereafter; the lawmaking regarding refugees and the visual representation thereof are mutually productive and constitutive. The law and the media go hand in hand in defining and policing who is a refugee and who is not, thereby producing the narrative such as the tripartite of “the rescue of Vietnamese nationals, the threat of Haitian nationals, and the welcome of Cuban nationals” in order to perceive them as unrelated to one another.²⁹ To critique these purportedly color-blind post-World War II American refugee politics, therefore, we must recognize that “anti-Black racism has worked together with anti-Asian and anti-Latinx racism,” as Loyd and Mountz argue, “to obscure the violence and geographic scope of the United States’s migration policing, carceral, and deportation apparatus.”³⁰ The racial politics of refugees is an interracial construct, and we need to analyze the historically entangled relationalities in this regard.

Model refugees, bad refugees

One of the most iconic and the first “official” Vietnamese refugee photographs was crafted by President Gerald Ford, even before the fall of Saigon. In the face of the impending military defeat in Southeast Asia, he authorized the evacuation of thousands of Vietnamese orphans to the United States on 3 April 1975, which came to be known as Operation Babylift. “We are seeing a great human tragedy as untold

²⁸ Anna Pegler-Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 7.

²⁹ Loyd and Mountz, 33

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.



Figure 3. Gerald Ford greets Vietnamese orphans at the San Francisco Airport, 5 April 1975. Reproduced by permission from Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum.

numbers of Vietnamese flee the North Vietnamese onslaught,” he declared.³¹ Two days later, Ford, with his wife Betty crying in pity for orphaned infants, welcomed a planeload of babies at San Francisco International Airport because, according to the White House press release, they were “deeply touched by the plight of the South Vietnamese people and especially by the thousands of innocent war orphans.” The Pan American Clipper 1742 transported 325 Vietnamese orphans with American and Vietnamese attendants from Saigon on board, and Ford carried two babies from the plane to waiting buses in his own hands. A picture that captured this symbolic ceremony, with the President holding a baby with care at the bottom of a ramp (see [Figure 3](#)), vividly conveys how innocent and vulnerable the Vietnamese children are, as well as, in turn, how benevolent and humanitarian the US government is. There were thousands Vietnamese children in Vietnam still waiting for our help, Reagan announced, as if it had not been the military intervention of the United States that brought about the “tragedy” in the first place. Another well-disseminated Operation Babylift photograph captures the inside of the Clipper 1742, which records how those Vietnamese babies were transported: each baby was given their own seat, while carefully compartmentalized with Pan American’s carrier boxes, and soon underwent a medical check on board conducted by an American medical team ([Figure 4](#)). These two iconic photographs, among other similar ones, succeeded in individualizing Vietnamese orphans as living people who were worth rescuing, while inviting spectators to sympathize with these victims and to support the United States as a good and just actor who brings justice to the world.

³¹Gerald Ford, “Statement by the President,” *Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum*, 3 April 1975, at www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/museum/exhibits/babylift/documents.



Figure 4. Vietnamese orphans in an Operation Babylift airplane. Photograph by Robert Stinnett. Reproduced by permission from the Oakland Museum of California.

When the Ford administration began bringing Vietnamese refugees to US soil, American racial discourse had just recast the stereotypical image of Asian immigrants from “yellow peril” to “model minority.” This shift occurred as the direct expression and enactment of white supremacy became more and more impossible after World War II. While Asian (especially Chinese and Japanese) Americans had been deemed “unassimilable aliens unfit for membership in the nation” until the 1950s, as Ellen D. Wu writes, the model-minority discourse invented a new way of defining these “orientals.”³² It was on 9 January 1966 that the sociologist William Petersen contributed the oft-quoted article to the *New York Times* that first introduced the term “model minority.” Japanese Americans have long suffered from racial discrimination, “like the Negroes,” but now they are “better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites,” he wrote. Now they should be characterized as model minorities in contrast to, in his words, “problem minorities.”³³ The discursive constitution of Asian immigrants shifted in the mid-1960s, Wu adds, from those who are “*definitively not-white*” to “distinct from white majority, but lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and *definitively not-black*.”³⁴ Asians became “model minority” as opposed to non-model, “problem” minority – that is, African Americans – who during that period were eagerly engaged

³²Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 2.

