

# Canadian Literature / Littérature canadienne

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#### Errata

Instead of how they appear in issue 244, notes 2 and 3 of Morgan Cohen's article "Foraging and Fodder" on page 99 should read as follows:

- 2 Karen Barad distinguishes between phenomena, as opposed to phenomenon, in "Posthumanist Performativity." She claims that phenomena considers the meaning of an object in relation to the affect of its situation; it considers all elements of space including the positioning of the observer, writer, storyteller, and so forth, whereas phenomenon is a fixed observation.
- 3 In Posthumanist Performativity, Barad relays Haraway's juxtaposition of diffraction and reflection in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. Whereas reflection is a direct reproduction of difference, diffraction analyzes the effects of difference through relations of space.

We apologize to author Morgan Cohen and our readers for this error and for any confusion it may have caused.

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We acknowledge that we are on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmiñəm-speaking Musqueam people.

# On Refugee Worldmaking

*Y-Dang Troeung*

While seared into the memories of most survivors who lived through the war first-hand, audiences here in Canada likely remember experiencing the last days of the Vietnam War from a distance, as they watched the scenes of frantic helicopter refugee evacuations in Southeast Asia flood the news. As I write this editorial for the special issue on *Refugee Worldmaking: Canada and the Afterlives of the Vietnam War*, these scenes of wartime upheaval, refugee evacuations, and people left behind in the ruins and ravages of war to fend for themselves are with us once again—not from Cambodia, Vietnam, or Laos this time, but from Afghanistan.

Today, it is not uncommon to come across references to the “Cambodian precedent” or the “lessons” from Vietnam in discussions about the nature of the contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, or Iraq. In his *New York Times* op-ed, “I Can’t Forget the Lessons of Vietnam. Neither Should You,” Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen writes,

[t]wo decades, billions of dollars and tens of thousands of deaths later, Taliban forces are now in Kabul, having secured control of the country with dizzying speed. As much as some American leaders resist it, the analogy presents itself again, with the fall of Saigon and resulting catastrophe foreshadowing the possible fate of tens of thousands of Afghans.

Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, similarly invokes the form of the analogy as he writes,

there have been many references to the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam as an important historical analogy in assessing the implications of the situation in Afghanistan; however, a better analogy is Cambodia. The history of Cambodia offers . . . important critical insights into the implications of the current situation in Afghanistan.

A recent conversation I had with Vietnamese Canadian author Kim Thúy about her 2021 book *Em* also pivoted around the topic of the Vietnam War's lessons for the present. I asked Thúy about the last chapter of her novel, entitled "Cold War," in which she likens Vietnam to a chess piece in the Cold War and describes how the "abandonment [of the Vietnamese] by the three great powers forced the two Vietnams to find themselves, to live together despite the discomfort" (148). In our conversation, Thúy acknowledged that over forty-five years later, the Communist Party remains in power in Vietnam and the major superpowers (the United States, China, and Russia), it seemed, were coming back to the region to "play" on the chessboard once again, if they had ever left at all. Thúy also noted the parallels between then and now: "There are some pictures," she recounted, "that people are posting. You see the helicopters and the people running. They are basically the same pictures, with forty-five years in between. . . . Did we learn anything from the first time?" What these writers and scholars elucidate is the porousness and permeability of imperial wars and their afterlives.

Some wars that we think are over are merely on hold, in a lull. The afterlife of one war bleeds into, and merges with, the afterlife of another, forming an entangled web of death, injury, loss, and heartbreak for victims and perpetrators alike, albeit asymmetrically. To name Cambodia, Vietnam, or Laos as a precedent for Afghanistan, Syria, or Yemen today does the important work of illuminating the global and temporally unconstrained infrastructure of US permanent war, in which peacetime, rather than wartime, is the exception to the rule. As the *Costs of War* project at Brown University explains, the human, economic, and socio-political costs of the US wars in the Greater Middle East since 2001 alone include an estimated 929,000 people killed, 38 million people displaced, 85 countries targeted, and \$8 trillion in US budgetary costs. The only lessons learned from the Vietnam War, it seems, were ones the US military learned about how killing with impunity could be done more expansively and more indiscriminately. But

there are also limits to this analogical form of reasoning. To what extent do the unresolved inheritances of past wars and conflicts become legible only insofar as they offer “lessons” for the contemporary moment? And to what degree is it even possible to cite Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos as a meaningful lesson or cautionary tale for the present when we have yet to adequately look at the example itself, on its own terms? Such rationales also rely upon liberal positivist assumptions of Enlightenment progress, which as critical theorist Alexander Weheliye argues, presuppose “that suffering must always follow the path of wounded attachments in search of recognition from the liberal state” (14). This “liberal notion of wounding” (14) confers legitimacy onto the site of injury only insofar as it illuminates a larger structural pattern. The “exemplifying” or “lessonification” of suffering also temporally demarcates the event of wars abroad as something that is over and done with, rather than something that is structurally endemic to the enduring imperial conquests of US empire.

This special issue joins the chorus of scholars who have been attending to the afterlives of violence (across multiple sites and scales) that turn out to be no afterlives at all. As a descriptor, “the Vietnam War” signifies differently across spatial, temporal, and geographical boundaries. Some of its variants, metonymies, proxies, sideshows, and postscripts include the American War in Vietnam, the Second Indochina War, the Cold War in Southeast Asia, the hot wars in Southeast Asia, the Secret War in Laos, the US bombing of Cambodia, and the Cambodian genocide. Collectively, these asymmetrical wars of empire contributed to the suffering of people in these regions on a scale that Michel Foucault described in 1979 as “unprecedented in modern history.” These wars also disproportionately enlisted the labour of Black, Indigenous, and brown bodies to fight on the front lines of the war in the name of securing the extractive economies of Southeast Asia for US-led global capitalism. Canada’s involvement in the Vietnam War was marked by both complicity with and resistance to empire.

On the one hand, Canada offered sanctuary to 30,000 US war resisters and 60,000 Southeast Asian refugees, more refugees per capita than any other nation in the world. At local levels, Canadian groups mobilized in support of Southeast Asian refugees (e.g., Operation Lifeline) while others (the majority of the Canadian public polled at the time) were against the government’s



asylum policies. On the other hand, over 30,000 Canadian troops crossed the 49th parallel and voluntarily enlisted to go to war in Southeast Asia. Canada provided the US military with war material, and allowed the testing of chemical weapons, such as Agent Orange, on Indigenous lands in Canada. Southeast Asian refugees arrived in Canada at a moment in history when the nation-state was invested in bolstering its “humanitarian character” and image of exceptionalism relative to the United States (Madokoro 188). Just as scholars have argued that the US Refugee Act of 1980 constituted a “key site for the production of Vietnamese refugees as grief-stricken objects marked for rescue and the United States as the ideal refuge for the ‘persecuted and uprooted’ refugees” (Espiritu 21),<sup>1</sup> the Canadian government’s Special Indochinese Refugee Program of 1979-1980 afforded an opportunity for Canada to promote its humanitarian image and to efface its involvement in the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> Canada’s granting of asylum to 60,000 refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam allowed Canada to present itself in many ways as the ideal haven for the victims not only of Southeast Asian communism, but of America’s brutal war in Vietnam. The Special Indochinese Refugee Program, which allowed for private groups and organizations such as church collectives to participate in refugee resettlement through sponsorship agreements with the federal government, was heralded as a resounding success in Canadian refugee resettlement history and a model for the world (Employment and Immigration Canada 7). This celebratory narrative is exemplified by an official report in which the Canadian government proclaims as follows:

The 60,000 Indochinese who were welcomed by Canadians in 1979 and 1980 are the latest chapter in the ongoing story of Canada’s humanitarian tradition of accepting the displaced and persecuted for permanent resettlement. . . . This situation created a kind of partnership between the Canadian people and government at all levels which was sudden, new and different from anything that had happened before—and it worked! (7)

As Robert McGill, author of the book *War Is Here: The Vietnam War and Canadian Literature*, notes, “It isn’t a coincidence that the years of the Vietnam War, 1964-75, coincide with the rise in Canada of the ‘new nationalism’: a nationalism bent on establishing the country’s political, economic, and cultural independence from the United States.” Through attention to the Vietnam War-era writings and archives of Canadian authors

such as Earle Birney, Margaret Atwood, Al Purdy, Michael Ondaatje, Timothy Findley, Roch Carrier, Anne Hébert, Louis Caron, and many, many others, McGill's book illustrates how the years of the Vietnam War, also not coincidentally, coincided with the flourishing of Canadian literature, as "writers sought to characterize Canadians as coming to a humanitarian reckoning with the war" and with their own national identity.

The contributions in this special issue query how we might begin to reconcile Canada's humanitarian image of benevolence with its complicitous actions. How do the literary and cultural works that have been routed through Canada engage with the recurring presence of the Vietnam War and its afterlives? To what extent does the Vietnam War as an imperial formation offer possibilities for rethinking the paradigm of Canadian literature as a field? In response to decades of knowledge production that has centred the wounding of white (American) soldiers, veterans, and publics (as well as white authors writing about Vietnam), this special issue contributes to the growing body of scholarship that has sought to bring a focus to refugee perspectives and ways of knowing in the collective conversation about the legacies of the Vietnam War. In the introduction to their edited collection *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada*, Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu argue that "[b]y centring the figure of the refugee and the concept of refuge, [their] book builds on and expands well-established critiques of Canadian nationalism, nation-building, and settler colonialism" (5). Their critical

approach is less concerned with critiques of the state, and more with the ways in which refugees take up, work with, challenge, and transform state directives and agendas, asserting their subjectivities variously in opposition to and in parallel with other categories and subject positions as well as carving out ways of living and being with others. (5)

Building on Nguyen and Phu's work, I conceptualize this refugee labour of challenging, transforming, asserting, and carving out ways of living as acts of "refugee worldmaking."

On the one hand, refugee worldmaking refers to interlinked structures of imperial, racial, and gendered violence that make, and bring, the material worlds of refugees into being in the first place through imperial wars, occupation, and mass displacement of populations. On the other hand, refugee worldmaking encompasses the reparative acts of creativity that

refugees deploy to remake themselves and their worlds. In her book *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*, Dorinne Kondo defines “worldmaking” as the creative acts of “making” and “crafting” that “transform the ‘material’ world” (28). As Kondo writes, “[w]orldmaking is always collaborative, in relation with other people, abstract forces, objects, and materials that are themselves imbued with potentiality” (54). Worldmaking is reparative in orientation since it involves practices of “navigat[ing] through violence, devastation, shattering, to work toward integration” (33). Through acts of scholarly and artistic making and through political activism, “we try to transform the worlds we inhabit, despite inevitably partial outcomes” (53-54). For Kondo, “worlds” indicate the multiple levels at which such attempts at transformation occur: “the world of” creative work, the social world, the inner world of the mind, and “the worldmaking assumptions of theory and culture” (54).

Worldmaking also invokes the concept of “worldbuilding” that derives from the field of speculative fiction. As Nora K. Jemisin explains in an interview, worldbuilding refers to the process that a writer uses to come up with the imaginative world of their story. Worldbuilding creates the atmosphere and environment of a story’s setting and can also provide allegories for problems that people are dealing with in our own world by presenting similar situations in the world of the text. Acts of speculative worldbuilding can include the conjuring of the fictional world’s elements of syncretism, differentiation, cosmogony, economy, and “element x”—a “point of utter weirdness” that signals to the reader that the world of the text is different from our own (Jemisin 00:19:19-27). As erin Khuê Ninh’s contribution to this special issue demonstrates, there is a fascinating blurring of the generic boundaries between the post-apocalyptic speculative narrative and the refugee narrative: the worldmaking of both genres is concerned with similar themes of life and death at the end of the world, of lives destroyed and remade, of aspirations for more livable and just futures.

This special issue collects five articles, five reviews, and two forums that all take up the topic of refugee worldmaking via the pathway of Canada and the afterlives of the Vietnam War in their own original and groundbreaking ways. One essay, by Timothy K. August, addresses the goals and elements of Southeast Asian Canadian refugee aesthetics through specific attention to

Lao Canadian author Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife* and Vietnamese Canadian author Philip Huynh's *The Forbidden Purple City*. The latter text is also the focus of an essay by Lindsey Diehl, who examines the theme of homeland return in the Vietnamese diaspora to destabilize the familiar scripts of refugee gratitude and thankfulness to the Canadian nation-state. Analyzing two works of documentary film, Jason Coe's essay in this special issue explores the painful legacies of loss, trauma, and silence that continue to reverberate in the long wake of the US bombing of Cambodia and the ensuing Cambodian genocide, as well as the possibilities for reconciliation and recuperation through refugee worldmaking. In Coe's essay, the entangled afterlives and futures of Canada and Cambodia come into view through attention to the figure of Cambodian Canadian graffiti artist FONKi Yav, who is also featured in one of the forum essays. Wesley Attewell and Danielle Wong's essay engages the space of the Vancouver donut shop Duffin's, an establishment owned and sustained since 1987 by Cambodian refugee couple Tony Chhuon and Paula Sim. Attewell and Wong discuss the practices of refugee worldmaking at Duffin's in terms of the circuits of refugee labour that intersect and saturate the 24/7 temporality of the landmark donut shop. Finally, erin Khuê Ninh's essay blends autotheory and textual analysis, querying the points of overlap and divergence between mainstream apocalyptic narratives and the refugee narrative, touching on a broad range of works saturated with the afterlives of the Vietnam War, whether implicitly or explicitly. The book review section of this special issue engages an impressive lineup of new works of scholarship and literature related to the topic at hand, including Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu's *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada*; Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Guy Beauregard, and Hsiu-chuan Lee's *The Subject(s) of Human Rights: Crises, Violations, and Asian/American Critique*; Thy Phu's *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam*; Timothy K. August's *The Refugee Aesthetic: Reimagining Southeast Asian America*; Monica Sok's *A Nail the Evening Hangs On*; and Greg Santos' *Ghost Face*. Finally, this special issue includes two themed forums, the first on the poetry of Hoa Nguyen, and the other on the exhibition *Remembering Cambodian Border Camps, 40 Years Later*.

Coming from all over the world, over the course of a pandemic, the contributions to this special issue deepen our understanding of refugee

worldmaking, Canada, and the afterlives of the Vietnam War in ways that expand the parameters of what has traditionally been thought of as “Canadian literature.” Collectively, they reimagine this category for a new generation of scholars, writers, artists, and activists. While I began this editorial with an ominous commentary about the lessons of war not learned, I end on a lighter note: a heartfelt thanks to all of the contributors and people who made this special issue possible. Of all the projects I have worked on in my career so far, this one has imparted to me some of the most valuable lessons of collaboration, friendship, mentorship, community building, and joyful revelation.

#### NOTES

- 1 Espiritu's citation here is from Victor H. Palmieri, who held the position of US Coordinator for Refugee Affairs during the Carter presidency.
- 2 See Victor Levant, *Quiet Complicity* and Yves Engler, *The Black Book*.

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# Donut Time

## Refugee Place-Making in 24/7 Afterwar

A bit of Southeast Asia, a bit of California, a bit of Tex-Mex  
and Vancouver.

— Christopher Cheung,  
“The Dictator, the Donut King, and a Shop Called Duffin’s”

In a profile of Duffin’s Donuts for *Scout Vancouver*, Andrew Morrison calls the “24 hour legend” on Knight Street an “anchor of East Van[ancouver],” in the same league as locally-born artist Ken Lum’s “famous cross,” which looms over the urban landscape some thirty-five blocks north on Clark Drive. Morrison is not the first food journalist or blogger to extoll the working-class and multicultural virtues of this Vancouver restaurant—nor would he be the last. Ayesha Habib’s article for *Vancouver Magazine*, for instance, relies upon this image of an anchored, resilient independent business, noting that the “little donut shop” has survived decades of real estate development in Vancouver, making it a “symbol of East Van itself, where immigrants have historically settled . . . and where gentrification fights against a robust culture that refuses to be wiped away.”

Other public commentators have both extended and complicated Morrison’s anchor metaphor, repositioning Duffin’s instead as a “crossroads” that authentically brings a local community into relations with a broader, more diverse world of global cultures, flows, and circulations. “You’ll find all types of people here,” writes Diana Chan on *Foodology*, a statement that succinctly signals the diverse ethnic, racial, and class composition of the Duffin’s customer base. Christopher Cheung, writing for the *Vancouver Courier* in 2016, offers an even more explicitly liberal reimagining of Duffin’s as a multicultural space, describing the shop, which offers an eclectic menu

of tortas, fried chicken, tamales, and *bánh mi* sandwiches in addition to donuts, as a “map of migration on a mosaic of a menu.” For this reason, Duffin’s has, in recent years, become a destination unto itself. Its signage, its neon-drenched design language, its small booths, and its white floor tiles all lend it a certain kind of working-class cache that evokes a longer-standing diner culture (see figs. 1 and 2): one that is slowly dying across the city, as institutions such as Bino’s, Reno’s, and Tops get gentrified, either into condominium projects or sleeker, more modern versions of themselves.



**Figure 1.** (top) Duffin’s Donuts on Knight Street and 41st Avenue in Vancouver. (Photo taken by Danielle Wong).

**Figure 2.** The “mosaic of a menu” at Duffin’s Donuts. (Photo taken by Danielle Wong).



While the diner's entanglements with the global geographies of imperialism, militarism, and refuge are, at first glance, less obvious to mainstream publics, most profiles of Duffin's are quick to remind readers that the shop has been owned and sustained since 1987 by a refugee couple from Cambodia: Tony Chhuon and Paula Sim. As first narrated in Cheung's profile, Chhuon—then a medical student—and Sim fled Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge genocide in 1980, eventually making their way to a refugee camp in Thailand. After staying in the camp for three years, they were relocated to Ottawa, where Chhuon found work in a nursing home and hospital as a cook (Cheung). It was during a cross-border vacation to Sim's Los Angeles-based family in 1986 that the couple first contemplated the possibility of entering the donut business back home in Canada. As one of the major destinations of Cambodian refugees in the post-Vietnam War period, California's rapidly growing diasporic community was primarily concentrated in southern municipalities such as Orange County, Pomona, and Long Beach. By the time that Sim and Chhuon arrived in Los Angeles to visit their relatives, the Cambodian American connection to southern California's burgeoning donut culture was already well established. One of the earliest Cambodian refugees to California, Ted Ngoy, famously parlayed a part-time job as a gas station attendant into an extensive empire of Christy's Donuts shops. Although Ngoy initially relied on the labour of kin and extended family to make ends meet, he eventually built Christy's Donuts into a communal infrastructure of upwards class mobility that provided successive waves of Cambodian refugees with the training, financing, and managerial expertise they required to stake their own claim on the industry (Curtis; Ong). Chhuon and Sim were one of the many beneficiaries of Ngoy's donut boot camp, learning how to make not only tasty pastries, but Latinx staples as well, including tortas, pupusas, and tamales. They brought their newfound skills and expertise back to Vancouver, where they followed the Ngoy playbook by opening their own donut shop in 1987 on Main Street and 33rd Avenue (Cheung).

Much scholarly and popular attention has been paid to tracking the ever-shifting fortunes of the Cambodian-owned donut shop in the context of southern California. Ngoy's rags to riches story has been the focus of numerous documentaries, including filmmaker Alice Gu's latest effort, *The*

*Donut King* (2020). Anthropologist Aihwa Ong also emphasizes how the story of Ngoy and many of the other Sino-Cambodian refugees who went on to make it big in the donut business “echoes the stereotype of the mobilization of family labor, the recruitment of relatives or pseudo-kin, and the circulation of money in the making of a traditional American ethnic family enterprise” (243-44). Much like the Vietnamese nail salon, or the Chinese restaurant, Cambodian donut shops are never merely “contemporary mom and pop operations,” but instead, “units in a chain that develops from the entrepreneur’s use of nepotism to mobilize unpaid and overworked labor to build an *empire within an ethnic labor niche*” (Ong 245, emphasis ours). Food historian Erin Curtis builds on Ong’s arguments to also emphasize how Cambodian donut shops “[gave] their owners and workers a unique means through which to negotiate their identities as both Cambodians and refugees living in the United States” (Curtis 22). Whether located in the Bay Area, San Diego, or the greater Los Angeles metropolitan region, each shop provided a space “in which entrepreneurs and their employees [could] partake of Cambodian culture, promote Cambodian values (particularly the concept of survival), and navigate American culture” (22). In Anthony Veasna So’s recently published short story “Three Women of Chuck’s Donuts,” for instance, the Cambodian-owned donut shop in California is a site of such navigations, particularly as the gendered labour of working in the 24/7 donut shop also involves surviving the multiple, overlapping regimes of the state, empire, and patriarchal violence.

Taken together, this rich literature emphasizes how the Cambodian-owned donut shop is an inheritance of US empire and an imperial form: or at the very least, a vehicle for refugee integration into racial capitalist projects of accumulation and exploitation. But what happens, we ask, when it is pulled out of its birthplace in southern California, and made to circulate transnationally across the US-Canada border? What kinds of spatial relations and (sub)urban racial forms does the 24/7 donut shop engender in a local context that has historically been shaped by distinct, if related, genealogies of militarized refuge, settler colonialism, and transpacific empire? How might we understand a “crossroads” like Duffin’s—which, as currently located, does not fit neatly into conventional mappings of Vancouver’s various ethnic enclaves—in *relation to* other, less obvious diasporic and imperial spatial formations?

As demonstrated above, the impulse of mainstream commentators—both white and Asian Canadian—is to hold up Duffin’s as a success story of the liberal multicultural project. Hard-working and self-sacrificing, Chhuon and Sim overcame much struggle and hardship to build a beloved community institution, where patrons can “seemingly step into the past, find dishes from differing parts of the world, and sit amongst a varied crowd” (Habib). Over time, Chhuon and Sim built Duffin’s into a space of *refuge*, not only for themselves and their family, but also for their diverse clientele. Vinh Nguyen theorizes *refugeetude* as the “coming into consciousness” of the forces that produce refuge(e) as well as the attempts to live it differently from what the legal framework prescribes (110). Following this conceptualization of refuge and the refugee, Duffin’s seemingly made it possible for a refugee couple to stop being a refugee couple. But if Nguyen is correct to caution that “refugeeness is not a cloak that can easily be shed with the coming of refuge” (111), but rather an enduring “state of being and a mode of relationality” (110), are there ways of telling the story of Duffin’s that do not rely on tropes of closure, assimilation, or integration? How can we account for the ways in which “the refugee past punctures the resident present” (109)? Putting critical refugee scholars such as Nguyen and Yến Lê Espiritu into conversation with other theorists of racial capitalism and empire, we argue that Duffin’s might be productively understood as a space shaped and haunted by the everyday (sub)urban experiences of *afterwar*. Borrowing from the anthropologist Zoë Wool, Emma Shaw Crane recently defined *afterwar* as the “time after war formally ends, yet remains in embodied experience and spatial relationships.” What, then, can an analysis of Duffin’s as a spatial-temporal landscape of *afterwar* tell us about how the Vietnam War gets reproduced as an inheritance for future generations of Southeast Asian diaspora subjects, even those who have built lives for themselves in spaces that seemingly exceed the martial and imperial grasp of the US?

By conceiving of Duffin’s as a spatial-temporal landscape of *afterwar*, we suggest that refugee place-making entails racial taste-making—the labour and pleasures involved in producing sensorial, culinary, and aesthetic tastes that constitute the everyday experiences of imperial haunting. Taking our cue from the donut shop’s around-the-clock operating hours, we argue that “24/7 time” indexes such a haunting: on the one hand, it marks the long

duration and unrelenting conditions of labour exploitation under racial capitalism and transpacific imperialism, and, on the other, it fragments and suspends the linear chronology of multicultural inclusion and capitalist success. In the section below, we analyze the restaurant's spatial aesthetics, signage, and menu in order to consider how the readymade—as a genre of art objects and as packaged, instant meals—traces lineages of transpacific imperialism and makes apparent the limits of neoliberalism's promises of seamless production. In the subsequent section, we scale up from the “24/7 tastes” at Duffin's to the “24/7 empire” in order to situate the intersection at Knight Street and 41st Avenue within the global circuits of supply chain capitalism. Our examination of Duffin's tells an alternative story of the Cambodian donut shop—one in which this particular site serves as a hinge that links East Vancouver to larger, ongoing projects of just-in-time empire, and allows us to see the possible survival strategies of, and opportunities for solidarities through, refugee place-making.

### **24/7 Tastes**

A central component of the Duffin's “legend” is its 24/7 operating hours. After Habib spent twelve hours in the restaurant in 2019, she wrote an article describing the restaurant as a place where customers “can find themselves eating a full meal at three in the morning, disjointed from the rest of their sleeping city and sharing an unnamed secret with the other misfits still awake.” This “unnamed secret” shared by elderly Cantonese-speaking patrons, fashionable young people, construction workers, and other “misfits” is made possible by the nostalgia produced in such a space—a feeling that Habib links to the diner's red-and-white tiled floor and cream-coloured wooden tables. In another profile of the restaurant, Michelle Cyca calls Duffin's a “time machine” that still, “after decades, retain[s] an aura of mystery.” “If Duffin's has been renovated or updated in my lifetime,” Cyca notes, “the changes are imperceptible.” These feelings of nostalgia or temporal suspension frequently associated with Duffin's spatial aesthetics illuminate how the time of afterwar is one that entails 24/7 *taste-making*. Cultural forms of imperial afterlife circulate via and as sensory, culinary, and artistic tastes, and such tastes are attached to fractured temporalities that are at once outside of sequential time and promise endless productivity. As

Pierre Bourdieu famously argued, taste functions as a marker of class and “presupposes” economic and social conditions (2, 6). Expanding upon this suggestion to consider taste also as a function of racialization—or what Minh-ha Pham calls “taste work”—we conceptualize 24/7 temporality as the global capitalist time of afterwar in which nonstop labour is aestheticized through everyday forms of racial taste-making.

Habib’s comment that Duffin’s is temporally and spatially “disjointed” from the rest of Vancouver is indicative of both the duration and fragmentation of afterwar memory production. The diner is not only located at an intersection outside of the city’s more well-known ethnic enclaves; it also inhabits an outside-of-time that indexes and exceeds capitalist temporalities of work and pleasure. According to Jonathan Crary, “[a] 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness” (9). The stories of migration and hard work attached to Duffin’s, however, disclose the human cost required to keep such a space constantly available in order to suspend life as a kind of social world, as refuge. In accounts of donut shops owned by Cambodian refugees in North America, the narrative of constant work is one that both the owners of these independent businesses and journalistic coverage fashion as a testament to model refugee industriousness. Sim, for instance, told a journalist in 2016 that she worked fourteen to seventeen hours a day when she and Chhuon first opened the restaurant. She suggested that hard work helped them overcome their statuses as refugees, or that they worked hard *despite* their legal status: “Even though we were refugees, it didn’t matter because we were willing to work hard. . . . That’s why I love Canada” (qtd. in Cheung).

Sim’s statement exposes how the settler nation-state’s promise of political emancipation is disavowed by the very conditions of this promise. Liberal empire’s “gift of freedom,” which Mimi Thi Nguyen theorizes as an “assemblage of liberal political philosophies, regimes of representation, and structures of enforcement” that produce freedom and nonfreedoms (12), structures a power relation between the giver and the indebted receiver. Through the gift, the refugee is subjected to an endless debt that requires her orientation toward a future shaped by this demand of gratitude (9). Nguyen points out that the critical purchase of liberalism’s gift of freedom is its power

over the receiver and its “duration *over time*,” as freedom is always deferred, always “‘to come’ because the debt extends endlessly” (8-9). Duffin’s 24/7 operating hours attest to the time of endless debt and the duration of what Nikhil Pal Singh calls “America’s long war,” signalling the nonstop work of the Duffin’s owners, employees, and customers, many of whom are assumed to be people doing shift work along global supply chains in industries expanded by and produced for military needs, including truck drivers, construction workers, and warehouse labourers. These 24/7 industries expanded in Canada during the Vietnam War, when “Canada and the United States signed a Defence Production Sharing Agreement” in 1958, which resulted in Canada supplying “\$2.47 billion worth of war material” including passenger vehicles, aircraft engines, boots, berets, whiskey, and Agent Orange to the US during the 1960s and 1970s (“Canada Supplies”).

24/7 is, after all, a military and imperial logic. The Canadian Army, for instance, mandates that soldiers be “effective for physical tasks” for up to 72 hours without sleep (Tetreault i). Western militaries have used sleep deprivation as a torture tactic for more than a century, with an early record of this practice appearing in an 1854 British commission report on colonial police operations in India (Rejali 291). French colonizers “in Saigon used sleep deprivation combined with electricity” and they used salt meals against Vietnamese nationalists in the 1930s (291). The US military and the CIA infamously used “monsterring” and “the frequent-flier program” torture techniques in their post-9/11 War on Terror—the latter of which involved keeping prisoners at Guantanamo Bay constantly moving “from one cell to another” (Rejali 292).

But rest is also crucial to imperial formulas of efficiency and wellness. Hacking the 24-hour day is increasingly a research interest for the US military, which has turned to sleep logistics as a way of developing sleep and alertness management systems to “optimize the general effectiveness of military personnel” and treat sleep disorders resulting from long-term exposures to “combat-related stressors and sleep restrictions” (Capaldi et al. 215). The US military’s Biotechnology High Performance Computing Software and Applications Institute even recently developed “sleep/alertness management software . . . called 2B-Alert”—a smartphone app that assesses the effectiveness of different sleep-wake schedules by “objectively” measuring

sleep duration through wrist actigraphy in order to develop a sleep and caffeine schedule that optimizes alertness (218). As Franny Nudelman points out, US soldiers' sleep during World War II and the decades to follow became a "special source of information" via military psychiatric experiments that led to brainwashing techniques as well as discourses of trauma (4). Vietnam War veterans' troubled sleep, in particular, was integral to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder as a diagnostic category (Nudelman 4). The measurement of the American soldier's resting body is part of the calculus and administration of life and death in colonial and imperial occupation.

"24/7 announces a time without time, a time extracted from any material or identifiable demarcations, a time without sequence or recurrence," writes Cray. "In its peremptory reductiveness, it celebrates a hallucination of presence, of an unalterable permanence composed of incessant, frictionless operations" (29). "As an advertising" declaration, 24/7 promises constant availability, never-ending needs, and the perpetual non-fulfillment of those needs (Cray 10). The sign above the Duffin's entrance announces such a timelessness—a time without clear demarcations—by, paradoxically, advertising three types of food under the restaurant name: hot tortas, noodle soup, and "Chinese food." Although it identifies these items on its sign, only the tortas remain on the Duffin's menu; the noodle soup and the vague, multivalent category of "Chinese food" linger on the entrance as a nostalgic gesture to "older" Asian diasporas in Vancouver and as a generic signalling of ethnic and immigrant tastes.

That the Duffin's sign advertises items that have been discontinued shows us how the "perpetual non-fulfillment" of demand under global capitalism is raced through taste—through the designation "Chinese food," which becomes less a culinary designation and more a gesture to a recognizable immigrant narrative and genre. Sianne Ngai notes that advertisement, which is necessary because over-accumulated commodities' values "cannot be realized until sold," promotes an "overarching reification of the 'idea'" in the form of the schtick (105). In this way, the Duffin's sign's announcement of menu items that have been largely *discontinued* makes visible the unrealized value of "Chinese food" and "noodle soup" as material commodities, thereby rendering them ideas in the ongoing deferral of their sale. The *idea* of Chinese food places Duffin's as concurrently part of, and at a distance from,

conventional narratives of Asian migration to Vancouver, and Canada more broadly, with the Chinese restaurant in Canada being a particularly well-known racial contact zone and a site that both attests to and contests liberal multiculturalism.<sup>1</sup> For Lily Cho, the Chinese restaurant does not necessarily reflect Chineseness, but is instead a cultural site that mediates relations between Chineseness and Westernness, and thus produces “Chineseness, Canadianness . . . and diasporic culture more broadly” (13). Gesturing to the genre of the North American small-town Chinese restaurant—Duffin’s used to sell hot dishes familiar to Western palates like Kung Pow chicken and wonton soup—while deferring its realization, the anachronistic sign makes a temporal insistence through taste-making: Duffin’s is not a “legend” because its menu is constantly updated, trendy, or seen as innovative; its charm is its outmoded menu of generic ethnic diversity, which, for many food bloggers and journalists, reflects working-class palates and the suspension of progress qua urban development.

Thus, 24/7 is an *aesthetic* designation. The look, feel, and taste of “constant availability” and nonsequential time instantiate especially in the *readymade*—through conveniently packaged or prepared tastes and/as ideas that hide the labour time needed to produce them. Here, we bring together aesthetics and military logistics, as the increase of what Ngai calls “readymade ideas” in artistic production and of readymade foods can be connected through late capitalist productivity in the time of afterwar. Many of the technologies used for producing readymade foods were developed by the US military for combat rations, and such processes and recipes were often honed in its wars in the transpacific. The first time that meat rations were served to US soldiers chilled or in tin cans, for instance, was in the tropical weather of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam during the Spanish-American War (Marx de Salcedo 51). The modern energy bar, as another example, was designed during World War I as a ration to give tired soldiers a productivity boost, and was developed by Hershey to be tastier for “the hot and humid Pacific theater” in the 1940s, with this “Tropical Bar” recipe being updated during the Korean War and the Vietnam War (Marx de Salcedo 87). The systematization, standardization, and optimization of imperial tastes—tastes that incorporate and shape cuisines in Asia and the Pacific, as seen in the case of Spam—is reflected in the Duffin’s menu,



which includes burgers, hot dogs, fries, and refrigerated burritos. One could argue that Duffin's, which is modelled on a system that was developed and perfected by Ngoy's southern California donut empire, is itself readymade.

Writing about Marcel Duchamp's art, Maurizio Lazzarato theorizes the readymade as a "lazy technique" that "flouts the celebration of artistic genius" "because it involves no virtuosity . . . no productive activity (19-20). He argues that such a "lazy" technique conceives of a politics of the "refusal of work," a principle that breaks away from capitalism's "enchanted circle of production, productivity, and producers" (6). But the readymade is only "ready" because of others' 24/7 labour—because of often racialized, migrant, and poor people's inability to refuse work. Moreover, as Ngai points out, the genre of the Duchampian readymade and other "poststudio" artistic practices are indexical of advanced capitalist production, as "[t]he integration of knowledge into production is . . . one of capitalism's general features, ensuring that artistic labor has followed productive labor in becoming increasingly reliant on concepts, signs, and information in what is sometimes the same process as becoming deskilled" (105). Under advanced capitalist production, Ngai argues, ideas are mobile and transferrable, and "can function as 'readymades' in artworks, too" (106).

So, while the readymade for Lazzarato, exemplified by pieces like Duchamp's *Fountain* and *Bottle Rack*, offers a critique of the artist-as-entrepreneur, our reading of Duffin's as a site of readymade tastes interrogates neoliberal logics from the other direction. Emphatically involving constant hard work and manual, racialized labour that is not seen as skilled or creative, sites like Duffin's make apparent central contradictions of neoliberalism. The off-the-shelf readiness of its menu items meant for bodily consumption and, in more recent years, for visual production circulated via food blogs and Instagram, draws uneven connections between the artist-as-entrepreneur (the freelancer, the blogger, the social media influencer) and the food-service worker (the cook, the food preparer, the cleaner, the cashier) through the disillusionment of freedoms promised by waged work. In fact, the 24/7 always-readiness of the food feeds the donut shop's "legend"; it engenders its gastronomical tastes and spatial aesthetics, which are in turn further realized by social media and journalistic coverage. In this assemblage of production and productivity, the food blogger is

categorized in the “creative class,” even though hers is often not waged work, while the Duffin’s staff working at all hours—labour that is rendered invisible in romantic accounts of Duffin’s—makes apparent the foils of liberalism’s promises of self-possession.

If ideas can function as readymades in artwork, then what would it mean to conceive of readymade ideas in food? Located outside of more conventionally recognized ethnoburbs, the East Vancouver diner’s disjointed temporality is marked not only by its nonstop working hours and its outdated signage, but also by its inauthentically ethnic menu, by its production of gastronomical tastes that reveal their own unstable origins. Offering tortas, burritos, tamales, pupusas, bubble tea, spring rolls, fried chicken, hot dogs, and Vietnamese subs, the diner’s nostalgia does not attach itself to a single, authentic, or linear route of migration. Rather, the 24/7 menu—a menu that exceeds the boundaries of the daily three-meal schedule—traces the entangled routes of production and labour in the ongoing histories of Western imperialism, as well as the pleasures of mis/remembering places and tastes that escape easy categorization by nation-state borders or clearly defined culinary traditions.

Anita Mannur reminds us that culinary memories cannot only be understood as merely reflectively nostalgic gestures toward home; rather, they must also be understood as metacritiques of “what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one’s relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices” (13). Mannur uses the term “culinary citizenship” to describe a form of affective citizenship that allows subjects to claim and inhabit certain subject positions through a relationship to food. As she writes, “[w]ithin such narratives official and traditional models of national definition become reinterpreted so as to hint towards the multiplicity of definitional possibilities” (13). What, then, might it mean for Duffin’s to be nostalgic for places, people, and affects that are shaped by national identity but exceed it? What kind of refugee memory or re-memory might this fragmented account of migratory and imperial routes trace through taste and food?

## 24/7 Empires

If shops like Duffin's emphasize how refugee place-making in settler cities like Vancouver has come to be expressed through the seemingly disjointed aesthetics of 24/7, less obvious are the ways in which such landscapes of readymade availability and just-in-time convenience necessarily invoke other far-flung historical geographies of (after)war and accumulation. In the writings of local commentators such as Habib, Duffin's appears as a stage for a diversity of local characters, "each of whom provide[s] only a glimpse into the myriad of stories within this city." As an interstitial space that somehow brings these characters—and their stories—into relation and encounter, Duffin's comes to stand in for East Vancouver itself.

Here, Habib's use of the term "story" to capture the life trajectories of Duffin's patrons recalls how the geographer Doreen Massey theorizes the story-so-far—or the dynamic "history, change, movement, of things themselves"—as the "raw building material of space" (Massey 12; Friedman 124). Following Massey, Duffin's is best understood not as an inert backdrop upon which everyday life unfolds, but rather as a space constantly being produced, remade, and transformed at the "meeting-up place" of "simultaneous stories-so-far" (Friedman 124). But the 24/7 encounters that give Duffin's its vitality and authenticity, as Sara Ahmed might remind us, "are not simply in the present" (8). "[E]ncounters between embodied subjects," Ahmed argues, necessarily "reopen[] other encounters" and "always hesitate between the domain of the particular—the face to face of this encounter—and the general—the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism." From this perspective, then, Duffin's is not just an "anchor" that grounds and reproduces a particular, localized form of East Vancouver culture in time and space. Rather, it might also be a hinge that opens outwards, tethering East Vancouver to broader, longer-standing projects of just-in-time imperialism, racial capitalism, settler militarism, and militarized refuge (Wesley Attewell; Nebolon; Espiritu).<sup>2</sup>

In his landmark book *Covert Capital*, Andrew Friedman argues that "[i]mperial space is often imagined through a binary relationship between metropole and colony, in which power trickles from the center to periphery, and both retain their location" (123). The American suburb, he continues, "appear[s] to be sealed off from these relationships by design, as a domestic,

residential space inherently defined by the gap between the foreign and the domestic.” The spatial relationships linking US empire and urban domestic life on Turtle Island become even harder to track in a Canadian city like Vancouver, whose residential neighbourhoods, on the surface at least, bear no obvious connection to overseas theatres of US counterinsurgency and race war. But a close reading of Duffin’s suggests how it is a landscape that both obscures and celebrates its imperial inheritances.

