

## “I Did Not Know What ‘Refugee’ Meant, But I Knew...It Was a Bad Word”: Intersections of Refugee Subject Formation with Language Loss and Acquisition

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“The night that the police officer beat me, he didn’t just beat the shit out of me...he beat and strangled the naïve refugee out of me, too. And I try to tell myself that it was not because I did not have the courage, but that *I did not have the words to fight back*. I did not know what refugee meant, but I knew by the way he called me one that it was a bad word.”

-Ky Tran, a Vietnamese refugee (and also my father); emphasis mine

### ABSTRACT

How does one prove and assert one’s ‘right’ and ‘deservingness’ to be in a country without the adequate language to do so? In this paper, I draw on the oral histories of my parents and interviews conducted with twenty-two other Vietnamese refugees who were resettled in Canada to theorize refugee subject formation as it intersects with language loss and acquisition. From recollections of police brutality to dizzying disorientation, my paper contributes to the field of migration and refugee studies by analyzing intimate, visceral memories and moments of Vietnamese refugees being asked to declare and defend their existence in a new country to various state actors and community members. By unpacking narratives of refugee resettlement that are colored by contours of both pain and joy, anxiety and excitement, struggle and accomplishment, and resentment and gratitude, this paper disrupts historically homogenous presumptions of Vietnamese refugees as passive ‘model refugees’ and sheds light on how they negotiate and mobilize ‘refugee’ identity. Reflecting on complicated trajectories of language loss, language abuse, and language acquisition enables Vietnamese refugees to not only make sense of themselves and their place in Canadian history, but also to position themselves as worthy, deserving subjects that ‘belong’ in relation to host populations and other racialized migrant groups.

### BIO

**Grace Tran** is a Ph.D Candidate at the University of Toronto’s Centre for Criminology and Sociological Studies and Visiting Scholar at Rice University. As the daughter of Vietnamese refugees, Grace’s research interests stem from both her background in English Literature Studies and the nexus of disruption, resettlement, opportunity, and overwhelm that informed her own parents’ diasporic narratives. Grace’s writing draws on ethnographic experiences to explore the various ways in which citizenship, migration, identity, and belonging intersect along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Her work has been featured in *The Toronto Star*.