³³William Petersen, “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” *New York Times*, 9 Jan. 1966, 21.

³⁴Wu, 2, original emphasis.

in the civil rights movement, whereas well-assimilated Asians were working hard without complaint. With this “success story,” racial liberalism not only forced Asians to owe a great debt of gratitude to American society, but also pitted Asian Americans against African Americans. This white–yellow–black triangulation and hierarchization prepared the racial coordinates for Vietnamese refugees, who have since then been deployed to advertise the United States as the land of freedom where everyone can achieve success. Mimi Thi Nguyen called it the “gift of freedom,” a form of power that promises freedom and at the same time forever indebts Vietnamese refugees, while rationalizing and sustaining liberal empire.³⁵ Southeast Asians were deployed as figures that might be termed *model refugees*, and they were defined as opposed to the undesirable Black refugees from Haiti.

Indeed, Operation Babylift and the making of the Vietnamese model refugee coincided with the time when Haitian refugees first entered the US media consciousness. Haitians quickly came to be deemed a great threat to American society; they were “problem minorities” par excellence who must be deterred, detained, and deported as quickly as possible. From the late 1970s to the present day, the dominant image of Haitian refugees has been that of “boat people” on an unseaworthy vessel, an image that the US media disseminated and solidified throughout the 1980s. When Haitians were denied asylum despite potentially facing death back in Haiti in June 1975, the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches accused the Ford administration of “adopting discriminatory double standards in dealing with Vietnam refugees and the Haitian refugees.”³⁶ Their treatment was already so severe that in November, as the nation’s largest Black newspaper, *Amsterdam News*, reported, Haitians who had arrived in the United States in April and had been detained in a prison in Dale County, Florida went on a hunger strike for asylum.³⁷ On 27 March 1980, the *New York Times* published an article titled “Haitian Refugee Tide at a Peak: New Boats Swell Florida Total,” which featured a photograph of ninety-eight Haitians on board a boat moored at a marina in Miami Beach (see Figure 5). “Though many of the Haitians attempt to claim political asylum,” it quoted a federal agent as saying, “they are simply fleeing the poverty of the densely populated island.” The assistant district director for investigations in the Immigration Service added, “There is poverty over there; they are hungry; they don’t have work; we understand that. But the problems of Haiti have to be solved in Haiti, not here.”³⁸ Their remarks were eloquently evidenced by the accompanying photograph. Since then, various kinds of US media have cemented the image of Haitian migrants as “boatloads of seemingly desperate poor and pathetic people washing onto *South Florida’s* shores.”³⁹ Whether on or off the coast, those pictures typically represent Haitians as a herd of Black bodies and

³⁵See Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*.

³⁶John E. Grimes, “U.S. Denies Haitians Political Asylum: Hundreds Fear Death if They Are Deported,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 11 June 1975, B1.

³⁷“Haitian Is on Hunger Strike for Asylum,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 Nov. 1975, B4.

³⁸“Haitian Refugee Tide at a Peak: New Boats Swell Florida Total,” *New York Times*, 27 March 1980, A22.

³⁹Stepick, *Pride and Prejudice*, 4. See also Thomas Boswell, “The New Haitian Diaspora: Florida’s Most Recent Residents,” *Caribbean Review*, 11, 1 (1982), 18–21; Jake Miller, *The Plight of Haitian Refugees* (New York: Praeger, 1984).



Figure 5. *New York Times* article reporting on the surge of Haitian refugees. 27 March 1980. Reproduced by permission from AP/AFLC.

rarely individualize them as living persons to be sympathized with. Refugee photography in the US media has determined human value by producing and disseminating racialized stereotypes of refugees.

