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Southeast Asians in Exile* by Jean Langford (review)

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SOJOURN Symposium

***Consoling Ghosts: Stories of Medicine and Mourning from Southeast Asians in Exile.* By Jean Langford. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.**

Review essays by Danielle Tan and Patricia Symonds, with a response from Jean Langford.

Keywords: Cambodia, Laos, American Studies, Southeast Asian–Americans, thanatopolitics, death and dying, violence and trauma of war, haunting.

Review Essay I: Danielle Tan

Consoling Ghosts is a moving ethnographic inquiry into how Southeast Asian refugee emigrants in the United States — Khmer from Cambodia and Hmong, Kmhmu, and Lao from Laos, all collateral victims of the American wars in the region — engage with death and the dead, ghosts, spirits, souls and the world of the uncanny in general. The starting point of the book is a research project for which an American hospital hired Jean Langford to talk about death with these émigrés. Her *tour de force* successfully manages to extract from the ethnographic conversations — conducted in four languages with the help of translators — a rich philosophical treatment of bioethics and relationships with life and death, interspersed with excerpts of literature and poetry written by Southeast Asians in exile, Kmhmu ritual chants, and Langford's own experiences of death and loss.

Langford mobilizes a strong and bold theoretical assemblage that goes beyond cultural difference to advocate the necessity of apprehending spirits and the dead as critical players and social figures who have their own “needs, their discomfort, their authority, their power”

(p. 3) and who sustain an intimate and reciprocal relationship with the living. Drawing in particular on Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics, concerning the management of life in modern societies; Giorgio Agamben's thanatopolitics, concerning decisions about death (Agamben 2009); and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, concerning the relationship between sovereignty and power over life and death (Mbembe 2003), she offers her own interpretation of a thanatopolitics "that is resonant with Mbembe's idea of necropolitics, in that it draws attention to the institutionalized dispensability of racialized peoples and the reduction of the dead within specific regimes of violence to 'empty, meaningless corporalities'" (p. 4). Langford's ambition is to consider the implications of such regimes of violence for the social existence of the dead, and even to force a recognition of the "co-belonging" of the living and the dead (ibid.).

Langford's essay complements Aihwa Ong's *Buddha is Hiding* (Ong 2003), which sees the same refugees — specifically, Cambodians — becoming new citizen-subjects through a dual process of being-made and self-making. Ong describes the ways in which various government policies and institutions providing social and healthcare services have affected the newcomers' lives and taught them how to be American. Both *Consoling Ghosts* and *Buddha is Hiding* present extensive criticisms of American institutions. American welfare institutions as well as hospitals embody disciplinary spaces and sites of state power that shape conducts and subjectivities. On the one hand, Ong highlights the everyday biopolitics in the modelling of new modern subjects into citizens, which subjects poor refugees and migrants to a series of determining codifications and administrative rules that govern how they should be assessed and treated, and how they should think of themselves and their actions. On the other hand, Langford looks at the ways in which everyday biopolitics "involves determinations about the relative value of particular lives, the relative permissibility of particular deaths, and an implicit governance of the traffic between living and dead" (p. 4). The most striking outcome of her consideration of these poignant testimonies and memoirs is the revelation that Southeast Asian emigrants are haunted by not

only the “embodied violence of war and state horror, but also the structural violence of minoritization and poverty” (p. 4).

Langford chooses, however, not to expand on two theoretical approaches that could help her provide a thorough picture of thanatopolitics.

First, the concept of “governmentality”: Michel Foucault’s biopolitics (e.g., Foucault [1979] 2008) is closely linked to his notion of governmentality, which he often defines as the “art of government” (Foucault [1979] 2008, p. 1). He develops a broad idea of “government” that is not limited to state politics alone, but also includes a wide range of control techniques. It applies to a wide variety of objects, from one’s control of the self to the “biopolitical” control of populations. As Ong points out,

“Governmentality” thus involves two entangled processes of subjectification: one is “subjected to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to one’s own identity by a conscience of self-knowledge”; but because no relationship of power is all-encompassing, “[e]very power relation implies at least *in potentia*, a strategy of struggle”. A strategy of power elicits a counterstrategy, so that interactions among power relations produce processes of ongoing adjustment, negotiation, and conflict. (Ong 2003, p. 15)

