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**Book Review: Troubling Borders: An Anthology of Art and Literature by Southeast Asian Women in the Diaspora by Pelaud, I. T., Duong, L., Lam, M. B., & Nguyen, K. L. (Eds.)**

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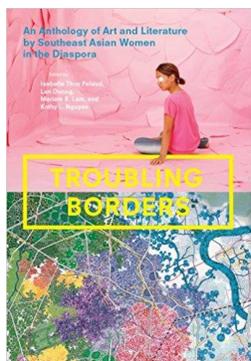
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**Book Review:** Pelaud, I. T., Duong, L., Lam, M. B., & Nguyen, K. L. (Eds.). *Troubling Borders: An Anthology of Art and Literature by Southeast Asian Women in the Diaspora*. (2014). Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press. 276 pp. ISBN: 0295993197

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My family and I arrived in California in 1993, after my father had met and qualified for the Humanitarian Operation Program. He spent ten years of his life in a reeducation camp, where he was starved, physically abused, and forced to perform labor-intensive tasks (e.g., construction, heavy lifting, crop work). After those ten years my family was allowed to immigrate to the United States. However, it left devastating emotional scars on my father as he struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and often acted out aggressively in sleep (nightmares) and when awake. My mother was a silent survivor of it all. She internalized the challenges that our family faced, buried all her pains in order to go to school and work to care for our family as we transitioned to a different culture, different country, and different way of living.

The poems, artworks, and stories featured in *Troubling Borders* resonated with me in that it captured the torment, identity discovery, and power of the Southeast Asian woman. A woman who, like my mother, buried her feelings to ensure that her family is safe, cared for, and protected; yet, however, grew strong in her voice and her position in the family. Thus, it makes sense that this book is a compilation of Southeast Asian women's voices, their experiences, interpretation of such experiences, and various forms of communicating their lived experiences.

The introduction of the book began with the authors' rationale for organizing the artworks and literature according to nine broad themes; 1) Wombs and Wounds, 2) Coming to Voice: Language, Writing, Literacy, 3) Homes and Homelands, 4) Loving Sex/ Sexing Love, 5) Militarized Lives, 6) Asians in America, 7) Race, Roots, Religion, 8) Travel Narratives and Narratives that Travel, and 9) Speech Arts: Labor, Activism, Resistance. The authors reasoned that they grouped the artworks and literature in this manner because they wanted to "move away from more familiar inherited images and narratives...and replace them with less commonly produced tales and iconography by people who have lived in these regions..." (p. 4). Notably, the authors shared the purpose of the anthology was to reframe Southeast Asian women's active participation on "larger global political and social justice dialogues" (p. 5). They also pointed out that the contributors are not just anatomically women, but some contributors identified as



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transgender or genderqueer who perceive their works to be embedded in the experiences of “immigrant women, daughters, sisters, and mothers” (p. 4).

The introduction continued with the authors’ comments on the themes, with reference to particular works and how the pieces of literary works embody the theme. They went on to discuss some of the limitations of their anthology, though I believe are strengths of this collection. The limitations include: nearly all submissions were composed in English, though the authors attempted to gauge international contributors; in certain cultures, oral traditions are more valued than written, thus many women’s experiences were not represented; the limiting nature of the term “Southeast Asian,” as typically they referred to Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian under the categories of refugees and Asian migration; difficulty of finding and selecting art and literary works (i.e., sensitive nature of certain works); social, political, and cultural conditions that do not allow art and literature production; and, large amount of works from Vietnamese American women.

The anthology had many strengths. The first being that it is only one of the few that have attempted to compile women’s voices/experiences into a single book. Another strength is that the featured works span from many generations and genres. Third, the anthology recognizes the diversity that exists under the umbrella term of Southeast Asian (i.e., political, historical, cultural, linguistic). Fourth, the authors’ reflections on their privilege in selecting and judging creative works were insightful. Finally, the introduction’s conclusion importantly provided historical context of variables that impacted Southeast Asian women’s experiences.

Works that were categorized under a specific theme exhibited particular patterns. The works categorized under the theme of *Wombs and Wounds* revolved around family—its protection, conflicts, and resilience. I noticed some of the works involved mother-daughter relationships and the cultural dissonance that occurred when the daughter attempted to acculturate into another culture—the tensions, misunderstandings, and communication barriers, which I myself have experienced at times with my own mother. These works had a sense of sadness, sorrow, separation anxiety, terror, acculturation stress, trauma, and the families’ varying coping strategies that at times hindered their ability to connect with one another. Despite this, the works highlighted the families’ perseverance and endurance, as they attempted to resolve and understand some of the traumatic experiences that they faced together—embodying familial resilience.

