

Is First, They Killed My Father a Cambodian testimonio?

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**John T. Maddox**

**"Is *First, They Killed My Father* a Cambodian *testimonio*?"**

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**Abstract:** In his article "Is *First, They Killed My Father* a Cambodian *testimonio*" John T. Maddox discusses aspects of the testimonial. Dialoguing with leading Latin Americanists, Maddox argues that Cambodian writer Loung Ung's *First, They Killed My Father* (2000) challenges this uniqueness and opens studies on the *testimonio* to new possibilities for intellectual reflection and political activism. In Maddox's view, the continued use of the term *testimonio* would serve as a reference to this long-standing tradition of writing and thinking about political violence in Latin America. After a discussion of the debate of the definition and function of *testimonio* and a synopsis of Ung's work, Maddox argues that the ongoing intellectual debates regarding the *testimonio*, its form, its place in the literary canon, and its role in politics among Latin Americanists can also be applied to the work.

**John MADDOX**

**Is *First, They Killed My Father* a Cambodian *testimonio*?**

What is a *testimonio*? Perhaps this question, heavily debated since the 1970s, could benefit from being reframed: where, and in what language, does the *testimonio* occur? Elzbieta Sklodowska's *Testimonio hispanoamericano* begins with the affirmation that, by the 1990s, scholars canonized the *testimonio* as a specific Latin American narrative form (1-3). I posit that Cambodian writer Loung Ung's 2000 *First, They Killed My Father* challenges the uniqueness of the *testimonio* and opens new possibilities for reflection and political activism. Further, fields of Cambodian and Cambodian American studies would benefit from this new direction because there is currently no other critical apparatus specific to first-person nonfiction texts written by survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Although Cambodia is often described as an invisible, forgotten nation, its invisibility is not the case in English-language scholarship in general or Latin American Studies in particular (see e.g., Beverly and Achugar; Gugelberger; Morello <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1712>>; McClennen and Morello; Partnoy <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1028>>). The haunting photos of the Tuol Sleng death camp play a vital role in Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (60), in which she argues that political ideology plays a vital role in how photographs are interpreted (63, 83). Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* has been used by Frederic Jameson and Doris Sommer among others to write some of the most polemic works on national literature and culture in Latin America. Further, Ben Kiernan has sought to find the commonalities between the ideologies genocidal regimes from before colonial times to the present and gives detailed analysis of the killings in Cambodia and Guatemala in the twentieth century and how they relate to the mass atrocities of the of the past (540-54). In 2004 Loung Ung's *First, They Killed My Father* has been translated into Spanish and this allows greater access to scholars of this kind of *testimonio* in the Spanish-speaking world. A brief *testimonio*-like report of recent human trafficking in the region was published by Mark Aguirre in 2006 and his 2007 article chronicles the war crimes tribunal of the Khmer Rouge (the journal's press released his *El legado de los jemerres rojos* in 2009). A survivor of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, Denise Affonço, wrote *To the End of Hell* (2007) translated in Spain and it will no doubt lead to more discussions of the connections and contrasts between the *testimonio* in Cambodia and Latin America.

The origin, definition, and function of the *testimonio* are among the most heated debates in Latin American letters. A possible origin is Carolina Maria De Jesus's 1960 *Child of the Dark* in which a resident of the slums of Rio de Janeiro narrates the struggles of her daily life, scrawled on piles of discarded paper to journalist Audálio Dantas creating a counter-narrative to the heady optimism that preceded the Brazilian dictatorship (1964-1985) (see Bartow). The form also has a possible origin in Miguel Barnet's interviews with Esteban Montejo, a 103-year-old slave, published in 1966 as *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Barnet's work was part of the first attempt at canonization of the *testimonio* in scholarship when in 1970 Cuba's Casa de las Américas created the Premio Testimonio and that coincided with the Revolution's crack-down on dissident writers like Heberto Padilla and the official end of the literary Boom, since many of the writers who preferred less mimetic and more complex forms were also considered counterrevolutionary (see Sklodowska 55). John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman counter this argument by noting that the tradition in Cuba can be linked to the writings of Che Guevara from the 1950s, a common belief among scholars (see Sklodowska 61). However, perhaps the most scholarly debate has arisen from *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), in which an Indigenous Guatemalan peasant travels to Paris and narrates to Venezuelan journalist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray the atrocities she and her family witnessed and suffered under Guatemala's military regime. Menchú's testimony was used in Guatemala's Truth Commissions and she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. However, David Stoll's 1999 *Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* sparked a debate over whether or not she lied during her testimony leading to other debates over the role of truth claims in the *testimonio*. This polemic informed other debates regarding truth and representation of the marginalized in the First-World academy that had been occurring since Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1983 "Can the Subaltern Speak?" called into