One place to begin might be with the diner’s star attraction: the donut. For much of the twentieth century, humanitarian organizations such as the Salvation Army, and later the American Red Cross, have leveraged the humble donut in service of US war-making projects overseas. In 1917, for example, the Salvation Army dispatched four members of its all-women volunteer force to a camp near the trenches in Eastern France. As the story is commonly told, two of the volunteers, Margaret Sheldon and Helen Purviance, started baking donuts to “remind the men of home” (Boissoneault). The “Donut Lassies,” as Sheldon and Purviance eventually became known, proved so popular amongst rank-and-file soldiers that their side baking project quickly took on a life of its own. A “day’s work,” according to Purviance, consisted of baking and serving “2,500 doughnuts, eight dozen cupcakes, fifty pies, 800 pan cakes, and 255 gallons of cocoa” (qtd. in Boissoneault). Their success at improving soldier morale in the trenches ensured that mobile donut-making operations would continue to play a central support role in future US conflicts. The American Red Cross established mobile brigades of “Donut Dollies” during the Second World War, as well as the Korean “police action” that followed (Kim; Nisa).<sup>3</sup> Donut Dollies were also a fixture on US military bases in occupied South Vietnam, although they were no longer officially required to serve donuts, coffee, or other pastries. Instead, as Heather Marie Stur notes, they staffed welfare and recreation centres, carried out mobile runs to frontline firebases, conversed with soldiers, and organized activities for them, which ran the gamut from fashion shows to games nights (76-77). They were meant to embody the “girl next door” for US soldiers, and in so doing, serve as a living reminder of the wholesome American suburban values that were supposedly threatened by the forces of global communism (67-68).

Given that the Donut Dollies were largely white, college-educated, and middle-class, they invariably contrasted sharply with the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and other Southeast Asian women who were recruited by US war managers to perform more everyday forms of domestic work, including cleaning, cooking, and various forms of relation-making, for soldiers in camptowns across the war zone. On occasion, Southeast Asian domestics even cleaned and did laundry for the Donut Dollies themselves, thereby reproducing longer-standing racial hierarchies of social reproductive work (Stur 75). When each brigade of Donut Dollies returned to America, they were generally celebrated by domestic publics for their selfless volunteer service in Vietnam. The Vietnamese and Cambodian women who performed similar kinds of reproductive labour for US soldiers, in contrast, have largely been forgotten in mainstream accounts of the war.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the local counterinsurgents, collaborators, proxies, and fixers that the US relied on to wage race war amongst the South Vietnamese people, Vietnamese and Cambodian domestics were less likely to have been rewarded for their imperial service with eventual refugee passage to Turtle Island (Attewell and Attewell forthcoming).

Indeed, existing research suggests that the first wave of Cambodian refugees to arrive in southern California likely had different ethnic and class backgrounds from their countrywomen who crossed the border to work for the US military-industrial complex in war-torn Vietnam. This is especially true of the Cambodian pioneers in the southern California donut industry, who, according to Aihwa Ong, were predominantly *Sino-Cambodian* and not, as one of Ong's interviewees delicately put it, "natural Cambodians" (243). Largely educated and mobile, Sino-Cambodians were "perhaps the best able to take advantage of the American economic scene" (241), leveraging transnational kin networks of capital circulation, family labour, and micro-finance to build what Ong names as an "*empire* within the ethnic labor niche" (245, emphasis ours). Even the infamous donut emperor himself, Ted Ngoy, was not a "poor boy from a poor family," as he is often portrayed in media profiles, but rather, according to Ong, "a Sino-Cambodian, one of the old Phnom Penh social and economic elite who survived the Pol Pot slaughter" (241).

But even if the first Cambodian donut entrepreneurs might not have endured the gendered and racialized violences of military occupation in their pre-refugee lives, their transpacific passage would have brought them into entanglement with a distinct, if related, mode of imperial power. When Ngoy arrived in southern California in 1975, the broader region was in the process of being transformed by the forces of a globalizing racial capitalism. The global economic recession of the mid-1970s hit California particularly hard, resulting in widespread deindustrialization and, by extension, rising unemployment across the state. This, in turn, set the stage for a number of structural transformations in California's geographical political economy. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, for example, famously locates the origins of California's prison-industrial complex in this mid-1970s moment. In *Golden Gulag* and elsewhere, Gilmore tracks how California organized and executed a massive prison-building and -filling scheme, as a way of solving a number of crises both catalyzed and exacerbated by the intensifying recession. But as Juan De Lara has also recently shown, the surpluses in land, finance capital, state capacity, and racialized labour that fuelled California's thirty-year prison-building boom also served as the building blocks for an emergent logistics regime. "[T]he same global economic changes that triggered capital flight away from Los Angeles and other cities in the United States," De Lara argues, "provided economic opportunities for local private and public leaders to invest in transpacific trade corridors," thereby setting the stage for a "new spatial politics that culminated in a regional development regime centered on logistics" (37). As the twentieth century transitioned into the twenty-first, this new logistics regime would make southern California—and in particular, the so-called Inland Empire—into one of the primary goods distribution hubs, connecting the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles to consumers across the state, as well as throughout the rest of the US.

This expanding logistics infrastructure undoubtedly served as a key spatial backbone for the various Cambodian donut empires that came to dominate southern California from the 1980s onwards. To be sure, donuts and freeways have always gone hand in hand. In a 2003 issue of *Los Angeles Magazine*, Patric Kuh writes that the city "offers the perfect landscape for the donut shop." "Another block," he quips, "another freeway exit, another donut shop" (63). This long-standing proximity between donut shops,

strip malls, gas stations, major thoroughfares, and freeway exits—all very much defining characteristics of southern California’s entrenched car culture—unsurprisingly went on to shape the locational decisions made by the emerging cohort of Cambodian donut entrepreneurs (Gu). But one might also argue that the eighteen- to twenty-hour workdays that came to organize the lives of Cambodian donut shop franchisees were, by necessity, synchronized with the “killing rhythms” of transpacific supply chain capitalism (Fanon; Wesley Attewell, “Just-In-Time imperialism” and “The Lifelines of Empire”).<sup>5</sup> Much like the Vietnamese, South Korean, and Filipinx nationals who worked ten- to twelve-hour shifts along military supply chains during the Vietnam War, Cambodian donut entrepreneurs found it necessary to hyper-exploit themselves, their kin, and their extended family networks in order to make ends meet. When the Los Angeles-based author Alex Espinoza famously described the strip mall—with its Mexican restaurants, Thai massage parlors, Korean liquor stores, Filipino *turo-turo* joints, and Cambodian donut shops—as “so Inland Empire,” he was explicitly flagging its capacity to serve as a quintessential space of interethnic transaction and contact (qtd. in Tongson 140). But as Karen Tongson reminds us, strip malls can also be understood as “monument[s] to the legacies of exile and interethnic conflicts wrought by imperialism” (140). Building on Tongson, we argue that the Cambodian donut shop therefore remains a useful space for better understanding how imperialism and racial capitalism continue to be felt as an inheritance by subsequent generations of refugee households, both in California and elsewhere.

At first blush, Vancouver seems to exist a world away from globalizing southern California. But even if Vancouver lacks a robust highway system or a clearly defined exurban logistics hinterland that could stand in effectively for the Inland Empire, Duffin’s very location at the intersection of Knight Street and 41st Avenue is immensely suggestive of how the broader metropolitan region is unevenly integrated into the global circuits of supply chain capitalism. As a designated truck route, the Clark Drive-Knight Street corridor is perhaps one of the key economic backbones of Vancouver (“Truck Route Maps”). Trucks loaded up with consumer goods and raw materials from cargo ships docked at the Port of Vancouver travel south down Clark and Knight, passing Duffin’s en route to the suburban markets

of Richmond, Delta, Surrey, White Rock, and Langley. While the “exhaust and roadway-debris dusted windows of Duffin’s Donuts look out on one of the busiest trucking route intersections in the city,” the parking lot is not designed to accommodate your average eighteen-wheeler (Haltiwanger). Certain speculative *Yelp* reviews notwithstanding, it is for this reason difficult to ascertain whether truck drivers actually make up a significant proportion of Duffin’s regular clientele. Yet, this ambiguity has not prevented Duffin’s from being known and celebrated by local food writers and bloggers for its distinctive “truck-stop vibes.” Given the cargo truck’s enduring centrality to the expanded reproduction of racial capitalist relations, both at home and abroad, we therefore want to conclude our paper by asking, What political horizons are opened up by rescaling Duffin’s from the crossroads of East Vancouver to a crossroads of transpacific empire? Or, to put it differently, what are the material stakes of trying to understand Duffin’s in relation to both the Cambodian donut empires of southern California and the war zones of the decolonizing Pacific?



**Figure 3.** The Knight Street and 41st Avenue intersection where Duffin’s is located. (Photo taken by Danielle Wong).



### **Donut Politics in Afterwar Vancouver**

To turn to taste in the time of afterwar is to linger in its *aftertastes*. Minh-ha Pham describes racial aftertastes as aversions to racial alterities produced under inequitable global labour conditions in the fashion industry that are not easily consumable, “either because their racial flavor is perceived as too strong or because their racial traces linger so long that they exceed the terms and limits of racial palatability” (18). Aftertastes therefore mark the boundaries of racial tolerance and reveal anxieties about figures and features of racial otherness, such as the model minority, that are “encroaching on places” where they do not belong (Pham 18-19). While aversion is not the dominant affect elicited by Duffin’s<sup>6</sup>—at least not in journalistic coverage or foodie narratives—its aftertastes emerge as unfaithful refugee memories in the production and consumption of food that is gastronomically very palatable, but that exceed linear chronologies of migration, mobility, and assimilation. “Here” and “there” are blurred by its menu, spatial aesthetics, and its location in Vancouver. Its nostalgia, after all, indexes the ongoing histories of transpacific imperialism, but also entails the sensorial and subjective pleasures of inauthentic racial contact—contact that does not fit neatly into Canada’s story of inclusion and tolerance. Reading Duffin’s as a landscape entails an orifical reading, which, as Kyla Wazana Tompkins suggests, allows us to see a flexible relation between the self and the social world, and to “recognize our bodies as vulnerable to each other in ways that are terrible—that is, full of terror—and, at other times, politically productive” (3).

Bringing together the routes of transpacific empire and the site of Vancouver as a settler frontier, and rerouting imagined immigrant palates through multiple diasporas produced by imperialism and settler colonialism, Duffin’s is a site that *lingers* temporally and spatially beyond liberal multicultural framings of the restaurant. The diner, like its customers, loiters not just in the sense that it persists in the face of rapid real-estate development, but also in the sense that the story of linear progression from refugee labour to neoliberal success is disrupted, suspended. The 24/7 time of racial capitalism, made material and visible in the constant production and availability of the donut shop, marks the limits of neoliberalism’s promises of seamless capitalist expansion and productivity.

Challenging accounts that figure the refugee-owned donut shop as a testament to Canadian multiculturalism, we show instead that Duffin's can be better understood as a thirty-year project of "making do" under ongoing conditions of transpacific imperialism and militarized refuge. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu concludes her recent book *Experiments in Skin* with a powerful meditation on the concrete political stakes of "making do" in a time of afterwar. Tu asks, "[c]an we find our way out of the convoluted histories and complex geographies that have come to 'rest' in all of us?" (164). While this is, in some sense, what the historian Monica Kim might call an "impossible question," Tu poses it in hopes of encouraging us to peer into the traumatic voids of life after war, and, by extension, "to challenge what we see, rethink what we've refused to see, and to find in the chasm not just our losses but our potential" (Ibid). This is not to suggest that Duffin's, and the labour that goes into building it, is wholly defined by the violences of (after)war, the traumas of the refugee passage, and the everyday indignities of economic precarity in gentrifying Vancouver. But it is, following scholars such as Vinh Nguyen, Y-Dang Troeung, Lina Chhun, Eric Tang, and Long Bui, to insist that for refugee households living on Turtle Island, repair and rehabilitation do not inevitably or cleanly *follow* war. As one of the many "fragmented and unsteady 'collateral afterworlds' of empire," Duffin's serves as another reminder of how rehabilitation and war-making are invariably "braided together" in the contemporary urban landscape (Crane).

On the surface, at least, there doesn't seem to be anything intrinsically revolutionary or radical about a donut shop like Duffin's. There is no easy through line linking a refugee politics of "making do" to some of the more urgent forms of decolonial or abolitionist organizing that have come to captivate public discourse in our new pandemic normal. Indeed, one might argue that refugee and immigrant "making do" actually has the unintended effect of reproducing the violence and dispossession intrinsic to ongoing settler multiculturalism in Canadian cities like Vancouver. But we want to conclude with Eric Tang's reminder that "survival can itself be a form of political resistance, one that does not easily submit to a premature resolution of the conflict" (63). From a certain perspective, refugee labour at the corner of Knight Street and 41st Avenue has produced an "abundant landscape:" a lush aftermath of deep-fried carbohydrates and other ethnic delights

that has also come to double as a dynamic crossroads of intercultural and interclass encounter (Crane). After thirty years of “making do” in a context of protracted urban warfare, it is now Chhuon, Sim, their children, and their extended family “who do the reparative labor of making life livable” for so many other individuals and households that now call the “stretched and lonely” inner suburbs of Vancouver their home (Crane).

About one hour into Habib’s camp-out at Duffin’s, she notices a “lone man, chat[ting] animatedly into his earphone speaker, swinging his legs in his seat.” Soon after, the man finishes his phone call and asks to join Habib at her table. His name, the reader learns, is Juan. A “construction worker who moved to Vancouver two years ago from Guatemala,” Juan tells Habib that “most of his coworkers only speak Spanish, so it’s difficult for him to practice English.” Habib notes that Juan “likes Vancouver, but he’s lonely.”

Reflecting back on this encounter, Habib is struck by how Duffin’s enables her to bear “witness to the loneliness of a man away from his home.” But Juan’s nighttime presence in Duffin’s also surely testifies to East Vancouver’s entanglements with the overseas fields of violence and primitive accumulation that have always been the hallmark of an extractive and asset-stripping racial capitalism (Woods). Vancouver-based mining companies such as Goldcorp, Tahoe Resources, and Pan American Silver are all directly complicit in the violent displacement and dispossession of Indigenous Guatemalans from their ancestral territories (Santizo). Juan, in turn, is undoubtedly one of the many Guatemalans who have migrated to the Greater Vancouver Regional District on temporary visas and now work in fields, kitchens, construction sites, factories, and warehouses, carrying out the dirty and precarious labour that Vancouverites no longer wish to do (Sasagawa). As a construction worker, Juan has played a small, but absolutely essential role in transforming Vancouver’s urban landscape over the past two years. In doing so, he has served as grist for the mill that is rampant real estate speculation across the city, which continues to exacerbate the ongoing housing crisis to even more unsustainable levels. It is also likely that Juan arrived in Vancouver through a logistical network of brokers and labour recruiters that spans both Guatemala and Canada and that profited handsomely from his 5,314-kilometre journey (Stueck).<sup>7</sup>

Juan's experiences in the city speak to how urban development here is fuelled by the trauma and violence of poverty and forced displacement over there. But like Chhuon and Sim before him, Juan has turned to migration as a way of building a better life, certainly for himself, and maybe for his family back home as well. Perhaps, too, it is Duffin's that helps Juan survive and carry on this life, offering him a space where he can eat foods like pupusas that approximate the taste of home; a space of connection, where (with the help of Google Translate) he can practise his English with a random stranger, and where it is perhaps possible for *him* to "make do" under the unrelenting conditions of racial capitalism and labour exploitation. When understood in this way, Duffin's might open up "new ways of conceptualizing refugee subjects and their relationalities that extend beyond the parameters of refugeeness, generating connections to past, present, and future forms of displacement" (Nguyen 110-11). It is precisely by remaining attentive to this enduring condition of "refugeetude" that we might begin to move towards a decolonial and abolitionist politics of refugee life in Vancouver.

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## NOTES

- 1 Lily Cho argues that the small-town Chinese restaurant in Canada, which Duffin's approximates, "poses a problem for a modernity that wants to move on without it" (7) because it cannot be folded within the "new narratives of multiculturalism" but is "too new to be a proper object of wistful histories" (5-6).
- 2 For a more in-depth discussion of these concepts, see Attewell's "Just-in-Time Imperialism," Nebolon's "Life Given Straight from the Heart," and Espiritu's *Body Counts*.
- 3 For the Korean War as a "police action," see Kim's *The Interrogation Rooms* and Nisa's "Capturing the Forgotten War."
- 4 See, however, Nadine Attewell and Wesley Attewell's "Between Asia and Empire" and "Sweat[ing] for their pay," forthcoming.
- 5 In the conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon argues that decolonizing nations need to "stop talking about output, and intensification, and the rhythm of work." Postcolonial development, he continues, must consider the "very concrete question of not dragging men towards mutilation, of not imposing upon the brain rhythms which quickly obliterate it and wreck it." Stefano Harney's article "Hapticality in the Undercommons," builds on these ideas to critique the "killing rhythms" of globalization. Attewell's "The

- Lifelines of Empire,” in turn, places Fanon and Harney in conversation to interrogate the “killing rhythms” of just-in-time imperialism during the Vietnam War.
- 6 Of course, there are blogs and *Google* and *Yelp* reviews that include classist and racist comments about the restaurant’s clientele and the restaurant itself.
  - 7 For more in-depth reporting on the transnational infrastructures of temporary labour migration that link Canada and Guatemala, see Stueck’s “Ten Stranded Guatemalan Women.”

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# The Refugee, Recently

Souvankham Thammavongsa,  
Philip Huynh, and The Aesthetics  
of Heterogeneity

To properly consider the afterlives of the Vietnam War one first needs to identify the types of lives created by the war and then examine how these lives are represented. Traditionally, the two groups of people that have garnered the most visibility in English-language writing are the American veterans who fought in the war and the Vietnamese refugees that the war produced. Initially, during the first two decades that followed the American involvement in Vietnam, veterans' voices were privileged through a series of stories where American soldiers expressed their lost innocence and idealism, serving as symbols of a traumatic war that shook the image of American exceptionalism. While fewer in number, Southeast Asian American refugee narratives played a complementary ideological role, as stories of refugee resettlement reformed the battered American exceptionalist myth with narratives of refugee "success" in the new country turning a "bad war" back into a "good war."

Most of these early stories of refugee "success" were cowritten with, or paraphrased by, white American writers, where the refugee voice provided factual information, but the aesthetic style of refugee expression was heavily mediated. This formal mediation persisted until the mid-1990s, when Southeast Asian refugees began to have the necessary institutional and linguistic access to produce their own English-language texts.<sup>1</sup> Particularly during the past ten to fifteen years, the figure of the refugee has been embraced as a generative authorial position, and there has been a marked



increase in the variety of stories generated about refugee life. These newer literary forays have recognized refugee literature as something that can offer unique artistic value, recoding the refugee as something other than an object temporarily produced by geopolitical forces. Providing a fuller presentation of refugee lives, the refugee position has provided refugee artists a complex perspective that can critique national myths that have been produced around them while explaining their continuing presence in new lands. This *style* of writing by and about refugees has emphasized the difficulties, racisms, and broken promises involved with refugee life, while disrupting the image of refugees as perpetually tired, faceless, docile masses. This reinvention of refugee aesthetics acknowledges that the Vietnam War was not just about “Vietnam,” and instead involved a radical disruption and reorganization of Southeast Asia as the fighting spread across national boundaries. Accordingly, refugees from the Vietnam War are not solely Vietnamese, but include a number of Lao, Cambodian, Hmong, and ethnic Chinese (“Hoa”) migrants whose lives were irrevocably altered by the war’s effects.

This heterogeneity is particularly useful to think about when considering Southeast Asian Canadian refugees and refugee aesthetics in Canada. In contradistinction to the American example, refugees in Canada became important figures not because of their ability to redeem their new country’s public wartime efforts, but rather because the timely introduction of their presumed “otherness” was useful in the long struggle to fashion a Canadian national identity distinct from its US and European imperial cousins. Indeed, the arrival of the Southeast Asian refugees coincided with the crystallization and formalization of the Canadian multicultural project, a project of a national plurality that distracted from persistent French/English divisions and the enduring settler-colonial project. Refugees became emblematic of Canadian efforts to find a unique narrative about the country where, as Vinh Nguyen explains, the nation-state itself could be celebrated “through the gift of refuge,” and refugee narratives formed tangible expressions of Canada’s “liberalism, diversity, and kindness” (2). Transforming personal refugee narratives into grand narratives was part of positing a personality for the state itself, turning refugee experience from something common to a few to something shared by all.

Contemporary Canadian refugee writers, then, create their own artworks by negotiating a refugee aesthetic that already exists, and one that provides great emotional resonance for the country—an expression of identity that goes beyond their own experiences. By and large, patterns of reading refugee production, as well as the taste for stories of refugee experience, have been created, shaped, and/or controlled by non-refugees, where the types of knowledge created about refugees involve, and at times centre, those who perceived themselves as hosts.<sup>2</sup> While oftentimes well meaning, the imperative to persuade readers to read refugee lives sympathetically is a rhetorical force that limits the ways that refugee writing is consumed. Many state and charitable organizations use one-dimensional narratives of sympathy and rescue in order to procure desperately needed funds to resettle and assimilate refugees into a “safer” new space, but this aesthetic structure can have the effect of erasing the complexity of refugee lives and leaves little space for creativity.

By contrast, in this article I will be identifying uses, techniques, and goals of Southeast Asian Canadian refugee aesthetics in the present moment. Looking specifically at Souvankham Thammavongsa’s *How to Pronounce Knife* and Philip Huynh’s *The Forbidden Purple City*, I show how each piece leverages what Ming Tiampo has called the “aesthetics of heterogeneity” (195) to articulate how refugee collectivities exist beyond state designations. While Thammavongsa and Huynh write from and about different Southeast Asian refugee communities, as well as belong to differing immigrant “waves,” both of their texts are similar in how they present a plurality of voices, with various interests, perspectives, and drives. This approach contrasts with the singularity that has positioned Southeast Asian Canadian refugees as the stable exemplary subject necessary to the formation of Canadian national mythologies. Tiampo uses the terms pluralism and heterogeneity interchangeably, staking her argument more to pluralism, where the visual artists that she examines reach outside of their own ethnic groups to make larger claims on the variegated structures of Canadian nationhood. Building off this insight, I diverge slightly by proposing that a specifically contemporary aesthetic of *heterogeneity* intervenes in the imagining of the Canadian social milieu, where refugee authors illustrate the different structures of knowledge created by refugee lives without having to represent

and give up to the reader exactly what the refugee life is. This technique creates room for the expression of a variety of details about refugee life (humour, sexuality, and so forth) that are oftentimes omitted from refugee writing, while indexing new refugee subject positions and presenting the variety of social spaces that these subjects move through.

Offering a number of affective appeals and formal perspectives, an aesthetic of heterogeneity can both engage and disrupt audience expectations, highlighting the processes and varieties of experiences that comprise refugee life while remaining embedded in the organizing social structures that reach across differing refugee ethnic groups. *Class differences*, not just hardship, can be expressed through this aesthetics of heterogeneity, where refugee protagonists aspire to move up in class, feel the effects of unequal class horizons, and/or deal with their own class advancement and the complications that this evokes within their refugee and/or ethnic communities. By following these kinds of movements, this aesthetic strategy is unique in its flexibility to trace the changes and conflicts that occur among immigration waves, generations, and gender positions.

### **From Multiculturalism to Heterogeneity**

Currently, one of the reasons that Canadian refugee literature is considered marketable is because it can offer the details necessary for others to feel as if they “understand” ethnic populations, while its very production confirms Canada’s role in cultivating successful immigrant communities. Refugee narratives tend to traffic in the intimate, explaining how refugee subjects have come to inhabit the new country, which provides the reader with a sense of a real-time narration of a constantly developing nation. Historically, Canada has conceptualized the role of cultural diversity and refugees at similar moments, as the ideology of Canadian multiculturalism was created as the Canadian populace was viewing images of Southeast Asian refugees on their television sets and shortly thereafter met this new immigrant population in person.<sup>3</sup> In his essential history of Vietnamese Canadian refugee aesthetics, Vinh Nguyen identifies how “the arrival of post-war Vietnamese refugees to Canada was bookended by two major legislative changes that significantly changed the nation: the Immigration Act of 1976 and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988” (3). The former

Act inaugurated the legal class of “refugees” in Canadian immigration legislation, which meant that Vietnamese refugees “entered Canadian society—physically as well as culturally—at a conjecture when state directives recognized the category of ‘the refugee’ as a legitimate course of entry into the country and the value of ‘cultural diversity’ to its conception of nationality” (3). Cultural diversity was a way of understanding Canadian national identity, a strategy that Smaro Kamboureli and others have argued was an attempt to politically outflank or divert attention from the deep cultural divides and mistrust sown between Anglo and French Canada (Kamboureli 82). Refugees, then, become key figures in an aspirational structure of dissimilarity that exists outside of a binary cultural imagination. Their relative malleability to narrative positioning, due to their dire material circumstances and linguistic marginalization, meant that this first wave of refugees was a group that allowed Canadian multiculturalism to be developed by the state and state interests without having to be concerned with how the refugees themselves “spoke back.”

This fraught relationship between political directives and immigrants’ artistic voices is not lost on Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, the editors of the remarkably durable *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*. This 1990 edited collection examines the manner that ethnic Canadian writers had to enter the Canadian literary conversation, bringing attention to “not only how multiculturalism is *lived* but how it is *written into* Canadian life” (6). This book pairs selections from various “multicultural Canadian novelists” literary work with interviews conducted by interlocutors whom the editors posit as “similarly diverse” (3). While acknowledging the incompleteness of any project that seeks to engage the expansive category of Canadian multicultural fictions, they are clear that they chose the term multicultural because it avoids the term “ethnic,” which they deem “always has to do with the social positioning of the ‘other,’ and is thus never free of relations of power and value. Yet these are the very issues raised by the structure of this book, as well as by the individual voices within it” (2). In this moment, then, it is noteworthy that, for the editors, taking a multicultural approach made it possible to include relations of “power and value,” for, as opposed to the coded term “ethnic,” multiculturalism wears these relations on its sleeve. This serves not only as

a useful reminder of the potential force that multicultural rhetoric carried as an academic and aesthetic perspective, but also how this ethos was transformed when enacted through official political channels.

Looking back, it is interesting that none of the literary authors selected for this collection are refugees. In fact, the one refugee who does make an appearance in the book is interviewer and (now retired) professor of English at the University of Toronto, Sam Solecki. With characteristic brashness, the first lines spoken by Solecki in this interview are, “I spent nearly the first ten years of my life living in a camp for Polish refugees in the English midlands, and one of the most magical of English words for all of us was ‘America.’ . . . Canada, on the other hand, was only mentioned if you had relatives there or as an adjunct to the United States” (26). Here Solecki draws upon his own refugee history to illustrate how unknown, remote, and, frankly, provincial Canada seemed to those living in the rest of the world—suggesting that following the Second World War, Canada had not achieved a reputation as a global ambassador, and thus had little draw for immigrant groups. In contrast to the editors of the collection, he expresses a forthright distaste for multiculturalism, stating,

I’ve always thought much of this is just political, a jockeying among parties for influence and votes with various groups. In fact, my own response to official multiculturalism is that it is ultimately divisive, in that it creates nearly countless small interest groups which see the country primarily if not exclusively from their own limited ethnic perspective. (29)

Solecki’s rather sour take on “official multiculturalism” is an occasion to register the well-earned cynicism that many refugee and immigrant groups have about such concepts, where the politicization of ideas like “culture” or “ethnicity” can be the root cause of why they had to flee. For them, these words and ideas are not something to be trifled with, particularly as politicians are eager to put them to use for their own needs and agendas. And indeed, many of the authors in the collection, like Dionne Brand, express concern or outright disdain for what is seen as the governmental management of cultures under the guise of multiculturalism. Here, Solecki’s take on Canadian multicultural “divisiveness” is similar to Hutcheon and Richmond’s concern with the position of the “ethnic,” where the diversity of otherness is either reduced or splintered into singularity.

Yet I would propose that when various populations are forged into a collective unit through common experiences, aesthetics can model a less “divisive” approach to heterogeneity when the litany of experiences are reimagined, catalogued, and linked through artistic form. An instructive explanation about how ethnic subject positions can be refashioned, aesthetically, can be found in Ming Tiampo’s 2008 book chapter “Ken Lum, Paul Wong, and the Aesthetics of Pluralism.” In this piece she shows how the two Chinese Canadian multimedia artists, Lum and Wong, “resist the temptation to focus on only Chinese-Canadian issues without ignoring them” and instead, “fragment the fiction of a unified, essential identity for any of us in the diverse, fractured nation” (181). Through the juxtaposition of rhetorical forms and artistic styles, these artists looked to unsettle the conventional ways that Asian Canadian art was *received*, with Wong using “rhetorical flair . . . characterized by fragments, overlap, and multiples” (196). Creating a cacophony of Asian Canadian voices in their work, Lum’s and Wong’s artistic styles made the everyday strange, striving to disrupt audiences’ ability to achieve a one-to-one focalization with Asian Canadian figures. Arguing that official Canadian multiculturalism constructs a series of binaries (like minority/majority, self/other) in ways that perpetuate the existence of an “invisible” centre, Tiampo sees Lum’s and Wong’s aesthetics of pluralism as fragmenting the singularity of the Asian Canadian story by emphasizing the multiple forces that these subjects consistently negotiate. Their aesthetics of pluralism, then, is a radical project, which seeks to “resist the hegemonic voice by undermining its authority and drowning it out with a cacophony of . . . Canada’s new reality” (197), disrupting the singular and knowable by highlighting the play of multiplicity.

While undoubtably important in their iconoclasm, by design it is difficult to relate the aesthetic interventions made in Lum’s and Wong’s gallery pieces back into the realm of everyday life. They mark and call out the collective rhetorical frameworks that Asian Canadians and Asian Canadian artists must work through, but their turn to radical fragmentation does not include an articulation of how Asian Canadians can move forward as a collective body. Lisa Lowe’s landmark 1991 essay, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity,” by contrast, takes on the challenge of moulding aesthetic or theoretical formations into a trenchant political and identifiable force that

engages a diverse subjecthood. Published just a year after Hutcheon and Richmond's collection, Lowe analyzes the emergence and use of the Asian American identity, documenting how different waves, ethnicities, and classes comprise Asian America. Aware of Asian American politics and the influx of Southeast Asian American refugees who were settling into the Asian American population during this period, she shows how the composition of Asian America had changed drastically since the civil-rights-era establishment of the term, necessitating a thorough rethinking of its original purview. In acknowledging that Asian Americans are a radically diverse group of people, Lowe does not dismiss the category, but instead concludes that there is an advantage to considering "our unequal circumstances and histories as being related" (30). Lowe argues that because there are "risks of a cultural politics that relies upon the construction of sameness and the exclusion of differences" (28), understanding that Asian Americans are heterogeneous is an important step in denaturalizing the Asian American identity and is a starting point to strategically disrupting white hegemony.

In this light, heterogeneity names a self-referential linking of social diversity that evacuates the centre, and the aestheticization of these links works to imagine, project, and suture a web, rather than conceiving of "the multiple" as scattered identarian fragments. This decentred web provides important flexibility to take on and interact with "newer" populations as different immigrant or refugee groups arrive. As Anita Mannur and Allan Punzalan Isaac argue, Lowe's essay clears "a place for diaspora and transnationalism" (324) in Asian American studies, and I would add that it also provides a different temporality for Asian American studies since it recognizes future Asian Americans to come. Mannur and Isaac note that Lowe's "work emphasizes *the process* through which subjects become and inhabit this position of difference to reveal the operations of American history and culture" (326, emphasis mine). Globalizing and historicizing these movements resonates with Christopher Lee and Christine Kim's call for Asian Canadian literature and critique to reframe Canada "through its relation to transnational movements rather than understood in isolation" (11). In seeking to move discussions of Canadian transnationalism away from solely European origins, Lee and Kim push for envisioning an *entirely* heterogeneous imagination of the Canadian subject, rather than arguing

that Canadian transnationalism should “include” the experiences of people of Asian descent.

### **Heterogeneous Style**

Revisiting Tiampo, Lowe, and Lee and Kim in the present moment helps in understanding the heterogeneous qualities of refugee literature as something coalitional, and the aesthetic approaches used in this work highlight the *processes* involved in positioning the Southeast Asian refugee population in, and through, the Canadian imagination. Highlighting the power and values involved in positioning “the other,” the aesthetics of heterogeneity hearkens back to the promise that Richmond and Hutcheon once held for the term multiculturalism. The difference in this instance, though, is that instead of highlighting difference through a diversity of authors, an aesthetics of heterogeneity highlights how diverse authors also present literary *styles* that advance, identify, and craft different futures. Souvankham Thammavongsa’s 2020 Giller Prize win signals a newly emerging recognition of refugee literature, standing as the first time that a refugee author and/or Southeast Asian Canadian has won the top Canadian literary award.<sup>4</sup> While there are certainly enduring questions about yoking literary achievement to awards, this event nevertheless does provide a useful benchmark to track the place of refugee authors within the Canadian literary landscape. But at the same time, it necessitates investigating how and why the work of Thammavongsa resonates in the current moment, particularly in regard to her distinctive literary style. A series of short stories, Thammavongsa’s *How to Pronounce Knife* portrays a wide variety of Lao migrant lives, presenting a range of characters, emotions, and class positions, in contrast to more conventional, singularly focused tales of refugee redemption. While the visual artists Lum and Wong used plurality to estrange viewers and disrupt their expectations of immigrant life, Thammavongsa uses a heterogeneous approach to offer the reader what appears, at first glance, as an “authentic” and intimate view of various Lao refugee lives. However, what is unique about her literary style is how she mixes this intimacy with a measured recalcitrance that holds back the easy rapport typical of refugee authors who seek sympathy from their audiences.



As Thammavongsa's stories are told in first or third person through spare unembellished prose, these stories *seem* transparent, but it is important to recognize the bareness of this language as strategic; for Thammavongsa is an accomplished poet—well skilled at spinning linguistic yarns that enrich and complicate the reading experience. Thammavongsa notes that the Lao language itself is direct and literal (“How to Pronounce”), but when her stories' narrators take on this transparent voice, they do so in service of creating distance between the narrator and the reader, while producing a sense of detachment from the characters as well. Fashioning this distance limits the ethnographic readings that often follow Asian Canadian authors, where the narrative content gives the impression that an ethnic community can be “known.” Instead, this distance amongst the narrators, characters, and readers creates the impression that the intimate views provided are incomplete and provisional. This is used to a particularly brutal effect in the short story “The Bus Driver,” where the lead character in question, Jai, loses his wife to the economically manipulative and naked sexual aggression of an affluent Canadian man. But instead of developing a sense of sympathy for Jai, the narrator coldly refers to him only as “the school bus driver,” (109-15) conveying that Jai is losing even his own name along with his wife.<sup>5</sup> The narrator's detachment reinforces the diminished place accorded to Jai in the Canadian landscape, mediating, forcefully, the reader's ability to pity Jai—the outcome often sought in conventional presentations of refugees and refugee life.

Thammavongsa's stories can be surprising in their frank portrayals of aging, sexuality, anger, brutality, humour, and detachment. And the characters themselves form a heterogeneous assortment of personalities and identities. The reader only glimpses each character through short encounters, but the variety of emotions and perspectives presented suggests that each character is multidimensional and can develop, even as the reader is afforded only a partial snapshot of their life. This reading contrasts with the conclusion of Jenny Bhatt's otherwise insightful review of the book in *The Washington Post*, where she suggests that “the overall impression . . . is of a collection that aims to educate the white reader about how various inequalities play out for minorities rather than to render fully faceted immigrant experiences.” One could certainly question the presumptive

burden of a “fully faceted” literary rendering of any population’s experience (especially through the short-story genre), but what is more interesting about this characterization of the book is that the racial conflicts and experiences presented in the stories are read as “education” rather than understood as an artistic presentation. Bhatt’s conclusion reaches broadly, framing this literary encounter as a “dialogue” between white readers and “minorities,” rather than a carefully staged expression of Lao community members that engages any number of readerly collectives. I would propose, instead, that the racial conflicts and so-called micro-aggressions that populate the stories can be read as a *unifying* part of Lao refugee experiences—experiences that Thammavongsa otherwise presents as remarkably diverse. So instead of educating “the white reader,” the aesthetics of heterogeneity provides the occasion to register the range of the Lao refugee population, and the *patterns* that underlie these refugee lives, including the interwoven forces of racism, intergenerational conflict, and, in many cases, poverty.

These patterns also offer the opportunity to consider what is not included in these stories. For one, it is not clear in all of the stories if these characters are, in fact, refugees—as refuge itself is only referred to on occasion and the *event* of refuge does not overtly serve as the dramatic core of any of these portraits. In its place Thammavongsa enumerates a series of jobs, linguistic difficulties, and small apartments that detail a racialized class position consistent with, but not exclusive to, refugee life. Further, while she is recognized as a Canadian author, Thammavongsa does not index the natural or social Canadian landscape much in the book. While there are a small handful of asides to locations like Canadian Tire, donut shops, or snowy climes, it is difficult to discern the exact geographic setting of these stories. It is clear that the stories unfold in “new lands” and involve the immigrant experience, but if the stories are set in the US or Canada, in Vancouver or Toronto, or in a small town or large city, it seems to matter little to the characters, outwardly, at least. Another notable absence is the Vietnam War (and its spread into Laos) itself, as it is also rarely mentioned outright but instead lurks in the background of these multiple Lao immigrant characters who are, presumably, refugees or the descendants of those who sought refuge. Instead of detailed accounts of the war, the past emerges through altered family dynamics—as a daughter, husband, mother, or other family

member is always present, holding a different social role in the new land, troubling the lead characters as they attempt to move through the North American milieu. In this light, it is the intergenerational, gendered, and socio-economic positions that provide much of the setting, whereas the exact locale of each story is less certain.

