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Author

Espiritu, Yen Le

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Refugee Lifemaking Practices

Southeast Asian Women

Yến Lê Espiritu

When the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian communists) captured Phnom Penh in April 1975, Ra Pronh was just twenty years old. For the next four years, under Khmer Rouge rule, Ra endured hard labor, near-starvation and a forced marriage. After the Vietnamese forces toppled the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, Ra, her husband, and their newborn daughter wandered the forests of western Cambodia for approximately eleven months before they finally crossed into Thailand to enter a UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) refugee camp. Ra spent the next six years in overcrowded and destitute refugee camps in Thailand and in the Philippines, where she gave birth to another daughter and two sons. Even after being granted asylum and resettlement in the Bronx in 1986, Ra's struggles continued as she battled poverty, crime, and multiple housing displacements.¹

Scholarly and popular accounts of Southeast Asian refugees tend to exclude refugee women like Ra, opting instead to highlight refugee men and their military service. The marginalization of refugee women's narratives is especially prevalent in the Hmong case, given the emphasis on Hmong men's alliance with the U.S. military via the Secret War in Laos.² Addressing this gender gap, this chapter centers refugee women from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, detailing how they have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves and their families. Specifically, it focuses on how they have engaged in complex and creative forms

of survival and resistance in three different but interlinked contexts: in wartime, in refugee camps, and in resettlement.

By most accounts, Southeast Asia was the site of one of the most brutal and destructive wars between Western imperial powers and the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. U.S. military involvement in the region in its proxy wars against communism globally displaced millions of Southeast Asians from their homes, killing many more. As a consequence, Southeast Asian refugees are associated with highly charged images of poverty, violence, and statelessness—an unwanted problem for asylum and resettlement countries. With some notable exceptions, social scientists have generally interpreted the refugees' experiences within a deficit model, reducing them to targets of disciplinary social service and mental health agendas.³ In this chapter, I move away from this “damage-centered” research that reinforces a one-dimensional notion of refugee communities as “depleted, ruined, and hopeless,”⁴ and toward a “desire-based” research that accounts for “the hope, the visions, the wisdom of [their] lived lives and communities.”⁵ Focusing on the rich and complicated worlds of Southeast Asian refugee women, culled from existing oral histories and interviews, I show how they constitute “intentionalized beings” who labor to have resilient, productive, and heroic lives even in displacement.⁶

Women's Experiences during Wartime

During the wars in Southeast Asia (1955-1975), Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese women became the spoils of war: they were not just killed but also raped and sexually abused—a fact that has been largely erased from historical accounts.⁷ Given the devastating personal losses that Southeast Asian women endured during the war, scholars have largely linked their mental

health—their psychological trauma, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder—to their wartime experiences.⁸ Accordingly, Southeast Asian women have been described primarily in terms of “poor, illiterate refugees in need of being saved.”⁹ However, even in the midst of war, people are always more than victims of their circumstances; they are also desiring subjects with both simple and complex needs and wants. This section discusses the multiplicity of Southeast Asian women’s experiences during wartime—the personal costs, to be sure, but also the unexpected moments of joy and opportunity.

War is not exclusively a matter for men, or a masculine domain. Instead, it is a complex process that relies in part on gendered beliefs, often working in tandem with and through racial beliefs.¹⁰ During the Vietnam War, as the U.S. government contemplated intervening in Vietnam’s civil war, U.S. print media began to publish stories and images of Vietnamese women designed to make U.S. intervention palatable to the public.¹¹ At the time, Vietnamese women were recognized globally as powerful participants in Vietnam’s civil war—as volunteers repairing roads and bridges, as soldiers operating anti-aircraft guns, as doctors working on the front lines;¹² and yet, American journalists and government officials often inscribed them “within an orientalist discourse of femininity, irrationality, and backwardness.”¹³ To make Vietnamese women, and therefore the Vietnam War, acceptable to the American public, U.S. print media framed Vietnamese women’s bodies as exotic and hyperfeminine, fitting them into the preexisting tropes on Asian women as prostitutes, war brides, and dragon ladies.¹⁴ Below are two examples of the media’s framing of the politically powerful and glamorous Madame Nhu, the *de facto* First Lady of South Vietnam from 1955 to 1963, as a “dragon lady,” and hence dangerous:

