



PROJECT MUSE[®]

Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique

Viet Thanh Nguyen

Shades of Past, Present, and Future

When I was young, I often saw Vietnamese soldiers patrolling the community gatherings of Vietnamese refugees. This was not in Viet Nam, but in San Jose, California, where, by the 1980s, tens of thousands of refugees had settled, having fled from South Viet Nam at the end of America's war in 1975. Over thirty years later, the feelings of nostalgia and longing for a short-lived nation-state have hardly abated for some of these refugees and their descendants. Although belonging to only one population out of many Southeast Asian populations in the United States, these soldiers in their military fatigues vividly illustrate one way that Southeast Asian Americans have struggled to recuperate troubled histories (see fig. 1). These veterans view the past through what Svetlana Boym calls "restorative nostalgia,"



Figure 1 South Vietnamese veterans at the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial, Garden Grove, California, April 27, 2003. Photo courtesy of Andy Templeton

in which the past can be recovered wholly and the lost homeland can be restored authentically. Restorative nostalgia also animates the volatile anti-communist politics that sets the dominant tone for Little Saigon in Orange County, home to the largest population of Vietnamese outside Viet Nam. Little Saigon's public style of discourse is nationalist and paranoid in a way not uncharacteristic of US politics. But in contrast to exiled nationalism's restorative nostalgia, there is another, "reflective nostalgia" that regards the past with more ambivalence, tolerating shadowy ambiguity, fearing not so much an other but the absolute truth. Many, if not most, academics and artists who deal with Southeast Asians in the United States tend to see the past reflectively, since they, too, sometimes find themselves in nostalgia's velvet grip. The consequences for their work are crucial, since "memory, at once impoverished and enriched, presents itself as a device for measurement, the 'ruler' of narrative."¹

Thus measured and tailored by the past in dissimilar fashions, restorative and reflective nostalgics seem to stand opposed. While restorative nostalgics perceive the past via nationalism's corrective lenses, reflective nostalgics

deploy another set of optics in which the bright light of the nation's dominant memory is dimmed. Darker lenses allow reflective nostalgics to see a "rubble of recognition" otherwise lost in the glare, the countermemory of all those minor peoples and cultures struck down by the ruler of narrative.² For the United States, the narrative that rules when it comes to Southeast Asia is the "The Viet Nam War." Although US stories of this war are far from unified, there is consensus that it was a US tragedy featuring US heroes and antiheroes, a blockbuster in which Southeast Asians play the supporting cast. This, of course, surprises Southeast Asians, who suffered most of the losses. On this matter of being silenced in America's great chorus, the restorative and reflective nostalgics among Southeast Asians would agree.

It is this agreement that makes evident how rare it may be to find any pure nostalgics of the restorative or reflective kind. Even the most reflective may find within themselves traces of the restorative. It is restorative nostalgia, with its belief in a coherent national or ethnic identity rooted in some kind of past origin, that provides one of the more compelling reasons for studying Southeast Asians in the United States. Meanwhile, purely restorative nostalgics are perhaps only a vocal minority among the exiled. Many Southeast Asians in the United States, focused as they are upon finding jobs, raising families, and building communities, evidently mix restorative desires for the homeland with doses of reflective pragmatism about the inevitability of staying in the adopted land. It is the focusing of the nostalgic gaze through both restorative and reflective eyes that allows the study of Southeast Asians in the United States, a population sharing some common history but in other ways hard to define.

The history is of Chinese imperialism, French colonialism, and US domination, which set the boundaries for the Southeast Asia that concern me: Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos. Important reasons for studying this Southeast Asia can be found in identity politics, academic-field building, community organizing, social service work, and political representation, but the most important reason for me emerges from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1967 speech, "Beyond Vietnam." Here he yokes together the domestic war against racism and poverty with the war against war, drawing attention to how the coin of the realm was being wasted on an unjust and immoral conflict, its brunt born by the Vietnamese and by the US poor.³ King called

upon US citizens to remember the Vietnamese, and if he does not mention other Southeast Asians it is because the war's viral reach into Cambodia and Laos was a state secret in 1967. While the US antiwar movement protested the bombing of North Viet Nam in the 1960s, most US bombs were being dropped clandestinely in Cambodia and Laos. To note the well-rehearsed figure, more ordnance was unloaded on the former Indochina than on all of Europe during World War II. With hindsight upon a history that King may not have known, I follow his call but expand upon it: any urge to remember Viet Nam must go "beyond Vietnam" to include Cambodia and Laos.

Without such inclusion, we risk substituting Vietnamese experiences for Southeast Asian ones in the name of the "Viet Nam War," when Cambodian or Laotian experiences could also provide a template for studying Southeast Asians. For example, much of the US-directed "secret war" in Laos was fought by the Hmong minority of that country, many of whom embarked on an odyssey after the United States abandoned them in 1975.⁴ The Hmong fled from their North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao enemies in a long march across perilous terrain to Thailand, where, for the half of the Hmong lucky enough to make it, years in refugee camps awaited. Aging Hmong veteran Jou Yee Xiong's odyssey ended in Goleta, California, where, musing about the Hmong forced into exile, he said, "Our suffering was due to the fact that we had no country of our own."⁵ The Xiong family's claim upon this country returns us to King's vision of the United States as a country that wages asymmetrical warfare upon dark others both inside and outside its borders. Thus the Hmong may claim this country because of the exorbitant price in blood they paid for the United States—perhaps a quarter of the Hmong were killed—but this country has not claimed them.⁶ Hmong experiences tell me this: Southeast Asians are in a country not their own because the United States conducted a brutal war, one that led many US citizens to wonder if their country was still, indeed, their own.

The study of Southeast Asians in the United States is therefore an effort to recall a history of war that most US citizens remember imperfectly, if at all, and to claim countries, with all the symbolic, real, and dead weight they carry. These include the imaginary homelands resurrected in the memory and feeling of Southeast Asian refugees and their descendants, as well as today's United States in which these refugees live, far from delighted states

for many. Then there are the “other” countries, the “America” of peace, justice, and equality that the United States fantasizes itself to be, and the people’s paradises promised by the communist parties of Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos.⁷ It is the ghosts of past, present, and future countries that haunt the study and the stories of Southeast Asians in these United States.

