SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICAN
AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: AESTHETICS OF TESTIMONIAL SPACE

by

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The completion of this project marks the passage of thirty years since my parents, Ponn Chap and Thoeun Pach, left Cambodia. The completion of this project also marks the year that my parents will finally return to Cambodia. This project is dedicated to them.
ABSTRACT

The project of re(imagining) history in Southeast Asian testimonials remembers and reconstitutes subjects and subjects of history. In this reconstitution of subjectivity and history, such texts necessarily speak of the violence and trauma of American imperialism enacted on refugee bodies. And while the war in Vietnam, the “Secret Wars” in Laos, and the Cambodian genocide each trigger traumatic experiences experienced respectively by Vietnamese, Hmong, and Cambodian refugees, these traumatic experiences have been severed from the imperialistic violence that occasioned the trauma of war in the first place. In other words, America’s invasion of Vietnam, the Central Intelligence Agency’s recruitment of Hmong men to fight on the side of American ideology, and the bombing of Phnom Penh by American B-52 planes disappear from American consciousness. The three Southeast Asian refugee testimonials addressed in this thesis each actively engage modes of knowledge production as they are enacted upon the refugee body. I approach each of the texts as testimonials to trouble the dynamics of autobiography and memoir but also to foreground the way in which testimony produces knowledge and history.

Chapter 1 engages Chanrithy Him’s text When Broken Glass Floats by focusing on the aesthetic design of Cambodian American testimonials as screens for traumatic memory. In Chapter 2, I offer a reading of a recent Hmong American memoir, written by Kao Kalia Yang, entitled The Latehomecomer. By foregrounding what I call “testimonial excess” in Yang’s text, I consider the ways that the text authorizes testimonial speech by engaging both the refugee and ethnographic models of Hmong subjectivity. In Chapter 3, I engage the aesthetic of asceticism to demonstrate how Lê thi diem thúy’s text, the gangster we are all looking for, disrupts dynamics of referentiality in relation to how knowledge of the Vietnam War becomes produced.
by focusing on the body.

While it may tempting to read Southeast Asian refugee testimonials as courageous fugitives from traditionally western autobiographies, I maintain that autobiography as a set of socio-politically informed writing practices is actually produced in a moment when identity-politics threatened to overthrow logics of individualism and teleology. I argue that these texts reconfigure testimony vis-à-vis the mode of self-representational accounts to testify to American imperialism, specifically during the Vietnam War and its aftereffects. Taken together, all three texts’ engagement with testimonial discourse forces us to reconsider and reconstitute the manner in which testimony authorizes and offers evidence to produce knowledge about the refugee subject.
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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction: Southeast Asian Refugee Bodies and Testimonial Space

Speaking of the historical amnesia that continues to render American imperialism invisible within dominant discourse, Victor Bascara states in the introductory portion of his text, *Model-Minority Imperialism*, “U.S. imperialism set the conditions for Asian immigration to the West—but then it disappears” (xxiii). While Bascara specifically utilizes Filipino American literary texts to “unburden” and thus make visible American acts of imperialism, Bascara’s critical intervention offers a productive point of departure with which to approximate an understanding of Southeast Asian American literature. In some ways, this thesis marks a continuation of Bascara’s “unburdening” of American imperialism by critically leveraging Southeast Asian literary texts as alternative sites contesting the invisibility of American imperialism. In other words, texts produced by Southeast Asian writers constitute alternative histories testifying to the enactment of American violence upon Asian bodies both overseas and within the nation-state. Such texts speak of this violence; they also speak back to this imperialist violence, contesting what is known and what can be known about Southeast Asian refugee bodies. The texts engaged in this thesis, then, operate politically by remembering and reconfiguring the history of American imperialistic violence. These texts also operate aesthetically to redefine the parameters of testimony, blurring the line of distinction between fiction and reality, and both offering and deferring models for producing knowledge of the Asian American body.

Foregrounading the manner in which history operates as a narrative, Walter Benjamin directs our attention in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” to the importance of memory and
trauma as the mediums through which history becomes produced; memory and trauma collide in an interstice to contest history. Benjamin writes, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin 257). Alluding to the constitutive relationship between history and traumatic memory, Benjamin disrupts the notion of history as a singular master narrative incumbent upon those in the position of victor. Instead, Benjamin proposes a sense of agency in creating, recreating, assembling and reassembling history when confronted with the moment of danger. In ways that are similar to Foucault’s useful articulation of countermemory, for Benjamin the encounter between history together with memory and trauma produces a tense interstice that challenges preexisting narratives of history “as it really was.” Such an encounter produces narratives of history contesting the tyranny of empire’s epistemological structures for producing history. In this chapter, Benjamin engages the concept of material history as one that is inextricably linked to the past, and it is within this interstice of the “wreckage” of the past and the “storm” of future progress that history is produced.1 Benjamin’s thesis becomes multiply complicated when taken in juxtaposition with refugee narratives, narratives extending modes of narration that cross national boundaries and further become refracted by displacement, immigration, and the project of imperialism.

Following Benjamin’s understanding of history to be materially marked and invested, 

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1 Thesis IX in Theses on the Philosophy of History: “This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (259). I evoke Benjamin here for two critical reasons. While his illumination on history is one that centrally tropes history in the writings of Southeast Asian refugee narratives, critical aspects of Benjamin’s own autobiography enlighten the understanding of his writing as well as the understanding of the texts I address here. A Jewish German intellectual, Benjamin sought to emigrate to America but ultimately committed suicide because the refugee group with which he fled was stopped by the Spanish police.
Lisa Lowe in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* extends a materialist critique of the novel as an artifact that produces and is produced by history. “[T]he novel as a cultural institution,” she holds, “regulates formulations of citizenship and the nation, genders the domain of ‘public’ and private activities, prescribes the spacialization of race relations, and most of all, determines possible contours and terrains for the narration of ‘history.’” In other words, the cultural institution of the novel legitimates particular forms and subjects of history and subjugates and erases others” (98). The genre of autobiography—configured alternatively as memoir, testimony, confessionals—in particular has been particularly effective in legitimizing itself as a genre on par with that of the novel. By foreclosing certain types of subjectivities from being folded into autobiography, the genre subsequently denies certain subjectivities entrance into dominant discourse. Furthermore, in narrating the history of a singular life, autobiography also legitimates certain subjects of history. As a site of knowledge production similar to that of the novel, autobiography regulates and legitimates both subjects and subjects of history aligning with dominant discourse.

The project of re(imagining) history in Southeast Asian testimonials, then, remembers and reconstitutes subjects and subjects of history. In this reconstitution of subjectivity and history, such texts necessarily speak of the violence and trauma of American imperialism enacted on refugee bodies. And while the war in Vietnam, the “Secret Wars” in Laos, and the

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2 For example, in their introduction to *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson consider the historical underpinnings that mark autobiography as a genre and practice steeped in the discourse of the Enlightenment. Linking traditional notions of autobiography to a discourse that privileges the rational ‘I’ figured in men of property, Smith and Watson point out, “Western autobiography colludes in this cultural mythmaking. One of the narratives that bring this Man into being, it functions as an exclusionary genre against which the utterances of other subjects are measured and misread” (xviii).
Cambodian genocide each trigger traumatic experiences experienced respectively by Vietnamese, Hmong, and Cambodian refugees, these traumatic experiences have been severed from the imperialistic violence that occasioned the trauma of war in the first place. In other words, America’s invasion of Vietnam, the Central Intelligence Agency’s recruitment of Hmong men to fight on the side of American ideology, and the bombing of Phnom Penh by American B-52 planes disappear from American consciousness. What is left, then, is an influx of Southeast Asian refugees, bodies that have been uprooted onto an American landscape and assigned new meaning within U.S. dominant discourse. Most often, refugee bodies have been emblematized as traumatized bodies requiring the need and care of American ideology. However, specifying refugee bodies as a site upon which trauma proliferates perpetuates the disavowal of witnessing, advancing, instead, dominant narratives of history.

The impossibility of “knowing” trauma, particularly with regard to refugee bodies, offers a site for producing history, for creating knowledge disavowed by dominant discourse. Addressing the impossibility of directly encountering trauma, Cathy Caruth states, “Through the notion of trauma…we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11). The trauma inflicted on refugee bodies permits the history of American imperialism to unfurl in a manner not immediately discernable, as

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3 Aihwa Ong engages Foucault’s notion of biomedicine as a resource that both provides care and produces subjects from the state ideological apparatus and applies such a notion onto the body of Cambodian refugees who escaped to the United States in the wake of Khmer Rouge’s seizure of Cambodia. Ong asserts that biomedicine functions as a scheme of knowledge and power that shapes and produces state citizens. In the case of Cambodian refugees, biomedicine seeks to diagnose and treat the Cambodian body in order to produce citizens that comply and complement the state apparatus.
Caruth suggests. Moreover, locating the refugee body as a repository for trauma is symptomatic of another trauma the American body-politic experiences in relation to the “disunification” propelled by the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War stands as the war in American history marked by the instability and inability of the United States’ technologies for knowing and claiming itself. Lisa Lowe inaugurates her text, *Immigrant Acts*, with a discussion of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial and subsequently observes:

> In a manner unprecedented in the twentieth century, the Vietnam War (1959-1975) shook the stability and coherence of America’s understanding of itself. An “unpopular” war contested by social movements, the press, and the citizenry, a disabling war from which the United States could not emerge “victorious”—there is perhaps no single event in this century that has had such power to disunify the American public, disrupting traditional unities of “community,” “nation,” and culture.” (3)

In other words, the Vietnam War was not just a war with an unknowable enemy whose guerilla tactics persistently refused the United States’ technologies for knowing; the war also signals the United States’ inability to know and contain its own sense of national identity.4 Addressing the rise of autobiographical criticism, James Olney writes of the “anxiety about the self” as one of the factors producing autobiographical criticism and this is directly linked to the Vietnam War, a war in which the production of knowledge and history is tenuous at best, evidenced by the conflicting narratives that mystify the Vietnam War.

> If the Vietnam War signals the United States’ inability to know itself then it brutally

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4 I refer here to the number of identity politics movements that occurred simultaneously and alongside the advent of the Vietnam War. By directing attention and acceptance to bodies differentiated by race, class, and gender, these social movements called into question the assumption of the United States’ illusion of homogenous unification.
forecloses Southeast Asian refugee bodies implicated in the Vietnam War, whether in the Vietnam War, the “Secret War” in Laos, or the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge, from becoming intelligible and legitimate at all. Renny Christopher notes in her critical explication of the Vietnam War through Vietnamese exile narratives, “U.S. discourse about the war seems most comfortable when it can center exclusively on American issues and abstract ‘Vietnam’ the war from Viet Nam the country” (4). This abstraction of Vietnam renders the Vietnamese unintelligible and illegitimate within United States’ discourse. As such, Christopher’s attention to the tendency of abstraction anticipates Katherine Kinney’s trope of “friendly fire” to structure narratives about the Vietnam War. In other words, the narration of the Vietnam War depends upon a trope of “friendly fire” that eclipses the faces of Vietnamese soldiers and citizens, replacing those faces with Americans. The utilization of such a trope suggests America was at war with itself and discounts Vietnamese (along with Cambodian and Hmong) bodies in the narration of the war. This abstraction and solipsism of Vietnamese bodies and Southeast Asian bodies resonates violently for Southeast Asian refugees forcibly relocated to the United States resulting from the United States’ involvement in Southeast Asia, between 1960 to 1979. Upon their emigration to the United States, these refugee bodies unknowingly stumble upon a pre-established discourse imposed on their bodies.

The three Southeast Asian refugee testimonials addressed in this thesis each actively engage modes of knowledge production as they are enacted upon the refugee body. I approach

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5 In his essay “Constructions Construed: The Representation of Southeast Asian Refugees in Academic, Popular, and Adolescent Culture,” Thomas DuBois articulates an analysis of the “models and metaphors for viewing Southeast Asians,” maintaining that these same models for understanding such bodies are entrenched in American political and sociological paradigms designed to achieve a particular end (1). DuBois examines first person accounts of self-representation produced by Southeast Asian adolescent refugees who have recently settled in the United States. Examining these accounts of self-representation, DuBois finds that while adolescents are aware of
each of the texts as testimonials to trouble the dynamics of autobiography and memoir but also to foreground the way in which testimony produces knowledge and history. The legal space of testimony demands the witnessing of a particular event in history as it is framed in a particular form, in a particular sequence, and by a particular subject position. Leigh Gilmore says, “Testimony refers not only to bearing witness, but to the protocols in which it must be offered; it evokes legal testimony and its juridical framing as a ready context for any testimonial speech” (5). Gilmore directs our attention to the manner that testimony produces knowledge.

Functioning in extension of the nation-state’s protocols for regulating and legitimating its citizenry, testimony authorizes only certain subjectivities to speak in very narrowly defined terms. Testimony produces knowledge by abjuring an “I” to speak who is the “eye” who witnesses a particular event in time and space. However, I argue that the socio-political contexts of the Vietnam War, the discourse of abstraction, and discursive models within which refugee bodies are conceived structure the testimonies that take place in each of the three texts I address.

In Chapter 1, I engage Chanrithy Him’s text *When Broken Glass Floats* by focusing on the aesthetic design of Cambodian American testimonials as screens for traumatic memory. I maintain that the use of screen memory indirectly influences the structure of the text by engaging Paul de Man’s concept of autobiographical prosopopeia and autobiography as defacement to show how trauma manifests itself indirectly upon the text. Him’s text complicates the direct models that constrain their acts of representation, they still anticipate those models to push against the frame that has already been set up for them.

6 Paul de Man in his often cited essay, “Autobiography as Defacement” proposes the idea of prosopopeia with regards to autobiographical texts in which the genre of autobiography constitutes the autobiographical subject. De Man operates from a deconstructionist framework and calls into question the referentiality of autobiography as hagiography. In some ways, de Man’s assertion operates as a precursor to Asian American Studies in which Asian American is understood as a coalition categorization that actually defaces the different subgroups within the
referentiality assumed in models of victimhood at the same time that she uses such models. By utilizing the victimized position of the child and female subject, Him offers a screening of trauma that forecloses “knowing” her testimony strictly as a refugee’s survival account. Moreover, by utilizing this screening of trauma to testify, Him’s text refuses the victim-savior relationship, implicitly contesting what can be known about the Cambodian refugee body because it is a traumatized body. As Caruth suggests about trauma, the text offers history in traumatic moments not immediately discernable.

In Chapter 2, I engage a recent Hmong American memoir, written by Kao Kalia Yang, entitled The Latehomecomer. By foregrounding what I call “testimonial excess” in Yang’s text, I consider the ways that the text authorizes testimonial speech by engaging both the refugee and ethnographic models of Hmong subjectivity. Moreover, the intersection between the refugee and ethnographic model call into question the notion of authenticity and truth-telling within the parameters of testimony. Much like the traumatized refugee models constructed on Cambodian refugees, Hmong refugees have been constructed to fit within the discourse of ethnography because of their so-called “primitive” and traditional oral culture. However, Yang exploits this ethnographic model to excess, extending the space of testimony to offer both individual and collective memories, constructing and reconstructing history from memory and cultural artifacts.

In Chapter 3, I engage the aesthetic of asceticism to demonstrate how lê thi diem thúy’s text, the gangster we are all looking for, disrupts dynamics of referentiality in relation to how knowledge of the Vietnam War becomes produced. While it may tempting to read Southeast Asian refugee testimonials as courageous fugitives from traditionally western autobiographies, I
maintain that autobiography as a set of socio-politically informed writing practices is actually
produced in a moment when identity-politics threatened to overthrow logics of individualism and
teleology. I argue that these texts reconfigure testimony vis-à-vis the mode of self-
representational accounts to testify to American imperialism, specifically during the Vietnam
War and its aftereffects. Taken together, all three texts’ engagement with testimonial discourse
forces us to reconsider and reconstitute the manner in which testimony authorizes and offers
evidence to produce knowledge about the refugee subject.