Perhaps the most extraordinary personality in the Ngo dynasty is Ngo

Dinh Nhu's wife. Mme. Nhu is a beautiful, gifted, and charming woman; she is also grasping, conceited, and obsessed with a drive for power that far surpasses that of even her husband.¹⁵

Beautiful in a strawberry pink *ao dai*, the dark-eyed lady seemed as gentle as a kitten. But when she launched into her speech in a high-pitched staccato voice, her words had the bite of an outraged tigress.¹⁶

Racialized and sexualized images of Vietnamese women thus became “tools to explain, justify, criticize, or create sympathy for the war.”¹⁷ The efforts to reduce Vietnamese women to “feminine, irrational, and backward spokeswomen of Vietnam”¹⁸ laid the groundwork for the eventual representations of Vietnamese women as one-dimensional victimized subjects in the war.

The wars in Southeast Asia, which repeatedly displaced families and pushed them to be on the move, forced women, and not only men, to actively bear responsibility for the war efforts through their everyday practices. During the peak of the secret war in Laos, Hmong men suffered the highest casualty rate among all the groups involved in the wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. For Hmong women, U.S. secret bombings and guerrilla warfare permeated their everyday lives, turning them into de facto civilian “soldiers”—unwilling participants in the war who do the labor of sorting, mourning, and burying dead bodies, and of keeping family members safe. They thus took on the task of constantly moving the family to stay ahead of the fighting and Communist persecution. This unrootedness constituted the “Hmong diasporic condition” whereby “Hmong women and families lived their lives on the edges of the escape paths in

makeshift shelters constructed with banana leaves to shield the rain.”¹⁹ As a Hmong woman described her family’s precarious life in Laos during the war:

we couldn’t live in any secure place to raise any pigs or chickens to eat.

With the bombing on vegetation, the animals were sick and we couldn’t raise or eat them We struggled a lot when you talk about refugee life. They dropped rice for us to eat but we didn’t have anything to eat it with. We just ate so we wouldn’t starve. . . . , you must bring a pot and a knife so that you can use it to find and cook food wherever you go. When the group leader decides that we’ll stay there, then everyone will go cut down bamboos and trees to build shelter We’ll live there for a while, but if Communists come then we have to move again.²⁰

While displacement created untold hardships for women, it also disrupted familial and community authority, opening new paths for some women and girls to resist cultural expectations and to adopt new ways of being. Wartime anarchy thus enabled more women to unshackle themselves from family discipline, and to make more independent choices about dating, friends, and work. As an example, during wartime in Saigon, the chaos of war allowed some Vietnamese women to upend sexual mores by having affairs with men outside of marriage.²¹ Trí Nguyễn related that his mother had a brief but passionate affair with a wealthy married man immediately before and after the Fall of Saigon. One can imagine her conflicting emotions at the time: the sadness of losing a country mixed uncomfortably with the sweetness of an illicit relationship. As Trí voices these conflicts: “I know that’s a big piece of her life during

the war, but she doesn't want to talk about it, so I still don't know much about the war.