question the ability of the lettered West to understand the subaltern's "voice" or "perspective." In 1999 another major debate began about Menchú's text which led to a controversy over whether or not the *testimonio* should be considered literature. For some, like George Yúdice, calling the *testimonio* "literature" represented a triumph of post-modern anti-elitism, while for others, like Beverley and Zimmerman, it meant the extinguishing of the text's political flame, neutralizing its affront to the status quo, and romanticizing the subaltern. Out of respect for this debate, I have chosen to use the term *testimonio* since the *testimonio* novel is, for Beverley and Zimmerman, an oxymoron.

Most of the scholarship on the *testimonio* does not challenge its uniqueness to Latin America. Some scholars, such as Roberto Fernández Retamar, Jorge Narváez, Alfonso Reyes, and Miguel Barnet have claimed that it is a uniquely Latin American literary form. However, Jameson expands this regional focus and Sklodowska concedes that the limits of the form are potentially endless. Jameson claims that the *testimonio* is part of a greater trend of "cultural import substitution" in which writers from the so-called Third World appropriate cultural forms such as the coming of age novel altering them through cultural hybridization with autochthonous forms and content ("Import" 172). Sklodowska, using the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Roberto González Echevarría, places the *testimonio* form in a greater history of the novel as a narrative form in Western culture thus calling into question her initial claim (4) that it is unique to *Hispanoamérica* (93-94). Despite this recent scholarship, readers need to be able to recognize a *testimonio* when they see one. Sklodowska's definition, the "testimonial contract," is the most soundly documented, because she frames it to revise the ongoing debate of how to categorize the text citing Barnet as the first attempt, although she finds it too vague, and Beverley's, based on *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, as the most complete. Sklodowska mitigates these by responding to Beverley's critics and proposing a new typology. I base my analysis on Beverley's and Sklodowska's models and note how other critics have expanded on them, but I also show how Ung's text challenges their premises. For Beverley, a *testimonio* has five elements: 1) the length of a novel, 2) it is a first-person narrative, 3) it narrates an individual's life or a significant moment in his/her life, 4) the narrator is not a professional writer, and 5) it is an oral recounting of events to an interlocutor ("The Margin" 24-25).

Here is a brief synopsis of *First, They Killed My Father*: Ung lived in Phnom Penh with her middle-class family until the age of five and her father worked for the Lon Nol regime (1970-1975), the government that preceded the Khmer Rouge (1976-1979). When the Khmer Rouge announces that the United States is going to bomb Phnom Penh, they are forced into the countryside along with most of the city's population. She lives with family until they are forced to leave and must hide their identity thereafter, because the Khmer Rouge was beginning to persecute those associated with the previous regime or Western influence. Ung and her family face unique discrimination, because they are of Chinese descent and this group was associated with the hated Vietnamese and China. The family is forced to work in the rice fields for months at a time with little food and virtually no time for rest. Rumors of a Vietnamese invasion lead to forced conscription, and Ung's teenage siblings are sent to labor camps to prepare for military service. Many in her village die from execution, starvation, and disease and her own sister dies from dysentery. Members of the former regime begin to disappear, including Ung's father and fearing for their lives, the surviving family separates. Her mother remains in the village while Ung, her youngest brother, and her sister go to separate work camps, where they claim to be orphans. Then Ung is sent to a military training camp, where she is indoctrinated and taught to operate weapons. She escapes to visit her mother and younger sister, but they have been taken away by soldiers and never heard from again. Ung returns to the military camp, but it is invaded by the Vietnamese and in the chaos Ung finds her brother and sister. The three siblings go to work for a series of families in a Vietnamese-occupied village. The area is invaded twice by the Khmer Rouge, but the children escape and go to a Vietnamese-run refugee camp where they are reunited with Meng, the older brother who had been sent to the military camp. They find their aunt and uncle, who help them to escape to Thailand via Vietnam, so that they can go to the United States for asylum. There is only enough money for two to travel, so Meng is chosen because he speaks English and Luong is chosen because she is the youngest in the family. There, they are adopted by a U.S. family and sent to Vermont, where Meng and Loung are raised.

