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Review of Afterparties Stories by Anthony Veasna So

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Book Review: So, A. V. (2021). *Afterparties Stories*. 272 pp. HarperCollins. ISBN: 978-0-06-304990-1

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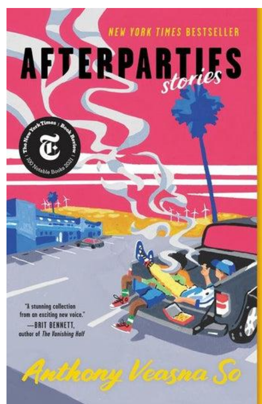

You're Khmer, right?" Tevy, one of So's characters from "Three Women of Chuck's Donuts," asks a customer (So, 2021, p. 21). Khmer is commonly seen as an ethnic identity and distinct from the broader national identity of Cambodian. Therefore, what does it mean to be Khmer, or generally as I will write in this review, Cambodian American? In his short story collection *Afterparties* (2021), Anthony Veasna So explores this question in *Afterparties* (2021) through a rich collage of stories featuring sisters in a donut shop, a cynical high school literature teacher, a reluctant son at the temple to *tver bon*, and a mother writing to her son. These characters express constructs of Cambodian American experiences, from living with traumatized family members to working in the family business.

Within the corpus of Cambodian diasporic literature—mainly consisting of texts processing, unpacking, and remembering the Khmer Rouge genocide—Anthony Veasna So's *Afterparties* presents another way of feeling and sensing the aftermath of mass violence. So's short stories present a fresh literary perspective on Cambodian diasporic life in the United States. Rather than focusing on the journeys and struggles of the 1.5 refugee generation, he traces the narratives of subsequent generations of Cambodian Americans. *Afterparties* moves the conversations about the Cambodian American experience, which has reasonably focused on memory, silence, and violence, toward new questions about being a second generation Cambodian American. These stories weave together the issues of race, class, sexuality, gender, memory, and trauma with a critical and cynical tone that offer both social critiques and bouts of laughter at the daily absurdities of Cambodian American lived experiences.

So reconfigures the dreary everyday into dynamic, grotesque, chaotic, and desolate situations. In "Three Women of Chuck's Donut's," So transforms speculative gossip between two sisters and their mother at their donut shop into a narrative exploration of the place of men in women's lives. Through their conversations, So interrogates the function of fatherhood and domestic partnership through the ruminations and connections formed by observing the Chinese (Cambodian) man who purchases, but does not eat, apple fritters in their shop each day. This disheveled man reminds the girls and their mother of their father/husband and how Cambodian identity is traditionally defined

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through ethno-essentialist markers. Furthermore, he highlights the tension between ethno-racial-national identity formation through the man's self-identification as Chinese rather than Chinese Cambodian. Chuck's Donuts, rather than simply being a Cambodian owned donut shop, is also a space of contention that opens questions about Cambodian diasporic identity formation and the role of experience in shaping how Cambodian American identity is constructed and mediated internally and externally through connections to the Khmer Rouge genocide.

Using the backdrop of the local Cambodian supermarket and badminton courts, So's second story "Superking Son Scores Again" raises further questions about Cambodian men in the diaspora. So, through the perspective of a high school badminton player, follows the washed-up local badminton star and coach Superking Son as he coaches local high school students. Justin, the new member of the badminton team, provides a stark contrast to the aging star as a young, attractive, wealthy, and skilled badminton player who challenges Superking Son at every pass. After their rallying back and forth, Justin and Superking Son serve as character foils that highlight masculine bravado as a form of toxic masculinity. Similar to how the fruit and fish rot in Superking Son's dilapidated grocery store, their competition for dominance decays the community of the badminton team. The story's examination of toxic masculinity asks readers to consider what forms of decay and rot exist in their communities and how these shape their community and its spaces.