Southeast Asian Studies and Southeast Asians in the United States

In considering the past and present countries of Southeast Asians in the United States, I look at how three academic fields have dealt with them: Southeast Asian studies, American studies, and Asian American studies. Southeast Asian studies has primarily been interested in mapping the countries of the past, the nations of origin and ancestry for “Southeast Asian Americans.” Southeast Asian studies itself needed quotation marks sixty years ago, for Southeast Asia only cohered and came into focus for both the United States and Southeast Asians themselves when the pressures of the Cold War molded “Southeast Asia” into a geopolitical reality and gave rise to “Southeast Asian studies.” The region described by “Southeast Asia” remained diffuse, with no “natural” boundaries and marked by wide differences in nation, religion, ethnicity, language, government, and geography. The 1967 founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bestowed a formal political shape upon the region. In the same way that World War II and the Cold War drew US state attention to academic knowledge production about Southeast Asia, ASEAN’s political and economic realities mean that local Southeast Asian studies has grown. But while “Southeast Asia” and “Southeast Asians” may be constructions, scholars in Southeast Asian studies nevertheless insist that they can serve as convenient academic categories.⁸

This self-conscious knowledge hardly insulates the field from criticisms of being orientalist in tradition, essentialist in practice, and state-sponsored in origin.⁹ Scholars of Southeast Asian studies argue that these charges are out of date: the field is more politically conscious, especially of its orientalist ancestry and Cold War origins, and more diverse intellectually than skeptics would allow. Contemporary Southeast Asian studies, they say, understands the fluidity of its object, its own existence at the nexus of power and knowl-

edge, and the need to negotiate between Western academics, who produce most of the English-language scholarship, and Southeast Asian academics, who often have a more intimate grasp of Southeast Asian cultures, but whose scholarship is less accessible, published in local languages. Still, intentions do not necessarily determine outcomes, and individual agency hardly trumps power, as Edward Said argued in *Orientalism*. Despite the sympathy that European orientalist extended to Asia, their scholarship still facilitated the exercise of power by the West over the Rest. Even worse, according to Rey Chow, contemporary area studies is complicit with a US agenda of global domination, with area studies helping to provide the data necessary for an aerially based war machine that transforms the world from a picture into a “target.”¹⁰

Even a reconfigured Southeast Asian studies that takes its cue from local scholars versed in postcolonial and poststructural theories like Said’s may not escape the nexus of power and knowledge. While Southeast Asian studies may have addressed the blind spot of its orientalist past, that spot shifts in the present. Thus even in renouncing Western power, a local Southeast Asian studies may produce knowledge that serves Southeast Asian power, both as the region leverages itself against other blocs, and as Southeast Asian nations compete with each other for regional hegemony. Having a blind spot hardly makes Southeast Asian studies unique, since a blind spot is what Ernst Bloch calls “the darkness of the lived moment.”¹¹ The blind spot is what we cannot see that allows us to see. We may even be aware of our blind spot, and yet not be able to turn our vision upon it.

A case in point for Southeast Asian studies is the Southeast Asian diaspora. Millions of people from Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos found refuge after the war’s end in the United States, France, Germany, Australia, and many other host countries. David Szanton acknowledges the “growing recognition of the value—indeed the necessity—of studying the flows of people . . . as they spread around the world.”¹² Some nation-based area studies do track diasporic populations and cultures in varying degrees, from the Philippines, South Korea, China, and Viet Nam, to name just some examples. This includes looking at the movements of people from Southeast Asian nations to other Southeast Asian nations, or elsewhere in Asia. But the notion of tracking a regional diaspora, one that would parallel and overlap

with a population called “Southeast Asian Americans” or “Asian Americans,” has less traction. By this, I mean that there have been successful US-based efforts at forming Asian American coalitions, versus simply ethnically or nationally based Asian American groups (such as Chinese or Vietnamese Americans); and that these efforts have led to emergent efforts to form Southeast Asian American or diasporic coalitions. In contrast, the notion and the name of a “Southeast Asian diaspora” or an “Asian diaspora” has had less traction in Southeast Asian studies than “Southeast Asian Americans” or “Asian Americans” have had in American studies or Asian American studies.¹³ Judging from its publication record, Southeast Asian studies shows relatively little interest in a collective Southeast Asian diaspora, versus nationally specific diasporas from Southeast Asia. Yet historical reasons exist for the formation of this collectivity, and this collective diaspora exerts an influence upon Southeast Asia through billions in remittances, *de facto* nations in exile, and transnational traffic in ideas and people.

This disinterest about Southeast Asians outside Southeast Asia is one reason for the emergence of a Southeast Asian American studies, which must insist on refusing the regional and national boundaries of “area studies.” Southeast Asian American studies must do so in order to account for people like U Sam Oeur, the Khmer poet and politician who challenges area studies’ alignment of a “people” with their “area.” Born in Cambodia in 1936 to an uneducated farmer, Sam Oeur was educated in the French colonial system. In 1961, he won a scholarship to study in the United States. At Georgetown, he memorized the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence; later at Los Angeles State College, he was stirred by John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, and eventually wept for him. Walt Whitman became his touchstone, and while studying industrial arts, he was moved to write poetry. His poems circulated. Then, one midnight, a knock on his Santa Monica apartment door announced a messenger bearing an airplane ticket for Iowa. A bewildered Sam Oeur found himself at the University of Iowa by the same evening, unsure why he was sent here by forces unknown. He learned that the head of the Asia Foundation and the director of Iowa’s famed writing program had read his poetry and decided that he should become a poet. “I was going to get a master’s degree in writing poetry? It seemed preposterous when they wouldn’t even allow me to have a second

minor in philosophy.”¹⁴ He returned to Cambodia with his master’s degree in fine arts, only to become, with his fellow city dwellers, “slaves” for the Khmer Rouge at war’s end.¹⁵ After the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia ended the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge, Sam Oeur worked for the new Vietnamese-sponsored government, which he considered a neocolonial power. He was fired when a colleague discovered a prodemocratic poem he had written. Eventually, Sam Oeur’s former roommate from Iowa arranged his deliverance to the United States in 1992, where he would finally publish his book of poems, *Sacred Vows*, and his memoir, *Crossing Three Wildernesses*. In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the United States, “I was finally free.”¹⁶

Southeast Asian studies needs Southeast Asian American studies to prod it into discussing stories such as Sam Oeur’s in all their epic nation- and ocean-crossing qualities, whereby what is important is not just the link between Cambodia and its diaspora but also the links between them and the other nations and diasporas of Southeast Asia. But conversely, Southeast Asian American studies needs the expertise of Southeast Asian studies—how else to read *Sacred Vows*, published bilingually with Khmer poems set opposite English translations? Southeast Asian studies overlooks this kind of collaboration between the local and the diasporic, calling instead for collaboration between “American” and “Southeast Asian” scholars that recognizes the multiculturalism of Southeast Asian countries while assuming America to be homogenous. In fact, the United States is in Southeast Asia, and Southeast Asia is in the United States. Southeast Asian American studies must think through both sides of the caesura at the same time, and by doing so, can prove how US power exerted in Southeast Asia has left witnesses in the United States. Sam Oeur is one. Upon returning to Cambodia after his schooling, he heard news of a US B-52 Stratofortress unloading twenty tons of bombs upon a mistaken target, the town of Neak Luong, killing one hundred innocents. It was this type of indiscriminate US bombing that terrorized and traumatized the Cambodian peasantry, helping to render them susceptible to the Khmer Rouge. The year was 1973, when “democracy looked so good in America, but America wasn’t looking good in Cambodia.”¹⁷