Ung's text has the first three traits of Beverley's schemata. However, the definition of "professional writer," based on Kant's notion of the artistic genius (*Critique* 2.46), has been thrown into chaos by recent debates over post-modernism as Yúdice points out. Beverley states that the *testimonio* is a socialist response to the bourgeois novel, the subaltern's rebellion against the structures that oppress him or her ("The Margin" 24). Sklodowska, following Yúdice, points out that oppression has many forms as in the case of intellectuals who are victimized for political reasons or victims of domestic abuse who belong to the middle class (80). Ung belonged to the middle class in Cambodia before living through the Khmer Rouge years; however, the notions of political center and margin changed overnight when the Khmer Rouge seized power and evacuated all of the cities under the pretext of a U.S. bombing raid (*First* 21). She lost most of her possessions, and the markers of status, racial privilege, and education which were once to her material, social, and psychological benefit quickly became the same signifiers which justified her family's persecution. Pol Pot's regime called itself communist and he based many of his ideas on his selective interpretation of Leninism (see *Long Live*). The regime is a tragic example of an institutionalized, authoritarian leftist revolution that maintains power through oppression. When the official discourse is explicitly Marxist and the political tables are turned — as the text explicitly shows when Ung's parents are systematically killed for their supposed ties to capitalism or the previous status quo — Beverley's definition becomes insufficient ("The Margin" 24). John Clytus's "Black Man in Red Cuba" and hybrid fiction-nonfiction texts such as Zoé Valdés's *Yocandra* (1997) and Reinaldo Arenas's *Before Night Falls* — which denounce human rights abuses in Cuba — have some parallels with Ung's work which merit more exploration. This is certainly not to say that the Cuban Revolution was as failed or draconian as the Khmer Rouge. I mention this to problematize the existence of an "anti-bourgeoisie novel" when the ruling, denounced party was once the guerillas. Also, unlike the Cuban Revolution — under which an intellectual class has not only been permitted, but often fostered by the state as the case of Barnet exemplifies — the Khmer Rouge targeted anyone with any formal education similar to the situation in all countries under Soviet Marxist dictatorship, famously to the point of executing anyone who wore glasses (*First* 97). Pol Pot's violent nationalist project sought to "cleanse" its territory not only of any political opposition but also of groups considered undesirable, particularly the maligned Vietnamese and Muslim Cham (see Kiernan 548). Kiernan has shown that this aspect of Cambodia's revolution and regime reveals more about the elite Khmer Rouge generals' Vichy French upbringing than Marxist or even Maoist orthodoxy (547-48). Khieu Samphan, one of Pol Pot's Khmer communist influences in France, based his ideas of economic reform on Argentine Peronism, which further complicates the relationship between this text, the Latin American left, and Marxism (544). In Cambodia — as Alberto Moreiras claims with regard to contemporary Latin America — hopes of revolution are no longer what they were in the 1960s and 1970s (194). This brief comparison to dissident *testimonios* of Communist Cuba also invites questions of how Ung's text, and the *testimonio* itself, differs from the large body of "witness" life writings about the Soviet empire (see, e.g., Lutzkanova-Vassileva <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1103>>): Sklodowska notes parallels with Soviet testimonial literature of the 1930s, such as Sergey Tretyakov, and 1990s German and Scandinavian documentarism, but she does not find comparative work beyond a few U.S./Latin American comparisons, nor does she contribute any in-depth comparative analysis regarding the *testimonio* (65).