Southeast Asian American life-writing expands testimonial space for individual and
collective stories of trauma engendered by imperialistic violence to be heard and understood in
new ways. The reconfiguration of testimonial space engenders possibilities for producing
knowledge and history about othered bodies violently elided in dominant modes of history, in
dominant modes of remembering. Because the marginalized subject-position of the refugee is
not nationally and legally sanctioned vis-à-vis dominant discourse, Southeast Asian testimonies
must be imagined in new ways. The testimonial space of all three texts discussed in this thesis
become reconfigured through de-centering narrative structure, destabilizing evidence to offer
new forms of evidence, and overcrowding the testimonial subject to refuse testimonial authority
usually figured in a reciprocal “I/eye” dynamic. Reconfiguring the space of testimony not only

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7 James Olney notes how academic disciplines organized around identity politics have used autobiographical texts as
the locus of legitimacy. In particular, Olney points out, “black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than
in standard histories and because black writers entered into the house of literature through the door of
autobiography” (15). Though Olney does not extend his discussion to Asian American studies, similar concerns can
be attributed to the emergence of Asian American studies as a disciplinary field within academia. While Asian
American studies differs because of the issue of knowing the Asian body, the fact remains that autobiography is the
site that provides technologies for knowing Asian American bodies. As scholars such as Viet Thanh Nguyen have
pointed out, the United States has enacted legislative measures against Asian Americans specifically by utilizing
racist representations of the Asian body (“Race” 7). For example, Southeast Asian refugee bodies have consistently
been configured as disabled and traumatized bodies requiring special medical attention.
allows for the production and historicization of marginalized subjectivities, this reconfiguration also gestures towards the violence of imperialism inflicted on both individual and collective bodies. Given the dynamics of trauma and imperialism, violent histories can never be told “as it really was,” since to do so would occasion the supplanting of one dominant discourse with another dominant discourse.

Locating and regulating refugee bodies as a site upon which post-traumatic stress disorder, fertility rates, and physical abuse proliferates continually constructs the refugee body as injured, pained, and not fully whole. Such practices of regulation operate in extension of U.S. political ideology indicative of the desire to continue the war in Vietnam. If, as Elaine Scarry critically points out in her important text *The Body in Pain: Making and Unmaking of the World*, “juxtaposed to the assertion that a country won or lost a war is the assertion of the number of injuries that occurred, showing that injuries are perceived to be demonstrable ‘proof’ of *either* victory or defeat,” then the United States is still at war with refugee bodies (117). While the United States’ victory in Vietnam can only tenuously be labeled dubious, by governing and regulating the refugee body as an injured body, the United States adds to the body count of the Southeast Asia as symbolic losers of the war. As such, when Southeast Asian writers grapple with the project of self-representation, they necessarily take on the project of producing alternative forms of history to context dominant narratives of the Vietnam War, of American imperialism. Such texts operate personally and politically, individually and collectively, to both testify and remember.
CHAPTER TWO

Screening the Subject in

Cambodian American Testimony: Aesthetic Design

in Chanrithy Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats*

Of the three Southeast Asian testimonies addressed in this thesis, Chanrithy Him’s memoir, *When Broken Glass Floats*, most closely approximates the juridical definition of testimony. And given recent developments of the United Nations’ implementation of an international tribunal to incriminate top Khmer Rouge officials for committing crimes against humanity, the tendency to situate testimonials such as *When Broken Glass Floats* within this legal definition is certainly understandable. The investment in attaching Cambodian American testimonials to juridical and political practice can be traced in the current use of narratives to substantiate the United Nations backed trials of Khmer Rouge leaders (“Khmer Rouge”).

Certainly, the material manifestations that Cambodian American testimonials enable are useful both artistically and politically. Ung’s testimony as both expert and victim on PBS’ *NewsHour* segment, for example, critically directs attention to testimonials as sites that offer evidence attesting to crimes of humanity. Nevertheless, this strict adherence to strict juridical testimonial, propagated by the desire to fully address and consequently redress the trauma of Cambodian

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8 Luong Ung, author of *First They Killed My Father*, who narrates her survival of the Khmer Rouge regime, recently made an appearance on national television in segment of the Public Broadcasting Service (*PBS*). Originally aired on March 31st after the initial trial of Kaing Guek Eav (otherwise known as Duch), this section of *NewsHour* engaged Gregory Stanton, the director of the Cambodian Genocide Project, as well as Ung whose role was that of an authorized testimonial subject. Ung’s text was published in the same year as Him’s. While I recognize that Ung’s and Him’s texts differ from one another in critical ways, both authors’ autobiographical texts ultimately approximate a similar task in testifying to the Khmer Rouge’s atrocities.
refugee bodies, masks underlying complexities that are not so readily intelligible on the surface of the text. By delineating the visible contours of Him’s memoir, I argue that while the text may operate as a manifestation of testimony in a simplistic sense, a latent layer of meaning persists in the subtext that troubles the understanding of testimony.

*When Broken Glass Floats* is the memoir of Chanrithy Him, a young but precocious girl merely three years of age at the start of the memoir and the Cambodian civil war.9 The text’s narrative trajectory describes the excesses of the Khmer Rouge, chronicling the overthrow of Lon Nol’s government, the terror of the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia’s liberation from that regime with the Vietnamese’s invasion of the country, and culminates with the protagonist Chanrithy’s eventual escape to the United States.10 Amid these political upheavals, Thy and her family are forced to evacuate their home in Takeo to the capitol city of Phnom Penh. Along with millions of other Cambodian families, Thy’s family is then forcibly relocated to the rural areas of Cambodia, where they toil in the “killing fields” to fulfill the Khmer Rouge’s fantasy of a utopian agrarian society devoid of foreign corruption and class disparity. Suffering through starvation and disease resulting from the Khmer Rouge’s refusal to sufficiently provide care to its citizens, members of Thy’s family begin to die, so that the narrative is recursively punctuated with images of death. Out of Thy’s ten siblings, five of her siblings die, beginning with her

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9 By civil war, I refer to the coup d’état led by General Lon Nol to topple Prince Norodom Sihanouk from power. Enacted in March of 1970, the deposition of Sihanouk as head of state resulted in a struggle for power among Khmer Rouge and North Vietnamese military forces. Speaking in an historical voice, Thy narrates, “On March 18, 1970, Prince Sihanouk was ousted by his premier, Lon Nol, and his cousin, Prince Sisowath Serik Matak, in a bloodless coup backed by the United States” (33).

10 Following current practices of autobiographical scholarship, I use Him when referring to the author of the text and Chanrithy (also referred to in the text as “Thy” or “Athy,” which are childhood nicknames belonging to Chanrithy) when referring to the autobiographical persona/narrator/protagonist in the text proper.
younger brother Tha, who dies from being born too prematurely to survive, and culminates with the death of her older sister Chea, who dies in a labor camp in the summer of 1978.\textsuperscript{11} The dissolution of Thy’s family unit signals the breakdown of national collective Cambodian identity.\textsuperscript{12} The continuous repetition of death is symptomatic of the trauma’s indirect exertion upon Him’s narrative. The repetition of death recurs even after Thy has relocated to the United States as a political refugee.

Surficially, Him’s text follows standard models of refugee narratives, where the United States is the locus upon which ideologies of equality, democracy, and liberation can take place. Nonetheless, Him’s text adopts the testimonial form in ways that significantly destabilize testimony as a site that produces truth and knowledge. Without disavowing the extent of her personal suffering under the Khmer Rouge, Him negotiates and navigates within pre-established frames using aesthetic design to contest what we know about the Cambodian refugee subject. Recasting the childhood self in the role of the emblematic victim to call attention to human rights violations, Him’s text engages human rights discourse and focuses attention upon herself as well Khmer Rouge history. I argue that her testimonial project utilizes the trope of the innocent child and female sufferer as aesthetic designs that simultaneously screen what knowledge is produced within the platform of testimony.

\textsuperscript{11} Though the deaths of Thy’s older brother, Tha, and younger brother, Bosdaba, do not occur as a direct result of the Khmer Rouge government, Thy narrates after B-52 bombings of Phnom Penh, “For Pa these have been months of frustration entangled in brutal lessons. He has lost two sons, children not touched by bombs but who might have survived if there had been access to hospitals and advanced medical care” (44). Though the B-52 bombings did not directly take the lives of Tha and Bosdaba, the bombings did destroy the family’s access to adequate medical care.

\textsuperscript{12} In addition to the deaths of Tha, Bosdaba, and Chea, the deaths occur as described by Thy: Pa is taken away by the Khmer Rouge, Vin dies at three years of age from lack of medical care, Avy dies from edema, and Mak dies when the Khmer Rouge throw her into a well.
In discussing the text’s aesthetic design as a testimony within testimony, I would like to engage the work of Teri Schafer Yamada, whose essay “Cambodian American Autobiography: Testimonial Discourse” usefully articulates important premises upon which Cambodian American autobiographies are based. Reading Chanrithy Him’s *When Broken Glass Floats* and Luong Ung’s *First They Killed My Father*, Yamada asserts that Cambodian American autobiographies reshape the genre of American autobiography.\(^{13}\) Discussing Cambodian American autobiography in conjunction with American biography as well as other Asian American autobiography, Yamada asserts that Cambodian American autobiography exists on an “indeterminate site.” By extension, Yamada differentiates between Cambodian American autobiographers, who remain “situated on a luminal interstice of the national/international” limited to the duration of the Khmer Rouge’s rule from 1975-1979, from Vietnamese American writers whose narratives often move beyond the status of refugee (146).\(^{14}\) Yamada argues that Cambodian American autobiography operates as testimonial discourse and registers on a personal/political, national/international arena. By gesturing towards the political imperatives of such autobiographies, Yamada necessarily entrenches Cambodian American autobiographies within the discourse of human rights. The act of autobiographical writing becomes a political act

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\(^{13}\) Yamada chooses to discuss both Him and Ung’s texts as testimonials. Although Luong Ung’s text *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* is another text that has received wide-spread circulation to garner attention for Khmer Rouge atrocities, I find her text problematic in many ways. While the narrative trajectory of Ung’s text is similar to that of Him’s, I take issue with a number of points in Ung’s text, namely her tendency to exceptionalize her position as victim while simultaneously speaking for millions of other Cambodians. For an extended critique of Ung’s text in comparison to other Cambodian American texts, see Sody Lay’s essay “The Cambodian Tragedy: Its Writers and Representations” in *Amerasia Journal* 27:2 (2001): 171-182.

\(^{14}\) Without discrediting the work Yamada has produced on Cambodian American literature as testimonial form, I find that her tendency to differentiate among Southeast Asian literature by ascribing a teleological progression to Vietnamese American literature while articulating the repetitious form of Cambodian American literature is problematic. Presupposing a linear development that moves from refugee model to immigrant model to successful American model inflicts an epistemic violence that reifies hierarchies and binarisms.
that demands recognition and retribution along national and international lines for the human rights violations Cambodians suffered. Interestingly, the lines between fiction and documentation become blurred with Yamada’s analysis since Him and Ung’s personal narratives operate as documentation, as witnessing, and as testimony. Yamada concludes that texts such as those written by Him and Ung resonate as hybridized texts.

Yamada’s essay is part of a collection of essays anthologized in *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* by editors Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi. While the anthology foregrounds the ways that Asian American literary aesthetics transform hegemonic forms of literature, the discussions on literary aesthetics often becomes a dialogue that simultaneously engages in the politics of representation (Chang 873). The slippage between aesthetics and politics in each of the essays included in the anthology is indicative of Asian American literature’s inseparability from the politics of representation. The possibility of parsing out politics and art from the category “Asian American” literature remains decisively untenable, as critics such as Susan Koshy and others have demonstrated.\(^{15}\) Politics and art are locked in a perpetual mutually constitutive relationship.\(^{16}\) Certainly, the politics of

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\(^{15}\) In her essay, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” Susan Koshy justly calls for reconsidering the canon of Asian American literature in light of dramatically shifting Asian demographics on global and transnational scales and warns, “We run the risk of unwittingly annexing the newer literary productions within older paradigms, overlooking radical disjunctions within more established formulations like Chinese and Japanese American literature, perpetuating hierarchies within the field” (317).

\(^{16}\) In her introduction to *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, a seminal text in Asian American studies that critically juxtaposes U.S. immigration policies with Asian American cultural productions, Lowe argues, “the immigration of Asians to the United States has been the *locus* of meanings that are simultaneously legal, political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic” (6). Lowe is correct to point out the multiple determinations that mark both the Asian American body as well as the body of work produced by Asian Americans. Viet Than Nguyen also remarks in his text *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* that “For better or worse, Asian American literary critics have generally approached Asian American literature as being symptomatic of ongoing historical concerns for Asian Americans—to read the literature, then, enables the critic to form political theses about the state of Asian America” (3). While, Nguyen complicates ideological assumptions that privilege resistance over
representation becomes problematic within Cambodian American autobiographies. As Yamada points out, Cambodian American literature often takes the form of testimony to testify to atrocities inflicted upon the Cambodian refugee bodies and the Cambodian body politic. However, without dismissing the importance of Yamada’s work, I find that her reading of Cambodian American texts is emblematic of the reading practices that are imposed upon such texts as testimonies that explicitly produce knowledge about the Cambodian refugee body. More importantly, locating Cambodian American testimonies in an “interstitial space” suggests that such texts only bear signification in relation to the genocide that occurred in Cambodia. Bearing great similarity to Vietnamese American and Hmong American literary texts, Cambodian American testimonials emerge from a discursive space that reveals traces of the United States’ political role in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. When Cambodian writers testify to atrocities enacted by the Khmer Rouge, they risk transcribing an exposé indicting United States foreign policies as acts of neo-imperialism.

While criticism directed towards the United States is certainly not novel in any way, this tension between education and exposé becomes particularly pronounced in the context of Cambodian American texts. If as Yamada asserts, Cambodian American literature takes the assimilation, he also echoes Lowe’s sentiment that Asian American cultural productions (literary or otherwise) are a dense sedimentation of politics and aesthetics.

Yamada states that because Cambodian American testimonials function as “historical evidence,” these texts’ “historical accuracy takes on more importance” than in other forms of autobiography (153). Furthermore, echoing Willa Schneburg’s review on Him’s text, Yamada argues that Cambodian testimonials “refute the false confessions written by prisoners in S-21” (153). Certainly, the excesses of the Khmer Rouge relied on what Elaine Scarry calls a “fiction of power” by torturing Cambodian citizens into false confessions. However, the political ideologies that undergird those false confessions and the testimonial demands of Cambodian American testimonials are not too dissimilar: in both instances, the desire to construct knowledge into a “fiction of power” depends upon so called empirical documentation.
form of testimony of surviving the Khmer Rouge, writers of Cambodian American texts often occupy the position of refugee subject seeking political asylum in the United States.\textsuperscript{18} Cambodian American autobiographies must traverse the tension between educating American audiences and testifying to Khmer Rouge atrocities that may reveal the United States’ own unsavory role. \textit{When Broken Glass Floats} arises at this critical juncture between testifying to the Cambodian refugee experience while being self conscious of political ideologies that demand a conservative representation of the United States’ role in the formation of the refugee subject. Him’s text negotiates the tense space of representation in its utilization of two prevalent tropes to gain compassion for American readers: that of the innocent child and that of the suffering woman. At the level of the text’s manifest content, Him’s deployment of both models of subjectivity enable the testimonial project. While Him’s aesthetic design of structure, evidence, and subjectivity enables her to structure the text in a way that appeals to mass audiences; this manifestation, which works to put readers at ease, functions in direct opposition to the latent content that is much more problematic and complex than the strictly juridical underpinnings of testimony.