American Studies and Southeast Asians in the United States

In the country of the present, Southeast Asians in the United States fall under the provenance of American studies. Like Southeast Asian studies, American studies emerged in response to World War II and the Cold War, serving a nationalist agenda until the war in Viet Nam and domestic struggles over civil rights brought “America” into crisis. One academic outcome of the postwar US crisis was John Carlos Rowe’s call for a “new American studies,” which would be more like a self-conscious area studies.¹⁸ A revisionist American studies hopes to transform American studies from a nation-based field masking US hegemonic ambitions to an area studies that reveals them. This revision addresses some significant blind spots in American studies: first, the focus of American studies on the United States, even though “America” is broader than just one country; second, the segregation of the United States as an object of study from other countries and regions, not only in the Americas but elsewhere; third, the exclusion of languages besides English as the basis of a methodology. A revisionist American studies assumes its practice to be multilingual, its object to be the Americas in comparison to the rest of the world, and its ideas to be more than just Western in origin. September 11 especially encouraged American studies to look more outward than inward, to consider the influences upon US culture from elsewhere and its imperfect consequences abroad.¹⁹ Wai-Chee Dimock, for example, proposes that the US literary critic’s pledge of loyalty should be to humanity, not the nation, and that US literary criticism should be “un-American,” its sometimes seditious task to reveal the linkages across time and space that connect United States literature to other countries and to the entire span of human culture.²⁰

But an internationalized American studies may share with a multicultural America a reluctance to see that the iron fist of domination can fit easily into the soft glove of diversity. The United States will not easily give up power and will still expect to hear others speak in a language that US citizens understand. For American studies, the blind spot is aural as much as visual, for American studies does not generally read, write, or hear in anything besides English. An English-only, internationalized American studies exercises through language what it precludes rhetorically—the domi-

nance of US scholars with Western ideas and theories, written in English or circulated in English translation. A Southeast Asian American studies able to use other languages addresses American studies' tin ear, encouraging it to hear what is spoken outside US borders and also what is spoken within them. US literatures are multilingual, as Werner Sollors reminds us. So are American societies and cultures, but the ones that do not speak English have not received adequate attention from American studies.²¹ In listening to and reading other languages beside English, Southeast Asian American studies initiates conversations not only between America and its foreign and domestic others but also between Southeast Asian Americans and Southeast Asians.

Take, for example, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's untranslated short story "Don't Cry in California."²² Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is, or perhaps was, Viet Nam's premier short-story writer, coming to fame in the late 1980s when he took up the Communist Party's invitation for a cultural renaissance by publishing stories critical of postwar life under the regime. Many of these stories have been translated into English, but this story has not made it through translation's very fine sieve in the United States. Dissidence and war—the Vietnamese themes of most interest to American publishers and readers—are only highly muted themes in it. The impressionistic and fragmented story is told mostly from an unnamed Vietnamese man's point of view as he imagines his former lover's life in California, "*perhaps the most beautiful place on earth*,"²³ where "people don't speak the savage and primitive Vietnamese she does. She speaks English. Only when breaking down, only when alone, when humiliated and worn out by shame does she break out in her mother tongue."²⁴ The man and the woman come to stand for, respectively, Viet Nam and its diaspora. Near the story's end, the man tells her this:

Don't cry in California.
Don't cry.
Don't cry in Louisiana.
Don't cry in the 13th district of Paris.
Don't cry
Don't cry in Berlin, in Sidney, in Tokyo
Vietnamese people, don't cry in California

The man names the various sites of the Vietnamese diaspora as he urges the diaspora to “*Remember me, remember your homeland,*” “*the place you long to see.*”²⁵

His injunction not to cry identifies what may be evident to those not in the diaspora itself: that melancholia, while being the dominant mode of Vietnamese diasporic self-imagining, is valid only insofar as the Vietnamese diaspora ignores pain elsewhere, notably in the homeland.²⁶ But Nguyễn Huy Thiệp casts the terms of his allegory more broadly than simply as an act of recrimination against the diaspora. His male protagonist is also a sad case, describing himself as a “bum” with “decaying teeth” who “deals heroin.” He’s also afflicted with “inflation” (*lạm phát*) and is “retrograde” (*suy thoái*), economic terms linking his degradation to the nation’s.²⁷ Both Viet Nam and its diaspora are enthralled with self-pity in the story, the Vietnamese because they live in a repressive nation, the diaspora because it endlessly mourns the lost nation of South Viet Nam. But when he tells her to get over her melancholy, she responds defiantly: “I don’t cry / I don’t cry in California / No matter how far apart we are.”²⁸ Her unsettling response leads to the story’s final words, the man’s unanswered question: “You’re coming home again . . . Aren’t you, dear?”²⁹ For homeland and diasporic Vietnamese, the lack of an answer may be disturbing because of their shared and strong belief that Vietnamese people, no matter how far, should never forget their Vietnamese-ness and always want to go home. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s story implies otherwise, questioning the authenticity of Vietnamese origins and Vietnamese mourning over loss. Pervasive mourning and the belief in authentic origins together lead to what Arif Dirlik calls the “whimpering preoccupation with the location of ‘home.’”³⁰

This fictional conversation is but one example of dialogues unheard by US citizens’ ears. US citizens are used to hearing what they want to be told about the war and its aftermath, evident in many US accounts of postwar visits to Viet Nam, in which one common refrain is how remarkably friendly the Vietnamese are, how eager to put the past behind them. The relations between Vietnamese and overseas Vietnamese are far more strained, for the past is not over yet when both sides still lay claim to the same homeland. Since Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s portrait of diasporic whimpering may not be something the diaspora wants to see—who wants to be seen as whimpering?—

it's not surprising that his story remains untranslated. But if Southeast Asian American studies can translate this contentious dialogue of siblings for other US citizens, of which Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's story is but one of many threads, then the field can help shift US views of how the Vietnamese at home and abroad understand the war's legacy. As the practitioners of Southeast Asian American studies cross trans-Pacific traffic, however, they must look both ways, for the tasks of translation, interpretation, and mediation are arduous, freighted with the dangers of mistranslation, betrayal, and collaboration. But these tasks and dangers are a necessary part of Southeast Asian American studies as it attends to its subject, those exiled peoples who are, to borrow from Baudelaire, "relentlessly gnawed by longing."

Asian American Studies and Southeast Asians in the United States

Ironically, the field within which Southeast Asians in the United States fit most intimately, Asian American studies, is also the one most troubled by them. Asian American studies is not just a reactive, antiracist project, but also a liberatory, utopian one premised on racial emancipation, when one can one day cease being Asian American. This cessation can take place with either the full integration of Asian Americans into the United States via the eradication of racial difference, or with the end of US identity, period. The former is multiculturalism's liberal dream, the latter a radical hope born from a Marxist critique of the state. Both are oriented toward a future country, bereft of difference in the liberal case, or free of state politics and national borders in the Marxist case. Both impulses exist within Asian American studies, and advocates of both positions have difficulty dealing with Southeast Asians, who inhabit their blind spots. On the one hand, Southeast Asians and Southeast Asian Americans are the kind of subjugated and voiceless people that have inspired Asian American studies and for whom it has always advocated. On the other hand, Southeast Asians also give Asian American studies problems, for many of them are not only victims but also victimizers.