Everything is so vague, and it's hard to ask my mom questions about it. How can I bring it up without bringing up bad memories?"²²

Wartime demands also provided some women with unexpected job opportunities that freed them from gender and class-based constraints. Due to the urgent need for medical support during the war, nurses were among the first group of Hmong women to be formally educated and to establish themselves as professionals.²³ Hmong women and girls flocked to nursing to escape agrarian life and to improve their social and class standing; more than 3,500 Hmong women became village health workers throughout Laos during the war.²⁴ Consequently, these women *embraced* the war because it provided them opportunities that they would not have had otherwise to improve their education and socioeconomic status—and to have fun and be financially independent.²⁵ The single young women's newfound independence irked elders and male peers, who charged that formal education and working among soldiers would lead the women to engage in sexual deviancy.²⁶

Another example of unexpected opportunities for women was the sex industry that sprang up in Saigon to serve American servicemen during the war. While the sex industry is replete with abusive encounters, it is important to note that some Vietnamese “bargirls” remembered the war comparatively “as the best time of their lives”²⁷ because it gave them unexpected freedom: “freedom from the drudgery of domestic work, from the dominance of husbands and fathers, and from the expectations of their culture.”²⁸ Born and raised in poor villages in Vietnam, these women chafed at the traditional gender roles that they were expected to fulfill. For most of them, the prospect of an impending marriage—and a looming life of drudgery—drove them to leave home and head for Saigon, where they worked in the many bars and clubs catering to American

soldiers.²⁹ According to these women, normal social distinctions blurred or collapsed during wartime Saigon, which allowed them to refashion themselves as single, independent, and moneyed women in the city.³⁰ Dislodged from their village communities and families, the women did not face the same social sanctions as did the Hmong nurses. For young girls and women who engaged in prostitution, they could earn \$100 a month, four times what male Vietnamese officials earned at that time.³¹ They thus recalled their wartime experiences in Saigon as “one of good times, and camaraderie, and the exhilaration of being young and free in the city.”³²

Wartime conditions also compelled and enabled women to patch together non-normative, and at times less-oppressive, families for themselves and their children. In the case of the Vietnamese bar women, when their American boyfriends reneged on their marriage promise or failed to acknowledge their offspring, the women became each other’s trusted families, protecting one another from predators and serving as surrogate mothers for each other’s children. In so doing, they (re)created a tight-knit network of the familial assistance that they had lost when they moved away from their villages.³³

More generally, in the face of devastating losses of lives, women labored to generate new social ties for themselves and their loved ones. The fifteen-year war in Laos killed thirty thousand, or 10 percent of the Hmong population, leaving behind tens of thousands of Hmong orphans, and countless number of widows and single mothers and separated women who were without direct family support. For the Hmong refugees who escaped into Thailand, the Mekong River crossing was traumatic, resulting in untold number of deaths and family separations. Youa Yang recounts that her family, pursued by Communist soldiers, split up right before they crossed the river, resulting in the tragic death of one of her uncles.³⁴ To survive, Hmong women had to

constantly rebuild families and communities for themselves and for each other—through adopting, fostering, remarrying, living together, and supporting one another.³⁵

In Cambodia, the “killing fields” of the 1970s, considered one of the most brutal mass atrocities in human history, left Cambodians with fewer resources to reassemble their personal and social life. The Khmer Rouge seizure of power in April 1975 unleashed genocidal policies and practices that destroyed family structure, which extensively impacted gender relations and women’s lives. Under Pol Pot, many women were raped and killed; others were removed from their families and forced into unwanted marriages—a form of gender and sexual violence that legitimized forced sexual relations.³⁶ As Ra Pronh described the fear and ambivalence that she experienced on her “wedding night”: “I don’t want to go to his house. But if I don’t go, I think they’re going to kill me I want to cry. I want to close my eyes because I don’t want nobody to see me.”³⁷

The Khmer Rouge brutality was most severe in the Northwest of Cambodia, where entire families were summarily executed. By 1977, in one Northwest region, “there were no more males in the village except for the base peasants.”³⁸ With the acute death rate of men, starvation, hard labor, illness and execution, Cambodian female survivors, such as Mrs. Tech struggled on their own, under the most daunting circumstances, to save their children and to hold their remaining families together:

