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# Shattered selves and border witnessing: globalising trauma studies in Cambodian survivor narratives

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## ABSTRACT

Calls to decolonise trauma studies have drawn attention to the need to extend our reading of testimonial narrative beyond the West; to the significance of Cathy Caruth's observation that 'trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures'; and to the importance of generating new critical paradigms that speak to testimonial narratives from the Global South. An analysis of narratives that bear witness to surviving the Cambodian genocide allows for an engagement with a critically-marginalised form of extreme aesthetics and extends our understanding of diasporic border witnessing on and across the threshold of life and death. My evaluation of the witness subject in transnational texts by Loung Ung, Madeleine Thien and Vaddey Ratner reveals the role of borders in the poetics of bearing witness, the significance and value of Khmer readings of grief, loss and suffering, and shows how a culture-specific reading of personhood speaks to both poststructuralist readings and postsecular scriptings of the self. Further, it shows how their soteriological readings of the 'shattered' self work to foreground shared precarity and the interhuman, providing a metaphysical rationale for a re-evaluation of the inscription of bare life in ways that create a space for globalising trauma studies.

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Calls to decolonise trauma studies have drawn attention to the need to extend our reading of testimonial narrative beyond the West; to the significance of Cathy Caruth's observation that 'trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures'; and to the importance of generating new critical paradigms that speak to testimonial narratives from the Global South.<sup>1</sup> Such calls pave the way for studies of survivor narratives that address the complex role of mediation across cultures and for the development of new theoretical frames in the analysis of trauma and testimony. The vast archive of Cambodian survivor narratives, published within the country and abroad after the Khmer Rouge genocide, explores a form of border witnessing that extends

our critical understanding of the mediation of trauma in testimonial narratives in ways that support both a decolonising and globalising drive. Written largely in English for a western-based audience, and covering a spectrum of genres that include autobiography, fictionalised memoir and novels by witness survivors as well as fiction-writers who bear witness to the genocide, the texts form a corpus of diasporised testimonies that deploy registers of travelling witness across the borders of life and death, across cultures, and between the boundaries of identities and selves.<sup>2</sup> As survivor narratives they also centralise what Krämer and Weigel describe as existential or 'embodied truth' (original emphasis).<sup>3</sup>

These registers of travelling witness combine concepts found in western-based trauma studies (themselves largely based on post-Enlightenment concepts of the autonomous subject and the finite life) with concepts that are specific to Khmer phenomenology, cosmology, cultural practice and religious beliefs that draw on radically different notions of self, suffering and death. An evaluation of Cambodian survivor narratives – a broad term that covers narratives on the Cambodian genocide that bear witness to its survival in ways that allow for a critical analysis of writing trauma – thus allows for an engagement with a critically-marginalised form of extreme aesthetics and extends our understanding of diasporic border witnessing on and across the threshold of life and death. As will be seen, the narratives' mobilisation of ontological borders presents us with a spectral register of haunting and layered witnessing that unsettles putative claims to authority and fixity, bringing to crisis testimony's role as a mediator of historically verifiable facts. An evaluation of the witness subject in these multi-sited survivor narratives draws attention to the role of borders in the poetics of bearing witness, the significance and value of Khmer readings of grief, loss and suffering, and the contentious role of the fictive and 'imaginal performance' in testimony.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, it also shows how a culture-specific reading of personhood speaks to both poststructuralist readings and postsecular scriptings of the self in ways that invite a radical reassessment of western critical paradigms on bare life and precarity, compelling a re-evaluation of what we may mean by trauma itself.

The narratives of Loung Ung, Madeleine Thien and Vaddey Ratner cover a spectrum of witnessing positions and literary forms that include autobiography, fiction and fictionalised memoir. They draw upon a range of fictive registers and fractured realisms that fit the dominant critical paradigms of 'traumatic', 'figural', 'psychotic' and magical realism.<sup>5</sup> Yet these writers use such fractured realisms to explore and configure concepts that allow for the re-evaluation of the witness subject and the distinction between self and not-self on which such realisms depend.<sup>6</sup> They deploy concepts such as *pralung* (the vital spirit that animates the human body and that forms part of a concentric, layered personhood whose 'shattering' marks

trauma),<sup>7</sup> the doctrine of *anatta* or ‘non-self’, and the Buddhist belief in rebirth (that marks life as borderless, with the single life conceived as part of a larger continuum of many lives) in ways that unsettle the notion of the autonomous, discrete, spatially bound and historically contingent witnessing subject. Their transnational mediation of refugee experience also provides the groundwork for a re-evaluation of border witnessing in relation to cultural dislocation, re-configuring testimony’s drive ‘to come out of the other side – of death, of life, of *the limits of belonging*’ (my italics).<sup>8</sup>

The full implications of these investments can perhaps best be understood if we consider *anatta* (or *anatman*), the Buddhist doctrine of ‘no soul’ or ‘non-self’, which argues that ‘whereas a conventional self – empirical, subject to conditional phenomena, and responsible in the causal-moral sense exists, no ultimate metaphysical Self can be apprehended’.<sup>9</sup> If life is conceived as part of a larger continuum of many lives and ‘no ultimate metaphysical Self can be apprehended’, Cambodian survivor narratives that are underpinned by such concepts provide not only a metaphysical rationale for a re-evaluation of the inscription of bare life, suffering and survival but also an alternative epistemological grounding for exploring concepts of interrelationality and intersubjectivity that inform the metaphysical theories of Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero. They unsettle Giorgio Agamben’s formulation of the ‘threshold’ of political order where shared precarity is exposed, Shoshana Felman’s concept of the ‘witness-traveler’, Levinas’ construction of the ‘interhuman’ and Cavarero’s contention that the self constitutes itself through memory, demarcating a site of critical tension indexed by intersecting cultural paradigms.<sup>10</sup> What follows is an introduction to some modes of border witnessing to be found in Cambodian survivor narratives that together create new horizons for reading the witnessing subject. As will be seen, they all draw attention to a model of selfhood and subjectivity based on Khmer scriptings of personhood that open up a space for ethical spectatorship and the globalising of trauma studies. Core to their configuration of the witness subject is the concept of concentric, layered personhood whose ‘self- shattering’ gives way to traumatic experience.<sup>11</sup>