Scholars Sucheng Chan and Daryl Maeda present the dilemma Southeast Asians pose for Asian American studies, which could be phrased this way: are those who speak of and for the voiceless always ready to hear what the

voiceless have to say? In his history of the Asian American movement's formation, Maeda singles out Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugees for their dual, and contradictory, influence on Asian Americans in this regard. He argues that while North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front revolutionaries inspired Asian American activists in the 1960s, the much more conservative Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States in 1975 conversely slowed the momentum of an Asian American movement. Asian American activists were forced to confront not just significant numbers of Vietnamese, but Vietnamese who also happened to be deeply anticommunist and who generally contradicted the anti-imperialism of the Asian American movement.³¹ Chan's autobiography parallels Maeda's account of the Asian American movement and its corollary in Asian American studies, an intervention into the academy that was initially wholly radical. She was, she says, an "antiwar activist. Along with other left-leaning young US citizens, I disparaged those who collaborated with the United States—especially South Viet Nam's political and military elite and the Hmong mercenary soldiers in Laos paid by the US Central Intelligence Agency—because they seemed to represent forces of venality and corruption."³² But as a professor, she teaches many Southeast Asian American students, and in "sympathizing with their suffering and admiring their courage, I decided it is important to relate to them as human beings, rather than as children of people who may have espoused ideologies or engaged in actions to which I was opposed."³³ The result is a collaboration with her Hmong American students to produce *Hmong Means Free*, a compilation of their autobiographical essays and the oral histories of their families, who fought for the US cause.

Chan's intellectual and political trajectories illustrate Maeda's characterization of the Asian American movement: initially inspired to align with Southeast Asian struggles against US imperialism in Asia, then dismayed by the actually existing Southeast Asians who came to US shores as refugees, and eventually reshaped by having to account for these new Southeast Asian Americans. Chan's problem in coping with Southeast Asian Americans is manifest obliquely in Lisa Lowe's influential *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*.³⁴ Here Lowe argues for the importance of intellectual work to address "the contradictions of the political and economic spheres . . . manifested in Asian American cultural production as a

material site of struggle”; “Asian American critique is the dialectical politicization of these contradictions.”³⁵ So far as Asian American studies and Southeast Asian American studies have a common method across varied disciplines, “dialectical politicization” is probably the most persuasive one. It allows Asian American critics to see that “the contradictions through which immigration brings national institutions into crisis produces immigrant cultures as oppositional and contestatory, and these contradictions critically politicized in cultural forms and practices can be utilized in the formation of alternative social practices.”³⁶ But while Asian immigrant cultures *may be* oppositional and contestatory, their political direction is sometimes radically conservative, as manifest by Southeast Asian Americans such as the exiled Hmong General Vang Pao, once arrested (and then released) by the US government on grounds of fomenting war against Laos, and by South Vietnamese military veterans. These old soldiers set the political tone for their communities, which, while being highly politicized, tend to oppose and contest an insufficiently nationalist, anticommunist response on the part of the United States toward Southeast Asia.

While Southeast Asian Americans are not the only Asian Americans who resist dialectical politicization, they make that resistance highly visible; and while Southeast Asian Americans are ideologically diverse, for a significant number of them political consciousness cannot be about dialectical politicization. These immigrants and refugees would equate such a method with communism. Asian American critique must overlook a contradiction such as anticommunism or find a way to politicize it dialectically, in a way that reads against the stated intentions of these populations. Thus Sam Oeur’s memoir could be read dialectically (if selectively) as a critique of US imperialism when he says the United States made “grave errors in judgment in Cambodia as well as in other places”; but he also says that it is the “goodness of the American people, and the value of hard work, which will help transform Cambodia into its own quirky version of democracy.”³⁷ While I think Sam Oeur’s memoir should be read dialectically, and while elements for an oppositional culture could be extracted, that oppositional culture is not the same as Cambodian American or Asian immigrant culture.

Southeast Asian American studies is forced to confront the sticky problem of actually existing political subjects that Asian American critique

would rather avoid. Kandice Chuh's *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, for example, makes compelling arguments about using Asian American critique for "justice" by vacating the problematic issue of subjectivity altogether. While Lowe cites Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism" as a pragmatic necessity for political struggle, Chuh argues for a "strategic anti-essentialism." Since there is no such essential thing as an "Asian American," Chuh offers the paradox of "subjectless discourse" to both retain the name of the "Asian American" and to deny it at the same time. The "Asian American" becomes the "designation of the (im)possibility of justice" and the term *Asian American* "deconstructs itself, is itself deconstruction."³⁸ But in the same way that deconstruction's political potential was never realized outside of the culture wars, Chuh's method is most applicable in studying the (im)possibility of "justice," and the Asian American itself, in Asian American texts. In dealing with political and cultural movements, subjectless discourse runs into difficulties, as represented here by Southeast Asians, whose history and presence should force Asian American studies to ask what its definition of justice is.

Southeast Asian Americans are not only heterogeneous, hybrid, and multiple, in Lowe's famous incantation about Asian Americans, but are also ideologically scattered, antagonistic, and unpredictable (as are all Asian Americans). These ideological qualities of Southeast Asian Americans, diverse but often also conservative and anticommunist, make clear how the problem with Asian American critique is not in its insistence on being dialectical and its powerful and necessary stress on utopian (im)possibility. The problem lies in attaching that dialectic to Asian Americans, whether we speak of Asian Americans as a panethnic whole, in their ethnic groups, or as a paradox of subjectlessness. Insofar as Asian American critique is primarily interested in the possibility of "justice," it cannot carry out its task primarily in the name of Asian Americans, since it must confront the sometimes opposing claims of "justice" advanced by some of the very people that Asian American critique purports to serve, such as conservative Southeast Asian Americans bent on their own quest for an (im)possible justice in communist Southeast Asia. To avoid this problem and retain the name of the Asian American, Asian American critique must dismiss or bracket those Asian Americans it does not agree with, as Chuh does when she puts "Asian

American” into quotation marks in reference to Republicans of that kind;³⁹ or create a select subgroup of ideologically leftist Asian Americans; or proclaim a subjectless discourse wherein *Asian American* does not designate a population but a self-reflexive critique of a category, a sign of the contradiction of racial formation itself. And yet this discourse arises precisely at a time when many Asian American groups are proclaiming their subjectivities, although sometimes in ways that contest the definition of justice that is central to Asian American critique. Confronted by this, subjectless discourse signals an attempt to keep the Asian American and justice linked. Subjectless discourse does so by shifting from the premise of a possibility of justice, key to the Asian American movement at its formation in the 1960s, to the (im)possibility of justice.

In contrast to Asian American critique, however, the emerging field of Southeast Asian American studies must confront demands for “justice” that run counter to the spirit of Asian American critique. Thus I cite the example of South Vietnamese veterans because they are a group whose militaristic politics I find repugnant. I find it hard to inhabit their worldview, yet I understand that they have valid claims for “justice”: they fought for a US-imposed cause, they served under US-sponsored military dictatorships, they were betrayed by the United States in their hour of need, they were marginalized once they reached US shores, they were forgotten in many US accounts of the war, and when remembered were usually maligned, their courage and honor impugned. Southeast Asian American studies finds just cause in giving credibility to these experiences and claims, since the most important reason for this field’s existence is the ethically complicated demand to speak of and for Southeast Asian American communities.