"Maly, Maly, Maly" follows two cousins, Maly and Ves, in the moments leading up to the birth of their new cousin and the supposed reincarnation of Maly's mother. Through Ves, So contemplates the place of gay men in an oppressively heteronormative social and technological landscape. "Maly, Maly, Maly" is about displacement of the flesh and body. Ves is continually displaced and othered by Thai lakorns, Maly and her boy toy, and heterosexual pornography. Additionally, he is abjected by his family as an outsider, someone leaving for college, and a gay man. His altered consciousness throughout the story further alludes to the failure to connect between Ves, his family, the broader community, and the construct of heterosexuality. Ves, in being high, unaroused, and disconnected from reality, refuses expectations from the straight and narrow (Halberstam 2011). In this story, So challenges the idea of family as a place of belonging by pointing to how familial and blood relations are both tenuous and filled with its own abjected others.

The fourth story, "The Shop," follows a recent college graduate from a small liberal arts college in Ohio who returns home to work at his father's car repair shop. As the business struggles with the theft of a car, the narrator begins a fling with Paul and imagines different lives with him from as mundane as escaping the Central Valley together to being a "radical symbol of love for the youth" (So, 2021, p. 105). Through "The Shop," So interrogates the ways in which Cambodian Americans might construct futures through the potential of their offspring. So raises multiple possibilities: marrying a wealthy daughter from Cambodia, having children who can be legacy admits, taking over the family business, and remembering how to make *tuk trei*, or fish sauce. While the narrator contemplates these potential realities, he upsets these constructs of the future through how his own queerness and education poses an obstacle to these heteronormative and linear narratives. So challenges the linearity of futures by highlighting contradictions such as how the main character's desire for authenticity as a gay man runs into conflict with the societal ideal of marrying a woman and having children.

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In “The Monks,” Rithy, reluctantly following the traditional expectation, spends one week at the *wat* after his father passes away. Rithy spends much of his time counting the number of push-ups he does in the morning, the number of times the monks gossip about his family, and the times he thinks about his girlfriend Maly. While at the wat, Rithy constantly searches for a way to do right by his father and his life. He plans to enlist in the military in the hopes of receiving financial benefits despite how he feels about the US military bombings of Cambodia during the Cold War. So contrasts these benefits with what Rithy infers monkhood offered Monk D, an escape from various unnamed social expectations. Monkhood and life at the wat offer a break from normative expectations that presents its own form of queerness, or deviation from the norm. So contrasts these two highly disciplined systems, monkhood and military, and indicates a parallel with two divergent outcomes: one of which is complicit in the US military industrial complex and the other an escape to a life in relative solitude. These systems are also contrasted with the failures of Rithy’s father to uphold either system. Rithy contemplates these paths as he leaves the wat—while monkhood offers a certain clarity, chooses not to stay there. Through Rithy’s dilemma, So implicitly asks what it means to live and do right within these systems.

“We Would’ve Been Princes” takes place at a wedding afterparty. While supervising the *chongdai*, or monetary contribution to the wedding, Marlon, Bond, Monica, and a FAMOUS SINGER notice that *pou* Visith, a family member who owns a jewelry store, did not contribute. The four of them pursue Visith during the afterparty in order to reveal that he did not *chongdai* despite supposedly having the disposable income. In this story, So explores wealth and excess through various scenes including the party at the RICH MING’s house and how Visith’s family attained wealth through imperialist conquest. Regardless of whether the characters are rich or poor, money remains a constant source of paranoia that is consistently compared to the autogenocide. So creates a parallel between money and the Khmer Rouge and indicates how financial conditions and values represent both scarcity within capitalist structures and an aftereffect of the genocide. The paranoia surrounding the *chongdai* indicates how intergenerational trauma might manifest in the present and may continue to shape the lives of future generations.

“Human Development” follows the recipient of the fictional “Frank Chin Endowed Teaching Fellow for Diversity,” a teacher at an elite high school named Anthony, as he hooks up with an app developer during the summer. Through Anthony’s biting commentary, So crafts a queer of color commentary interweaving race relations, Grindr politics, place, and class. He brilliantly situates the main character’s perspective as a Cambodian American through ethnicity guessing games on Grindr, the inadequacy of safe spaces, and the failure of the education system in teaching students about difference. So shows how the failure of neoliberal projects of diversity and inclusion are lived, felt, and conveyed through Anthony’s inner narration and frustrations with the people around him and their indoctrination into both liberal and conservative ideologies. As So critiques neoliberalism, he explores what it means to be human. The main character Anthony draws parallels between the feelings of lostness and the lack of closure in *Moby Dick* and his own desires to be “indefinite, free to fuck off and be lost” (So, 2021, p. 194). Therefore, according to So, living with a history of war, genocide, and colonialism means wading through the murkiness of life without any degree of certainty for the future.