I was a single mother with four sick children. I carried all my sick children by turn, running from one place to another to find a place free from the Khmer Rouge I needed to find money to support the children I escaped to the Thai border, where I set up a little business to make some money. When I arrived,

all my energies were almost gone, and the two children who were with me were very sick too We were admitted and then sent to Khao-I-Dang hospital by ambulance It had been extremely difficult to escape. I have felt sorry and sick ever since.³⁹

Stripped of any degree of safety, women did everything they could to stay alive, including stealing food for their children, smuggling and bartering, burying evidence of their family status, and faking their class or ethnicity.⁴⁰ Tragically, many women perished because they gave up their meager ration to feed their family, or because they were killed for stealing food for their family.⁴¹

Women's Experiences in Refugee Camps

The living conditions of the refugee camps in Southeast Asia varied considerably, depending on the resettlement status of its residents. There were two major types of refugee camps: the refugee processing centers that focused on the rehabilitation of refugees bound for resettlement; and the closed camps and detention centers that warehoused rejected refugees and treated them as little more than the living dead. For the most part, refugees who arrived prior to the mid-1980s had a much higher chance of moving on to resettlement than those who came after, when the world's attention had largely shifted away from the plight of the refugees. As a result, the rejected refugees became "the forgotten ones."⁴² Across Southeast Asia, the protracted refugees lived in prisonlike camps, encircled by barbed wire and armed military guards.⁴³ In the closed camps, such as the Hei Ling Chau and Chi Ma Wan camps in Hong Kong, asylum seekers were packed in "something akin to industrial shelving":⁴⁴

The camps were composed of “huts” made out of metal containers. Each hut contained approximately 20 three-level bunk beds which were constructed using metal frames and thin plywood boards. Each level counted as a unit which was partitioned from its neighboring unit by a wooden board and drapes. The bottom levels were usually allocated to families, meaning that a family of three, four, or even five had to live in an 8’ x 6’ x 3’ cubicle. The middle cubicles were usually allocated to couples, and the highest cubicles to single men or women.⁴⁵

Living in triple-decked cubicles the size of a twin bed, or on six-to-eighteen-square-foot mats on the crowded floor, camp dwellers “[had] absolutely no privacy.”⁴⁶ All daily activities, even the most intimate, were conducted in public. The refugee camp environment thus inflicted serious and often lasting wounds on refugee family life, as refugees struggled to maintain family life under very trying conditions: lack of privacy, mass meals, regimented routines, uncertain future, and changing gender and generational dynamics.

For young women, sexual harassment was rampant, made worse by the close living quarters and lack of privacy. Young women also had to fend off sexual assault from the local police and officials. At the prisonlike Khao-I-Dang (KID) refugee camp, operated by the UNHCR and the Thai army, Thai soldiers routinely terrorized and sexually violated Cambodian refugee women.⁴⁷ Fearing ostracization by their families and communities, many Cambodian women who had been raped often dealt with their shame by keeping silent; “sexual abuse was the one kind of unspeakable experience they would not discuss.”⁴⁸ As a Cambodian American aid worker said, “Cambodian women face many problems, but rape is the worst of all of them. In

Cambodia, girls are compared to flowers that can wither at a hurtful touch, like the rose and the jasmine.”⁴⁹ Vietnamese American Suzie Xuyen Dong Matsuda exhibited the same reticence when she confided that as a young woman without family, she was subject to sexual abuse in the camp: “There’s several incidents but I am not going to share here. I overcome that, but it . . . really did take a toll on me.”⁵⁰

In the camps that housed long-stayers, refugees out of necessity institutionalized many aspects of their daily life. For example, in the Palawan camp in the Philippines, Vietnamese residents established a governing body, the Vietnamese Refugee Council, which had jurisdiction over the internal affairs of the camp. The principal goal of the council was to create a “small Vietnam” *in situ*; a unique ritual was “the weekly flag ceremony at which the flag of the former Republic of South Vietnam was raised, the old national anthem was sung and the chairman of the VR Council spoke to the gathered camp population to make announcements and to exhort the Vietnamese to uphold Vietnamese values.”⁵¹ This nation-building ritual was gendered, since most members of the council were former male officers of the South Vietnamese military who, in diaspora, embodied the fallen nation and the opposition to communism professed by the majority of the refugees.⁵²