But the contradiction that the field cannot resolve emerges when it must inevitably face the ethical call to speak against those communities. Speaking against, and not just speaking of, for, or about these communities, is what the field must do if it heeds the method of dialectical politicization, exercised in the name of “justice.” I have constantly and irritatingly placed “justice” in scare quotes to indicate that its meaning is something that is fought for by different factions, many of whom might see “justice” as something that is achievable and that serves their self-interest rather than as something endlessly deferred and that calls attention to the interests of

others (as deconstruction would propose). Since Southeast Asians are also covered by Asian American studies, this contradiction—between dialectical politicization and those who may resist that method and its assumptions about “justice”—extends to Asian American studies.

It’s because of this contradiction that Asian American studies and Southeast Asian American studies cannot properly speak of a future country. By appropriating and renaming their forms of displacement and marginalization—as Orientals and gooks—these fields also acknowledge the power of racial identity and their investment in it. Whether or not one likes the idea of being Asian American, once one accedes to that name—even with the self-conscious knowledge that Asian Americans do not really exist—one agrees to the validity of that category. In many instances, such agreement also agrees with, or at least concedes to, the state that allows that category to exist. Even if one is an Asian American of the type that rejects the state and imagines radical alternatives, it’s not clear why Asian American formation is the endpoint, the strategy, or the name for such a vision, versus serving as a way station, a tactic, and a pseudonym whose very use forecloses the imagination as much as opens it. The advantages, disadvantages, and contradictory logic of racial identity also percolate downward, so that the legitimacy of Asian Americans inspires the demand of Southeast Asian Americans for a formal acknowledgment of their existence. For Southeast Asian American studies, this takes place in academia, where, as Robyn Wiegman puts it, difference is disciplined and where, I would suggest, a related attachment to (im)possibility can be nurtured.⁴⁰

In identity-based forms of academic study, subject and object tend to converge—hence women study women, Asian Americans study Asian Americans, and increasingly, Southeast Asian Americans study Southeast Asian Americans. Exceptions prove the rule. For Wiegman, academic identity politics are matched by the university’s alignment of traditional disciplines with nationality (e.g., English literature, French history). Identity-based forms of study that do not challenge disciplinary divisions end up unable to contest the legitimacy of the nation that leads to the creation of minorities in the first place. Southeast Asian American studies must respond by foregrounding an interdisciplinary study that, in crossing national boundaries and disciplines, challenges the alignment of nation and disci-

pline. But Southeast Asian American studies can hardly do so without also being aware that interdisciplinary, transnational work inevitably brings into question national and racial categories such as “Southeast Asian American” and “Asian American.” Thus unlike “traditional” disciplines, which, like nations, are premised on a sense of immortality, Southeast Asian American studies, like Asian American studies and other identity-based forms, must function under the sign of its own expiration date.

Southeast Asians as Refugees in the United States

Until that unknown date arrives, are Southeast Asian American studies and Asian American studies simply unable to get over the attachment to their own names? Yes, for this melancholia is productive, although it is also restrictive. Nation-states produce minority identities and minority injury, and minorities need to deal with the loss that constitutes them.⁴¹ Asian American critique, through dialectical politicization and subjectless discourse, offers methods for dealing with this loss and the losses of subjugation, most notably through its orientation toward a concept of justice that emanates from the other. In this context, Southeast Asian Americans and Asian Americans must work through loss rather than take loss for granted or assume anything special about their loss. Such assumptions lead to victimization and resentment, as well as acting out via forms like nostalgia and cultural nationalism, with their concurrent expressions of homophobia and patriarchy. All of these have been evident in Southeast Asian American cultures.

The experiences of Southeast Asian Americans also suggest other ways for working through loss and ethically managing grief that render problematic the relationship between Asian Americans and justice. Here we could recast DuBois’s notion of double consciousness, now that the United States is on the brink of being a multicultural society of minorities, albeit one where some minorities are more equal than others. In the contemporary United States, multiculturalism not only contests hegemony but also fine-tunes it. When multiculturalism manages domestic dissent in order to further the consensus about America’s right to dominate the world, the question of power lines becomes as important as the question of color lines. Minorities can no longer *only* see themselves as both self and other; they must *also* see

themselves as both disadvantaged in some circumstances when at home and advantaged in some circumstances when abroad. The American minority's new burden is a revised double consciousness, an awareness of how a multicultural United States packs a two-fisted punch of diversity and domination as it struggles to keep its grip on hegemonic power. Asian Americans are not exempt from this problem; if anything, they are deeply implicated in the exercise of US power through their increasing importance as cultural ambassadors, global corporate citizens, transnational commuters, and model minorities between Asia and the United States.

What does this burden involve for the study of Southeast Asians in the United States? First, it involves acknowledging the way that Southeast Asian Americans are seen from Southeast Asia, rather than centering an Asian American critique that is implicitly invested in American assumptions, institutions, and boundaries, its transnational protestations notwithstanding. This other view, which could be extended to all Asian Americans, includes recognizing the material differences between the United States and Asian nations in order to confront the shifting positions of Asian diasporic communities in relation to their nations of origin. In many instances, the power of diasporic communities is out of proportion, relative to the nation of origin, than the size of the community would entail. What these shifts demonstrate is that the displacements of people and the production of diasporas entail not only tragedy but also irony and even comedy. While Southeast Asian Americans may find melancholia and restorative nostalgia to be the most self-satisfying emotional register, the material privileges of being American for many Southeast Asian Americans, if recognized, must ameliorate that melancholia and make nostalgia reflective.

Second, the Southeast Asian minority's burden is also realized through remembering its refugee origins and feeling the ethical demand of the refugee. As Yen Le Espiritu rightly argues, the Vietnamese refugee's narrative in the United States has been rewritten so that American responsibility for its failures in Southeast Asia is forgotten in favor of remembering how Americans rescued Vietnamese refugees at war's end. Her "critical refugee study" treats the Vietnamese refugee not as a victim in need of aid, casting the United States in the role of savior, but as the product of American policy.⁴² A critical refugee study of Southeast Asians in general turns our

attention to issues of war, race, and violence, as Espiritu says, and not so much the questions of identity, assimilation, and the recuperation of history characteristic of immigrant studies. Immigrant studies affirms the nation-states the immigrant comes from and settles into; refugee studies brings into question the viability of the nation-state.

This more radical argument about the significance of the refugee comes from Giorgio Agamben. For him, the refugee brings into question the citizen, sovereignty, rights, people, and workers, everything associated with the nation-state and the struggle for inclusion and recognition within it.⁴³ The refugee exists without rights and the protection of nation-states, in refugee camps and immigration detention centers that share a lineage with concentration and death camps. But if we locate Southeast Asians in the United States in a refugee discourse, then we must remember that this discourse predates the refugees' US arrival. Even before Southeast Asians fled to the United States, there were already hundreds of thousands of internal refugees in Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos, mostly rural and poor people dislodged from their villages, rendered homeless and forced into refugee camps or urban ghettos. This dispossession of the weak would precede the dispossession of the elite, at least for Cambodia and Viet Nam. In the Vietnamese case, for example, it is these native elite, from the political, military, and urban classes, who would compose the first wave of refugees to the United States. For those in the first wave to call themselves refugees is a complicated move that draws from any or all of the following: laying claim on American guilt, acknowledging a fallen and perhaps shameful status, and erasing the memories of earlier refugees. The existence of these earlier refugees points not only to the tragic outcome of an American war policy that mandated the forced relocation of rural people, but also to how South Viet Nam was itself a nation fractured by inequality and injustice. The internal refugee crisis pointed prophetically to the fragility of national belonging and citizenship for the rest of the South Vietnamese. The wartime refugee camps of South Viet Nam illustrate Agamben's claim that the camp is a "state of exception" where the law is suspended by the law, a seemingly exceptional situation that reveals the rule, the permanent state of emergency that Walter Benjamin saw first as characterizing the life of nation-states. For all its brief life, South Viet Nam was never anything but a state of emergency.

