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Politics of refusal and crip willfulness in Y-Dang Troeung's *Landbridge [Life in Fragments]* and Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the perimeter*

MARÍA JESÚS LLARENA ASCANIO*

Universidad de La Laguna (Spain)

ABSTRACT

Troeung's creative and theoretical intervention in *Landbridge [A life in fragments]* (2023) and Madeleine Thien's in *Dogs at the perimeter* (2011) pose questions around alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric notions of healing and trauma recovery in the aftermath of mass violence. Thien's engagement with bioscientific discourse exposes the "limits of a scientific epistemological framework for understanding the traumas induced in socially, and historically, situated contexts" (Troeung, 2013, p. 72). Both works assemble an archive that enacts a politics of refusal, or crip willfulness –"a refusal to act in accordance with the system of compulsory able-bodiedness" (Johnson & McRuer, 2014, p. 136). This act of creative resilience in the afterlife of the Cambodian Genocide is what seems to inspire Troeung and Thien, whose works acknowledge a new *cripistemology* (McRuer, 2018; Puar, 2017) and are foundational in their attempt at decolonizing disability in trauma narratives.

KEYWORDS: Y-Dang Troeung, Madeleine Thien, Canadian literature, refugee worldmaking, resilience narratives, life writing, Cambodian genocide, crip willfulness

1. INTRODUCTION

Y-Dang Troeung's *Landbridge* and Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the perimeter* follow a literary trend of human rights literary portraits in their politicized act of inscribing a collective history

Address for correspondence: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Facultad de Humanidades, Campus de Guajara s/n, Apdo. 456, 38200 La Laguna, Santa Cruz de Tenerife; e-mail: mllarena@ull.edu.es

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of intersectional relations of race and ableness and ethical encounters in the afterlife of the Cambodian Genocide. This turn in refuge(e) afterlife attempts to rebuild a physical and psychological space of debility (Espiritu, 2014; Puar, 2017), in contrast to McRuer's "compulsory able-bodiedness" (2006), through the revision of the effects of generational trauma and war on the lives of Canadians (Nguyen, 2019; Troeung, 2013). Compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice (McRuer, p. 8). In this context, refuge(e) subjecthood demands a new onto-epistemology to decolonize dominant resilience stories and visibilize a collective disability, or crip willfulness, in refugee stories after the Cold War (Espiritu, 2014; Johnson & McRuer, 2014; O'Brien, 2017). The term crip includes not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well. Crip theory here contests and speaks back to institutions which perpetuate able-bodied hegemony, "figuratively and literally constructing a world that always and everywhere privileges very narrow (and ever-narrowing) conceptions of ability" (McRuer, p. 151).

In this respect, Troeung follows Ben-Moshe's concept of *race-ability*, as an assemblage of power formed at the intersection of race, disability, and refugee life, to propose *refugee race-ability*. As Troeung explains, refugee race-ability "seeks to grasp the entangled ways in which race and ableism exert their force upon refugee life, generating in turn their own refugee forces and epistemologies of resistance" (2023b, p. 278). We are dealing with an alternative paradigm of impairment, which interrogates concepts such as refuge(e) dehumanization and "slow death" or "living death" (Berlant, 2017; Mbembe, 2019). This new onto-epistemology analyses the "multivalent ways in which refuge(e) life and disability come together in the afterlife of war" (Troeung, 2023b, p. 279). Accordingly, refugee disability refers here to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of bodily, mental and behavioral functioning aren't made to signify monolithically" (McRuer 2006, p. 157). This turn in trauma studies seeks a physical and psychological alternative to self-adaptation and survival, that is, the refusal of the dominant "subaltern" resilience that interrogates: Who counts as disabled? Thus, the purpose is to analyze the possibility of agency in decolonizing dominant resilience narratives in the afterlife of the Cambodian Genocide and explore alternative approaches to resilience writing that offer decolonial models of thought instead.

This essay attempts to enact a new space of dissension and agency in crip narratives and analyze the links between disability and race to contest previous attitudes of assimilative resilience. Instead of understanding the 'disabled' body as an aberration, disqualified from the full attributes of subjectivity, we should revalue it as a variable mode of becoming (Shildrick, 2009, p. 15). Following Hirsch's idea of postmemory, refuge(e) subjectivity rather imagines, projects, and creates the past, which "approximates memory in its affective force" (2008, p. 109) and explores "potential new paths to (self) understanding, knowledge, hope, and positive agency opened by contemporary resilience narratives and the nascent field of critical resilience studies" (Fraile-Marcos, 2023, pp. 2–3).

