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Book Review: War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work, by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials

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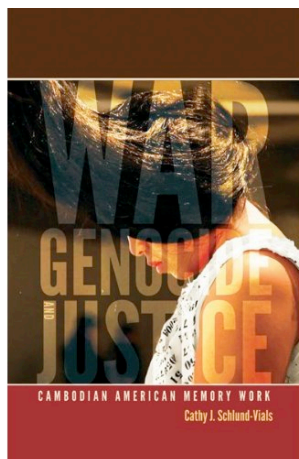
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Nearly four decades after the Khmer Rouge seized control of Phnom Penh and executed the genocidal policy that killed an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians (1975-1979), it is timely to ask: How and why do Cambodians and Cambodian Americans remember and forget the genocide? What is at stake in their diverse engagement with this genocidal past? Cathy Schlund-Vials tackles these questions with depth, urgency, and theoretical nuance in *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work*. Through an effective comparative approach, the author juxtaposes dominant cultural narratives about the Cambodian genocide with the multilayer “memory work” of 1.5-generation Cambodian American cultural producers. She convincingly argues that in light of inadequate and amnesiac state-sanctioned narratives about the Khmer Rouge era, Cambodian American

filmmakers, writers, musicians, and performance artists generate alternative sites for justice, healing, and reclamation through their labor. More specifically, she shows that by engaging genocidal past through documenting survivor testimonials, personalized narratives, and familial genealogies, Cambodian American “remembrance activists” assert cultural citizenship claims in both Cambodia and the United States. Their politicized, intergenerational, and transnational efforts offer rich platforms to explore the agency of survivors, questions of war and genocidal justice, and the politics of memory.

Comprising of four engaging chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, *War, Genocide, and Justice* draws on an impressive and unexamined archive of Cambodian American cultural production that privileges the perspectives of genocide survivors. The book begins by confronting the “Cambodian Syndrome,” which Schlund-Vials defines as “a transnational set of amnesiac politics” that “encompasses the paradoxical nonadmission of U.S. culpability before, during, and after the Democratic Kampuchean era” (p. 13). The current Cambodian government’s selective remembering and strategic forgetting of the crimes committed by the



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Khmer Rouge also exacerbates this syndrome. For example, the author argues in Chapter 1 that because the Vietnamese occupying army (1979-89) rehabilitated and curated sites like Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and Ek Center for Genocide Crimes for the purpose of legitimizing Vietnamese military presence in the nascent People's Republic of Kampuchea, these iconic places essentially reproduce a master narrative of Vietnamese liberation rather than providing meaningful spaces for collective remembrance and reconciliation on Cambodian terms. Such sites are additionally problematic because they emphasize the perpetrators' atrocities at the expense of the victims, whose skeletal remains are displayed indefinitely as criminal evidence and deprived of proper and culturally sensitive burials. Moreover, as these sites become renowned international atrocity tourism destinations, they perpetuate and commodify the victims' miseries.

Moving beyond the built memorials in Cambodia, Schlund-Vials turns to cinematic memory of the Khmer Rouge era by analyzing the historical drama *The Killing Fields* (directed by Roland Joffé, 1984) alongside Socheata Poouv's autobiographical documentary *New Year Baby* (2006) in Chapter 2. Interpreting *The Killing Fields*, which is based on American journalist Sydney Schanberg's *The Death and Life of Dith Pran*, as an apologetic and redemptive narrative, she points out that the film's preoccupation with American moral qualms associated with U.S. foreign policies in Southeast Asia serves the pursuit of American atonement rather than genocide survivors' search for justice and reconciliation. In contrast, Schlund-Vials asserts that *New Year Baby*—an autobiographical film that documents the filmmaker's and her family's quest for truth and closure—engenders a powerful and intimate remembrance effort that privileges survivors' desire for justice, reconciliation, and reclamation. As the intergenerational, affective, and familial registers of remembrance that permeate in *New Year Baby* confront family secrets and connect family members, they also illuminate the impacts of Khmer-Rouge-era biopolitics and necropolitics. Such dimensions of Khmer Rouge violence are often overlooked in dominant narratives about this era.