In the same way, given the valorization of Hmong men as military heroes,⁵³ Hmong refugee women had a difficult time gaining leadership positions in refugee camps.⁵⁴ In 1992, in the refugee camps of Thailand, even though Hmong women made up over half of the camp population, not one woman held an administrative position or was on any decision-making committee. Women were also underrepresented on staff, filling just 7 percent of the refugee-hired positions for the UNHCR and the three largest nongovernmental organizations.⁵⁵

On the other hand, the daily exigencies of camp life and the goals of international relief organizations—to save women and children—empowered women vis-à-vis men. In the processing centers in Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, as relief workers sought to “civilize” Cambodian refugees through public-health campaigns, schools, and women’s organizations, they appeared to be more sympathetic to Cambodian female clients than to male ones, “ma[king] women key agents in these lessons of clientship.”⁵⁶ For their part, forced into the role of sole family caretaker, Cambodian women had to figure out how to get what they needed from the aid and service agencies to ensure the survival of their children.⁵⁷ Because women were more dependent on handouts than men, who could more easily engage in smuggling, trade, and construction work, they actively built patronage relations with relief workers and strategically attended language classes and religious services in exchange for access to food, goods and services. In families where men were present, women’s increased access to Western institutions and corresponding decreased dependence on and deference to men widened the fissure between husbands and wives and destabilized the traditional family arrangements. As an example, given their strengthened position vis-à-vis men, some women retaliated against their husband’s polygamy by taking lovers of their own.⁵⁸

Hmong women also strengthened their economic position by parlaying *paj ntaub*, a traditional form of embroidery designed and stitched by women, into a source of income. In the Thai refugee camps, with the help of international relief workers, Hmong women began to market their embroidery to international buyers. Over the years of their stay in the camp, *paj ntaub* evolved from simple animal and human shapes into more elaborate representational story cloths that illustrate the traditional Hmong tales, the old ways of life in Laos, and more recent war and exodus stories. In Laos, *paj ntaub* was traditionally reserved for women; in the camps,

men contributed by penciling the initial designs on the cloth. Given their precarious status as protracted refugees, Hmong women used the story cloths not only as a commercial enterprise but also as a vehicle by which to convince Western audiences of their legitimacy as communist-fleeing refugees.⁵⁹

Bound by their shared fate, confined in a cramped environment, and with ample time to spare, many refugees developed intense kin-like relationships with each other. A quick Internet search for “Southeast Asian refugee camps” produces numerous photographs of inhabitants of all ages posing with large groups of friends or families. Eyes bright, smiles wide, arms linked, their warm intimacy radiates through the computer screen. Mary Hoang Long, a refugee from Vietnam, described a typical day’s activities for her family at Phanat Nikkhom refugee camp: “. . . I volunteer, I work for the office for interview with new people come to the camp. My sister, she volunteers to teach at the preschool. My cousin, he volunteers and teach soccer and table tennis for the minor kids. On the night, we go to two theaters. . . One theater always had ghost movies and one theater for the drama movies and we can go to the movies in the night or we can dance. Yeah, and so fun.”⁶⁰

Other quiet rituals punctuated the passing of each day of camp life: “After a hard day at work, women usually get together in the shade of trees near their home. Talking about the past and sharing their dreams of resettlement in a third country are favorite social habits of the stateless Vietnamese in the Philippines.”⁶¹ As a Vietnamese refugee who spent two years at Galang refugee camp in Indonesia exclaimed, “It wasn’t luxurious but we were happy. Everybody helped each other. It was very social . . . There are a lot of good memories there . . . God, I miss those days!”⁶² These celebrations, both the boisterous and quiet ones, are a testament to the depth of the refugee spirit—to their ability to tap out a rhythm of life to

interrupt, however briefly, the monotony of their suspended existence.⁶³ These examples suggest that in the very space of despair and chaos of refugee camps, many refugee women and their families had managed to create new and meaningful social relations that endured long after their departure from the camps.

