

Review

Schlund-Vials, Cathy J. *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 243 pp. \$22.50 paper.

Centering on the period between 1975-1979 when over 1.7 million Cambodians perished under the rule of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials's *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* examines the commemorative practices of Cambodian American cultural producers attempting to rearticulate history and reinforce Cambodian American selfhood outside of their country of origin through film, literature, and music. Schlund-Vials engages James Young's concept of "memory work" to argue that Cambodian American artists and writers open transnational sites of commemoration that erase the state-sanctioned forgetting that continues to obscure the Khmer Rouge era, while generating creative methodologies for genocidal justice. In this important area of Asian American criticism, *War, Genocide, and Justice* carefully navigates the untenable ground between history and memory by rigorously historicizing and analyzing current/past modes of collective remembrance and artistic modes of resistance through this historical, theoretical, and juridical scholarship that falls in line with the revisionary and "justice-oriented" texts it studies (25).

In exploring the complicated and highly politicized landscape of genocidal history and memory, Schlund-Vials notes that Cambodian American cultural producers "reimagine" the Killing Fields era (as the period is known to outsiders) and "Pol Pot time" (as it is known to those within Cambodia) from a transnational standpoint that negotiates the incapacities of "exceptionalist national narratives of reconciliation" both in a post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia and a present-day United States (4). Therefore, the book begins with an introduction that comprehensively examines the "transnational set of amnesiac politics revealed through hegemonic modes of public policy and memory" that traverses both Cambodian and United States memory politics (13). The introduction's title, "Battling the 'Cambodian Syndrome,'" repurposes Ronald Reagan's phrase "the Vietnam Syndrome" to call attention to the selective and strategic U.S. remembrances of the Cambodian genocide, which complicate and obscure historical facts for political, militaristic, and humanitarian ends. Underwritten by past cold war foreign policies, the complicated relationship between the United States and Cambodia is invariably forgotten in these tactical remembrances that are used to promote nation-building in both countries through a bilateral sense of shared grief and victory over genocide. In accordance with the cultural productions it analyzes, *War, Genocide, and Justice* pushes against these ommissive forms of remembrance by shedding light on the always already political agenda behind such convenient references to the past and suspect forms of humanitarianism. Furthermore, Schlund-Vials critiques the UN/Cambodian War Crimes Tribunal and its attempt to restore justice and international relations through *national* reconciliation that establishes "historical facts" but thus forgets the *individual* who might bespeak something closer to "historical truth" (16). Schlund-Vials notes directly that, "[t]hese historical negotiations—between facts and truth, betwixt events and experiences—are at the forefront of *War, Genocide, and*

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Justice” (16). Indeed, it is through rich interdisciplinary critique that the text uncovers the commemorative aims of 1.5 generation Cambodian American cultural producers who wish to give voice to the individuals of the Khmer Rouge era who were silenced and continue to be forgotten. Schlund-Vials begins her critique, however, with Cambodian modes of in-country remembrance.

Moving on from an introductory historical and political contextualization, chapter one, “Atrocity Tourism: Politicized Remembrance and Reparative Memorialization” analyzes more concrete forms of Cambodian genocide remembrance, by way of constructed memorials. Schlund-Vials notes that Cambodia’s Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (that functioned as a prison where fewer than twenty of the twelve to fourteen thousand prisoners survived) and the Choeung Ek Center for Genocide Crimes (which is the site at which over a hundred mass graves were found, and from which the phrase “Killing Fields” is drawn) function as problematic memorial sites. Through a close reading of these repurposed places of torture and death, Schlund-Vials defines such politicized sites of remembrance incapable of properly contributing to contemplative commemoration and reparative remembrance on account of their promulgating Vietnamese liberation narratives, privileging “perpetrator over victim and criminality over reparation” (52), and engaging in a type of “morbid venture capitalism” through the profit-driven focus of atrocity tourism (62). Chapter one outlines this “in-country crisis of memory” and further buttresses the necessity for transnational modes of remembering that work to rearticulate negligent narratives both within and outside of Cambodia (66).

Chapters two through four comprise the interdisciplinary critiques of Cambodian American memoir artists attempting to reimagine a forgotten past through documentary film, literature, and hip-hop music, respectively. Throughout, Schlund-Vials draws on important theorists including James Young, Marianne Hirsch, Freud and others whose theories undergird the memory work *at work* in these cultural productions. Beginning with the cinema, chapter two puts Socheata Poouv’s autobiographical documentary *New Year Baby* in dialogue with Roland Joffé’s Academy Award-winning film *The Killing Fields*. In doing so, Schlund-Vials attempts to counteract the “cold war apologetics” at play in Joffé’s American-centered film that position an “expression for remorse and an excuse for problematic action” through an apolitical story of resolution between an American and a Cambodian man (77). Poouv’s film renders palpable the shortcomings of apologies through a narrative that centers on Cambodian refugees in search of closure from their traumatic past. Schlund-Vials puts forth that *New Year Baby* ends with a “markedly different path toward reconciliation,” one that focuses on the individual refugee who must simultaneously attend to larger transnational conflicts while traversing the sometimes more difficult-to-settle familial and intergenerational struggles. Chapters three and four explore further these frameworks that condition past and present modes of selfhood in the literary memoirs, *First They Killed My Father* by Loung Ung and *When Broken Glass Floats* by Chanrithy Him, and the hip-hop music of rapper Prach Ly. For each refugee-oriented narrative that *War, Genocide, and Justice* considers, Schlund-Vials pays particular attention to the juridical registers of these works that rely on survivor voices to re-testify those silenced in the past, while opening spaces for justice, reclamation, and reparation for Cambodian Americans in the present.

Critically rigorous until the end, *War, Genocide, and Justice* situates Cambodian American cultural productions as a multivalent archive of survivor testimony that “indefatigably militates” against the many mechanisms of forgetting through which the

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Cambodian genocide has been positioned. It is through the memory work of Cambodian American artists that Schlund-Vials points to the importance of this “critical mode of cultural labor that brings into dialogue genocide remembrance, collected memory, and juridical activism” (182). In shedding light on the significance of Cambodian American memory work, Schlund-Vials affirms Cambodian American literature, film, and cultural criticism as a crucial area of Asian American Studies.

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