Artworks under the theme of *Coming to Voice* had works that involved self-growth and expression. It encouraged women to express themselves using various means and languages. Perhaps, this theme was also a motivating force in encouraging my own attempt at art expression. Further, since language can be seen as indicative of how one identifies culturally, the works that had multiple languages can be the artists’ ways of expressing respect and paying honor to the various cultural identities that shaped their perspective and interpretation of their experiences. Moreover, the works exhibited a sense of navigating between various identities and how these identities influenced the artists’ presentation of their artworks.

The works that displayed the *Homes and Homelands* theme had vivid imagery that evoked senses in description of one’s Motherland. There is a nostalgia and longing evident in the artworks and literary pieces. The works also were representations of the author’s past memories, which involved past sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. These memories continue to have strong, lingering effects on the authors’ perception of a place that was once known, felt, and experienced.

Works that were categorized as *Loving Sex/ Sexing Love* were, as the theme stated, about Southeast Asian women's sexual and love lives. Some of the works had a deeply sensual and erotic premise whereas others were playful and serious. Notably, the works brought forth and addressed the challenges that Southeast Asian women experience in their love lives such as pressure to marry and not pursue higher education, domestic abuse, suppression of sexual identities, and pressure to be fit into the hetero-normative narrative. Similarly, I remember not long ago my own family had warned me that pursuing higher education would mean I would be single for the rest of my life.

The theme of *Militarized Lives* had works that induced notions of colonialism and its damaging effects on Southeast Asian women. Some works represented cultural rape, where colonizers arrived and broke aspects of a culture into commodities to be sold, bought, and judged. Other works revealed the stereotypes of Southeast Asian women by "outsiders" as "submissive" and as individuals who can be easily taken advantage of.

The *Asians in America* theme had art pieces that spoke to the invisibility of Southeast Asian women experiences. These pieces revolved around the misunderstanding that Asians are a homogenous group. Due to this misunderstanding, Southeast Asian women's experiences are treated as though they are similar to that of East Asians (i.e., Korean, Chinese, Japan). Thus, issues such as poverty and trauma that Southeast Asian women face are often overlooked. Even when considering educational attainment, Southeast Asians struggle academically (due to issues like poverty) yet are treated as though they exhibit no academic issues.

The works that fall under the *Race, Roots, and Religion* theme centered on experiences that formulated Southeast Asian women's identities. Some of the artworks indicated the initial desire to be white, to fit in, which, when followed by higher education, allowed the artist to critically examine underlying reasons of feeling this need to fit in. Likewise, I remember as a child despising my big nose and wanted so much for my nose to look like the white girls in my fourth grade class. Other artworks spoke about forced assimilation, cultural misunderstandings between two differing cultures, changes that the Motherland endured, cultural interpretations of illness, and coping with and displaying of grief.

Artworks that exuded the theme of *Travel Narratives* centered on "women on the move"—their transitions and development of independence. The works shared the experiences of women leaving their country, home, family, etc. in pursuit of opportunity, educational freedom, personal liberation, and self-discovery. Additionally, the works evoked senses of fear, excitement, hope, and longing. The first time I moved out on my own, I remember feeling nervous, yet excited. I can still recall hearing my heartbeat and feeling the numbing sensation of my legs when I stepped into my own apartment. At the same time, it was not long after when I started to miss my family and wanted to be closer to them.

The *Speech Arts* theme had art pieces that encouraged women's active participation in political change. These works focused on female empowerment, strength in cultural identity, respect of experiences, background, and family, advocacy, and moving forward. It was special that the authors decided to close the anthology with this theme, as further recognition of the value and power of Southeast Asian women's experiences and voice.

Despite the many challenges and obstacles that Southeast Asian women faced and continue to face, there is hope. There is hope in our ability to heal, nurture, and act, as evidenced by the stories and art featured in *Troubling Borders*. There is also hope evidenced by the women who raised us, sacrificed for us, and loved us. Given our shared historical and political circumstances, we—our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, and so forth— are a

community of survivors. We do not bury our pasts, yet we set them onto our personal altars and worship the perspective, experiences, advice, and direction that our pasts gift us with.

### **Author the Author**



**Kim Dieu** is a school psychologist at the Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders and doctoral student at Chapman University. She is currently in her third year of the doctoral program. Her areas of research interests include resiliency, culturally and linguistically diverse populations, disability, mental health promotion, and Asian American mental health needs. She is a reviewer for *Contemporary School Psychology* and works with local, national, and international organizations in promoting inclusive educational practices, mental health awareness, disability rights, and humane psycho-educational assessment procedures.



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