### **Loung Ung: Doubling and the spectral self**

Loung Ung’s autobiographies,<sup>12</sup> *First They Killed My Father* (2000) and *Lucky Child* (2005), offer insights into the writing of testimonies that require the dramatisation of events the author did not witness.<sup>13</sup> The former recounts the child survivor’s experience of genocide and the decimation of her family, including the loss of her parents and younger sister who died in her absence, and the latter recounts her experience as a child refugee growing up in the United States and that of her older sister, Chou,

in Cambodia, from whom she was separated for fifteen years. The autobiographies address the limitations of her witnessing and fill in the epistemological gaps in her knowledge of the past by presenting us with imaginary reconstructions of the deaths of family members, and an imaginative reconstruction of Chou's life during the period of separation, which is based on conversations with her sister after their reunion. Both texts thus use imaginal play to work towards a form of narrative closure that might heal the trauma of unknowing, offering an explicitly aesthetic resolution that works to seal the unfinished nature of traumatic experience.

Ung's engagement with marking the unseen and the unknown in her narrative – what might be called the 'blind spots' in narrative witnessing – are clearly marked in her texts. In *First They Killed My Father* Ung marks the borders between direct witnessing and imagined witnessing by using italicised passages, and in *Lucky Child* she alternates her story with that of her sister, switching from first to third person while creating temporal unity through the sustained use of the present tense and parallel time frames. Both autobiographies thus textually mark out the borders between the real and the imagined past, the first through typography and the second structurally and through a shift in narrative perspective.

Yet Ung also works to mediate the borders between real and imagined worlds by presenting the primary witnessing subject – the autobiographical self – as a medium for travelling across the boundaries of the known and the unknown. In *First They Killed My Father* this takes the form of affectively linking the real and the imagined past through presenting the latter as visionary products of the imagining self. Here, the autobiographical subject is divided between the witnessing child-survivor, who bears witness to her own experience, and the adult narrator who bears witness through imaginative reconstruction to what the child-survivor cannot. All of the italicised sections draw heavily on affectively linking real and imagined worlds.

In the narration of her sister Keav's slow starvation, for example, the narrator draws upon a remembered sense of timelessness and physical exhaustion to invoke her sister's imagined suffering in ways that resonate with and magnify her own. The shift from the real to the imagined builds on a sense of shared suffering that magnifies the slow *durée* of starvation:

we have no instruments to tell us the time [...] the wait feels like forever. [...] Each step I take, the earth beneath seems to shift, throw me off balance. Each breath I take, the air rushes quickly down my throat, choking me. In my mind, I envisage Keav at her camp.

*Keav wakes one day to notice that her stomach is bloated and rumbling, making sounds as though something was swishing around inside. She ignores it, believing it is merely hunger pains. She takes a deep breath [...] Always there are the hunger pains. Sometimes the hunger pains hurt so much that they spread to every part of the body.* (118)

The passage opens a channel for psychic connection that blurs distinctions between the sisters – a form of ‘heteropathic identification’ that ‘externally projects the self onto the other’<sup>14</sup> – so that the stress falls on the experience of shared suffering at the threshold between life and death:

*In my mind’s eye, I see Keav breathing deeply and trying to fill the void in her heart. Her lungs expand and take in more air as she chases our images away. This loneliness. How is she to survive this loneliness? [...] She misses Ma’s arms around her, stroking her hair. (118)*

Ung’s imaginative reclamation of her sister’s suffering draws upon a series of corporeal connections – breath and breathlessness – to link her with her lost sister in an imagined space of communion. While this imagined connection may, arguably, mark an ethically compromised space of vicarious witnessing, it also marks communion at the very moment when her sister might have most need of it, enacting a kind of psychic healing – fleeting but no less powerful – that brings into being *the possibility of care*. The calculated elision between real and imagined worlds, marked by the narrator’s claim that she has ‘envisaged’ the scene and seen it in her ‘mind’s eye’, also enacts a form of ‘empathic unsettlement’ which offers both connection and critical distance from the event.<sup>15</sup> It reveals how the narrative marking of bare life and ‘degrees of extinction’<sup>16</sup> results in a rupture of the witnessing subject whereby the narrator is split and doubled in the act of bearing witness to events that happened out of her sight. The rupture takes her over the threshold, communicating what happens ‘inside’ to the ‘outside’ of a limit condition. The divided subject gains wholeness as an alter-native testifying subject who speaks from a site of temporal and spatial displacement that replicates Ung’s own exilic status, testifying to Agamben’s claim that ‘the life of the exile [...] borders on the life of *homo sacer*’, one who may be killed with impunity.<sup>17</sup>

In another imagined scene, the doubled witness materialises as a spectral presence that flies above the land, travels across it and connects with her father at the moment of his execution in a bid to grant her father a reprieve: ‘my spirit leaves my body and flies around the country, looking for Pa’ (131). The panoptical gaze of the travelling spirit – its feverish flight and search – marks the anguish of unfinished trauma, part of a traumatic sublime that Fisher has characterised as an ‘aestheticization of fear’.<sup>18</sup> It is a form of counter-factual thinking that resists the reality of her father’s death by offering a moment of connection just prior to it (a word in her father’s ear has her begging for forgiveness for her own survival) that serves to mark both healing and harm. This imagined version of events marks the impact of trauma on bearing witness, rendering witnessing an act that requires a necessary blindness to the full truth of a crime: ‘*My eyes dare not blink as*

*the soldier raises the hammer above his head. "Pa," I whisper, "I have to let you go now. I cannot be here and live."* (original italics, 132).