One of the most powerful and influential contributors to this visual refugee making in the US media is Michael Ramirez, a cartoonist. Ramirez has won most major journalism awards in the United States, including two Pulitzer Prizes for Editorial Cartooning in 1994 and 2008, the 2005 National Journalism Award, and the 2018 and 2020 National Headlines Award, among many others, and has contributed works to such popular venues as *USA Today*, the *Weekly Standard*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and others. While he currently serves as an editorial cartoonist for the conservative *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, he was previously a resident editorial cartoonist at the *Los Angeles Times* as an unmistakably conservative cartoonist, which is quite uncommon among the *Los Angeles Times* cartoonists, or among cartoonists in general in American journalism. He is perhaps the most influential and established conservative cartoonist in the US media in recent decades. His works sometimes appear liberal-sarcastic regarding some specific issues – he has been acclaimed as an arbiter of advancing American democracy⁴⁰ – but in most cases they are straightforwardly nationalistic, patriotic, racist, and, above all, anti-refugee. Despite his Mexican and Japanese ethnicity, his cartoons often verge on typical white supremacism. When a military *coup d'état* occurred in Haiti on 29 February 2004 and Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the first democratically elected Haitian President, was overthrown by the National Revolutionary Front for the Liberation and Reconstruction of Haiti, Ramirez drew Haitian refugees as a black tsunami, a monstrous creature

⁴⁰See Tristan Justice, “Daily Signal Cartoonist Michael Ramirez Honored for Advancing ‘Values of Democracy,’” 17 Sept. 2018, at www.michaelpramirez.com/daily-signal-cartoonist-michael-ramirez-honored-for-advancing-lsquovalues-of-democracyrsquo.html.

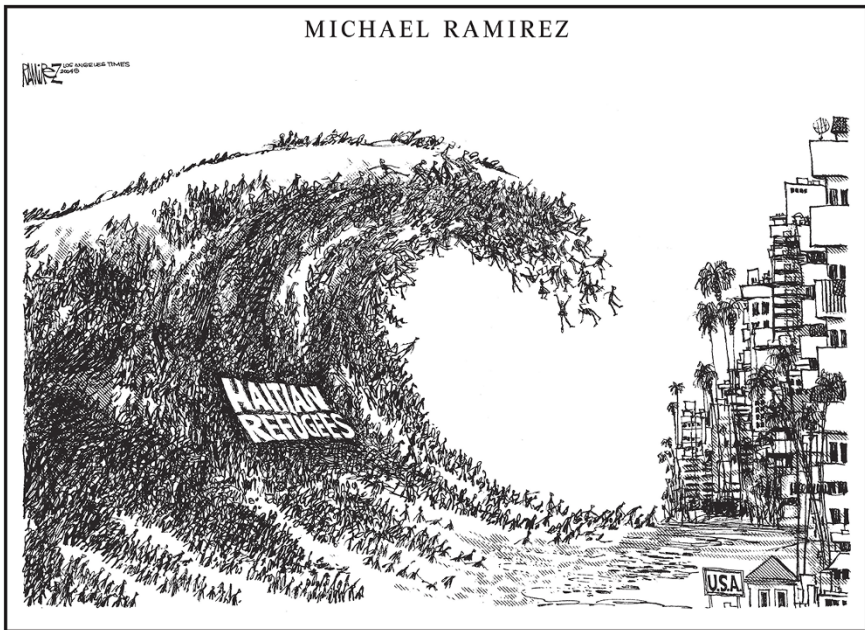


Figure 6. Michael Ramirez's cartoon depicting Haitian refugees as a black wave. *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 2004, B23. Reproduced by permission from the *Los Angeles Times*.

about to hit a city in south Florida (see Figure 6). Inheriting and intensifying the US media's tradition of representing Haitian refugees as an aggregation of Black bodies that constitutes a threat to the United States, Ramirez's crosshatching amplified American racial hate against Haitians by rendering them as a non-human leviathan that was about to engulf and endanger American cities.