The prefatory portion of the text includes a poem written by Him, underscoring an explicit invocation of testimonial discourse in the narrative structure. The voices of those who did not survive the genocide are “Determined to connect” and beg the world and the narrator:

\textit{Please remember us.}

\textsuperscript{18} Yamada argues in the essay I have referred to that Cambodian American autobiography assumes the form of a “tripartite chronotype” that begins with an idyllic childhood in Cambodia, the disruption of this idyllic life with the Khmer Rouge’s rise to power, and the subsequent relocation to refugee camps and/or immigration to the United States. Yamada attributes this chronotype to an article printed in the \textit{New York Times} by journalist Sydney H. Schanberg, the close friend and cohort of the Cambodian photographer Dith Pran. Schanberg was assigned to report on the political upheaval in Cambodia spanning the years 1975-1979.
Please speak for us.

Please bring us justice.

A supplication for justice, this opening poem emphatically marks the text as testimonial and as a part of human rights discourse. Furthermore, the poem authorizes the author to speak of her experiences with the objective of securing political justice and ethical remembrance for those whose lives were lost during the war. Hence, Him’s position as narrator and author is multiply and complicatedly structured: she speaks not only for herself but also for those two million Cambodians who did not survive. While Him narrates the tale of her own survival, the unfolding of her story necessarily tells of the dead. As such, the text functions both as a personal testimony and as the collective testimony of those who did not survive. It is the deployment of the autobiographical form that enables Him to enter into rights discourse and to approximate Cambodian American subjectivity. When writers such as Chanrithy Him—who are marked by the intersections of race, class, gender, and ideology—enter into a pre-existing discourse to represent the self, much care must be taken to ethically represent one’s self and one’s collective identity. Him herself addresses the multiple functions that work within her text. While she speaks for herself in the national arena for mainstream American audiences, her testimony is a meta-narrative that also functions to call attention to atrocities across an international platform.

Of testimony’s practical uses in human rights discussions, Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer direct our attention in Human Rights and Narrated Lives to the pragmatic uses and limitations that arise in the circulation of life writing within contemporary human rights discourse:

As meta-sites for social critique, published narratives sometimes unsettle received conceptions of personal and national identity, sometimes dismantle the foundational
functions through which nations and imagined communities construct and reconstruct their histories, sometimes promote new platforms for and forms of political action, and sometimes produce a backlash of actions that forestall recognition and redress. (31-2)

As texts capable of producing counterhistory, life writings are a particularly useful tool for victims of human rights violations to plea for human rights. In other words, the aesthetic and politics of life writing such as those produced by survivors of Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge, allow counterhistory to gain currency and circulation within western and human-rights discourse. Such texts not only narrate the life of a singular identity, but also operate politically and socially within national and international contexts.

Though Him utilizes the autobiographical form to offer her testimony, she is careful to avoid constructing a narrative that either wholly condemns or exonerates the political forces at play in Southeast Asia during the 1970s. For example, while she fails to explicitly incriminate the United States’ secret bombing of Cambodia, she intersperses the narrative with newspaper editorials that speak to the United States’ role. One such example occurs in Chapter Two, where the narrator Athy’s idyllic childhood in Cambodia literally becomes shattered with the bombing of Cambodia. The chapter, entitled “B-cinquante-deux” begins with a 1973 article from the New York Times written by Seymour Hersh. Portions of the excerpt Him includes read:

> Washington, July 17—United States B-52 bombers made at least 3,500 secret bombing raids over Cambodia in a 14-month period beginning in March, 1969, Defense Department sources disclosed today. Military sources did confirm, however, that information about the Cambodian raids was directly provided to President Nixon and his top national security advisors, including Henry A. Kissinger. (38)

The evidence Him levers here critically underscores a multiply positioned subjectivity that
traverses American, Cambodian, and Cambodian American ideology. Because testimony must fit the demands of American public audiences and expectations, the possibility of explicitly contesting the United States’ role in those secret bombings is offset by a greater need to reap the benefits of compassion and understanding from American readers. Including sources produced by American writers that indict the United States’ role allows Him to negotiate this otherwise impossible space of testifying and educating. Him’s strategic negotiation avoids entering into a “blame-game” while articulating some troubling facts about the events surrounding the Khmer Rouge’s rule of Cambodia. As such, Smith and Schaffer are correct to cautiously point out that the platform of human rights necessitates a specific form of story-telling that both overrides and overwrites difference. To gain currency and direct political action, testimonials must be written to correlate with a specific model. However, this act of writing into a pre-existing frame problematizes individual agency for those who have suffered. Not only do sufferers have to present themselves as victims, they must represent themselves as a specific type of authentic victim. *When Broken Glass Floats* negotiates this problem not within the space of the narrative-proper, but along the marginal spaces of text that consists of footnotes and newspaper editorials. This strategic gesture avoids the wholesale reification of a simple victim and instead produces a text that engages in a dialogue between the so-called victim and savior, between subaltern subjectivity and hegemonic discourse vis-à-vis autobiographical testimony. While testimony initially offers a space for the constitutional design for imagining oneself and the other, as suggested by Scarry, this design can be deployed in a manner that offers subaltern subjectivities the possibility of engaging and contesting that design. Subaltern subjects bear the burden of representing individual experience and collective experience for the “dominant” culture in their autobiographical texts.
Him is able to negotiate within this interstitial space of speaking for herself and speaking for others in the autobiographical mode because of the manner in which she positions herself as a child witness. Autobiography as a genre of representing the self is one that has always been fraught and perhaps even uncomfortable with itself as a genre. Certainly, the trope of the child as the quintessential innocent bystander is not one that is unique to autobiographical texts. However, by positioning herself as a child narrator, Him is able to garner compassion for her cause while simultaneously exploiting this model to complicate her position as innocent bystander. An interesting moment occurs in the text when Chanrithy describes the exodus of two million Cambodian families who are forced to evacuate Phnom Penh, per Khmer Rouge orders, to rural areas in Cambodia. Observing the “mass river of humans” crowding Cambodian streets, Chanrithy observes, “To me the scene seems like a page out of history, though schoolbooks and lessons seem worlds away right now” (66). Chanrithy further elaborates once the family stops for lunch at a wood clearing, “Unlike my sisters and brothers, I mingle with these adults,” which allows her to overhear important information about the events (71). While overhearing adult conversations creates moments to structure events in the narrative, Thy navigates the structures of kinship and familial power positions by positioning herself as the precocious child. Thy actively seeks out moments to educate herself with the political situation in ways that refuse the label of “emblematic victim” while superficially seeming to conform to such a model.

19 I refer here to debates in which Philippe Lejeune, Paul de Man, Paul John Eakins, and Georges Gusdorf among others have troubled the genre of autobiography as a legitimate genre within literary studies. In establishing autobiography’s canonicity, traditional scholars of autobiography have privileged an autobiographical subject that is white and male. Later scholars such as Leigh Gilmore, Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer, among others, have troubled this assumption to critically open up space for discussions of autobiographies that do not follow this traditional form.
Thy’s question of agency additionally becomes complicated when she and her family are hailed to attend the first meeting with Khmer Rouge officials. Although Him fails to explicitly discuss class conditions that serve as an impetus for the war, she does invoke the affect of anger, which mobilizes her refusal and resistance to the orders of the Khmer Rouge: “I glare at Pa. Why must we sit on the ground and obey the Khmer Rouge? *We can’t just obey them. We don’t owe them our respect*” (82). Unlike the rest of the citizens, she refuses to defer to Khmer Rouge authority and further elaborates, “Anger boils inside me. Internally, I take it out on my father as I squint defiantly at the makeshift stage” (83). Defiant and claiming agency, Chanrithy is far more than an innocent observer as she is actually defiant and claims agency, troubling her role as simple hapless and innocent victim, a model of innocence that remains ahistoric and unchanging in the face of political exploitation. She later comments on her refusal to prostrate to Khmer Rouge soldiers, “It is a small act, but an important one” (84). Her defiance shows through in another instance as she reflects, “This is the delicious power of the mind—they can’t stop me from my silent thoughts. They can’t interrogate my memories” (86). While no single person possesses the ability to interrogate his or her own thoughts, Him’s text tackles the momentous task of representing the collective experience of Cambodian suffering in the hands of the Khmer Rouge. The text also forecloses the reader from understanding Thy as merely a suffering victim. Thy’s stubborn refusal to allow Khmer Rouge soldiers access to her memory suggests to readers that there are some things she will disclose but some things that she will keep hidden from the reader. This particular moment in Him’s text marks the intransigence in faithfully textualizing the refugee experience for American audiences. At the same time that readers regard Thy as the innocent bystander, readers are foreclosed from gaining access to her memory, suggesting that the act of testimony necessitates the act of levering certain memories of evidence while eliding
those that are less important.

Him’s role as child observer becomes implicated in interesting ways later on in the text. She is able to form alliances with adults in positions of power in order to negotiate survival for herself and her siblings. In Chapter Ten of the text, Him and her sister Ra befriend a Khmer Rouge official, known as Pok or father. Thy describes, “Though I haven’t met him, I envy Pok. I wonder how he fits in with the ideology the Khmer Rouge have long preached to us” (208). Though not her biological father, who is referred to as Pa, Pok provides Thy and her sister with care in a manner reminiscent of her own father, a man who faithfully provides care for his family and countrymen regardless of political ties. Reflecting earlier on her bouts of asthma, Thy relates, “As always, Pa is my doctor—he’s there for me, checking my breathing, listening to my lungs, trying to make things better as my chest rides up and down, struggling for air” (84). It is the death of Pa and the subsequent loss of western medicine that later serves as the impetus for Thy to learn medicine once she arrives in America. However, Him’s childhood promise to commemorate her father’s death by studying medicine takes on a significant structure, not in the text proper, but in the prefatory material of the text.

In the preface of the text, Him discloses the nature of her work on post-traumatic stress disorders with Cambodian communities in Portland, Oregon, the place of her new home in America. Him reveals,

As a survivor, I want to be worthy of the suffering that I endured as a child. I don’t want to let that pain count for nothing, nor do I want others to endure it. This may be our greatest test: to recognize the weight of war on children. If thousands upon thousands of children will suffer and are suffering right now in the world, we must be prepared to help them. But it is folly to look at the future without an eye to the past. (20-21)
Assuming the persona of child narrator allows Him to attest to her personal trauma suffered under the Khmer Rouge, and to the collective trauma of the Cambodian body-politic, at the same time permitting her to gesture towards the ways her narrative resonates across national and international boundaries. While usefully furthering Him’s cause, the image of the suffering child enables the proliferation of Him’s narrative in contexts that are not specific to the Cambodian genocide alone. In addition, Him describes the horrendous inability to assuage the suffering of her sister Chea who died of a prolonged fever shortly before Cambodia was “liberated” by the Vietnamese: “At thirteen, unable to save her, I was angry at myself for not having Pa’s medical knowledge, for not having learned from him…If I die, I will learn medicine in my next life” (24).

At the end of the preface Him invokes the childhood memories suppressed in her, “There were times when I’ve denied my own memories, when I’ve neglected the little girl in me” (25). At the same time that she positions the child victim’s memories as pure and authentic, she navigates this trope of child victim in ways that critically undermine the passivity of such a model.

While positioning herself as a child productively allows Him to testify to Khmer Rouge atrocities along national and transnational fronts, Him’s position as a gendered subject also plays a critical role in framing her narrative. As the work of Anne Cubilie demonstrates, the testimonies of Third World women persist along the peripheries of dominant discourse. Cubilie contends in her preface that victims who survive to tell their stories in the form of life narratives “come to be figured by us in the form of ‘ghosts’ who haunt our collective imagination. Configured as the uncanny, visible only from the corner of one’s eye” (Cubilie xii). Him’s position as a gendered subject certainly does not operate in a manner that is immediately intelligible for readers. While we are focused on the pain and suffering that she and her family undergo, Him’s gendered status only becomes intelligible at key moments that are “visible from
the corner of one’s eye.” Those moments become transcribed within the margins of the text or are narrated implicitly when Athy witnesses the deaths of her female relatives. For example, Him imparts in the preface, “Being raised by educated and open-minded parents, I had advantages. I was never forced to live up to the sexist expectations of traditional Cambodian culture—a fact that would become important to my survival” (23). Here, Him explicitly counters assumptions that women from Third World countries are systematically disenfranchised and rendered ahistorical, monolithic, and unchanging in opposition to the global feminist. Moreover, Athy’s refusal to conform to the gender expectations ascribed to her allows her to witness certain events that subsequently allow her to testify. Following the fall of Lon Nol’s government and Khmer Rouge’s ascendency to power, Chanrithy’s father sets out to ensure neighboring villagers have put up white flags to signal their surrender to the Khmer Rouge. As Chanrithy demands to accompany her father, he first admonishes “Athy, stay home with your mother,” only to give in to her persistent demands (59). Also, when she discovers a rotting body at her school site, she says, “Once home, I try to be as normal as I can, acting like I’ve just come back from a typical visit at a friend’s house. No one suspects my spying, nor the horror that has visited our playgrounds. I keep it to myself and it seems to eat me up, devouring me from the inside out” (61). While it is easy to read her memoir as a child’s remembrance of traumatic events, the quote referenced above points to the ways in which Chanrithy actively sought out scenes to witness instead of merely allowing them to happen to her. Moreover, during critical moments in the text when Chanrithy is not present in the event, she frames the event as they are related to her by others. She receives second hand accounts of what happens.20 Resisting the gender

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20 An example of Chanrithy actively engaging herself with events surrounding the Khmer Rouge’s takeover occurs in Chapter 4 where Chanrithy does not accompany her father, who goes to help Khmer Rouge soldiers by providing
expectations imposed upon her enables Him to negotiate survival in the face of Khmer Rouge’s fanaticism.

A particularly compelling scene in which the mark of gender becomes a site for negotiating survival occurs in 1978 when Thy, her sister Chea, and her brother Map are left to take care of themselves after the deaths of both parents. To negotiate survival, Thy’s sister Chea dons the mask of what Khmer Rouge comrades call “crazy old man.” Chea has altered her gender marked body so that she can fluidly slip between male and female. In addition to her emaciated and starved body, Chea shaves her head so that her female body is rendered unintelligible by Khmer Rouge leaders. At the same time, this mode of survival simultaneously functions as a site of abjection for Chea, who writes a poem to articulate the plight of her position:

I pity myself. Though I am a virgin, I am called an old man.

In the previous society, how furious would I’ve been. But now it’s normal for a woman.

I pity myself as a woman. Twenty-three years old, yet they think I’m sixty.

My teeth still intact, my hair shiny black, they think I’m sixty, for I’ve shaved my head.

I pity myself so much, living without parents.

There’s no hope of caring for them, of living near my beloved mother and father. (232)

While gender fluidity and performance allow for survival, Chea also bemoans the loss of gender

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21 Chea and Thy keep books in secret places only to have those books later discovered by a Khmer Rouge spy. Since books were prohibited by the Khmer Rouge government as a method of regulating citizens from questioning their illusion of authority, the discovery of hidden books become a life-threatening event for Chea and Thy. However, Chea circumnavigates punishment by asking Srouch, the leader of Khmer Rouge informants, “Does comrade want these books? You may have them. I just keep them for wiping myself after I poop” (230).
norms ascribed in the former society. In her doctoral dissertation, Susan Moynihan describes the ways that Chea’s gender transformation signals to Thy the threat of her own future. Moynihan argues, “In Chea, Thy sees her own possible fate, where her sexuality and sense of femininity are so distorted, she feels she has no chance of fulfilling life, at least in traditional ways” (114). It is this sense of both not having to and being unable to fulfill traditional gender roles that allows Him to testify to her traumatic experience as she seeks refuge in the United States. However, Him is careful to locate her refusal of gender roles in the seemingly traditional and primitive homeland. In other words, she carries with her the seed of survival as engendered by the markings of her gender. Hence, in addition to testifying to the violence of genocidal regimes, Him’s text also calls into the question the presumption that feminist discourse only mobilizes those women who located in the west.