The mediation between real and imagined worlds is made possible through a spectral revisioning of the human subject that draws upon the notion of life as a continuum in which the single life is but a part. It is not only central to the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth and *anatta* that renders the self borderless but also to the Khmer concept of concentric, layered personhood, vulnerable to disturbance and 'self-shattering' when put under strain.<sup>19</sup> Such spectrality gains material presence in Ung's second autobiography, *Lucky Child*, in the form of the ghost girl who serves as the narrator's troubled Other, occupying a phantom realm between her country of residence, the United States, and the world of an unforgotten Cambodian past. When the narrator finds that the bedroom in her host country overlooks a cemetery, the stage is set for the construction of a third space of unbelonging, made up of dreams, hallucinations and nightmares in which the ghost girl resides.

Ung provides a strong metaphysical grounding for this figure by first revealing the uncanny materiality of the body of the child survivor and refugee. Without photographs to tether her memories to the family she lost, and without the ability to speak about her loss to her brother and sister-in-law who are drawn into their own silence on the past, the narrator's body becomes a living tomb, a vessel that memorialises family members lost: 'When I look in the mirror, I don't see the girl they see. Instead, my hands pinch and pull at my features to bring forth Ma's nose, Pa's eyes, Keav's smile, and Chou's lips' (22). Her body becomes a dead weight that marks her liminal status occupying a temporal zone of terrifying indeterminacy between life and death: '*I've died with my sisters, and yet have to live to miss my parents!*' (original italics, 120), 'the war invades my body like worms burrowing into a dead corpse'. (161)

The ghost girl takes us beyond the registers of the western uncanny or 'horrorist aesthetics';<sup>20</sup> she is more than a mirror image of the narrator, more than an alter ego or dead double, more than a marker of a 'crisis of perception'<sup>21</sup> or 'systematic injury in the social world'.<sup>22</sup> Rather, she is a culturally-congruent manifestation of what Nayar has called 'traumatic materialism' that marks 'the aesthetics of the abject materiality of the body in representations of torture and extreme suffering',<sup>23</sup> an embodiment of 'self-shattering', 'a spiritual rupture in which one's soul, *the pralung* [...] has disappeared from the body, awaiting the time when it can be called back and be born anew'.<sup>24</sup> The narrator's trauma is configured as *sramay*, or ghost-haunting, a physical and psychological affliction affecting survivors who are haunted by the spirits of those who have not been given proper burial rites. This manifestation of trauma is informed by the Khmer Buddhist belief in 'bad death' which is predicated on the notion that burial rites are

necessary for the successful transmigration of the soul.<sup>25</sup> As Khatharya Um has pointed out, in the absence of such rites, trauma ‘engenders a psychical sense of “being stuck” not only for the soul of the departed but for the survivors as well’.<sup>26</sup>

This sense of ‘being stuck’ – something indexed in Freud’s scripting of melancholia<sup>27</sup> – is registered in the ghost girl’s first appearance which prompts an out-of-body experience that has the narrator witness to her own embattled state resulting in a kind of ‘sleep paralysis’ that Devon Hinton, in his study of trauma in Cambodian refugees, has claimed informs Cambodian scriptings of traumatic experience.<sup>28</sup>

I float out of my body and hover above the two girls [...] watch from the clouds as one girl clings desperately to stay together while the other fights to escape [...] With this last vision still lingering, I am jolted awake. In front of me the girls continue to struggle. The residue of the ghost girl’s desperation, the tight grip of her hands, her palpable fear as she tries to hold on to me hang in the quiet air like a mist. (p.59)

The ghost girl’s hovering replicates the flight of the witness survivor in *First They Killed My Father* but here is marked by a physical aggression that is consistent with sleep paralysis, an orthostatically-induced and neck-focused panic attack that occurs just before sleep or after waking when ‘the ghost pushes you down’.<sup>29</sup> The ghost girl’s appearance not only serves as an external manifestation of trauma but also indexes the displaced discursive register that is intrinsic to refugees’ expression of traumatic experience. As Devon Hinton and others have shown, Cambodian trauma victims rarely make direct use of the first-person when describing sleep paralysis using ‘the term, “proleung khoenhom,” meaning “my soul,” and never “I”, drawing upon both a notion of an ‘extended self’ and an “I” [that] is multiple, and often nested’.<sup>30</sup> Ung’s culturally-congruent scripting of traumatic experience and psychic breakdown thus effectively works to rationalise grief in a register that translates the ontological ruptures and dislocations embedded in this experience and grants it a home.

### **Madeleine Thien: neuroscience and the shattered self**

Madeleine Thien’s testimonial novel, *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2012), is a fictional account of the experience of a child survivor of the genocide who becomes a neuroscientist in Canada.<sup>31</sup> Opening in the first person and shifting into multiperspectival witnessing, Thien, a Malaysia-born Canadian, writes of survival and traumatic memorisation using metafictional registers to foreground the text’s status as a fictional work. Yet like Ung’s autobiographies and Ratner’s novels, Thien’s fiction marks a form of border witnessing that registers the absent dead as material presences in the text. Indeed Thien goes further than Ung and Ratner in her marking of witnessing across



cultures by presenting trauma through a ‘thick’, layered exploration of self-shattering that is indexed by an explicitly transcultural scripting of psychic disintegration that brings into dialogue western neuroscience and the Khmer concept of *pralung* to provide a transnational framework for the analysis of trauma.