Further exploring survivor remembrance through literary production, Schlund-Vials examines the memoirs of Cambodian Americans Loung Ung and Chanrithy Him in Chapter 3. Published in 2000, Loung's *First They Killed My Father* and Him's *When Broken Glass Floats* both focus on the female writers' childhood memories of life in Cambodia before and during the Khmer Rouge reign. Schlund-Vials reads these narratives not as a kind of bildungsroman that the memoir genre often beckons, but as "evidentiary texts." She argues that they both embody a collective juridical agenda of survivors who saw their responsibility as bearing witness not only to the Khmer Rouge crimes, but also to the destructive impacts of U.S. military involvement in Cambodia during the Vietnam War era. Furthermore, by attending to class, ethnic, and gender tensions apparent in these memoirs, Schlund-Vials also shows both the similarity and diversity of these texts' remembrance agendas. Ending the chapter with the controversies over issues of authorship in *When Broken Glass Floats* and veracity in *First They Killed My Father*, Schlund-Vials maintains that although Loung's and Him's memoirs may be "less stable authentic narratives," these works are still valuable "as qualified memorials to the Cambodian genocide and as conflicted monuments to a still-forming Cambodian American selfhood" (p. 147).

The articulation of Cambodian American selfhood and genocide remembrance also manifests through music, which is the site of inquiry in the fourth chapter. Analyzing rapper praCh Ly's provocative *Dalama* trilogy, Schlund-Vials attends to both the cultural and political interventions that the Southern-California-based Cambodian American musician generates. Closely examining the content and hybrid musical forms that make up praCh's multi-volume and

bilingual “hip hop memoir,” the author argues that the *Dalama* trilogy delivers a distinct Cambodian American critique against the matrix of forgetting that Killing Fields survivors have to navigate and confront both in the United States and in Cambodia. She shows that by combining collected survivor oral histories, traditional Cambodian music forms (e.g. pin peat), and socially conscious American hip hop genre, praCh produces a hybrid site of genocidal remembrance that resonates with both old and young Cambodians/Cambodian Americans. Such resonance exemplifies the transnational and intergenerational significance of his multivalent memory labor. In addition, praCh’s “capacious” and “interdisciplinary” music also reveals the deep-seated connections between past and present U.S. foreign policies in Cambodia, Khmer Rouge authoritarianism, refugee experiences, elusive genocide justice, contemporary Cambodian politics, and present-day Cambodian American deportations.

War, Genocide, and Justice concludes with close readings of poet/performer/visual artist Anida Yoeu Ali’s work. Focusing specifically on Ali’s poem, *Visiting Loss*, and her bodily installation, *Palimpsest for Generation 1.5*, Schlund-Vials highlights the lyrical and embodied memory labor of the self-described 1.5 Cambodian American Muslim transnational. As the author puts it, Ali’s poetic and bodily articulations of loss simultaneously “memorialize the passing of family members, homelands, and childhoods to instantiate juridical claims of profound communal injury in need of recognition and justice” and “monumentalize survivor remembrance and recuperates refugee selfhood” (pp. 186-187). The same assessment could be extended to the Cambodian American memory work that the book previously mentioned.

The juridical stake and the resistance against state-authorized forgetting that *War, Genocide, and Justice* foregrounds renders this book a timely and substantial contribution to multiple fields of inquiry. In particular, students of Cambodian studies, Asian American/Cambodian American studies, American Studies, Southeast Asian diasporic studies, genocide studies, and memory studies have much to gain from the author’s deep and sustained theoretical engagement with the politics of genocide memory, transnational identity formation, and Cambodian American cultural production. The diverse forms, sites, and actors of genocide remembrance also enliven this book. The clarity of the arguments further makes this accessible to both undergraduate and graduate audiences.

War, Genocide, and Justice and the memory work that it examines prove more relevant than ever in light of the recent death of Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary in the midst of the ongoing UN-backed genocide tribunal in Cambodia in 2013. While the termination of the trial against Ieng Sary upon his death reveals yet again the limits of state-authorized juridical engagements with genocide past, the cultural works that Schlund-Vials documents and analyzes powerfully remind readers that survivors and subsequent generations continue to demand for justice and reconciliation beyond state-sanctioned parameters. Like the compelling Cambodian American cultural works that it investigates, this book confronts the Cambodian Syndrome and refuses to yield the final say on the questions of genocide justice and survival to the nation-state, international power, and dominant narratives that privilege the nation-state’s agendas and the perpetrators.

About the Reviewer

Quan Tue Tran is a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at Yale University. Her dissertation, "Anchoring Boat People History and Memory: Dimensions of Refugee Identity, Community, and Knowledge Production in the Vietnamese Diaspora," examines transnational processes of memory and history making in the contemporary Vietnamese refugee diaspora by documenting and analyzing boat refugee burial sites, memorials, archives, and pilgrimages in Southeast Asia, Western Europe, and North America. Her teaching and research interests include Asian American studies, diaspora studies, transnationalism, history and memory. In 2013-2014, she will be a pre-doctoral fellow at the Asian American Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. Her published writings can be found in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, at www.damau.org, and in *Troubling Borders: An Anthology of Art and Literature by Southeast Asian Women in the Diaspora*.



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