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War, Genocide and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work,
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Reviewed by Amy Fagin
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For Cambodian Americans, the challenges of identity, as individuals and community, whose recent past embodies the societal fragmentation and the trauma of war, genocide and relocation is the raw material for “memory work” in Cathy J. Schlund-Vial’s publication *War, Genocide and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work*.

This volume brings to the forefront the deep reckoning with history and memory manifest through the intimacies and perplexing challenges faced by the “1.5 generation” of Cambodian Americans through contemporary cultural expressions in film, literature, rap music and dramatic performance.¹ The thrust of Schlund-Vials’ theoretical framework is revealed through her analytical treatise of these forms of cultural expression, which she evaluates in couched terms as an “attempt to remember a history of U.S. imperialism, Khmer Rouge authoritarianism, and involuntary refugee dispersal.” The clarity and depth of critical analysis that Schlund-Vials attends to with each example is impassioned, thorough, multi layered and illuminating for the otherwise uninitiated reader to the complexities and trials of survivors and their descendants in the Diaspora of the “Khmer Rouge Reign of Terror.”

The introduction sets the stage for the content of the work as an “interdisciplinary investigation into how Cambodian American cultural producers analogously (yet divergently) labor to rearticulate and re-imagine the Killing Fields era vis-à-vis three distinct and unfixated modes of negation: dominant-held erasures, refugee-oriented ruptures, and juridical open-endedness.” Schlund-Vials lays out, in no uncertain terms, the “problematic terrain” of justice in contemporary, post genocide Cambodia (and American geopolitics) through a provocative recapitulation of the political dynamics of the current Cambodian administration as well as the various US government administrations’ “politicized memory of a preventative humanitarianism” that “revises the script of the Vietnam War era to fit a humanitarian, not militaristic, end.”

The revelations in the first chapter, entitled “Atrocity Tourism” enlightens the reader to the “juridical mode of collected memory fixed to Vietnamese-oriented statecraft” in the critical analysis of the *Tuol Sleng Prison and Choeung Ek Killing Fields* which, in Schlund-Vials’ compassionate observation, “fail to provide Cambodians with viable spaces for commemoration.” And more egregiously have become a “place where they use the bones of the dead to make business.” So begins Schlund-Vials’ quest for “contemplative commemoration: (through) Cambodian American memory work.”

The next chapter sets out on a crossing of sophisticated and politically revelatory chronicling of two American-produced cinematic portrayals: The Academy Award winning film *The Killing Fields* (Roland Joffe, director) and *New Year Baby* (Socheata Poouv, author). Joffe’s film, and the back-story of the friendship between American journalist Sydney Schanberg and Dith Pran, former U.S. Army translator turned foreign press assistant is, on its surface, “a story of two friends separated by (the realpolitik of) forces beyond their control.” But under Schlund-Vials’ tenacious scrutiny the “reframing” of failed U.S. policy in South East Asia, through this film, is transformed into an “exceptionalist narrative of reunion, salvation and redemption [through a] master narrative of cold war victimhood” that reconciles American military aggression through the trauma and redemption of the friendship, “forged in the interstices of war...literally screened, strategically staged and tactically projected by way of guilt, apology and reconciliation.” Poouv’s autobiographical film, based in the “Cambodian American present” is portrayed sympathetically as a “documentary-reliant on survivor memory instantiated by intergenerational inquiry (which) militates against familial silences and strives to connect survivors and their children by way of historical reclamation, collected family stories, and collective remembrance.” Schlund-Vials’ understandably impassioned assessment of *New Year Baby* is nonetheless accurate and deeply instructive. In fact, the contextual structure for evaluation of *New Year Baby*, a restructuring of an “unfinished memory work that grapples with intergenerational, familial silences and... partial knowledge of this past” serves as the template for exploration in the following chapters, that is, to “rationalize contemporary family frames” (through Cambodian American Memory Work) of the “1.5 generation” of Cambodian Americans.

Chapter 3 investigates “Cambodian American Life Writing” through the publications and reception politics of Loung Ung’s memoir: *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* and Chanrithy Him’s memoir: *When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up under the Khmer Rouge*. This moving chapter expresses the “anti-forgetting...labor of (Cambodian American) memory to expose catastrophic U.S. policy, lay bare international indifference, and underscore contemporary juridical inaction.” A clear rebuilding of identity of the Diaspora Cambodian American survivor evolves through this chapter, which masticates the constructs and narratives of each work. The directive of Schlund-Vials in-depth considerations of Cambodian Life Writing, in this chapter is aimed at remembering the “politics of representing mass-scale loss... and the necessarily politicized act (of the memoir) that break(s) potent silences...in a largely un-reconciled milieu of competing national agendas (in the U.S and Cambodia).”

Chapter 4 crafts the fascinating trajectory of Cambodian American Hip Hop artist Prach Ly aka praCh’s up-bringing in “Cambodia Town” Long Beach California and the transnational strength of his lyrics and musical compositions. Schlund-Vials expression and analysis of praCh’s career and work “emblematically remembers a fractured genocidal history, a forgotten post conflict imaginary, and a ruptured Cambodian-American selfhood” and is decidedly upbeat. “Locating Who We Are and Where We Came From” develops thematically through clear and inspiring explorations of several albums; the lyrics and remix of traditional Cambodian musical instruments through original, contemporary compositions. Schlund-Vials predicates on praCh’s work which traces the “rapper’s evolving Cambodian American consciousness...and restive potential of Cambodian American selfhood.”

The epilogue chapter narrates the creative work of poet / performer/ visual artist Anida Yoeu Ali’s epic composition “Visiting Loss” which, in Gordon Fraser’s words: “employs a stream-of-consciousness narration evident in en-jambéd lines, imagistic stanzas, and affective vignettes” and engages the central aims of Cambodian American memory work that “brings into dialogue genocide remembrance, collected memory and juridical activism.” Consecutively the installation “Palimpsest for Generation 1.5” activates the performance of Ali’s back as canvass upon which “intergenerational grievances are inscribed and summarily erased.” Through dress, gesture, and erased inscription, the performance artistry of Ali is an act of “re-memory” reminiscent of” nineteenth-century American slave narrative” that re-assembles a “communal memory without the luxury of justice at the level of the nation-state.” This potent closure to *War, Genocide and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* succinctly expresses the impactful narrative of this revelatory volume of the legacy of the Khmer Rouge era on today’s Cambodian Americans. Their contributions to contemporary society, on an international scale, and woven from the raw material of “memory work” have undoubtedly added vital contributions to the color, texture and weave of the fabric of remembrance in the face of annihilation.

End Notes

1. The term **1.5 generation** refers to people who immigrate to a new country before or during their early teens.