Women's Experiences in Resettlement

A crucial difference between immigrants and refugees is their differential relationship to the state. While immigrants are not closely monitored by the state after arrival, refugees are processed by layers of government policies and programs, designed to both assist and control them.⁶⁴ The inadequacy of U.S. resettlement policies has adversely shaped the economic and social wellbeing of Southeast Asian refugee communities.⁶⁵ Emphasizing economic self-sufficiency, U.S. refugee placement policy initially dispersed the refugee population to all 50 states, in an effort to speed their assimilation *and* to minimize any negative impacts on local communities.⁶⁶ This "scatter" policy stripped the refugees of invaluable ethnic community support, thereby decreasing the availability of resources to refugees at a time when they were most in need of them. Over the strong objections of resettlement workers and sponsors, many refugees eventually left the place of initial resettlement and migrated to other states to join their compatriots, producing large refugee concentrations in numerous states, especially in California and Texas.⁶⁷

When the Southeast Asian refugees began arriving in large numbers in the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. federal and local resettlement agencies strained to fit them into the existing economic, political, and cultural systems of under-resourced communities that could not

accommodate them. They were resettled *en masse* in “hyperghettos”: inner-city neighborhoods that warehouse the poorest of the urban poor. For these refugees, resettlement in the United States has often meant “continued violence, uncertainty, itinerancy.”⁶⁸

The one-size-fits-all approach to refugee policies botched resettlement efforts. Lavinia Limon, the executive director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees, explained the failed effort to resettle Cambodian refugees: “The Cambodians are manifestly the greatest failure of the refugee program in this country. . . . Mistake No. 1 was that we didn’t treat the Cambodians as different. The scope and breadth and depth of what they endured—the only thing you can compare it to, was the Jewish Holocaust.”⁶⁹ Moreover, as the majority of Cambodian refugees were poor, less educated, and from rural areas, they were particularly ill-prepared for the demands of urban life.⁷⁰ Even as U.S. resettlement workers preached economic self-sufficiency, they did not establish concrete and workable policies to assist refugees in becoming self-supporting. Instead, social workers instructed poor Southeast Asian refugees to apply for liveable-wage jobs that did not exist or did not match the refugees’ skill sets. In the postindustrial economy of the 1980s and 1990s that was marked by increased feminization of labor, refugee women with limited education, skills, and English fluency often congregated in female-intensive low-wage industries, such as garment and microelectronics.⁷¹

To support their families, many Southeast Asian refugee women relied on public assistance. Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian refugees represented the largest per capita race or ethnic group in the country receiving welfare. In 1990, in California alone, they registered welfare-dependency rates of nearly 80 percent.⁷² The major federal welfare program for needy refugee families was AFDC—Aid to Families with Dependent Children. A woman-centered program, AFDC provided benefits directly to women, thus tipping the balance of

familial power toward them, strengthening their role in caring for the family and making household decisions. The fact that it was women who received the government's monthly checks undercut male authority, already reduced due to the inability of many men to secure viable employment.⁷³ In the poor areas of Oakland, California, many Cambodian households became *de facto* female-headed households, not only because they had no surviving male head, but more so because women were better integrated into the system of government-provided financial aid and health coverage.⁷⁴