This uncertainty is intentional and should be read as an aspect of her literary style, for Thammavongsa herself explains that “[t]he thing about simple language is that it can be very porous. It leaves so much room for the reader to do the work. Often in my stories I don’t refer to any specific place, I just use the word ‘here.’ The reader has to determine where ‘here’ is. Or else, they are haunted because they don’t know” (“Laughter”). This haunting suggests the presence of something else out there, creating space to acknowledge that there are multiple realms beyond the reach of both the characters and readers. In her stories the reader gets to become familiar with the characters; however, they cannot be sure how to place them or where they are going. Threading the needle between representation and representative, this wide variety of immigrant and/or refugee characters are not limited to, in Thammavongsa’s words, “sad and tragic figures” (“How to Pronounce”)—impressing that there are more kinds of Lao experiences out there, and more to come that exist beyond the book itself. In other words, uncertainty allows Thammavongsa to present a heterogeneity that speaks to the afterlives present in the current moment, and also to the afterlives that will continue to come in the future.

Vietnamese Canadian writer Philip Huynh is another contemporary writer who presents voices from “his” community in a heterogeneous manner. In an interview about his 2019 collection of short stories *The Forbidden Purple City* with local Vancouver paper the *Georgia Straight*, Huynh relates, “The throughline, certainly, of all my stories is the fact that I’m of Vietnamese heritage . . . Vietnam is the prism through which I see the world. But at the same time, I started thinking about just putting together the complexity and diversity of this community writ large” (“Spring Books”). And indeed, in his collection Huynh presents a remarkable range of people, with differing motives, perspectives, and personas: yet they are all linked in his stories through their Vietnameseness and the presence of the refugee experience. While in this respect *The Forbidden Purple City* is similar to Thammavongsa’s

book, Huynh differs greatly in how he depicts the spaces that these immigrants now inhabit and the imaginative relationships that they have with both the new and left-behind lands. Whereas Thammavongsa provides multi-layered portraits of refugees and their interrelationships, in Huynh's book named places, and the social geography of these areas, also play a key role in developing the stories.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the first short story of the book, "The Investment on Dumfries Street," the piece that marked Huynh as an up-and-coming Canadian author. Dumfries Street is a quiet residential street that cuts, mainly, through the Victoria-Fraserview area of suburban Vancouver. The street's setting plays an important role in the story as the large investment house that the protagonist's father buys sits in this "tree-filled neighbourhood" (13), adjacent to the bustling area of East Vancouver where the protagonist and his father rent a cramped one-bedroom apartment near a busy intersection. Despite the apartment and the house being a relatively short distance from each other, less than a five-minute drive, in the story the locations are presented as if they are worlds apart. The apartment is a cramped space overfilled and overflowing with the messiness of working life, whereas the middle-class house seems pristine, a spacious symbol of stability and success. Huynh creates psychological distance between the two locations by having the narrator note that he never even walks by the house on Dumfries, leading him to forget that it is even there. Yet when the protagonist does have an occasion to enter the house, he finds his father's "business partner" Sonny hanging out in the nearly empty building, and discovers that it serves as a place to grow (illegal) marijuana plants in the basement. In this moment the story-world inverts, where the aspirational aura and value held within the house itself is revealed as a shell, deflating the standing of the slick cash-rich Sonny as well, with the protagonist tersely noting,

When I got home, I slammed the door hard but failed to wake up my father. I couldn't forgive him for associating with someone so truly ghetto as Sonny. Sure, my father and I were also poor, but we were different. Sonny, although born in Canada, was ghetto from day one. My father and I were rendered poor by unfortunate geopolitical circumstances. As deluded as my father's aspirations were, at least, I had once thought, he had always set his sights high. But in fact he was risking our liberty to be something as pedestrian as a marijuana farmer. (17)

The narrator's father is presented as naive in his relentless (and ultimately fruitless) pursuit of business opportunities and wealth. Despite working as a short-order cook, he collects the trappings that accompany a Canadian businessman's life, like suits and shoes from Tip Top Tailors, while splashing out for prime rib dinners (that he cannot finish) at The Keg restaurant. Both of these businesses, Tip Top Tailors and The Keg, are Canadian chains that would not be valued by those with elite cultural capital and wealth but serve as durable symbols of middle-class attainment for people across the nation. Like with many immigrants, the ability to acquire these Canadian goods signifies success and, potentially, moving on from the traumatic refugee past and the enduring precarity of subsistence living. Yet in the passage above the narrator cannot wake his father from his "Canadian dream" of immigrant upward mobility, rebuking the belief that one passes from a "ghetto-ness" into a respectable Canadianness through money and commodities alone. In its place the narrator advances a different value system where Canadian-born Sonny is "truly ghetto," suggesting that a generational transformation away from the immigrant to the native-born guarantees little.

The narrator sees his family's struggles and circumstances as something that exists beyond their control, as they were "rendered" poor due to forces much grander than their own actions. That said, there are consequences to the actions and mindsets that one develops along the way. The investment property on Dumfries is ultimately raided by the police, but the narrator's father is never charged as Sonny did not include the father's name on the deed (which was likely a matter of Sonny's conning the father out of his investment). While this story is certainly a rebuke to the blindness and naivety of the father, Huynh makes explicit that this is not just a character study of one rogue personality, but rather that he is taking aim at a refugee cohort who are haunted by the past and perpetuate societal problems because of it. Described as "a typical Vietnamese man of his generation" (11), the father's continual attraction to financial schemes stems from having left behind the potential inheritance of a rubber plantation in Vietnam, and he is haunted by the spectre of this "other life" that he was destined to live. In Huynh's story, though, there is a noticeable lack of sympathy for the father's weary nostalgia, where instead of the refugee's relative poverty being painted as something tragic and perpetually beyond one's control, the lack of social

mobility is expressed as an enduring character flaw that hurts and hinders Vietnamese Canadian refugees as they attempt to move forward.

Through the protagonist's perspective, we glimpse the anger that one generation can hold towards the other. Rather than concluding with the conflicted indebtedness that refugee characters and authors often hold towards the elder generations (who are seen as having risked their lives for their families) the narrator expresses anger towards his father for "risking our liberty," the very spoils that were presumably sought through refuge. The father remains unredeemed and headstrong, with the story ending on the narrator's father's inability to articulate the meaning of the word "contrition." Huynh leaves this ending deliberately vague, where it is unclear if the father is unaware of or unwilling to admit his missteps. Perhaps, though, this is not an either/or question, where the events of the story are meant to mark the limits of a Vietnamese refugee man of his generation, a structure that the narrator is fed up with. Indeed, instead of continuing to attempt to recuperate this refugee ambiguity, the narrator concludes the story by pursuing ambitions of his own, hightailing it down to the US to chase his acting dreams, and never seeing his father again.

This willingness to move and move on is found in many of these stories about refugees, immigrants, and their descendants. This is highlighted through Huynh's explicit foregrounding of geography, location, and social station. Multiple narratives involve immigrants dwelling in cramped basement apartments—one where characters must literally turn themselves sideways to get by one another. However, the stories explore glamorous above-ground worlds as well, like an exclusive private school in Winnipeg, or a downtown Manhattan hotel room that a Vietnamese Canadian lawyer resides in after the wreckage brought on by 9/11. Whether cramped or glamorous, one constant is that these "homes" serve as what Ato Quayson describes as "chronotopes of disaggregation," where there is the sense that the characters are dwelling temporally in these spaces and will move on from this setting. While traditional examples of literary chronotopes of disaggregation include locations of transport, like an airport or train station, in Huynh's stories the home-space itself, which is usually a place where characters take root, instead bears the feel of disaggregation. It is too small, subterranean, and/or full of familial disappointment for the protagonists

to want to stay, so instead the space is presented as something to move on from. Of course, conventionally, refugees are known for their movement, but once in the new land refugees are often portrayed as being stuck. In Thammavongsa's work, perhaps because places are not mapped as directly, the spatial signifiers and social settings seem more stable, whereas in Huynh's stories, the identifiable markers map places so that the characters can engage, move around, and go through them.

This spatial restlessness is also found in Huynh's "The Toad Story," where it is not only the characters who are seen as moving but the landscapes as well, thus challenging the certitude of refugee memory and histories. Returning back to Hội An<sup>6</sup> for the first time since his forced displacement, Diem, an elderly Vietnamese Canadian man, finds himself increasingly disoriented and disappointed by a physical and social climate that does not match the details that coloured his escape from Vietnam. Despite the tragic premise of the story Huynh does not let this piece meander into saccharine, nostalgic reminiscing and pity. Instead, we learn that Diem has worked as a security guard in charge of watching construction sites where modern condos are put up in Vancouver, suggesting that the "new" land also undergoes transformation as much as the "old" one, and that the past is altered wherever one goes. Hội An was mostly spared from destruction during the war, and therefore is unique in offering a view of its colonial antecedents, with the narrator noting, "[t]hese houses were elegant mutts of Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, and even French architecture" (122). But as "mutts" they resist unitary authenticity, and it is implied that they are preserved in ways that exceed their "natural" station, as they were "built in the centuries before the Thu Bồn River silted up and turned this trading post of a city into a museum piece, preserved in the amber sunlight" (122). By emphasizing how the city is now a UNESCO heritage site, the third-person narrator conveys how places from the past do not endure, simply, as passive and pristine objects, and that instead "the past" is something actively constructed and revised. As the narrator relays to the reader, "[w]hen Diem was a young man, the merchant houses were dilapidated, the roofs sagging, the shutters of the facades cracked, coal-searched an ancient. Now the roofs were restored and the shutters painted with this lacquered sheen, as if honey had been poured over them" (123). Through a series of "restorations" that relentlessly pursue

tourists and capital, the buildings have a chance at another life, whereas the protagonist, out of synch and outmoded in both Canada and Vietnam, is unwilling or unable to see the change that has happened in his one life—and clings helplessly to the past.

Both Thammavongsa and Huynh include many autobiographical details in their work; however, they are more similar in their interest in exploring and, at times, critiquing the lives around them. Huynh was born in Canada shortly after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, and while Huynh's parents fled Vietnam due to the war, they were not “refugees” by legal definition, themselves (“Ricepaper”). Because of this relatively unique upbringing Huynh, at times, felt like an outsider in his community, but he relates that this psychological distance also provided him with an enduring curiosity about the refugee lives around him. Certainly, many ethnic North American writers shy away from memoirs or autobiographies, since they are often consumed as sociological documents, where readers sift through these stories to gain knowledge *about* rather than *of* a community. Huynh explains instead that “[f]iction allows for entry into ‘the actual lives and selves and the sensibilities of the characters . . . I’m just much more interested in exploring different people’” (“Spring Books”). And, indeed, both authors value *exploring* others through their creative expression, rather than educating other people about themselves or their communities. Thammavongsa offers in an interview with the *Paris Review* that “I grew up in Toronto, near Keele Street and Eglinton Avenue West. In our neighborhood, it was not a big deal to be a refugee. Almost everyone was.” This proximity gives both authors the ability to explore a range of refugees, with the differing life experiences and expectancies that this range of people entail. Through their respective engagement with aesthetics of heterogeneity, they bristle against rote representation and explanation, and instead creatively present these voices and the possibilities that they hold.

### **Conclusion: The Proximate “Luxuries” of Heterogeneity**

It is striking that in neither Thammavongsa's nor Huynh's work do we find a story about “the passage.” There are no boats, refugee camps, or escape narratives—the common, and at times, official narratives about refugee life that track their incorporation into a new nation-state. Instead, these



authors offer heterogeneous perspectives that foreground the acts of refugee worldmaking in the aftermath of war to explain how characters form social positions through a combination of historical events and their own individual sentiments. Thammavongsa sums up this relationship between the personal and the social succinctly, when she notes, “Raymond wasn’t the only person who’d ever lost the place he saw for himself in the world, but that’s not how it felt to him” (*How to Pronounce* 59). Huynh and Thammavongsa demonstrate that the refugee story does not end at moments of individual despair, and that “losing the place” that one has in the world necessarily involves gaining a new one. Through their examination of newer generations and stations of refugee life these authors highlight the social and class contradictions that propel Southeast Asian Canadian populations forward; however, this is not an easy or linear path. The individuality expressed by Huynh’s and Thammavongsa’s characters is fashioned through the social structures and history of refuge, illustrating how refugee movements are not *Bildungsroman*-like developments that follow a pattern of “immigration, assimilation, and identity” (Yu 24) but are instead uneven journeys that unfold across numerous generations, political configurations, and forms of subjecthood.

Tales of pleasure, sex, humour, and detachment are told by a variety of characters whose spectrum of behaviour is not easily plotted on a “good” or “bad” refugee binary. When the narrator’s mother in Thammavongsa’s short story “Edge of the World” walks out on the family, the narrator flatly relates, “My father did not grieve. He had done all of this life’s grieving when he became a refugee. To lose your love, to be abandoned by your wife was a thing of luxury even—it meant you were alive” (104). In this light, one could say that both Huynh and Thammavongsa traffic in a series of luxuries—the emotional range of opportunities for the 1.5 generation and those who are the descendants of, or are proximate to, refugees. The first generation of refugees most often worked long hours and/or multiple jobs, were dealing with the memories of the passage and of those left behind, and, of course, the cultural difficulties that come with living in a new land with new languages. Even when they were able to find the time to communicate some details about their lives to their children and others, what aesthetic forms could possibly capture the magnitude of the ruptures, traumas, and/or joys that they

endured? This narrative gap produced, then, a generation of story hunters and creators, born and/or raised in a multicultural Canada trying to create, interpret, and find narratives for themselves. This generation were able to grow up without having their lives *solely* marked by the Vietnam War and/or the refuge voyage, despite much of their material and familial upbringing being shaped by the event. In Thammavongsa's and Huynh's stories the authors display their ability to *explore* the heterogeneity of their respective communities with the luxury to step back, survey, celebrate, and, even, critique the movements of their respective communities within the Canadian social landscape.

This essay proposes that *heterogeneity*, while similar to pluralism, provides an opportunity for contemporary Canadian writers to revive earlier, less official, imaginings of Canadian multiculturalism where the formation of power and value is part of the very work itself. In their reading of Lisa Lowe's famous essay, Mannur and Isaac explain that heterogeneity is not a mere inverse of homogeneity, but instead works to recognize "the differential power relations within and among Asian Americans, particularly in relation to law and class. It articulates the names and differences between and among undocumented immigrants, H1B high-tech workers, fourth-generation Nisei Japanese Americans, and "boat people" (326). I would propose, then, that authors like Thammavongsa and Huynh are doing something similar in marking power relations, except this time for refugees and Southeast Asian Canadian populations. While "Southeast Asian Canadian" is understood as a coalitional designation, the refugee position also needs to be recognized as a diverse category. The spectrum of experiences that Thammavongsa and Huynh draw upon is intergenerational, transnational, and differential in terms of educational and class opportunities. But both books work to demonstrate how, despite their disparity, many of these different people still live in a close proximity to each other—emotionally, linguistically, and geographically. Assembling such a range of characters in a book of short stories allows each story and voice the space to stand on its own, and the differing styles of lyricism and storytelling demand that readers look across and recognize the variety of refugee life experiences. Both of these writers have come of age in a Canadian state and social milieu that rewards the rhetoric of heterogeneity, plurality, and multiculturalism. However, Huynh

and Thammavongsa are nimble enough to harness the style of heterogeneity on their own terms. No longer beholden to having their social identities forged by the nation-state, these authors tell stories that redirect the official management of cultures so that the reader must listen, instead, to the continual emergence of refugee heterogeneity itself.

#### NOTES

- 1 This should not be interpreted as a complete “freeing” of refugee aesthetic form, as writers still need to negotiate the desires of the reading public and a publishing industry that is overwhelmingly white in its composition.
- 2 Of course, the performance of being a “host” when one is a settler is part of a national narrative that erases Indigenous experiences and rights.
- 3 The visual overlapping of Canada’s cultural diversity and refugee life continues in the contemporary moment, as seen in the international dissemination of images of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau greeting Syrian refugees at Toronto Pearson Airport with winter coats and the reassurance that “you’re safe at home now” (Austen).
- 4 In 2020 refugee author Samra Habib won the Canada Reads top prize for *We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir*, and Kim Thúy won the Canada Reads top prize in 2015 for her novel *Ru*. Perhaps it is arguable that the Giller is the top literary prize in Canada, but I am presenting the case here based on the significant disparity found in the financial reward that the winning authors receive (currently \$100,000 for the Giller Prize, compared to \$15,000 for a Governor General’s Literary Award and the \$6,000 offered by Canada Reads).
- 5 This insight was first made by Columbia student Anjali Ramakrishnan during a Columbia Zoom lecture/interview with Denise Cruz.
- 6 Hôi An is a city in Central Vietnam. Its name means “peaceful meeting place” and it now serves as a major tourist destination.

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# Regenerative Remembering

## Reconciliation and Recuperation in Transpacific Cambodian Documentary

In the documentary *The Roots Remain* (Jean-Sébastien Francoeur and Andrew Marchand-Boddy, 2015), Cambodian Canadian street artist FONKi lightly treads through a bucolic grove of trees, settles into a shaded patch, and begins to meditate. Having just visited The Killing Fields memorial in Choeung Ek, Cambodia, and seen the stupa monument that shelters over five thousand human skulls, testimony to the massacres that took place during the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975-1979, he turns his back to the camera and retreats into the brush without explanation. The film then intersperses shots of the artist's calm but focused visage with images of life and death: an extreme close-up of a scampering fly, beads of water rolling down the patterned venation of a leaf, tightly framed steel-edged barbed wire, a snail inching along a stalk of thick grass, a single human tooth enfolded in a haphazardly buried burlap bag, an ant detecting the air with its antennae, and an open field of grass-covered pits that were once mass graves—memories of murder embedded within verdant, tranquil, and seemingly banal space.<sup>1</sup>

In this former orchard-cum-killing field-cum-memorial site, FONKi, a 1.5 generation migrant born in France and raised in Montreal after his parents escaped the Khmer Rouge, explains his reaction:

At first I didn't want to go to The Killing Fields or S21 [Tuol Seng prison]. I told myself that The Killing Fields aren't that disturbing. It's just like going to any rice field. And then when I entered . . . there were all those skulls, all those mass graves, and there

was this monument in which they had collected all the skulls. It took me . . . I thought it wasn't that bad but all those skulls . . . It gave me a big shock. You can see it in films, read it in books, but to see it in front of you? It gave me a shock. A big shock. (1:04:18 – 1:05:25)<sup>2</sup>

Uncharacteristically flustered, the articulate native French speaker hesitates, pausing several times to start again in search for words that can adequately describe the visceral experience of seeing first-hand evidence of the atrocities visited on his forebears, an embodied knowledge unmediated by books and movies. FONKi's sense of shock and hesitant assimilation of that visual testimony illustrates the challenge and necessity of reconciling his individual present with the trauma of the collective past.

The following scene cuts to a shirtless FONKi equipped with a gas mask strung around his neck, confidently striding through his makeshift studio and returning to work on the soon-to-be revealed commemorative family mural that brought him back to his family's homeland. Combining the previous montage of life and death with the scene of the artist doggedly determined to honour the memory of his murdered grandparents, the film renders a narrative about a process of collective memory: testifying to trauma, witnessing testimony, reconciling with that traumatic past, and recuperating those memories in the present. Through this collective process, remembering can reshape communal relations. In narrating how its protagonist remembers, *The Roots Remain* illustrates the function of its declarative title: to insist upon the continuity of the Cambodian cultural community despite systematic efforts to erase those connections.

As a work of Quebec and British Columbia filmmakers about a Cambodian Canadian artist and returnee, *The Roots Remain* makes a necessary intervention into Canadian literature by expanding the aesthetic and geographic imaginaries of Canadian collective memory. The above-mentioned scene of the returnee's personal reconciliation illustrates a particular transformation in the remembering subject's conceptualization of collective identity. The boundaries of collective identification are determined by a sense of what happened to whom. In this sense, collective memories of what happened to "us" vis-à-vis what happened to "them" defines who "we" are. If the collective memory of colonialism and genocide in Canada only registers as something that happened to "them," Canadian minority

populations such as Cambodian refugees and Indigenous Peoples, then these communities are excised from the “us” of Canadian collective identity. The reconciliation and recuperation of these communities into the body politic thus requires the expansion of Canadian collective memory to include genocide at home and abroad as part of its national reckoning.

Whether they know it or not, colonialism and genocide have fundamentally and irrevocably determined the present circumstances of all North Americans, not just refugee families such as FONKi's or the subjects of the other documentary film to be discussed, *Daze of Justice* (Michael Siv, 2016), a first-person narrative about Cambodian American survivors who return to Phnom Penh to testify in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), a UN-supported commission to address historical injustices through official documentation of cultural genocide, as well as to try perpetrators of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.<sup>3</sup> This essay argues that these two films work to expand the collective memory of the Cambodian genocide and its afterlife across transpacific divides by depicting the reconciliation and recuperation of intimate relations through sharing and witnessing individual testimonies about collective experience. I describe this phenomenon as “regenerative remembering” because the filmmakers and their subjects construct collective memory as a means to re-establish and grow intergenerational and transcontinental connections between Cambodians and North Americans that have been severed by the devastation of genocide, forced migration, and cultural amnesia.

The histories of Canadians and Americans are entangled with the Cambodian genocide, whether through tacit support of US bombings of Southeast Asia or participation in capitalist globalization that motivated those imperialist incursions. Yet, for many Canadians and Americans who have not directly experienced the trauma of events such as Euro-American imperialism in Southeast Asia and the subsequent Khmer Rouge regime, or European settler colonialism and state-abetted cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples throughout the Americas, the facts of history may not register as events that happened to them or that they participated in. Despite the benefits accrued from military and economic imperialism and living on land taken from Indigenous Nations, many settlers fail to recognize or

acknowledge how the afterlives of these formative events continually shape their national identification and the very ground upon which they live. Without hearing and assimilating testimony to collective traumas, whether in the case of seeing the human remains of genocide or listening to testimony from those forcibly separated from their parents by the state, many Canadians have been “kept in the dark” about their collective past (Fee 6).

Likewise, a Canadian collective memory without the refugee encounter remains incomplete. The legacies of Cold War imperialism live on in various transpacific discourses as tools used by various states for negotiating and advancing their geopolitical interests. Even discourses that ostensibly seek to remedy past injustices often buttress state interests as opposed to serving the individuals who endured that trauma. As Cathy Schlund-Vials demonstrates, the many politicians and warmongers aligned with the US military and its allies leverage the Cambodian genocide as a “useable past” to justify further imperialist interventions on humanitarian grounds without acknowledging how unauthorized bombings by the US military and its allies along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border enabled the rise of the Khmer Rouge (13). Likewise, as the living embodiment of imperialist legacies, refugees themselves function as levers used in political discourse. The history of racially based immigration laws in the US offers a blatant example of how excluding migrants from certain regions, often migrants directly impacted by US westward imperialism across the Pacific, shaped American national identity.<sup>4</sup> However, even the Canadian government’s “welcome refugees” policy serves a political function. As noted by Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu in *Refugee States*, the notion of Canada as the more humanitarian nation as compared to its bellicose southern neighbour—the discourse of “Canadian ‘humanitarian exceptionalism’”—requires the figure of the refugee to generate an imagination of Canada as a state that welcomes those displaced by war and humanitarian disaster (3). For politicians to align liberal Canadian nationalism with “qualities of generosity, hospitality, and tolerance,” they need not only condemn the xenophobic policies, domestic and foreign imperialism, and humanitarian failures of the US, but also need to propagate a narrative of welcoming refugees—a narrative that contradicts Canada’s complex history as a former imperial British colony that has both offered and denied refuge in various contexts. Configured in the political



discourse as exceptional cases of non-citizens being granted refuge, the refugee encounter with Canada, then, is central to the concept of Canadian “exceptionality” and paradoxically helps define state sovereignty and nationhood (Nguyen and Phu 3-4).

State-sponsored reconciliation projects such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal too often function at the convenience of the nations that authorize them as opposed to the communities and individuals in need of justice. In *Cold War Ruins*, Lisa Yoneyama argues that while the objectives of such state apparatuses are to provide justice to victims, they often function to “present reparations demands and settlements as reflective of the collective will of a nation-state” (6). The inclusivity of that collective will is questionable for two reasons: 1) “understandings about historical justice have not been shared or pursued uniformly within national borders,” and 2) individuals seeking redress or rights to reparations “have had to struggle against their own governments and official policies while relying on subnational and supranational spaces where alternative discursive parameters have allowed such juridico-historical claims to be heard.” Yoneyama questions state claims of a collective will for justice because those in greatest need of redress are “subjects ambiguously or multiply positioned by their national and ideological affiliations.” The state cannot adequately represent subjects with “precarious relations to their national polity and its free market.” Thus, Yoneyama argues, “the rights to reparations neither originate in nor are protected by the State” (6).

Many state-sponsored forms of reconciliation, such as national memorials, commissions, and state apologies, can generate a discourse of “closing a book” or to “forgive and forget,” which “imply that after the apology and the TRC hearings, mainstream Canada will be able to return to ‘normal,’ once again acting as if Indigenous people don’t exist—as if they are not part of the body politic” (Fee 10). Moreover, states normalize their sovereignty through state-run reconciliation policies. In Cambodia, official “memories and memorial sites become political resources” (Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci 853). “[P]art and parcel of a specific and judicious representation that conforms to the politically negotiated tribunal” negotiated between the current regime and the United Nations (862), official Cambodian memories and memorials

entrench state power. These examples demonstrate that simply documenting the history of North American imperialism and colonialism cannot reconcile the traumas left in their wake, especially when that knowledge is mediated by bureaucratic state administrative organs similar to the ones that enacted systematic state exercises such as the forced assimilation of Indigenous people and genocide in the first place.

The politicization of traumatic memory demonstrates how states utilize collective memory to establish and maintain their sovereignty. State-mediated reconciliation commissions, as in the case of the TRC, function to document and make available information. However, state interests supersede individual justice, and the growth of collective memory requires individual participants. The TRC was necessary to reconcile and recuperate Indigenous experience with Canadian collective memory. However, the work of reconciliation happens not in court but in the sharing and witnessing of testimony—that is, through actual collective remembering. In “Before Truth: The Labors of Testimony and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” Naomi Angel emphasizes the “intimate work of reconciliation between family members and communities” and the need to recognize that “both nationhood and reconciliation are negotiated through intimate relations” (210). Observing the national gathering in Winnipeg for the TRC, Angel notes how “reconciliation often occurs in liminal spaces, between and within nations and families,” as opposed to being a state-to-state or state-to-citizen phenomenon. Regardless of the stated outcome of the Commission to restore the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples, the testimonies at the national gathering functioned primarily to repair intimate relationships between families and communities. Non-Indigenous Canadians played their part in the labour of reconciliation by listening to testimony, “an ethical act, entailing responsibilities and active engagement,” not only through sympathy for survivors but also the witnessing subject’s identification as part of that collective event (209). Reconciliation occurs through acts of collective memory that restore intimate relations in and amongst communities, not through official state apologies that seek to proclaim that injustices such as colonialism are over. For these reasons, other sites of memory must be made visible in order to “counter-balance the

official, state-sanctioned collective memories of genocide” (Tyner, Alvarez, and Calucci 867) in Cambodia and Canada.

In what Y-Dang Troeung conceptualizes as an “act of literary responsibility,” Canadian literature can address this aporia by “mobiliz[ing] an aesthetics of entwined responsibility to work against the idea of Cambodian genocide as a ‘foreign’ trauma, as an event that happened solely ‘over there’ and has nothing to do with the lives of Canadians at the time or the Cold War foreign policy . . . in Southeast Asia and its resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees” (152). If the narrative of Canadian exceptionalism depends upon the refugee subject, then Canadian literature needs also to include Cambodian Canadian experiences. Documentary films about the Cambodian genocide in which people recount their experiences, both perpetrators and survivors alike, make significant contributions to transpacific Cambodian and North American collective memory.

This essay focuses on a new mode of remembering in two documentary films about Cambodian Canadian and Cambodian American returnees—*The Roots Remain* (2015) and *Daze of Justice* (2016)—as transpacific examples of what Y-Dang Troeung refers to in this special issue as “refugee worldmaking.” This mode, which I call “regenerative remembering,” grows out of earlier practices of collective memory in documentary films that remember and testify to the trauma of the Cambodian genocide. Many scholars, artists, and writers use collective memory as a tool to understand the Cambodian genocide and its afterlife. Until recently, the details of the atrocities were purposefully censored and hidden by various state actors. Many of those who were empowered after the Khmer Rouge were deposed by the Vietnamese military, as well as the many former Khmer Rouge members who work in the Cambodian government today, seek to “bury the past” (Schlund-Vials 8). This meant that nearly all perpetrators went unpunished until the twenty-first century. Even in Cambodia, many victims and perpetrators live side by side, while other complicit parties like the US military and its allies (whose indiscriminate bombings along the borders of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia enabled the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the first place) remain beyond juridical reach. States collaborate in “a transnational set of amnesiac politics revealed through hegemonic modes of public policy and memory” (Schlund-Vials 13). Documentation and

testimony through collective remembrance must then serve as an alternative site to the state for possible redress, reconciliation, and recuperation.

Cambodian and Asian American documentary films serve in that capacity as modes of collective memory. The “perpetrator cinema” of filmmakers like Rithy Panh and Thet Sambath seeks to provide a truthful account of the Khmer Rouge era by documenting testimonies from those who experienced the atrocities first-hand as both survivors and perpetrators.<sup>5</sup> To address these aporias, these films depict encounters between perpetrators and survivors (or their family members) when filmmakers try to set the record straight about what really happened.<sup>6</sup> Their films also often include long interviews with Khmer Rouge leaders, former prison guards, and torturers. These films depict and share testimonies of traumatic experience. Asian American documentaries about Cambodian Americans, such as Spencer Nakasako’s trilogy *AKA Don Bonus* (1995), *Refugee* (1998), and *Kelly Loves Tony* (2003), record the refugee experiences of second and 1.5 generation Cambodian Americans and their attempts to recover their family memories. Taken in tandem, these Cambodian and Asian American documentaries contribute to the collective memory of the Cambodian genocide by articulating the truth of what happened during the Khmer Rouge era, as well as the subsequent devastation it wrought on survivors and their families who escaped. They function as political activism through remembrances that unlock collective memory, and thus provide a remit to inspect a wound that still festers and that many survivors have not completely processed or assimilated. As such, these films fill in an enormous gap in the collective memory of Cambodians, the “intellectuals of the west,” and really, of everyone who watches them.<sup>7</sup>

Building upon the fertile grounds of collective memory established by these Cambodian and Asian American documentaries, *The Roots Remain*, co-produced by Rithy Panh, and *Daze of Justice*, co-produced by Spencer Nakasako, respectively document how a Cambodian Canadian artist and a Cambodian American witnesses<sup>8</sup> re-establish connections across intergenerational and transpacific divides. Focusing on FONKi’s refugee and returnee experiences, including his sense of alienation from both his family and society while growing up in Montreal and becoming a famous street artist in the francophone world, *The Roots Remain* recasts Canadian collective memory to include transpacific refugee experience. By depicting

the Cambodian Canadian artist's visceral encounter with the Cambodian genocide and its aftermath, the film demonstrates how collective memories about refugee experience can recuperate transpacific Cambodian-North American relations. Narrated by Siv, the 1.5 generation Cambodian American director who escaped the Khmer Rouge as a young child with his mother, *Daze of Justice* operates as a memory of Siv's transpacific encounter with the son of a perpetrator, and the reconciliation of relations through recognizing the human and inhuman experiences of perpetrators and survivors alike. Using a participatory road-trip narrative, the film depicts how its protagonists renegotiate their relationships to the trauma of genocide through intimate forms of reconciliation. Both films expand transpacific Cambodian and North American collective memory by recuperating and reconciling with the testimonies of the Cambodian genocide and its afterlife, thus encouraging the regrowth of transpacific connections divided by injustice, generations, oceans, and forced forgetting.

### **Reconciliation**

How do Cambodians, whether living in Canada, the US, Cambodia, or elsewhere, accept that perpetrators and their brethren live amongst them? Despite the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, the vast majority of murderers, torturers, rapists, guards, cadres, and complicit spectators have gone unpunished. Perpetrators of crimes against humanity were also victims of crimes against humanity. Reconciliation, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in *Nothing Ever Dies*, requires a "just memory." State-sanctioned memories of war and its afterlife enact the "basic dialectic of memory and amnesia," which is "more fundamentally about remembering our humanity and forgetting our inhumanity, while conversely remembering the inhumanity of others and forgetting their humanity" (19). Official state memory work such as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal functions through this basic dialectic, humanizing survivors as representatives of humanity who have been victimized and dehumanizing perpetrators as criminals who committed crimes against humanity. The state uses apparatuses such as tribunals to define "humanity," creating a dichotomy of us (humans) and them (inhumans). By identifying with "human" victims and dissociating from "inhuman" perpetrators, we (all of humanity) forget our inhumanity as perpetrators, collaborators,

bystanders, and beneficiaries of genocide and its afterlife. “A just memory,” Nguyen argues, “demands instead a final step in the dialectics of ethical memory—not just the movement between an ethics of remembering one’s own and remembering others, but also a shift towards an ethics of recognition, of seeing and remembering how the inhuman inhabits the human” (19).

Nguyen argues for the historical and ethical significance of Rithy Panh’s films that interview perpetrators, because they deconstruct the paradox of reconciliation between victimizers who see themselves as victims and victims who are also victimizers, as is made clear by the many former Khmer Rouge cadres, torturers, and guards that were themselves eventually tortured and murdered by their colleagues. Reconciliation thus must also overcome “the reluctance to recognize and to reconcile with one’s capacity to harm others” because “when we refuse to see victims as capable of violence, we allow ourselves to imagine that we are the same way” (90). To reconcile with the Vietnam War and its afterlife (which includes the Cambodian genocide), Canadians and Americans must acknowledge the inhumanity of their complicity with systemic murder. As a primary example, the collective memory of the Cambodian genocide as depicted in New Cambodian Cinema provokes audiences into acknowledging that the Cambodian genocide is an integral part of a “just” Canadian and American collective memory. This process of ethical recognition begins with understanding that victims can hurt others and victimizers can also be hurt and evolves through understanding our inhumanity and the humanity of others.

To reconcile with others requires reconciling one’s own irreconcilability. However, even if we acknowledge that victimizers can be victims and vice versa, the work to reconcile these truths and develop an ethics of recognition requires more than just mutual acknowledgement of each other’s dual humanity and inhumanity. In *Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary*, Raya Morag describes the new trend in films of the New Cambodian Cinema of depicting a “survivor-perpetrator duel” (27). In these films, which Morag titles “perpetrator cinema,” survivors attempt to transform power relations by compelling perpetrators to admit to their crimes, accept responsibility, and see their victims as equals.<sup>9</sup> Even after survivors/documentarians “win” and demonstrate incredible courage in their

“documentary duels” with perpetrators who may finally see them as human and deserving of justice, more “memory work” can be done to regenerate the community. *Daze of Justice* depicts how post-genocide generations enact regenerative remembering through practices and rituals of sharing and listening to traumatic memories, which enable participants and observers to see others as themselves and themselves as others.

The film begins with Dr. Leakhena Nou, an associate professor of sociology at California State University, Long Beach, and founder of the Applied Social Research Institute of Cambodia, conducting outreach work with the Cambodian American community in Southern California. Congregating with survivors beneath the shade of a willow tree in a Long Beach park, Nou asks for volunteers to speak about their experiences: “You guys are witnesses,” Nou explains in halting Khmer. “Pardon me, but if you die, that’s it. No one believes me because I didn’t live through it. Do you want to address the atrocities?” (0:03:00 – 00:03:17). The group falls silent in response as the camera pans across worried faces. “The silence is familiar to me and most of my generation,” Siv narrates over the sound of wind blowing into the microphone (00:03:20 – 00:03:30). Remembering trauma can retraumatize, but the importance of remembering drives Nou to persist in her request for brave testimony from justifiably fearful people who have lived through hell.

The recruitment drives continue at a community event at the Long Beach public library where Cambodian American survivors gather. “We are trying to help you find closure to this traumatic history,” Nou announces to the group, “not by violence, not by hatred, not by anger but by using the legal mechanism as a way to educate the next generation” (4:02 – 4:17). To prepare them for this nigh-impossible task of recollecting the worst years of their lives, the volunteers ask the survivors to draw anything that they remember from before, during, and after the Khmer Rouge years. While explaining their mission to seek out survivors willing to testify despite knowing that most would prefer to forget, Nou announces to the cameras and roomful of Cambodian American elders, “thirty-five years ago you experienced the kind of horror that no human cou[ld]—or should ever experience” (4:17 – 4:25). Nou stops herself from saying that they endured what “no human could” because the people in front of her in fact did endure

the atrocities and of course are humans. Yet, I argue that Nou's slip of the tongue works to deconstruct a conventional understanding of the humanity/inhumanity dichotomy. Genocide is oft considered an inhuman activity, but its perpetrators are humans. If "no human could or should" ever experience genocide, then living through genocide is inhuman. These contradictions illustrate how the "inhuman inhabits the human."

Audiences can plainly see the survivors' humanity, as they find ways to begin recounting the unspeakable. Using paintbrushes, coloured pencils, and markers provided at the event, they make illustrations depicting their memories of lost loved ones and traumatic experiences under the Khmer Rouge. However, the inhumanity of their traumatization at the hands of the Khmer Rouge also manifests itself. Nou interviews one elderly gentleman as he paints his deceased family members: "This is my father, mother, me, my sister and brothers. My parents died when I was seventeen," he explains (4:52 – 5:05). Speaking in Khmer, another survivor recalls being imprisoned and tortured, pointing at an image of three individuals wearing restraints on their hands and necks, tied together, and lined up against a wall. After recollecting that trauma, he switches to English and states, "No choice. No choice, but . . . lucky not die" (5:09 – 5:20).

After being photographed with their illustrations, more of the once-reluctant survivors come forward to the microphone and share their memories of the Cambodian genocide in an act of communal mourning. "They treated us like animals," one survivor states before breaking into tears. "They killed all my siblings and parents," states another. One survivor begins by stating, "I had five children," but then is unable to continue (5:35 – 6:00). Through these depictions of survivor testimony, the film compels audiences to realign their understanding of inhumanity as also experiencing something unfathomable, instead of just committing monstrosities. To experience the atrocities, let alone survive to remember, is an inhuman experience. For survivors to remember on behalf of the next generation, they must also remember their inhuman suffering.

The communal setting of collective memory sets the stage for Marie Chea, Sophany Bay, and Sarem Neou, along with Nou, Siv, and his digital camera, to embark on their journey to Cambodia to testify at the ECCC on behalf of their families and friends murdered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge



regime. In Cambodia, they find little of what they sought through official channels. The scenes from the court chamber's waiting room exhibit this "daze of justice," as they wait days on end for resolution when none seems forthcoming. The eventual indictment and trial of several high-ranking former Khmer Rouge leaders such as Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, and Ieng Sary for crimes against humanity and genocide in their very old age—Chea died a year into his sentence, Sary died before a verdict could be rendered, and Pol Pot died of heart failure a decade before trials began—illustrates how official courts are a means to write history as opposed to addressing injustice. Repairing a community needs the creation and sharing of memories. Understanding that reconciliation also requires remembering perpetrator experience, Nou takes the survivors to meet with the son of Kang Kew Iew (a.k.a "Duch"), the first convicted war criminal and former Khmer Rouge leader of the infamous S21 Tuol Sleng prison, where twenty thousand people were tortured and executed. Meeting Duch's son Hong Siu Pheng, who lives in the countryside with his family in poverty, makes evident that the descendants of perpetrators also suffer in the afterlife of war and genocide.