When the Ratje piece went viral in 2021, Ramirez did not miss an opportunity to denigrate the liberal reaction to the photograph as misleading, as a kind of reverse racism. In his reactionary caricature of the photograph, he declared that he would "set the record straight" with captions revealing how the US media misunderstood and misrepresented what had happened when Ratje captured the border patrol agents on the horse grabbing at the Haitian refugee.⁴¹ The agent is "not a villain" but official personnel "enforcing the law"; the Haitian man is "not a victim" but "a lawbreaker trying to illegally enter the U.S."; the exasperated criticism of reporters, or of the American and global audience at large, that the practice is racial violence is "not the truth." While he also points out that the instrument in the border patrol's hand is "not a whip," as was reported, but rather "split rains used to control the horse," which was in itself correct, Ramirez himself secretly alters one detail: the Haitian man in the cartoon is holding a black bag that looks like a garbage bag, but what was actually in the refugee's hands were blue plastic ones in which we can

⁴¹See Michael Ramirez, "Cartoon: Doing Their Jobs," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 21 Sept. 2021, at www.reviewjournal.com/opinion/michael-ramirez/cartoon-doing-their-jobs-2445988.

detect white carton boxes that must contain food (though the cartoon seems to be based on another picture also taken by Ratje on the same day, Haitian refugees are carrying food in that one, too). Though more vulgar and candidly racist, Ramirez's vocabulary and logic parallel those of Biden, who said that the picture "sends the wrong message" and "it's simply not who we are." The item in the American border patrol agent's hand is important because it proves that he is enforcing law and nothing more; the one in the Haitian man's hand is not because whatever he holds he is breaking the law and nothing more. It is the Cold War racial politics that dominates Ramirez's, Biden's, and perhaps most viewers' optics. The United States is categorically on the side of the law vis-à-vis illegal Haitians, and to commit a crime by enacting racial violence is un-American by law – it is "simply not who we are," as shown by the visual history of refugees.

A stereoscopic view of Haiti and Vietnam

Though US media and refugee politics have gone to great lengths to characterize and represent "economic migrants" from Haiti and "political refugees" from Vietnam as irrelevant to one another, Haitian and Vietnamese asylum seekers are not just related; they are both products of American warfare and militarism as well. Under the Woodrow Wilson administration, the US Marines invaded Haiti in 1915 and occupied it until 1934. Wilson's "pacification" campaign in Haiti (which was a part of the Banana Wars deployed across Central America and the Caribbean) was instigated by the National City Bank of New York, whose financial interest in Haiti "often overlapped with the US State Department's strategic goals for the region."⁴² It was James Weldon Johnson, then a field secretary of the NAACP, who publicized US imperialism in Haiti via the NAACP magazine *The Nation* in 1920. In his "Self-Determining Haiti," Johnson reported how the National City Bank took control of the National Bank of Haiti and how the US military had already murdered 3,000 Haitians during the first five years of the occupation. Most Americans might believe – if one can ever know anything about the little-reported military enterprise – that the United States was "forced, on purely humane grounds, to intervene in the black republic because of the tragic coup d'état," Johnson wrote, but the "fact is that for nearly a year before forcible intervention on the part of the United States this government was seeking to compel Haiti to submit to 'peaceable' intervention." A *coup d'état* of President Vilbrun Guillaume and a massacre did happen in Haiti; however, these "did not constitute the cause of American intervention in Haiti, but furnished the awaited opportunity."⁴³ The US government disarmed Haitian forces, occupied the National Palace as its headquarters, selected a US-friendly President, and forced the Haitian government to sign a convention to renounce its independence. "Ostensibly initiated on humane grounds," Peter James Hudson argues, "the occupation had not fulfilled any of its stated goals of building infrastructure, expanding education, or providing internal or regional stability" – a typical American strategy with which we

⁴²Peter James Hudson, "The National City Bank of New York and Haiti, 1909–1922," *Radical History Review*, 115 (2013), 91–114, 93.

⁴³James Weldon Johnson, "Self-Determining Haiti," *The Nation*, 28 Aug. 1920 (18 March 2004), at www.thenation.com/article/archive/self-determining-haiti.

are all too familiar now.⁴⁴ Since then, the United States has repeatedly intervened in Haitian politics in the name of democracy and peacekeeping. Whether directly or indirectly, Haitians have been compelled to escape their own country because of American military interventions, just like the Vietnamese refugees.