In the penultimate story, “Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly,” Serey takes care of Ma Eng at an elderly care facility. According to their family, Serey is the reincarnation of Somaly, Ma Eng’s second

cousin. Ma Eng confuses Serey with Somaly throughout the story and, in doing so, blends Somaly's past with Serey's present to the point where Serey must remind herself that she is Serey and not Somaly. So's use of reincarnation explores postmemory, or the ways in which the past is understood and interpreted by later generations (Hirsch 2008), through Serey's interpretations of her dreams and time with Ma Eng as recapitulations to Somaly. Through the fragmentation of Serey's self-identity, So focuses on the tension between remembering the genocide and moving forward. Ultimately, Serey refuses this connection to the past and seeks a way to preserve the self she wants, a self that seems to have moved on from the dreams of the dead. In doing so, she asserts independence from a history of violence and the burdens of trauma stemming from the genocide. This produces a notable contrast with the previous and subsequent stories that both sit with the seemingly inextricable connection to the genocide. With this broader tension, So concludes with the question of how to move on from or with the past.

So ends the collection with a letter from mother to son. In "Generational Differences," the mother reflects on a scene all too familiar, gun violence at an elementary school. The mother interweaves this violent massacre with a conversation with a coworker in her classroom, the sounds of gunshots, a McDonald's parking lot, her brother's suicide, the arrival of Michael Jackson at Cleveland Elementary, the genocide, her son eating an ice cream cone, the death of her husband, the Michael Jackson song "Man in the Mirror," and the endless expanse of the sky. Though we don't necessarily hear this as readers, So creates this tumultuous collage of sounds and scenes to portray the fragmented and uneven processes of remembering and reflecting. He concludes with a broader question of what it means to survive in a world filled with moments of destruction and flitting instances of childlike innocence. By concluding the collection in this way, perhaps my initial question of what it means to be Cambodian American is intertwined with the question of what it means to survive in systematic inequity and ongoing destruction. How do people make do with the simultaneity of memory and experience?

I offer a series of questions throughout this review to explore what it means to be Cambodian American. In each of their struggles, the characters in *Afterparties* offer a glimpse into how So conceptualizes the Cambodian American experience. Being Cambodian American involves considering the tensions that arise from social inequities, generational conflicts, intergenerational trauma, and perpetual resettlement. He asks readers to consider how to exist with these overlapping and fragmented realities, experiences, and memories. So offers no answers.

Anthony Veasna So passed away at the age of 28 in December 2020 leaving behind the nine rich short stories in this collection. These short stories, though I discuss them independently from each other, include intertextual references that make rereading the collection or reading the stories in a different order incredibly worthwhile. For instance, various characters reappear across the short story collection as the book constructs a world of its own. Not only does So explore issues of memory and trauma, but he also opens conversations for later generations of Cambodian Americans and asks questions throughout about how they might understand the aftermath of the genocide. So also uses tropes and stereotypes about Cambodian Americans as a backdrop for interrogating ethnicity, race, class, gender, and sexuality. Readers who are interested in Asian American studies, gender, sexuality, and queer studies, and the Cambodian diasporic experience will find *Afterparties* a worthwhile and enriching read among the current Cambodian American

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literature. I look forward to interrogating this text further in future writing and I hope this inspires educators and scholars to engage with So's writing in their work and in the classroom.

About the author

Allan Zheng is a PhD candidate in Ethnomusicology with a Designated Emphasis in Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Riverside. He explores how identity, sound, and the body in contemporary Cambodian arts engage in social injustice. Allan's research has been supported by the Center for Khmer Studies, Society for Asian Music, and Center for Ideas and Society. Allan holds an MA in Ethnomusicology from the University of California, Riverside and a BA in Music from Colorado College.

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