Drawing our attention to the ways that the genre of autobiography operates in extension of notions of power, surveillance and truth-telling, Leigh Gilmore states: “Identification, then, marks a point of tension in autobiography for writers whose self-representational projects place them squarely within the dynamics of surveillance and who fall outside the most familiar operations of identification and memory” (23). This point of tension further becomes problematic for Southeast Asian female writers of autobiographical texts. Such writers immigrated to the U.S. under preconceived notions of what constitutes the Southeast Asian refugee, a role which already connotes certain limitations as suggested in Thomas DuBois’s essay “Constructions Construed.”

22 Thomas Dubois argues in his essay that “We understand other people, and to some extent ourselves, by means of discursive systems: models that focus attention on certain factors and occlude or obscure certain others” and defines the construction of the South East Asian as “steeped in American social and political ideology and certainly serving particular socio-political ends” (1). DuBois is interested in the ways in which these discursive models of Southeast
persistently trouble hegemony’s modes of identification and memory. The question of surveillance too becomes iterated in a different way since those that are surveying such texts for the empirical measures of truth exist not just on the side of hegemony but within the writer’s group of identification. As such, the structure of the text, the evidence it levers, and the authority it confers upon the testimonial subject provide a fruitful design for Him to speak of the self and culture. However, such strategic negotiation leaves the text vulnerable to attack and criticism for failing to achieve “authenticity” and empirical substantiation. Such attacks stem in part from the desire to locate Cambodian American autobiography as prototypical embodiments of testimonial discourse. To better understand the complexities of Him’s texts, however, requires the detachment of the narrative from a strictly juridical definition of testimony. I alluded earlier to the text’s latent content which works in opposition to the manifest content. My application of psychoanalytical terms here is intentional since I argue that the text’s aesthetic design as testimony belies the continuation of trauma inflicted upon the Cambodian refugee body. Following Moynihan’s premise that trauma indirectly influences the text, I maintain that the text’s strict testimonial form screens readers and Him from directly encountering trauma, in ways undermining the explicit testimonial dynamics that appear on the surface of the text.23

Reflecting upon the tenuous relationship between self and culture in autobiographical texts in his critical essay “Self and Culture,” Paul John Eakin examines the models of identity

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23 Identifying the recursive scenes of death as symptomatic of the traumatic nature of the text, Moynihan argues that the trauma of familial loss becomes reenacted in the context of the American landscape vis-à-vis state sanctioned technologies for governing the refugee body (117).
engendered by the autobiographical project. Of particular import to Him’s text is Eakin’s attention to the psychoanalytic self as a frame with which to restructure autobiography’s traditionally conservative structure and content. Reading the work of Philippe Lejeune, who maintains that psychoanalysis can function to liberate the conventions of autobiography, Eakin allies himself with Bernard Pingaud and asserts that autobiography is “unsuited to the project of confessional autobiography formulated by Lejeune because it reveals no secret but constitutes one itself” (Eakin 85).

In direct opposition to Philippe Lejeune, who espouses a formalist approach to define autobiography’s underlying complexity, de Man argues that autobiography fails to exist as a genre, complicating the referential dynamics that Lejeune presupposes in articulating his notion of an autobiographical pact. de Man maintains that ascribing generic definitions to autobiography tends to obfuscate the centralizing structure of the genre: the question of referentiality between the autobiographical author and subject and the way it functions to authorize autobiographical texts. In his essay “Autobiography as De-facement,” de Man rhetorically questions:

“We assume the life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of its medium?” (920)

In other words, while autobiography has tended to presuppose the existence of life before the text, de Man argues that, in fact, the demands of the autobiographical genre (demands defined by Lejeune) govern that author’s act of writing. Of particular importance here is de Man’s
replacement of autobiography’s teleological function with one that is tautological and circular. While de Man does not anticipate James Olney’s argument one year later that there has been a paradigmatic shift in autobiography from “bios” (life) to “auto” (self), de Man’s conjecture does trouble the problem of autobiography’s self-reflexive referentiality in ways that parallel the issues in Cambodian American autobiography and in the limited models of subjectivity available for self representation. Where Lejeune locates referentiality in autobiographical texts among the figures of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist, de Man reconfigures autobiographical referentiality as a “figure of reading or understanding” between the text and the reader (921). Engaging Lejeune’s notion of the autobiographical pact, de Man asserts that autobiography refuses totalizing closure and access to the mind because it is constituted by a system of tropological substitutions figured in prosopopeia; “not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute” (930). While de Man does not directly address testimonials, which can exist as a subset of autobiography, testimonials also function as representations and not as tools for full disclosure of that unnamed “thing” itself. In Chanrithy Him’s text, that thing is the traumatic moment that never becomes directly encountered or articulated but can be read in the traumatic symptoms exhibited in the text. While de Man reinscribes the paradox of autobiography’s referential dynamics solely through the figure of prosopopeia, in Him’s text, the figures of the women and the child are both prosopopeic representations and screens preventing direct access to the text’s core. The models of subjectivity function as screens, simultaneously preventing the refugee from directly confronting

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24 It is interesting here that de Man’s analogy between prosopopeia and photography anticipates Roland Barthes later work on photography where he argues that photographs contain no inherent symbolic meaning. See *Camera Lucida* for Barthes’ critical discussion.
trauma and providing a screen of visibility for readers. Moreover, the application of the word “screen” to Him’s text operates on two distinct levels. On the first level, the screen functions as a defense mechanism allowing the self to circumnavigate the direct encounter with trauma. On the second level, the screen is also the medium upon which audience members encounter the refugee body’s self-representation, a screen that concomitantly reflects the audience’s understanding of the refugee body as mediated through dominant discourse. Thus, utilizing testimonial discourse as a mode of unearthing, addressing, and redressing trauma from the dead, is a gesture that does not uncover the secrets of trauma: the gesture reconstitutes another secret. Though testimony seems to confer upon the witness the ability to see and know the particularities of trauma, the testimonial project continually slips back into indeterminacy in multiple layers or screens of secrecy.

While it may be easy to become lost in de Man’s *mise en abyme* of substitutions, I find it useful when applied to Him’s text since it is this form of substitution that signals the lack of an encounter with the traumatic moment. Of prosopopeia’s utility de Man holds, “it is the figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech” (926). If we understand that deceased or voiceless entity as the refugee’s trauma, then we find that prosopopeia both enables speech at the same time that it serves to mute that same speech. What is textually represented is not the entity itself (which is absent and voiceless and thus refuses utterance, much like trauma) but a representation of it.

Taken to its logical conclusion, de Man’s conception of prosopopeia renders Him’s testimonial project emblematic of the difficulty in engaging Cambodian testimonials as purely historical sites producing knowledge about the Cambodian genocide. The text’s strictly juridical
parameters can be contested in ways that destabilize testimony as a site of knowledge about the “real” world. Despite Him’s attention to testimonial evidence, utterance, and narration, the text gestures to the ways that conscripting Cambodian testimonies within a strict juridical framework functions as a continuation of violence against the refugee in the desire to know and address issues of trauma. The aesthetic design of testimony in Him’s text signals the ways that such a homogenizing approach continues to push traumas not in the immediate field of view into further peripheral spaces. In the case of Him’s text, the adoption of aesthetic design in the testimonial formation of the self, evidence, and truth is a manifestation of a traumatic screen that elides certain memories while allowing certain others to rise to the fore. Southeast Asian women’s autobiographies such as Chanrithy Him’s call attention to the refugee status, to the memory of the Cambodian genocide, and U.S. narratives of history that continue the violence of that genocide and its aftermath by failing to address such alternative narratives. Texts produced by writers such as Him underscore the American failure to render visible and intelligible events surrounding the genocide, the implications of this failure on American national and cultural memory, and the refugee subject’s relationship and construction within this mode of memory or historical amnesia that continues to inflict violence. Situated even within a juridical frame, Cambodian testimonies destabilize this frame even as they work within it.
CHAPTER THREE

Aesthetics of Excess in Hmong
American Testimonials: The Transcendent Testimonial

Subject in Kao Kalia Yang’s The Latehomecomer

As with refugee narratives produced by Cambodian American artists, the narratives of Hmong American refugees also bear signification as counterhistories enabled by the autobiographical testimony. If, as Lisa Lowe points out, the novel functions as an extension of the nation’s regimentation of its citizenry, then the autobiography operates as an institution within which particular subjectivities become normalized through the erasure and elision of other subjectivities. Utilizing the genre of autobiography as both a political and aesthetical tool with which to contest U.S. dominant discourse provides refugees of the Vietnam War and its spillover to assert agency and to remember the Vietnam War in a manner that does not reify Southeast Asians as either faceless victims or monstrous villains. Furthermore, unlike Cambodian and Vietnamese American literature, which have been received rather well among American audiences, the development of a mainstream Hmong American literature is presently “emerging.” For example, published in 2002, Bamboo Among the Oaks is hailed as the first Hmong American anthology of literature in English. While the existence of Hmong American literature prior to the recent anthology cannot be denied, those literary works were not targeted and marketed toward mass audiences in the same way as Bamboo among the Oaks or other Southeast Asian texts produced by Cambodian and Vietnamese writers. Moreover, where When Broken Glass Floats paradoxically ruptures testimony as a site of knowledge production by adhering to testimony’s legal form, Hmong American testimonials also offer a nuanced
negotiation of testimonial form to both indulge and subvert the parameters of testimony. In particular, Kao Kalia Yang’s recently published memoir, *The Latehomecomer*, actively engages in testimonial form, utilizing an aesthetic of excess to reconceptualize our understanding of history, memory, and truth as they are produced vis-à-vis the processes of testimony.

Though the socio-political conditions under which Hmong American testimonials emerge are similar to that of Cambodian American testimonials, autobiographical projects testifying to the Hmong experience depart from Cambodian American texts such as Him’s in critical ways. To better understand the autobiographical project undertaken by Hmong writers of what has been labeled “generation 1.5,” it is necessary to understand the contexts and homogenizing structures that determine the movement of Hmong bodies into the nation state.\(^{25}\) Where Cambodian Americans have been constructed within the models of traumatized refugee subject, constructions of Hmong subjectivity become augmented with an ethnographic model. The construction of the Hmong through the lens of ethnography becomes extended to other platforms, particularly in legislative acts that continue to locate Hmong refugee bodies as primitive and savage.

**Construct by western ethnographers as an ostensibly “backwards” and “primitive” people, the Hmong have been deemed unfit for the demands of western modernization. Addressing outdated models of ethnography that limit marginalized groups within narrowly defined parameters, James Clifford writes in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*:**

\(^{25}\) By “generation 1.5” I refer to Southeast Asians who came to the United States as political refugees as a direct result of the United States’ military involvement in Southeast Asia. Though not born in the United States, this generation of Southeast Asians was essentially raised in the United States.
Whenever marginalized peoples come into a historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by the western imagination…their distinct histories quickly vanish. Swept up in a destiny dominated by the capitalist West and by various technologically advanced socialisms, these “suddenly” backward people no longer invent local features. What is different about them remains tied to traditional pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it. (5)

And certainly Hmong refugees have been co-opted into American discourse vis-à-vis the science of ethnographic study, distorting and excessively exploiting the Hmong’s so-called primitive and pre-literate status. The forced migration of Hmong refugees to the United States subsequent to the Vietnam War generated a source of study for ethnographers who tended to dramatize both their exoticism and their primitiveness (Chiu 45). This monolithic ahistorical construction of the Hmong was further circulated in popular media when Spencer Sherman, writes in a 1988 issue of National Geographic, “illiterate working age men puzzle over the tools of the industrial revolution as the rest of America marches into the computer age” (589). Such an assertion about Hmong privileges masculinity as the site upon which cultural identity becomes inscribed. Furthermore, this construction of Hmong male identity erroneously represents Hmong masculinity as one that is castrated by the protocols of history and writing. Confronted with the West’s modernity, Hmong masculinity is rendered impotent and incapable of reproduction and creation in the “here” and “now.” Hence, as ethnographic subjects, the Hmong are cast into an ahistoric template of traditional, primitive culture, paralyzed from successfully moving into the future with the rest of the civilized world, as Clifford suggests. In her discussion of Hmong American autoethnographic innovations as discursive practices, Jennifer Chiu echoes similar concerns with applying an ethnographic lens to Hmong culture and literature. Discussing Anne
Fadiman’s work of ethnographic journalism, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, a text published in 1997 and the recipient of the National Book Critics Award, Chiu notes that although Fadiman’s text strives for sensitivity in presenting Hmong culture, the text is ultimately limiting; it fails to give individual voice to Hmong subjectivity, persisting instead in homogenizing Hmong people as objects of ethnographic texts. Chiu asserts, “Fadiman’s focus on weaving a coherent, folk-inspired ethnographic narrative obscures the agency and adaptations of her subjects” (49). Chiu’s reading of Fadiman underscores the problems arising from an ethnographic interpellation of Hmong subjectivity. Even at its most sensitive, the text’s insistence on ethnographic interpellation inflicts the violence of silencing and effacing individual agency.

The construction of the Hmong as peoples from a primitive culture within the United States’ dominant discourse, however, did not prevent the United States from exploiting the Hmong as guerilla militaristic forces during the Vietnam War. In fact, this ethnographic discourse was used to justify the United States’ exploitation. The United States enlisted the help of Hmong soldiers under the commandment of General Pao Vang in what is now known as “The Secret Wars” to battle Viet Cong troops along the mountainous regions of Ho Chi Minh Trail. Citing the Hmong’s fierce fighting skills, the United States entered into a supposed agreement and promised the Hmong a sovereign nation-state to call their own. However, once the United States pulled out of Vietnam, the Hmong were left in an especially precarious position, unwanted in Laos because of their ethnic minority status and essentially abandoned by the United States. Consequently, many Hmong families sought asylum in refugee camps along the borders of Thailand. Unlike the Vietnamese who were granted asylum immediately following the war and Cambodians who escaped between 1975 and the mid 1980s, the Hmong were detained in refugee
camps until as late as the late 1980s (Chan 49). Furthermore, the United States’ abandonment of Hmong veterans is inscribed in the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial through the lack of Hmong names. A commemorative cultural product that fails to memorize the role of Hmong veterans in the war, the Memorial emblematizes the failure to witness the suffering and heroism of Hmong peoples.

Though recent measures have been taken by the government to redress the concerns of Hmong veterans, these measures continue to follow the ethnographic model of Hmong subjectivity. The convergence between the ethnographic and refugee models can be traced out in legislative measures aimed at assisting Hmong refugees to acclimate to American life. The Hmong Veteran’s Naturalization Act of 2000 aims to “expedite the naturalization of aliens who served with special guerilla units in Laos.” The act extends naturalization to include the wives and children of Hmong Veterans if proper documentation is presented. The act makes exempt for Hmong veterans certain requirements that are otherwise required by the Immigration and Naturalization Act (“Hmong Veterans Act of 2000”). The legal document then moves to provide a background of Hmong history to justify the need for expediting the naturalization process and enacting the policy. While the act aims to enfold Hmong refugees into American citizenry, that enfolding into citizenry is contingent upon very particular constructions of Hmong identity. Advocating for the Hmong’s exemption from demonstrating English language proficiency prior to naturalization, the act reads:

Many Hmong refugees have found it difficult to naturalize because of a difficulty in learning English. This is due to the facts that they came from a tribal society without a

26 The Hmong Veteran’s Naturalization Act was amended in 2000 to include a clause that would prevent instances of fraud in which the forms of documentation would satisfy and provide proof of service in special guerilla units.
written language until recent decades and that many Hmong were recruited to be guerillas at the age of 12-14 and hence did not attend school. In order to naturalize, permanent residents must demonstrate an understanding of the English language, including an ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language.