Interestingly, it is conservative commentators who have pointed out the similarities between the Vietnam War and the US invasion and occupation of Haiti. In 1981, John Tierney, a former professor of politics turned special assistant and foreign affairs officer at the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, published an article titled “America’s ‘Black Vietnam’” in the journal *Lincoln Review*. Looking back at the war in Southeast Asia that had ended several years before, he wondered whether Americans in the year 2000 would still remember the Vietnam War and how it divided American society. It is unlikely that his contemporary readers in the early 1980s would remember, he surmised, that the United States had once intervened and occupied Haiti, because it “came and went practically unnoticed.” Yet the “Haitian war against the U.S. military” – not the other way around – “was a true ‘black Vietnam’ in American history” from which the post-Vietnam United States must draw a lesson. For Tierney, “Vietnam” is a trope that brings about division, protest, and unrest in US society. It was the first war in American military history in which “politicians, black and white, could use the readily available camera to reach millions of Americans in an instant,” he wrote. Black activists, “with the tiny resources at hand,” became more and more vocal in protest and “Vietnam was labeled a ‘racist’ war.” In this “early ‘Vietnam’ against a black country” in which the US Navy tried to pacify an island in “virtual anarchy” with an “Iron Age” economy, “the racial implications of the intervention were used to the fullest by the cacos,” a name given to those the United States deemed rebellious. Through “caco propaganda against the U.S.,” the humanitarian operation “became a war against white invaders.” Despite censorship, “word still leaked out” about atrocities committed by US Navy, allowing the NAACP and others to criticize the occupation as “imperialism” (Tierney puts the word in scare quotes).⁴⁵ The United States fought a good and just war, but the enemy’s propaganda distorted and revised the history by *racializing* it – this is exactly the same logic that Reagan replicated in revising the Vietnam War as a war of cause in 1980.⁴⁶

Sixty years after the end of the occupation, the US military was deployed across Haiti again. After the Aristide administration was overthrown in the 1991 *coup d’état*, the United Nations Security Council authorized a US-led coalition to intervene militarily in Haiti under the banner of Operation Uphold Democracy. When the coalition withdrew on 31 March 1995, about fifteen years after Tierney, the conservative commentator Georgie Anne Geyer also drew a parallel between Haiti and Vietnam in her *Chicago Tribune* article. “April 30 is the 20th anniversary of the American withdrawal

⁴⁴Hudson, 91.

⁴⁵John Tierney Jr., “America’s ‘Black Vietnam’: Haiti’s Cacos vs. the Marine Corps, 1915–22,” *Lincoln Review*, 2, 3 (1981), at www.iwp.edu/articles/1981/09/01/americas-black-vietnam-haitis-cacos-vs-the-marine-corps-1915-22.

⁴⁶Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Chicago,” *American Presidency Project*, 18 Aug. 1980, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-veterans-foreign-wars-convention-chicago.

from Vietnam ('withdrawal' is a better word than 'defeat')," she began. "March 30 marks a very different and much more positive kind of withdrawal: our troops leaving Haiti." These two events may seem unconnected, she wrote, but "taken together, they illustrate how far America has moved in its use of power – and how far it has not moved." Her point was that Americans, after Vietnam, came to embrace gradualism in military interventions, though "one can 'win' only by destroying everyone." Thus, in her opinion, the Vietnam War was not at all "immoral or vicious" but simply "stupid" because it ended "halfway," thereby incubating the so-called Vietnam syndrome. Yes, the US military is now leaving behind a new democratically elected Haitian President in power; does that mean, then, "that 20-year-old Vietnam syndrome has been broken for good?" Her answer is no. "The greatest danger is that we are leaving behind an unfinished situation, one that has been caused by our fear and our unwillingness to take too strong an action"; that is, to "destroy everyone." If there is any difference between Haiti and Vietnam, she concluded, the "halfway" operation in Haiti would bring about direct repercussions, including "thousands more Haitian boat people."⁴⁷ But there is very little difference between what the United States did and its consequences in Vietnam and in Haiti; both aggressive wars were expressions of US imperialism, destroyed almost everything, and created thousands of boat people. The difference was in how the United States strategically represented and treated Vietnamese as compared to Haitian refugees. As an event in US military history, Vietnam was indeed an uncanny return of Haiti.