*Dogs at the Perimeter* is a multilayered fiction that recounts the story of Janie, a genocide survivor who is an electrophysiologist at the Brain Research Centre in Montreal, and her quest for a missing colleague and fellow scientist, Hiroji, who has gone in search of his brother who disappeared a few months before the Khmer Rouge take-over of the country. The double disappearance indexes the material dissolution that marks the haunted space occupied by Janie who herself has lost a brother in the genocide and carries the memory of him with her in his scarf. Indeed the scarf, a cultural marker of Khmer identity, could be read as one of Thien’s subtle registers of *pralung* as its layering of the body serves as a metonymic register for layered personhood. Core to the novel is the scripting of trauma as a form of ‘memory sickness’, a Khmer concept that is summarised as the desire ‘to pray, to grieve the missing, to long for the old life’ (79). Thien shows how memory sickness is invoked by the Khmer Rouge to identify and root out potential dissenters but constitutes a lived reality for Janie and Hiroji for whom the will to remember is countered by the will to forget.

Janie’s experiences of memory sickness are mapped through sensory and metaphysical registers, rationalised through neuroscience and Khmer phenomenological scriptings of consciousness. Janie’s scientific reasoning – a result of her education in the West – draws on evidential, verifiable truths that are built on the results of experiments and observations of patients suffering psychic degeneration and memory loss. This scientific ‘objective’ reasoning is counterpointed and complemented by an alternative form of reasoning that is affectively and metaphysically realised: Janie’s own unsettling and often harrowing experiences of occupying a liminal zone between material and imaginary realms that bears witness to the existential truth of *pralung*. Janie’s evaluation and experience of psychic degeneration thus brings into productive tension these different readings of trauma: the rational, sensory and metonymic that focuses on the observations of an eye-witness who stands outside and apart from the object of analysis, and the aesthetic, experiential and metaphoric that focuses on relating the experience of the I-witness who stands inside the experience of trauma. One of the differences between eye-witnessing and bearing witness, as Pramod Nayar has pointed out, is that the former observes loss while the latter ‘stands testimony to absences’ in its effort to enter the experience of such loss.<sup>32</sup> By mediating these witnessing positions the novel constructs a distinctive transcultural frame of reference for evaluating the cognitive realm of the traumatised subject.

Janie's psychic disintegration is mirrored by the novel's polyphonic shattering into the multiple discourses and stories of other, doubled characters, and is framed early in the novel through the description of the experiences of Hiroji's psychiatric patients suffering from memory and language loss. One of these patients reflects in a letter, '*I would like to know which part of the mind remains untouched, barricaded, if there is any part of me that lasts, that is incorruptible, the absolute centre of who I am*' (original emphasis, 16). The troubled interiority that marks the opening of the novel not only brings into question the concept of the 'absolute' subject but makes the dissolution of the witnessing subject the primary register of the text.

This dissolution is structurally marked: the book is divided into chapters named after the main characters, all of whom have at least two names, so that switches in time and space also mark changes between characters and within characters as each is shown to contain another self or selves, other internal witnesses to their suffering. Janie, who has been so named by her foster family in Canada, is called Mei by the Khmer Rouge (her original name remains unknown); her brother, Sopham is renamed Rithy by the regime; and Hiroji's disappeared brother shifts from being James, to Ichiro, to Junichiro, to taking on the identity of Kwan, a person of ambiguous ethical standing whom he is mistaken for by his interrogator in prison. Within a transnational, memoried framework of ruptured temporalities and realities and prosopopoeic inscriptions that bring back Janie's dead brother, and later her dead father too, identities are rendered radically unstable, fluid and porous as they mediate across times and places, memories and selves. As Y-Dang Troeung has observed, 'as the narrative unfolds, the reader discovers that Janie is currently inhabiting her third name and identity'.<sup>33</sup> In this way self-shattering is not only structurally embedded in the text but also becomes the basis for cognition and recognition, presenting us with a form of ethical spectatorship that works in resistance to any easy appropriation of another's story as the narrating self remains elusive and indeterminate.

The narrative's plotment as a quest for the disappeared is also rendered radically unstable as what constitutes the 'human' is marked as unfixed and unfixable, transient and transitory, without an absolute centre. The reality of this radical instability is counterpointed with the historical reality of the Khmer Rouge regime's insistence on the fixity of self – 'Every person, no matter their status with the Khmer Rouge, had to dictate their life story or write it down' – an obsession with recording biographies that is exposed as an existential menace as 'the story of one's own life could not be trusted, [...] it could destroy you and all the people you loved' (25). This draws into question the very possibility of autobiography and memory, destabilising the integrity and authority of the witness narrator, while

indexing how the biographical self may be a construct of power-relations that render the human subject vulnerable.

Thien uses knowable and factually-verified historical truths – the name changes enforced by the Khmer Rouge and their paradoxical insistence on the singularity of the self through obsessive archiving of biographical data – as the groundwork for building up the existential truths of precarity and self-shattering. She also reveals how the shattered self marks a site of ethical instability and epistemological uncertainty by counterpointing western and Khmer scriptings of trauma, describing in detail scientific analyses of brain circuitry and Khmer conceptions of the multilayered, concentric self, and bringing these to bear on a scripting of trauma that lies somewhere between a scientifically verifiable fact and a subjective truth. She draws on a range of disjunctive strategies that are consistent with Rothberg's formulation of traumatic realism: there are gaps in the text where violence is rendered unsayable (83, 95) marking the unnarratability of trauma – 'I have no words for what was done' (137) – and the text is marked throughout by temporal shifts that show the breakdown of the borders between the past and present to mark how Janie's lived experience in Montreal is invaded by her past.