When Nou explains their reparative mission to Pheng, he retorts with an insecure smirk, "My father never acted directly from his own will. It was a complicated time. The way I see it, my father had to obey orders, therefore, it wasn't his fault" (11:18 – 11:50). The camera pans across the family members and neighbours of Pheng's village, with happy children playing on the unpaved floor in the background. These scenes imply that Pheng's powerlessness undergirds his reluctance to condemn his father, especially when compared with his American visitors, who come in a fancy car with an expensive digital camera to request something he and his family cannot give. Flustered, Nou explains that the aging survivors of the genocide need justice to recover and heal. Pheng responds thoughtfully, "I don't understand how justice can be paid to them" (12:17 – 12:20). This statement serves as the crux of the film, illustrating the seeming impossibility of forgiving the unforgivable. Inflicting such human misery incurs an unpayable debt, and yet forgiveness is forgiveness only when it forgives the unforgivable.

To repair the bonds of a people who have been torn apart by genocide requires something miraculous. This impasse prompts Nou to ask Pheng to accompany them back to Phnom Penh and attend the trial, all expenses paid.

By journeying with the son of a war criminal responsible for their family's deaths, the survivors demonstrate a commitment to the togetherness and future of Cambodia and Cambodian Americans. With this surprise twist, the film documents a collective sharing of memory. By joining the group, Pheng adds a vastly different, but necessary, perspective on past events. All memory is fallible and subjective, but that seeming weakness is actually the strength of collective remembrance. Memory grows to encompass different and conflicting perspectives—capacious enough to include those of both victims and perpetrators, as well as their children.

In the seminal scene of *Daze of Justice*, Pheng asks the group to go with him to temple. Having spent the previous weeks with the group in Phnom Penh waiting for the court's verdict on his father and the possibility of justice being done, Pheng surprises the group with this request just days before the Americans must return home with no resolution in sight. Understanding that his new friends will likely return home “without justice,” Pheng gathers everyone in the temple and lights incense to pray. Unexpectedly, Pheng then makes a public apology on his father's behalf to the survivors and all his father's victims. Framed in close-up as his jaws twitch with anxiety (see figure 1), Pheng begins:

Everyone travelled thousands of miles from America in search for justice. The way I see it you guys will not find it. The court is dragging on and on. Look at Noun Chea, he is really old. It doesn't seem like he wants to admit to any wrongdoing. There is no justice in that. I've been affected by this history as well. I didn't see any killings, but I've been deceived before. You know how those with power treat others. I've been a part of this since I was born. They took my father to hide for two years, but they never told me. I was a kid and only cared about my father. When I see his picture . . . excuse me. (53:50 – 55:10)

At that moment, the camera focuses on Siv's face (see figure 2); he turns his head down to look away, looks back, then moves to look down once more, but then finally overcomes his resistance and moves his eyes back up again to maintain Pheng's gaze. His willingness to return that gaze and accept Pheng's testimony, despite the tremendous difficulty, illustrates reconciliation at work through collective remembering.

This scene illustrates the humanity of the perpetrator through his son's apology. Of course, Duch himself does not apologize or confess, but Pheng's insistence upon his childhood need for and abandonment by his father



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**Figure 1.** Pheng makes a public apology to victims on behalf of his father, the convicted Khmer Rouge leader Kang Kew Iew. Image courtesy of Michael Siv.



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**Figure 2.** With difficulty, Siv accepts Pheng's apology. Image courtesy of Michael Siv.

signifies the perpetrator's humanity. The willingness of the son to apologize on behalf of the father for something for which he has no culpability testifies to the familial bond. Pheng's testimony also recasts the understanding of perpetrators as not just murderers, torturers, and rapists, but also as parents with children who love them very much despite the knowledge of their inhumanity. At the same time, the scene illustrates the difficulty of accepting the humanity of a killer, especially as a survivor of inhuman atrocities. Reconciliation requires mutual acknowledgement from both ourselves and others of our collective humanity and inhumanity.

The group reciprocates this act of reconciliation by offering many gifts to Pheng's family, sent through Nou and Siv after they depart, including charitable donations to the local school that Pheng has built in his village. For survivors of genocide to give so generously to a perpetrator's descendants seems miraculous, but the mutual acknowledgement of the in/humanity of the Cambodian genocide enables that reconciliation. The official documentation and assignation of blame cannot remake what has been lost, but as the documentary demonstrates, the willingness to understand and share memories with others enables new communities to form. By remembering the humanity and inhumanity of survivors and perpetrators alike, *Daze of Justice* works towards the regeneration of transpacific Cambodian and North American connections.

### **Recuperation**

In "Witness and Recuperation: Cambodia's New Documentary Cinema," Annette Hamilton discusses a younger, post-Khmer Rouge generation of Cambodian filmmakers who take Rithy Panh as a mentor and whose films aim to "restore a sense of continuity, and to assert the value of what existed prior to 1975" (16). While Panh's films and memoirs foreground witness and re-enactment as a means to remember trauma and encourage claims for justice in the wake of Khmer Rouge genocide, the new movement challenges the cultural amnesia wrought by the Khmer Rouge's obliteration of Cambodian culture. In Hamilton's essay, exemplars of this new approach to Cambodian documentary cinema include Davy Chou's *Golden Slumbers* (2012), Lida Chan's *My Yesterday Night* (2010), Guillaume Suon's *About My Father* (2009), *The Last Refuge* (2013), and *The Storm Makers* (2014), and Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon's *Red Wedding* (2012). For Hamilton, these films

are linked by a positive intention to move beyond that which must not be forgotten, and by attempts to recuperate what was of value in that which was lost. They recognize the years of suffering and tragedy but also seek to offer respectful recognition to a society and culture which was more thoroughly destroyed than probably any other in modern times. (27)

They recuperate Cambodian culture by restoring links between past and present.

Recuperation is especially difficult for the younger generation of transpacific Cambodian artists and filmmakers, who are doubly removed from, yet thoroughly affected by, their parents' generational trauma. To make these connections between a past that can be difficult to speak of or has been systematically censored, and a present-day Cambodian society that emphasizes globalization and capitalist development, artists and filmmakers must make their own memories capable of bridging that chasm. As indicated by its title, *The Roots Remain* attempts to illustrate how the "roots" of Cambodian culture, art, and music still exist despite the genocidal efforts of the Khmer Rouge. Featuring artists that work to recover Khmer artforms, the film recuperates the collective memory of Cambodia by depicting how artists reinvigorate Cambodian cultural practices by incorporating them into their artwork and community organizing. The film focuses on FONKi's return to Cambodia for three months to work on two major art projects, as well as his acquaintance with and participation in the "Khmer Renaissance," a contemporary art and music movement that incorporates global forms such as hip hop and street art with local themes, motifs, and language.

The first project is a graffiti mural with a lettering style based on traditional Kbach forms. The film begins with FONKi visiting Angkor Wat to study and sketch the classical Khmer architecture and decorative elements, such as bas-reliefs that reproduce narratives from the Hindu epics and ornamental engravings of the lotus petal, snail shell spiral, and flames. Inspired by these classical forms, FONKi decides to incorporate Kbach into the style that made him famous in Canada and Europe. Recuperating this classical art, FONKi creates something completely new and never before seen anywhere; as he states before starting the mural, "Today's the day for a classic. . . . Today's my baptism" (6:55–7:01). In order to secure the site, he asks a local landlord for the right to use a decrepit wall that overlooks an abandoned construction



**Figure 3.** FONKi's never-before-seen Kbach-styled tag. The artwork was later destroyed by unknown parties. Image courtesy of Jean-Sébastien Francoeur and Andrew Marchand-Boddy.

site as his canvas. Located across from the council of ministers in Phnom Penh and at the entrance to a slum, the large Kbach-styled tag, a spray paint signature, stakes a claim to his artistic ingenuity and incorporates classical Khmer art with contemporary street style (see figure 3). While FONKi works, local police harass him for vandalizing property, forcing FONKi to speak to the captain of the police. Eventually, he completes the mural, but soon after the tag is painted over and the abandoned lot is surrounded by advertising boards. While the film does not explain the details pertaining to who censors the mural and why, the event seems to demonstrate that the celebration and recuperation of traditional Khmer art faces the constant threat of state-sponsored forgetting motivated by appeals to investments of global capital and generic commercial development. As a form of remembering that does not match the state's projected image of Cambodia's future, much like war-crime tribunals or justice for survivors, FONKi's act of recuperative memory—that the roots remain regardless of erasure—functions as a mode of political resistance.

Recuperation works against state-sponsored forgetting. By pioneering and popularizing the Kbach street style, FONKi connects the pre-Khmer Rouge past with present-day Cambodians marginalized by the state, such

as those living in slums and crowded out by gentrification. At the same time, recuperation also means to heal. What does it mean for a collective memory to be healed? I think that this requires an understanding of memory as something that is alive, fed into, and shared amongst those that remember. Memories also articulate an affective dimension, meaning that they can be coloured by mood. FONKi's second major project is a family mural based upon portraits of his relatives who were murdered during the Khmer Rouge regime (see figure 4). These two projects function to recuperate collective memory in the sense of reclaiming a tradition but also healing a traumatic injury. The film demonstrates this affective dimension as FONKi discusses the portrait mural with his family, who recount the pain of losing their parents and grandparents—forebears who attempted to work towards the betterment of Cambodia after the end of French colonialism and were murdered for their efforts. Yet, as FONKi works on the mural and several family members as well as strangers come to visit, they all begin sharing various memories about their deceased loved ones. At the unveiling ceremony, FONKi states, “Yes, it’s my family on this wall, but every family has its own unique story. And every family’s story is Cambodia’s story” (1:07:55–1:08:04). By sharing these memories within the context of celebrating and honouring lives, FONKi’s memorialization of family tragedy becomes part of a commemorative national memory of survival.

The two-storey tall mural reproduces the portraits in black, white, and grey, but FONKi adds small streaks of bright but subtle colours into the foreground and points of white of varying luminescence as if the sections of black contained the stars and expanse of outer space. In describing his inspiration for the mural, FONKi shares a maxim: “Add colour to your past if your present seems grey” (29:00–29:11). By “adding colour” to this tragic family memory of family members who were “disappeared,” sharing it with the greater community, and celebrating the modern Cambodian nationalism that the Khmer Rouge sought to eliminate, FONKi works with his family and the local community to recuperate the collective memory of Cambodia and hope for a better future that can emerge from reckoning with the atrocities of the Cambodian genocide.

The Khmer Rouge attempted to completely annihilate contemporary Cambodian society by reforming or murdering the “new people” (civilians



**Figure 4.** FONKi's commemorative mural celebrating the lives of murdered family members. Image courtesy of Jean-Sébastien Francoeur and Andrew Marchand-Boddy.

from urban areas) who were considered antithetical to the Maoist revolution to be led by the “old people” from rural areas. In their attempt to start again and remake society, the Khmer Rouge regime severed the traditions and cultural practices of modern Cambodians, which included thriving art, music, and film industries. They also worked to eliminate the professional class, such as teachers, doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, and civil servants, like FONKi's family members. By the time that the Vietnamese Army deposed the Khmer Rouge and ended their reign of terror, many of these cultural and professional practitioners had died or been forcibly relocated to places such as Canada, the US, France, and Southeast Asia. Even though the Khmer Rouge is no longer in power, the damage has been done. However, Cambodian collective memory neither begins nor ends with the genocide and its aftermath.

### **Regeneration**

Testimonies of the Cambodian genocide serve an invaluable function: to register the reality of past atrocities, to present evidence that can be used in the establishment of historical truth and the pursuit of justice, and to allow victims and perpetrators to recognize and articulate their traumatic



experiences. Readers, listeners, and audiences of testimony bear witness to the retelling of trauma and to its impact on survivors, perpetrators, and their descendants. However, testimony alone cannot heal a community riven by genocide, forced migration, and official denials of state complicity. Survivors and perpetrators do not bear sole responsibility for ensuring the establishment of historical truth and justice. Although their testimonies enable regrowth, post-genocide generations are responsible for cultivating that collective memory.

At the conclusion of *Daze of Justice*, Siv sits in the back of a tuk-tuk casually conversing with Hong Siu Pheng, the son of the war criminal and former Khmer Rouge leader Kang Kew Iew. Although both grew up without their fathers due to the atrocities, Siv and Pheng are products of very different upbringings and experiences, which are visible in their appearances and demeanours. However, these differences seem of little significance to them, as their fraternal affection is obvious. They make regular eye contact and squeeze together in the cramped open-air back seat of the tuk-tuk, despite both knowing that Pheng is the son of someone who murdered members of Siv's family, and that Siv is part of a coalition seeking to convict and imprison Pheng's father for murder. The film makes clear that these tensions actually bring the two together and generate the possibilities for them to develop an affinity for each other.

As the soundtrack plays a lo-fi hip hop song that liberally samples hooks, melody, and lyrics from the 1960s Cambodian rock singer Ros Serey Sothea's "Kaun Komsott,"<sup>10</sup> the scene cuts to teenaged boys commuting by bike, then to one of the many construction sites along the roads of Phnom Penh, and finally to a lone airplane in a blue sky and the sound of jet engines, marking the narrative transition to the journey home. The documentary offers one last overhead shot of Cambodia from an airplane window looking down at the confluence of the Tonlé Sap and Mekong rivers, the bringers of life to Khmer civilization. The montage ends with Siv's narration: "I still find it hard to get my mom to talk about Cambodia, but after the trip I learned that it's not just her generation that needs to talk but mine too. And now, it's my turn to help the next generation make sense of what happened" (1:04:05–1:04:30).

The final image shows Siv with smartphone in hand shooting into a mirror. The shot then pans down from Siv's reflection to a swaddled newborn

being inspected and cleaned by a neonatal nurse. The credits roll as the infant begins to cry, and the film treats audiences to home videos of Siv's newborn son seeing and experiencing the world for the very first time—a world made possible by remembering and making sense of what happened.

To create a new society from that which they considered irredeemably corrupt, the Khmer Rouge adopted the position that people whose existence would not benefit this society did not deserve to live. This mindset of starting over and complete erasure of that which cannot be accepted enabled the Khmer Rouge cadres to tell the “old people,” “To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss” (Mam 13). The very tragedy, the refusal to let others live, was prompted by an insistence on total annihilation of the old and beginning again with “Year o.” To do so, they sought to purify the population—to cut off the roots.

Both *The Roots Remain* and *Daze of Justice* repudiate the notion of “Year o.” They demonstrate how transpacific returnees remake the memories they inherit of the Cambodian genocide in ways that restore connections with the Cambodian community, combining and incorporating their subjects' experiences with the collective memory of the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian genocide, as articulated and preserved through testimony by previous generations of witnesses and documentarians. By creating new forms of collective remembrance, these films generate a more commemorative and relational mode of remembering that encourages the regrowth of transpacific and intergenerational connections in and amongst the Cambodian and Cambodian North American communities. These acts of regenerative remembering cultivate the growth of new forms of cultural community that connect with the past, as opposed to forgetting and ossifying its traumas.

## NOTES

- 1 During the Khmer Rouge regime, thousands of Cambodians systematically imprisoned, tortured, and killed millions of other Cambodians, including ethnic and religious minorities such as Champa Muslim, Chinese, and Vietnamese Cambodians, in converted fields, schools, and temples that remain officially unmarked, including three hundred mass grave sites and three hundred security centres discovered as of 2010: “[H]idden in plain sight’: those places that are not commemorated through official channels but are in fact experienced on a day-to-day basis” (Tyner, Alvarez, and Colucci 861).
- 2 Translation from English subtitles. Original in French.

- 3 The ECCC is also commonly known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.
- 4 For a detailed account of how the neocolonial interests of the US in East and Southeast Asia during its imperial ascent interacted with the presence of Asian immigrants on its soil to shape American national identification, see Palumbo-Liu.
- 5 The term “perpetrator cinema” is Raya Morag’s.
- 6 Other recent films in the “genre” of “perpetrator cinema” include *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, both of which examine the massacre of “communists” and ethnic Chinese people in Indonesia in the 1960s. For more on perpetrator cinema, see Morag.
- 7 I borrow the expression “intellectuals of the west” from Rithy Panh, as quoted in Troeung and Thien.
- 8 *Daze of Justice* features Marie Chea, Sophany Bay, Sarem Neou, activist Leakhena Nou, and filmmaker Michael Siv. Siv also features in Spencer Nakasako’s *Refugee* (2004).
- 9 Raya Morag elaborates this notion of the “duel” in the third chapter of *Perpetrator Cinema*. For an overview of this notion, see Morag’s introductory chapter, especially pp. 23-30.
- 10 For more on Cambodia’s thriving music scene before the Khmer Rouge took power, see John Pirozzi’s documentary film *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten: Cambodia’s Lost Rock and Roll* (2014).

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# Journey to Hội An

## The Theme of Return in Philip Huynh's *The Forbidden Purple City*

**W**hile Asian Canadian studies has emerged as a significant area of inquiry, the field has been slow to engage with Vietnamese Canadians in its research, theories, and discussions. Indeed, several critics have commented on the historically limited framing of Asian Canadian studies, which has tended to focus on Chinese and Japanese communities that “have been present in Canada since the mid-nineteenth century” (Ty 565). This focus has meant that the field has examined “the earlier flows of migration into Canada” and “the traumatic histories of racist government policies against East Asians” (Leow 1131). Yet, aside from a few recent contributions,<sup>1</sup> scholars have found it difficult to account for Southeast Asians, like Vietnamese Canadians who mostly came to Canada as refugees or “boat people” following the end of the Vietnam War (Ty 565). One reason for this difficulty is that the arrival of Vietnamese refugees, and their resettlement across Canada, has commonly been viewed as “an exemplary historical example of Canadian generosity” (Nguyen, “Vietnamese Canadian” 397). That is, in contrast to earlier Asian immigrants, who are now understood as having encountered “the terrible realities” of institutional racism (Leow 1123), Vietnamese refugees are often believed to have been openly welcomed and readily integrated into Canada. This belief is largely due to a state-sanctioned discourse that not only constructs Vietnamese subjects as “deeply beholden to the rescuing state” (Ngo 69), but also bolsters an image of Canada “as a haven of refuge” (Nguyen 397). More than four

decades after the first Vietnamese refugee arrivals, this discourse, and its accompanying image of Canada, continues to circulate in powerful ways, due to its ability to depict the nation-state as “a benevolent peacemaker” (Nguyen 398) that has given Vietnamese refugees “the gift of freedom” (Ngo 70).<sup>2</sup> As evidenced in recent legislation like the Journey to Freedom Day Act, politicians continually draw upon this “grateful refugee” discourse, further enconcing “a very specific, dominant Vietnamese Canadian identity . . . within Canadian culture, history, and politics” (Nguyen, “Journey” 75).

The “grateful refugee” discourse, moreover, has shaped the production and reception of Vietnamese Canadian literary works. Vinh Nguyen observes, for example, that many refugee narratives in Canada “are crucially framed by,” and thus can only be “understood in relation to,” this discourse (“Vietnamese Canadian” 397). In effect, the idea that refugees are greatly indebted to their rescuing state has offered Vietnamese Canadian writers a kind of “aesthetic strategy,” allowing for them to render their community “recognizable and acceptable to the state while also finding a place in the national community” (399). Gratitude, then, tends to inform “both the content and the structure” of these refugee narratives (399); it affords writers a means to “remember and make sense of their past as well as imagine modes of living in the present and future” (397). In addition to inspiring writers to tell their stories, the “grateful refugee” discourse produces audiences ready to hear these stories (399). Nguyen elaborates that since Vietnamese Canadian literary works tend to depict Canada as a benevolent land of freedom, they have attracted “mainstream readers” and achieved “critical and commercial success” (“Refugee Gratitude” 17-18). Looking at Kim Thúy’s *Ru*, for instance, Nguyen surmises that this novel’s popularity is in many ways due to its perception as a “Vietnamese refugee success story” (17) that attests to “the nation’s own success at multicultural, collective building projects” (18). The prevalence of the “grateful refugee” discourse in both public policy and popular narrative has thus made it difficult for scholars working within Asian Canadian studies to examine the more complex realities of Vietnamese Canadian experience, realities which are not only more difficult to access and theorize but also indelibly marked by “war, displacement, resettlement, and diasporic connections” (Nguyen, “Vietnamese Canadian” 396).

This paper therefore responds to recent calls within Asian Canadian studies “for the most inclusive framing possible” (Lai 92). Contributing to efforts to better acknowledge the “rich histories and diverse subjectivities” of Asian groups in Canada (Pon et al. 16), it illuminates aspects of Vietnamese Canadian experience that have been eclipsed by the “grateful refugee” discourse. Thus, instead of reiterating the familiar understanding that Vietnamese Canadians “lost democracy in their homeland” following the Vietnam War “only to be gifted with a second life” in Canada (Ngo 70), it scrutinizes the intricate theme of return in Philip Huynh’s collection of stories *The Forbidden Purple City* with the aim of destabilizing this widespread belief. Consisting of nine stories, which move among different characters, settings, and time periods, *The Forbidden Purple City* focuses on first- and second-generation Vietnamese Canadians who either envision or enact a return visit to Vietnam. Crucially, this theme suggests active connections between Vietnamese Canadians, their homeland, and its complicated history of Western imperialism<sup>3</sup>; these connections not only go unrecognized in the “grateful refugee” discourse, but also challenge the colonial idea that the past has been resolved and replaced by the present. Indeed, Huynh’s stories depict the various ways that Vietnamese Canadians can remain haunted by the past. For example, the children in “The Fig Tree off Knight Street” become fascinated with a boy who they believe can teach them “something of our pasts” (Huynh 88); likewise, the protagonist in “The Forbidden Purple City” searches the Internet to visualize what it might be like to be in his homeland again. While many of the stories in the collection explore the theme of return, “Toad Poem” is the only one that pursues the theme through the protagonist’s physical return to Vietnam. As I argue, this physical return vividly illustrates an impulse to move back in time and across space to reveal what has been covered over by Canada’s state-sanctioned discourse. It highlights how many Vietnamese Canadians have not simply left a war-torn and “communist” Vietnam to flourish in a democratic and “free” Canada; rather, for them, their identities remain unsettled by what remains unacknowledged. The impulse to return to Vietnam hence gestures to thoughts, questions, and memories of the past that continue to interrupt and shape the present.

This paper asks, How does Huynh's story "Toad Poem" help to facilitate a more critical discussion of the Vietnam War and its legacies? How does this discussion reveal devastating realities, illuminating the effects of Western imperialism in Vietnam and complicating Canada's image as a benevolent "rescuer"? Also, since the story allows for a comparison between the people who stayed and the people who left Vietnam, how does it raise difficult questions about the sacrifices Vietnamese refugees have made to pursue a life in Canada? By contemplating these questions, this paper emphasizes how the theme of return in Huynh's story performs complex back-and-forth movements between the past and present, Canada and Vietnam. Significantly, these movements trouble the straightforward trajectory of the "grateful refugee" discourse, which simply portrays the Vietnamese subject as escaping "communism" to enjoy "freedom" and "success" in Canada. In this way, "The Toad Poem" gestures to experiences and connections that, despite being hidden, continue to endure across time and space.

### **The State-Sanctioned "Grateful Refugee" Discourse**

To better understand the significance of Canada's state-sanctioned discourses, it is worth turning to critics like Homi K. Bhabha who have examined the "coming into being" of modern nations (Bhabha 1). Bhabha observes, for instance, how each nation has created its own "system of cultural signification," or constellation of nationalist discourses, to produce an "image" or "narration" of itself. In turn, this image or narration is what allows the nation to wield "its own sphere of influence." Bhabha's understanding "of the nation as a symbolic force" (1) helps to underscore how Canada's state-sanctioned discourses are, indeed, carefully constructed to promote the uncomplicated generosity and kind-heartedness that ostensibly define the nation's identity (Ngo 71). The "grateful refugee" discourse is thus a kind of narrative strategy or "governing technology" (Ngo 67); it operates to incorporate the Vietnamese subject into the national symbolic in a way that bolsters Canada's desired image as "a torchbearer of rights, freedom, and democracy" (Nguyen, "Journey" 85). According to this discourse, the Vietnamese subject has enjoyed warm welcomes and rewarding opportunities, following the developmental trajectory from "rags to riches" in Canada (Ngo 70). What is overshadowed or covered over by



this discourse is what drove refugees to leave Vietnam in the first place: “the ugliness of the war” (71). The figure of the “grateful refugee” hence shifts attention away from the disturbing realities and global contributors of the Vietnam War, “with a refocus on celebrating” Canada as a peaceful and tolerant nation (62). As Nguyen reflects, this manoeuvre allows Canada to downplay the war’s costs on Vietnamese civilians, as well as to disavow its role as a major arms dealer that supplied the US with “both traditional and chemical weapons” (“Vietnamese Canadian” 399). The “grateful refugee” discourse thus produces a form of “forgetting complicity,” in that it disregards Canada’s “acts of war-making” to present the nation as “a bystander and facilitator of peace” (399). Underpinning this discourse, however, is also the logic that Canada has rescued Vietnamese refugees from the dangers of communism; it is a logic that Y n L  Espiritu identifies as reinforcing “partial and imperfect recollections of the war” by implying that the conflict was appropriate “no matter what the cost” to further “the progress of freedom and democracy” (1702).

Espiritu’s comments highlight how Canada’s “grateful refugee” discourse has been informed by the political history of the Cold War. Indeed, Ngo explains that the Cold War “goes beyond a historical event or series of events” (68); it represents an enduring ideology, or a way of making sense of the world, that frames “communism,” and not Western imperialism, as the real “tragedy” defining the Vietnam War (74). To show how Canada continues to uphold a “historically questionable account” of the war (65), Ngo investigates the parliamentary talks that led to the passing of the 2015 Journey to Freedom Day Act (Bill S-219). As Ngo explains, the Bill was introduced as a way to commemorate the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in Canada and express “the gratitude of Vietnamese people to the Canadian people” (63). Recognizing the Bill as deeply political (65), Ngo underscores how the Journey to Freedom Day Act not only portrays Vietnamese Canadians as “grateful refugees,” but also upholds a particular version of history in which “communist invasion” is responsible for the Vietnam War (65). Importantly, this version of history is controversial and outdated; current scholarship commonly describes the Vietnam War as “a civil war plagued with foreign intervention” (65). The Bill thus reveals how Canada’s “grateful refugee” discourse “effectively shut[s] down” larger

discussions about the Vietnam War (66). By stubbornly relying upon Cold War interpretations, the discourse evinces what Espiritu calls “technologies” that frame Western imperialism and military intervention in Southeast Asia as a worthy endeavour meant to bring “progress” (1700). Also, by focusing on how Vietnamese people have found a “bright and peaceful life in Canada” (Ngo 70), the “grateful refugee” discourse works to eclipse the enduring costs of war—“the baggage of trauma, distrust, and war-created divisions”—borne by Vietnamese Canadians (79).

As Ngo emphasizes, the “grateful refugee” discourse exerts a great deal of influence in Canadian society; it structures “how the Canadian state and the Vietnamese know themselves and one another” (68). Through this discourse, a specific definition of the “Vietnamese subject is legitimized, while other competing identities are discursively expelled” (69). In this case, the legitimate Vietnamese subject is grateful, anti-communist, and successful; “endlessly, consistently, and deeply beholden” to Canada (69), this subject does not complicate the state’s version of history. Instead, as Juliana Chang explains in another context,<sup>4</sup> “the proper subject of the nation-state” is compelled to participate in state-sanctioned discourse, or else risk being cast out of “the national symbolic” (112). In the parliamentary talks for the Journey to Freedom Day Act, Ngo observes this dynamic, where “those who opposed the Bill in any form were positioned as communists, and thus, not members of the Vietnamese Canadian community” (71). She surmises that, when confronted with the “rigid choice” between receiving a “little bit of official recognition . . . from the state” or getting none, many Vietnamese Canadians choose to embrace the “grateful refugee” discourse (71-72). They conform to the state’s “shaping of the Vietnamese subject,” disavowing memories and experiences that do not fit into the prescribed representation (69). This disavowal adds to what Nguyen identifies as the larger trend of “forgetting complicity,” whereby Canada’s image “of innocence remains whole, consistent, and . . . difficult to challenge” (“Vietnamese Canadian” 400).<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Chang points out, such a disavowal is never complete; subjects may attempt to forget “[u]nassimilated and unresolved” elements of the past, but these elements have a tendency to return and haunt the present (111). Drawing on concepts of traumatic repression, she theorizes that even

subjects who outwardly assimilate “into the national symbolic” can privately “kee[p] alive that which has not been symbolized” (112).

Accordingly, this paper takes inspiration from Chang’s theorization of “repression, disavowal, and haunting” (116).<sup>6</sup> It argues that the character Diem in Huynh’s short story “Toad Poem” can be viewed as going through a process of trying to grapple with “that which exceeds legitimacy, propriety, and the symbolic order itself” (Chang 117). More specifically, it pays attention to Diem’s return visit to Vietnam, arguing that this visit speaks to an unwitting desire to “uncover the remains of the unspoken” (Chang 117) or make visible what has gone unrecognized or unarticulated by the state-sanctioned discourse. Moreover, my focus on the theme of return allows me to complicate the sequential logic underlying the “grateful refugee” discourse; as I show, this return denotes a movement to “what should be left behind” (115)—a movement back into a past, the Vietnam War, whose endings “*are not over*” (Espiritu 1702),<sup>7</sup> but also to a country, Vietnam, that does not correspond with the memory of Vietnam represented in Cold War narratives.

### **Philip Huynh’s “Toad Poem”**

Diem, the protagonist of Huynh’s “Toad Poem,” in many ways frames his life through the lens of the “grateful refugee” discourse. Like the witnesses who testified at the passing of the Journey to Freedom Day Act, Diem presents his history as following a straightforward and familiar path—he escaped communist forces and was given “the gift of freedom” in Canada (Ngo 70). He “fled Vietnam at the age of nineteen” (Huynh 121) because he feared that “the Communists would come after” him (145). As the son of “the richest man in our village” (129), Diem reasons that he would have faced certain suffering, or even death, at the hands of the Communists; he insists, “There was nothing for me to do,” except leave Vietnam and pursue a life in Canada (145). In organizing his experiences according to “the common sense Cold War logic” (Ngo 72), Diem gestures to the influence of the state-sanctioned discourse, which constructs the legitimate Vietnamese subject as a beneficiary of Canadian-style freedom. This construction depicts “grateful refugees” as leaving the past behind and moving forward into the future—as evading communist persecution and realizing their “dreams and potential in capitalism” (Ngo 74). However, Diem’s apparent conformity to this narrative

of progress for “grateful refugees” turns out to be complicated by a desire to “return to Hoi An to write his toad poem—to memorialize his parents” (Huynh 121). Significantly, this desire emerges as a troubling indication that “the past is not erased but remains in the present” (Chang 111). As Chang suggests, proper subjects of the nation-state can portray the image of having “achieve[d] closure and move[d] on” (115); yet beneath this image is a “condition of unresolved mourning” (111), which often pushes them to “reveal the excess”—the memories, feelings, and experiences—that cannot be represented in “the process of symbolization by the nation-state” (117). Diem’s impulse to visit his parents’ “grand old house” (Huynh 146) hence speaks to this lack of closure. Even after living and working in Canada for forty-five years, he has unfinished business; he feels compelled to return to Vietnam, a space where he will inevitably encounter “the forgotten,” those losses “that should be relegated to the past” (Chang 111), but that instead continue to resurface and haunt the present.

As his outlook has been shaped by the “grateful refugee” discourse, Diem initially diminishes the significance of his return to Vietnam; he is blind to the extent to which he is still grieving his parents or other losses unassimilable into the symbolic order. For example, to the “officers at the airport,” Diem claims that the purpose of his visit is “[s]imply pleasure” (Huynh 121). He believes that the task of writing a toad poem to commemorate his parents will be easy (148), and that running into locals, who ask “where he had come from or what he had been up to all these years,” will be enjoyable (125). Importantly, these beliefs speak to Diem’s faith in Canada as the site of better lives, of social and material fulfillment (Ngo 75). This faith requires Diem to imagine that whatever he has sacrificed to come to Canada has been worth it. It also speaks to a larger trend amongst Vietnamese Canadians of coming to believe, in accordance with the claims of the “grateful refugee” discourse, that they are lucky—they have thrived under capitalism, while Vietnamese people have “suffered under communism” (Ngo 72). That Diem has internalized this assumption manifests in his efforts to uphold the image that “his life [in Canada] had been successful” (Huynh 124). Indeed, he has taken care to appear as well-to-do as possible. For example, Diem has “emptied his meagre life savings” and bought a new “shiny grey suit” (121); he has prepared a “large wad of American bills” to

hand out to less fortunate people or “street beggars” (127-28). Also, he has “rehearsed many times over what he would do if someone called out to him” (124). These measures indicate the extent to which Diem anticipates that Vietnamese locals will “remark on Diem’s own prosperity” (136). Furthermore, they suggest Diem’s investments in the “Vietnamese Canadian story of rags to riches,” a framework which effectively generates knowledge and makes sense of the world (Ngo 70). This framework not only distances Diem from the sorrow he feels over losing his parents, but also fills him with misguided ideas about Vietnam.

Diem’s experiences in Vietnam push him to discover what is neglected or made invisible by Canada’s “grateful refugee” discourse. Indeed, since this discourse is informed by Cold War ideology, it continues to portray Vietnam as fixed and unchanging—as communist and “absolutely devoid of any freedom” (Ngo 73). Walking down the modernized city streets, Diem is consequently surprised by what he sees. Instead of encountering a country wrecked by communism, Diem observes a “restored” and “chic” Hội An (Huynh 124), which is now “a UNESCO World Heritage Site”<sup>8</sup> and international tourist attraction (123). Though he insists that he is “not a tourist” (122), Diem finds himself like the “red-faced Koreans and Australians” taking in his surroundings with awe (123). Furthermore, after “buy[ing] a ticket to enter the Old Town” (123), Diem ascertains that little about this area is “how he remembered it” (124). “[T]he merchant houses,” which he had once “taken refuge in while hiding from a war” (123), are no longer ancient and dilapidated (124); they have been renovated and painted. Likewise, the shops, which used to “doubl[e] as homes” and “echo[] with bartering,” have now been transformed into upscale boutiques (124). The ritzy changes to the landscape have Diem struggling to find his bearings; however, he finds himself in an “alien place” for another reason (125). Despite Diem’s expectations, the locals show no curiosity in him: “none of them” recognize or approach him, and some look right through him like “he was a pane of glass.” On one level, Diem apprehends that the locals are too “full of their own concerns” to be interested in him; yet, on another level, Diem falls back on a Cold War way of thinking. This ideology convinces him that his exposure to “freedom” and capitalism in Canada has been a gift, which should receive attention. Thus, Diem can only reason that his lack of

reception in Hôi An is due to the Communist authorities instructing locals “to ignore his ilk” (125). Importantly, Diem’s use of the word “communist,” even though Vietnam is “now officially recognized as a Socialist state” (Ngo 76), signals his entrenchment in the logics and grammars of the Cold War. This entrenchment creates barriers to what he can readily acknowledge. Like other Vietnamese Canadians whose “subjectivity has been formulated by” the war (Ngo 68), Diem finds it difficult to accept the present-day realities of Vietnam.

Due to his assimilation into the “grateful refugee” discourse, Diem finds “strolling the Old Town” disorienting (Huynh 123). In effect, this experience threatens to confront him with what Chang identifies as realities “incomprehensible within [state-sanctioned] frameworks” (119), and thus “too dangerous to fully acknowledge” (120). To avoid “losing himself as a legible subject” (Chang 120), Diem realizes that he needs “to get away from the people on the street” (Huynh 125); he retreats into “a fancy-looking restaurant” and takes a seat as far away from the street as possible, in “its rear patio.” The restaurant provides Diem with a familiar setting, where his position as a paying customer accords him a certain place of power and privilege, especially in relation to the service staff. Here, where the social roles are clearly demarcated by the exchange of capital, Diem can further advertise his wealth and project an image of prosperity.

To restore his own sense of legitimacy, Diem attempts to assert his influence over the waitress. For example, upon learning that the restaurant will “not be open for another hour,” Diem makes a special request to “rest here awhile” until the lunch service commences (Huynh 125). In asking the waitress to show “him a table” and bring him “a beer fresh,” he relies upon his purchasing power to ensure that more respect and recognition be given to him. That Diem’s level of confidence increases within the restaurant is also evidenced in his imagining that the waitress “would be his daughter’s age, if he had one.” Indeed, his patronizing attitude, which construes her as a “weaker Other” (Ngo 75), is congruent with “racist and imperialist” perspectives embedded within the “grateful refugee” discourse (69). As Ngo describes it, this discourse celebrates Canadian refugees as “resourceful and successful,” while diminishing Vietnamese people as passive and obedient (69). At the restaurant, this dynamic plays out in Diem’s frequent demands

for the waitress' attention. Taking for granted that his affairs are more imperative than hers, he expects her to stop "clearing the dirty plates and glasses" (Huynh 125) and help him "figure out how long he could live in Vietnam with the traveller's cheques" (126). However, as she begins to ignore his calls to "come here" (127), she presents a challenge to his desired persona. To protect his image of wealth and importance, and to keep her from turning and walking away, he resorts to handing her American dollar bills: "For your time,' he said" (128). The impulsiveness with which he makes these displays of money speaks to Chang's observation that national subjects are often driven by a dread of becoming "illegible and illegitimate" (119). As Chang elaborates, this dread stems from deep-seated fear of being cast aside by the national symbolic for failing to live up to its narrativization of history (119).

While Diem desperately tries to uphold his image as a "grateful refugee," his private concerns about money intimate how he does not fit into this model of cohesion. For example, after struggling with exchange rates, Diem discovers that "even if he stayed in a thatched hut with a pounded mud floor," he could not afford to stay in Vietnam for long—"a few months at most" (Huynh 127). Faced with these results, Diem concedes to himself that he has worked and "scrimped his whole life," but that he has "little more than a bag of bones to show for it." In admitting his poverty, Diem gestures to how the ideology of Canada as the site of "success" and "well-being" "covers over an economic system that recruits and then discards . . . cheap, exploitable labour" (Chang 118). In this context, the description of Diem's money as "a bag of bones" is meaningful (127); as Chang explains, "[b]ones are . . . figures of remains" (117)<sup>9</sup>; they gesture to what cannot be assimilated into the symbolic order—what "is necessary for the national economy but must be disavowed by nationalist ideology" (118). In this case, Diem's savings are like remnants of an aging, used-up body, haunting traces of an underpaid and exploited life of labour. Diem's memories of working as a security guard in Vancouver further suggest how he has toiled in unwanted, low-wage jobs, rather than thrived in Canada's "capitalism [and] free enterprise" (Ngo 75). As Diem discloses, his face is no longer "fair but lined . . . from years standing out in the cold rain" (Huynh 134); the "rain dripping off the sides of his baseball cap and down his cheeks" has left deep ruts in his skin (135). The marks on Diem's body, which are reminiscent of tears running down his face,

reveal him as a “subject of loss” (Chang 120)—a subject who has repressed what cannot be symbolized, but who nonetheless suffers from “a condition of unresolved mourning” (112).<sup>10</sup> What Diem cannot fully recognize is that his “journey to freedom” did not necessarily entail an escape from exploitative work conditions; it did not lead to a life of liberty, prosperity, and fulfillment. Indeed, such a recognition would destabilize his very identity, which depends upon the Canadian nation-state. It is not surprising, then, that Diem decides to enjoy his time in Vietnam in luxury, despite his financial worries (Huynh 127). By wearing fine clothes and displaying his money, Diem mimics the operations of the “grateful refugee” discourse: he aims to subtract or hide whatever does not fit into the state-sanctioned discourse of progress and success, mainly the continuing reality of labour market racism and exploitation in Canada.