Lastly, I would like to draw one visual parallel between Haiti and Vietnam in a different manner than Tierney and Geyer – in a way, to discern a historical link between Haitian and Vietnamese refugees as produced by US militarism. While an iconic photograph stands for the event it captures, its recontextualization can bring forth a different cultural memory, one that the iconicity of photography screens out. On 30 April 1975, the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* reported that "Saigon surrenders." This article featured a picture taken by the United Press International photographer Hubert van Es. From a hotel four blocks away, he shot people swarming into a Huey helicopter on a rooftop, which became the most iconic "Fall of Saigon" image (see Figure 7). "Americans being evacuated from US Embassy compound in Saigon climb ladder to waiting helicopter," the caption said.⁴⁸ Today it is known that the *Chicago Tribune* miscaptioned the picture. The building was not the US embassy but a CIA safe house, and those people were not Americans but Vietnamese intelligence officials. The photographer's three-hundred-millimeter lens was too short to capture the subjects' racial identity. Van Es himself put a correct caption on the image, the photographer himself reminisced thirty years later, but the editors "didn't read captions carefully" because "they just took it for granted that it was the embassy roof, since that was the main evacuation site."⁴⁹ They saw what they

⁴⁷Georgie Anne Geyer and University Press Syndicate, "U.S. Foreign Policy in Vietnam Then and Haiti Today," *Chicago Tribune*, 31 March 1995, at www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1995-03-31-9503310006-story.html.

⁴⁸*Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1975, 1.

⁴⁹Hubert van Es, "Thirty Years at 300 Millimeters," *New York Times*, 29 April 2005, A25.



Figure 7. Hubert van Es's miscaptioned picture published in the *Chicago Tribune*, 30 April 1975. Reproduced by permission from AFLO.

wanted to see, and their wrong caption came to establish a dominant cultural narrative of the historical event. It framed the fall of Saigon “as an American retreat from a foreign territory and the end of the war,” Sylvia Shin Huey Chong argues, “rather than a South Vietnamese exodus from a homeland and the beginnings of a diaspora.”⁵⁰ Whereas the US media defined the fall of Saigon as the end of the “Vietnam War,” in Vietnam it only signaled the beginning of a new phase of the never-ending “American War.” This photographic event signals more than photography’s definitive power to disseminate a (revisionist) historical account; by capturing the “last” Vietnam War photograph, Van Es took one of the first and most famous Vietnamese refugee photographs. When looking at the Vietnam War, we cannot categorically differentiate “war photography” from “refugee photography” precisely because of the continuity between US war making and refugee making.

During Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti, the renowned photojournalist Peter Turnley took a photograph with a composition quite similar to Van Es’s (see Figure 8). It captures boats, seemingly moored at a quay in Port-au-Prince, on which dozens of Haitians are gazing up at a military helicopter, a US Black Hawk, hovering above them. “The United Nation is providing Haiti with military assistance,” its caption reads, “to insure a peaceful transition of government from General Raoul Cedras to Jean-Bertrand Aristide.” It was the following year that Emmanuel Constant, the founder and leader of the anti-Aristide paramilitary junta FRAPH, revealed in a

⁵⁰Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 6.



Figure 8. Haitians watching a US Black Hawk hovering over Port-au-Prince. Photograph by Peter Turnley. Reproduced by permission from Getty Images.