Ung's text also challenges Beverley's fifth point, which apparently applies to "mediated" or "indirect" testimonies ("The Margin," 24). He would probably consider *First, They Killed My Father* a "direct" *testimonio*, since the author-narrator-protagonist speaks for herself without the role of a mediator. Menchú's and Montejo's stories were orally related to, and edited by, an expert other. Sklodowska bases the presence of a mediator on prologues which all of these texts include (97). Can Ung's text not be a *testimonio*, since she can write it for herself? In that case, De Jesus's diary must be excluded because his text was also heavily edited, as Robert Levine's and Sebe Bom Meihy's translation shows. Also, mediation takes many forms: Sklodowska points out that not only do interviewers and editors alter the narrator's words, creating hybrid subjects in the text (Montejo/Barnet, Menchú/Burgos-Debray, De Jesus/Dantas), but that narrators often edit themselves during the interview (83-84). Ung's text, although narrated entirely by the author, has

elements of both the mediated and unmediated *testimonio*. There must be at least two "Loungs" for the text to exist as it does: a U.S. Loung and a Khmer Loung. At the time of narration, U.S. Loung, the narrator, has lived in the United States for twenty years, speaks fluent English, has a bachelor's degree in political science, and has been a public speaker with the United Nations and other organizations for many years. She is a person of letters and she has had many of the benefits of living at the political center of the world's largest capitalist economy. However, Khmer Loung is five years old and no less real, but she is different and she sees the world through a child's eyes. She is the subaltern Loung, the silenced voice of the oppressed that Barnet, Burgos-Debray, and Dantas sought. But, because she is a skilled, professional, Western writer, U.S. Loung has much, if incomplete, control over Khmer Loung. Like the mediated *testimonio*, Ung's text has ample secondary material, such as metatextual commentary from U.S. Loung: "I tried to channel the physical feelings and emotions of the child who had to lose her voice ... to survive ... With the narrative style and point of view selected, I sat down and wrote the first three chapters ... in the past tense. But it did not feel authentic ... Writing in the past tense allowed me to distance myself from that pain, but it distanced the reader as well" (5-6).

It is clear that, like all literary writers, Ung thought about how she would make the scattered sensations, traumas, ideas, and emotions from her past into a coherent narrative. This is why, like Barnet, Burgos-Debray, and Dantas, U.S. Ung pieced together her text and it is written beautifully. Consciously or otherwise, it obeys the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, with exposition, climax, gradation, and resolution. Her work has a clear beginning, middle, and end, and U.S. Loung chooses to leave out details, for example mundane ones which were not pertinent to her story, because this might bore or distract the reader or because they were not important to her. This is not to doubt her honesty; rather, it is to praise her talent as an engaged and engaging writer. Beverley might call this a "testimonial novel," but the fact that the narrator, protagonist, and author are all Ung complicates this formula. U.S. Ung is distanced from Khmer Loung by twenty years and an entire hemisphere and her waking memories are as surreal and horrifying as her nightmares, a parallel with Alejo Carpentier's magic realism. U.S. Ung states that she feels she cannot understand completely the experiences of Khmer Ung or vice versa (5). However, her attempt at narrating a hybrid self between the writing U.S. Ung and the previously silenced Khmer Ung — because of its narrative unity — allows the reader to enter into a "contract" with her that goes beyond mere suspension of disbelief. One "forgets" that she/he is reading and begins to empathize with her, to feel pain, anger, sadness, and mourning at the mirror of her pain. This is one effect of her conscious authorial decision to narrate in the first person, because it brings the author, reader, narrator, and protagonist close to one another (6). This proximity is more than a search for truth: it is a matter of affect, of seeing pain, feeling pain, and wanting to do something to stop it. Affect is central to that urgency and one of the functions of rhetoric is to stir the emotions. Beverley's contention that the *testimonio*'s value is political, not aesthetic, is called into question by Ung's writing talent, because her polished prose, product of a Western education, is every bit as stirring, shocking, and subversive as that of Menchú, De Jesus, and Montejo (*Against Literature* 3).