According to Chang, the formation of a “subject of loss” “is accompanied by a failure of language” (112). More specifically, the process whereby a subject buries their own losses to assimilate “into the symbolic of national history” (111) also produces an enduring void that words cannot fill (112). Diem’s interactions with the waitress thus emphasize not only what he is able to articulate, but also what he is unable to express—“what remains unspoken” (Chang 116). For instance, Diem’s patronizing attitude towards the waitress means that he finds it easy to admonish her for having a tattoo; he does not hesitate to share his opinion that her parents did not teach her “the proper ways” (Huynh 128). Alternatively, when the waitress inquires about his upbringing, Diem “choked on the mention of his parents, and had to take a sip of his beer fresh” (129). Diem’s momentary loss of language suggests a sadness that he cannot acknowledge. As Chang explains, when a subject has bottled-up experiences, their silence emerges “not from having nothing to say, but from having too much to say” (117). In this case, Diem’s silence “is not so much an absence” as a troubling presence (117); it is “the symptom of an excess,” of sorrow and hardship that cannot be represented in “the symbolic order” (117). Thus, Diem is relieved when the waitress turns the subject away from his parents (Huynh 129). Later in their conversation, however, he struggles again with “the remains of the unspoken,” producing another moment in which “[s]ilence appears to cover over” the surplus “that remains after the process of symbolization by the nation-state” (Chang 117).



Tellingly, Diem finds himself speechless when the waitress shares her recollections of the Vietnam War. Her narrative offers a perspective that is unrecognizable within the framework of the “grateful refugee,” as it challenges Cold War ideology and its “Manichaeic logics” (Ngo 68).<sup>11</sup> As Yuk Wah Chan and Thi Le Thu Tran observe, overseas Vietnamese, like Diem, often staunchly oppose communism as a dangerous and ever-present threat, expressing a binary way of thinking that divides Vietnam into “sides.” Alternatively, many local Vietnamese, like the waitress, voice frustration at these returning visitors who “lack information about the present situation” (Dung qtd. in Chan and Tran 1111).<sup>12</sup> This dynamic is evidenced when the waitress grows irritated by Diem’s anti-communist sentiments. Responding to his suggestion that she has been trained by her government to bite her tongue around foreigners, she clarifies that her reticence is a sign not of communist suppression but of patience, which she learned from her parents (Huynh 132). Stressing that they were not soldiers, she describes how her parents “carried shovels instead of guns,” fixing “parts of the [Ho Chi Minh] trail that the Americans bombed.” Unlike Cold War accounts, which “depicted United States military intervention as a blessing” (Espiritu 1700), the waitress’ story does not skip over the Vietnamese people “over whom (supposedly) this war was fought” (Sturken 62). By praising her parents’ perseverance (Huynh 132), the waitress commemorates civilians for their efforts to rebuild in the face of the US “carpet bombing of entire regions in Vietnam” (Ngo 75); she also underscores the costs borne by these civilians when she confesses that her parents died in one such bombing (Huynh 132). The waitress hence urges Diem to see what is “veiled behind discourses of democracy, freedom, and success”—the devastation caused by American atrocities (Ngo 75-76). Her indictment of US violence, moreover, implicates Canada, who acted as “the chief arms dealer for the United States” during the war (Nguyen, “Vietnamese Canadian” 399). It is little wonder, then, that Diem struggles to register the waitress’ proposition that “I owe *this* life to [civilians like her parents]. We all do” (Huynh 133). Her celebration of Vietnamese civilians as heroes of the war, rather than American soldiers or Canadian rescuers, exceeds the symbolic order of the “grateful refugee” discourse: “[A]lthough thoughts were welling up in his mind from what she had just said, he could not find the words for them” (133). Diem’s loss of

words points to what Vietnamese Canadians must repress to enable their national subjectivity; specifically, they must distance themselves from the experiences and perspectives of local Vietnamese, those “lost and missing subjects . . . made invisible” by Cold War narratives of the Vietnam War (Espiritu 1702).

Diem’s bewildering exchanges with the waitress inspire him to consider what has been “covered over by history’s transformation of catastrophe into progress” (Chang 116). Confronted with realities hidden underneath the “grateful refugee” discourse, Diem leaves the restaurant desiring to see “someone from his past,” someone whom he has previously tried to forget (Huynh 134). Walking to “Mr. Fang’s tailor shop” (138), Diem fears not finding the tailor’s daughter who, during the war, used to “come up to the attic” and leave him food (140); he regrets not having “ever told her he was headed to Canada” (142). Upon reconnecting with the daughter, furthermore, Diem recalls their youthful flirtations, causing his eyes to “soften [with] the sting of memory” (139). These powerful reactions suggest that the daughter, now called Madame Nguyen, is “a specific love-object” (Chang 120) whose loss Diem has had to suppress to assimilate into Canada’s symbolic. Madame Nguyen’s responses to him, moreover, increasingly undermine his “grateful refugee” discourse, which reasons that he had to escape from Vietnam and separate from his loved ones. For example, when Diem tells Madame Nguyen that he is planning to visit his parents’ spirits, she challenges him, “Do you even know where they are?” (Huynh 144); she intimates that, in leaving, Diem condemned his parents to an “afterlife wandering aimlessly among strangers” (145). Even though Madame Nguyen’s comments might appear as superstition, it is worthy to consider how they signal the limits of Diem’s perspective. As Chang suggests in a different context, spirits have a “haunting quality,” such “that their stories remain incomprehensible within” state-sanctioned “narratives of progress” and “frameworks of modernity” (118-19). Meaningfully, what emerges from Diem’s conversation with Madame Nguyen is that he “could have stayed with” his parents (Huynh 145)—it was a choice, not a necessity, for him to go to Canada. Madame Nguyen thus motivates Diem to wonder “what his life could have been” (144); he could have “seen his parents while they were still alive” (143). Additionally, Madame Nguyen criticizes Diem’s idea to write a toad poem to commemorate his parents; as

she explains, the toad poem is inspired by an old folk tale<sup>33</sup> and contrasts the “romantic” notion that poets die for their “genius” with the more realistic view that they “die from being crazy, poor, or drunk” (144). In this way, she implies that Diem’s way of honouring his parents is fanciful. While his toad poem is meant to demonstrate his aptitude and success, it operates as a diversion, much like the “grateful refugee” discourse, preventing Diem from conceding his losses and recognizing more disturbed realities.

Ultimately, Diem’s inability to compose his toad poem belies the sequential logic of the “grateful refugee” discourse, a logic that suggests that “the loss and terrors” of the war have been left behind and fully replaced by a life of freedom and prosperity in Canada (Ngo 69-70). As Chang elucidates, this kind of logic, which assumes the “forward march of” progress (116), is closely tied to the horizontal time of the nation, whose “modern trajectories of development” conceal the reverberations of past harms and sufferings (111). Nonetheless, Diem’s actions at the end of the story show that he is increasingly drawn into the past, desiring to re-encounter memories and feelings that he has previously avoided. This desire speaks to a multi-layered concept of time, where the past, far from being over, lives on—it continues to emerge and influence the present. Diem’s meeting with Madame Nguyen emboldens him; he wants to remember his parents and find out what happened to them. Departing from the tailor shop, Diem hails a cab and heads directly for his parents’ village. Although he dreads what he might “find in the place of the grand old house,” he ascertains “there was no turning back” (Huynh 146). Diem’s determination to recover his family’s history further confirms an “attachment to the past” (Chang 115), despite his outward conformity to dominant narratives “as formulated by the nation-state” (111). Moreover, like other Vietnamese Canadian subjects who remain haunted (111), Diem is only starting to explore a dialogue between past and present—only beginning to realize the extent to which state-sanctioned narratives always produce an unresolvable remainder. Indeed, one might expect the story to reveal the parents’ fate at its narrative climax. However, the story significantly ends with Diem still in transit to the village, reminiscing about his childhood. His backward-gazing thoughts suggest that, instead of arriving at a reassuring future, he is being “propelled into a past that remains unknown and radically open” (Chang 115). By not providing definite answers

about the parents, the story offers no comforting sense of closure; it gestures to what Espiritu identifies as the enduring need “to bring into being what is neglected or made invisible or thought dead—to see the living effects of what seems to be over and done with” (1702).<sup>14</sup>

In the cab, Diem’s thought process suggests a deep-rooted relationship to the “grateful refugee” discourse: at first, he recalls memories that have been narrated by this discourse; however, he gradually begins to access recollections that he has been obligated to forget. For example, Diem’s initial recollections centre on his parents’ wealth and status, which are signified through external characteristics such as the father’s “courtier hands” and the mother’s “silk *ao dai* dresses” (Huynh 147). The father’s hands convey that “[i]t was other villagers who bent over to harvest” his rice paddies, while the mother’s dresses communicate her imperial tastes and fondness for delicacies. These remembrances are compatible with the “grateful refugee” discourse, which upholds a capitalist belief system in which “greater freedoms” and “better lives” are connected to private property and capital accumulation (Ngo 74-75).<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Diem does not become emotional while recalling these aspects of his parents’ lives; he refers to them only as “the most simple facts” (Huynh 148).

Alternatively, what generates a touching response from Diem is his recollection of “walk[ing] barefoot in the wet paddy in the early evenings . . . just the three of them . . . for the pleasure of the mud around their ankles, for the feel of coolness in those humid evenings” (Huynh 147). This recollection, with its humble sense of togetherness, points to losses—of love, care, and intimacy—that Diem cannot resolve by pursuing a life, and attaining money and prestige, in Canada. At this point, Diem makes the realization that he has “carried in him for years some unwritten lines about [his parents], like so many pebbles hidden on the floor of his mouth beneath the tongue” (147-48). In this moment, Diem likens his unresolved feelings to stones, gesturing to the burden of losing his parents, as well as the pain of not being able to articulate this loss. Though Diem has previously consoled himself that writing a toad poem would ease his pain, he becomes aware that his “errant” sentiments about his parents “would never cohere into a poem” (148). Importantly, these sentiments are “errant” because they are outside of, and cannot be symbolized within, the “grateful refugee” discourse that structures

his subjectivity. Thus, Diem cannot accord his feelings “ready-made form and momentum.” They do not translate into narratives of worthwhile sacrifices and material progress: “In the end all he could write down would be the most simple facts of his parent’s lives, and that the moments they all shared together were just too brief. They breathed and loved him and each other, he left them, and soon after they were no more.” While the Vietnam War caused “the destruction of kinship ties” (Ngo 78), the discursive frame of the “grateful refugee” creates limits to what Vietnamese Canadians can acknowledge and grieve. This discursive frame ensures the continuation of “war-created divisions” as well as “the baggage of trauma” (79). Diem’s unwritten toad poem therefore points to perceptible yet inarticulable losses; once again, his silence emerges as a strategy for dealing with “the excess remains of the national symbolic” and for making visible what might “otherwise remain discounted and uncoun­ted” (Chang 128).

### **Point of Departure**

In examining the theme of return in Huynh’s story “Toad Poem,” this paper has endeavoured to disrupt the “grateful refugee” discourse, which influentially constructs the Vietnamese subject in relation to a supposedly innocent and benevolent Canada. This discourse stipulates that Canada has “gifted” Vietnamese refugees with a new life in a welcoming and prosperous society, and that these refugees are consequently deeply indebted to their rescuers. The prevalence of this discourse has made it difficult for scholars working within Asian Canadian studies to imagine discussions beyond what has already been deemed readily understandable about Vietnamese Canadian experience. Thus, my analysis of “Toad Poem” has explored an alternative framework for interpreting this experience. In particular, by examining a politics of return, I have reflected on how Diem’s journey to Hôị An points to active connections between former refugees, their homeland, and its history. Crucially, these connections complicate the sequential logic undergirding the “grateful refugee” discourse, a logic suggesting that refugees have simply left their war-torn “communist” country behind to flourish in Canada. Indeed, Diem’s desire to memorialize his parents speaks to unresolved feelings and attachments that, though repressed, continue to inform his actions and decisions. By illuminating these ongoing negotiations

between past and present, Canada and Vietnam, Diem's journey gestures to unrecognized complexities, which cannot be incorporated within the dominant narrative of refugee rescue and success. As a part of this journey, moreover, Diem increasingly encounters local Vietnamese people and realities that challenge his "grateful refugee" perspective. By showing the limitations of such a perspective, the story invites questions about the fallacies and tensions produced by Canada's state-sanctioned discourse and its stubborn reliance upon Cold War interpretations of the Vietnam War. In conclusion, then, the theme of return—as it emerges in "Toad Poem" and more generally within Huynh's short story collection—offers an important point of departure for thinking about Vietnamese Canadian identity. As I have aimed to demonstrate, this theme can inspire a shift in focus—away from simplistic ideas of gratitude and patriotism and towards more probing inquiries about the losses and struggles, both material and symbolic, suffered by the Vietnamese refugees who have resettled in Canada.

## NOTES

- 1 For discussion about Southeast Asian Canadian literary works, see Christine Kim and Christopher Lee's "The Cold War and Asian Canadian Writing" and Joanne Leow's "Transpacific Spaces (East and Southeast) Asian Canadian Literature." For in-depth readings of Vietnamese Canadian literary works, as well as preliminary ideas about a Vietnamese Canadian literary tradition, see Vinh Nguyen's "Refugee Gratitude" and "Vietnamese Canadian Refugee Aesthetics."
- 2 "The gift of freedom" is a reference to the work of Asian American scholar Mimi Thi Nguyen. In *The Gift of Freedom*, she uses this concept to emphasize the contradictions inherent in US accounts of the Vietnam War. As she points out, these accounts portray the "rescue" of refugees as a generous "gift," positioning Vietnamese subjects as perpetually indebted to the US for their "freedom." This indebtedness, in turn, works to limit the freedom of Vietnamese subjects by encouraging their unquestioning adherence to governmental rules and regulations. In reflecting on how "the gift of freedom" is applicable to the Canadian context, Ngo suggests the ways that Canada uses similar accounts of the Vietnam War to distinguish itself as a refugee saviour and to promote a specific Vietnamese Canadian identity defined by ideas of gratitude and patriotism.
- 3 Western imperialism refers to the influence of Western nations, particularly France and the US, in Vietnam. In 1859, France captured Saigon and then extended its colonial rule to modern-day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. French colonial policy ensured that colonial rulers occupied the "topmost positions" in society, while creating an elite class of Vietnamese landlords to oversee a larger class of landless tenants (Smith 459). Resistance to colonial rule reached its height following World War II, when an independence movement led by the Viet Minh engaged in a series of guerrilla wars against the French. The wars ended with the 1954 Geneva Accords, which divided Vietnam into two military

zones: the northern zone to which Viet Minh forces withdrew, and the southern zone where French troops and their supporters remained. In response to a communist-led insurgency movement, called the Viet Cong, which was trying to reunify the country, the US became increasingly involved in the region, sending financial and military aid to the south. As Ngo indicates, American imperialism in Vietnam was largely justified “in the name of ‘containing communism’ as the physical and ideological threat to neoliberal democracy” (68).

- 4 Though Juliana Chang’s article examines Chinese American experience through an analysis of Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*, her discussion of state-sanctioned discourses, and how they produce subjectivity and history, is helpful when thinking about questions of repression, memory, and identity. As Chang stresses, the different family members in *Bone* show signs of continuing struggles and sorrows, which belie the national narrative that racialized immigrants “follow a trajectory from initial hardship to eventual fulfillment and belonging” in America (113). Using Chang’s theorizations about how to make “palpable what has been encrypted by subject and nation,” I explore the specific implications of a “grateful refugee” discourse on Vietnamese Canadians via a close reading of Huynh’s story.
- 5 Nguyen suggests that Canada’s “forgetting of complicity shares some maneuvers with American amnesia” (“Vietnamese Canadian” 400). For example, both nations rely on a process of incorporating the past into a national symbolic that only “mime[s] remembering” (400). Yet, Nguyen finds that Canada has been more successful than the US in distancing itself from wrongdoings. He thus sees a significant difference between Canadian and American Vietnamese literary works. Mainly, he asserts that the Canadian texts have no representations of “‘ghosts’ or ‘syndromes’ that return to disturb and puncture the national imaginary” (399). However, this paper complicates this belief, to some extent, by showing how Huynh’s story points to silenced spectres or buried realities that have indeed returned to discount Canada’s narration of history.
- 6 As Chang readily acknowledges, her exploration of how such psychosocial phenomena function in Fay Myenne Ng’s novel *Bone* and in Vietnamese refugee communities more broadly draws heavily on psychoanalytic theory, not only Freud’s work on mourning and melancholy but especially its later elaboration in Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török’s influential *The Shell and the Kernel*.
- 7 Espiritu cites this phrase from Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*.
- 8 Hoi An became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. Since gaining this recognition as a historic Southeast Asian trading post, the district has seen a marked increase in tourism. As a 2008 UNESCO Impact Report divulges, the surge in tourist arrivals has contributed to more employment and greater prosperity in the area; however, it has also produced some negative impacts. For example, residents express concern about the intensification of local “traffic, noise, and air pollution” (UNESCO 61). Also, the “touristification” of the Old Town has led some scholars, like Nir Avieli, to comment on how the local landscape and economy is radically changing and putting pressure on the traditional lifestyle and culture (51-52).
- 9 Chang is discussing the figure of bones in Ng’s novel, but her insights apply to Nguyen’s text as well.
- 10 The latter half of this sentence paraphrases Abraham and Török, whom Chang is citing.
- 11 Ngo’s citation here is from Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire*.
- 12 Here Chan and Tran are citing the former Vietnamese prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

- 13 In his acknowledgements, Huynh writes, “The folk stories that appear in ‘Toad Poem’ and ‘Mayfly’ are found in *Vietnamese Folk-Tales: Satire and Humour* by Huu Ngoc” (262).
- 14 Here Espiritu is paraphrasing Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, pp. 17-23.
- 15 Here Ngo is citing former Canadian Member of Parliament Peter Kent.

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# Refugees and Other Impossibilities

## Imagining Apocalypse

**T**his essay takes place at two different points in time. The first is in the immediate aftershock of the election of Trump, during which many of us in the US were learning that you don't know you're living in the Before until there is an After. The second—we can call them chronotopes, to mark the rule of genre on these reflections—is four years later, in month fourteen-and-counting of a pandemic and the getting-to-know-you stage of a new presidency. I pause in each of these moments to sift through refugee feeling: both the expressive set about (being) refugees, and the more spidey-sense kind that runs a refugee's buying habits and storage proclivities. It hasn't been so long that the US fashioned itself as a state of refuge,<sup>1</sup> but I submit to you that with 2016, its historical imagination mutated with whole new panicked communities edging for flight.

What I want to do here is feel my way through both of those moments—keeping the telling of that raw shock intact, and then confronting the accretions that fifteen hundred days of headlines have wrought. Not a traditional academic offering, this essay pores through cultural texts of apocalypse for messages from the future, and the tea leaves of my own scattered senses for a reading of the present. Half time capsule, half forensic report, it is at its heart a grappling: We who are shaped by our refugee pasts, what will we make of our refugee futures as the world ends?

## I. FRESH HELL

On the evening of November 8, 2016, with election results putting out the lights, something became thinkable to me that had until then felt impossible. Because my parents had run pell-mell across a Saigon tarmac in 1975, with me and little else in hand, I grew up on loss so engulfing I could never bear to uproot again. If California were a small town, I'd be the girl at the high school reunion who had never left. Yet these days, as if a lever has been flipped, I see myself as if in a movie trailer in my mind, strapping my life to my back, with my husband taking our son's hands, and picking our way through rubble land to some glimmer of safety. Nuclear war, racial holocaust, or social collapse—these dystopian premises don't seem so far-fetched now, and so neither does the possibility that I could become a refugee once again. I think Walter Benjamin would find it fair to call the election, for those of us on the losing side, a catastrophe in the historical sense—following his definition, “a catastrophic event being one that destabilizes the way in which we see the world, and leads to an ‘end’ of the world as it is known and cognized” (Baishya 2). Rendered in fiction, such events are often synonymous with apocalypse. So I have since found myself circling the intersection where postapocalyptic science fiction meets the figure of the refugee.

Yet, that catastrophe came as a shock exposes me, I think, for my model minority imagination. What a storyscape of flawed givens. Even when chosen but especially when forced, loss of the magnitude of migration is supposed to be the inciting incident of Asian American identity: the thing that launches our American storylines into motion. And then as model minorities we are to scale ever upwards away from that moment, redeeming its hardships with each generation . . . striving asymptotically to belong. Or as refugees, we may be allowed to flounder in uprooting's intergenerational inheritance, trauma encoding itself into our dreams or DNA and crippling us out of the gate, but subject no less to the ontology of migration as singular, incomparable. The prospect of apocalypse as our narrative future is a return: to displaced person, to internee. So, Asian America, what now?

Undecided, I linger here on two questions. On the one hand, what might the American imagination of refugees, Asian and otherwise, suggest about its investment in apocalypse? On the other hand, where does a refugee

imagination plot apocalypse, especially from the narrative position of the model minority?

### **Americans for Apocalypse**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines their charge as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. . . . [Refugees] cannot return home or are afraid to do so” (“What Is a Refugee?”). UNHCR also reported in June 2015 that global forced displacement had reached a record high—and has no doubt only continued to rise.<sup>2</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen calls the refugee “a historical effect of liberal governance and statecraft,” where to be without the rights, protections, or claims of a state is to be “an abnormality,” “a terrible exception,” a “problem” (57-58). To these descriptions I’d add that “refugee” is a relative position. Those who occupy it trace a trajectory from devastation to another place that is symbolically whole, another people from whom succour is hoped. As we know, the dominant US narrative of the refugee is not told from that supplicant point of view; in the popular imagination of this global superpower, “we” are those who offer or withhold political and other asylum, not “they” who seek it. If it is generally true that *migrants* figure in multiculturalist narratives “as being rescued from their homelands to live in a tolerant North American space” (Patterson and Troeung 94-95), refugees are consummately that, if they are lucky. So when Hollywood dreams up the end of the world, the stories take a particular cast.

Postapocalyptic tales abound in mainstream US film and literature; in the film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, the nature of the extinction event is unclear but its effect is total. Still, this genre is speculative fiction: a cautionary tale of what-ifs starring Sarah Connor. Each of the marquee titles I have in mind—*The Road*, *The Walking Dead*, *The Terminator*<sup>3</sup>—is exemplary of its form: Western dystopias “almost invariably . . . creat[e] worlds no more than a temporal step from the reader’s own and thus adjacent enough to *now* to be responsive to and shaped by contemporary decisions” (M. Brown 31). Yet, for all that such stories string their dark “near-futures” as if “umbilically” from the present (33), these projections are strangely *not* meditations on the global displacements that they most immediately resemble. For all that their characters wander broken landscapes,

nation-states in shambles around them, they may be nomads, but not refugees. For all their warnings to avert “hyperboles of evil” (Marius Conkin qtd. in M. Brown 33), such stories may themselves pose a danger: the refusal to acknowledge that evil is not hyperbolic, and dystopia is already here.

Indeed, it is telling—no, incriminating—that the Western culture industry plots apocalypse exclusively in a (pending) future, night to this (still) day. In a parallel reality, Indigenous environmental activists and scholars would remind us that their communities “already inhabit what [their] ancestors would have likely characterized as a dystopian future” (Whyte 207): that whether it be military campaigns of alien invasion and extermination, the devastation of habitats, or the statelessness of “forced removal and relocation, containment on reservations” (209), Native American peoples have spent the last five hundred years post-nightfall. By that token, the global present is asplinter with timelines sent careening—by atom bomb or Agent Orange, slave traders or carpet bombing—through end times.

Yet strictly speaking, in most mainstream dystopian fantasy, the refugee as stateless churn does not put in an appearance. Exceptions include *Children of Men* (the P. D. James novel and the film version), in which the species has become infertile, and zombie flick *28 Days Later*. In the former, the “majority of the world’s nations have disintegrated, yet ‘Britain soldiers on,’ spurring mass populations to seek asylum there” (J. Brown 126). *Children of Men* visually references, through depiction of “cages and internment camps,” “the hundreds of detention centers that spread across Europe, set up to indefinitely detain immigrants and asylum seekers from the global south” (126). At the risk of jumping to generalizations, if these films seem to acknowledge rather than entirely to deflect a refugee present, it may be that they are set in a first-world nation with a difference: the landscape of the United Kingdom has known holocausts in modern memory, and now is visibly pocked with refugee camps, leading already to a sense of apocalypse as palimpsest rather than terminus. Still, even these rare projections are not stories of a beset nation *handling* its refugee crises<sup>4</sup>; narratively they are driven to find the biological “cure” to extinction, rather than to understand (as recurring necessity or human choice) the living dead.

That the American culture industry imagines no tragedies but its own is not worth belabouring. Likely more interesting, however, is the point that

the categorical absence of refugees in Hollywood's postapocalyptic fiction also has to do with such stories allowing for nowhere else in the world to go. Whether dealt by zombie or artificially intelligent machine, that which can end the American world spares no nation. Brooking no superior survivor, the exceptionalist US in its worst nightmares cannot be a "sending" nation. Which is further to say that *The Walking Dead* or *The Terminator* are not parables of a nation in crisis; they are stories simultaneously of Mankind (i.e., humanity in the universal), and of the Individual with maybe his Also Very Exceptional Friends. That is, "Apocalypse as a literary genre, as well as a political and religious agenda . . . tends toward punishment for transgression and salvation of an elect" (Doyle 99). Hegemony's postapocalyptic imagination narratively shakes out the deserving, separating the heroes from the masses. But "refugee" is not an individuated figure. We come in thousands, denominations of legion—looking like the punished rather than the deserving.

It does seem to me, then, that in the popular lexicon of apocalypse, zombies are the pre-eminent, culturally *unconscious* manifestation of the refugee horde, as a quite particularized symbol of xenophobia. After his father-in-law's win, Jared Kushner revealed in an interview with *Forbes* that, using big-data mining and precision social media-marketing methods, their campaign had targeted viewers of "*The Walking Dead* for people worried about immigration" (Bertoni).<sup>5</sup> To some, this revelation seemed illogical: walkers (in the show's lingo) "aren't foreign invaders, they're just other American men and women . . . [While] weird and scary . . . they [don't] really pose any threat to the core American values that the main group of survivors represents" (Barsanti). But citizenship is a quibble in the balance of emotional analogy. The sheer impunity with which zombies may be killed, in untold number, echoes nothing so much as the bare life of Oriental combatants from (films about) the Vietnam War. In his aptly named *Nothing Ever Dies*, Viet Nguyen endorses the same metaphor, citing "*Night of the Living Dead*, where a white militia of good old boys wipes out the zombies in what they call a 'search and destroy operation'" (174). That a red-blooded American's loved ones stand also to be killed and/or turned into *Homo sacer* speaks all the more to the sense of infiltration and infection that defines zombie threat in its current form: "[T]he rhythm of the zombie is the rhythm of *diaspora*—the spread, the sporing, of zombie culture as cultural politics"

(Comentale 278). Readings of *28 Days Later* see the zombie as “an allegory of . . . post 9/11 anxieties about terrorism,” i.e., “that anyone could be a suicide bomber or a hijacker” (Kyle Bishop qtd. in Baishya 9), such that “the fear is not only one of annihilation. It is also the fear of invasion by the ‘other’” (7). In this allegorical form, gates slammed shut on the refugee as the possibly infected—carriers of terrorism, stealthily incubating—are justified: “pitiless self-interest” celebrated as necessity in what Gerry Canavan calls “case against helping the poor’ zombie ethics” (445). Large-scale indifference to the suffering of refugee children is perfectly legible in this imagination: there are no innocents among zombies.

If it seems I am imagining intense opposition to an easy given, this is because recent scholarship in the zombie boom has tended to take its political-economic symbolism in a different direction: toward seeing these figures as dehumanized subjects of debt, labour, or consumerism (see Fojas or Comaroff and Comaroff for examples; Canavan or Kozel for critiques). But I believe that such arguments are misreadings insofar as they assert zombies to be (unconscious cultural) representations of “us” viewers.<sup>6</sup> As Canavan argues, exegeses which take the zombie for

the proletarianized subject[s] of late capitalism . . . [are] troubled and necessarily incomplete. The audience for zombie narrative, after all, never imagines *itself* to be zombified; zombies are always other people, which is to say they are Other people, which is to say they are people who are not quite people at all. . . . The zombie’s mutilation is not one that we easily imagine for “ourselves.” (Canavan 432-33)

Indeed, one such exegesis concludes, “Although we have tried to subdue the fantasy of spectral labor by recourse to historical reason, *its key animus still eludes us*. What, finally, are we to make of its symbolic excess?” (Comaroff and Comaroff 798, emphasis added). Apparently, to bypass the fact that zombies are aggressively, physically repulsive is to obscure from one’s own analysis the animating pleasures that drive the fantasy: the pleasure of killing them, and the pleasure of surviving them.

Many Obama supporters counted ourselves among the fans of these fabulations; we did not take them seriously as apocalyptic visions. We explained them as secularized, *post*-apocalyptic tales, which “as a contemporary modification of apocalypse . . . withholds revelation in favour of playing out scenarios of human survival in the ruins of the old world”

(Doyle 100). We took them for action-adventure parables, in which we, too, can fancy ourselves part of a diverse “group of survivors . . . [exploring] social and environmental breakdown at a subjective level,” along with the “possibilities that emerge” in that wake (Doyle 104, 101). But it turns out that we have underestimated the horror of this genre, just as we underestimated the “animus” of conservative America. If I may call back a quote: “Apocalypse as a literary genre, *as well as a political and religious agenda* . . . tends toward punishment for transgression and salvation of an elect” (Doyle 99, emphasis added). In its older, fundamentalist rendering, apocalypse is already about massive cleansing of the ungodly, the unworthy; in the form embraced by the radical right of a resurgent white supremacy, the cleansing is explicitly racial.

A web search for the Christian Identity millennialist movement yields scholarship primarily from the 1990s through to the early 2000s. Christian Identity is a strain of religious ideology with considerable overlap in survivalism, many of whose known associates (e.g., David Duke, Tom Metzger) have come to permeate our newsfeeds in the past year under the new flag of the “alt-right.” To read Michael Barkun’s article on this breed of millennialism (published in 1990 and entitled “Racist Apocalypse”) is to discover an eerie prognostication, too late. Christian Identity’s “followers see white Americans as a ‘dispossessed majority.’ Their resentments against the civil rights movement, civil rights legislation and court decisions, and affirmative action programs have thus been channeled into religious myths” (Barkun 126). Because in this aggrieved view “history itself is a prolonged crime for which only the most awful retribution will suffice,” the ardently foretold end time is no less than an “extended revenge fantasy” (128)—and the open-season extermination of zombies courtesy of *The Walking Dead* its emotionally compelling placeholder. The survivalist’s stance toward apocalypse is not to avert it, but to welcome (even hasten) it.<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek names “the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the [capitalist] system itself . . . and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions” as “four riders of the apocalypse” (qtd. in Doyle 102)—but in millennialism, these horsemen are not the nightmare. They are the delivery mechanisms of a “racially purified future” (Barkun 130), from the nightmare that is the now. The Christian Identity faithful are counselled to stock supplies and prepare escape routes, so as to ride



out the “catastrophe and chaos . . . [that are] harbingers of the millennial consummation” (124). A weekend retreat might include field training on how to garrote or knife one of the “mud peoples” (Mitchell 123) with good technique:

Pull the head backward quickly, kick the legs out, slice *twice*, once across, once back again. Now on the ground, push his face into the dirt. They often make gurgling sounds. Thrust down past the shoulder blade into the heart. (Mitchell 129)

A target with more specific vulnerabilities may, of course, require different entry points and a thrust or stab rather than a slicing motion, but practice is key to effective form in either case:

An upwards thrust through the lower jaw and mouth avoids the skull entirely, although one must get very close to the target, and the motion [is] cumbersome and unnatural. A person can use their superior speed to dodge a zombie lunge and move around behind it to stab right into the brain stem. (“Knife”)

The past six months have seen a new genre in media and scholarship: the horrified retrospective, rewinding to June 2015 and beyond to trace clues we missed, signs foretelling the success of Trump’s campaign.<sup>8</sup> Critical reconstructions of this kind certainly existed before, but have come into their own since November 2016: they take the reeling mind from that Oedipal moment of anagnorisis, of awful realization, and march it through the evidence that paved its fate. Evident here in the American apocalyptic imagination, too, were the signs of catastrophe in the making—about as subtle as a knife to the brain. It occurs to me now to wonder, in the crush of Oedipus’ anguish at learning his vanquished enemy’s true identity and his own, whether there wasn’t also embarrassment, shame, at having laughed off the oracles as meant for someone else.

### **Alien vs. Predator . . . and the Model Minority**

Yet for all that enmity, there are ways that survivalist and refugee imaginations mirror one another. The following compare-and-contrast exercise is not sponsored by Derrida, however, in that it hopes for more than mutual de(con)struction.

Survivalists come in different strains, varied by class and education, by region and locale, by degrees of resignation or enthusiasm for apocalypse—

and assuredly, by violence and racial virulence. What unites them is the principle of preparedness:

One premise is common to all survivalism: trouble is coming, but manageable trouble. The talked-of cataclysm ahead may destroy, confuse, destabilize, but only selectively. Necessities now available from traditional sources . . . may dwindle. But prepared survivalists can fill the gaps, for themselves and perhaps for others. (Mitchell 30)

Personal resources and local norms dictate what forms preparedness takes, but surely stockpiling food is *sine qua non*. For some, hoarding gold and silver feels like insurance against economic collapse (Mitchell 18). Yet all must confront the problem of protecting what they stash—tools, weapons, necessities—from postapocalyptic poachers. “[B]uild sequestered nooks and crannies ‘in houses, cars, motorcycles, bicycles—even one’s own body;’” the survivalist books advise (Mitchell 32). For some, digging in is the overarching strategy: bomb shelters, fortified homes. For others, hiding is step two, after first escaping to stocked retreats in geographically strategic locations.

None of this figures on appealing for aid from foreign governments; none look to the option of integrating into a new nation or people. Survivalists bank on no surviving nation-states, and have no plans to become other than American.

Responses to (varying) refugee experiences also fall into more than one set of patterns. Some of us hoard. Teachers find it “not uncommon for refugee children” to stockpile “books, clothing or food,” perhaps gathering discards of this last from the school cafeteria: “It was difficult to tell if she was trying to save food for a later time, or perhaps for another family member” (Szente et al. 16). This behaviour is explained as a holdover response to *past* hunger: “[P]rior to obtaining refugee status, they never knew when they would eat again” (16). But of course hoarding is even more specifically a response to possible *future* privation. Much has been written about the exile’s complicated emotional inhabiting of time, and I have elsewhere<sup>9</sup> appreciated the truth of Hamid Naficy’s descriptions of nostalgia, both for the past (retrospective nostalgia) and for the present as something constantly being lost (prospective nostalgia): “It is as though the present cannot be appreciated without projecting it onto the future as a loss, which thereby creates a nostalgia for it” (148). The refugee is of course also an exile, and

this poetic sipping of loss is certainly one mode of inoculation, a kind of daily hygiene that fancies to keep the system conditioned, battle-ready for pain. But nostalgia is a peacetime practice; hoarding operates at a more primal level, in an animal brain. The refugee is coined in cataclysm, and does not harbour hopes that such trouble is manageable. For refugees—unlike survivalists, and certainly unlike Christian Identity millennialists (who claim to be the true Israelites)—preparedness is not a narrative of Passover; it is a narrative not of being Chosen, but of being lucky, that time.

Refugees have also been known to stash gold, silver, or jewellery, though from an ongoing distrust of banks and other institutions that perhaps stems more from their perceived (lack of) integrity than from their (lack of) longevity (Song 712-14). Nonetheless, in multiple or even figurative forms a stash can serve various modes of preparedness. For Thi Bui's family in *The Best We Could Do*, the stash consolidates all of the things that must be snatched up on evacuation: "Our most important possession was this unassuming brown file folder—in which my parents placed the most essential pieces of our identity" (297). The night a fire breaks out in the apartment below them, Bui says that she "learned what my parents had been *preparing me for* my whole life," i.e., the content of her "inheritance: the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to run when the shit hits the fan" (304-05, emphasis added). She calls this her "refugee reflex" (305)—meaning that her inheritance is nothing other than the preparedness itself, the refugee identity, and its current claims to federal asylum: that folder containing "[o]ur birth certificates, translated and notarized, our green cards, and our Social Security cards" (297). For this family, surviving means flight, not fight; it means being *poised* for flight, as if refugee status is not one and done but permanently provisional.

The narrator of Kim Thúy's *Ru* uses strikingly similar language, but for a different permutation of the reflex:

My parents . . . won't have any money for us to inherit, but I think they've already passed on to us the wealth of their memories, allowing us to grasp the beauty of a flowering wisteria, the delicacy of a word, the power of wonder. Even more, they've given us feet for walking to our dreams, to infinity. (41)

Thúy's model of inheritance seems to comprise a non-materialistic vision of the American Dream narrative (her term even though she is Canadian):

personal fulfillment powered by ancestral gifts. What sense of serene mobility the excerpt above imparts is quickly corroded, however, by its very next sentences: “[What my parents have given us] may be enough baggage to continue the journey on our own. Otherwise, we would pointlessly clutter our path with possessions to transport, to insure, to take care of” (41).

Baggage, clutter—this betrays anxiety and uncertainty about a path that must be navigated with difficulty, along which few liabilities can be borne. And with its next words, the passage has in the span of five sentences unravelled from gratitude to fear:

A Vietnamese saying has it that “Only those with long hair are afraid, for no one can pull the hair of those who have none.” And so I try as much as possible to acquire only those things that don’t extend beyond the limits of my body.

