

Review

Pelaud, Isabelle Thuy. *This is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010.
Paper: 216 pp.

In *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to The Writings and Their Social Context* (1982), Elaine Kim writes, "What I have attempted in this book is to trace the topography and rich textures of the Asian American experience as it is expressed in Asian American literature from the late nineteenth century to the present day" (xi). Traversing more than a century, suggestive of multiple geographies, and rooted in diverse cartographies, Kim's "topographic" analyses – fixed to the "rich textures of the Asian American experience" – maps the contested social contours of Asian American literary production. If at stake in Kim's foundational study is a relational contemplation of how literature and experience are linked, then Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's *This is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* provides an analogously innovative introduction to Vietnamese/American writers. An incontrovertible first with regard to topic, Pelaud's book skillfully navigates a heretofore under-examined Vietnamese/American literary archive. In so doing, *This is All I Choose to Tell* – replete with histories of war, acts of remembrance, and experiences of relocation – is an undeniably useful "starting point" for Vietnamese American literary studies. Shaped by shifting aesthetics, changing politics, and at times still-forming selfhood, *This is All I Choose to Tell* is an important work within American literary studies.

Like Kim, Pelaud commences with a topographic reading of Vietnamese American literature. Accordingly, Pelaud maintains that *This is All I Choose to Tell* "offers an analytical introduction to Vietnamese American literature, and delineates the historical, social, and cultural terrains from which the writings emerge and critics read and interpret them." Pelaud's text further contextualizes such production through an overarching theme of hybridity manifest in "the debates, themes, and issues that surround the production of [Vietnamese American] literature" (1). As significant, *This is All I Choose to Tell* is marked by a pedagogical impulse evident in its emphases on literary genealogies, the inclusion of biblio-biographical source material, and its efficacious treatment of the American War in Viet Nam and its collateral aftermaths. Pelaud's book begins and ends with a necessarily complex characterization of Vietnamese American literature, which repeatedly underscores the extent to which such "new identities...cannot be fixed in time" (1). Spanning half a century, from the Cold War to the "War on Terror," *This is All I Choose to Tell* is a timely work that charts new and exciting cartographies in Asian American cultural production and literary criticism.

Composed of six body chapters, *This is All I Choose to Tell* is divided into two parts that each contain three sections ("History," "Overview," "Hybridity," "Survival," "Hope and Despair," and "Reception" respectively). Titled "Inclusion," Part One opens with a productive reading of George W. Bush's 2007 speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention, wherein the forty-third president "re-members" the Vietnam War by way of refugee loss in order to justify further occupation in Iraq. Such amnesic frames

Cathy J. Schlund-Vials is an Associate Professor of English and Asian American Studies at the University of Connecticut.

foreground an expansive recuperative project, which necessarily encapsulates the social and historical contexts that undergird the present-day Vietnamese / American experience: the Vietnam War, the so-named “Fall of Sai Gon,” migration, and resettlement. Relocating sites of war memory from U.S. soldier to Vietnamese refugee, the book shifts from history to cultural production in the “Overview” section, which is characterized by a historicized reading of homeland politics, nostalgic yearnings, stories of return, and contemplations of identity via three distinct temporalities: 1975, 1979-1984, and the 1990s- the present. From exilic author Nguyen Ba Trac to refugee writer Le Ly Hayslip, from Vietnamese American anthologies (e.g. 1995’s *Once Upon a Dream*) to more recent novels (i.e. Bich Minh Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*), Chapter Two identifies and evaluates the critical texts that comprise an emergent Vietnamese / American literary canon.

Chapter Three, concentrated on transnational theories of hybridity, prefigures the central frame that structures *This is All I Choose to Tell*. According to Pelaud, hybridity is “useful because it incorporates all Asian American identities regardless of politics and takes in account power relations between nations and between the state and its citizens” (50). Reminiscent of Lisa Lowe’s well-known articulation of the field and redolent of fluidity, fusion, and statecraft, hybridity serves as an apt frame through which to consider the social, cultural, and political registers of the Vietnamese American experience, inclusive of mixed and unfixed identities. This theoretical focus – inclusive of postcolonial and ethnic studies -- presages the literary arguments that take center stage in “Part Two: Interpretation.” The sections that follow – “Survival” (Chapter Four), “Hope and Despair” (Chapter Five), and “Reception” (Chapter Six) – evocatively bring to light the politics of Vietnamese / American literary formation, embedded in a set of contradictions found in stories of resistance, tales of accommodation, narratives of disillusionment, and present-day practices of exclusion.

In drawing to a close, *This is All I Choose to Tell* provocatively ends with the following authorial declaration:

The main goal [of the book] is to introduce, despite challenges, the large scope, diversity, and complexity of Vietnamese literature, to facilitate teaching, and contribute to the inclusion of Vietnamese Americans in Asian American studies and in American society in general. (135)

To be sure, Pelaud certainly fulfills the introductory promise partially at work in *This is All I Choose to Tell*, which repeatedly reminds its reader that, notwithstanding more than three decades after Elaine Kim’s ground-breaking work and almost fifteen years after Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*, Asian American literature remains a transnationally “rich” site. Equally illuminating, Pelaud’s pedagogical insistence, coupled with her commitment to inclusion, potently calls forth the founding principles of Asian American Studies, a field inflected by community engagement, social formation, and activist critique.

Works Cited

- Kim, Elaine. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to The Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 1982.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996.

--- Cathy J. Schlund-Vials
University of Connecticut