The debate over the origin, form, content, and function of the *testimonio* should spill over into Cambodia, because Ung's text bears so many similarities to what was previously considered a uniquely Latin American phenomenon. Sklodowska claims the *testimonio*'s roots are as deep as the *relaciones* of the first conquistadores (59), something that it shares with the first contact between Hispanic culture and Kampuchea (Ellis 217). However, the *testimonio*'s most recognizable origin is as a continuation of engaged art, a Sartrean ideal that, although it was espoused by the journalists, poets, and novelists of the Latin American Boom, took a different form in 1970. If the Boom's *nueva novela* was marked by antirealism and fantasy, the political violence of the 1960s and 1970s seemed to necessitate that the narrator assume the role of a journalist in search of truth (Sklodowska 99). Thus, literary form was altered by the violence of history. Further, the *testimonio*'s origin is inseparable from the violence of the Cold War (Moreiras 193). The Cuban Revolution played a vital role in the Boom and the *testimonio* and its military threat to the United States led to an explosion in Latin American studies, the field that led to the study, debate, and canonization of the *testimonio* in the United States (see Delpar 153; Swanson 95). Montejo's

narration of the violence of slavery was a celebration of Castro's triumph over the U.S. neocolonists and their supporters who had instituted segregation and a stratified economic system. This bears parallels with De Jesus's text, though its role was to make visible to the dominant classes in Brazil and the United States the miserable conditions of the slums of Rio de Janeiro. However, by the 1970s, United States sponsored dictatorships — in part reactions to the Cuban Revolution — were the norm in Latin America and this is why Menchú's text is so exemplary of the genre. Her descriptions of torture, rape, and executions are examples of a phenomenon that will haunt humanity: *los desaparecidos*, victims of secret torture and execution. Two million of seven million Cambodians were killed during the Khmer Rouge regime, yet many questions remain unresolved regarding victims whereabouts and mines continue to kill millions. Ung's tale of her parents being taken away without warning by the soldiers and spies of a genocidal military regime during the Cold War will no doubt be familiar to anyone aware of the many tragedies of Latin America.

Another familiar term will be "Truth Commission," the search for justice for unspeakable crimes in the courts. Recently, Dutch, the head of Tuol Sleng, a death camp so infamous that Ung identifies as a survivor of it, though she was never physically there, was recently tried and found guilty of his crimes (see Aguirre). A U.S. journalist discovered him teaching middle-school math in a Cambodian village and turned him in to authorities. After the trial, he gave a public apology for the many lives he ended or ruined. This is an example of the continuing political flame of the *testimonio* and activist journalism, in a hauntingly similar setting, half a world away from Latin America. Ung's text, like truth commissions, has made the disappeared come to light. *First, They Killed My Father* became a bestseller in 2001 and has been published in eleven countries and translated into nine languages (3). Its popularity has allowed Ung to become a professional writer after the text's success and has also permitted her to publish two sequels, *Lucky Child* — in which she is reunited with her sister, who was left behind when she came to the United States — and *Lulu in the Sky* in which Ung tells about her challenges, resilience, and joys while growing into a woman in the United States and negotiating her Cambodian American identity. She is now working on a historical novel, which will no doubt play an important role in making sure the West is aware of Cambodia and its injustices. Like the *testimonio*, it, too, will play a revisionist role in how the history of the nation is written and read. As Moreiras notes, the *testimonio*'s function is not only to denounce ongoing crimes, but to memorialize the victims (201).