In any case, since our escape by boat, we learned how to travel very light. (41-42)

Gratitude, Mimi Thi Nguyen has clearly shown, is the definitive posture of the refugee—but of course it is not ours exclusively. The first excerpt of Thúy’s passage might just as easily have been slipped out of a post-1965 Chinese or Korean immigrant family narrative, with hardships and gratuities transacted on a retail basis: this set of pasts in exchange for a handful of futures. In the ensuing portions, however, inter-ethnic similarities peel away to reveal an identity poorly cohered to the model minority trajectory: one manoeuvring as if to evade threats both past and future. In her everyday life, as part of her upward mobility, this narrator’s imagined reference point is a safety check on Cormac McCarthy’s postapocalyptic road.

As someone who burrows with their accumulated safeties, I have not seen myself in more motile refugee figures until now. When wildfires threatened parts of Santa Barbara some years ago, I crammed the trunk of my car with skirts and shoes, because a functional wardrobe is wicked hard to rebuild. But in actuality, she who walks toward her middle-class dream on a road drawn by apocalypse lives in the same timeframe as I do, as I build my middle-class home in the pattern of bomb shelters, stacked with flats of toilet paper.

I dare say, though, that Asian refugees have been to other Asian Americans as survivalists are to white liberals—ativistic cousins, exasperating in our doomsday preparations. In the “chronopolitics” of liberal capitalism, with its developmental timeline routing the subject from “colonial dependency, primitive culture, or abject poverty” to modernity (M. Nguyen 47, 44), we

Southeast Asians have continued to lag sociologically behind the Eastern model. We have also thus far plotted apocalypse differently. Researching this paper, I searched for Southeast Asian refugee speculative fiction in vain, turning up none that cast dystopic or cataclysmic themes in the future hypothetical. Why bother, maybe, when stories of the mundane present or the very non-fictional past already contain within them that dystopian hypothetical: the fallout of cataclysm running like a shadow code beneath character and plot.

## II. TIME AND TIME AGAIN

The structure of US politics feels cruelly provisional now: a bureaucracy of massive heft and yet somehow liable to flip with a strong wind. I remember in civics classes, the election cycle extolled for its stately measure. Four years feels now frankly monstrous. Meet again here, in a few turns of season, to do it again? If you care about the outcome, there's a stretching rack with your name on it.

With Biden's administration, the past few months have seen a mixture of provisional rehabilitation and familiar neoliberalisms, necropolitics—but that good news and bad have resumed their standard deviations is, in a harshly pragmatic sense, what we fought for. The idea, for many of us anyway, was choosing the manageable opponent: he whose moves we could read. The problem is, relative quiet is no longer reassuring; everyone knows 2016 is marshalling for a comeback, so the media coverage we discovered then to be utterly unreliable leaves us only the worse off now for having gone dark. This lull is the stuff of horror movies.

Many a horror story comes down to that single injunction: *Get out*. Only the foolish wait; the right-minded do not think to tarry. For four seasons since April 2017, that imperative has played out on home screens in the US, Canada, and internationally as *The Handmaid's Tale* (Goldie 257). With this series, pop culture debuted the very vision I had not found in writing all of part 1: that of persecuted (erstwhile) Americans fleeing for political asylum. A US production based on Canadian author Margaret Atwood's classic novel, the show was in the midst of shooting its first season when the 2016 election went to Trump. For inspiration, Atwood had drawn in part from the early 1800s, when what was then British North America was terminus for the Underground Railroad (Nguyen and Phu 4); anything short of its borders

and fugitives could be recaptured, legally re-enslaved. In the *Hulu* adaptation, Canada figures even more prominently as the “magical land of the North,” bastion of democracy, and saviour of huddled masses (Goldie 255)—a star turn that did not feel much like fiction given Justin Trudeau’s famous January 2017 tweet: “To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will *welcome* you, regardless of your faith. . . . #WelcomeToCanada.” Yet, much though visions of Gilead may have strummed viewers’ desires to leave Trump’s America, that time-honoured fantasy is not actually a matter of refugeedom. Historically speaking,

Americans evoke the war every four years during presidential election campaigns when, dependably, more than a few progressive-minded citizens threaten that they will move to Canada if the Republican candidate wins. Just as dependably, the Canadian news media report those threats and recall the precedent of US emigration during the Vietnam War. (McGill 4-5)

It was the Vietnam War that cemented Canada’s new nationalist mythology as “welcoming to refugees, multicultural without racialized violence, internationalist rather than xenophobic, peacekeeping rather than bellicose, and protective of individual freedoms”—in contradistinction to its neighbour (McGill 11). By 1965, Canada had become “a choice haven” for perhaps thirty to forty thousand “American draft dodgers and deserters” (Knowles 91). Whatever the language of flight and sanctuary around their decamping, though, these young men were admitted as immigrants rather than refugees, along with perhaps tens of thousands more Americans who “came to Canada because they felt they could no longer tolerate the political climate in the United States” (Churchill 4). Among the latter were academics and professionals, and overall this influx constituted the “best-educated group [Canada] had ever received” (Knowles 91). Indeed, for many of these Americans,

crossing the Canadian boarder [*sic*] was a relatively simple and uncomplicated journey. Though the choice of going north may have been difficult and filled with cultural significance, the actual entry into Canada was often negotiated with ease. In some cases it was only a matter of loading up the car, driving to the border, and declaring the desire to immigrate. (Churchill 4)

This points to conditions quite the opposite of persecution, whether then or now: “We want [our move to Canada] to be a political statement in the U.S.,”

one 2018 émigré declared. “We want to say, ‘Our tax dollars are not going to go to fund this administration and their actions’” (Blanch).

In short, there is a second migratory tradition here, which would not fall under UNHCR’s charge: emigrants exercising options to stay, leave, or even (after the political crisis passes) return (Knowles 91). Such voluntary exodus is a *repudiation* of the nation and, whether acted upon or fantasized indefinitely about, an expression of privilege. That such privilege trends white—enough to make the actual list of *Stuff White People Like*: “#75: Threatening to Move to Canada” (Lander)—has historical roots. When Black Americans (disproportionately drafted to Vietnam and further disproportionately killed) showed up at the Canadian border as deserters, they were apt to be turned away (Churchill 2); since 1905, the Immigration Branch had considered them “unwelcome,” but needed no laws to exclude them: “For the most part . . . American black people expressed no great interest in coming to [Canada]; they were too impoverished to contemplate emigration” (Knowles 10). In Hulu’s version of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, everyone in Gilead is white, whatever their skin colour; the zeitgeist of this Trump-era adaptation has the stylings of refugees, but the emotional truth of settler colonialists. *Fuck this place; we’re outta here.*

After four years of punishing national headlines, a death drive paused only by presidential and congressional elections won at great cost yet by meagre margins, I have stopped casting about for escape. Not because we’ve seen the worst. But ironically, leaving—or even indulging in this fantasy of divestment—has come to feel like the model minority choice. It assumes mobility not granted to the descendants of slaves; it incriminates the Asian American of his settler ways. In the Trudeau era, Indigenous narratives of apocalypse have continued to attest that for “visibly racialized minorities,” the land of the North is not magical, and no refuge. Cherie Dimaline’s YA novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) is set in the end times of global warming, but First Nations people in Canada face particular jeopardy as settlers hunt them for their bone marrow—trapping and mining them like a resource to be exhausted. In *Blood Quantum* (2019), Jeff Barnaby “indigenizes” the zombie flick into a similarly “thinly veiled” allegory (Bramesco): though immune to the contagion, a Native community in Quebec is overrun by whites demanding sanctuary from the very death they embody. Thinly veiled indeed:

On May 28, [2021,] . . . the remains of 215 children [were found] buried at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School, run by the Catholic Church in British Columbia from 1890 until 1978. . . . Just a few weeks later, on June 24 . . . radar scans detected up to 751 unmarked graves at the site of the Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan, operated by the Catholic Church from 1899 to 1997. . . .

Then, on June 30 . . . [searchers at] the former St. Eugene's Mission School—another Catholic institution in British Columbia, open from 1890 to 1970—uncovered another 182 unmarked, shallow graves holding children's remains. (Weisberger)

We who are (im)migrants or refugees partake of this violence, as critical refugee studies holds: a “settler state’s capacity to grant political asylum to refugees—and assert its sovereign power—is contingent on its . . . suppression of Indigenous sovereignty over land, natural resources, and people” (Nguyen and Phu 11). In the US and Canada alike, refugee gratitude launders long records of atrocities, domestic and international (Nguyen and Phu 6). But however profound our own dispossession and displacement when first we petitioned for asylum, refugees swell “the constant waves of settlement” that often feel to “Indigenous peoples colonized by the French, British, and then by Canada . . . like a continuation of centuries-deep colonial genocide” (Adese and Phung 119).

Yet the expulsion of refugees is not what Native communities call for (Saranillio 284); our departure would renew the cycle elsewhere. What critical refugee studies urges is allyship with Indigenous movements “to counter the intertwined logics of militarism, imperialism, and settler colonialism” (Gandhi 66), because those who do that work cannot afford to be left to hostile or indifferent company. Jennifer Adese (otipemisiw/ Métis) and Malissa Phung—writing respectively as an Indigenous scholar and a refugee scholar, but also as Canadian subjects and friends—would have these communities “find ways to build relationships with one another and foment a sense of responsibility in the manner in which Indigenous peoples frame it, to one another and to the natural world around us” (136). This “has never been more pressing,” they say—not because prospects are bright where they are but because “with each passing day we become more aware of the threat that climate change poses to all of our survival.” Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi reminds us that decolonial practice does not mean “masculinist assertions of national belonging [nor roaming] bachelor independence but rather . . . the feminist labor of building grounded solidarities” (66).



I find myself here quoting feminist and critical refugee scholarship back to friends whose faces I picture, because I know: we are heartsick and drained of hopes for this nation. But fellow refugees, *stay anyway*. Not for faith in flag or allegiance to country. What is asked and what's on offer are responsibilities—to each other and to those who cannot opt out, “to the land and its sentient and non-sentient inhabitants” (Adese and Phung 120)—responsibilities without which a land acknowledgement is hollow performance, and a refugee becomes . . . something else. What is the political category for people who get while the getting is good, then go? Admittedly, I've wondered at my sea change of heart between the chronotopes of this writing, inspected it for delusion or cowardice. Have I reverted to staying because staying is easier? I don't think so. What 2016 did to so many of us was trigger a panicked decision tree, as if branches could be tested for future regret and the soundest one followed to safety. In the emotional landscape of 2021—with headlines worldwide a drumbeat of pestilence, war, famine, and death—there is no good choice to be had to the question of *where*. But I feel that the answer cannot be for us to go someplace less dear to us, where we know ourselves in fewer of its trees and tastes and faces, are less implicated in its history, and less pained by the prospect of its loss. What would it take to be a *critical* refugee? Trading one First World home for another won't cut it—but neither would the kind of “staying” that is bubble-wrapped in disaffection and divestment. Even in suspension, the rhetoric of moving to Canada or France is an indulgence, a desiccant. With lots no longer cast here, disaffection lets things die, moves among a place and people but keeps the future to itself. Like white flight, this kind of divestment can be achieved hyper-locally: the private school, the gated community. But the refugee narrative that ends as model minority is in the wrong timeline now. Whatever we may manage to reserve for our own children, in the coming post-refugee dystopia, all of our grandchildren's arms are linked. So the future I hope for is counterintuitive, in which refugees are the ones who cast our lots where we stand: both atavistic and futuristic in our high alert, zero waste; sure only that worse is coming; here for it.

## NOTES

- 1 The first incomers to be admitted as refugees were Jews during the rise of Hitler, but until 1945 they were very few; a standing policy admitting refugees was not implemented until 1953, and even then restricted to those “fleeing communist-dominated countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union” (Anker 76-77). The tens of thousands of Cubans admitted in the 1950s and the first several hundred thousand Southeast Asians admitted in the late 1970s had to be ushered through a legislative “loophole” known as “parole power” (78). What we understand now as refugee policy dates back to 1980, with the Refugee Act’s elimination of ideological categories for admission, and adoption of the United Nations definition of refugee instead (79).
- 2 The former record includes the internally displaced, but counting international refugees alone, the tally around the world stood at 21.3 million by the end of 2015. That is one person in about 325. See Edwards, “Global Forced Displacement”
- 3 My references to *The Road* and *The Walking Dead* are to both the original print versions and their later filmic productions. See Robert Kirkman, *The Walking Dead* for the (ongoing) comic book series. See Frank Darabont, *The Walking Dead* and John Hillcoat, *The Road* for the television and film versions, respectively. *The Terminator* is directed by James Cameron.
- 4 For that I would look to director Neill Blomkamp’s 2009 film *District 9*, which is significantly not a story of (human) apocalypse.
- 5 The figure of the zombie originated in “Haitian traditions,” where “the word *zombi* means ‘spirit of the dead’ and represents the fear of former slaves that they would be brought back from the dead and enslaved anew” (Halberstam 163). In film, early zombie movies directly “engaged the material of slave revolt,” but the trope is understood to have “quickly transformed” into other “iterations” of white fear and other configurations of racial subalterns (163).
- 6 This cultural snapshot predates the publication of Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018), as well as the pandemic it seemed to many to presage. Ma’s zombies are pathetic, unthreatening creatures of habit, however, bending end times not to horror but to a winding-down of global capitalism, work, consumerism, and “economic subjectivity” (Fan 97-99). I’d grant this exception that *Severance* is not a fable of refugees but of “us.”
- 7 So, if “disease catastrophe” is the baseline in right-wing ideology, what millennialists add is the other half of a binary: “cure catastrophe” is the belief that apocalypse “should be welcomed and even fomented” as the “remedy” to the debilitating social ills of leftist progress (Davis 80).
- 8 See for example the *This American Life* episode “The Beginning of Now.”
- 9 erin Khuê Ninh. “Forwarding Memory through Diaporama: The Passing-on of Việt Kiều Nostalgia,” *Amerasia Journal*, 35:2 (2009), 146-67, DOI: 10.17953/amer.35.2.x655636874w83427.

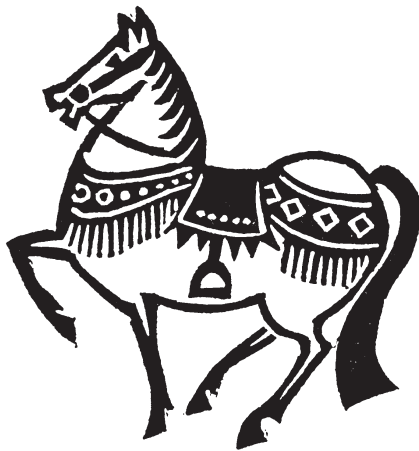
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## Where Ghosts Reside

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**Greg Santos**

*Ghost Face*. DC Books \$19.95 USD

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**Monica Sok**

*A Nail the Evening Hangs On*. Copper Canyon \$16.00

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Reviewed by Lina Chhun

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A literary treatment of the past . . . focuses on those aspects of the real past which the historical past cannot deal with.

—Hayden White, *The Practical Past*

Greg Santos' third full-length poetry collection, *Ghost Face*, and Monica Sok's debut collection, *A Nail the Evening Hangs On*, provide a stunning example of literature's potential to capture the complexities and contradictions of subjectivity and feeling in the afterlife of historical violence. Through the genre of poetry, Santos' and Sok's collections meld the historical with the personal and the experienced with the imagined, creating accounts of first-order and second-order testimony that might stand witness to the spatial and temporal dimensions of war, mourning, grief, and sorrow. Crossing oceans from Canada to Cambodia to the beaches of Cascais, Portugal (Santos), and from Cambodia to Lancaster, Pennsylvania to New York City and back (Sok), these two collections illustrate what Laura Hyun Yi Kang articulates as the compositional dimensions of subjectivity as well as history, the ways in which shifting and uncertain locations within and across nation-state borders trouble fixed notions of individual and collective identity as rooted in a single time, place, or culture. Part memoir, part historical testimony, *Ghost Face* and *A Nail the Evening Hangs On* trace a critical genealogy of second-generation Cambodian diaspora in North America—Santos in Canada and Sok in the United States.

In his deeply personal collection, Santos navigates the indeterminacies of “being” and “been there” for the simultaneously transnational and transracial Cambodian Canadian adoptee of diasporic Portuguese parents. Conditioned by the unknowable histories of geopolitical violence experienced by the birth parents he never knew—of Khmer Rouge rule and the Cambodian Holocaust—as well

as by the historical violence experienced by his adopted mother's parents—who lived through Franco's fascist regime in Spain—Santos' transnational adoptee is seemingly out of place and time, yet also constituted by a desire, a mourning of and yearning for, ghosts. Through a weaving in and out of imagined conversations and pasts, dialogical self-reflection (Santos constructs inquiries into his life before adoption as a conversation between two unnamed persons, perhaps the author and the author in an imagined time "before"), personal life events, and communion with the memory of his adopted father—whose death Santos mourns poignantly decades later—Santos' adoption story is a search for ghosts, a reaching for and grasping at those spectres that haunt in their absence-presence.

In *A Nail the Evening Hangs On*, Sok also engages in a search for ghosts, for the nameless, faceless kin lost to years of war and genocide—a search for her missing uncle, her grandmother's son, whose absence continues to haunt the day-to-day of Sok's family. Shifting from narratives in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap to meditations on childhood in Lancaster to reflections on memory and diasporic experience while on the subway in New York, Sok explores the possibilities and impossibilities of second-generation, second-order witnessing to histories of geopolitical violence in Cambodia. Through narrative that deftly navigates this oftentimes ambivalent tension, Sok engages in a kind of memory work that materializes the violence of civil war and genocide in Cambodia alongside the violence of US intervention in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. Through a trenchant reflexivity which positions the second-generation subject as both the inheritor of trauma and citizen-subject of empire, her collection reckons with multiple dimensions of historical violence—its registers, registrations, memorialization, and accounting.

Through a literary treatment of the past, these two collections activate what Raymond Williams terms "a structure of feeling": those "social experiences *in solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available" (133-34, emphasis original). This structure of feeling, "at the very edge of semantic availability," is "a specific structure of particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions and, in what are often its most recognizable forms, particular deep starting-points and conclusions" (134). Through verse and prose, Santos and Sok construct historical testimony that functions as a structure of feeling, an articulation of haunting as well as enactment of mourning, a yearning for the belongingness of kin (Santos) and for futures of accountability (Sok).

Santos opens Part I of his collection (entitled "I/YOU") with the simultaneously broken and continuous, recursive, and repetitious "History":

Thisishistory.Th  
 isishistory.This  
 isherstory.Thisis  
 everyone'sstory.  
 Thisisnoone'sst  
 ory.Thisistheirst

ory.Thisismysto  
ry.Thisisyoursto  
ry.Thisisourstor  
y. (3)

“History” is an apt representation of what follows in the pages of *Ghost Face* as well as in *A Nail the Evening Hangs On*, the two texts meditating on personal, familial, collective, and ancestral histories and on parallel and imagined lives through the voices of multiple narrators and a multiplicity of “I’s” and “You’s.” The contradictions of “everyone’s” and “no one’s” and “theirs” and “my” in “History” are reflected in the opening poem of Part I of Sok’s collection, “Ask the Locals”:

Nobody knows: How those so-called revolutionaries  
who wanted so-called Year Zero so bad,  
turned into mosquitoes. I mean, mosquitoes, right?  
Because not butterflies or moths rolling  
in the mass graves—we all know the moths are children  
who didn’t make it past five. . . . (5)

“Nobody knows” how the Khmer Rouge, as they came to be called, striving for a “pure revolution” against what they considered to be the imperialism of the West, became strongly parasitic instead. Nobody knows how so-called revolutionaries became like the mosquito, sucking the lifeblood of its host, sucking dry those marked as “enemy” and the innumerable hosts-to-be, their own, who eventually become the enemy inside. “Nobody knows” and yet “we all know” the outcome, the unbearable loss of too many lives, the deaths of men, women, and children—their bodies buried in mass graves—filling the land with sorrow.

Sok’s injunction to “ask the locals” positions the author in relation to but not fully “inside” this history, an ambivalent positioning continually produced and reproduced throughout the collection vis-à-vis the weaving of testimony from various imagined “I’s” as well as the “I” of the authorial voice. Speaking from “within” Cambodian history, Sok deploys the imagined voice of a radio host in “The Radio Host Goes into Hiding” to convey an experiential telling of the unfolding of historical events:

Disguising myself as old people

to survive in these fields of black-uniformed Khmer      red-white krama  
our outlined rib cages and tight skin  
if I could air  
the voices of the people      to the Powers of the world  
what would they say[.] (8)

Sok’s radio host, speaking in a present tense that also speculates, relays the embodied memory of life during “Pol Pot time” (the term Cambodian people use to refer to the Cambodian genocide), which began in April 1975 in Cambodia.

Upon capturing Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge evacuated people from cities into the countryside and forced the Cambodian populace to work in co-



operatives. When placing people in these rural work camps, the regime separated families—of the unnamed radio host’s friend Rithisal, a former historian before “Year Zero,” we learn: “his wife Rachana a singer / which camp is she we don’t know / her voice like milk when she sang” (13)—and also mandated collective eating. As a result of the severe rationing of food, vast numbers of people died of starvation. Medical care became non-existent in the camps as doctors were targeted for extermination along with other “intellectuals.” From 1975 to 1979, approximately 1.5 to 2 million Cambodians died from starvation, illness, disease, or murder during what William Shawcross has termed, in *The Quality of Mercy* (1984), the Cambodian Holocaust.

Shifting from the present into the past tense, Sok’s radio host materializes the oftentimes “forgotten” or relegated-to-the-margins geopolitical and historical conditions that provide context for the rise of the Khmer Rouge during the Cold War in Southeast Asia.

I was warned by the French			
before they left Kampuchea		in a hurry	
<i>Come with us</i> they said		but like my only friend Rithisal	
		I chose not to abandon	
in such cowardly fashion			
Rithisal young historian says			
why the Powers do nothing to end this experiment			
first began with American president orders from menu			
campaign	breakfast	lunch	dinner
snack on Ho Chi Minh Trail	Kampuchea after independence		
not land			
for wars	Khmer Rouge in power		threatens
Phnom Penh evacuate now			
the city will be bombed	I say <i>quiet Rithisal not so loud</i> [.] (9)		

In 2000, US President Bill Clinton released extensive Air Force data on American bombings in Southeast Asia from 1964 to 1975. The data show that the bombing was nearly five times as extensive as previously thought; 2,756,941 tons of explosives were dropped on Cambodia. Taylor Owen gives the following comparison for perspective: “the Allies dropped just over 2 million tons of bombs during all of World War II, including the bombs that struck Hiroshima and Nagasaki: 15,000 and 20,000, respectively.” Owen goes on to state: “Cambodia may well be the most heavily bombed country in history.” Previously, about 50,000 to 150,000 Cambodians were estimated to have died from American bombing. Given the revised data, this number is likely higher, with some estimates ranging up to 500,000 deaths (“Frontline/World”), in a country at the time of about seven million.

Speaking from a third-person perspective that shifts into a first-person narrative, Santos also imagines the context of war and genocide which conditions his life in “another life,” his poem “Siem Reap, Cambodia” detailing the events experienced by his imagined birth mother as she too flees an impending violence. Santos begins:

Before stepping into a taxi  
 a young girl struggles to take the city with her:  
 Warm, sticky air bathing the street market,  
 comforting scent of fragrant rice,  
 . . . the city she will no longer call home. (5)

As the city retreats into the distance, “echoes of distant missiles pierce her memories” and “murders of crows dive into reddened fields” (5). Santos ends his poem:

The faces of Angkor watch  
 as their city crumbles,  
 as another one of their children flees,  
 taking nothing but me,  
 gently growing inside her. (5)

Here, Santos’ imagining of his birth mother’s journey enacts a dedication, the juxtaposition of violence (“distant missiles pierce,” “murders of crows dive”) with words that signal care (“gently growing inside her”) enacting a kind of testimony that might do the work of sorrow and gratitude alongside that of love.

As the daughter of Cambodian Holocaust survivors, whose parents have lost family on both sides and whose father belonged to a targeted population—my father, a former Lon Nol soldier who worked with Americans and Thais during the civil war like Sok’s radio host, taking on the persona of “old people”—my own relationship to this familial and ancestral history has been, and remains, fraught. Like the starts and stops, broken verse, and flowing prose that constitute both these poetry collections, I have long sought a language to articulate and reckon with the ellipses and silences, traces and errant memories, and imaginings and hauntings of those who have come before and of those who have since passed. I have spent over a decade attempting to materialize the words that might capture the tension and longing of diasporic desire, the imagining of a time “before”—Sok’s “before birth” and Santos’ “before adoption” echoing my own “before migration,” my time in the refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines. In “Amnesiac,” Santos writes:

It all happened a long time ago.  
 Do you remember?  
 I think there was a nun, a war,  
 the phone call that changed everyone’s lives.  
 No, how could you remember? You weren’t even there.  
 But now that I think about it, neither was I. (23)

Santos’ amnesiac expresses the absence in the absence-presence of History in the narrator’s missing origin story (Santos’ own, constructed dialogically here). Through the back and forth of this poem and others in *Ghost Face*, Santos questions the histories that we (and you and I) might claim.

Which histories and futures do we, can we, mourn? How do we, can we, grieve the missing picture—for instance, Sok’s uncle Yuos Samon’s missing photograph at Tuol Sleng—the missing pieces that linger on in affective structures of trauma left behind?

How do we remember as second-generation, second-order witnesses without co-opting, without consuming the historical and experiential violence-trauma of known and unknown kin? And how do we yearn for an interconnectedness that does not dismiss contradiction and complexity, for an understanding of self that does not reproduce the binary of us and Other, a yearning that might account for our own complicities as diasporic citizen-subjects in the wake of historical violence?

*Ghost Face* and *A Nail the Evening Hangs On* open up the scope of Cambodian diasporic cultural production, engaging the ethics of subject position, commitments, and attachments to major and minor histories of violence. In “Cruel Radiance,” for instance, Sok tells us: “the Khmer Rouge executed, one of many / children presumed counterrevolutionary enemies, / as the soiled descendants of such. My chest heaves. . . .” (42, emphasis original). Sok continues:

I catch the N [train] across the platform, continue  
reading about S-21. *We were not inside*  
*those prisons: they were. Our hells*  
*almost certainly are not theirs. . . .* (42, emphasis original).

Here as elsewhere, Sok manifests an ambivalent tension, her diasporic subject leaning into the dissonance of a grief without a “being” or having “been there.”

Through the affective register of poetry, Sok’s and Santos’ collections function as a testimony to loss as they also ultimately function as a dedication to love. Santos’ dedication (“*for my parents*”) is reflected throughout the collection, especially so in his closing poem, a love letter entitled “Dear Dad,” which appears in the final section, “An Ode to Joy”: “The children / are asleep, you / watch me from / photo frames” (65). Sok’s dedication to her grandmother (“*for Bun Em*”) is punctuated in Part I’s “The Weaver” and Part III’s “Ode to the Loom.” “Ode to the Loom” also provides the title of the collection as well as the image on the front cover: a photograph of traditional Cambodian silk woven by Sok’s grandmother, who throughout her life was a master weaver. Sok writes:

Dear loom, dear box skeleton,  
.....  
Sweet loom, old friend of an old woman,  
you are an ancestor she prays to,  
so that when her hair falls  
not as rain does  
but as nails the evening hangs on,  
and her hands slip no longer  
from silk but on walls in the dark  
hall to her room,  
.....  
You will remind us of her[.] (45-46)

Rather than a thread we might expect the evening to hang on, Sok’s grandmother lowers her hair not gently like rain “but as nails the evening hangs on,” illustrating

both the precarity as well as the strength of lives lived during and after historical violence. In Sok's material-discursive engagement with her grandmother's loom as the thread that connects her life to those lives lived otherwise, this collection, like *Ghost Face*, weaves an alternative understanding of loss and hope. Sok's detailing of the harsh, fragile strength found in the afterlife of war and genocide orients us towards an alternative formulation of hope, not a hope premised upon reconciliation signalled by the dawn of a new beginning, but rather a hope that might be found in the in-between spaces of dusk before dark, a hope like twilight that transitions into stardust.

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## The (Im)possibility of Human Rights in Asian/ American Studies

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**Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Guy Beauregard, and Hsiu-chuan Lee, eds.**

*The Subject(s) of Human Rights: Crises, Violations, and Asian/American Critique.*

Temple UP \$51.95

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Reviewed by Keva X. Bui

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Refusing the boundedness of the nation-state that oftentimes constrains Asian American studies, *The Subject(s) of Human Rights* powerfully centres human rights discourse as a framework within which to develop a transnational, global Asian/American critique. As editors Cathy Schlund-Vials, Guy Beauregard, and Hsiu-chuan Lee provocatively contest, the interdisciplinary of Asian American studies, historically, has primarily concerned itself with the proliferation of anti-Asian racism within the continental US—indexing its history as a field of study emerging out of the civil rights movement and Third World Liberation Front (2). Engaging with a larger contemporary turn in Asian American studies towards conceptualizing “Asian/American” as a global formation shaped by transnational and transpacific flows of migration, militarization, imperialism, and racial capitalism, this collection of essays reroutes Asian American studies through an attention to the (il)legibility of the figure of the Asian within international human rights discourse. In doing so, the authors

assert that engaging with human rights discourse—and specifically offering a critical consideration of who constitutes the “subject(s)” of human rights concerns—opens up an avenue for reconceptualizing Asian/American critique in the unsettled and contested geographies of Asian America.

The first section of the collection recalibrates Asian American studies towards a sustained engagement with human rights critique, circulating around the constitution of the “human” within the afterlives of World War II and the Cold War. Through an analysis of camptown prostitution in South Korea, Min-Jung Kim urgently addresses the continued deployment of human rights as a juridical discourse that obscures violent US militaristic interventions behind the veil of moral humanitarianism. Christopher Lee’s essay animates “transnational lifeworlds” of Chinese migrants in the early Cold War period, demonstrating how they were both regulated by and posed a challenge to Canada’s human rights regime. Masumi Izumi revives the previously forgotten story of the Vancouver Asahi baseball team—a group of Japanese Canadians forcibly repatriated to Japan after World War II—in order to engage their reintegration into Japanese society, extending their histories beyond deportation from the Canadian nation-state. Similarly, Vinh Nguyen traces how diasporic Vietnamese refugee identity is constructed via the *absence* of human rights in their homeland, enfolding themselves into Canada’s liberal-capitalist nation-building process wherein “humanity is contingent on subscription to and acceptance of conditions of violence, displacement, and exclusion as part and parcel of social life” (88). In both cases, the authors emphasize how the legibility of Asian subjects as “human” within North American human rights discourse functions to embolden national projects invested in racial capitalism and military imperialism.

The second section builds on the insights of the first to interrogate the “impossible subjects” of human rights discourse—those already rendered illegible as human at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and labour. Yin Wang offers an important analysis of James Baldwin’s opposition to the war in Vietnam, demonstrating how US imperialism employed its disposable, Black subjects in service of a facade of liberation in Southeast Asia. The next two chapters turn to Southeast Asian migrant domestic labourers: Christopher B. Patterson examines the figure of the “matronly maid” to understand the circuits of gendered labour exploitation that undergird the consolidation of Asian capitalism, while Grace Hui-chuan Wu critiques “literary humanitarianism” as a reading practice that renders human rights an abstraction, instead emphasizing the need to “visualize the subject of human rights . . . as an embodiment of particular social, cultural, and historical contexts” (134). Annie Isabel Fukushima heeds this urgent call, reading the failure to facilitate human rights for trafficked human labour across the US, Asia, and the Pacific, propelling the social death of subjects tethered to incomplete dualities of victim/criminal, illegal/legal, and citizen/noncitizen. These “tethered subjectivities,” as Fukushima notes, produce limited imaginaries of migrant workers trafficked under global capitalism, thus, “[t]o untether subjectivities requires not merely new positionalities but rather enacting new ways of witnessing rights violations” (157).

The final section envisions the afterlives and aesthetics of warfare, genocide, and military occupation across various sites of Asia, exposing the limits of human rights discourse for offering justice for those affected. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials opens this section with a powerful critique of atrocity tourism at Cambodia's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum to demonstrate the limits of juridical justice in commemorating victims of genocide and mass violence. Dinidu Karunanayake interrogates the limits of humanitarian interventions in postwar Sri Lanka and argues for the necessity of "mnemonic citizenship," a humanitarian encounter "where the benefactor has to acknowledge intricacies of the beneficiary's cultures, identities, histories, and subjectivities that are very much alive and active in mnemonic domains" (194). Mayumo Inoue turns to Okinawa to underscore the limits of a state-centric mode of human rights, a site that requires confrontation with "the triangulation of sovereign, disciplinary, and regulatory powers across the global space, the powers that need to be mediated locally by the nation-state form" (202). Finally, Christine Kim demonstrates how testimonials from North Korean defectors exemplify the Democratic Republic of Korea as a space of exceptional inhumanity, wherein "[t]he inhuman is denied the kind of subjectivity and recognition that the human is assigned not because it is a different species from the nonhuman is [*sic*] but because it represents the limitations of what can be recognized as human" (226). This powerful argument exemplifies the absolute limits of human rights discourse as an epistemology of Asian/American inquiry: How might we grapple with a history of racialization that has so often excluded particular Asian subjects—the foreign, the communist, the gendered, the sexualized, and the so-called primitive—outside the privileged category of the human itself?

As Madeline Thien argues in the afterword of the collection, central to the constitution of personhood is "unofficial history," silences that inhabit and haunt the atmospheric geographies of violence surrounding us (234). Indeed, this provocation underscores the necessity for Asian/American critique to develop new analytics for confronting the cacophonous histories of racialized and gendered violence that have constituted the imagined geographies of Asian America, reminding scholars to do the important work of *listening* as a practice of resuscitating the human from colonial and imperial powers. In this manner, *The Subject(s) of Human Rights* powerfully opens up important conversations about animating human rights discourse within Asian/American studies, both in its limitations and possibilities.



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# British Empire, Settler Colonialism, and Humanitarian Exceptionalism: Critical Refugee Studies in the Canadian Context

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Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu, eds.

*Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada.* U of Toronto P \$55.00

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Reviewed by Eryn Lê Espiritu Gandhi

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Following Y en L  Espiritu’s landmark 2006 article, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship,” the field of critical refugee studies has centred refugee voices, narratives, and contexts, examining how the refugee figure illuminates dynamics of war, imperialism, and statecraft. Rather than accept dominant state and media discourses about refugees at face value, the field probes what such discourses reveal about the nature of nation-building projects. So far, much scholarship in critical refugee studies has focused on the US context or analyzed US empire. *Refugee States*, edited by Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu—scholars who themselves were displaced from Vietnam and resettled in Canada—is groundbreaking for tackling the specificity of critical refugee studies in a Canadian context, attending to ongoing legacies of British empire and settler colonialism as well as contemporary discourses of humanitarian exceptionalism.

As Nguyen and Phu note in the book’s introduction and epilogue, Canada has defined its refugee regime precisely in contrast to that of the US. In January 2017, when US President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13769—effectively suspending the US Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days, banning refugees from Syria indefinitely, and barring entry to migrants from predominantly Muslim countries—Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reiterated Canada’s commitment to welcoming “those fleeing persecution, terror & war” (qtd. by Nguyen and Thu 3). In 2018, Canada surpassed the US as the leading nation of refugee resettlement. Such moments underscore Canada’s narrative of “humanitarian exceptionalism,” which Nguyen and Phu define as the “belief that what sets Canada apart from the US and other nation-states is its distinct benevolence and commitment to human rights” (3). Historically, moreover, Canada has been characterized as “celebrat[ing] peaceability rather than the conquest and militarism so manifestly characteristic of the US” (9). *Refugee States* offers tools for critically analyzing how Canada’s claims to humanitarian benevolence elide earlier historical moments of race-based exclusion, ongoing policies of Indigenous genocide and dispossession, as well as contemporary attempts to distinguish between “genuine” and “bogus” refugees. The collection’s multi-layered title both indexes the “nation-state’s role in producing refugees” and invokes “the conditions of psychic experience, everyday modes of living, challenges to the state, and articulations of sovereignties beyond nationhood” (6).

The first section, “Historicization,” highlights continuities and disjunctures across key moments of refugee inclusion and exclusion in Canada. Johanna Reynolds and Jennifer Hyndman begin by providing a helpful overview of current asylum

and refugee discourse and policies, such as the 2002 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which replaced the Immigration Act of 1976. Via an analysis of Canadian newspapers between 1996 and 2014, they examine how political leaders' use of anti-migrant rhetoric, such as "bogus refugee" and "queue jumper," belies Canada's claims to humanitarian exceptionalism. The next two chapters examine how key moments in Canada's migrant history continue to impress upon the present, via re-telling and re-presentation. Alia Somani examines one historical and one contemporary depiction of the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident, in which 376 Punjabi migrants from Hong Kong—British subjects who hoped to settle in the British Dominion of Canada, as was their right as imperial citizens—were prohibited from disembarking in Vancouver. Laura Madokoro analyzes how, across multiple forms of writing, Adrienne Clarkson née Poy, former governor general of Canada, narrates her family's 1942 flight from wartime Hong Kong as a successful refugee migration, eliding contemporaneous policies of racialized exclusion such as the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act. Crucially, both of these chapters analyze moments prior to Canada's establishment of a legal category for refugee admissions, understanding refugeehood more broadly as a condition of mobility and displacement. Peter Nyers likewise extends discussions of refugee agency and activism beyond the limitations of the law. He posits that the Non-Status Women's Collective of Montreal's acts of writing an "irregular petition" and dressing up as ghosts in front of Trudeau's constituency office constitute "a haunted form of citizenship," that both appeals to and challenges state authority (101).

The second section, "Convergences," examines refugee relationality, exploring how "refuge and refugee are made and remade through race, sexuality, disability, and Indigeneity" (15). Reframing the fraught question, "Where are you from?" Jennifer Adese (otipemisiwak/Métis) and Malissa Phung (Sino-Vietnamese refugee) posit genealogical disclosure—"narrating who we are and where we come from at a deep level"—as a key practice for decolonizing Indigenous and refugee relations (120). Edward Ou Jin Lee examines how queer and trans migrants with precarious status—who remain vulnerable to state practices of surveillance, detention, and deportation despite Canada's self-representation as a haven for LGBTQI freedom—enact a politics of refusal to evade state control. Putting critical refugee studies in conversation with critical race studies and critical disability studies, Gada Mahrouse unpacks how Canadian constructions of the "super-refugee"—a parallel to the "supercrip"—create unrealistically high expectations for refugee accomplishments and erase the difficulties of resettling in a white settler state, even as they may also help to facilitate citizens' tolerance and offer genuine inspiration to other refugees. Lastly, Donald Goellnicht, a key member of the Critical Refugee + Migration Studies Network Canada (CRMSC), who sadly passed away before the book's publication, probes the potentialities and possibilities of cross-racial refugee fiction, in which the author embodies a minoritized subjectivity other than that of the refugee characters. Via an analysis of Black lesbian feminist writer Dionne Brand's depiction of Vietnamese Canadian



refugee narratives in *What We All Long For*, Goellnicht replaces the hierarchies of empathy with the radical possibilities of kinship as a form of cross-racial relationality.