2. REFUGEE ARCHIVE OF CRIP WILLFULNESS

> Disability itself does not live in depression or anxiety but rather exists … in the belief that certain bodily conditions are a fate worse than death. In short, disability politics establishes that the

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> problem of disability is not about individual bodies but about social injustice. (Clare, 2014, p. 208)

Decades after leaving Cambodia, the characters in both *Landbridge* and *Dogs at the perimeter* are still "haunted by the knowledge of those left behind" (Troeung, 2023a, p. 84) and maimed by the suffering they went through before arriving in Canada. In fact, as Troeung argues, Canadian mental health services failed to accommodate and attend to the needs of the Khmer Buddhist Cambodian refugees in the late 20th century stemming from their trauma as they did not have any prior knowledge of their spiritual and cultural practices. Accordingly, Puar's sense of maiming and debility (2017) makes Troeung and Thien articulate an onto-epistemology and write a refugee archive for the Cambodian afterlife based on the concept of "crip willfulness" (Johnson & McRuer, 2014, p. 24). This archive is a paratactic text which analyzes different moments of physical and psychological traumatic events that, as Clare argues, questions how we deal with loss when the host country's restoration is not the answer, but actually exerts "pure social control":

> I want us to respect and embrace the bodies disabled through environmental destruction, age, war, genocide, abysmal working conditions, hunger, poverty, and twists of fate, rather than deeming them abnormal bodies to isolate, fear, hate, and dispose of. How can bodily and ecological loss become an integral conundrum of both the human and nonhuman world, accepted in a variety of ways, cure and restoration only a single response among many? (2014, p. 212)

Following Puar's work, not all debilitated bodies are able to rehabilitate; thus, "the conditions that make disability endemic as opposed to exceptional are already ones of entrenched economic, racial, political, and social disenfranchisement" (2017, p. 16). The Khmer Rouge years (1975–1979) caused death to more than 1.7 million, and the rest suffered a terrible annihilation of collective history, memory, and culture in Cambodia. Known as the Pol Pot time, this communist regime destroyed the bourgeoisie, the intellectual and professional classes, and all ethnic minorities, together with all forms of cultural and spiritual life. In recent decades, however, we have witnessed a Southeast Asian renaissance in the arts to overcome the traumatic past, both within and beyond official state mechanisms. Both Troeung and Thien's work challenges cultural amnesia in an effort to "articulate the incomprehensible or heretofore unspeakable" (Espiritu, 2014, p. 3). This in-between space calls attention "to the discarded who emerge from the brutal dislocations produced by war, colonization, and globalization"; so, Yến Lê Espiritu asks, "what is involved in maintaining this balance between 'refuse and refuge'?" (2014, p. 23). As we read in *Body counts*, "it is precisely through the retellings and rereadings of these stories that people negotiate, forge, and live with their version of history, however fragmented and contested" (2014, p. 138).

This "crippling" that began before the war is later relocated in the space of Canadian exceptionalism (Troeung, 2023a, p. 92, p. 95, p. 101; Thien, 2011, p. 7, p. 53, p. 114). The lack of strength these characters suffer has more to do with the Khmer form of expression *baksbat*, meaning broken courage or simply distress, which in essence is a psychological fear response. The Cambodians who survived the genocide suffered *baksbat*, i.e., a broken body or broken form, which responds to a traumatic distress in a variety of forms, such as lacking trust in others, submissiveness, fear, and refraining from speech, or being mute. The latter means that the Khmer Rouge survivors were afraid to discuss the traumatic experiences of the past, or to speak their minds in the presence of more powerful people, due to their fear of possible disappearance, blame, hatred, and deportation. Accordingly, such a term signals the importance of interweaving the cultural meaning and knowledge of trauma and its aftermath with the Western models of trauma treatment (Chhim, 2013).