While Menchú's and Burgos-Debray's *testimonio* ends before the Truth Commission begins, the complex questions of justice for the oppressed are dramatized in Ung's text. In *First, They Killed My Father*, the chaos of the crumbling Khmer Rouge regime provides for a raw, immediate confrontation with the question of what survivors should do or how to react when faced with a chance at vengeance. On 19 March 1979, after the Vietnamese invade, Ung learns that one of the Khmer Rouge soldiers is imprisoned near her (203). A crowd gathers around the prison and threatens to riot if the soldier is not handed over to them. The Vietnamese give the man to the crowd, but they do not kill him immediately. A hierarchy of age and pain emerges in a public trial when two middle-aged men display the prisoner to the seething crowd, a culturally specific tribunal (204). Apparently at the behest of the mob, the men announce that he is to be put to death immediately. The executioners chose two women whose husbands and families were murdered by Khmer Rouge soldiers. Like Ung's text itself, their authority is their own suffering. The narrative time slows to capture the thoughts and sensations of the narrator-protagonist and retard the trial's resolution. The mob storms the prison with weapons identical to those used to torture their families (203). Ung is wearing the same uniform as the soldier. Only a short time before, she was a child soldier herself and she knows that there was widespread forced inscription. The helpless prisoner who is about to die arouses fear in Ung that he will kill her (204). Ung sometimes displaces the boiling desire to torture him onto the crowd, saying that "they" want to kill him, but in other moments "we" or "I" want him to die (204-06). Ung, like the prisoner, is helpless, but she is the voice for this collective crisis. This inversion of the former political order under the Khmer Rouge has made the tortured into torturers. In the same paragraph, Ung's narrator mourns the soldier alongside her own family and nation (206). One could question the exact age, number of people present, or even if all these events "really" were witnessed by Ung, as was the case with Menchú, but they are presented as a dramatization of the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge of which the text is

a part. The soldier's body is thrown into a well poisoned by a wreaking sea of blood, rot, and lifeless faces (208). It is not revealed if they are Vietnamese, Khmer Rouge, or their victims. This narration is a rhetorical attempt at giving coherence to what Khmer Loung saw and heard, but at the same time it is an expression of the ethical and psychological incoherence that emerges after the unspeakable. This human sacrifice, unsatisfactory for Ung and the crowd, questions whether justice, vengeance, or even closure can be reached for Ung or Cambodia. While Beverley describes the *testimonio* as a narrative of "urgency" (40), Ung's text asks "urgency to do what?" Like Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, it ends with the quandary of traumatized oppressed and oppressors and the often gray line between them (249). It is also an example of memory and mourning, another function of the *testimonio*, as Moreiras (201) and Gareth Williams (79) note.

Applying the comparative method to the testimonial genre allows scholars to transcend the limitations of nationalism, just as Latin American studies allows scholars to compare texts from countries as different as Cuba, Brazil, and Guatemala written by authors that did not read one another. It also calls into question the exclusion of memoirs of other theaters of the Cold War from the category. Anderson called nations "imagined communities" (1) and literature, above all canonical literature, is its own imagined community. However, crossing national boundaries is problematic at best. The most famous advocate for Cambodia is Angelina Jolie, who immortalized the nation in the film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. The film's romanticized vision of the country has resulted in a tourism boom to United Nations Heritage Sites, particularly Angkor Wat, the largest religious complex in the world. *National Geographic* has reported extensively on this "lost city." Its famous jungle temple, Wat Ta Prom, "discovered" first by French archaeologists, is now often referred to by locals and tourists alike as "Tomb Raider Temple." This Cambodian tourist industry has a parallel tourist industry in which visitors can tour Toul Sleng guided by a survivor not unlike Ung. Like Ung, one can pay respect at the Killing Fields, which now have a majestic monument erected with skulls of the victims inside. One can walk on paths, sprinkled with exposed human bones through the craters that were once mass graves. Survivor Rithy Panh directed the film *La Machine de mort Khmère Rouge* (2003) which includes the testimonies of other former inmates at the infamous prison, now a tourist attraction. The U.S. film industry has paralleled this trend with films like *The Killing Fields* (1984) and the subsequent *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987), in which an actor from the first film recounts his experiences in Kampuchea while filming. Street vendors, gift shops, and "traditional" markets sell all of these films side-by-side in a surprising juxtaposition of magic and horror.