*Refugee States* is an important contribution to the transnational, interdisciplinary field of critical refugee studies. Not only does the book function as a key resource for Canadian and Canadian studies scholars interested in understanding how refugees shape Canadian nation-building, but also it serves as an exemplary model for how to attend to the specificity of national context when engaging critical refugee studies methods. I hope *Refugee States* inspires other scholars to examine other spaces in turn, extending critical refugee studies beyond the US context from whence it began.

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## Photography and Vietnam: A New Take

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Thy Phu

*Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam*. Duke UP \$25.95

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Reviewed by Marianne Hirsch

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What images come to mind when you recall the war in Vietnam? My inner vision conjures the widely reproduced photograph taken by Nick Ut in 1972 that came to be known as "The Napalm Girl": a small naked girl, in agony and looking terrified in the centre of a wide-angle shot of children running away from an enormous black cloud and toward the camera, American GIs behind them. Her silent cry has followed me through many decades, ever since my student days. You might think of Malcolm Browne's image of the monk who set himself on fire in a 1963 protest against the persecution of Buddhists. Or, possibly, of the 1968 Eddie Adams image taken in Saigon in 1968 of Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan pointing a gun at the head of a suspected Viet Cong officer, about to assassinate him. These powerful black and white images fuelled the antiwar movement at the time, helping to convince a global public of the war's cruelty and injustice. Unbearable to contemplate, and difficult to ignore, they drew a tremendous audience and remain iconic reminders of the war—images for which, in the terms of Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, "no caption [is] needed."<sup>1</sup> They have both truth value and symbolic power. Barbie Zelizer argues that images of war that become iconic are often "about to die photos"—photos that capture the instant between life and death, and that is true of the three images discussed here.<sup>2</sup> It is true even if Kim Phuc narrowly survived the napalm attack,

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1 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007).

2 Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford UP, 2010).

eventually even agreed to meet with the officer who ordered the air strike, and became friends with the photographer who turned her into an icon of the war.

Thy Phu's *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* begins precisely with these three images of the war in Vietnam. But, she asks, whose icons are these? From whose perspective were they taken, who circulated them, who remembers the living and dying during this war through their frames? These questions arise, Phu argues, because so much of the war's visual archive emerged from the work of American journalists and the "visual framework" they shaped, one that overwhelms even Vietnamese photographic practices and Vietnamese memory. An entirely different archive of everyday images also survived from the war on the two Vietnamese sides, however: images of weddings, of smiling children, of domestic rituals and everyday lives lived in the midst of political turmoil, combat, destruction, and flight. Images of courage, resilience, defiance, or of mere survival, they form a counter-archive to the various official archives of this war. These too are war images, and Phu argues that "we need to expand 'war photography' beyond the narrow parameters defined by the Western press" (11). We need to consider how, in *this* war, North and South Vietnam, as well as diasporic Vietnamese communities, "actively enlisted images . . . to legitimiz[e] different claims to the nation" (15), even as pro- and anti-war propaganda in the US and the West used images in their own competing narratives.

The opening chapters of *Warring Visions* offer an illuminating discussion and critique of the Western category of war photography and its focus on combat, based in large part on local archival research and oral histories that fill in what was missing from official histories. Phu uses the opportunity Vietnamese archives offer to situate this discussion in a deep history of photography in the region and to examine, with rare open-mindedness and attention, the socialist ways of seeing that shaped official North Vietnamese visual culture. In the visual record of revolution, subtly examined from both iconographic and historical dimensions by Phu, women came to play a significant role. Phu analyzes some female icons of the revolution: both through their self-fashioning and through the ways in which different groups mobilized their images in the interest of solidarity but often in conflicting and counter-productive ways.

Continuing the mission of enlarging the frame of how the war has been imaged, understood and remembered in photographs, the book's second part turns to South Vietnam. Out of scant material legacies collected throughout the region and in the diaspora, Phu imagines a process for stitching together an archive of South Vietnamese history and photography. The images forming such an archive need to be constructed rather than found, but Phu has by now already established that some of the most powerful images of this war were staged or retouched for greater effect. Phu finds materials in unusual places; for example, in the frequent reenactments of the war, taking place in the US, and in An-My Lê's stunning images of such reenactments in Virginia. In performing different sides of the war, white reenactors, as much as Vietnamese refugee participants, engage in more or less successful exercises of empathy and possible reconciliation. As Phu insightfully shows, An-My Lê's images,

as much as the performances themselves, help shape the war's continuing and conflicting afterlives and the ambiguities and contestations of memory and loss.

Phu's consideration of family photographs offers the most powerful counter-narrative to the warring images of combat. Family photos inflect the memories and identities of the Vietnamese diaspora, exhibiting also the complex family relationships that emerged from the encounters of this war. Phu looks closely at both individual images and at albums, unpacking the multi-dimensional stories they can tell despite their conventionality. These narratives are enlarged even further by photo-based artists like Dinh Q. Lê, who has developed a moving technique of photo-weaving used with orphan images. Lê's reparative aesthetic builds on the efforts of the Vietnamese diaspora to collect and archive orphan images, and thereby to supplement and to enlarge official histories. Lê's acts of weaving and stitching invite a collective form of repair in which photography becomes a platform of community-building in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Similarly weaving and stitching archival fragments together to teach us to see in new ways, *Warring Visions* also offers similar correctives. It provokes a reevaluation of war photography, of socialist visuality, of memory, loss and diaspora. Reading it has not displaced the lasting power of the image of Kim Phuc from my visual memory, but it has made me think anew about what the stubborn persistence of this image has rendered invisible.

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## Refugee Possibilities

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**Timothy K. August**

*The Refugee Aesthetic: Reimagining Southeast Asian America.* Temple UP \$27.95

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Reviewed by Van Anh Tran

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There are approximately two million SEA refugees in the US today; more than a quarter of this population are the children of refugees, born in the US (see Han). Their parents' refugee experiences not only significantly affect them as Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA), but also have implications for how they remember, represent, and pass on their own understandings (see Maffini and Pham and Sangalang and Vang for discussions of the transmission of intergenerational trauma within Southeast Asian communities). The stories of those within the SEA diaspora—who fled the region after the social, political, economic, and military turmoil during and after the war in Vietnam—live within the communities themselves, emerging academic studies, and contemporary art and literature. *The Refugee Aesthetic: Reimagining Southeast Asian America*, by Timothy K. August, weaves these realms together in a volume that “examines how refugees are represented and represent themselves” (3). In a thoughtful exploration of how SEAA artists have enacted refugee aesthetics as powerful, transformative ways of knowing,

being, and producing (and being produced), *The Refugee Aesthetic* interrogates how the refugee is often constructed and emphasizes the agency of refugees.

*The Refugee Aesthetic* offers an interdisciplinary lens of analysis that not only reconceptualizes the refugee but also centres the ways that such notions have been taken up, remixed, and redefined by those directly impacted by displacement. In doing so, August extends the discourse on refugees, migration, and Asian North Americans by grounding these inquiries specifically within the realm of aesthetics. This approach speaks back to dominant social, political, and legal constructions of refugee populations that have been reinforced, in part, by mainstream media discourses of the refugee. In framing analyses through the works of SEAA artists, *The Refugee Aesthetic* attentively demonstrates the ways refugee art “can reposition, reimagine, and . . . rewrite aesthetic structures and values that produce the relationship drawn between the dominant and minor positions” (11). Disrupting such paradigms and exploring refugee production “on its own terms” enables nuanced, multi-faceted, and complex scholarly inquiries that provide insight to ways refugee production “challenges, avoids, or even reinforces” existing narratives (23). Refugee aesthetics is a “generative force” and SEAA are conceived and positioned as actors who are critical to shaping and reshaping refugee identities, realities, positionalities, and possibilities (24).

After an introduction that engages the fields of critical refugee studies, Asian American studies, memory studies, literary and artistic inquiry, and beyond, *The Refugee Aesthetic* presents four lenses that guide the volume. August shares the frames of 1) the refugee image; 2) the refugee position; 3) refugee space; and 4) the refugee personality to investigate and add texture to multiple refugee aesthetics that shift power toward refugee actors as they “redefine how their work and experiences are received” (124). Chapter One unpacks the image of the refugee not only in the ways that it has been produced historically, politically, and discursively (recognizing the impact of the refugee image on audiences) but also in how this image has been used for particular goals. August showcases aesthetic interventions to assert refugee voice and to make visible how the refugee image has been “absorbed into and used by the nation” (54). Chapter Two examines how SEAA artists “respond to the demand to explain one’s presence, gesture toward *social* identities, and articulate a future for all refugee communities that acknowledges the lasting qualities engendered by the refugee experience” (56, emphasis original). August highlights the ways that SEAA artists draw upon their lived experiences to actively (and in some cases directly) engage with readers/consumers, community members, and institutional spaces in their process of navigating the ways that refugees have been conceived as temporary. Chapter Three names the tension between the ways that refugee space mixes with everyday spaces and how refugees can, indeed, transform spaces. Therefore, August argues, considerations of space are imperative to understanding refugee aesthetics and refugee futures. Chapter Four specifically explores how Viet Thanh Nguyen’s embrace of the refugee position has allowed them to amplify and stand in solidarity with social and political movements.

Throughout *The Refugee Aesthetic*, August infuses a variety of artworks—including graphic novels, fiction, and poems—to exhibit the immense power that refugee aesthetics have in asserting refugee interpretations. The variety of references not only reinforces the analyses but also demonstrates ongoing, reflexive refugee identities. Within an interrogation of legacies of colonization and displacement, there are opportunities to invite a variety of literary, artistic, and scholarly works into the conversation and to continue to process the current examples in the volume with intersectional frames across chapters.

Marianne Hirsch describes postmemory as the “relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears . . . to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (5). Connections between who we are and what we remember (and from whom these memories may come) within this framework are mediated by representations, projections, and imaginations. *The Refugee Aesthetic* expands notions of postmemory to consider agency and the wider cultural and political impact of such representations. In the closing chapter, “Refugee Futures,” August writes that “the refugee experience can forge a critical consciousness that not only describes what happened during refuge but also has an acute sense of what is to be done” (130). As I, the daughter of refugee parents myself, consider the ways that my own meaning-making is constructed and reframed alongside others of my generation, this volume offers language and frameworks to understand how refugee artists are working to reclaim the refugee position. *The Refugee Aesthetic* demonstrates that “the refugee position is a choice and a strategy” (132). And as we critically engage with refugee aesthetics and understand their power and complexity, we affirm and contribute to such refugee possibilities as we move toward the future.

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## A Forum on *Remembering Cambodian Border Camps, 40 Years Later*

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*Y-Dang Troeung, Rithy Panh, Colin Grafton,  
Phala Chea, Rotha Mok, and FONKi Yav*

Y-DANG TROEUNG: The following forum essay derives from the exhibition *Remembering Cambodian Border Camps, 40 Years Later*, which took place from July 1, 2021 to September 31, 2021 between Vancouver, Phnom Penh, Paris, London, and Lowell. A collaboration between myself and Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh (founded by critically acclaimed Cambodian director Rithy Panh), the exhibition emerged in response to what has been heralded as “Cambodia’s artistic renaissance” or the “Khmer Renaissance.” A rebirth, revival, and regeneration of Cambodian arts and culture in the afterlife of war, the Khmer renaissance movement has sought to grapple with the ongoing legacies of the US bombing of Cambodia (1970-1973) and the ensuing Cambodian genocide (1975-1979). Over forty years later, these events continue to reverberate with vivid intensity in the lives of Cambodian people today.

Only more recently have artists and scholars begun to reflect more on the meaning of Cambodian history after 1979, when hundreds of thousands of Cambodian refugees fled overland to the refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. The largest of these camps was Khao-I-Dang Holding Center (KID), a refugee camp that expanded to

the size of a small city of over 130,000 people in 1980. Here, and in other refugee camps along the border, Cambodian people lived out their lives as intervals of excruciating loss and relative joy, awaiting resettlement in Western asylum countries or repatriation back to Cambodia. Many refugees who sought asylum in these camps, like my family, came to Canada between 1979 and 1980 as a part of then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's Indochinese Refugee Operation. In Canada, there has been little public discourse about this chapter of Canadian history, and even less about the circumstances that displaced these refugees to Canada in the first place. In Canadian literature, moreover, there has been an almost complete silence about what happened in Cambodia. Part of what I wanted to do with this exhibition is to insist that Cambodian history is Canadian history, as well as the history of the world in the twentieth century.

The seeds of this exhibition were first planted in 2014. It was at a film screening event at Meta House Art Cafe in Phnom Penh that I met Colin Grafton and realized our mutual connection to KID. I was born in KID, and Colin worked there as a relief worker in 1980. Since that first meeting in 2014, Colin and his partner Keiko Kitamura have become two of my dearest friends and collaborators, seeing me through countless personal and professional crises as I have sought to navigate the fraught and delicate terrain of conducting research about Cambodia's Cold War legacies. The work is exhausting and, at times, more emotionally excruciating than I could ever have predicted. With Colin, Keiko, and Sopheap Chea from Bophana Center by my virtual side throughout 2020 and 2021, this exhibition brought together the voices of artists, activists, and community members for a collective conversation focused on Cambodia's artistic renaissance today. These events included a three-month photography exhibition at Bophana Center, a screening of Rithy Panh's film *Site 2*, a recorded interview with Rithy Panh, gallery talks, embassy visits, countless conversations (as well as disagreements), and a concluding Zoom roundtable that gathered voices from across the Cambodian diaspora.

One panellist, Davi Hyder (formerly Davy Heder), was originally scheduled to participate in the roundtable but had to withdraw at the

last minute due to illness. We later found out that Davi had tragically passed away after suffering from complications due to COVID-19. I was stunned and deeply saddened by this news. I know Colin was devastated by this loss, as the exhibition had provided the occasion for him and Davi to reconnect as friends after many years of being out of contact. Like Davi, so many in Cambodia had suffered immensely when the fourth wave of the Delta variant began to take hold in the country. The situation in Cambodia was characterized by the lack of a safe vaccine availability (especially in the rural countryside where people like Davi lived), an inequitable medical care system, prolonged lockdowns, quarantine zones, heightened surveillance, security checkpoints, empty city streets, military patrols, and the sound of police megaphones blaring curfew orders throughout the streets. The geopolitics of the pandemic had laid bare the reality that in places such as Cambodia, the thin layer of scab holding back the unhealed wounds of the past could easily come undone.

Even though I had known Davi for only a short time, I will never forget the vibrant energy, enthusiasm, and wisdom that she exuded, even across a computer screen over a spotty Internet connection, during our last conversation in June 2021. During this conversation, Davi shared her experience with me about the last months before the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975, about building a bomb shelter under her house during the Cambodian Civil War. She talked about how the apocalyptic storm of violence that engulfed Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took over was something that caught so many Cambodian people, like herself, completely by surprise. She told me about how she managed to escape from Cambodia before the fall of Phnom Penh, but had lived in anguish for those four years not knowing the fate of her family members that she had left behind. Finally, she told me about her travels to the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand when the border finally opened up in 1979—how she had learned the Thai language, enlisted as a relief worker, and did what she could as one of the few Cambodian women relief workers in the camp who could help translate between Thai and Khmer. She wanted me to know that refugee women and girls had suffered the most in this camp. What she had witnessed in the



camps—the pain Cambodian women and girls had endured, as well as the care and love they had showed each other—had shaped her entire life's path from that point onward. I was humbled by the intensity and compassion with which she spoke about her memories of the refugee camp. This forum is dedicated to Davi Hyder.

RITHY PANH: Between 1988 and 1989, the refugee camp Site 2 on the Thai-Cambodian border had a population of about 180,000 people. The camp covered 5.2 to 5.5 square kilometres, and it was considered the second largest Cambodian city after Phnom Penh. In 1989, it had been ten years since Cambodian refugees started coming over the border. If children were born there, they would be ten years old. It was important for us (as Cambodian people) to document the lives of the refugees there. That was one of my thoughts. At that time, no Cambodian person had filmed this topic yet. There were only films made by foreign film crews and there was no participation from our side. Therefore, it was necessary for Cambodians to reconstruct the memory of the camp and to collect testimonials in order to preserve a historical record for the present.

When I went to film in Site 2, the Thai border guards didn't want to grant me access to the camp because I spoke Khmer and I was also a former Cambodian refugee who had immigrated to France. I waited for a long time. A few months later, I went to the Thai army headquarters based in Bangkok to get a permit to enter the camp. I told them they didn't need to let me in, but I also told them, "We are neighbours. You let other nationalities make films here, why not Cambodians themselves? It doesn't make sense." They finally gave me three days to film. I didn't enter the camp immediately. I took a taxi and waited very close to the camp gate. When I closed my eyes, I could hear voices from inside the camp. When I got there, I didn't know how to start filming because I had only three days to make the film! My time was too short, but back then, I was young and daring. On the first day, I didn't film anything. I just walked around the camp, looking for someone we were destined to talk to. I didn't film at first. On the evening of the first day, I met the family of refugees Yim Om and Vong Poeuv. They were sleeping in their hut. They asked me why I wanted to make the film.

I replied, “I want to know what your life is like today.” They said, “In the past, we had rice fields, freedom to travel, water, fish, a lot of things. But now we have to live in a small area of land, even a place to dig a toilet is hard to find.” I also asked them about the *Tuek-dey* (water-land). For Cambodians, *Tuek-dey* is not a simple word. For those who live in rural areas, the word *Tuek-dey* means something essential. If we have no land, we will wander. Like Cambodian people say, as a refugee, “I’m like a floating weed carried off by the current, with no roots.” I listened to them talk like they had been waiting for us for a long time. They finally had a chance to tell me their story.

The story was that Site 2 was a remarkable place. Everything came in from the outside, including rice, water (for sanitation), and so on. Without water, everything is nothing. The refugees’ lives were so difficult, depending totally on outside help. I listened to the refugees talk about why they came to this camp, the gunfire they had dodged while they were fleeing. For them, living in a camp was not easy. During the day, there was not as much danger, but at night, it was a different situation. Some women were raped. Some were abused and kidnapped. They needed to be protected. They were vulnerable and had nothing to rely on.

If we live in our land, no matter what our problems are, we have relatives and friends who can help us. We still have hope. But when it comes to living in a refugee camp, the only hope is to go to a third country, and it is still difficult after that. When refugees migrate to a new country, the children born in these lands are disconnected from their identities. Some Cambodian refugees who went to Thailand were abused. Some were robbed. Some were beaten. Some were sent back to the Khmer Rouge soldiers, and some were “repatriated” back to Cambodia.

According to statistics, refugees flee due to war, poverty, violence, and economic collapse. When we have nothing to eat, we can’t send our children to school, and we lack dignity. It’s hard for us to live. The number of refugees worldwide is increasing year by year. Some countries do not welcome refugees because they think those people are escaping for economic reasons. Wars never cease, but no one considers

the refugees that wars create. In fact, no refugee wants to leave their homeland. You can go ask them. No one wants to leave their family, friends, and homeland to go to a camp and to depend on food aid from others. No one wants to do that. Most of them flee because of crises such as violence. Not many people pay much attention to its causes. It is hard for us to live completely reliant on others in a foreign land, treated like a kind of parasitic plant that grows on tree branches. We have nothing of our own, not even the right to speak, the right to travel, or the right to produce rice or other food for ourselves.

It is heartbreaking to be a refugee and know what it means. We are “stateless people.” It seems to be stuck in our head forever. It is hard to move on. Some refugees reach distant lands and still have problems. For example, in Site 2 between 1988 and 1989, refugees arrived in the camp already suffering from mental health crises, but little attention was paid to them. According to statistics, some refugees committed suicide out of despair. They faced obstacles if they wanted to return home. Most of these refugees were women. They were desperate and felt helpless. After waking up each day, they sat, waited until night, and went back to sleep. They did this repeatedly, every day. Their lives felt meaningless. Sometimes, gradual despair prompted them to commit suicide. They had trauma and suffered invisibly. At that time, PTSD was not yet believed to be a problem at the camp. In fact, it did exist. When thinking about the global migrant crisis today, we cannot blame refugees, who should be protected from the beginning.

COLIN GRAFTON: I think I have the distinction of being the only non-Cambodian here, and also maybe the only one who was walking around in Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in 1980, apart from Mok Rotha. Y-Dang, you were probably just crawling at that time! What I’m going to do is just give you an overview of what was happening in 1979 and 1980.

When the Khmer Rouge were driven out of Phnom Penh in 1979, the Vietnamese army came in, the people were free to move, and they were encouraged to move wherever they wanted to go, at first. Some people tried to get back to their villages, and a lot of people moved towards the border. They were either escaping from the Khmer Rouge,

the Vietnamese military, or both. The refugees arrived at the border at first not so much for reasons of politics or starvation. There was no starvation at that time. This happened later in the year, and in a certain group. The first refugees were mostly former city dwellers. They were going to the border for commerce, or to join the Khmer Serei (Free Khmers), which included all of the groups on the border who were in resistance against the Vietnamese occupation.

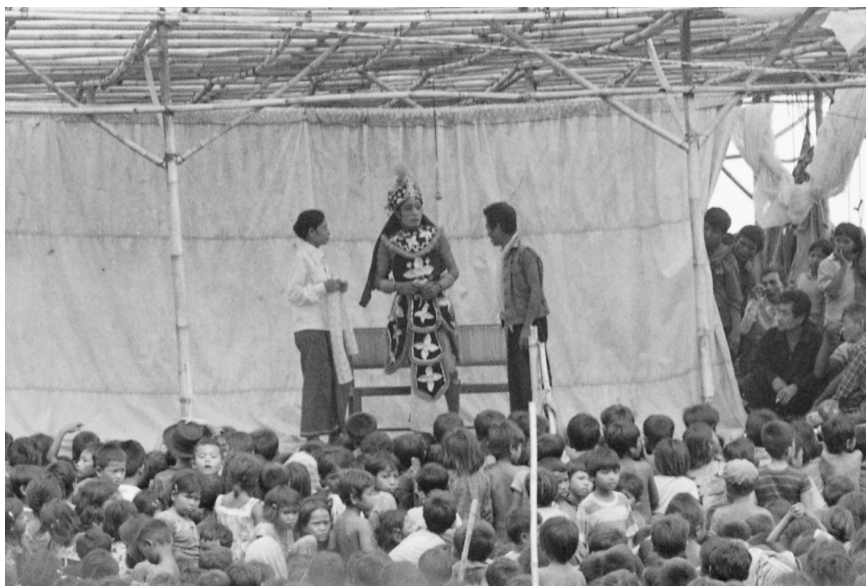
In September 1979, about 30,000 people came out of Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge, and these refugees were in desperate condition. They were starving, they were dying from disease, and they had been barely surviving for six months. These were the people that attracted worldwide attention. Journalists came and took photographs of them, and the world was suddenly aware that there was a refugee problem. To cope with this, Sa Kaeo Holding Center was set up on October 24, 1979. Sa Kaeo consisted of a group of people brought over with the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer Rouge retained control over them in this space. The people at Sa Kaeo were mostly from the countryside, and they had no relatives anywhere in other countries, so they had no thoughts of getting to a third country. They were expecting to go back to Cambodia when it was safe to do so. The Khmer Rouge wanted to get everyone back into Cambodia as soon as possible. That was Sa Kaeo with 30,000 people.

Information received by UNICEF and the Red Cross had led these organizations to believe that there were over 100,000 people moving towards the border from inside Cambodia. They expected conditions of malnutrition and disease, so they decided to set up Khao-I-Dang. This was only decided at the end of October 1979, but on November 21, Khao-I-Dang was opened. Only about 28,000 people came in the first week, and they were in fairly good condition. It wasn't what the Thai government and the international relief organizations expected, but then the numbers increased gradually and by the time I got there, which was in April 1980, there were 130,000 people in Khao-I-Dang. The majority of these people came from the cities. They came out in groups or individually. They didn't come with the Khmer Rouge. A lot of these people were hoping to be resettled in a third country. Just

to see them, the difference from the refugees at Sa Kaeo was obvious; these new arrivals at Khao-I-Dang cast off the black pajamas they had been forced by the Khmer Rouge to wear for the past four years. The first thing they did was buy colourful sarongs. They shed their skin; they changed their image. This was the feeling in Khao-I-Dang. When I was there, I was with people who had just found refuge and relief from three years of suffering. People had to pay a lot of money to get to the camps. It was very dangerous coming over the border. They had to pay off the bandits, and then the Thai military, and the only negotiable currency was gold. When they arrived in the camp, they had food, they had medical attention, they had a place to live. They also had hope for a future for the first time. This was a very optimistic period in the life of Khao-I-Dang.

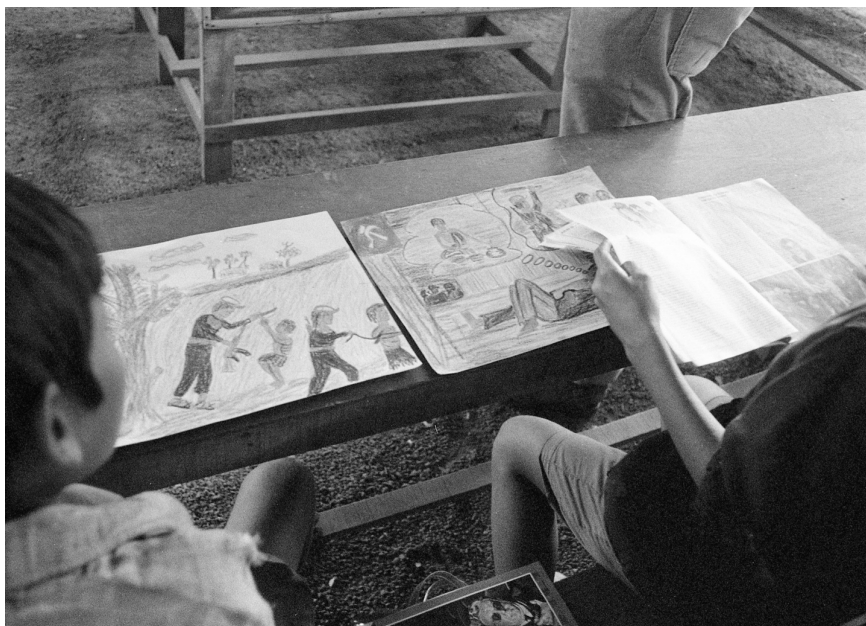
This spirit of optimism is evident in the photographs that I took in Khao-I-Dang. They were all taken between May and September 1980, when the situation on the Thai border had stabilized. It was almost a year after Cambodians had started crossing the border. People are smiling a lot in these photographs. When I went back to England the next year, I made an exhibition in London, and I found I had to almost apologize to the British audience looking at these scenes. I had to explain why people were smiling. They were not expected to smile, because they were refugees. They had nothing, but they seemed to be enjoying life. British people could not understand this. Of course, the point is that relative to what they had just gone through, they *were* enjoying life. For the first time since 1975, they had relative security, enough to eat, and enough to drink. And they had the opportunity, as far as the kids were concerned, to play and have a good time, so they did that as much as they could.

Someone set up a playground. There were art classes and kids with trucks—toy trucks made from empty oil cans. A lot of imagination went into making toys which were traditionally made for festivals. There were always little girls at the camp gate selling baskets or pendants. Some pendants were even made from intravenous drip tubes from the hospital. There were even dance classes held in Khao-I-Dang. There



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**Figure 1.** Theatre performance at Khao-I-Dang, 1980. Photograph courtesy of Colin Grafton.



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**Figure 2.** Kids' art class at Khao-I-Dang, 1980. Photograph courtesy of Colin Grafton.



**Figure 3.** Khmer classical dance classes for kids in the temporary hospital at Khao-I-Dang. Photograph courtesy of Colin Grafton.

were no beds in the camp hospital yet, so they allowed the dance teachers to set up classes there. I took some photos of the first open-air performance where the Cambodian girls could dress up. It was a very windy day. The principal dancer wasn't bothered at all, but some of the others were laughing or looking rather angry because of the strong wind blowing through their hair.

There were kids' and teenagers' classes, and don't forget the musicians. The musicians sometimes found discarded instruments; sometimes they made their own instruments from various scraps. People showed so much ingenuity and creativity in their everyday lives.

There are very few images in the exhibition that are sad or horrific. I think my photographs contrast with the situation eight years later, when Rithy Panh made his film, where people were suffering from a kind of lethargy because they had lost hope for the future. A lot of them thought that they could eventually go back to Cambodia, that it would



**Figure 4.** Khmer classical dance classes for teenagers in the temporary hospital at Khao-I-Dang. Photograph courtesy of Colin Grafton.

be stable, but many of them were also hoping to go to a third country—France, America, Australia, Canada, or somewhere else. Khao-I-Dang closed in 1985, and, by that time, a lot of people had been stuck there for years. Refugees were no longer hoping for resettlement. They had settled into this rut of not knowing where they were going, and they were totally dependent on outside help. That is a small part of the history of the border camps.

PHALA CHEA: I am speaking to you right now from Florida, but I actually live in Lowell, in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, and work for Lowell public schools. Lowell, Massachusetts has a large population of Cambodian people. It's the second largest Cambodian community in the US. The first is Long Beach, the second is Lowell, and the third is Lynn, also in Massachusetts. So, with that, I've had the opportunity to work in a school system where about twenty-four percent of our



students are of Cambodian descent. Families in the Lowell public schools have experienced a great deal of trauma, and they come with the experience of being a refugee. Trauma is very prevalent in Lowell, not just in the first generation, but down to the second and third generations as they raise and interact with family members. The second and third generations are now struggling to communicate with their elders in their native language. In our community, it's very difficult for people to seek help because they don't see it as an issue or as a problem. We're lucky that we have so many Cambodian temples in Lowell where they can go socialize and be among people of their background and religion, but to seek professional help to help treat their mental health is still an issue within our community. I think they don't want to have that identity or stigma that they're not well or not mentally healthy. They just don't want to be seen that way. We still see problems of alcoholism within the family. It's a long process of recovery that we have to go through together—to support each other, and not just when we see each other in the neighbourhood. We have to try to empower each other and encourage Cambodian elders to socialize with each other, to interact with each other, to not be left alone.

At this moment in Lowell, we are also seeing a number of refugees arriving from all over the world. Many of the refugees come to Lowell from the Congo, Burma, Myanmar, Syria, and other parts of the world. We continue to see this displacement of refugees happening, so I think it's important for us to understand what it is to be a refugee and what it's like to be a refugee, and the experiences that continue to carry on long after arriving in the new country. Like Rithy mentioned earlier, we are stateless, and it's very difficult to learn how to navigate a new world and be able to find acceptance and fit in. We need to have some resilience in order to survive and to be able to adapt and find success in our world.

I, myself, experienced being a refugee; I left Cambodia when I was seven with my family. We escaped Cambodia and we went to live in Khao-I-Dang for a few years, and then we made our way to Indonesia, Galang Island, and we stayed there for several months, and then we finally arrived in the US. When I arrived in the US, I was nine years old and starting life in a new country and in a new school. I'd never

had an education before, so it was quite scary, entering the school without having any experience. Our family worked very hard to survive. Because of my personal experiences, I wanted to do something to help the Cambodian community not only in Lowell, but back in Cambodia as well. In 2017, I met a director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), who had recently published a book by Khamboly Dy about the history of Democratic Kampuchea and the Cambodian Genocide. The director wanted that history to be taught in Cambodian middle schools and high schools, so he wanted to find someone who would be able to write a curriculum to help support the instruction. I signed up, along with my colleague Christopher Dearing, to write the curriculum to help support teachers. After we completed that publication, we went back to Cambodia several times to help train teachers and professors on how to use Dy's book in their classrooms. Thankfully the Ministry of Education in Cambodia was able to grant us that endorsement, and the prime minister also helped endorse the program. We were able to go and travel across the country to help support teachers. Right now, that history is part of the instruction and the national exam.

**ROTHA MOK:** Let me introduce myself. My name is Rotha Mok. I was born in Svay Rieng Province, Cambodia. Under the Khmer Rouge, my family was evacuated to Battambang's Krous village near Kampong Pouy water reservoir. Then, when the Vietnamese forces came into Cambodia, my uncle hired the militia to bring us—me and my sisters—to a refugee camp in Thailand. Like the other refugees, we had to be in the camp before we could go to the US, France, or Canada. We had to move from one camp to another, like from Khao-I-Dang to Kampu, and from Kampu to Chonburi.

At Chonburi, I met a painter, Mr. Nget Sin. Do any of you know him? He was the only one in his family to survive the Khmer Rouge. All of his family members were killed during the Khmer Rouge. He was a teacher of painting at the Royal University of Fine Arts, in Phnom Penh, before the Khmer Rouge. When the Khmer Rouge came to power, he lost all of his family. He was also a sculptor. His work mostly depicted

his pain from the Khmer Rouge era. At that time, I was just a kid, aged ten. I knew nothing about the Khmer Rouge, and I did not understand anything about the war. When I saw his paintings, I came to understand that terrible things had happened in Cambodia, causing great pain to many people. I saw this artwork about the killing, rape, and death from hunger and sickness that had happened. Mr. Sin did a lot of work. He gave his paintings to foreigners who came into the camps as NGO aid workers. He gave them as gifts, as a witness and memory to inform the public about what had happened in Cambodia.

After Chonburi, I went to another camp, a transit stop, of which I have little memory, before arriving in France. I just knew that it was like a prison. Before going to France, we were kept in that place, what might be called an “adaptation centre,” which was like a prison. I was there for a week in Bangkok, then I arrived in France. I arrived in France in the winter, January or February of 1983. It was extremely cold for me. We had climatic and culture shock, especially the elderly people. For me, I was just happy to discover new things that we did not see in Cambodia. I was different from the elders. It was so difficult for them. I had the chance to go to school, and I earned a master’s degree at a university and became an entrepreneur. I encountered a project that brought me back to Cambodia. It was a theatrical musical titled *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*, written by the famous French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous. It was an eight-hour musical performance on stage in France. The title of the play was very interesting and attractive—and it recounted the tragedy of Cambodia. Some people called it “Franco-Shakespearian.”

FONKI YAV: To introduce my myself, my name is FONKi Yav. FONKi is a nickname because my background is graffiti, so I sort of reinvented myself when I was fifteen by doing graffiti. I was born in France after my parents fled the war and the genocide in Cambodia in the late 1970s. I was born from refugee parents, and then grew up in Canada. Since I was four years old, I’ve been coming to Cambodia. I am based now in Phnom Penh, and I’ll explain what led me to dedicate my time to setting up a gallery and new platform for art here in Phnom Penh recently.

In 2011, Rithy Panh came to Montreal for a conference about Cambodian memory at Concordia University. That is where I met Rithy. At the time, I was studying film animation and cinema, so Rithy invited me to the Bophana Center in Phnom Penh. This really changed my life. Growing up, I was basically in the streets doing my own thing. In Montreal, I grew up around a lot of immigrants, direct refugees, or children of refugees. Growing up with this reality and sharing stories with this community, consciously or unconsciously, led me to come to Cambodia in 2012 to the Bophana Center. The team at Bophana helped me make a movie called *The Roots Remain* with my Canadian filmmaker friends. I wanted to adapt my graffiti style and really dig into our community's identity and culture, and to use the traditional *kbach* style from the Angkor Wat temples. I have many styles. When I started coming to Cambodia, I was really struck by the ornaments carved on the walls of these ancient temples. I mixed *kbach* with the graffiti style that I had learned in Montreal. I also do a lot of photorealistic art. There was a period where I did realistic portraits of traditional Khmer portraits and of mythical Khmer statues. This is a way to know my cultural heritage and to share it. By doing research or going to the national museum, I've learned that there are a lot of statues coming back to Cambodia that have been looted—for example, the Sotheby collection of Khmer statues. This is how I do research: an image captivates me, and then I do research and I learn so much about, for example, the Rigveda or the Ramayana, classic literary texts that really influenced the whole region here. That's the style of research that I do, as a way to really dig into our heritage and make it alive today.

When I started adapting my graffiti to the Cambodian landscape, I wanted to paint murals of my great-grandfather, because I grew up with my great-grandparents, who had been through the war and genocide. Some of their personal archives convey really strong moments—coming out of the refugee camps, living in the refugee camps, waiting to go to France or to go back to Phnom Penh. This whole return trip to Cambodia in 2012 changed my life, and I wanted to paint my great-grandfather somewhere in Phnom Penh to honour his life. To make a long story short, with that little intention, I started

meeting communities through graffiti by painting out in fields and in slums. I had been doing traditional graffiti before and then this new form of graffiti opened up an intergenerational dialogue, not just with my family, but with a lot of people around me. After finishing the film, I started travelling to show it to different audiences around the world. The premiere of the film was in Long Beach, California, where we shared the film with a lot of refugees and second-generation Cambodians who were born in America. This is when I realized the power of art and the responsibility of the artist. I realized that I had become part of the “Khmer Renaissance” without realizing it. Because I grew up in the diaspora, all I heard were bad stories, right? I understand this was because you hear these stories from a generation that was traumatized first-hand. Then when I came back to Cambodia, I saw a change. I came in 1994 for the first time, then in 2004, 2007, and 2012. Between 2012 and 2015, things changed in Cambodia so quickly. With music and other forms of art, through which we could have a discussion without speaking, I could feel that there was a process of healing or even just a dialogue happening. It is a Renaissance. I actually heard the term “Khmer Renaissance” for the first time from my friend, who is sort of the pioneer of bringing hip hop to Cambodia, mixing hip hop with old Khmer rock ‘n’ roll songs from the 1960s. So that’s why, in 2012, I realized that this was going to be a life’s work.

Today, I see so many great artists working within this Khmer Renaissance, from music, to film, to art, and literature. I found the purpose of art—to open up a certain kind of dialogue, to grasp what’s happening now. Everything that we do now is based on people like Rithy Panh, as well as on people who sacrificed their life or lost their life because they were artists or intellectuals. My understanding of these sacrifices became the fuel of my work, and the result is what I am doing right now—along with other artists—in Cambodia and elsewhere. There are many, many things happening now, but it’s important that we remember the people who lost their lives in the war. We have a heritage that is over one thousand years old. How do we recreate meaning for this generation, our heritage of today, which is going to be the heritage

of tomorrow, to continue a cycle of regeneration? When you try to cut down a tree, something that is so old, the roots remain.

Y-DANG: That's a great way to conclude our discussion today. Thank you to everyone. To be continued.

NOTES

- 1 Rithy Panh's contribution to this forum was translated from the Khmer language. Questions were submitted to Panh by Y-Dang Troeung in English and translated into French with the help of Hoi Kong and Tara Mayer. Panh's filmed answers in Khmer were translated into English script by Ratana Cheng, Sopheap Chea, and Colin Grafton.
- 2 Rotha Mok's contribution to this forum was translated from the Khmer language. Questioned were posed to Mok by Y-Dang Troeung in English. Mok's live responses in Khmer were translated into English script by Sopheap Chea and Colin Grafton.