The text also invests in traumatic realism's scripting of authorship in which the survival of the witness-narrator is both troubled and 'as troubling as the failure of language to correspond to reality'.<sup>34</sup> Traumatic realism, Rothberg claims, 'has a doubled relationship to the real', marking the co-existence of normality and the traumatic where the 'coincidence of opposites overwhelms everyday structures of understanding, which nevertheless remain present'.<sup>35</sup> The 'doubled relationship with the real', in which the dead and the living co-exist, is evident when the narrator escapes the claustrophobic confines of her apartment and walks outside alongside her brother who, we later learn, had been killed in the genocide: 'I get up ... [and walk] [d]own the treacherous stairs, sliding along the invisible sidewalk. My brother is here. Sopham and I take the quiet streets, we file past the silent houses' (25). Here the reader is alerted to the fact that 'the structure of experience', marked by trauma in which 'events remain unintegrated into narrative memory'<sup>36</sup> draws into simultaneity the living and dead in a 'coincidence of opposites' that overwhelms everyday reality in such a way that material elements such as the sidewalk are rendered 'invisible'. The eidetic witnessing that marks the materialisation of the dead registers an excess of signification that overwhelms 'everyday structures of understanding that nevertheless remain present'.

Yet the novel's representation of witnessing cannot be contained within this register of traumatic realism. Existential excess and psychic overload are part of Janie's migrant reality as a refugee, a position that requires the use of cultural registers that will accommodate and home her suffering.

While Janie, as a western-based scientist, can read trauma from the outside as an analytical observer to others' suffering, her own experience can only be rendered knowable through registers of suffering drawn from Cambodia. The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth is deployed to rationalise the psychic overload of transnational refugee trauma as Janie's experience is indexed through the many selves of her migrant present and the many souls from past lives, as well as those 'wandering ghosts' she carries with her from Cambodia: 'I know too much, I have too many selves and they no longer fit together' (139); 'Everything, the good and the selfish, the loved and the feared, had taken refuge inside me' (154); 'The soul is a slippery thing. A door slammed too loudly can send it running. [...] But in darkness, unpursued, the soul, the *pralung*, can climb back in through an open window, it can be returned to you' (253). The shattered subject in the novel thus indexes both a form of 'multidirectional memory' resistant to a linear view of time, generative of dialectal relations across discrete sites of violence,<sup>37</sup> and a kind of existential co-hosting concomitant with Ross Chambers' 'foster-writing', offering a 'form of hospitality or pseudo-home to that which is culturally homeless'.<sup>38</sup>

Chambers has argued that 'foster-writing' plays upon 'the readability of the figural' in its materialisation of the haunted imaginary.<sup>39</sup> Thien's novel renders readable this imaginary through focalising events through Janie's eidetic witnessing when she enters a church and is joined by a woman who 'hesitates, then [...] looks down at the boy in my lap who is nothing but a knotted, filthy scarf' (27). The scarf is not only all that Janie has left of the brother she failed to save but stands as a figural representation of his absent and irretrievable body. Janie's narrative of survival becomes coterminous with her restoration of her lost brother, accommodating 'that which is culturally homeless' in herself, as the reader has to make sense of Janie's I-witnessing – bearing witnessing as a mode that 'stands testimony to absences' – through the split epistemes of the woman's gaze and Janie's.

The novel also shows the limitations of western scientific paradigms by mapping them in relation to a plethora of neurologically-grounded readings of brain disorders that are rendered insecure: a woman who loses language but gains the gift of painting has her condition explained as a 'kind of asymmetry [...] between words and pictures' (13); a man with Alzheimers is led to ask, 'Is there a self buried in the amygdala or the hippocampus? Is there one burst of electricity that stays constant all my life?' (16). In the amnesic register of the text, writing is invoked as the link between self and world, such that – in the words of one patient – it becomes the 'only way of thinking' (145).

Thien goes further and exposes how scientific reasoning takes us to the edge of understanding what constitutes the human, and how an understanding of chemistry may mark the biological limits of bare life but may also, in fact, be anti-human, reducing suffering to words: some scientists believe

there is no suffering, there is only chemistry. Suffering is a description, but chemistry is the structure. [...] Pain and suffering are not, in the end, the same thing, one can be cleaved from the other like a diamond split along its planes, so that you feel pain but you are no longer bothered by it. (231)

Physical and mental trauma – pain and suffering – are here differentiated to mark the elusive ephemerality of human consciousness but the distinction between the two can be rationalised through *pralung*, a form of ‘layering’ that allows for the very possibility of their separation. Western science may be able to identify the ‘chemistry’ involved but cannot offer an explanation for the distinction without recourse to the metaphor of a diamond cleaved, a recourse that returns us to Khmer scriptings of self and trauma which, as Sotheara Chhim, a genocide survivor and psychiatrist, has observed ‘are rich in meaning and metaphor’ and may be lost in translation.<sup>40</sup> By deconstructing science this way, Thien compels us to re-vision the human subject and bare life, insisting upon our shared vulnerability:

I harvest cells, gather data, measure electricity while, in the upper floors, lives open and change: a patient with a brain tumour begins to lose her vision, a girl ceases to recognise faces, including her own, a man stares, disgruntled, at his left leg, refusing to believe that it belongs to his body. So many selves are born and re-born here, lost and imagined anew. (34–35)

While neuroscience provides factual data, it is ‘local’ knowledge from Cambodia that provides a rationale for understanding the experience of the suffering subject whose fragility as a shattered being marks a borderless self, subject to rebirth and renewal. Thien’s text thus registers precarity as constitutive of the human subject, re-visioning trauma as part of a continuum of shared suffering.

