

Moving Beyond the Pandemic: English and American Studies in Spain. Francisco Gallardo del Puerto (coord.), María del Carmen Camus Camus (coord.), Jesús Ángel González López (coord.). Editores: Ediciones Universidad de Cantabria, Editorial de la Universidad de Cantabria, 2022

ISBN: 978-84-19024-15-2

Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos. Congreso (44. 2021. Santander).

New Sustainable Bodies in Transit: Transnational Affects in Some (South-East Asian) Canadian Women Writers.

Abstract

This paper is focused on interpreting the way in which some South-East Asian Canadian refugee aesthetics of affects is articulated by some collectivities beyond state designations. This paper tries to analyse Souvankham Thammavongsa's aesthetics of heterogeneity in her last collection of stories *How to Pronounce Knife* to show its belongingness to a plurality of immigrant voices with various perspectives, interests and drives (August 2022). I look at the centrality of affective relations in the transformation of subjectivity under processes of a growing (un)happiness in the diasporic *homeSpace*. I will try to conceptualize this refugee labour of challenging, transforming, asserting, and carving out ways of living as acts of "refugee worldmaking" (Jemisin 2018; Y-Dang Troeung 2022) after the suffering of people on a scale that Michel Foucault described in 1979 as "unprecedented in modern history".

Keywords: Souvankham Thammavongsa, Canadian literature, refugee worldmaking, sustainable affects, hospitality, *homeSpace*.

Resumen

Este ensayo trata de interpretar la articulación que la estética de los afectos en algunas voces de refugiados del sudeste asiático hace en colectividades con independencia de su estado de procedencia. Este ensayo analiza el libro de relatos *How to Pronounce Knife*, de Souvankham Thammavongsa (2020) para mostrar su pertenencia a una nueva visión centrada en la multiplicidad de voces con intereses y anhelos diferentes a lo recibido en las últimas décadas (August 2022). Mi interés yace en la importancia de las relaciones afectivas en la transformación de nuestra subjetividad, sujeta a procesos de (in)felicidad creciente en el espacio doméstico de la diáspora del sudeste asiático en Canadá. Intentaré conceptualizar este intento de la comunidad refugiada de desafiar, transformar, afirmar y extraer distintos modos de vida como actos de creación un ser en el mundo (Jemisin 2018; Y-Dang Troeung 2022) tras años de sufrimiento de una magnitud calificada por Michel Foucault en 1979 como sin precedentes en la historia moderna.

Palabras clave: Souvankham Thammavongsa, literatura canadiense, recreación del refugiado, afectos sostenibles, hospitalidad, espacio doméstico.

It is not surprising that Southeast Canadian refugees in Canada are publishing their heterogeneous work while positioning intersectional approaches to race, class and ethnicity at the centre of their creative inquiry. Ten years ago, Bharati Mukherjee asked how any immigrant can "renounce her earlier self, her fidelity to family history and language 'without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion'" (2011, 681). A refugee worldmaking was underway, rejecting assimilation, embracing hybridity, to "center on the nuanced process of *rehousement*

after the trauma of forced or voluntary *unhousement*” (2011, 683). Not all Canadian writing that details migrancy evolves from a postulation of wretchedness though. As Aritha van Herk argues, some prose works that gesture towards resistance unsettle far more than those that reinscribe a recital of otherness and suffering (2020, 1). We will try to find new responses to what Spivak terms “the cultivation of an imagination that can flex into another’s space” (2018, 169). An embodied and embedded commitment towards “sustainable affects” (Braidotti 2021; García Zarranz 2020), where the narrative voice makes out of its vulnerability with promise and commitment (Van Herk 2020, 3). That desire and capacity expresses Butler’s “embodied enactment” (2016, 22) as proof of bodies who recognize their precarious positions (Butler 2004), to embrace dissent and defiance, which accompanies migrancy’s necessary transformation (van Herk 2020, 8).

Souvankham Thammavongsa was born in 1978 in a Lao refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand, before coming to Canada when she was one year old. She was one of the sixty thousand who arrived in Canada from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, being part of a Canadian history of refugee passage which has seriously impacted Asian Canadian writing (Kim & Lee 2020, 268). Together with other women writers such as Sharon Bala and Kim Thúy, Thammavongsa deals with matters of memory, generation, forced migration, and statelessness. This bodily transit entails a *transpacific precarity* (Beauregard 2021, 135), which Timothy K. August approaches through the concept of “aesthetic heterogeneity,”

to articulate how refugee collectivities exists beyond state designations. While Thammavongsa [and Kim Thúy] write from and about different Southeast Asian communities, as well as belonging to differing immigrant “waves,” both texts are similar in how they present a plurality of voices, with various interests, perspectives, and drives. This approach contrasts with the singularity that has positioned Southeast Asian Canadian refugees as the stable exemplary subject needed for Canadian national mythologies to be formed. I propose that a contemporary aesthetic of heterogeneity intervenes in the imagining of the Canadian social milieu, where refugee authors illustrate the different structures of knowledge created by refugee lives without having to represent and give up to the reader exactly what the refugee life is (August, 2022, 40).