Some women also turned to state agents—in the form of social workers, police, and judges—for help with domestic disputes.⁷⁵ However, dependence on the welfare state has its costs, including having to learn the right story and language in order to fit the state's "controlling narratives about being a refugee and a welfare recipient."⁷⁶ Thus in seeking to use the law to resolve domestic disputes and discipline their wayward husbands, Cambodian women had to tacitly agree to, or at least not to disagree with, the social workers' projection of domestic abuse onto Cambodian culture, which was described variously as "traditional," "authoritarian" and "patriarchal."⁷⁷ In effect, Cambodian women mitigated private patriarchy by becoming subjects of public patriarchy—of state agents who espouse white middle-class social and cultural norms.⁷⁸

Following the mandate of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), social workers insisted that the refugees use public welfare programs—specifically cash assistance and food stamps—only as stopgap measures. However, as federally funded resettlement assistance programs ended, and un(der)employment persisted, most of the refugees had to remain on public assistance into the 1990s, at times illegally supplementing their meager welfare checks with off-the-book menial jobs, such as piecemeal sewing.⁷⁹ Challenging the myth of the "welfare cheat" who unfairly profits from public assistance, Rorth Pronh, a Cambodian American youth

organizer, described her family's substandard living conditions while on welfare: "There are nine people living here. It's not enough space. We can't afford to get any furniture . . . This is what we gotta live through because we're on welfare. And they say welfare is supposed to help us. It's not. It's not at all. Because if it was, we wouldn't be living in these [types] of conditions."⁸⁰

Forgotten by refugee agencies and left to linger in the welfare system, a large segment of Southeast Asian families was entering a third consecutive decade of welfare dependency when President Bill Clinton signed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), replacing AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).⁸¹ TANF introduced "workfare," mandatory work programs that required welfare recipients to work 30 hours a week, and limited the total number of years for which they could receive welfare to five—demands that disproportionately affected homebound women with young children who had to scramble for childcare while toiling in no-wage city-approved jobs or low-wage, dead-end jobs.⁸² The American welfare state succeeded in reducing the number of public assistance caseloads through pushing poor women into dead-end jobs, expelling them from the welfare rolls, penalizing them for violating the work requirement, and curtailing their personal choices. Six years after the passage of PRWORA, in California, Southeast Asian welfare cases decreased from 53,805 in 1996 to 31,155 in 2002—a 42 percent drop.⁸³ Within ten years, nationally, the welfare reform measures had reduced the number of poor single mother families served by 63 percent.⁸⁴

Southeast Asian refugees and their children strenuously fought what they perceived to be punitive and gendered welfare reform measures. Distraught women, assisted by their children who served as interpreters, flocked to community organizations and immigrant rights groups, seeking assistance. In countless testimonies in welfare reform hearings, court cases, and social

service forums, Southeast Asians angrily spoke out against what they perceived to be a series of U.S. broken promises. Centering their experiences as refugees, they linked their despair over welfare reform to their stories of war trauma and to U.S. irresponsibility.⁸⁵ A recurring narrative told a story of two acts of U.S. betrayal: the first act of betrayal occurred when U.S. troops pulled out of Southeast Asia in the 1970s, and the second act when the government removed welfare—the only form of economic security for the refugees. In one of the most desperate and direct condemnation of welfare reform, Hmong refugee Chia Yang ended her life, leaving behind an audiotape attributing her action to her despair over impending economic insecurity: She “could not bear the pain of starvation or that of having to watch her family suffer once again.”⁸⁶ In short, Southeast Asian refugee women viewed welfare loss as yet another act of U.S. betrayal; their testimonies indicated that they believed they were entitled to welfare benefits, given the role of the U.S. military in inducing their displacement in the first place.⁸⁷