States of exception and emergency reveal that state power is ready at any

time to exercise power nakedly. Without rights, the refugee depends on state power to protect her, but while state power holds the refugee's life in its hands, that power has no obligations to the refugee in the way that it owes rights to its citizens. Thus the refugee and the refugee camp make visible what the nation-state masks: what ultimately counts is sovereign power and its monopoly upon violence, to which the citizen has agreed. Agamben seizes upon the refugee and the refugee camp at least partially because he believes in the end of the nation-state and what comes after. The plight of stateless refugees must be worked through in order to end the system of states that has produced them. If the study of Southeast Asians in the United States has any utopian potential, if it is to point toward a future country that is not a nation-state, it cannot rely ultimately or only on the languages of area studies, American studies, or Asian American studies. All of them run up against the borders of race, ethnicity, or the nation-state because of their orientation toward claiming national culture, citizenship, or rights. Only by disavowing the blind spot of citizenship where the refugee lives (or, as the case may be, dies) can these claims be made.

But a discourse about refugees is also double edged. If it critiques nation-states, it must also be unsentimental in critiquing refugee aspirations to national belonging, even when those refugees are far from elite. This is the case with the Hmong, where we can see the invocation of a refugee past and a desire for national inclusion in some of their cultural work, realized most cogently in Kao Kalia Yang's memoir *The Latecomer*. Since the Hmong did not even have a written language until the 1950s, the publication of an English-language monograph by a Hmong author is significant. Yang, born in the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand, begins by tracing the history of her family and their struggle to reach a refugee camp across the border in Thailand. The exodus, by foot, takes four years. Once there, the Yangs are assigned numbers by the United Nations, which requires them to have birthdays. Since these are unknown for some, the Yangs make up dates. "For many of the Hmong," Yang writes, "their lives on paper began on the day the UN registered them as refugees of war."⁴⁴ The United Nations bureaucracy shunts the Yang family from camp to camp until they wind up in Ban Vinai, where "the dominant feature of the camp was the stench of feces. There were toilets, but they were all flooded."⁴⁵ Seven years later, the Yang family is finally sent to the Phanat Nikhom Transition Camp to the

United States. “The building we were assigned smelled like the toilets that I had dreaded back in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp,” Yang recalls. “In fact, it had been used as a bathroom. There was always human waste between the buildings and amid the cement blocks and large rocks throughout the camp.”⁴⁶ The theme of filth resonates throughout other Hmong accounts of life in the camps, which is no surprise, since refugees are themselves waste products of the nation-state. *The Latehomecomer* illustrates Agamben’s claims that refugees are reduced to “bare life” or “naked life,” the raw humanity cloaked within nation-states by the rights of citizenship and the protection of sovereign power.

But while *The Latehomecomer* shows how refugees are both too human (being reduced to the purest need) and not human enough (through their exclusion from nation-states), it also exemplifies the desire for voice common in Asian American, immigrant American, and women’s literature:

For many years, the Hmong inside the little girl fell into silence . . . all the words had been stored inside her. . . . In the books on the American shelves, the young woman noticed how Hmong was not a footnote in the history of the world. . . . The young woman slowly unleashed the flood of Hmong into language, seeking refuge not for a name or a gender, but a people.⁴⁷

But voice and speech are not as transparently good as they may seem, as Spivak shows in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”⁴⁸ The discomfiting answer is no, because the subaltern is, by definition, silent. Those who wish to hear a subaltern speak oftentimes unknowingly substitute this one individual’s voice as representative for an entire subaltern class that remains silenced. This individual’s speech soothes Western audiences, implying that speech is possible for the oppressed masses, when, as a matter of structural oppression, it is not. Rather, “riot is the voice of the unheard.”⁴⁹ To deny that reality, Western audiences generously reward postcolonial writers, since it is easier to deal with a literary representative than the subalterns for whom they speak, deliberately or otherwise.

The Hmong refugee who becomes an American writer is therefore engaged in a perilous endeavor. By learning to write at all, by learning to write in English, by earning degrees, by publishing, Yang and the Hmong American writers in the anthology *Bamboo among the Oaks* are now bound

by a minority discourse that is both created by minorities and that recreates them. They are judged by the standards of both the minority community they come from and by their national audience. Ha Jin describes this dilemma as the tension between “the spokesman and the tribe.”⁵⁰ This tension is magnified and becomes guilt for women of color, says Trinh T. Minh-ha, because they know that other women’s labor makes their writing possible.⁵¹ Guilt also arises from possibly betraying the people of whom one speaks. As Mai Neng Moua, editor of *Bamboo*, says of the Hmong in the United States, “This is a community that is very private . . . and may very well be threatened by the writings of its young people.”⁵²

At the same time, Hmong American writers risk being judged by aesthetic standards that they feel may not be appropriate. As Yang noted with dismay, *USA Today* graded her book with a B+.⁵³ This recalls a line from Chang-Rae Lee’s novel *Native Speaker*, in which the Korean American narrator, constantly anxious over his American status, is judged by his white wife to be a “B+ student of life.”⁵⁴ The novel’s meticulous use of lyrical, unassailable English indicates that a critical B+ is not what Lee is after. Likewise, in Nam Le’s lauded debut collection, *The Boat*, the metafictional kickoff story features a writer named Nam at the University of Iowa MFA program—where Le went to school almost forty years after U Sam Oeur—who does not want to write the “ethnic” story but ends up doing so anyway, betraying a horrible family secret in the process.⁵⁵ Ironically, this story brought national attention to Le, a Vietnamese refugee who came to Iowa via Australia. The trajectory of Hmong American literature in English is likely to follow the one outlined in the stories and careers of Jin, Lee, and Le, who all exhibit unease with the label of ethnic writer and aspire simply to be writers.⁵⁶ This is the inescapable problem for a writer in a society marked by racial difference. But the so-called ethnic writer is not much different from the minority scholar. The minority writer is simply more naked and vulnerable about her or his aspirations. Both the ethnic writer and minority scholar are marked inevitably by the difference from the norm that authorizes them to speak and yet disciplines them into manageable categories. As for the refugee who speaks in a language that her adopted national audience can hear, her dilemma is that she has ceased being a refugee even as she speaks in the refugee’s name.