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In this effort to decolonize the dominant resilience in the afterlife of the Cambodian Genocide, the author of *Landbridge* resists a genealogy whereby "the refugee becomes legible only when whiteness enters the frame as an adjudicator of the refugee's humanity" (Troeung, 2022, p. ix). Decades after leaving Cambodia, our protagonists are still haunted and maimed by the suffering they went through before arriving in Canada. Accordingly, as the narrator in *Landbridge* points out, "even as I write these words, I do not do so idly. To write my own story, I must first create conditions for myself so that these written words will be, in some way, outside the demands of productivity" (Troeung, 2023a, p. 37). Thien's project is also a bold and difficult one. It is a project that "resists narrative, one that overwhelms narrative; one that is ultimately impossible to narrate fully, namely to traverse that place that human beings traverse at the soul's murkiest" (Brand, 2011, p. 32). *Dogs at the perimeter* also interweaves its treatment of the Khmer Rouge Genocide with a sustained exploration into the neurobiological underpinnings of trauma (Águila-Way, 2014, p. 22). It is with this awareness of the limitations of narrative, and, more generally, language, that we encounter the fragmentary narration of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime, where, as Brand suggests, "to describe human despair in despairing language or documentary language or journalistic language has already numbed us and so these details need another means of transport so that we may not look away" (2011, p. 32, cited in Beauregard, 2014, pp. 170–171).

Thien explores these questions through the interrelated stories of Janie and Hiroji, two friends and colleagues at the Brain Research Centre in Montreal, who share a common bond as refugees who flee to Canada to escape violence, before and during World War II, respectively. Janie arrives in Vancouver as a child refugee thirty years earlier, after losing her entire family to the Khmer Rouge Genocide in Cambodia, while Hiroji and his family flee Japan after the American fire-bombings of Tokyo during World War II. Hiroji's brother James has gone missing in Cambodia while working as a doctor with the Red Cross mission in Phnom Penh. As we read, the boundaries between past and present, between Canada and Cambodia, and between scientific objectivism and subjective experience begin to blur as the novel's plot line interweaves Janie and Hiroji's collaborative efforts to shed light on memory disorders, with the fractured accounts of their respective struggles to assimilate their own traumatic memories. Thien constructs a poignant parallel between the structural damages suffered by these patients and the more subtle failures in connectivity that can emerge from experience, particularly from historically induced forms of trauma (Águila-Way, 2014, p. 24).

In this respect, Marianne Hirsch argues that shards of memories of traumatic events persist to mark the lives of children of survivors, so the postwar generation "remembers" these powerful experiences by means of the fractured images, stories, behaviors, and affects transmitted, sometimes indirectly and wordlessly, within the family and the culture at large. Postmemory in the afterlife of the Cambodian Genocide lives with eyewitness memory; it imagines, projects, and creates a past that can be just as weighty, as it "approximates memory in its affective force" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 109). As we read in Espiritu's *Body counts*, both the first and the second generations use silence –sometimes to control and hide, but other times to love and protect– in an attempt to shield family members from the painful grip of the past (2014, p. 149). This intergenerational strain that we observe in the protagonists of *Landbridge* and *Dogs at the perimeter* thus becomes "a social, historical, and geopolitical affair that exposes multiple and interrelated forms of power relations" (Espiritu, 2014, p. 165). Accordingly, this postmemory occurs by itself in situations that share similar characteristics with the original traumatic situation. Several times it is also triggered by the information or past memories the brain has stored subconsciously during and after the genocide: "I did not know what I was making. Terrible dreams came, but I tried to let them run through me and reach the ground. I saw that they would always return, this was the shape of my life, it was

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where the contours lay, this was the form. Yet I wanted, finally, to be the one to describe it" (Thien, 2011, p. 171). This key moment in the narrative, with its references to overlapping memories and terrible dreams, is brought under apparent control through Janie's determination to be the one to describe her life –its shape, its contours, its form. Yet Thien's novel is not content to stop here. Immediately following this declaration, Janie remembers her son, Kiri, back in Canada, who "names the rivers for me just as I once taught him: *St. Lawrence, Fraser, Kootenay, Mackenzie, Yukon, Chaudiére, Assiniboine.* Words to keep him company, to name the world, to contain it" (Thien, 2011, p. 171). This forceful turn to a Canadian nationalist pedagogy –signalled here through a mix of colonial and Aboriginal (re)namings of rivers, repeated and arguably reproduced through the figure of Kiri– "raises the questions of additional 'cartographies of violence' that are not locatable in Cambodia in the 1970s and beyond *but remain inextricably present in Canada*" (Beauregard, 2014, p. 184; italics in the original).