For the majority of Southeast Asian refugees, the war did not end with resettlement. Refugee women, especially the elderly, reported a significantly higher level of war-related psychological distress than their male counterparts. Of all the Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants in the United States, Cambodian women are among the most in need of mental health care. As Rong detailed her anguish: “I lost my entire family, I have no parents, aunts or uncles, no grandparents. How can there be any happiness, that way?” Another, Noun, said, “How can there be any relief? I lost a husband, a son, seven brothers, and both parents. I am the only one left—like a lone reed.”⁸⁸ Many Cambodian women have been afflicted with a form of mysterious blindness, which has been explained as a physical manifestation of their retreat from sight and sound and into themselves.⁸⁹ At a Los Angeles eye clinic, fifty-four Cambodian women over age 40 suffered psychosomatic blindness over a three-year period in the late 1980s. Close to 80

percent of this group had lost at least three members of their families, often in their presence and often to arbitrary killings.⁹⁰ Elder Hmong women who lived through war's violence and multiple displacements linked their difficulties navigating life in the United States to the trauma they experienced during war. As two elder Hmong women explained, their hearts and minds are "constantly at war" even when they no longer hear gunfire.⁹¹

Despite their reliance on public assistance, Southeast refugee women have resisted the welfare state's attempts to curtail their reproductive rights through the imposition of family planning. For three decades, Cambodian mothers, many of whom lost their own children to starvation, disease, and war during the Khmer years, have defied attempts by the welfare state to regulate their bodies and limit their right to have more children.⁹² For them, exercising their reproductive rights was about ensuring the replenishment and survival of their family. However, cognizant of the importance of maintaining good relations with state workers who control access to needed medical services, Cambodian women did not actively resist family planning pressures, opting instead to quietly disregard medical advice, oftentimes through feigning ignorance. As an example, Asian American nurses who worked with Cambodian refugee women reported that their instructions on reproductive health were often met by silence. Through their strategic passivity and silent resistance, Cambodian women deftly negotiated a space "for making their own [reproductive] decisions and yet still eliciting the bureaucratic attention that helped secure medical access."⁹³

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have assessed the legacy of the U.S. wars in Southeast Asia not in the words

and deeds of American state officials and public media, but in the creative, improvised, and defiant life-making practices of Southeast Asian refugee women. We have examined how the women have created their worlds and made meaning for themselves and their families—in wartime, in refugee camps, and in resettlement—with particular attention to the alternative forms of life that they have generated on the social margins. While wartime exigencies devastated many aspects of women’s lives, including disrupting familial and community authority, they provided non-traditional women with unlikely opportunities to escape gender expectations and to invent new ways of being and living. In refugee camps and in resettlement, women’s increased access to Western institutions, such as international relief agencies and welfare offices, and their corresponding decreased dependence on and deference to men widened the fissure between husbands and wives and destabilized the traditional and unequal family arrangements.

The lives—and contributions—of Southeast Asian refugee women underscore the importance of examining gendered displacement from the knowledge point of the forcibly displaced, which takes seriously the hidden and overt injuries and also the joy and survival practices that play out in the domain of the everyday. As Ra Pronh, the Cambodian refugee woman whose story opens this chapter, expounds on the importance of listening to and learning from refugee stories, “I’ve gone through a lot . . . I want people to know my story. Everything I did—I want people to know it.”⁹⁴

Notes

- ¹ Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 1-5.
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⁵⁵ Cha, "Women."

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⁵⁷ Ong, *Buddha*, 148

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⁶⁵ Soo Ah Kwon, *Uncivil Youth: Race, Activism, and Affirmative Governmentality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 111.

⁶⁶ Carol A. Mortland and Judy Ledgerwood, “Secondary Migration Among Southeast Asian Refugees in The United States,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 16:3/4 (1987).

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⁷⁵ Ong, *Buddha*, chapter 6.

⁷⁶ Ong, *Buddha*, 141.

⁷⁷ Ong, *Buddha*, 167.

- ⁷⁸ Ong, *Buddha*, chapter 6.
- ⁷⁹ Tang, *Unsettled*, 77, 81.
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- ⁹³ Ong, *Buddha*, 115.
- ⁹⁴ Tang, *Unsettled*, 21.