While Langford ascribes an active role to the dead and considers the storytellers of the book as “cotheorists of death” (p. 6) precisely to resist casting them as “suffering refugees” or “struggling immigrants” (ibid.), she rarely tells us how these subjects resist the schemes of control to which they are subjected. Nor does she elaborate on their counterstrategies to evade, subvert, criticize, or negotiate such techniques of control and practices of regulating the end of life and the bodies. She writes as if these storytellers possess no “spirits of resistance” (Ong 1987). As a result, their stories reinforce a perception of them as “suffering refugees” and “struggling immigrants”, exactly what Langford wanted to avoid. She writes, for example, “Emigrants speak of humiliations at the welfare office and a lower standard of care in the hospitals” (p. 47).

What emerges from their testimonies is that they are not treated “as an equal friend” (p. 10). Some of them denounce “the lack of hospitality”; they confess their anger against a U.S. government that never recognized their contribution to the war or offered them veterans’ benefits (ibid.). As good guests, however, they have to keep their mouth shut and be respectful (p. 9).

The second theoretical approach whose value Langford seems to underestimate is one centred on the relationship(s) among race, class, and biopolitics. She informs us in her book’s introduction that ethnicity had already been established as the primary variable in the research project in which she was participating. Yet she deliberately chooses not to organize her book by ethnicity or to focus on ethnographic descriptions in order to “avoid flattening and reifying ‘complex persons’ into cultural representatives” (p. 6) and “to discourage a reading that would explain away critical perspectives on thanatopolitics as the results of cosmologies relevant only to specific social worlds (ibid.). Though we can understand this choice, it does not help us understand Langford’s recourse to Mbembe’s necropolitics with its emphasis on “the institutionalized dispensability of racialized peoples”. We must also regret her failure to engage more with Mbembe and his concepts especially regarding the function of racism as a means to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state (see Mbembe 2003, p. 17). Can we see the United States as a “hyper-neoliberal racial state”, as the work of critical educational theorist Henry Giroux seems to provocatively suggest in *Reading Hurricane Katrina* (Giroux 2006)? In particular, Giroux had argued that the United States has, since the Reagan administration, silently governed in the interests of corporate America at the expense of human lives. He argues that it has utilized the repressive power of colour-blind ideology to implement policy reforms that increasingly and silently relegate disadvantaged populations to the margins of society, thereby permitting their disposability — letting them die. In the case of natural disasters like Katrina, the neoliberal state was complicit in the biopolitical project not only of letting die, but of

actively disposing what it had redlined as valueless portions of the U.S. population.

With regard to Southeast Asian emigrants, Ong (2003) has shown that in the discourse that locates “newcomers” to American society along a continuum running from black to white, Cambodian refugees are placed at the “black pole”. Lao, Hmong and Kmhmu refugees are also assigned to the status of “new underclass” and stigmatized as recipients of social welfare. They are clearly distinguished not only from whites, but also from other Asian groups such as Vietnamese and Chinese Americans, considered “model minorities” as a result of their successful economic integration. The inclusion in Langford’s book of stories and testimonies from Vietnamese and from Khmer and Lao refugees of Chinese descent might permit examination of whether their higher social and economic status enables them to resist or better negotiate the violence of thanatopolitics.

Apart from these minor questions and comments, Jean Langford’s remarkable work will inspire anthropologists to conduct comparative ethnographic research in other Western countries in which Southeast Asian emigrants have found refuge. In France, for instance, Southeast Asian refugees have a more positive image than in the United States. They are seen as victims of communist regimes that seized power in the former French Indochina, and they have thus received better treatment than other immigrants — those, for example, from the Maghreb or the more recent newcomers from Afghanistan. Unlike their peers in the United States, who reproach that country for its “lack of hospitality”, the refugees in France have generally been grateful for the protection of the former colonizer. However, they suffered from downward social mobility at the time of their arrival since they came from relatively privileged backgrounds in contrast to those Southeast Asians who found refuge in the United States; a large number were well-educated urban-dwellers, and sometimes belonged to the elite. The other sociological pattern apparent among Southeast Asian refugees in France is the high proportion of ethnic Chinese — more than 50 per cent — among them and the degree to which they have been “resinicized” as a result of stronger forms