Though the act documents and thus acknowledges Hmong soldiers’ contributions to the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) organized activities during the Vietnam War, the act perpetuates and reinserts representations of Hmong refugees as backwards, primitive, monolithic and ahistorical. Furthermore, the act points out that American governmental officials kept few records documenting the identities of Hmong soldiers who served in specially organized guerilla units. In 2002, the Hmong Veterans Act came up for amendment because the 1997 rendition supposedly articulated too broad a definition of “appropriate documentation,” creating an excessive potential for fraud. This construction, however, places Hmong Veterans within a double bind; by agreeing to ascribe the label “Vietnam War Veteran” to their bodies, Hmong veterans and their failures have to sacrifice their intellectual integrity. The lack of official records also makes expediting naturalization difficult for Hmong veterans and their families. Hence, Hmong bodies continue to be easily erased despite their militaristic assistance to America during the Vietnam War. Furthermore, the fear of fraud reinserts stereotypes of Asians as manipulative and conniving, always ready to infiltrate the American body politic with their large numbers. This gesture is evident in the numerical cap that is enumerated in the act itself.27 The enclosure portion of the document is also interesting because it projects the amount

27 Section 7 of The Hmong Naturalization Act of 2000 proposes a cap on the number of beneficiaries allowed entrance into the United States: Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act, the total number of aliens who may be granted an exemption under section 2 or special consideration under section 3, or both, may not exceed 45,000.
of revenue that could be potentially generated with the passage of the act. Hence, the project of enfolding and thus legitimating certain types of citizenship becomes contingent upon the refugee’s body as a money-making machine, a complicated relationship that Asians have always experienced in relation to the United States.

Much has been made of the Hmong’s preliterate status and their tradition of oral culture. Practitioners of ethnography and Hmong American scholars will affirm the lack of a traditional writing culture. Linguistically translated as “free,” the word “Hmong” refers to the history of migration along the coasts of China down to the mountainous regions of Southeast Asia, where they have traditionally lived as farmers (Buley-Meissner 327). The Hmong have faced particular difficulty in staking claim to a homeland and to a written language. Although at one point in history the Hmong did have a written language, it was forbidden and destroyed by the Chinese empire (Chan xxiv). The invention of a formal Hmong writing system was spurred in the 1950s by Catholic missionary projects to translate the Bible into Hmong. Though subsequent writing systems were developed by Hmong intellects, the Romanized Popular Alphabet of RPA originally developed by Catholic missionaries remains the writing system predominantly used (Moua 4). While such missionary projects have provided a written language to complement a tradition of oral language, the RPA is an explicitly artificial language constructed by an external culture. It is difficult to dismiss the racially imperialist motive of religious domination. Reclaiming history for the Hmong, then, does not only function as a practice for re(imagining) a homeland, but takes also as its project the act of traversing the rules of written language.

Hmong American texts explore the difficulties that arise from migrating to America and struggling to negotiate between two vastly different cultures. This perpetual oscillation between two disparate cultures has been projected into an ethnographic frame, a frame that highlights
differences and hierarchies rather dialogue and negotiation. The question of referencing Hmong subjectivity becomes complicated since the project of ethnography has as its goal the conduction of a qualitative study to gain understanding of a group’s culture. Ethnography is not without its usefulness however; the adoption of autoethnographic form provides Hmong American writers a useful tool for self-representation. With autoethnography (“self-culture-writing”) the line of demarcation that marks subject and observer becomes self-reflexive instead. The movement from ethnography to autoethnography is an important one, for the self-reflexive act of writing about the self and culture allows for the testimony of a Hmong subjectivity that does not become so filtered through the western gaze. While no purely unfiltered Hmong subjectivity can exist, the act of representing oneself is critical for Hmong writers because it dismantles the structure of the powered and disempowered inherent in traditional ethnography. Hmong American narratives have been relatively new within the field of Asian American studies and even more so with American audiences in general. The first anthology strictly comprised of Hmong American literature entitled *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, was published and edited by Mai Neng Moua in 2002. As the title of the anthology suggests, *Bamboo Among the Oaks* thematically engages questions of difference, assimilation, and growth within a new breeding ground. The title metaphorizes the relationship Hmong American writers experience in relation to the United States. Understanding the ideological context undergirding constructions of Hmong refugee bodies and how such bodies have been permitted to occupy American public discourse is critical to investigating autobiographical texts young Hmong Americans writers use as vehicles to offer alternative histories.

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28 See Felicia R. Lee’s review of Moua’s text in the *New York Times.*
The autobiographical project provides Hmong writers with an especially useful site for wrestling with identity, recognition, and healing of past historical traumas. Kao Kalia Yang’s memoir *The Latehomecomer* comes at a critical juncture; where Asian American studies has pushed for a decentralized model of hermeneutics, her text explicitly calls into question the deployment of a decentralized model. Hailed as the first Hmong American autobiography of its kind, Yang’s text troubles the genres of autobiographical testimony and autoethnography: autobiography and autoethnography intersect within the text.\(^9\) Testifying to her personal story allows Yang simultaneously to testify to the collective experience of the Hmong. Yang negotiates self-representation, I argue, by utilizing a form of testimonial excess to embody the intersection and oftentimes conflicting demands of representation. *The Latehomecomer* troubles the boundaries of testimonial discourse in the way that it is overly excessive. While the text seems to fit all of the autobiographical and autoethnographic demands of Hmong narratives, the text’s aesthetic of testimonial excess is achieved in three critical ways: in the mode of narration, the use of evidence, and the construction of a testifying subject.

Yang’s text testifies to the multiple constitutions of Hmong American subjectivity: structured literally *ab ovum*, the narrator and protagonist Kalia is able to witness and bear testimony to the course of her parents’ lives even though she is not actually present. In her epigraph, Yang invokes Hmong superstitious belief: “Before babies are born they live in the sky where they fly among the clouds. The sky is a happy place and calling babies down is not an easy thing to do. From the sky, babies can see the course of human lives.” The deployment of

\(^9\) Amy Doeun’s review of Yang’s text in *The Hmong Times* reads, “*The Latehomecomer* debuted as the first Hmong American memoir” and cites its universal appeal to the Hmong experience (Doeun 5). See also Mallary Jean Tenore’s review in *The Dallas Morning News*. 
Hmong cultural belief enables Yang to testify to the Secret War in Laos and life in Thailand’s refugee camps despite the fact that she was not present to witness these events. When Yang narrates the portion where her mother gives birth to her, Yang reiterates this tale and further comments, “I loved the idea and power of a journey from the clouds. It gave babies power: we choose to be born to our lives, we give ourselves to the people who make the earth look more inviting than the sky” (56). Yang further inscribes this structure by incorporating a photograph of her father and herself. The photograph depicts the young Kalia in the arms of her father standing on the upper branches of a tree. Taken in long shot, the photograph encloses the tree’s wide branches reaching into what looks to be clear blue skies. Kalia and her father literally look as if they are standing upon the tree, like mythical beings ascending to earth. While other photographs of the young Kao Kalia are interspersed within the text, this particular one is especially compelling because it works to reify her position as a baby in the sky who is all seeing and all knowing. About the photo of Kao Kalia and her father in which he somehow manages to climb to the top of a tree, she narrates, “[My father] always said: Your father is holding you up to see the world” (88).

Functioning as cultural artifact and personal text, Yang’s text differs from both Him’s and lê’s memoir because the narrative spans her birth in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand and concludes with the narrator’s funeral rites for her late grandmother. The narrative proper ends with an epilogue where the author reflects on her experience in writing the memoir. The temporality in each of the three texts differs: Him’s is preoccupied with a traumatic past while lê’s is immersed with the problematic present, and Yang’s text falls somewhere in between with its portrayal of the past and its optimism about the future. As a Hmong family memoir, the positionality of the narrator assumes a multiplicity that pushes against the autobiographical “I” as
the writing of a singular life. In her discussion of Asian American life writing, Rocio G. Davis writes, “The increasing dialogic nature of life writing reflects a multivoiced cultural situation that allows the subject to control and exploit the tensions between personal and communal discourse within the text and signify on a discursive level” (165). And since the etymology of autoethnography translates as self-culture-writing, Hmong autoethnography certainly enters into this often fraught dialogue between self and culture. The tension between self and culture is embedded into the act of inscription. For Hmong American writers such as Yang, the act of writing the self as constituted by culture becomes a powerful mode for controlling the gaze and representing Hmong refugees within dominant discourse. Yang achieves multiplicity in subject positions as both autobiographical and autoethnographic subject, as the voice of the new generation of Hmong writers and the older generation, and as the native informant who privatizes the political and public in a personal memoir.

The autobiographical projects of Hmong Americans such as Kao Kalia Yang refuse the homogenizing gesture that currently subtends Asian American literature into a supposedly subjectless discourse. Such a gesture proposes to enforce a hermeneutics of Asian American criticism without critically examining the ways in which they differ. Furthermore, such movements read the canonized Asian American literatures and elevate East Asian texts as exemplar of Asian American texts that operate as criticism without critically assessing other Asian American texts that actively and explicitly resist such an orientation. As the first Hmong

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30 See Kandice Chuh’s text, Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique.

31 If Asian American literature is a subject-less discourse that cannot be pinned down to any particular spatial-temporal place, then why hasn’t the literature of Hmong American writers, writers who often possess tenuous ties to homeland and language) been addressed by Asian American scholars?
American memoir to be published and nationally distributed and targeted towards mass American audiences, *The Latehomecomer* occupies a difficult position: while the text functions to educate American audiences about a virtually unknown refugee group who is politically connected to the United States as result of the Vietnam War, the text must also ethically represent a Hmong American identity for Hmong communities in the United States. This vacillation between two disparate cultures and their respective demands presents two competing discourses that exert pressure on Hmong American identity; as a whole, however, much Hmong American literature reflects upon this cultural conflict experienced by Hmong Americans. For example, Mai Neng Moua’s anthology of contemporary Hmong American literature evidences the conflict between the self and two cultures.

Dissimilar to Cambodian refugee experiences which centers on the killings fields during the Khmer Rouge regime, the history of the Hmong remains relatively unfamiliar to American audiences. And if the Hmong have been familiar, they have often been cast as ideal subjects ideal for ethnographic scrutiny, because of their so-called pre-literature status, tradition of oral culture, and knack for arts and crafts. In addition to the refugee model, the ethnographic model has been one by which Americans have sought to understand Hmong refugees in America. Yang’s text takes this ethnographic model and explicitly delineates it on the text. The memoir opens with the interpellation of the autobiographical subject vis-à-vis her cultural heritage:

In Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, Loei Province, Thailand

December 1980 – January 1987

From the day that she was born, she was taught that she was Hmong by the adults around her. As a baby learning to talk, her mother and father often asked, “What are you?” and the right answer was always, “I am Hmong.” It wasn’t a name or a
gender, it was a people. (1)

The autobiographical subject becomes interpellated vis-à-vis culture and explicitly disavows the western ethos of individualism. In fact, individualism is deferred in favor of collective identity; the autobiography is in excess. The opening scene of the memoir sets a local and temporal space in a refugee camp in Thailand, underscoring the political implications that have resulted in the Hmong’s containment. Explicit, also, in this opening scene is a deferral of gender and individualism to allow collective cultural identity to surface in a manner that collapses lines of demarcation between the public and private, the collective and individual. From the very opening of the novel, subjectivity is multiply positioned, demonstrating the text’s multiple voices that reject unilateral modes of narration and testimony. Moreover, the memoir opens in the third person form of narration, but switches over to first person plural in the description of Hmong history:

She heard stories of how Hmong people did not have a country, how we always had to leave places behind. First China because the Chinese didn’t want us on their land—how they took away our written language, and how they tried to turn us into slaves, and so we spoke our fears to our ancestors and made our way to Laos. (2)

The narration provides important and critical information for readers concerning Hmong cultural and historical experience. In addition to collapsing individual and collective subjectivity, signified by the fluid switching between first person plural and third person singular, the text also performs the important work of constructing political history where it has normally been erased from dominant and legitimate narratives of history. Representation of Hmong Americans has been particularly problematic given their position as political refugees within the United States.
Extant in this representation is an asymmetry with what the Hmong perceive to have been their role during the Vietnam War and the elision of this role from American history and politics, evidenced in the lack of Hmong names on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC. The text’s use of multiple voices, then, allows Yang to grapple with the overwhelming task of representing the Hmong subject despite the tremendous amount of obstacles and demands.

Speaking of the differences between white and green Hmong tribes, the narrator states, “In this camp, they found themselves listening carefully so they could understand each other; they felt they were all just Hmong—people without a history, rooted in the same past” (47). The text carefully delineates the differences between what constitutes a “history” and what constitutes a “past.” While the past is a summation of life experiences encountered in the juncture between individual and society, history seems to be the articulation of a past into narrative form, as written text, so that it may be recognized and subsequently circulated within and alongside pre-established dominant modes of discourse. Especially compelling in Yang’s text is the perpetual negation of gender to historicize a collective Hmong past. However, in an interview with Coffee House Press, Yang says that during its nascent stages, her text began as an epistolary homage to her late grandmother, a woman who lived life with tremendous strength, who “lived like a man, and remained single during a time when powerful men had many wives” (Yang “Interview”). In fact, in the text Kalia’s grandmother is depicted as the backbone of the novel and the Yang family: capable of using shamanic healing skills even though the Hmong body politic has been displaced into Thai refugee camps, Kalia’s grandmother “carried her shamanic tools with her from Laos….split cow horn in one hand and in the other she held a bag of coins (71). Thus, Yang’s presentation of the text as a non-gendered text is perplexing and conflicting. Despite authorial intentions, referentiality becomes misaligned and the negation of a
gendered subjectivity becomes offset by the physical and psychical omnipresence of Kalia’s grandmother. In her essay “Contemporary Women’s Roles through Vietnamese, Hmong, and American Eyes,” a comparative study of gender roles among Vietnamese and Hmong women’s texts produced in the east and west, Lisa Long notes that “cultural identity is the defining feature of Hmongness” (20). Long elucidates that for Hmong American women to resist traditional notions of kinship and gender roles results in the disappearance of traditional Hmong culture, a culture that is perpetually threatened due to the Hmong’s lack of ties to a singular reified homeland (21). In addition to the pressure of educating Americans, representing Hmong culture and identity, Hmong American writers must also tread this fine line between representing a culture that is always threatening to disappear while forging new interpretations of culture, particularly in regard to gender roles. The representation of Hmong subjectivity, then, operates on multiple levels that exceed the boundaries of testimony. Where testimony presupposes a singular “eye/I,” Yang’s testimony advances a plurality of “I’s” to elude singular reduction.