The question of “how Laos is represented” is crucial when we read this 2020 Giller Prize winner collection of short stories, which cut sharply across lives marked by precarious conditions. Across many of these work spaces, the position of one’s father, the shape of one’s nose, and the colour of one’s skin seem to determine who is eligible for advancement into managerial circles, and who is not. In the lead story the young protagonist,

[I]listened as her father worried about his pay and his friends and how they were all making their living here in this new country. He said his friends, who were educated and had great jobs in Laos, now found themselves picking worms or being managed by pimple-faced teenagers.

They'd had to begin all over again, as if the life they led before didn't count. ("How to Pronounce Knife" 4)

Here, "in this new country" Lao language is a warning for survival: "[d]on't speak Lao and don't tell anyone you are Lao. It's no good to tell people where you're from'. The child looked at the centre of her father's chest, where, on his T-shirt, four letters stood side by side: LAOS" ("How to Pronounce Knife" 4-5). This sets in motion a powerful theoretical device, an irony made visible through the daughter's line of vision, which keeps LAOS in sight, in her sustainable struggle to move forward: "When my parents read the newspaper or watched the evening news, they never heard anything about what was happening [in Laos]. It was almost as if it didn't exist" ("Edge of the World" 96). This *unhousement* is deployed through "the other's language" in the host country (Derrida 2000, 89) while the child narrator watches her father's inability to pronounce knife, "she thinks of what else he doesn't know. What else she would have to find out for herself. She wants to tell her father that some letters, even though they are there, we do not say them, but she decides now is not the time to say such a thing" ("How to Pronounce Knife" 9). As Thammavongsa reflects, "when a parent does not know how to pronounce knife or the meaning of 'thief' you cannot tell them the truth since he feels he belongs and is accepted in a country which is speechless to him" (online interview). This shame in the absence of parental speech plays negatively on the possibilities for a political subjectivity or any domestic authority. The child's lies will then subvert the linguistic absence of her parents' speech: "Did you get your parents to read the note we sent home with you?" asks her teacher. "No, she lied, looking at the floor where her blue shoes fitted themselves inside the space of a small square tile. She didn't want to lie, but there was no point in embarrassing her parents" ("How to Pronounce Knife" 5).

Thammavongsa complains about how being born in a refugee camp in Laos makes you stateless and displaced and writing gives you the freedom of speech when something is unbearable: "There were two kinds of people in the world," the child discovers, "those who were seen, and those who were not. I considered myself one of the latter" ("Gas Station" 137). Parenting the parent makes her subjectivity build her political dissent, creating processes of transnational solidarity (Mohanty 2003), to validate her identity and thus a new refugee worldmaking (Y-Dang Troeung 2022). Irony and humour will pave the way to subvert and displace tension and tragedy, "[t]he sadder the story, the louder the laughter" ("Picking Worms" 167). Here is where "radical openness toward unexpected outcomes" can be rehearsed (van Herk 2020, 13).

Thammavongsa undoes this projection of (un)happiness while carefully unpacking the ugly feelings (Ngai 2005) from the child's view towards adult's life in a tight, commanding prose, and, surprisingly, these subtle yet shattering stories glow with empathy, humour and wisdom: "When she was about four, she wanted to be the beast. She roared and pounded her chest and no one ever said that was not how a little girl should be. She could be ugly and uglier and even more ugly [...] To be a monster, a beast of some kind. Watching everything shudder, down to the most useless blade of grass. She wanted that for herself" ("The Gas Station" 143-44). This need of power can unveil your monstrosity when depending on a promise, in projecting your desire (Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011).