of solidarity among ethnic Chinese. The most telling example of this pattern is the Chinatown in the thirteenth arrondissement of Paris, which was established by Southeast Asian emigrants of Chinese descent. Moreover, the violence of thanatopolitics in French hospitals might also have different implications for Southeast Asian emigrants, as the healthcare system in France is not discriminatory and the quality of medical care or treatment is not dependant on income. Finally, these refugees have been subjected to a policy of assimilation, and encouraged to lose their cultural specificity — language, religion, cultural rituals — in order to live according to the Judeo-Christian values of French society. Despite a forced march toward assimilation, Southeast Asian emigrants in France have found new ways of organizing their rites by renewing syncretistic practices and confining them to the private sphere in order to be able to continue to pay their debts to the dead and to console their ghosts.

Review Essay II: Patricia Symonds

“Death is inconceivable if it is not related to a new form of being in some way or another, no matter how this form may be imagined” (Eliade 1977, p. 20). This quotation from Mircea Eliade suggests that death needs explanation. It needs to be, in some way, seen as the end of life as we know it but not the end of being.

This essay considers an important book for anyone interested in the study of Southeast Asian medicine and mourning. Jean Langford’s *Consoling Ghosts* provides a careful and in-depth analysis of changes in the lives (and deaths) of people who came to the West as a result of war and violence in Southeast Asia. War and violence leave people involved with memories and horror, and escape from war necessitates a new way of living. However, Langford argues that the trauma that the subjects of her research have faced and the shock of entering a new cultural milieu have brought problems of their own. These people’s methods of healing, their rituals and rites around the dead and dying, are often questioned and misunderstood. Langford

uses stories and discussions with many of these Southeast Asians to learn about their views, their fears and the ways in which listening to their stories and dreams can make it possible to understand their experiences. She shows that many of these nightmares concern the present in the United States, not the past. In fact, their experiences in the United States sometimes mirror the betrayals of the past in Laos or Cambodia.

The book tells us a great deal about Khmer Kmhmu, and Hmong experiences since their migration to the United States. It carefully explains informants' stories, and I noted many similarities among — not least in informants' regarding Buddhism as the basis for their beliefs — but also differences. My own experiences are with Hmong who came from Laos after the Vietnam War. Their beliefs are different, and their views of health and illness — and of death and dying — often take different paths. In 1980, I worked in the obstetrics area of a healthcare clinic and saw Hmong women's confusion and apprehension about medical practices. As an anthropologist in training I became concerned and wanted to know why drawing blood or requesting a urine sample made many of them leave the clinic. I became interested in birthing practices, as many of the women became resentful when a male physician wanted to examine them. I began my own discussions on who the Hmong were and on changes in their medical practice and the need for those changes. I was interested in their views about spirits, about sacrificing animals and, when I began to see babies born in the hospital, in the kinds of kinship that I observed. I decided to find out more about how the Hmong lived, what kinds of medical care they had known, and what rituals they performed when a person died.

It took some time before my research with the Hmong started in Asia, but I learnt a great deal about the Hmong in the United States before I left. Undertaking language training in order to be able to communicate, I became friends with several women and especially with Iab Moua Yang, who took me to rituals and explained their functions and significance. I met students in the local schools and a young Hmong man who was training to be a physician. I observed

the killing of pigs in the bath tub and tried hard to discover the reason for it. I went to the ritual performed after a baby was born, and I was taught how to wrap the strings around the wrist of the child wishing the spirits to be good and to provide a good life for the infant as it grew. I went to death rituals and attempted to understand the ways in which death affected families.