CBS *60 Minutes* interview that he had long been a paid CIA informer and had interfered with the 1993 UN mission to land on Haiti (the *Harlan Country* incident).⁵¹ The CIA, knowing that Constant was abusing human rights, had long supported this supposed “enemy” of the United States and democracy. This incident initially appeared to represent a conflict between the “good” Clinton administration and the “bad” CIA, but the US government soon decided to allow Aristide, who had fled from Haiti to the United States after Haiti issued an arrest warrant against him, to stay in New York City as long as he would make no public statements about Haitian politics. The US government offered this human-rights abuser asylum on US soil – it acknowledged him, indeed, as a *political refugee*. “Both the CIA and the U.S. armed forces’ sympathies lay with the junta, not with Aristide,” Philippe Girard observes, “leading them to fund, then protect from prosecution, a leading human rights abuser, and to hold back, then prosecute a soldier to investigate such abuses.”⁵² Operation Uphold Democracy did create “thousands more Haitian boat people,” as Geyer warned, but that was not because the operation was done “halfway” – the whole incident was a part of the traditional American practice of war making and refugee making in the name of keeping peace or upholding democracy.

⁵¹See Tim Weiner, “Haitian Ex-paramilitary Leader Confirms C.I.A. Relationship,” *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 1995, at www.nytimes.com/1995/12/03/world/hafrican-ex-paramilitary-leader-confirms-cia-relationship.html; Nathan J. Robinson, “Haiti’s Clinton Problem,” *Jacobin*, 22 Oct. 2016, at <https://jacobin.com/2016/10/haiti-clinton-guantanamo-hiv-aristide-constant>.

⁵²Philippe R. Girard, “Operation Restore Democracy?”, *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 8, 2 (2022), 75–85, 79.

Throughout the long Cold War, the United States had made wars throughout Asia and elsewhere by producing what I elsewhere refer to as “Afro-Asian antagonism.” US war making and race making are mutually productive and constitutive, and this amalgamation has incubated racial hate between Blacks and Asians (or Asian Americans) through warfare and militarism.⁵³ Building on this discussion, I would like to add that refugee making is also intertwined with the US war-making and race-making enterprise, and, more importantly, it also functions as a crucial apparatus in pitting Black and Asian Americans against one another to prevent them from forming interracial Afro-Asian solidarity. By categorizing “economic migrants” and “political refugees” – or bad refugees and model refugees – not merely as unrelated but also as opposed, US refugee politics has compelled asylum seekers to compete to gain the status of refugee, a successful model minority who contributes to making the United States appear to be a multicultural (and neoliberal) utopia. This is why the critique of US refugee policies and the racial politics of the Cold War optics require a comparative approach, a kind of stereoscopic way of looking at refugee representations. By juxtaposing Vietnamese babies on planes and Haitians on boats, or US helicopters above Vietnam and Haiti, against the historical background of American warfare and refugee policies, for instance, we begin to see how Vietnamese and Haitians look different *despite* their historical and political similarities. When encountering the racist treatment of refugees, it is not sufficient to feel moral indignation; we need to bring legally, culturally, and visually divided immigrants together in order to develop a multidimensional optics and make a radical critique of US refugee making as a form of global and persistent violence.

“They all have AIDS”: Trump and US refugee policy

In 2017, President Donald Trump said of Haitian immigrants, “they all have AIDS.”⁵⁴ In 2024, with his second administration on the horizon, he is once again provoking indignation by renewing anti-Haitian racist remarks, such as claiming that Haitians are “eating the pets of the people” in Springfield, Ohio, a city close to vice president-elect J. D. Vance’s hometown.⁵⁵ Trump is, of course, not the first to associate Haiti and AIDS; this racist connection dates back to July 1982 when the Centers for Disease Control declared Haitians as constituting one of “four H’s” – homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin users, and Haitians – four primal origins of the then unknown disease.⁵⁶ By tapping into the long-standing US history of pathologizing Haitians as a public-health threat, the president-elect continues to perpetuate racist stereotypes. During his first term, Trump refused to sign bipartisan legislation that would have assisted

⁵³See Kodai Abe, “Afro-Asian Antagonism and the Long Korean War,” *American Literature*, 94, 4 (2023), 701–28.