In "Mani Pedi," Raymond, an ex-boxer taken in by his sister to work in her nail salon, knows things about the women his sister employs that he thinks she doesn't know: "People form this kind of friendship in this country," she said. "How they tried to get pregnant, but no babies ever caught on because of the chemicals from the salon. How their coughs started and didn't ever stop" (70). Not only toxic chemicals threaten the health and livelihoods of Thammavongsa's characters: Raymond has to take weeks off work because he develops warts on his hands from touching people's feet without gloves. But, the narrator tells us, the warts bother him less than an invisible contamination: "It was the smell of feet. It got into the pores of his nostrils and took root there, like a follicle of hair. It was becoming a part of him, the smell—like spoiled milk. He could never forget what he did for a living because it was always there. He was beginning to taste the smell of feet at the back of his throat" (66). The smell of male clients' neglected feet is a stench slowly dulling his senses and diminishing his body. But he can still smell, and when a female client on whom he has a crush is dropped off at the salon by a wealthy-looking man, "the smell of this man's cologne came in with her" (69). Raymond's heart is broken and his impossible dreams dashed; his sister sees his face fall, "the way it would fall in the ring when he knew he was losing" (69). But Raymond could never win this round, and the story ends with a heartbreaking image of him and his sister sitting in her car, windows open, listening to the sounds of a family barbeque and children giggling, the soundtrack of middle-class innocence "like a far distant thing, a thing that happened only to other people" (71).

Things that happen to other people is also a theme in "Paris," where the labouring refugee body is contained by the gendered, racialized, sexualized, and classed networks of power that structure workplaces. The Laotian women working in a chicken processing plant think that nose jobs, hairdos, and glamorous clothing might get them promoted to the front

office by their sexual predator of a boss. But altering their bodies and trying to appear like the white wives of the company men can never unmark them as racialized others, and it can never insert them into nepotistic reproductions of managerial power. The narrator, Red, who distances herself from the other Laotian women's feminine performances, is a bystander when her boss is discovered by his beautiful wife, Nicole, having sex with a Laotian female worker in his car. In distress, Nicole runs over to the narrator, seeking comfort in a hug: "She grabbed Red and held her like they were the closest of friends, and buried her pointy nose in Red's neck. She could feel the poke" (23). The white woman's pointy nose that other Laotian women mimic through plastic surgery breaks the invisible boundary Red maintains around her body, and the story ends with both women crying, "but for different reasons" (23). The male boss' sexual exploitation of his female Laotian factory workers tethers these two women to each other, uncomfortably and without collapsing their differences (Rifkind 2020).

Labour situates the refugee body on the ground, figuratively and literally. In "Picking Worms," the narrator's Laotian mother's skill at picking live earthworms from farmers' fields for bait gives her pleasure - "Man, I love shit of the earth" (172) she says after every shift—but it will never get her the promotion she deserves. Instead, the narrator's fourteen-year-old white boyfriend, who joins them on a lark, is promoted to manager and changes the way they pick. Her mother's organic, intuitive method of going barefoot and ungloved is prohibited; her health and productivity suffer because the boy manager's rules separate her physically from the earthworms she finds through touch and feel (177). And so she lives the contradictions of her refugee, racialized, gendered labouring body that is at once too physical for her physical job and too expert to be promoted to management. The characters' complex relationships are what elevate these stories beyond sociological or political exposé to rich explorations of the labouring body as also a loving, longing, knowing, and defiant body at once marked out for certain kinds of physical work and marked by it. The somatic focus of these stories offers a specificity of Southeast Asian refugee and migrant experience grounded in the labouring body that is always, both visibly and invisibly, seeking to transcend basic survival (Rifkind 2020).

The transmission of affect is then problematized, and sideways feelings unravel various ways in which shame, anger and conditional happiness can become sustainable with important ethical repercussions (Ahmed 2014; García Zarranz 2020). Here is where the aporia of transnational solidarity (Mohanty 2003) in the *homeSpace* and the validity of alterity (Kamboureli 2021) can re-enact the subversion of this linguistic invisibility and perverse affect.

He thought for a few seconds that she was talking about someone else, or to someone else. But then he realized, that's what his name was now. Jay. Like blue jay, a small blue bird, a little dot in the sky. He wanted to remind his wife that his name was Jai. It means heart in Lao! He wanted to yell. But then she would just remind him how men in this country do not raise their voices at women. Or tell him to practice his English. "No one here knows jai means heart," she would say. So what if that's what it means? It does not mean anything in English. And English is the only language that matters here... And if he was going to live here, he had to learn to adapt and fit in. ("The School Bus Driver" 114)

This resistance to exploiting the experiences they have somehow survived defies "traumatage" (van Herk 2020, 11), in texts that luxuriate in affliction and that make misery the core of diasporic narrative exposure. As Mbembe and Spivak argue (Mbembe 2018; Spivak 2005), we should stop this affective leaking, abolishing official boundaries, and building new forms of knowledge, reimagining a new life that would be planetary. A *homeSpace* which will draw on planetary entanglement, away from fear and anxiety, in continuous complaint with the old archives of previous decades "to change the field of what is possible" (Beauregard 2019, 577).

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