Little had been written about Hmong culture, life and death when I went to live in a Hmong village high in the mountains of northern Thailand. This dearth of knowledge on the Hmong people was also a motivation to study them for I learned a great deal in my eighteen months in Thailand. In my first months, I learned about shamanic practices and their importance for health issues. The Hmong cosmology also dictated the importance of understanding that birth and death are not opposed to each other, but they are different stages on a continuous journey and their difference is what makes the journey possible. I saw rituals and wondered if they were practised by the Hmong community in the United States. The Hmong shaman ceremony was a daily happening, sometimes nightly, and I was always welcome to observe. I could also ask questions during these ceremonies, but the answers were sometimes puzzling. However, speaking about death and dying was taboo, especially in a Hmong home. When the dead person was buried and the rituals finished, I would go off into the trees with the elders and ask my questions.

What started out as an investigation into how and why birth is so important to the Hmong became intertwined with the study of death. I was shown what Langford writes about the social existence of the dead and how the Hmong negotiate this relationship. The Western approach turns death into a medical condition to be managed, but not an existential condition to be experienced. It is an upsetting topic. While death is very real, it is hard to talk and write about it. It is arguably the biggest unknown that people experience across continents and societies. *Consoling Ghosts* not only examines the trauma of war, dislocation and cultural shock emerging from the stories of emigrants from Laos and Cambodia, but it also touches on a common and basic human experience. It writes about the Euro-

American ways of dealing with death and shows how a people who suffered in horrific ways in Southeast Asia before arriving in the United States had to rethink the meaning of death.

Langford illustrates the inadequacy of Western ideas about death for these people of Southeast Asia with strong animist and Buddhist traditions. She shows that the management of death in hospitals, funeral homes and cemeteries effectively invalidates the social existence of the dead in ways that echo the violation of the dead during war time. Western ideas of mourning and memorializing the dead allow us to move on in a world that contains only the living. For Southeast Asians, the world never contains only the living. The eternal angst of the murdered and tortured dead is real to them and demands that one must propitiate and comfort, or console their ghosts. However, this is true for all who die, whether from the horrors of war or from other causes. Responsibilities to the dead and the ways that they are played out are important for the living. Langford discusses in depth how difficult it was, and for some still is, for Southeast Asians to “perform” the rituals here.

Much has changed for these Southeast Asians who arrived in the United States after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. It has been difficult for them to deal with the hospitalization of the very sick, changes in their health conditions, the experience of witnessing relatives die in hospitals, and the trauma for some of going through the experiences of autopsies or arranging funerals. As time passes, many Hmong have found ways to adapt after gaining more knowledge and experience about living here.

However, Langford argues that death is still an issue as responsibility to the dead — and to the spirits that accompany them — represents their primary responsibility. Cows are still killed for the dead here in the United States, not just for mythical/spiritual reasons but also for social, economic and political reasons, as they were in the past. However, most of them are now killed on farms and then shipped to funeral homes that conduct Hmong rituals.

I attended the funeral of Vang, a very good Hmong friend. He was a shaman and had been a source of information for me on

Hmong medicine. I experienced a rather difficult period of bad health, and I asked him if he could perform a shamanistic ritual for me. I was consuming Western medicine but, like many Hmong people, I wanted the rendering of words and advice from my friend. He and his wife came to our home and brought all of the paraphernalia that he needed to conduct the ritual. My children were present, and they had to make many paper boats out of Chinese “paper money” as an offering for me during the process. Vang considered many of the issues that could have caused my illness and told my husband that his deceased parents in “the land of the ancestors” needed money and had made me ill to signal to him to send some paper money to them. All of the paper boats were burned in our fire place. We killed several chickens and he looked at the bones and did an augury to assess the future for me.

A couple of years later, I was called to attend Vang’s funeral. He had died at home and was prepared for burial by his family. The funeral ceremony in which the “Showing the Way” chant (*Qhuab Kev*) — giving detailed instructions for the journey to the land of the ancestors that are recited and played to the soul of the deceased — is sung was happening the next day. Vang was dressed carefully, but he was wearing a suit bought for the occasion. I was much surprised, as all the Hmong whom I had seen at previous funerals had been carefully dressed in beautiful embroidered clothing made by the women in the family. All of these clothes were symbolic, intended to identify the dead person to the ancestors. When I asked, Vang’s wife said that all of his burial clothes were behind his head in the coffin so that he could change into them if he wished. He also held his identification papers in his hands in the form of his American passport. This is, of course, a sign that adaptation can change some of the ritual practices, but the responsibilities and love of family and friends continue.