Troeung's life in fragments is also read in a first-person narrative intertwined with photos, drawings, and letters that take a new meaning of refusal and resistance after her cancer diagnosis. This graphic resilience emerges from an interaction of systems of collective relational vulnerability, which creates an emotional ecosystem of co-dependence: "Here, in the space of loss and survival, injury and joy, the refugee makes and remakes life, confronts death, and grapples with the difficulty of language and meaning in the afterlife" (Troeung, 2023a, p. 93). Both fragmentary narratives begin with the first of many sections labelled a "[fragment]", presented in this bracketed form and told from the point of view of the narrator. In *Dogs at the perimeter,* Águila-Way argues, "[t]he motif of synaptic 'malconnection' established by the formal structure of the novel is echoed in a series of cartographic metaphors recalling how she was forced to leave her mother's deathbed at the work camp infirmary, Janie casts her suppression of this painful memory as an erasure of the landmarks that might have led her back to her most cherished childhood memories" (2014, p. 27). The narrator visualizes "a space in which there were no doors, no light or darkness, no landmarks. No future, no past. The things I kept hidden from Angkar had not been buried deep enough", she laments (Thien, 2011, p. 121). Thien builds on this insight by suggesting that although trauma-driven changes in the neurobiological self may not be as readily visible as the changes created by degenerative brain conditions, their effects are no less material or devastating. Thien illustrates this point by examining the lasting material effects of the fear-conditioning strategies that the Khmer Rouge regime deployed in order to maintain its pervasive control over the Cambodian population during and after the revolution.

Thien's novel explores how the Khmer Rouge government, or Angkar, as it called itself, systematically conditioned its people to sever all the memories that might connect them to their past. Children in particular were indoctrinated to forget their families and look at Angkar as the only source of filiation, to "cut loose" all the memories of their loved ones (2011, p. 79). The novel also illustrates how the Khmer Rouge kept obsessive records of the biographies and family trees of the entire population and used its knowledge of these "networks of connection" to hunt down suspected traitors and their families (2011, p. 107). As Águila-Way reminds us (2014, p. 25), this led many civilians to adopt false identities; thus, the novel stages a proliferation of discarded identities as it untangles the past lives of those who lived through this traumatic period in Cambodia's history. Especially significant in this regard is that Janie's own birth name remains elusive throughout the novel: her Khmer name, Mei, turns out to be an alias that she adopted at the suggestion of a Khmer Rouge cadre, who advised her that "if you want to be strong … you have to become someone else. You have to take a new name" (2011, p. 92).

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Through these precise coordinates, Thien's novel sets in motion a narrative marked by disappearance and loss. As we soon learn, Hiroji's disappearance is simply the most recent in Janie's life since her forced departure from Phnom Penh as a child in 1975 (Beauregard, 2014, p. 171). Montreal is where Janie lives and works as an electrophysiologist, and as Hiroji's colleague, in the fictitious Brain Research Centre. It is also a site charged with what Khatharya Um has called "memory fragments of a past that are hidden and preserved in recollection" (2012, p. 833). This is also a site of refugeetude (Nguyen, 2019), which is conceived of through literary and cultural analysis and seeks to examine the affective, experiential, and representational aspects of refugees' political consciousness. Nguyen's concept of refugeetude builds on the conceptual ground laid out by Um's refugitude (2015), extending the focus on memory and on questions of survival and resistance in the wake of violence to center affect and highlight the possibilities for relational politics, activism, and social critique (Nguyen 2023, p. 26).

When she thinks back to her time as a newly arrived transnational adoptee in Vancouver, Janie recalls how she "tried to imagine a way back", even if she acknowledges the impossibility of this task, as, for Janie, "[t]ime had to be held, twisted, cut wide open" (Thien, 2011, p. 25). And indeed, Thien's novel holds together cumulative references to files, documents, and archives by which, as Troeung argues, Thien's novel seems to "reconstruct the socio-historical context of [the Khmer Rouge's] system of state-sponsored disappearance, provoking the reader to reflect on the kinds of shattered identities that would emerge from such a system" (2013, p. 162). In this act of reconstruction, refuge is given new form and further life in different time-spaces. Both texts are acts of writing as modes of recovery, recounting, and recording that extend and reproduce experience. In this process, as Nguyen reminds us, "resilience emerges in the process of storytelling, whereby more life is possible (2023, p. 25).