In addition to the all-encompassing structure of the narrative, the circulation of evidence in the text functions in excess of testimony’s juridical demands for empirical and provable evidence. One notable use of evidence in the text is the inclusion of photos to “speak” of the Hmong experience.32 The cover of the text, for example, is a photo taken of Ban Vinai Refugee camp taken immediately before Kalia’s family leaves for the United States. The inclusion of the photograph literally exists in excess of the text’s physical boundaries. In addition, the text

32 Roland Barthes elaborates on the relation between photography, history, and memory: “History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it” (27). Thus, the nature of photography always signifies what one was and can never be again. Though photography brings something to life and into history, it is always the past, always a memory that troubles and haunts the present. Photography has as its project the act of capturing a moment in freeze-frame while simultaneously rendering it dead.
includes family photos of Kalia, her parents, grandmother, and sister Dawb to provide material evidence testifying to their life in Laos and America. Testimonial evidence in photographic form closely resembles a family photo album, reinforcing the fluidity between personal and collective identity. On a more complicated level, if the inclusion of family members’ photos marks the privatized dynamics of the text, then key photos in the text highlight the political function of the text. Included as photographic evidence is a photograph of Kalia’s father standing in a field of tall grass. With an AK-47 cradled in both hands, Kalia’s father dons camouflage military army garb (6). This photograph of Kalia’s father provides a harsh contrast with National Geographic’s photo of illiterate Hmong men discussed earlier. Where ethnographic photos render Hmong men incapable, Yang’s photographic evidence unsettles this construction. The photo is a confirmation of Hmong veterans’ role in the Vietnam War in ways that American historical narratives and artifacts, such as the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, efface. As such, photographic evidence functions both personally and politically to both confirm and constitute a history that has typically been ignored: the cultural history of the Hmong and the political history of Hmong veterans.

A second form of evidence levered in the text also approximates ethnographic documentation of Hmong culture. However, Yang’s use is more sensitive: at the same time that she depicts Hmong culture, she reconfigures aspects of culture and reflects the multiple determinations constituting Hmong subjectivity. The reconfiguration of Hmong culture occurs in two critical and contradicting points in the text. As a young girl in Ban Vinai, Kalia hears traditional folkloric stories, such as the story involving a beautiful Hmong girl and a magical striped tiger. Kalia imparts, “In Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, I discovered the shapes of stories, how to remember them, and how to tell them” (72). While Kalia acknowledges that stories
become inherited and transmitted orally in ways that may fit ethnographic understandings of Hmong culture, she balances this use of folklore with the inclusion of a story about a watermelon seed. The two stories side by side read:

Long ago in Laos, there lived a beautiful girl named Yer. She had long, flowing black hair….One day Yer went to go fetch some water from a small mountain. She did not see the tiger lurking in the bamboo grove by the stream’s edge. But the tiger saw her. (72)

They story is about a watermelon seed that was planted in the ground by a little girl. Each day, the girl watered the watermelon seed and talked of how delicious the seed would become once she grew bigger. From the day the seed sprouted on the earth, the watermelon seed knew she would be eaten. (148)

On the surface, the two folklores included as part of the text do not differ drastically. Both stories seem to offer traditional folkloric narratives depicting the relationship between humans, nature, and animals. Taken at face value, both stories may in fact reinforce stereotypes of the Hmong as traditional and perhaps primitive. However, the latter story is actually a story written by Kalia in the second grade. She adapts traditional modes of narration to produce a project for her English class. The active manipulation of traditional form in new settings refuses the ahistorical template of ethnography. Thus, folkloric traditions become transplanted to generate new stories that are both similar and different. This juxtaposition of an old Hmong story and Kalia’s creative story calls in to question the presumptions of authenticity advanced by ethnography and testimony. The marked similarities between both stories complicate assumptions of authentic evidence. Cultural artifacts are continually remade and reconstituted, regardless of the spatial-temporal context.

Finally, the subject that speaks in the narrative not only exceeds but transcends
testimonial form. The text complicates the concept of the testifying subject in two critical ways: in the narrator’s inability to speak and the narrator’s superstitious embodiment. Throughout the text, Kalia focuses attention on her difficulty with speech and her ability to testify. Most notably in the Prologue, the narrator (who unstably shifts from third person narration to first person plural, as I’ve pointed out earlier) says, “For many years, the Hmong inside the little girl fell into silence. Because she hadn’t said very much in her first twenty years, all the words had been stored up inside her” (4). While there are problems with equating repressed speech as pure and authentic speech, it is the storage of words that engenders the excesses of Yang’s testimonial. The young Kalia faces a particularly difficult ordeal once she begins school in America: “English was hard on my tongue. I was learning the meaning of the words and how to write them, but my voice sounded different to me in English. I didn’t like the way I stuttered and breathed through the words, so I tried never to speak unless it was necessary” (145). Much like the complete lack of voice and visibility that has marked the absence of Hmong refugees in the national body politic, the text substantiates this lack by refusing the singular testimonial eye/I. Moreover, marked as a Hmong family memoir, the text’s testimonial dynamics reflect a testifying subject structured in familial ties and collective belonging. Once Kalia leaves college, she comes to a realization about testimony, truth, and memories:

I began to realize how our lives in America would be our stories. I started to understand one of the many truths that governed life: by documenting our deaths, we were documenting our lives. The Hmong had died too many times, and each time, the deaths had gone unwritten. There were no testimonies. The witnesses grew old, and they died, and life continued, as if they never lived. I didn’t want this to happen to my grandma. (215)
The testifying subject does not speak, she writes to transcribe the stories that history has failed to witness. In this act of transcription, the testifying subject does not speak solely for herself; she also speaks for the grandmother who is on the brink of death, a grandmother who transcends death in Kalia’s testimonial act. This multiple subjectivity further becomes inscribed in the text in ways that exceed standard expectations of testimony. In the beginning and end of the text, Yang includes two photographs of herself, photos that mirror one another in a sense. In the picture adjacent to the prologue, Yang is pictured in formal Hmong dress, in “the classic Hmong pose,” her face turned westward. On the other hand, the picture included after the epilogue depicts Yang in western garb, her face turned toward eastward. Though it might be simplistic to assert that the former picture shows the traditionally garbed Yang looking into the past and the modernly dressed Yang looking into the future, I maintain that this photographic juxtaposition materializes her subject positions at testifier. While, such a reading can be gleaned from reading the text, the photographs are excessive reminders testifying to this fact.

To be sure, the question of culture is certainly one that Hmong writers continue to grapple with in representing Hmong identity. For example, Mai Neng Moua’s anthology *Bamboo Among the Oaks* enters into this dialogue of engaging self and culture. In the introductory portion of the anthology, Moua foregrounds the number of complexities that propound the emergence of Hmong American literature within both American and Asian American literary traditions. Citing the same arguments that early Asian Americans articulated against hegemonic American culture, Moua asserts, “It is essential for the Hmong and other communities of color to express themselves—to write our stories in our own voices and create images of ourselves. When we do not write, others write our stories for us, and we are in danger
of accepting the images others have painted of us” (7). While Moua’s fears are well founded, such an assertion presupposes that art and identity possess equal referentiality, that life mirrors art when in fact any articulation of identity is contingent upon a multifaceted relationship that shatters the mirror that supposedly reflects reality. Furthermore, towards the end of the introduction to Bamboo Among the Oaks, Moua makes her final contestation about the literary pieces included in the anthology: [T]hese writings mark the foundation of written literature as works of art first and foremost and then perhaps as sociological or anthropological findings” (15). While I understand Moua’s reluctance to reinscribe Hmong American identity vis-à-vis the western lenses of anthropology and ethnography, I take issue with a gesture towards eliding the social, historical, and political to advance a contemporary literary identity on par with Asian American writers of other ethnicities. Identity is constructed within the intestice formed by historical, social and political intersections and collisions. Nevertheless, Moua’s introduction does provide both subtle and overt instances in which she underscores the burden that she along with other Hmong American writers inherit when undertaking the task of writing a Hmong American literary identity. Of having to answer the question “What is Hmong?” Moua holds, “Sometimes it feels like an added burden, one not imposed on writers who are white and from

33 In a similar way, the Hmong community in Sacramento has negatively reacted to the recent Clint Eastwood film Gran Torino. The film depicts Hmong youth as gangsters while valorizing the white Korean War veteran at the expense of Hmong youth. Although viewers may feel sympathetic towards the Hmong, they ultimately empathize with the old protagonist who redeems his killings in the Korean War by protecting the Hmong youth. When Hmong culture is presented to the American public it is made palatable through traditional foods and dress, cultural practices and artifacts, and folklore crafts. The article states, “the movie missed an opportunity to provide critical context: It didn’t adequately explain why Hmong refugees wound up in the United States in the first place” (1). Hmong members of the Sacramento point to the negative stereotypes of Hmong youth as gang members and the scant depiction of Hmong ceremony and culture, in addition to the elision of the Hmong’s role in “The Secret Wars’ in Laos. Hence, the act of writing is doubly important for the Hmong American writer; the act of writing about the self undermines being written about.
the majority culture. But as a Hmong writer, I must engage the question in order to have
dialogue” (3). Identity is historically marked and cannot be imagined separate from history’s
tyrrannical narrative. Instead of striving to parse out the two, it is be more useful to examine why
Hmong American identity emerges out of a site in which individual identity and ethnographic
representation intersect.
CHAPTER FOUR

Ascetic Aestheticism in Vietnamese American Testimonials: The (Dis)embodied Testimonial

Subject in lê thi diem thúy’s the gangster we are all looking for

That the Vietnam War occurred simultaneously to movements of identity politics is in itself an interesting phenomenon that becomes reflected in Vietnamese American refugee narratives. Katherine Kinney’s text Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War offers an interesting point of departure with which to begin my discussion on autobiographical testimonials produced by first generation Southeast Asian American writers. Kinney proposes that the trope of “friendly fire,” the act of Americans killing Americans, singularly tropes the structure of American narratives of the Vietnam War. While Kinney acknowledges that friendly fire is not unique to just the Vietnam War, the threat to American male authority evident on both foreign and domestic fronts is: “The perceived breakdown of American world hegemony in Vietnam occurred concurrently with an attack on the categories that defined and upheld that power: race and gender” (Kinney 4). In other words, while America sought to impose democracy and equality in Southeast Asia to quell the unruly threat of communism, social movements founded upon race, class, and gendered lines continued to underscore the misalignment between American political rhetoric and political action. As American troops invaded Vietnam under the pretext of spreading democracy, the country’s own body politic became fractured by the proliferation of social movements contesting the nation-state’s authority. Moreover, the trope of Americans enacting the killing of other Americans advances a master

34 By first generation, I refer to those writers who are the first in their family to be born or predominantly grow up in the United States. The latter are often referred to as generation 1.5.

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narrative that elides Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Thai bodies from the history of the Vietnam War. Kinney points out, “The stories told by friendly fire are so dramatically conflicting because the trope is not so much a historical narrative as the marker of its absence” suggesting that the Vietnam War is a free-floating signifier that resists one-to-one correlation with a singular referent (Kinney 6). If the Vietnam War suggests the failure of historical narratives, of historical authority, then the project of capturing the memory of the Vietnam War becomes evident in cultural artifacts that provide different modes of remembering. The absence of historical narrative cannot be recuperated by telling another history but through alternative narrative forms.

Michele Janette, who is careful to acknowledge the usefulness of Kinney’s scholarship, points out that Kinney’s sincere attempt to include Vietnamese perspectives by including Le Ly Hayslip’s *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* does not shift pre-existing understandings of Vietnam and argues that Kinney’s inclusion of Hayslip’s text is sensitive but does not push against boundaries and formulations that privilege American perspectives on the war (“What We Talk About” 787). Following Janette’s review of Kinney’s text, I find that though Kinney’s text works to expose the solipsism in the representation and narration of the Vietnam War, in some ways she participates in that practice, particularly in her discussion of Hayslip’s text. Kinney surmises, “The most sensational and in many ways most telling of Hayslip’s relationships in the United States is the last she describes” and “Le Ly Hayslip’s memoir has become a much read corrective to American narratives of the war” (163, 164). While this assertion seeks to reclaim a space for Vietnamese narratives of the war, such narratives become useful only when they are beneficial to American ideology.

In both form and content, then, contemporary Vietnamese American literature emerges
within this frame and scope of the Vietnam War. Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh’s *South Wind* Changing narrates refugee hardship during the Vietnam War, alternating between pastoral scenes of homeland and violent scenes of war and bloodshed. Lan Cao’s text *Monkey Bridge* takes as its central plotline the oft utilized trope of Asian mother and Asian American daughter, complicating the privatized mother-daughter dyad by contextualizing its formations along social and political determinations that refuse simple reduction to generational conflict resulting from acculturation. Andrew X. Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala* maps out a Vietnamese refugee’s return to Vietnam to warn against a simple nostalgia for some presupposed illusion of primordial origins. Though this list presents only a minor and rather recent picture of Vietnamese American literary texts available for general readership, all three texts briefly discussed above outline general tropes and themes that persist in texts produced by Vietnamese American authors: the experience of the refugee, the memory of Vietnam, and the mutually constitutive relationship between the two. In ways that significantly depart from Cambodian and Hmong American texts, the trajectory of Vietnamese American literature retains a circular progression that traces the refugee’s departure and return to the homeland. In an article published in *Amerasia Journal*, Michele Janette presents a chronology of Vietnamese American literature in English and points out that although a multitude of first generation texts exist, their visible circulation among American audiences has been limited because “they were not useful for either the American left or the right in the years that followed the war in Vietnam” (“Vietnamese American” 267).  

Janette’s summation, of course, echoes sentiments shared by many scholars in the field who

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maintain that Vietnamese American texts and subjectivities pose a significant threat to the construction of the nation state and to the history that has been narrated about the Vietnam War. In other words, the nation state’s narrative of the Vietnam War as a failed war depends upon the erasure of Vietnamese subjectivities and texts that threaten to rupture the attempts at historical homogeneity propagated by the nation’s dominant discourse.

While the elision of Vietnamese American texts operates as a continuation of the nation state’s imperialistic violence on Vietnamese bodies, Janette argues that “Vietnamese American literature has complicated its own authenticity, even as it has also often insisted on the veracity of its accounts” (Janette, “Vietnamese American” 27). Given the nation state’s continual erasure of Vietnamese American presence within dominant discourse and cultural memory, Vietnamese American writers have seized the concept of authenticity as a mode of resisting the nation state’s imperialistic narrative. Janette moves on to describe what constitutes the largest body of Vietnamese American texts, what she dubs “tales of witness” that evoke the autobiographical project of writing self in writing nation (271). While Janette does not explicitly attach the term “testimonial” to such autobiographical “tales of witness,” she provides a general overview of typical tales of witness that implicitly underscore their testimonial nature. Janette describes the lack of condemnation directed toward the United States in these texts as problematic and disconcerting. This lack of direct condemnation, however, cannot simply be considered trepidation on the part of Vietnamese American authors since Vietnamese American literature emerges out of a particular discursive context. Of hegemony’s construction of the United States as victim during the Vietnam War Janette writes:

Vietnamese American literature muddies this picture. If what was lost in the war was innocent faith in the American right, it is embarrassing to face the insistent belief in the
American Dream that is present in much of this. If American forces are the primary victims, it is awkward to listen to the accusations of betrayal from South Vietnamese soldiers. And if the war was really about America, then accounts that center on Vietnamese experience are phenomenological impossibilities. (278)

Thus, while Janette has been astute to point out the “phenomenological impossibility” of Vietnamese American texts, her concern that such texts fail to offer a critique of the United States is misdirected since such impossibilities necessitate condemnation and resistance within a discursive context. I argue that lê thi diem thúy’s text the gangster we are all looking for participates in aforementioned modes of discursiveness.36 As such, though Janette fruitfully outlines and categorizes general tropes and ideas that first generation Vietnamese American texts present, her gesture towards understanding such texts teleologically is problematic. The Vietnam War and the narratives surrounding it refuse teleology.37 Moreover, attempting to organize Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian literatures into strict categories and hierarchies, whether explicitly or implicitly, reify hierarchies among Southeast Asian literary texts in ways that

36 Following lê thi diem thúy, I have retained the Vietnamese practice of referring to persons by last name followed by first name. As such, lê thi diem thúy’s surname is “le” while her first name is “thuy.”