Since the events narrated in *First, They Killed My Father*, contact with the West through film and tourism have changed Cambodia. There are texts which create two narratives of national identity from the perspective of the United States: the palace of Angkor Wat and the prison of Tuol Sleng. *First, They Killed My Father* is often sold alongside these DVDs and at airport newsstands. If scholars focus exclusively on its content, one may not notice a stark contrast with *The Killing Fields*. However, the fact that it is written by an exile makes it part of a long tradition of intellectuals who "write the nation" from abroad, such as José Martí and Pablo Neruda. The text is further "exiled" by the fact that it was originally written in English, the language of business in Phnom Penh, but not the home language into which it had to be translated. Ung's text, along with Affonço's *testimonio* could be the beginnings of a new national literature. Pol Pot's intellectual mentor, Keng Vannsak, spent his life collecting works of Khmer literature in search of a "pure," "authentic" national identity, which heavily influenced the propaganda of the Khmer Rouge (see Kiernan 544). In today's Cambodia, the songs, speeches, and dances of the Pol Pot era are gone (see Marston 51). Now the epic of the *The Reamker*, a local version of the Indian epic *Rámáyana* inscribed on the walls of the Royal Palace and Angkor Wat, is among the few commonly circulated written narratives which attempt to unite the Cambodian nation. It is not the only one since the Khmer Rouge, however. Judith M. Jacob in her 1996 *The Traditional Literature of Cambodia* presents the rich narrative tradition in the country; however, like *The Reamker*, Jacob does not deal with the contemporary everyday experiences of Cambodians. There are national dances and ballets which celebrate the empires of the past, often for tourists, and a national museum with a similar function, but they do not tell the story of a Cambodian life or of the events of today's Cambodian community. If scholars from Latin American and postcolonial studies devote more study

to Cambodian *testimonios* like Ung's, it could play as much a role in the formation and dissemination of this literature as the former field did in the experimental novel of the Boom and the Latin American *testimonio* (see Swanson 86, 95).

In conclusion, Ung's text represents Cambodia, but it represents a unique experience as well and her text is also important because it talks about the role of racism and xenophobia in the genocide. Ung has also has a unique understanding of the treatment of women in war and genocide, something she shares with Menchú. This makes her privy to sexual crimes and the silencing of women that patriarchy in its many forms results in. Ung was molested by two men and she is told she will grow up to be a prostitute by a Cambodian woman after she is orphaned (177, 180). This makes her text a feminist counter-narrative to a patriarchal, oppressive political culture. Like the Latin American *testimonio*, Ung's and Affonço's texts show the prominent role of women in decrying the injustices of the past. Time will tell if Ung's text should not be called a *testimonio*, but something different. While it may be part of the beginnings of a literary phenomenon that will demand its own category, a Cambodian or Cambodian diaspora literary renaissance. Ung says she sees one forming already ("Surviving" 53). An example of this ebullience is Cambodian American Anida Yoeu's "1700% Project," a film, dance, poem, and performance installation that focuses on the stereotyping and persecution of Arabs and Muslims in the United States since 11 September 2011. In a 2013 film endorsed on Ung's website, *Girl Rising*, Haitian American Edwidge Danticat and Peruvian American Marie Arana tell the story of survivors of Cambodian human trafficking with the collaboration of Hollywood stars. In sum, *First, They Killed My Father* resulted in visibility for Cambodia and its history and the debate about the form, content, and function of the *testimonio* should be the starting point for understanding the stories of those who survived the Khmer Rouge.

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