The novel also inscribes a critical paradigm that is grounded in the experience of displacement, a form of border witnessing that marks and is informed by exilic loss. Its epiphanic close opens a path for healing the shattered self that marks a communion between lost and recovered selves, between the Cambodian past and Canadian present: ‘We did not come in solitude, my mother told me. Inside us, from the very beginning, we were entrusted with many lives’ (253). This ending marks a restoration of the self based not on the wholeness of singularity or the reclamation of an absent centre, but on the co-existence of multiple realities and selves. Like the ghost girl of *Lucky Child* – whose final appearance marks a parallel existence that ‘no longer haunts’ the witness narrator (257) – Thien’s spectral register marks a reclamation of a self in balance with its Other. The novel’s closing representation of the co-existence of multiple realities thus invokes a form of ‘multidirectional memory’, which is ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing [...] productive and not private’.<sup>41</sup>

Yet Thien's focalising of traumatic experience insists on something more. By siting trauma as part of a continuum of suffering whose healing requires communion between and within migrant selves, it creates a space for a form of interhuman relationality that situates ethical spectatorship at the very intersection between 'local' and western paradigms of subject constitution and presents witnessing as an interstitial negotiation of seemingly incommensurable realities. In so doing, it asserts – as Jacqui Alexander does – that there is a 'great deal of urgency in reimagining wholeness as a necessary part of a pedagogy of crossing'.<sup>42</sup> The deconstructive drives of Thien's text not only work to reimagine wholeness but also draw attention to the connection between the poetics and politics of witnessing in ways that anticipate Vaddey Ratner's mediation of traumatic experience and healing.

### Vaddey Ratner: the art of healing

Vaddey Ratner, a genocide survivor resident in the United States and a member of the Cambodian royal family, lost her father, sisters, grandmother and members of her extended family in the genocide. She chose to write a fictionalised memoir, *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (2012), rather than a survivor testimony, because she felt that in order to do justice to the past and the people lost she needed 'not only to cull from memory and history but also to employ imagination, the art of empathy'.<sup>43</sup> Her second book of fiction, *Music of the Ghosts* (2017), extends this 'art of empathy' to explore the relationship between a genocide survivor and her disappeared father through the medium of music.<sup>44</sup> Both texts thus explore the 'hauntedness of a culture' by presenting an explicitly aesthetic resolution to emotional conflict.<sup>45</sup>

In *In The Shadow of the Banyan*, the Manichean Cambodian myth of the *Reamker* frames the scripting of the traumatic past through a child's perspective, offering an ethical register that universalises as well as localises the slow slaughter in the country. The child-witness presents us with a morally-rationalised world where the Khmer Rouge are transformed into false gods (160), where true divinity can be found in everyday selves, in which *tevodas* or imaginary spirits become 'suspiciously familiar. With names like Skinny One, Plump One, and Dark One' (8), where her uncle might be a naga serpent or dragon *yiak* (274), and the journey through the nightmare of the labour camps is scripted as a journey through an underworld – *thaanaruak* (90) – 'where gods and *tevodas* were not revered but captured and shot like caged animals' (92). The magical realist scripting of the killing fields as an underworld provides a critical framework for the Cambodian reading of the dead as 'an extension of the moral community of the living' whose wellbeing is essential for bringing peace to survivors. It also includes a hagiographic scripting of Ratner's late father as a tutelary spirit who lives on to guide her fictionalised self into bearing witness to the

atrocities – a scripting consistent with the practice of ritual healing in Cambodia that confers such status to lost relatives.<sup>46</sup> In giving an honoured place to lost victims, such hagiography serves to endorse the Buddhist practice of ‘making merit’, marking a redemptive manoeuvre that works to mitigate some of the hurt and harm of ‘bad death’.

The novel thus acts as a powerful testament to the therapeutic power of storytelling, indexing the regenerative power of memory and the restorative power of language to reconstitute and give coherence to the damaged and traumatised self. Ratner scripts the intimacies of personal connection through intersubjective reflections and refrains: ‘Once in a journey’s dream, I came upon a child bearing my soul ...’/ ‘Once in a journey’s dream,’ I replied [...] ‘I came upon a reflection of myself’ (106). The fictionalised memoir thus takes us into and beyond multilayered personhood to mark communion in the face of its denial, reflecting what Levinas has called ‘the ethical perspective of the interhuman’.<sup>47</sup>

Ratner’s use of the *Reamker* is a cathartic act of cultural restoration that not only marks memorialisation as an act of collective agency and empowerment but also a culturally-cognizant and culturally-congruent scripting of trauma that renders such cognizance and congruence an ethical necessity; the Cambodian genocide was, after all, also a cultural genocide that worked to wipe out the religious teachings, literary traditions and aesthetic practices that the novel draws upon. The ending of the novel also translates the regenerative power of Cambodian myth into an explicitly transnational enterprise, melding storytelling and border witnessing in ways that suggest that it is through the transcendence of multiple borders that healing can be realised: ‘I could leap into words and stories, ... cut across time and space. Like Papa, I’d become a kind of Kinnara, that half-bird creature, escaping from this world to another. I could transform myself. I could transcend boundaries’ (314). Ratner’s redemptive witnessing thus moves beyond the brute particularities of the historical genocide and Cambodian mythopoeic registers to construct a utopian, borderless realm where the human is marked by its transcendence, remaining ‘responsible to history while importantly unconstrained by it’.<sup>48</sup>

In *Music of the Ghosts*, Ratner focuses on the transformative power of music, an intangible and ephemeral mode of remembrance, to index healing.<sup>49</sup> Music in Cambodia marks memorialisation *as* healing, the rhythmic chants of monks and mourning songs (*smot*) by lay people ‘placate both the minds of the living and the spirits of the dead’.<sup>50</sup> In the novel, musical performance creates a spectral space of witnessing and communion where the central ‘ghost’ of the text, Teera’s disappeared father, is metonymically presenced through the musical instrument he bequeaths to her – a *sadiev*, an ‘ancient instrument used to invoke the spirits of the dead’ – and prosopopoeiacally presenced through the Old Musician, who plays the instrument ‘as

if in that solitary note, [her father] has called her to him' (7). The text's inscription of music as a medium for healing through communion with the dead marks the novel not as an elegy but a spiritual calling forth that puts wandering ghosts to rest, giving 'thanks to the spirits that remain as well as the spirits that move on' (316); a form of 'merit-making' that works to obviate 'bad death' as it assists dead relatives through the cycle of birth and death.<sup>51</sup>

While both novels draw on culture-specific aesthetic forms to create an imagined space of healing that transcends the borders of nation and culture, in *Music of the Ghosts* Ratner presses home the logic of her scripting of healing as a form of cultural restitution by investing it with an ethical charge that challenges a core element of criminal law. In the most intensely realised projection of self-shattering in the novel, Teera's father is shown to be killed by a fellow prisoner, the Old Musician, at a detention centre at his own bidding. Ratner uses the complex ethicality of this mercy killing to show how victim and perpetrator gain existential realisation through differentiation and communion. After both figures have been tortured and taken to the limit experience – where 'despite the violence done to them, it was painfully clear that each was a life – heart, breath, and soul' (273) – the Old Musician uses a blade 'no bigger than a plectrum' to find himself in a skinless space of being after killing his friend, 'witnessing the slow concaving of a life beneath the weight of unimaginable brutality, one layer of suffering amassed upon another' (298).