Toward Un-American Cultures

The existence of multiple kinds of mobile populations in transnational times—immigrants, flexible citizens, exiles, refugees—means that there are also multiple times occurring at the same moment. A refugee discourse allows us to see that writing in English is not the only way by which the Hmong produce culture or aesthetics. Even Hmong American writing in English does not have to be categorized as Hmong American, Southeast Asian American, Asian American, or American literature, all of which return us to nation, difference, and identity; instead, we could categorize it as refugee literature, allowing a different set of connections across time and space that point somewhere else besides assimilation into the nation and to affiliations with other people besides US citizens. For refugees, the imagination of past, present, and future countries can occur simultaneously, in refusal of the progressive notion of time that belongs to the nation, marching relentlessly from past to future. A refugee discourse can be produced from the experiences of refugees while also producing objects of knowledge called “refugees”; a refugee discourse can also be the framework by which we read such experiences and the times and spaces that produce such experiences. Thus this discourse can be used to read second-generation Hmong Americans who write in English because they must do so in order to be heard in the United States as the descendants of refugees. But this discourse can also attend to the existence of other Hmong cultural practices that signify from other times beside the American one.

One example of refugee discourse, both as mode of telling and mode of reading, can be found in the hybrid genre of the story cloth and its reception. The story cloth tells a narrative by using traditional Hmong practices of *paj ntaub* (intricate needlework stitched onto textiles meant to be worn). For Moua, story cloths “do not represent the artistic soul of the Hmong . . . the identity of a people is reduced to an object that is easily recognized, acceptable, simple, and ancient,” especially to outsiders.⁵⁷ But Yang describes story cloth differently, as

a lost story, a narrative sewn but no longer legible. The Hmong in Laos had fled from China. . . . The Hmong language had been outlawed. The written language was hidden in flowers. It was a women’s rebellion; they devised a plan to hide their stories . . . in the child-carrying clothes that

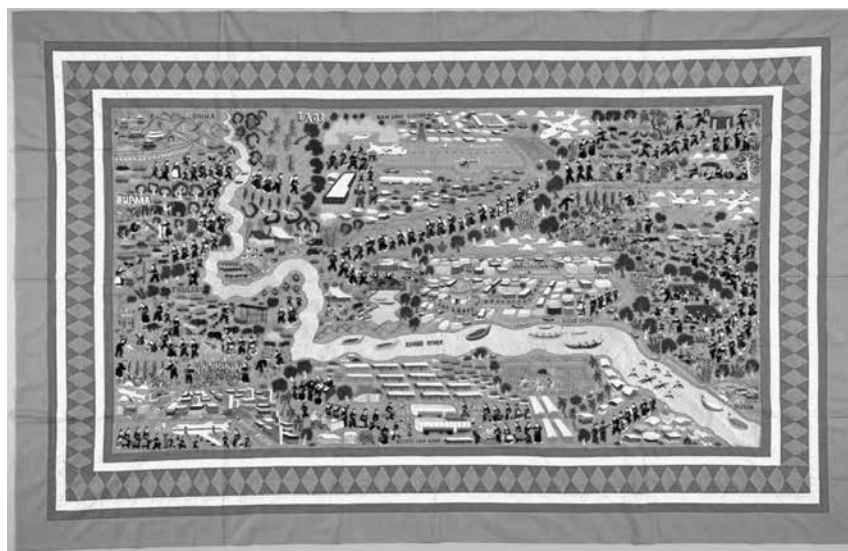


Figure 2 Chue and Nhia Thao Cha's story cloth. All rights reserved. Bailey Archive, Denver Museum of Nature and Science

bound their children to themselves . . . in the passage of time the written language would become lost in the beautiful shapes and colors, no longer legible in words, holding on to meaning.⁵⁸

Hmong story cloth is a profane form, as refugee forms must always be, contaminated by forced wandering. As Dwight Conquergood, the most insightful critic of this form, says, the most memorable types of story cloth are the escape narratives that are also “visual laments” about the plight of the Hmong people.⁵⁹ But in the refugee camp and in the United States, the story cloth also becomes a commodity with the advantage of “authenticity” in the eyes of American consumers, with the disadvantage of being “primitive” and marked as a women’s practice. Even in a sympathetic presentation, as in the book *Dia’s Story Cloth*, the story cloth stitched by Dia Cha’s aunt and uncle, Chue and Nhia Thao Cha, is framed by their niece’s English narrative and marketed as a children’s book (see fig. 2).⁶⁰

Even so, the story cloth is literally at the book’s center, its narrative still visible. It achieves the “deep time” across national borders and centuries

that Dimock argues should be the chronology and geography of an un-American literature. Created in a refugee camp on a double-bed-sized piece of commercial cloth, the story cloth is an epic history of the Hmong people, from their origins in China; to their settlement in the mountains of Burma, Thailand, and Laos; to their refugee odyssey on foot and across the Mekong River; to their life in Thai refugee camps and their embarkation onto an airplane bound for the West (see fig. 3). “The Hmong did not wait for Western historians to document their tragedy,” says Conquergood,⁶¹ and while the map’s place names in English indicate that it is addressed to foreign eyes, this does not mean that it isn’t also addressed to the Hmong. The story cloth speaks to multiple communities, including second-generation Hmong in the diaspora who might need reminders of their people’s history.

But seeing only a children’s book, a Western audience can turn a blind eye to an aesthetic form it does not understand, dismissing it as infantile while not acknowledging its challenge to Western knowledge and aesthetics. For this story cloth appropriates the map, the cartographic tool used in colonization and aerial bombardment. Western maps are usually empty of people, while Western accounts of new lands often describe them as wildernesses, the people already there not existing under Western eyes. The Chas’ story cloth insists on putting Hmong people on the map, their country scattered across many nations.

Furthermore, the story cloth’s simultaneous rendering of all the many historical journeys of the Hmong means that the story cloth not only remaps space but also reorients time. As Jeannie Chiu says, “Because the story cloth lays out historical migrations on one large panel of cloth, narrative is organized spatially and visually. Rather than unfolding history in a traditional linear narrative, the spatial juxtaposition of events . . . creates a sense of the mythical and cyclical.”⁶² The story cloth’s aerial view insists that the past exists at the same time as the present. The story cloth suggests that its creators already possess elements of the cognitive map that Fredric Jameson says is necessary to confront postmodernism’s diffuse and overwhelming present.⁶³ The Hmong, constituted by migration and unsettlement, already have a sense of postmodern displacement before they arrive in the West, just as African slaves experienced the Enlightenment’s dark side long before they saw modernity’s light. But like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, the



Figure 3 Detail, Chue and Nhia Thao Cha's story cloth. All rights reserved. Bailey Archive, Denver Museum of Nature and Science

Chas can only look backwards, ending with the Hmong beginning their “lives on paper” in the lower left-hand corner, taking oaths, signing documents, marching to the orders of a white man on a bullhorn, and flying into an unknowable Western future. Ironically, the Chas themselves never made this journey, although their artwork did. *Dia's Story Cloth* laconically notes that Chue and Nhia Thao Cha returned to Laos.