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# Worlds Lost and Found

## On the Poetics of Hoa Nguyen

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### Introduction

*Y-Dang Troeung*

**H**oa Nguyen is the author of several books of poetry including *Red Juice: Poems 1998-2008* and *Violet Energy Ingots*, which was nominated for a Griffin Poetry Prize in 2017. Her 2021 book, *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*, is a poetic meditation on historical, personal, and cultural pressures pre- and post-“Fall-of-Saigon” with a verse biography featuring the poet’s mother, Diệp Anh Nguyễn, a stunt motorcyclist in an all-women Vietnamese circus troupe. She teaches at Ryerson University (which is currently in the process of changing its name), in Miami University’s low residency MFA program, in the Milton Avery School for Fine Arts at Bard College, and in her own long-running private poetics workshop. Her poetry has been recognized with a 2019 Neustadt International Prize for Literature nomination and a Pushcart Prize. Born in the Mekong Delta and raised and educated in the US, Hoa lives in Tkaronto with her family.

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### Sounding the Archive

*Bronwen Tate*

who wants to hear  
about your Asian North American experience anyway

if I write flowery and incomplete

We bird you to the sky and suffering released there  
We cry city mountains

I came to  
tame with a song bowl  
a sung swap to dynamite  
the arthritic as an  
expansion trick

—Hoa Nguyen, *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*

To read Hoa Nguyen’s 2021 *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure* within the context of the legacy of the Vietnam War is to register the many received narratives and cultural pressures the book writes against. For years, the main North American depictions of Vietnam (a country, like Korea, where the name alone is often used as a synecdoche for a US war) would feature tales of heroic acts or moral anguish of white “men fathers and soldiers” (Nguyen 57) against a backdrop of anonymous suffering. More recently, accounts by Asian and Asian North American writers have given detail and contour to lives previously blurred into background. Yet even now, pressure remains to render trauma in ways readers can easily recognize and catalogue.

In *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, Cathy Park Hong describes “[t]he ethnic literary project” as “a humanist project in which nonwhite writers must prove they are human beings who feel pain” (48). In thinking about *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*, I find myself returning to the scholars and writers who helped me understand what was so vital about Harryette Mullen’s similarly experimental, sound-driven work.<sup>1</sup> Like Mullen, Nguyen offers a crucial challenge to what Sianne Ngai describes as the “underlying assumption that an appropriate emotional response to racist violence exists, and that the burden lies on the racialized subject to produce that appropriate response legibly, unambiguously, and immediately” (188). It is against this pervasive pressure to render racialized trauma in a way that invites the immediate comprehension and empathy of a white reader that we must consider the stakes of Nguyen’s bold reversals of focus, disruptive collage aesthetics, and extravagant punning and sound play.

At the centre of the book is Nguyen’s mother Diệp, who left home in 1958 to join an all-women stunt motorcycle troupe. While Nguyen in no way glosses over violence, deprivation, and trauma, her eye is on the acts of courage and agency of this woman who “took a taste of earth / held hands on



the Wall of Death” (23). Nguyen writes from an archive, both personal and public. The book includes reproductions of photographs and correspondence as well as snippets of ghost stories, song lyrics, magazine copy, language textbooks, newspaper headlines, and military statistics. Over and over, Nguyen insists that we recognize how partial, how incomplete this archive is. While memoir (or even consistently narrative poems) might suggest that history, or at least an individual story, can be fully known, these polyvocal poems of juxtaposed fragments emphasize gaps, leaps, and questions. Sometimes a key signifier is missing: “when asked about the / of the past: the skin she quit” (92). At other times we observe the questioning dialogue between mother and daughter—“Ride a bicycle // Are you sure: a bicycle?” (22)—or a parenthetical statement pointing to an unresolvable contradiction: “how is this possible? the letter was written in March” (80).

While Nguyen’s collage aesthetics foreground the lacunae in both archive and memory, they also draw attention to language as shared material, used material. As I recently instructed MFA students writing poems inspired by Nguyen’s work, “Imagine yourself arranging and gluing together gum wrappers, scraps of gold paper, torn recipes from an old cookbook, and the obituary section of the newspaper. You want them to add up to something together, but you also want their diverse origins to be detectable on some level, for those origins to be part of the meaning-making.” Nguyen is never less than keenly attentive to the connotative baggage each word carries. “What lies ahead / rainbow // rainbows / who cares” (1), the first poem reads, evoking all the associations with future promise implied by Doris Day singing “Que Sera Sera” but also foreshadowing Agent Orange and the other “Rainbow Herbicides” that caused so much destruction and pain.

If connotative history is one way we experience language as material, sound is another equally crucial way. Consider the following passages:

Now glossy  
 gold looks cheap        the color of loss  
 Joss stick & paper  
                                  smoky bundle trick &[.] (8)

sags  
 Skully sag-faced    Why build the nest  
 on the sea when your name means  
 scree                                    serene.[.] (35)

silt-sift  
 silt gift  
 slit mouth spilled open  
 and grain pours out[.] (62)

Such density of sonic echo nudges us towards puns, mishearings, double entendres, and the anarchic instability of language, sources of both anxiety and pleasure. Such rich aural textures make you “meet your mouth, feel your face, and hear the hum in your head as you pronounce each word” (369), as Jessica Lewis Luck puts it in an essay on embodied cognition. This embodied engagement through sound also explains why I find these poems so moving even as they slip and elide the knowable story at every turn. These are poems that live in the searing details of peripheral memory, in the hum of a throat awakened by sound, in the “dragon tongue drum / and leatherette clasp purse” (Nguyen 63).

NOTE

- 1 For more on sound play and ambivalent emotion in Mullen’s work, see my article “Reading Affect in Harryette Mullen’s *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*.” It’s also worth noting that Nguyen studied with Mullen at Naropa and has taught her work in one of her celebrated living-room workshops.

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# Ghost in the Nerve: Hoa Nguyen's Sonic Archive

Claire Farley

wing a string we sing to  
wing again

—Hoa Nguyen, “We Sing To”

Like all archival investigations, Hoa Nguyen's *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure* is haunted. In these serial poems, Nguyen traces her mother Diệp Anh Nguyễn's line of flight as a “Flying Motorist Artist” (11), a stunt motorcyclist in an all-women circus troupe in 1950s Saigon. In assembling her mother's archive, Nguyen articulates her own diasporic experience through the absences and omissions that haunt personal and historical archives, particularly those shaped by colonial violence and displacement. While Nguyen works directly with source material in this collection—photographs, letters, lessons from a Vietnamese language course, song lyrics, ghost stories—her poetry also explores other material dimensions of memory. Across decades of writing, Nguyen has developed an approach to language and poetic form attuned to how language's material properties, particularly its sonic resonances, provide access to the liminal space between remembering and forgetting. The documentary impulse in Nguyen's latest collection should be understood as a formal approach that builds on, rather than departs from, this long-standing attention to the materiality of memory.

In a 2016 *Open Book* interview, Nguyen discusses her relationship to the Vietnamese language and suggests that our bodies hold language in excess of its communicative function:

I think what operates inside of my poems is that I'm searching for a ghost language. I lost my original language, Vietnamese, a monosyllabic tonal language, due to rupture and circumstance. My only language is English. I think when I write, the poems attempt to recover or somehow express this ghost language, this musical, lost

language. It is in my body, but I can't speak it. Instead I feel the Vietnamese language as a nerve ghost. And the poems become a way for that language to arrive somehow.

Nguyen's description of "the Vietnamese language as a nerve ghost" echoes a study of "the unconscious maintenance of a lost first language" by McGill University's Centre for Research on Brain, Language, and Music (Pierce et al. 17314). Using neural imaging, the study found evidence that "early formed language representations are maintained in the brain even if exposure to that language is discontinued." Just as the archive is haunted by its omissions, Nguyen's sonic archive negotiates the "nerve ghost" of the Vietnamese language. In Nguyen's poem "Tones in the Vietnamese Language," we learn that the difference between "ghost," "mother," "horse," and "tomb" in Vietnamese is a tonal variation: "Ma—level : ghost / Mả—high rising : mother . . . Mã—dipping rising horse : Ma?—low dipping : tomb" (25). The English words themselves cohere through assonance, and while this assonance is not a translation of Vietnamese lexical tones, it is an invitation to notice how unconscious connections accumulate sonically: we might hear the echo—or the synaptic firing—of relations across time and space through a poem's acoustics. Noticing this neuroscientific basis for the link between sound patterns and memory might also put Nguyen's work in productive conversation with other Asian North American writers, like Madeleine Thien and Ruth Ozeki, who draw on emergent scientific frameworks in their own representations of diasporic displacement and intergenerational memory.

The poem "Netting (Language Ghost)" assembles recollections and memory-objects associated with Nguyen's mother:

You left a thread and a serious  
leather pouch      Green lined  
several hauntings      yellow amber gems  
to line it      left in the washroom[.] (14)

Throughout the poem, disparate images and visions are taken up and then placed side by side. Instead of feeling disjointed, the poem's catalogue of disparate images evokes a deep relationality. In part, the poem builds this sense of connection through the successive use of polyptoton, the repetition of words with the same root; the repetition of "line" and "lined" in the excerpt above is one occurrence, but the device appears numerous times in

the poem, as in “the mind doesn’t mind” (14) and “shoots to shoot through” (15). Polypotton builds relations through sonic reinforcement, and its repeated use in this poem weaves a sonic “netting” that gathers the poem’s objects, visions, and quotes together. Reminiscent of Ursula K. Le Guin’s notion of fiction as a “carrier bag,” the archive as sonic net pushes against assumptions that the archive is a hermetically sealed and institutional space haunted by its omissions. In Nguyen’s sonic archive—with its holes, echoes, and tangles—ghosts are free to come and go.

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## Dear Hoa

*Fred Wah*

**T**hanks for your recent collection, *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*. It really opened up for me ways of positioning poetic composition and language around the complex social dynamic of “asking.” The way you enlarge the focus of the interrogative by framing it as genealogical and personal is powerful. As Charles Olson said (somewhere), “the subjective as objective requires correct processing.”<sup>1</sup> The frame of “asking” in this book is manifestly “soulful” (I hesitate to say spiritual, but close); I feel thrown back into R. D. Laing’s *The Politics of the Family*, an

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1 Editor’s note: As Wah reveals elsewhere, the phrase is from “Charles Olson’s seminar on Contemporary Poetry at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1964,” where it “was chalked on the blackboard.” See Fred Wah, “Cohen’s Noos,” *Canadian Poetry*, no. 33, Fall-Winter 1993, [canadianpoetry.org/volumes/vol33/wah.html](http://canadianpoetry.org/volumes/vol33/wah.html).

eye-opener I taught from many years ago. I also triangulated this poetry with Phyllis Webb's intricate reflections in her poem "A Question of Questions" as a way of thinking about the role of desire behind the questing/questioning in these poems. You make a "poetry of asking" intriguingly multi-faceted (not complicated, though). It could be theoretically simplistic and I appreciate that you don't do that. I feel energized by this poetic biotext and more aware of the realm of "hungry ghosts" that inhabit all our bloodlines.

Best, Fred

JUST ASKING HOW MANY TIMES YOU LOSE YOUR TREASURE

(Music at the Heart of Thinking 172)

extract the breeze from her river    mistake the answer for the question  
 refinement of the bruised knee    Dear Mother may I    step away  
      into the bruised words    you'll have more than you asked for    what  
 did you forget    remember the future    It'll show up in the tea leaves  
      ask the waitress to leave it    ask her when when she's off    ask her  
 tenderly    don't misunderstand the suddenness equal to hello  
      we's tricked into this future tense    a knee job    a little fishy  
 the agent of endurance interrogates the sentence    misspells the word "reckon"  
      the mistake is in wanting the answers    doesn't the family equal desire  
      do you want to see her face    are you asking for the moon  
 the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh moon    souls wander    another American war  
      just happens    ask around about it    the answers are untranslatable  
 until a white soldier wanders by kapow    and you still don't know how  
      the herbicides of memory are lost and gone forever    no cookie no phở  
 it is what it is but don't touch my dragon    my bike is what I hold on to  
      the speed is for balance    the scar a strawberry    the kickstand  
 a "bundled trick" of hybridity    the shaved head must be love    the hello  
 of her arms    Dear Mother may I    hold up your arms  
 now sing the answers    hum a little trick    smell the mums  
      with clarity    a thousand times you're lost    hold out your arms  
 a thousand times    I'll meet you



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## In the Living Room with Hoa

Joseph Ianni

There's a sort of awkwardness to using someone's surname when you're in their living room. It's not a place for professionalism but closer to an intimate and private space. Though it might be one you share and invite people into. Sometimes they take things with them when they leave, like some extra tomatoes or a borrowed book, other times they bring things like loukoumades. They're spaces we decorate to show off a bit of ourselves. Where we welcome talking with one another about what we're doing, what's happened, and what we might do. Fortune-telling and forecasting, personal tidbits and gossip. It's where we celebrate and cerebrate.

In Hoa's "Living Room" lecture, she quotes Joanne Kyger, saying "poetry is about continuing poetry" (00:01:22-00:01:24), to which she adds, "But I guess the question is how—how can we continue poetry?" (00:01:27-00:01:32). This question is at the root of Hoa's (now two-decades-long) reimagining of the workshop model, with the goal of extending its poetic possibility. Offering her home as a hearth, Hoa conducts a twelve- to thirteen-week workshop where participants, virtually and in person, read out loud and in turn from a selected text, consider the text together, and then write in each other's company based on those considerations.

What, in the prevailing workshop model, might be seen as inconsequential or incidental is, in Hoa's living room, present and capable of poetic intervention. As giving to the process as are the assigned readings, supplemental materials, and participants themselves. A photograph of Diệp Anh Nguyễn and her motorcycle; a *Pilea peperomioides*; broadsides of Joanne Kyger, Robert Creeley, Amiri Baraka, Philip Whalen, and other poets; Carl Jung's *The Red Book* on the fireplace; Philip Trussell's *Opening of the Field* hanging over the mantel; other paintings; records and a record player; shells; stones; owl figurines; and of course, books. But most importantly, in the corner, there is Hoa's writing desk, where she writes poems. In our company and in expectation of their readership, those cherished others whose presence is generative.

Reading in turn, it's easy to stumble on a word, to mistake it or over-read it. A participant might backtrack and repeat themselves or slow down. Sometimes I'd make a note of those mumbles, notice my own, and even begin to notice them in Hoa:

I walk I wal—  
 I walks down sometimes  
 why the advi—  
  
 abide the advice was  
  
 not "Fair better"  
 but "Fail better[.]" (*Violet 2*)

There is a process that occurs in reading text aloud. The reader encounters sites of reception, the skin and ears of fellow participants. In being read out, made into sound, those sounds inform a rendering of the text in our own way. The participant finds themselves embedded as an active part of the meaning's continuum. This process with regard to our own sense-making is something of a mirror image of what is experienced in Hoa's workshops. They make room for the ways in which our readings receive, interrupt, and revivify the texts we are engaging with.

"Perform an instant acrostic" on a word: whenever "you get stuck," look up the page, select a word, and perform an acrostic on it. E.g. "sky" becomes "said 'Kill yesterday.'" (Nguyen, "Writing")

This is a note from one of Hoa's workshops, and the following is a selection from one of Hoa's poems: "She said, 'What do you know about Vietnam?' / Violet energy ingots Tenuous knowing moment" (*Violet 8*).

These traces of the workshop appear directly in the text as part of the poetics, keeping one unstuck and moving through tenuous relations that breach their presence with history, silence, and the other. These traces inform a poetics with an expanded notion of intertextuality that disturbs horizontal or vertical renderings. It moves, perhaps, in a spiral or in widening circles. A constellation or a ball of elastic bands. An intertextuality that encounters, invitingly, the other as a text one lives *with* rather than works at or on.

"I live with this photograph of Amiri Baraka taken by Pat A. Robinson at Woodland Pattern in 2003." This citation is from the transcribed version of



Hoà's "Living Room." Where someone else might say, "I have a photograph," Hoa says, "I live with." That preposition, I think, is important.

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## Hoa Nguyen's "Languageless" Poetics

*Kim Jacobs-Beck*

**H**oa Nguyen's work examines the ruptures of language, resists conventional syntax, and centres on the liminal blur of meaning. Here, I will highlight two energetic fields for these experiments: her engagement with the English language as a person of the Vietnamese diaspora, and her intuitive divination work.

Born in Vietnam, Nguyen grew up in the US speaking English. Though not bilingual herself, her use of language recalls the slight displacement of familiar syntactical patterns that one hears from non-native speakers of any language. In her book *As Long As Trees Last*, a good example is "Agent Orange Poem":

What justice foreigners for a sovereign  
We doom in nation rooms

Recommend & lend   resembling fragrant  
Chinaberry spring

Here we have high flowers   a lilac in the nose  
"The Zeroes—taught us—Phosphorus"

and so stripped   the leaves to none[.] (4)

This poem, subtitled “[a]fter Emily Dickinson,” draws on Dickinson’s pared-down syntax and lineation. Nguyen adds her own wordplay, denominalizing/verbing the nouns “foreign” and “doom,” shifting abstractions into action. The poem is political commentary, a nature poem, and a remix of Dickinson, all in forty words, and much of the work is done here through breaking noun/verb conventions in a way that sounds like non-native speakers grappling with parts of speech.

Nguyen’s play with liminal spaces in language is reinforced by her interest in divination and the use of the intuitive in poetic composition. In an interview I conducted with her in April 2021, she discusses the important role of both tarot and *I Ching* divination in the composition of her most recent book, *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*. I ask her what had surprised her about her trip to Vietnam while she writing the book, and she recounts that she was there during the festival Tết Nguyên Đán, “which is a time of year in which everyone’s away with their family . . . I was independent there and I was able to walk around languagelessly and quietly.” While out walking, she happened upon the Wall of Death, the motorcycle stunt-riding attraction that her mother had worked in before Nguyen was born, set up temporarily for Tết. This chance moment set in motion a series of recognitions that became integral to her composition of the book. She recounts having had a tarot reading before her trip and pulling the Tower card:

I thought, “oh no, I’m going to feel like I’m crashing to the ground.” Instead it came in the form of this performance silo, which looks, from a distance, like a tower. The tower doesn’t necessarily have to be catastrophe. It can also be synchronicity, surprise, being struck by a sudden recognition. So that’s how the tower actually arrived in my experience being in Vietnam. I also recognized the Tower card as connected to the *I Ching* hexagram called Chen, or Thunder. I draw the title *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure* from the hexagram, the same archetype as the tower. It’s convulsive change, and it made me realize that’s also the story that I’m telling about this period in history, about my mother, but also about many, many, many people, who have had those kinds of experiences that are directly related to empire, imperialism, toxic masculinity, organizations, and that the tower becomes an expression of. Empire-building is so toxic; it has to be dismantled or it just explodes from its own toxicity.

Hexagrams figure in the book overtly as a title for one poem, “Shock Fate | Hexagram 51,” and Thunder also appears in “‘O My 4FH Planes’ (Cries of Johnson: A Folk Opera)”:

o you powerful Thunder Chief  
God of Thunder himself  
thunderstruck

o crusaders o flying sabres  
o sky raiders[,] (75)

Here the language is derived from a North Vietnamese folk opera that Nguyen found in a French anti-war documentary; it floats in the air like thunder, like US Air Force jets, like the language that comes if one listens for it while reading tarot cards or casting *I Ching* coins.

Divination, like speaking a second language, requires careful listening and a willingness to accept what is heard in order to understand. These methods that inform Nguyen's poetic practice are in line with Charles Olson's "Projective Verse"—all drawn on the intuitive acceptance of language as it arises, even when that language is mysterious, associative, or syntactically blurred.

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## A Note on Hoa Nguyen's Diasporic Lyric

*Michael Cavuto*

Since 2015, a broadside of Hoa Nguyen's poem "Diệp Before Completion" has hung in the entrance hallway of my apartment. It was a gift from Nguyen when I left Toronto, our shared city. She had moved there with her husband, the poet Dale Smith, from Austin, Texas, having before then lived in San Francisco. Her author bio at that time always began, "Born in the Mekong Delta and raised in Washington DC," a simple enough

statement that speaks twice: Nguyen grew up in the power centre of the imperialist nation that had forced her to leave her home, the initial event in a life of motion. “Diệp Before Completion” was the first poem I read from what would become, in the years following, *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*, and the first time I saw a photograph of her mother, Nguyễn Anh Diệp, daring and riding trick-style on her motorcycle, now the frontispiece of the new book.

*A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure* is comprised of poems that tell the stories of Diệp’s life—who came to the US in 1968 with her infant daughter and took the name Linda Diệp Lijewski—through mosaicked shards of memory. It is a documentary piecing-together of personal histories both defined by and evading European colonialism and the US-waged war, and a channelling of haunts and spirits that live within the journeying cultures of the world.

Fractured and fragmentary across the page, gapped while melodically twined together through the sonic bind of rhymes, frictional and at times downright wounded by elisions and loss, the poems do not seek a complete or even coherent history, but rather to inhabit the missing, unretrieved, and contradictory spaces of diasporic experience. In “Learning the Đàn Bầu,” which describes the traditional musical instrument, Nguyen writes,

plucked entirely in harmonics  
 .....  
 Fairylike a winged string  
 .....  
 the pitch bending the way  
 the voice holds sway  
 bends towards the Vietnamese voice[.] (18-19)

Through the poem’s voicing, one tone stretches to another and gathers significance in combination, extending into a singular, almost mythic sensation.

The poem is a distillation of Nguyen’s poetics—resonances cast across open space that sound harmonics. The vibrations of a tone spreading outward centrifugally generate emergent forms of clarity, distort, and join with other tones undergoing decay, obscurity, and confusion. In a synesthetic merging of sound and colour, these tones make poetic auras felt: blue flesh, vital red stains, the purple áo dài grief-ghost that shadows over the book, all

seeming to ask how many tones comprise memory. “[T]he voice holds sway,” carries on and falters, and in bending finds meaning inherent to poetry’s unique formal modes, a meaning-making akin to the calling, wavering pitch of the đàn bầu. *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure* holds open the reverberatory space within these soundings: a swelling that is at once an overflow of history’s unspoken voices and the swelling of a wound as it strains towards healing. Out from an array of biographical details and contexts, Nguyen’s life and her mother’s overlie one another, inform each other, the pronouns *I*, *she*, and *we* becoming a vessel in language through which both speak. Presences in the harmonic sway, their voices fuse and merge with those of the deities that their stories conjure. This lyric voice in Nguyen’s poems is expansive and choral, and in the same way one would not ask of a choir, who is speaking?, the poems evoke the irreducible and unlocatable within diasporic rupture. Instead of attempting to make these experiences fully legible or representable, Nguyen’s poems trace the contours of diaspora’s errant song. “Fairylike a winged string”: passageways through the personal, severed by geopolitical crisis and cultural disruption, are rethreaded, and impossible distances (generational, geographical, cultural) are made proximate. Nguyen’s diasporic lyric does not reconstruct her mother’s life as much as it relives and reimagines it, lifting out of Diêp/Linda’s “sole memory” (Nguyen, 113) a complex of memories that go on living in the present. Nguyen’s work has always been marked by dislocation. The lacunae of her lines are the wellsprings of the poems’ semantic and aesthetic powers and a refusal of the sentence’s strictly legislated grammar. In her latest book, this poetics evolves into a mixed language both commanding and broken by her history. Learning the Vietnamese language that she lost as she unlearns the English of her homeland’s oppressor, she writes, “I get things wrong like this” (15); “Lose the word lose / in its original shape // You lose every other word” (8); “Here be chopped things” (60); “I say it wrongly / fake my way” (20); and especially the well-known line, “The past tense of sing is not singed” (20). In this way, Nguyen’s poems provoke in the spirit of her mother: “she the disobey” (11) who “made things burn or break,” enacting a reverse rehearsal of assimilation that uncovers in these breakages a new vocabulary of insight.

“[S]catter the song,” reads the book’s opening poem, “Seeds and Crumbs” (1). The term *diaspora* developed from the Greek verb *to disperse*, the prefix *dia-*, meaning “through, during, across, by,” added to the Greek word for sowing, seed, or spore (“Diaspora”). The motion brought to life in Nguyen’s lyric disrespects proper history’s spatial and temporal orders, embracing the multidirectional waver of memory, trauma, and survival. As she writes, “we sing her story beyond time” (97) and “we sing to / wing again” (95).

Diaspora is the movement of the world’s commons: the migrations of the global poor; the dispossessed; the masses who move, change names and customs; who take and offer refuge throughout the world. Nguyen’s lyric is the beauty of their motion—brave and determined paths that cross rupture and incompleteness and in doing so are not wholly followable. Spore carries another meaning, describing the reproduction “of flowerless plants” (“Spore”). Perhaps language would have it that the world’s poor should be thought of as flowerless, but Nguyen’s poetry shows that we can take language and make art, that facing all loss we risk “a running leap at the song” (21)—that the poem is our treasure.

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## A Lighthouse to Shore: Patterning and Lyric Discovery in Hoa Nguyen’s Poetry

*Paul Tran*

**P**oetry is patterned language. “The relationship between pattern and the meaningful disruption of that pattern,” Carl Phillips writes in the essay “Muscularity and Eros: On Syntax,” “gives poetry the muscularity

required to become memorable.” And while it is memorable because of its sonic, rhetorical, or imagistic surprise, muscularity also enacts the emotional and psychological transformation of the speaker, their vexed interiority. It also results in the memorable transformation of the reader.

This memorable transformation has been a hallmark of Hoa Nguyen’s poetry since the publication of *Dark*, a chapbook from Mike and Dale’s Press in 1998, and *Your Ancient See Through*, a full-length collection from Subpress in 2002. Nguyen’s poems have taught me, a queer and transgender poet of the Vietnamese diaspora, how to import my interiority and experience onto the page. Their muscularity and insistent investigation, refusing the neo-liberal imperatives assumed by other Vietnamese writers of empire, inform my returning to them, to their thinking and magic, season after season as I reconsider what a poem can be and do.

One poem of such magic is “Shred,” published in *Your Ancient See Through* and reprinted in *Red Juice: Poems 1998-2008* by Wave Books in 2014. It is a strophic poem in seven stanzas, which signals at least seven interior movements, and in relatively short lines that concentrate attention on units of syntax and image. This concentration begins with the utterance “we are complicating / patterns” (40). The “we” refers to a collective, perhaps that of the Vietnamese people, and conscripts the reader who must, suddenly, wonder which of their own patterns will be complicated. With the first word, Nguyen ushers a reader into a lyric crisis: Who are we? What are we doing? Moreover, the ambiguity of the first utterance, which can also be read as “we *are* complicating patterns,” is part of the crisis itself: Is there a difference between who we are and what we do? “Destiny,” another way to frame this ontological dilemma, appears alone beside “patterns” on line 2 of stanza 1. It acts as an answer, suggesting that our patterns shape our destiny, before the stanza breaks into white space.

In fact, this repetition of “we are . . .” and “destiny is . . .” is one of three patterns made and meaningfully disrupted in “Shred.” When it recurs in stanzas 6 and 7, “we are complicating / patterns” becomes “we are here / in our skin” (40), and “destiny // is a big room” becomes “destiny // is a small city.” As “a big room,” destiny may have been purposeful, the way most rooms have a purpose, and it may have been intimate, perhaps eventually claustrophobic, but manageable. As “a small city,” however, one’s destiny

is tied to the destiny of others, and while it may still be intimate, there is no way to control or know all of it. An example of *metanoia*, a rhetorical device signalling a change of heart or mind, this pattern and disruption signals the transformed interiority of the speaker. Because the speaker changes their mind about who “we are” and what “destiny is,” the reader must also revise their understanding of themselves and the figure of destiny.

Revised understanding, or discovery, is for me the chief reason for making a poem. Since revision requires repetition, and repetition is emphasis, Nguyen’s poem proves that lyric discovery is enacted by patterning and meaningful disruption. That every stanza is a couplet—but for stanza 5—is another point of disruption. While couplets signal duality, a dialectic between two forces, stanza 5 is a monostich, a single-line stanza, that calls attention to its isolated utterance: “what days aren’t pinched by absence” (40). While “Shred” is cast primarily in the indicative grammatical mood, this utterance shifts to the interrogative, a question, without the attending question mark. It suggests that the query can barely be asked, that it is, in itself, rhetorical, much like the experience of displaced Vietnamese people. This demonstrates, again, how muscularity not only elevates a poem’s subject towards formal resonance, but also does so by revealing the inner life of the subject.

Finally, the third pattern made and disrupted in “Shred” is point of view. Shifting from the collective “we” to the pronoun “I” in the final line, the poem’s speaker steps on stage to declare, “I could die today” (40). This intensely intimate utterance is at once a revelation of interiority—that because of days “pinched by absence,” talking “like jets missing home,” the speaker “could die”—and a completion of three consecutive off-rhymes: “destiny,” “city,” and “today.” I highlight this moment of disruption, with its relentless rhyme, to highlight also that this poem, its thirteen lines, is both in conversation with the sonnet tradition and a disruption of it. Although it ends brilliantly on what could be a heroic couplet, which typically signals closure and certitude, the omission of a fourteenth line formally and psychologically resists the impulse for closure. It is, to me, Nguyen’s way of reimagining what poetry can do to more accurately enact the experience of Vietnamese people throughout the diaspora, and likewise,



it is an example of what Vietnamese poets, and our imagination, can do with poetry.

“Shred,” like all of Nguyen’s poems, is startling. It is stunning. And it remains a lighthouse guiding me to shore.

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## On Daring and Hoa Nguyen’s Seriality

*Stephen Collis*

This will be some slippery thinking—some slipping thoughts vaulting over pages, lunging at stars that move faster than I think they should. Quicker than language can catch. Which is how I read Hoa Nguyen’s work—thinking here mostly about *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*, but also thinking *Violet Energy Ingots*. As pure nimbleness of mind. As quickening. And how this has something to do with form.

If just glancing through these books, they seem collections of short lyrics, little songs, brief effusions. And they are—in part. Light and fleeting. Poems as improvisations on sudden coalescences. But that isn’t quite right—they are more like intuitions, sudden insights the poet, listening to dailiness, accords and follows. The things that truly fascinate me though are 1) that the poet returns in poem after poem to that same fount of intuition, a thousand times making the world anew in each poem (thus the bravado of that consistent method), and 2) that the poet includes her reading and research—her material inquiry into the world, what is done there and what has been thought about that doing—as another flash of intuition and insight. Which is to say that intuition can catch fire from a chore—sorting candies or folding socks—or from what seems more purposeful reading and study (say, on the nature of the nine muses, or who Andrew Jackson was).

But these are lyrics in chains that run right through books to their last pages. So they could be read as serial poems. Maybe because they also have such beautiful plain paper covers like Nguyen's Wave books, I pull Etel Adnan's *Time* (Nightboat, translated by Sarah Riggs) and Fred Wah's *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* (the 1981 Talonbooks edition) from my shelves. Adnan's poems are without question serials. Wah's too, but maybe closer to what Nguyen is doing because of so much formal variety within the basic each-page-is-an-individual-poem chain. These books are all favourites and kept close to where I work. But Nguyen has this trick—each poem does have its own unique title—so seriality seems held at bay. Or under erasure. Poems are separate *and* in series. They are different *and* the same. Part and whole do not subsume one or the other.

Which seems true to the serial in Jack Spicer's formation (via Robin Blaser) of the form as comparable to "a series of rooms where the lights go on and off" or "a sequence of energies which burn out" (Blaser 119), only to be lit anew in the next iteration of the series. With Nguyen's work it might be more accurate to say each poem is a tarot card drawn and placed on the table, the cards giving the poem access to the cosmic Outside, taking dictation from stars' energies and other radiances.

But—my second point above—I'm drawn to the way the intuitive "readings" of poem after poem in the seriality of *A Thousand Times* are specifically improvised in the midst of an open-ended documentary project—the poet's mother's life during and after her career as a flying motorcycle artist in Vietnam. Documentary can involve intuition and improvisation, documents can be "read" or "screed" or can give access to unaccountable energies welling.

In this documentary series are ghosts (Vietnamese ghost stories recur) and temporal derangements ("unrelated future tense" [57]), as well as what one might expect in documentary: letters, photographs, and scraps of interviews. The latter are so enjoyable as voices in conversation interrupt poetic narrative—"Are you sure: a bicycle? / A bicycle" (22). And then too there are poems as "notes" on war legacies ("Napalm Notes," "Notes on Operation Hades"), or "Notes toward a Social History of Vietnamese Music in the Twentieth Century." There is much more to say but I will simply note that in the most researched poems the spirit of quick inspiration and winged flight still dominates so these poems feel much the same as even the most

ephemeral of improvisations in the series. Document does not disrupt vision. It deepens it.

Nothing is exhausted. As Maria Stepanova writes in *In Memory of Memory*, “[i]n our own history the most interesting part is what we don’t know” (299). The unknown as part and parcel of Spicerean seriality—to gather in what yet remains outside. To be gathered. And the most remarkable thing about Nguyen’s gorgeous body of work is her daring—each page a leap into the unknown riding radiant energies. What *A Thousand Times* shows is how much this spirit of adventurous and winged inquiry comes from her mother Diệp’s equal daring: “To say you are flying flying fucking flying / on the small French motorbike Hair / also flying and a glamour shot smile” (54).

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## Altars and Archives

*Sydney Van To*

■ In *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure*, Hoa Nguyen writes about her mother, Diệp Anh Nguyễn/Linda Diệp Lijewski, as if writing about an anonymous young girl she had come across in an old photo album—before she passed away in 2019, before she fled Vietnam for the US, before she became a mother, before she left her stunt motorcycle troupe, before her “old skins shed / as a Silver Snake” (56). Nguyen reflects upon her mother as someone she did not fully know, and consequently upon herself as stemming from and indebted to this mystery lost in death: “Born of thee who dies more / (now I trail myself)” (65). The collection is an altar to her mother, with the appropriate ghost stories, ritual instructions, spiritual songs, and photographs. But if death estranges us from our loved ones,

Nguyen shows that life can do the same—another altar for a mother made alter: “I have no sacred rites for you / saving the sacred / grove you grew” (97). Diệp’s wayward life, to borrow Saidiya Hartman’s phrase, becomes an act of protest against the patriarchal nation-state that demands the domestic confinement of women: “Refusing the motherland mother role / Delta girl plotting a runaway plot / No waiting-in-shadows life for us” (6-7).

Like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who includes her mother among the revolutionary women she honours in *Dictée*, Nguyen also offers a mythopoetics of her migrant mother, shown to be spirited, tenacious, and independent. In Nguyen’s writing, as in Cha’s, English is transformed by a non-native tongue: each word becomes heavy like gravel, each line rattling resolutely like a bike chain. The speaker is suspended in these fraught but fertile relationships to Vietnamese as a lost tongue and English as the colonizer’s tongue:

myth and history twist  
 exile into a tower structure  
 also called “mouth”  
 that feeling of headlong  
 the site of mother  
 my longing in language[.] (83)

In her desire to reconnect with the Vietnamese sources of *ca dao*, or folk poetry, Nguyen recognizes how this “failed tower” has come to propel her own poetry. The works of both Cha and Nguyen rotate around intricate astrological and divinatory structures. In *A Thousand Times*, the tarot card of the Tower is politicized as the crumbling phallic structure that must give way not only to a feminine poetics of absence and non-linearity, but also to the fate of Babel through which language is irreversibly dispersed. In an interview, Nguyen states, “Often I think I write poems toward . . . the loss of my first language, Vietnamese—that that language displacement informs the cadence of sound I seek” (“Never”). But so too was her mother isolated from language, as an illiterate girl in Vietnam and as a non-native English speaker in North America. But Nguyen discovers the language of poetry in these losses:

silt-sift  
 silt gift  
 slit mouth spilled open  
 and grain pours out[.] (62).

In honouring her mother as more than her mother, as someone having endured the travails of war and history, Nguyen returns Diệp to the vast and hostile landscape of Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s. Even alongside the odes to her mother's youth, bike stunts, and romances, the collection refuses to take its eyes away from the decades of incendiary and chemical devastation wreaked upon Vietnam, and Canada's complicity as the US's leading arms supplier. In the face of man-made death and catastrophe, language seems to crumble: "Clear the eyes / with chrysanthemum / and how do you protest disaster?" (61). The avant-garde style of Cha and Nguyen represents this effort to find alternate modes of communication in ludic translation exercises, reproduced letters, found photographs, Sapphic fragments. Nguyen's characterization of *Dictee* could equally describe the aqueous qualities of *A Thousand Times*: "The book figures a confluence of language, identities, and forms. . . . As the writing includes, it erases. As it identifies, it defies coherence" ("Stars, Poetry").

Having immersed Diệp within the collection's archive of news clippings, military reports, and interrogation transcripts, the poet finally digs her mother out: "and no I don't want to conduct / Mỹ Lai research and produce it / for you here / Dear Reader" (78). The wayward mother is recovered only to be re-covered, speaking only to refuse to speak, dying only to become spirit.

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## Articles

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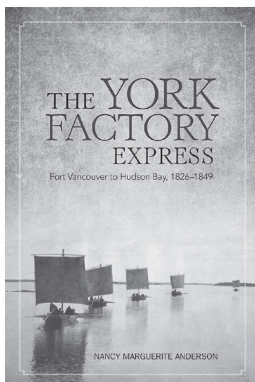
Danielle **Wong** is Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literatures at the University of British Columbia. Her research and teaching interests are at the intersections of race, empire, and technology. Her current book project, *Racial Virtuality: The New Media Life of Asianness*, traces a genealogy of the “virtual” in racial capitalist, settler-colonial logics, and examines how everyday experiments applications of virtuality are entangled with Asian diasporic and Asian North American racialization and labour.

FONKi **Yav** is a Cambodian artist who grew up in Montreal and was born in 1990 in Paris. In 2005, he discovered graffiti, co-founded the FT crew and began painting. His triple identity, accompanied by the universal language of art, makes him discover the world. Now curator and owner of FT Gallery & Studio in Phnom Penh, FONKi uses his art as an ambassador of Khmer culture, as a tool to create bridges across the world and forge links with the different communities where he paints.

## Reviews

Keva X. **Bui** is a PhD candidate in Ethnic Studies at the University of California, San Diego. Lina **Chhun** teaches at the University of Texas Austin. Evyn Lê Espiritu **Gandhi** teaches at the University of California, Los Angeles. Marianne **Hirsch** teaches at Columbia University. Van Anh **Tran** is a PhD candidate at Columbia University.

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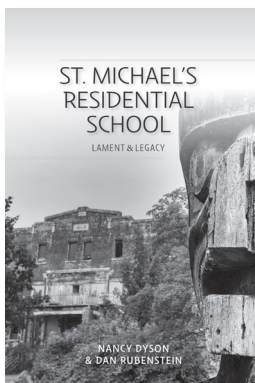


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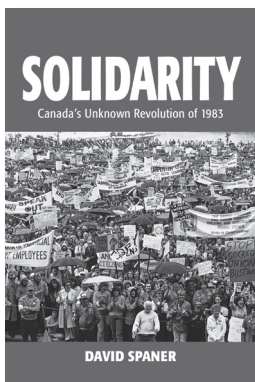


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