This moment of unfixed ethicality blurs killer and victim and creates a new ethical horizon that marks the site of the interhuman where 'layers of suffering' are made 'one'. By drawing executioner and victim into a continuum of suffering, Ratner re-vision's bare life and precarity to show how a Khmer register of the human subject can serve to mark a space of ethical spectatorship at the very moment of its unsettlement. It is a form of unsettlement that seems to speak directly to Rothberg's call to revitalise trauma studies through the development of 'differentiated maps of subject position and experience that neither eliminate distinctions nor seek to multiply particularities'.<sup>52</sup> Ratner's mapping of subject positions and experience is closely allied to that of Ung's and Thien's in its foregrounding of *pralung* as a foundational element in subject constitution but extends to show how the re-visioning of trauma through such layered personhood might require a re-visioning of ethicality as well.

In a direct challenge to the foundation of western justice which has revenge at its heart,<sup>53</sup> the novel also draws upon the registers of Buddhist doctrine to generate a new paradigm of justice proposing that 'justice is not simply the exchange of a life for a life, an ideal of retribution to right a wrong, but a path one walks and lives, a way of being' (177). As a 'way of being' Ratner sets up an existential paradigm that substitutes healing for



punishment, reparation for revenge, in ways that re-vision security as a kind of existential 'wholeness'. Her layered reading of personhood promotes what Hinton and others have described as a 'concentric' scripting of ontological security, one based on reading bare life as composed of many different layers of existence that form protective circles, indexing 'security' as protection from psychic harm.<sup>54</sup>

The scripting of justice as a 'way of being' also creates a space for empowerment through self-healing and marks genocide emphatically as an ontological crime. It goes further. In a rhetorical passage, Ratner destabilises the concept of impunity by affirming a principle of karmic law that suggests that all crimes inevitably cause suffering through psychic unsettlement to those who have the knowledge of committing them: 'Are we truly exempted from punishment for our crimes, when [...] knowledge of the atrocity we commit is itself a punishment?' (176). This puts into question the power of legal frameworks to bring peace and throws into crisis the possibility of having an ethically secure basis for the law. In this way, Ratner's soteriological reading of self comes to render justice supple and subtle, subject to negotiation and navigation, 'a path one walks' that is transitory and transitional, inviting us to consider the role of transitional justice mechanisms to which post-conflict countries like Cambodia are subject, as well as the place of retribution in the indexing of so-called 'universal' human rights.

Between them, these Cambodian survivor narratives use Khmer knowledges of self and suffering in ways that compel a re-evaluation of testimony's dominant critical paradigms; their metaphysical scripting of the human subject through the register of *pralung* puts into question the very narratability of the 'self' on which testimony and autobiography depends.<sup>55</sup> Their metaleptic transgression of narrative levels invests in a form of narrative layering that directly relates 'levels of witnessing'<sup>56</sup> to layers of consciousness in ways that offer an alternative postsecular scripting of the interhuman. Their re-siting of trauma on a spectrum of suffering militates against exceptionalising and individuating trauma in ways that generate new pathways for collective healing. And their transnational drives not only resist the kind of 'particularizing' localisms that Rothberg has claimed can constrain and work to culturally overdetermine the analysis of postcolonial traumas<sup>57</sup> but call into question 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' appellations in ways that suggest that it is perhaps not *pralung* that particularises these texts but our resistance to addressing and accommodating non-western registers of grief, loss and the human subject into our critical register. Drawing on forms of layered witnessing that speak to both established critical paradigms of traumatic realisms as well as culture-specific 'idioms of distress',<sup>58</sup> these survivor narratives – working in the interstices of culture – reveal how a transcultural scripting of trauma can compel us to look beyond difference as they

transform memory into memorialisation, hurt into healing and survivors into selves.

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## Notes

1. See Irene Visser, ‘Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospects and Prospects’, in Sonya Andermahr (ed.), *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism* (Basel: MDPI, 2016), pp. 7–23; Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy (eds.), *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Michael Rothberg, ‘Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1&2 (2008), pp. 224–37; Caruth cited in Rothberg, ‘Decolonizing’, p. 227.
2. For more on border witnessing, see Minoli Salgado, “‘Can Only the Dead Speak?’ Terror, Trauma and the Witness Traveller”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 52.3 (2017), pp. 467–83.
3. S. Krämer and S. Weigel, ‘Introduction: Converging the Yet-Separate Theoretical Discourses of Testimony Studies’, in S. Krämer and S. Weigel (eds.), *Testimony/Bearing Witness: Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), p. xii.
4. G. Becker, Y. Beyene, and P. Ken, ‘Memory, Trauma, and Embodied Distress: The Management of Disruption in the Stories of Cambodians in Exile’, *Ethos*, 28.3 (2000), p. 339.
5. See Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Hayden White, ‘Figural Realism in Witness Literature’, *Parallax*, 10.1 (2004), pp. 113–24; Mario Perniola, *Art and its Shadow* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).
6. See Pramod K. Nayar’s reflections on psychotic realism in *The Extreme in Contemporary Culture: States of Vulnerability* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), p. 35.
7. Hinton et al.’s analysis of nightmares and ontological trauma in Cambodian refugees foregrounds the Khmer conception of personhood which is composed of ‘multiple “layers” [that] protect the self and produce “ontological security” (Giddens 1984, 1991), a feeling of being safe and protected’. They observe that ‘Cambodians are extremely concerned about physical and spiritual strength and the soul’s degree of connectedness to the body; these are components of an elaborate conception of personhood, a layered self-image. The self is not just one’s clothing, skin, appearance, thoughts, group affiliations, and so on; it is a concentric, power-layer self, comprised of bodily and extrabodily power sources’. D. E. Hinton, A. L. Hinton, V. Pich, J. R. Loeum, and M. H. Pollack, ‘Nightmares Among Cambodian Refugees: The Breaching of Concentric Ontological Security’, *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 33 (2009), p. 219.
8. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 117.