What I see with my inexpert gaze upon this un-American story cloth is a refugee aesthetic that offers a profane alternative to Hmong American writing in English. The story cloth is coauthored, and collaboration is a devalued practice in literary cultures based upon the mystique of the individual auteur. That mystique is born from a long tradition of romantic, bourgeois, and modernist notions of art, in which the artist's craft is separate from the rest of society, transforming art into icon and commodity. The story cloth gestures toward a different time of art, one in which art is not an isolated activity in society's division of labor but instead exists as an everyday practice with an everyday function. In the West, this kind of art is coded pejoratively as “craft,” something regional, marginal, from the folk, and very often from women. While craft is not immune from capitalism—nothing is—the Hmong story cloth at least carries with it the reminder that art is not always a practice alienated from society. The story cloth acknowledges the Western gaze but also insists upon its own aesthetics and its own time, one wherein everyday people create art. Far from being the time of children, the primitive, the native, or the refugee, this time also belongs to another country, a future country, an un-American country where, if people were truly emancipated, art would belong to the people rather than to an elite.

A discourse of refugees like the one found in this story cloth is oriented both outside the nation and toward a future after the state. Oriented this way, a discourse of refugees reminds Southeast Asian studies, American studies, Asian American studies, and Southeast Asian American studies of the limits of their fields. While each of these is necessary for the study of Southeast Asians in the United States, each one is premised upon the rights of citizens, who are haunted by the possibility of their loss via the states of exception and emergency that are routine for refugees. This possibility is real for Southeast Asian American communities that have grown from

refugee roots in a country not our own, brought here by a war sometimes imposed upon us, sometimes fought for by us. But in arguing for the study of Southeast Asian Americans, we are also arguing that the United States is our own country. This is a complicated claim. It means that we wish to sit at America's multicultural banquet and savor the citizenship and equality promised to all. It also means that we must partake of strange fruit: the responsibilities of being a US citizen in an age when the United States willingly wields the power to wage war and create refugees, acts that should make us wonder if this is, indeed, our America.

Notes

This essay benefited from comments by Michelle Clayton, Judith Coffin, Mariam B. Lam, Lê Huy Lộc, Fiona Ngo, Mimi Nguyen, Min Song, and Koen Vermeir. Thanks to Chih-Ming Wang for inviting me to present this essay at the Institute of European and American Studies of the Academia Sinica in Taipei. All errors are my own.

1. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 24.
2. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001): xv.
3. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard, eds., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 2001). I treat King's speech in more detail in "Remembering War, Dreaming Peace: On Cosmopolitanism, Compassion, and Literature," *Japanese Journal of American Studies* no. 20 (2009).
4. The idea of Southeast Asian migration as an "odyssey" comes from Lan Duong's unpublished work on Southeast Asian American autobiography.
5. Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America, Asian American History and Culture Series* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 66.
6. *Ibid.*, 40.
7. The Lacanian language here indicates the difference between the geopolitical United States and the utopian mythology of "America," as "phantasmatic" as the orientalist fantasy of old French Indochina, discussed in Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
8. My discussion of Southeast Asian studies in this section draws from the essays in Cynthia Chou and V. J. H. Houben, eds., *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the International Institute for Asian Studies, 2006); Ronald A. Morse, ed., *Southeast Asian Studies: Options for the Future* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America and Asia Program Wilson Center, 1984); Laurie J. Sears, ed.,

- Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects* (Seattle: University of Washington Press in association with NUS Press Singapore, 2007); and David L. Szanton, *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
9. See the essays in Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian, eds., *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
 10. Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
 11. Ernst Bloch, *Principle of Hope* (Boston: MIT Press, 1986), 290.
 12. David L. Szanton, "Introduction: The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David L. Szanton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 27.
 13. A conversation with Oscar Campomanes helped me clarify this distinction between nation-based diaspora studies and a more regional or collective Southeast Asian diaspora studies. For a ground-breaking work on advancing the notion of "Asian diasporas," see Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Lok C. D. Siu, *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).
 14. U Sam Oeur, *Crossing Three Wildernesses: A Memoir*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2005), 114.
 15. *Ibid.*, 261.
 16. *Ibid.*, 356.
 17. *Ibid.*, 171.
 18. John Carlos Rowe, *The New American Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
 19. Calls for American studies to internationalize have taken place since the 1970s, but they have increased significantly since 9/11. Several presidents of the American Studies Association in the last decade have also made the internationalization of the field a theme of their keynote addresses to the association.
 20. Wai-chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
 21. Werner Sollors, *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
 22. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, "Không khóc ở California" ("Don't Cry in California"), in *Tuyển tập truyện ngắn Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (The Short Stories of Nguyen Huy Thiep)* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Phụ Nữ, 2002).
 23. *Ibid.*, 602, italics in original. All translations from the text are mine.
 24. *Ibid.*, 586–87.
 25. *Ibid.*, 599 and 600, italics in original.
 26. Freud's notion of melancholia as an unending grief (versus the terminal act of mourning)

- has received a great deal of treatment in postcolonial, ethnic, and cultural studies; see Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*; and Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film and Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
27. Nguyễn, “Không khóc Ở California,” 597.
 28. *Ibid.*, 601.
 29. *Ibid.*, 602.
 30. Arif Dirlik, “Asians on the Rim: Transnational Capital and Local Community in the Making of Contemporary Asian America,” in *Across the Pacific: Asian Americans and Globalization*, ed. Evelyn Hu-DeHart (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 46.
 31. Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of the Asian American Movement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xi.
 32. Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, xiv.
 33. *Ibid.*, xiv.
 34. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
 35. *Ibid.*, 156.
 36. *Ibid.*, 172.
 37. Sam Oeur, *Crossing Three Wildernesses*, 366 and 367.
 38. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.
 39. *Ibid.*, 124.
 40. Robyn Wiegman, “Difference and Disciplinarity,” in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
 41. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
 42. Yen Le Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in U.S. Scholarship,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (2006).
 43. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 16.
 44. Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2008), 46.
 45. *Ibid.*, 46.
 46. *Ibid.*, 93.
 47. *Ibid.*, 4.
 48. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

49. Representative Maxine Waters, speaking of the Los Angeles riots, quoted in Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight—Los Angeles, 1992 on the Road: A Search for American Character* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).
50. Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.
51. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 7.
52. Mai Neng Moua, *Bamboo among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 10.
53. Artist's talk at the "Southeast Asians in the Diaspora" Conference, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, April 16, 2008.
54. Chang-Rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995).
55. Nam Le, *The Boat* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).
56. Such aspirations tend to raise the hackles of cultural critics. The discussion over minorities and aesthetics is too complicated to deal with here. I will simply point to Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne's excellent collection, *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), which calls for a critically conscious return to aesthetics, especially as many minority artists refuse to abandon aesthetics in the same way minority critics tend to have done.
57. Moua, *Bamboo among the Oaks*, 7.
58. Yang, *Latehomecomer*, 17.
59. Dwight Conquergood, "Fabricating Culture: The Textile Art of Hmong Refugee Women," in *Performance, Culture, and Identity*, eds. Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer (Westport: Praeger, 1992): 207–48.
60. Dia Cha, *Dia's Story Cloth* (Denver, CO: Denver Museum of Natural History, 1996).
61. Conquergood, "Fabricating Culture," 233.
62. Jeannie Chiu, "'I salute the spirit of my communities': Autoethnographic Innovations in Hmong American Literature," *College Literature* 31, no. 3 (2004): 43–69.
63. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).