Consoling Ghosts is an important book for anyone interested in literary and cultural analysis. It is thought-provoking and thorough in its treatment of the results of war and trauma for those who now live in the West. I think it would be a difficult book for undergraduate

students but informative and illuminating for graduate students and for people who work with refugee populations. I have one criticism of the book: I would have liked to see Vietnamese exiles included among the Southeast Asians whose stories it narrates.

Author's Response: Jean Langford

Many thanks to Danielle Tan and to Patricia Symonds for their thoughtful comments on *Consoling Ghosts*, and to the *SOJOURN* editorial staff for organizing this symposium and offering me a chance to reflect again on the weave of stories and their intellectual afterlives that composes this book.

Both Symonds and Tan have entered into the spirit of *Consoling Ghosts* (so to speak) by offering further stories, Symonds from her experience with Hmong in Laos and in the United States, and Tan from her knowledge of Southeast Asian communities in France. This cross-disciplinary gift of stories invokes the work of anthropology as a rolling reciprocity of stories, shared in fieldwork, and on the page, always prompting and provoking further reverberating stories, and gesturing to stories still untold. It also reminds me that stories inevitably spill beyond the illustrative projects to which they are called, and invite us to hear them otherwise.

Tan directs her attention to the book's discussion of biopolitics, in which she notes two critical absences. The first is a fuller engagement with governmentality, and particularly the way that it involves "counterstrategies" to biopower. She suggests that despite my authorial intention to not reproduce static images of "suffering refugees" or "struggling immigrants", *Consoling Ghosts* ends up doing just that by not showing the ways in which emigrants "evade, subvert, or criticize" biopolitical regulations of life and death. I very much appreciate her comments, which recall to me the title of the first published essay that resulted from my work with Southeast Asian emigrants, "Spirits of Dissent" (Langford 2005), a title that marks the initial interpretive thrust of the work — to listen to stories of spirits

precisely for a refusal of biopolitical regimens of organizing life and death. Yet this refusal might be embodied, dreamed, or circulated in rumours; it might not, that is, take on an easily recognizable form in “counterstrategies”. The refusal unfolds, I suggest, in registers of imagery, irony, and ambivalence. It involves what Lisa Stevenson, in another context, has called “the psychic life of biopolitics” (Stevenson 2014). Insofar as these ghost stories renegotiate biopower, they do so on terms other than those of liberal-political subjectivity (cf. Chakrabarty 2000, p. 112). Accounts of troubled ancestors, restless ghosts, or angry spirits of place reveal the way in which governmentality and its effects are infused with conflicting desires, fears, longings and psychic defences. I am interested, then, in how relations with the dead call into question a notion of resistance as a deliberate, self-consistent, or non-contradictory agency, and gesture toward a resistance (if that is still the right word) at once subtler and perhaps more profound, insofar as it shakes ontologies of life and death that are foundational in much of the global North.

Biopolitics itself, when viewed from this ghostly perspective, is exposed (as if through paranormal photography) as being in the grip of its own Euro-Christian spirits, entangled with eschatological commitments in which souls are asked to depart quickly and cleanly from dead bodies that medical and mortuary gazes work to reimagine as instantaneously inanimate matter. This argument, which labours to make visible the latent theological entailments of biopolitics, and which is less *about* Southeast Asian personal histories and philosophies than *inspired by* them, is from my own perspective the most critical intervention of the book.

If biopolitics can be reimaged as a project caught up in uncanny psychic undercurrents, then the responses to biopolitics that seek to evade its framings can be similarly reimaged. Why then for Tan, and perhaps for other readers, does this evasion seem to be eclipsed in *Consoling Ghosts* by narratives of suffering? Does an emphasis on ghost stories necessarily emphasize sorrow and mourning rather than the forcefulness of ongoing life as it carves out paths that crosscut biopolitical agendas? To this question I would raise another: what if