⁵⁴“Despite White House Denial, Some Find Trump’s Comments about Black Immigrants Believable,” *Washington Post*, 23 Dec. 2017, at www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/12/23/despite-white-house-denial-some-find-trumps-comments-about-black-immigrants-believable.

⁵⁵“Trump’s Derision of Haitians Goes Back Years,” *New York Times*, 18 Sept. 2024, at www.nytimes.com/2024/09/18/us/politics/trump-haitians.html. For J. D. Vance’s reaction see also Yves Engler, “Lies about Haitians Reflect America’s Racist Imperialism,” *Common Dreams*, 13 Sept. 2024, at www.commondreams.org/opinion/ohio-haiti-migrants-eating-pets.

⁵⁶See Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation*, 178–80.

Haitians, and he also ended the issuance of temporary work visas to them.⁵⁷ “They have to be removed,” he said again in 2024, promising to revoke even *legal* migrants’ temporary protected status in his second term.⁵⁸ In January 2025, reportedly, his administration plans to carry out the “largest deportation operation in American history” to expel those who are “poisoning the blood” of the United States. During his first term, Trump deported about 1.5 million people; Vance is now suggesting 1 million *per year*.⁵⁹ Trump’s policy is consistent in scapegoating refugees and migrants as obstacles to making America “great” again, and it seems to be getting harsher in his second term. “Why do we want these people from all these shit-hole countries here?” he said in 2018, referring to Haiti, El Salvador, Guatemala, and African nations. He then added, “We should have more people from places like Norway”⁶⁰ – Trump’s “model” migrant. US refugee policy has always been an anti-Black racist enterprise, and in order to designate certain groups “bad” refugees, it has continually relied on a contrasting category of “good” ones.

On 20 January 2025, Inauguration Day, Trump declared a national emergency at the southern border of the United States. “America’s sovereignty is under attack,” he said. Over the last four years, the Biden administration has lost control over “illegal aliens” to let them murder innocent American citizens. Referring to himself as the “commander in chief,” Trump claimed that “it is necessary for the Armed Forces to take all appropriate action to assist the Department of Homeland Security in obtaining full operational control of the southern border.”⁶¹ He is declaring a war on aliens, a permanent and unending war, like George W. Bush’s global war on terror. We are yet to witness how the administration is to wage the “war” on “illegal aliens,” but Trump’s seemingly abnormal racism should be historically contextualized not as an exception to but as the norm of American refugee/immigrant policies. The difference is fundamentally one of scale but not of ideology. To keep critiquing Trump’s forthcoming anti-Black refugee and immigration policies – this time, certainly in tandem with the racist and post-truth social networking service run by Elon Musk – we must recall the long history of how US policy makers and media have constructed racialized frameworks for viewing refugees. As with the visual rhetoric surrounding Haitian refugees since the 1980s, the Trump administration will continue to rely on images and media to justify targeting those deemed “bad” refugees. The lines that separate “good” from “bad” refugees are arbitrary, strategic, and racial; we must look at both sides of this divide at once. When American policy makers name a certain kind of refugee as “bad,” we must ask, in contrast to whom?

⁵⁷See #TeamEBONY, “Trump: Why Do People from ‘S**thole Countries’ Keep Coming to America?”, *Ebony*, 11 Jan. 2018, at www.ebony.com/trump-america-sthole-countries.

⁵⁸“Trump on Springfield Haitian Migrants: ‘They Have to Be Removed,’” *NewsNation*, 2 Oct. 2024, at www.newsnationnow.com/politics/2024-election/trump-springfield-haitian-migrants-removed.

⁵⁹Rachel Leingang, “How Would Donald Trump Carry Out His Mass Deportation Scheme?”, *New York Times*, 4 Dec. 2024, at www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/04/donald-trump-mass-deportation-explainer.

⁶⁰See #TeamEBONY.

⁶¹Donald Trump, “Declaring a National Emergency at the Southern Border of the United States,” *White House*, 20 Jan. 2025, at www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/declaring-a-national-emergency-at-the-southern-border-of-the-united-states.

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