9. Gregory Price Grieve, 'Do Human Rights Need a Self? Buddhist Literature and the Samsaric Subject', in Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (eds.), *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), p. 247.
10. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), p. 19; Shoshana Felman, *Testimony*, p. 25; Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in M. B. Smith and B. Harsahv (trans.), *Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 94; Adriana Cavarero has contended that 'I am always the *self* of my narrating memory' (original emphasis), *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. P. A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 36.
11. Y-Dang Troeung, 'Witnessing Cambodia's Disappeared', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 82.2 (2013), p. 163.
12. While the boundaries between autobiography and memoir are porous, I have chosen to categorise Ung's texts as autobiographies rather than memoirs as they privilege temporal linearity and tether their presentation of the evolving subject to a historically verifiable past.
13. All citations are from the following editions: *First They Killed My Father* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2009); *Lucky Child* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).
14. J. Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017), p. 135.
15. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Maryland: John Hopkins UP, 2001) p. 47.
16. Rosi Braidotti, 'The Politics of "Life Itself" and New Ways of Dying', in Diane Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010), p. 203.
17. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 110.
18. Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 2.
19. Troeung, 'Witnessing', p. 163.
20. 'Horrorist aesthetics involves an eversion of the body that calls into question the insider/outside boundary or border'. Nayar, *Extreme*, p. 40.
21. Nayar, *Extreme*, p. 66.
22. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (London: Minnesota UP, 2008), pp. 24–5.
23. Nayar, *Extreme*, p. xxi.
24. Troeung, 'Witnessing', p. 163.
25. Janet McLellan, *Cambodian Refugees in Ontario: Resettlement, Religion and Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 105.
26. Khatharya Um, 'Diasporic Nationalism, Citizenship and Post-war Reconstruction', *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees*, 23.2 (2006), p. 9.
27. Anne Anlin Cheng develops Freud's scripting of melancholia to explore what she calls 'racial melancholia', a process of being 'psychically stuck'. See Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), p. 8. Cheng's scripting is universalising and draws on a racially polarised rhetoric of blame and victimisation that the Cambodian writers analysed here explicitly reject.

28. D. E. Hinton, V. Pich, D. Chhean, and M. H. Pollack, “‘The Ghost Pushes You Down’: Sleep Paralysis-Type Panic Attacks in a Khmer Refugee Population’, *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 42.1 (2005), pp. 46–77.
29. *Ibid.*, “‘The Ghost’”, p. 47.
30. Hinton et al., ‘Nightmares’, p. 232 and p. 259.
31. Madeleine Thien, *Dogs at the Perimeter* (London: Granta, 2013). All citations are from this edition.
32. Nayar, *Extreme*, p. 71.
33. Troeung, ‘Witnessing’, p. 161.
34. Michael Rothberg, ‘Between the Extreme and the Everyday’, in Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (eds.), *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 59.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 60, 63.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
37. Lissa Skitolsky, ‘Recollecting Violence: Michael Rothberg’s Multidirectional Memory’, *Philosophy Faculty Publications* 6 (2010), p. 4.
38. Ross Chambers, ‘Orphaned Memories, Foster-Writing, Phantom Pain: *The Fragments Affair*’, in *Extremities*, p. 101.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
40. Sotheara Chhim, ‘*Baksbat* (Broken Courage): A Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome in Cambodia’, *Medical Anthropology* 32 (2013), p. 170.
41. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), p. 3.
42. M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 14.
43. Vaddey Ratner, ‘A Conversation with Vaddey Ratner’, in *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2012), p. 332. All citations are from this edition.
44. Vaddey Ratner, *Music of the Ghosts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017). All citations are from this edition.
45. Chambers, ‘Orphaned’, p. 95.
46. Inger Agger, ‘Calming the Mind: Healing after mass atrocity in Cambodia’, *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 52.4 (2015), p. 550, 553.
47. Levinas, ‘Useless Suffering’, p. 94.
48. Y-Dang Troeung, ‘Iterations of War and Its Literary Counterforces: Vaddey Ratner’s “In the Shadow of the Banyan” and Kosal Kheiv’s “Why I Write”’, *MELUS*, 40.2 (2015), p. 101.
49. See Sabine Marschall, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural Difference: Official vs. Vernacular Forms of Commemorating the Past’, *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 14.1 (2013), p. 79.
50. Inger Agger citing Hinton, Field, et al. in ‘Calming the Mind’, p. 551.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 551.
52. Rothberg, ‘Decolonizing’, p. 231.
53. Teresa Godwin Phelps, *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence, and the Work of Truth Commissions* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 3.
54. Hinton et al, ‘Nightmares’, p. 222.
55. See Cavarero’s concept of a ‘narratable self’ which she argues is central to the construction of a biographical subject, in *Relating Narratives*, p. xvi.

56. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. 75.
57. Rothberg, 'Decolonizing', p. 229.
58. Chhim, '*Baksbat*', p. 160.

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