37 Katherine Kinney argues in her text Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War that the trope of “friendly fire,” of Americans fighting Americans, sounds the bell of solipsistic preoccupation with regard to American cultural and collective memory of the Vietnam War. In other words, the failure to historically narrate the events of the Vietnam War in a manner that takes into account multiple perspectives offered by multiple populations implicitly and explicitly implicated in the war refuses teleological narration that names winners, losers, beginnings, and endings. Without disavowing the complexity of and intricacy of Kinney’s scholarship, Michele Janette has offered concerns that Kinney slips into this same solipsism by focusing on “American images” of the war and its ramifications on the American body politic. While I agree with Janette’s concern regarding Kinney’s slippage into self-referentiality (her reading of Le Ly Hayslip’s text When Heaven and Earth Changed Places, for example, privileges portions of the text that take place in America), I find that her attention to self-referentiality is relevant to autobiographical questions surrounding Southeast Asian refugee narratives of self-representation.
obscure nuances and differences among these texts. More attention needs to be directed to the manner in which Vietnamese American texts engage, navigate, and meander within this impossible space.

Moreover, this relation becomes complicated when juxtaposed with the American cultural imagination and collective memory pertaining to the Vietnam War, memory that more closely resembles historical amnesia than it does memory. Proposing a hermeneutics for reading and writing Vietnamese American literature that ethically remembers the dead, Viet Thanh Nguyen cautions, “So much is told about Vietnam, and so little is understood. The war and its aftermath lodge uncomfortably in my imagination, as it does in the American imagination. In between these two versions, the personal and national, stands the collective imagination of minority discourse” (“Remember” 13). The refugee’s encounter with America’s narrative of the Vietnam War is mediated through screen memories signaled by American cultural productions such as the popular television series MASH or Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now, in which Vietnam and its people become a backdrop and prop for the nation state’s narrative of intentions gone horribly awry. As such, the presence of Vietnamese refugees serves as a painful reminder of a failed war on the part of the nation state.

lê thi diem thúy’s text the gangster we are all looking for proposes questions that engage and disturb identity and identification—national identity, refugee identity, and post-colonial

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38 Teri Shaffer Yamada makes a similar assertion in her essay “Cambodian American Autobiography: Testimonial Discourse.” Yamada differentiates between the trajectory of Vietnamese and Cambodian autobiographical texts, arguing that Cambodian American autobiographies remain in an “indeterminate site” while Vietnamese American autobiographies have moved beyond the narrowed temporal space of the refugee experience. However, this paradigm of linear progression offered by Yamada and Janette can be contested since texts produced by Vietnamese American writers refuse this teleological categorization. Lê’s text, for example, was published in 2003 but explores refugee experience, a move that could be called regressive if we follow linear categorization of Vietnamese American texts.
identity. A Southeast Asian refugee narrative, it pieces together escape from the nation state, and re-settlement and displacement in the United States as a new homeland, as well as reconstructed memories of childhood and points of origin. Reflecting on the links between history and memory, imperialism and nationalism, and minority discourse and the transformation of hegemony, Lê’s text interrogates these intersections upon a terrain that glaringly sets into relief the incommensurability of reifying a homogeneous, ahistoric, and monolithic homeland. At the same time, the text refuses the western wholesale embrace of modernist progressivism to recuperate the homeland. Invoking Michel Foucault’s writing on memory and history in relation to Asian American constructions of identities, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, “Minority memory’s relationship to national memory is often dissonant, taking on the shape of what Foucault calls countermemory. Countermemory is fundamental to Asian Americans as we stake our claim to America and to Asia” (“Remember” 13). Though Nguyen proposes a hermeneutics of moving toward Southeast Asian refugee identity, his attention to refugee narratives as “dissonant memories” that confront national memory is useful in thinking about refugee identity in Lê’s text. Utilizing the aesthetics of asceticism to withhold sanctioned models of knowledge, history and memory, the text explicitly de-centers and disorients pre-established trajectories of refugee identity as read in conjunction, alongside, and/or against a western imperialist hegemonic discourse.

_the gangster we are all looking for_ perhaps provides the greatest discernable departure from autobiographical testimony in both form and content when read in conjunction with both Him and Yang’s autobiographical texts. In similar fashion, the text explicitly obscures the line of demarcation that prevents autobiography from bleeding into fiction. Moreover, if Him and Yang ostensibly lever their individual and family war experiences as a central determinants in
their respective narratives, lê foregrounds displacement and migration in the United States as raison d’être of the text. As such, testimony is rendered textually visible and intelligible in a radically different mode in lê’s text; testimony of the war is never directly witnessed; we have instead a testimony of the war’s traumatic after-effects. Narrated from the perspective of a six-year-old girl, the text relates the story of a Vietnamese refugee family that immigrates to the United States following the Vietnam War. Though the novel is loosely based on the author and her family’s escape from Vietnam to the United States, lê has consistently denied in a number of interviews the strictly autobiographical scope of her textual project.39 Paradoxically, then, the text complicates our notion of autobiographical testimony and the authority that such testimony confers upon the writers of autobiography. As such, distanced from a strictly autobiographical project, lê’s text destabilizes normative assumptions of autobiographical testimony and questions the foundational structures of history and truth-telling through the heterodox use of textual structure, narrative voice, and refugee memory.

lê’s text complicates testimony in terms of its narrative structure; comprised of a series of vignettes organized into five discernable chapters, the text oscillates between past and present, Vietnam and America, child and adult narrator. However, the text avoids reifying existing paradigms of binaries; instead it calls attention to the slippages that occur among these multiple determinations upon the text. The novel’s lack of linear narrative progression denies readers the testimony we are all looking for: the testimony of experiencing the Vietnam War directly. The

39 In an article in The Boston Globe by David Mehegan, le explains, “The characters move through a landmark that my family moves through but in the novel I follow them as characters; I don’t necessarily think of them as me and my father and my mother.” Le further elucidates that by distancing herself from the text in such a manner she underscores, instead, post-Vietnam War trauma as a universal human experience that cannot be attached to her particular and personal body (le “Interview”).
text instead engages the subject of the Vietnam War indirectly, testifying to effects on and affects of the refugee-subject. Lê makes testimonial intelligible to readers by rendering textually visible the affects of trauma first and foremost through the deliberate refusal to provide traditional narrative structure. The text denies the chronological trajectory that traditional autobiography assumes and legitimizes. Instead, the narrative moves through a series of vignettes beginning with displacement of refugee bodies onto U.S. shores:

Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses is where we eventually washed to shore. Before Linda Vista, we lived in the Green Apartment on Thirtieth and Adams, in Normal Heights. Before the Green Apartment, we lived in the Red Apartment on Forty-ninth and Orange, in East San Diego. Before the Red Apartment we weren’t a family like we are a family now. We were in separate places, waiting for each other. Ma was standing on a beach in Vietnam while Ba and I were in California with four men who had escaped with us on the same boat. (3)

Hence, narrated in media res, the beginning of the text marks a departure from linear form and centralized location, highlighting instead the sense of displacement from homeland and the breakdown of the nuclear family unit. The persistence of water imagery further evokes fluidity indicative of the problematic interchange of bodies from one location to the next. This trope of fluid bodies and boundaries is marked by prefatory pages of the text, one of which reads, “In Vietnamese, the word for water and the word for a nation, a country, a homeland are one and the same: nu’ô’c.” The text’s vacillation between “we” and “I” also connotes a slippage between collective and personal experience. Thus, the opening paragraph of the text saliently explodes assumptions of autobiographical testimony of Vietnamese refugee experiences by refusing the discourse of testimony and the authority it confers upon textual linearity and narrative
Shoshana Felman’s work on testimony and witnessing sheds light on how testimony operates in lê’s text. Citing Alfred Camus’s writing as demonstrative of the crisis of witnessing precipitated by the general disavowal of the Holocaust as an historical event, Felman contends, “This is why contemporary narrative -- the narrative of that which, in the Holocaust, cannot be witnessed -- has by necessity inaugurated a contemporary Age of Testimony, and why the age of testimony has also turned out to be, paradoxically enough, the somewhat unique age of historic prooflessness: the age of the professional denial, by ‘revisionist’ historians, of the very evidence of the historical existence of the Holocaust” ( “Crisis of Witnessing” 237). Though Felman specifically addresses the failure to witness the Holocaust, she usefully points out that the Age of Testimony must rely on alternate forms of evidence to bolster the claims levered in testimonial narratives. Felman’s argument can be applied to the context of the Vietnam War, where evidence has been misconstrued, selectively omitted, or provisionally accepted to benefit the existing narration. Emblematic of this line of thinking is the Vietnam War Memorial, which provides overwhelming empirical evidence of the United States’ role as victim during and after the war.\(^{40}\) This historical amnesia becomes narrated by the six-year-old girl in lê’s text who recalls the elderly American couple who decides to sponsor both her and her father along with four other Vietnamese men. She states, “Mr. Russell was a retired Navy man….In Mr. Russell’s mind, the Vietnamese boat people merged with his memories of the Okinawans and the Samoans and even the Hawaiians” (4). Mr. Russell’s failure to differentiate between Vietnamese boat

\(^{40}\) I refer here to Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* in which she locates the injured body as a site upon which the fiction of a nation’s power becomes actualized during times of war. In chapter 2 entitled “The Structure of War: the Juxtaposition of Injured Bodies and Unanchored Issues” Scarry intertwines her understanding of pain as fundamentally non-referential with the fiction of a nation state’s fiction of power.
people and Pacific Islanders illustrates the American public’s overwhelming inability to remember Vietnam: Vietnam becomes a country of nameless and faceless bodies that haunt the imagination, but are detached from historical events. That the opening of the text opens with a washing of bodies ashore affirms the failure to accurately attach Vietnamese refugee bodies onto a complicated matrix of politics, ideology, and imperialism. The text further moves to disrupt linearity and reveals the family’s mal(adjustment) to American life while it is simultaneously interspersed with episodic memories of the death of family members, photographs of relatives left behind in the homeland, and the fragments of the life of a gangster figured as the narrator’s father. The narrative’s truncated ending returns to memory as closure: “My father remembers stroking my mother’s face. My mother remembers wearing my father’s coat. I remember taking off my sandals and digging my heels into the wet sand. As my parents stood on the beach leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights” (158). The text refuses narrative closure and testimonial corroboration as authorizing gestures to legitimate the text as a reliable account of Vietnamese refugee experience. Testimonial evidence becomes intelligible in disclosure and the ephemeral act of memory.

Memory as evidence of both testimony and trauma further works to complicate autobiographical and testimonial aspects of the text. Memories serve to complicate the text in two distinct ways: as evidence for the testimony disclosed and as traumatic memory that structures and ruptures the narrative. In order to illustrate this point I would like to advance three specific textual examples that imbricate memory in the construction of testimony and autobiography. When the narrator and her father arrive in America, they are received by Mel Russell, the son of Mr. Russell, who reluctantly takes in six Vietnamese refugees to honor the last wishes of his deceased father. As the narrator, her father, and four uncles arrive to their new
home in America, she overhears a discussion between Mel and his mother that takes place later on in the night:

They stood in the hallway and we could hear them talking. Even without understanding a word of what they were saying, the tone of their voices troubled us. Had we been able to understand, we might have heard the following:

“I feel like I’ve inherited a boatload of people. I mean, I’ve been living here alone and now I’ve got five men I’ve never met before, and what about that little girl?”

“Dear, you know your father wanted them here.” (6-7)

The narration of the six year old girl becomes disrupted to suggest the presence of an adult voice who interprets the memory of the young girl. Memory operates poignantly here; this is very obviously fabricated memory in an adult’s voice constructing later meaning from the diegetic moment of the young girl’s misunderstanding of actual events. The girl does not linguistically understand the details of the disagreement between mother and son. In this particular instance, then, the narrator exists outside the narrative history of actual events. The scene can only be witnessed outside of history’s seemingly proper narrative and the testimony of the young girl becomes intelligible only through external mediation. At the same time, the gesture of mediation is rendered so fluid and slippery that we do not doubt and subsequently accept that the discussion between the American sponsors actually takes place. We are foreclosed from knowing what takes place. Returning to Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in which he argues that historical narratives have “empathy with the victor,” Lisa Lowe in Immigrant Acts counters

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that “the material memory of the unvictorious is not simply repressed by that narrative; it dialectically returns, to pressure and restructure precisely the regimes of uniformity that seek to contain its representation” (127). Lowe’s point on memory here is useful since the exchange between mother and son becomes heard and hence witnessed by the young narrator who later returns as an adult to restructure that scene in multiple layers that illuminate the non-uniformity of the text. It is important that the memory and revised memory occur within the same moment. While Lowe speaks specifically of the structure of the novel to historically legitimate certain subjectivities by erasing and denying others to establish “regimes of uniformity,” I want to extend Lowe’s argument a step further to specifically contend that memory also exerts pressure on regimes of authority that take the narrative form of autobiography and testimony. The particular scene excerpted above both denies a unified autobiographical subject and object and also refuses the concept of history. The narrator goes back to memory and reconstructs it to testify to the refugee experience.

Moreover, countermemory serves to underscore the historical amnesia of most Americans when it comes to remembering the Vietnam War. As the narrator and the other refugees begin to settle in America the best that they can, the narrator points out, “There were things about us Mel never knew or remembered,” localizing America’s amnesia within a particular domestic space that resonates within a larger national context. Implicit in the narrator’s seemingly benign observation is the indictment of the nation-state’s incapacity to fully grasp the implications of the Vietnam War on Vietnamese human bodies, both during the immediate space of the Vietnam War as well as on the refugee bodies that become displaced as a

42 Lowe asserts that the western novel has worked to establish legitimate certain identities by repressing others. She reads Jane Austen’s novel of manners, Emma, as exemplar.
consequence of the United States’ imperialistic intervention. While memory reconstructs, the
refugee’s memories also function to foil the historical amnesia that persists in the American
public imagination. This amnesia further becomes rearticulated with violent ramifications during
the scene in which the narrator shatters Mel’s cabinets and its glass menagerie. As a young child
would, the narrator makes a habit of innocuously invading an adult’s work space (in this
unfortunate case, Mel’s home office) to find recreation. Displaced and lonely from having to
live with six adult men, the narrator befriends the glass animals in Mel’s cabinet; in her childish
misunderstanding she also picks up a butterfly preserved in glass which she perceives to be
“trapped in a pool of jelly” (25). While it may be easy to attribute the child’s misunderstanding
to a misunderstanding of culture, her perception of the butterfly as a trapped being suggests her
own feeling of entrapment. The narrator makes a habit of visiting the glass animals and the
butterfly. She describes, “I always touched the animals. I carried them to the window sill and let
them sit on the sunny ledge beside my golden butterfly” (28). The narrator identifies with the
entrapped butterfly whose rustling wings were a “whispered song” and “the butterfly’s way of
speaking” (25). Similar to the glass butterfly whose voice cannot become intelligible within the
confines of a frozen environment, the narrator struggles to articulate her thoughts to someone
who will listen, to testify about a personal experience to a receptive audience. Hence, the
butterfly metaphorizes the narrator’s own experience as a trapped, displaced refugee subject in
the United States. As a result of her loneliness and misunderstanding, the narrator converses
with the animals in the hope that they will listen to her testimonial. However, the narrator soon
realizes that glass figurines make inadequate companions. Frustrated, she admits, “It didn’t
matter what I told them. The story could take place in the courtyard of our house in Vietnam or
on the deck of the Navy ship that picked us up from the sea or in a hammock at the refugee camp
in Singapore” because “the glass animals didn’t blink” and “didn’t ask questions. They didn’t seem to want to know about anything” (30). While the glass animals may appear to hear her testimony, they do not and cannot listen to her testimony due to their frozen state. This inability to hear the Vietnamese refugee’s voice parallels the United States’ inability to incorporate Vietnamese experiences into America’s official narrative of the Vietnam War. It is not enough for testimony to be given; testimony must be actively engaged by an audience to produce some material manifestation or else it becomes frustrated into some violent end, which is what occurs at the end of the first chapter.