suffering, mourning and involvement with the dead are not opposed to life, but rather integral to its imaginative movement and motivating force? Here I might once again invoke Lisa Stevenson's work, this time for her notion of "mournful life" (Stevenson 2014, pp. 121–23), a life in which the dead play a vital part. Neither emigrants' stories nor the spirits that they invoke are passive entities. Rather, they actively wrestle with ethical-political questions. This ethical struggle can be heard in the conversations of Khmer elders who debate the merits of communicating terminal prognoses, share their knowledge of healing via sacred power or discuss the moral admonitions and reminders that spirits communicate to the living; or in the humour of Southeast Asian healthcare workers who enact a jokingly ironic distance from and implicit critique of the philosophical presumptions of biomedicine. Ultimately, I suggest that biopolitical theory — in which, following Foucault, I include theories of governmentality, as the aspect of biopolitics that focuses on populations — proves inadequate to grasping the social relations between the living and the dead.

The second absence that Tan observes concerns the way in which biopolitics is necessarily inflected with race and class. She argues for a more thorough engagement with Mbembe's notion of necropolitics and with the way in which racism enables "the murderous functions of the state". She is right to highlight how Lao, Khmer, Hmong and Kmhmu in the United States have been positioned, with some exceptions, as an "underclass" that is then counterposed to other Asian groups, who are framed more often as "model minorities". While racism is a theme in many of the stories retold in the book, it is often embedded in biopolitical protocols whose white Euro-Christian entailments are masked within secular framings of science and sanitation. That is, I have tried to show how, within the seemingly benign institutions that manage life and death, racism takes the form not only of medical inequities and neglect, but also of a Euro-Christian bias, the violent effects of which are directed beyond biological life to the sociality of the living and the dead. Undoubtedly, as Tan suggests, it would be interesting to know

how other groups of recent Asian emigrants, such as Vietnamese, might differently negotiate the regulations of life and death enforced in medical and mortuary settings. As Heonik Kwon has shown, in Vietnam itself ghosts have played a critical role in mourning and reinterpreting the American war and its aftermaths (Kwon 2008). Have they played a parallel role for Vietnamese emigrants seeking to negotiate life and death in the United States? Both Symonds and Tan note that the inclusion of Vietnamese emigrant communities could have enriched the book. I don't disagree, but will only note that, in terms of both fieldwork and the effort to even minimally understand the relevant histories, cultural repertoires and cosmologies, it was already ambitious to engage four language groups in one text. To extend the conversation to a fifth linguistic community, practising another strand of Buddhism, seemed better left to other scholars.

If Tan has focused on the biopolitical questions raised by *Consoling Ghosts*, Symonds attends more closely to the "existential" questions. With that focus, she illuminates a central intention of the book, which was to grapple with death and mourning in and of themselves, rather than with a culturally located set of ideas *about* death and mourning. Inevitably, perhaps, the book will be read as a representation of Southeast Asian–American cultures, and further as a clash between these cultures and Euro-American and biomedical cultures. Inevitably, perhaps, this story will catch us, and we will fall down, seduced by the tragedy of cultural collision (Taylor 2003). I am all the more grateful, therefore, for this opportunity to argue again for a different reading of the stories in this book, a reading that is partly articulated in Symonds's comment that "the world never contains only the living". Except that I would suggest that it is not only for Southeast Asians that the dead are a seething presence that must be taken into account (cf. Gordon 1997). However suppressed, sublimated, inadvertently stumbled over, or insistently dematerialized (cf. Keane 2006) the dead may be within Euro-Christian and secular regimes of mourning and memory, they are nonetheless a presence for all humans (and I suspect for many other species as well). This is why I invoke a thanatopolitics (though

the intellectual project may call for another word altogether) in the United States that extends to violations of the social existence of the dead. Opposing such a thanatopolitics entails, at least in part, a recognition of the inter-involvement of living and dead, and of the indebtedness of the living to the dead. As I note in the book, “An inability to conceive of a material indebtedness to the dead in favor of an abstract obligation to remember them is integral to a biopolitical regime that is not only focused on the management of life, but also based on a division of that life into materiality and spirit” (p. 165). The gift that, I still hope, is wrapped in this book is the possibility of thinking about biopolitics and the “existential” confrontation of death together, in order to suggest that biopower, along with many of the theorizations it has inspired, implicitly relies on a negation of the social life of the dead and a disavowal of the reciprocity between the dead and the living.

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