One particular day, the narrator becomes overwhelmed with the butterfly’s cry for freedom. The scene suddenly gains momentum as the narrator spins round and round in Mel’s office chair. She decides to try to free the butterfly by throwing it through the window that divides between the wall and the cabinet that houses the glass animals. Due to her misjudged aim, “The disk flew hard and fast, but not where I had sent it.” She, instead, throws the butterfly against the cabinet and shatters it, whereupon “the animals’ knees buckled. As they fell, some of the animals lost their heads while others’ bodies broke in two” (34). Shattering the glass animals with the preserved butterfly finally results in shattering the animals’ frozen state and “Mel’s office filled with sounds that animals make” (35). The collision between the glass butterfly and the glass animals both works to liberate the butterfly as well as to allow the animals to speak out of their frozen state. While the collision may be violent, it also signals a productive moment in which both testifier and witness become reconstituted within this cataclysmic encounter.

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43 The narrator imagines that the trapped butterfly contains a soul for she questions her four Vietnamese “uncles,” “If there’s no soul, how can the butterfly cry for help?” (27). Given that the words “butterfly” and “soul” are the same word “psyche” or “ψυχή,” it is fitting that le uses the metaphor of the butterfly to signal the narrator’s own entrapment.
However, within the trajectory of the text, this collision only takes place within this symbolic level but fails to be actualized within the practical context. As a result, the family gets evicted from their first American home and become displaced once more. Lê’s text fails to offer a cohesive resolution in terms of reconciliation between testifier and audience.

If the scene of the collision between the glass butterfly and the glass animals exposes the failure of witnessing and American historical memory, so too does it complicate the act of witnessing and testimonial insofar as it defers a testimonial subject. While the narrator of the text obviously exists within the body of the text, that existence continually negates and disavows itself to deflect the autobiographical “I” and the testimonial “eye” of both discourses. This point is especially critical given the demands placed upon the autobiographical “I” to narrate to an audience a certain chronotype of subjectivity within a specific type of narrative structure. I have already discussed they ways that gangster disrupts notions of memory and structure to complicate the Vietnam War’s testimony, and its effects on the refugee experience as mere “correctives” to American history. Here, I argue that the opacity of the autobiographical “I” and the testimonial “eye” refuse teleology as a recuperation of American historical amnesia. At the same time that autobiographical opacity refuses reification of trauma into absolute terms that reassure the reader.

In an essay titled “The Autobiographical Pact” published in his text On Autobiography,

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44 In his highly referenced essay, “The Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Georges Gusdorf writes, “the prerogative of autobiography consists of this...that it reveals...the effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale....Artistic creation is a struggle with the angel, in which the creator...wrestles with his own shadow” (48). Citing an impermeable and exhaustive list of autobiographies beginning with Augustine, Gusdorf firmly establishes autobiography within the literary canon as a reputable and highly elite model of representing self, of representing identity. For Gusdorf, the act of writing the self privileges and presupposes a static identity and subject-position that can faithfully be fully rendered and mirrored onto the autobiographical text.
Philippe Lejeune proposes the notion of a contract—whether rendered implicitly or explicitly in and on the text—an autobiographical pact that holds readers and writers of autobiographical texts accountable to certain norms and expectations. Lejeune asserts, “In order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical” (5). While Lejeune has often been called to task for his rigorous application of formalist analysis to the genre, a wholesale condemnation of his ideas on autobiography is overly hasty; although his strict formalist stance may be intolerable to some, Lejeune acknowledges the inherent difficulty of presenting autobiography as an entirely disparate and atomized genre different from that of the novel. Calling attention to the inherent problem of referentiality and naming in autobiography, Lejeune elaborates:

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are referential texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourses, they claim to provide information about a “reality” exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of verification. Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not “the effect of the real,” but the image of the real.” (22)

Lejeune locates autobiographical texts in a convoluted space, seeking to make sense of this “autobiographical space” and providing numerous combinations within which autobiography may and may not emerge. As such, Lejeune’s articulation of autobiographical space is not dissimilar from Leigh Gilmore’s later work on testimony and trauma, in which she analyses a range of autobiographical testimonies that test the limits of autobiography. 


scholars’ excavation of possible permutations of autobiography, Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact” is perhaps one critical aspect of autobiography that prevents the genre from being completely subsumed into other genres of literature. For Lejeune, autobiography necessarily mandates uniformity among author, narrator, and protagonist. In other words, autobiography demands three way reflexivity in which the author, narrator, and protagonist become “confused” and conflated. Moreover, the collapse of differential space among these three figures becomes figured in the implicit understanding between author and audience that they are identical, even if in the act of the author’s autobiographical project, the author may embellish or erase certain details and events. The author and audience share an implicit understanding that the three figures of author, narrator, and protagonist are one person, one person who dons three different masks. Lejeune’s autobiographical matrix of combinations, however, is too narrow in its scope and does not withstand the test of time despite his attempts to delineate that ways that autobiography can be discerned by corroborating the text with the title page to evidence autobiography. Of particular relevance in Lejeune’s matrix is the combination in which the author is named in the title page while the narrator and protagonist remain unnamed. According to Lejeune’s formulation, this combination constitutes a viable form of autobiography. Upon first glance, gangster appears to fit Lejeune’s matrix since the life of the narrator/protagonist closely resembles Lê’s life. However, this three way mirroring becomes multiply complicated because the narrator/protagonist remains unnamed and the name of the author operates as a false naming of the autobiographical writer. In a number of interviews, Lê
has revealed that the name “lê thi diem thúy” was mistakenly ascribed to her body. 47 “lê thi diem thúy” is in fact the name of the author’s sister who died at a young age resulting of a drowning incident similar to the one that occurs in the text. When the author and her father arrived in Southern California from Vietnam in 1978, her father accidentally wrote down the name “Thuy” instead of the name “Trang,” the author’s given name. Consequently, the autobiographical “I” exhibits traces of ghostliness and opacity in the same way that narrator remains unnamed. In other words, although lê names herself as the author of the text, the name she adopts is the name of the ghost of her drowned sister, figuratively embodied as the narrator’s drowned brother in the text. While Lejeune allows for autobiography in which the writer, narrator, and protagonist remain unnamed and unidentifiable, gangster pushes against this furthest departure from traditional autobiographical form. The proper name inscribed on the title page of the text is a false naming, complicating the corroboration among author, narrator, and protagonist. As such, while gangster approximates autobiography as a venue for uttering the refugee’s testimonial, the depiction of an opaque refugee refuses the simple act of co-option because such subjectivity refuses embodiment and reification. Paralleling American memories of Vietnam, which are often presented as embodied cultural artifacts that work to demystify this dark memory of Vietnam, gangster both exploits and denies this embodiment. Central to the development of the narrative is the narrator’s opacity and (in)ability to be conflated with other bodies, to be simultaneously witnessed and denied, from her conflation with a dead brother (71) to her refusal to answer to the hailing of her name:

47 An interview with The Boston Globe reveals le’s decision to adopt the name “thuy” (Mehegan B.7) When le and her father arrived via refugee boats to the United States in 1978, her father mistakenly wrote down her sister Thuy’s name (le’s given name is “Trang”).
After I left Linda Vista, I was on the street when I ran into someone from home. I crossed the street when this man called me, called my name. I let that name fall all around me, never once sticking to me, even when he yelled, “You liar! I know it’s you.” I kept moving as the lilting syllables of my own name fell around me like licks of flame that extinguished on contact, never catching. (100)

This moment in the text comes at a critical juncture in the identification of author, narrator, and protagonist. Instead of giving us the name, the assurance that the author and narrator are indeed one and the same, the text denies us this closure since the narrator fails to either negate or affirm this identity. The failure of names to stick to bodies is critical since we are denied a proper name that attaches to a proper body. The lack of “contact” or “catching” denies readers reassurance in the same way that the man feels. Like the man, we want to correlate the naming of the narrator/protagonist with the name of the author, but we are foreclosed from ever really knowing. Though the man seems to recognize the protagonist by her outward appearance, the narrator refuses him the satisfaction of his interpellation. The passage above underscores the incommensurability of attaching proper names to bodies as a reliable form of establishing identity and some sort of authority. In the same way, the scene gestures towards a metatextual reading of the text, a reading that arises in part from Lejeune’s idea of the “autobiographical pact” where the reader desires to identify the author with the narrator/protagonist in a collusive act producing the autobiographical moment. This moment, however, is offered in Lê’s text but falls just short of providing reassurance for the reader. Elaborating on his idea of the autobiographical pact, Lejeune writes that this pact can be explicitly articulated in the title of the text as in the title *The Confession of J.J. Rousseau* or it can be articulated elsewhere in the text. Ideally, this critical moment in *gangster* is where the autobiographical pact could be located if Lê
had provided us with a proper name; however, she merely gestures towards it and we are not called on to interpellate the proper name but to interpret it because Lê defers closure in the opacity of bodies and identity. By constructing an opaque identity, she withholds simple reification of the refugee experience.

While the deferral of a fully embodied “I” complicates notions of autobiographical expectations so the text cannot be easily co-opted as a corrective to American narratives of the Vietnam War, the scene discussed above also shatters the testimonial “eye,” the eye that bears witness to truth. Witnessing takes place on three levels: the level of the witness who testifies to an event or circumstance, the level of the person who hears that testimonial to validate the reality of the witness’s experience, and witnessing of the process of witnessing (Felman and Laub 75).

While the narrator provides a testimonial of her experience as a Vietnamese refugee, she does so in a manner that obfuscates the totality of the testimonial “eye.” In the passage above, the man sees and recognizes the narrator and desires to ascribe a proper name to her body. He witnesses her presence and proclaims, “You liar! I know it’s you,” but his moment of witnessing and hence “knowing” the narrator is thwarted. I argue that the detachment between the act of witnessing and the body is propagated by the opacity of both author’s body and narrator/protagonist’s body. As the title suggests the gangster we are all looking for connotes a continual witnessing signaled in the grammatical tense of “looking.” While the text offers testimonial accounts of displacement and loss engendered by U.S. invasion of Vietnam, the indictment of US imperialism occurs in a manner that overrides the testimonial “eye.”

Testimony in its strict juridical sense assumes a symmetrical relationship between “I” and “eye.” However, gangster complicates and troubles this assumption. While the allegorical dimension of the text can be critiqued for failing to directly indict the United States’ role during the Vietnam
War, this allegorical dimension also functions productively to undermine assumptions of proper naming, testimony of an authentic I/eye that witnesses traumatic events.

While *gangster* complicates narrative structure and epistemological understandings of memory to push against autobiography, lê’s disavowal of the text’s strictly autobiographical project explicitly forces us to engage her text with autobiographical studies. The text’s refusal to assign proper names to specific bodies complicates the notion of referentiality in ways that parallel the trope of “friendly fire,” where referentiality becomes a practice of solipsistic introspection that forecloses teleological understanding. That is, the Vietnam War becomes a free-floating signifier that produces narratives and is produced by narratives. Within this interstice of unintelligible meaning, images and artifacts function as repositories for recuperating memories of Vietnam at the same time that they underscore that inability. As such, given the crisis in representing and referencing the Vietnam War, *gangster* refuses reification of a testimonial subject.
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By engaging three testimonials produced by Southeast Asian American writers, I consider how the production of such texts forces us to reconsider how history and knowledge become produced in alternate ways. Reconfiguring the space of testimony allows for articulating stories, traumas, and histories that have been elided by hegemonic formulations of history. In their destabilization of testimony’s temporal-spatial structure, the re-conceptualization of evidence, and (dis)embodiments of the “I” who speaks and the “eye” who sees within testimonial space, Chanrithy Him, Kao Kalia Yang, and lê thi diem thúy reconceptualize the act of testifying to a history of the past. By troubling these configurations of testimony, the primary texts discussed in my thesis call into question the manner in which legal definitions of testimony regulate the nation-state’s citizenry by abjuring subjects to speak while limiting the speech that can take place. Moreover, the demands and constraints that weigh upon Southeast Asian writers of testimony are marked by intersections of the discourses surrounding American imperialism figured in the Vietnam War, discourses surrounding autobiographical testimony, and discourses surrounding the regulation of the refugee body.

By engaging with my primary texts vis-à-vis the vehicle of aesthetics, I foreground the manner in which these texts trouble the line between art and politics. While the invocation of testimony presupposes legal discourses and treatises, the testimonies of Him, Yang, and lê radically alter those terms to negotiate an alternate space to engender testimonies usually erased from dominant discourse. Situating these texts within the socio-political space of the Vietnam War and its aftermath calls into question epistemological constructions of history and knowledge. By extension, these questions highlight how Southeast Asian refugee bodies secure
a place in dominant discourse by negotiating against and along models of the refugee. The aftermath of the United States political involvement in Southeast Asia under the guise of freedom of democracy for Southeast Asians, evidenced by intervention in Vietnam to protect against the spread of communism, the “Secret War” in Laos, or the secret bombings of Cambodia by B-52 planes has resulted in an influx of Southeast Asian refugee bodies in the United States. American constructs of the Southeast Asian refugee body has been inaugurated by multiple and intersecting apparatuses to govern the unruly refugee body. Such practices, however, tend to focus on psychosomatic and psychoanalytical models that elide political and cultural determinations in the movement of refugee bodies. Moreover, the United States’ legislative policies on immigration directed towards refugees signals the continuations of “an orientalist discourse that defines Asians as ‘foreign’ in times when the United States has constructed itself as ideologically at war with Asia” (Lowe 102). The United States’ regulation of the refugee body has been determined in ways that both overlap and depart from the discourse of orientalism prior to the Vietnam War.

The texts I chose to include in this thesis speak to the ways that testimonials need to be re-conceptualized as a site of knowledge production. Though each of the primary texts take on vastly different aesthetic forms, each text call into questions the modes of testimony, ranging from straightforward representation to the lack of a representation at all. My use of the word testimony illustrates the manner in which each of the texts complicate the notion of testimony as a site that produces knowledge and legitimates certain subject positions while eliding others. I find that each of the texts addressed offer rich sites of potential for furthering discussions surrounding testimonial discourse, history, memory, and trauma as they are constructed along socio-political lines.
Most importantly, the texts addressed here complicate the category of “Asian American” along ethnic and class lines. As recent immigrants from homelands destabilized by the effects of war, the socio-political motivations that engender the movement of Southeast Asian bodies differ greatly from other Asian American groups. And while I do not seek to exceptionalize the experiences of Southeast Asian refugee to supplant one hierarchy with another, I maintain that texts produced by Southeast Asian American writers require new forms of reading allowing for resistance, remembering, and reconfiguring. The texts engaged here transcend binaries of assimilation versus resistance. Conversely, texts produced by Southeast Asian writers negotiate the confines of testimony, utilizing flexible aesthetic designs to navigate against models of refugee, traumatized subject, and ethnographic subject. By traversing in and against these models, such testimonials demand an interdisciplinary reading approach bridging literature and social sciences. These texts complicate the line of distinction between literature and history.

While the history of Southeast Asian politics and literature is certainly not new, the literary criticism subtending it is. As Southeast Asian American literature continues to be produced by a new generation of writers, literary criticism must develop new theoretical frameworks with which to render intelligible the social, political, and economic implications of such texts. As the Khmer Rouge trials proceed, as Hmong American bodies are depicted in the “reel” world for mass audiences, and as Vietnamese writers grapple with the effects of capitalistic globalization, Asian American studies must address the ways that Southeast Asian texts trouble the distinction between visibility and invisibility, and the local with transnational. Furthermore, while my investigation of Southeast Asian texts has focused specifically on testimonial dynamics, the texts can be further be engaged along gendered readings to contest and engender meanings operating on Southeast Asian American women’s bodies.
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