3. DEHUMANIZATION, MOTHERING, AND MUTENESS

> There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard. (Roy, 2004)

Dogs at the perimeter, defined by Troeung as "neuronovel", has been an inspiration in her later theoretical framing of *Landbridge* and *Refugee Lifeworlds* to analyze how the processes of racialization and disablement are intimately entangled. These life fragments, composed of medical files and essays, show how the refugee condition cannot be understood, in Western standards, as a neurological anomaly separate from the racial and social contexts that produce it. Our focus, then, is to unravel "the disabling structures of war, genocide, and white supremacy that generate nervous conditions at the interlinked levels of the biological, the psychological, and the linguistic" (Thien, 2011, p. 157). These life fragments are not only a memoir of family history but also an archive of "mourning within the collective memory of the diaspora [that] becomes a refusal to submit to the invisibility or dismissal of this history" (Thiyagarajan, 2020, p. 355). Accordingly, we witness a broken narrative which shows a narrator who is "incapable of writing, except in short fragments" (Troeung, 2023a, p. 24), while the reader discovers an assemblage of linguistic resistance, solidarity, and sociality.

It is a paratactic narrative that unsettles ableism in order to confront old epistemologies of abjection (Nyers, 2003), and to focus on the disabled body-mind in discussions of social justice (McRuer, 2018). The concept of *cripistemology,* therefore, "expands the focus from

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physical disability to the sometimes-elusive crip subjectivities informed by psychological, emotional, and other invisible or undocumented disabilities" (Johnson & McRuer, 2014, p. 134). In the aphasiac space that this "life in fragments" presents, the figure of the mother is petrified in a physical, psychological, and affective hold in ways that have yet to be addressed. *Landbridge* is revealed as a process of organic crip willfulness where the narrator, diagnosed with cancer, recreates how illness is also present in her two-year-old son: "I read obsessively about the epigenetic transmission of trauma, asking my son's doctors, all ten of them, about the possibility that his condition stems from the methylation caused by histories of violence" (Troeung, 2023a, p. 170). In her refusal to give in, the mother moves awkwardly in her effort to resist, "yeaung ban kamleang chet: we had to have strength of the heart" (Troeung, 2023a, p. 61). This goes along with the standards of behavior imposed during the Angkar's mandate, where being "mute" becomes a particular Cambodian cultural idiom. One of the tools that the Khmer Rouge harnessed to serve the goal of domination was language, which is used as a powerful instrument to pressure people into conforming to the ideals of the regime, in both *Landbridge* and *Dogs at the perimeter*.

> In *Dogs at the perimeter*, neuroscientific discourse has the important function within the novel of creating a space of dialogue in diasporic historical trauma. This "neuronovel" has also been described as a "ghost story" to explain its structure of exclusions and invisibilities (Morgan, 2018). A prominent trigger, therefore, is the disappearance of Janie's mentor, colleague, and friend, Hiroji, on the very first page, which is the first sign of loss of control. Hiroji's vanishing figure is the first of many in the novel; for example, Janie guesses that Hiroji has left Montreal to search for his brother, James, who had gone missing in 1975 while carrying out humanitarian work for the International Red Cross, first in Vietnam and then in Cambodia. While staying at Hiroji's apartment following his departure, and following her own painful separation from her husband and child, Janie notes,
>
> Sometimes this apartment feels so crowded with loved ones, strangers, imagined people ... I am unable to part without them. In the beginning, I had feared the worst, that Hiroji had taken his own life. But I tell myself that if this had been a suicide, he would have left a note, he would have left something behind. Hiroji knew what it was to have the missing live on, unending, within us. They grow so large, and we so empty, that even the coldest winter nights won't swallow them. (Thien, 2011, p. 9)

At this point, the narrative takes us to her departure from Cambodia via the coast of Vietnam as she recalls both her dead mother and brother: "I remember floating, a child on the sea, alone in the Gulf of Thailand. My mother is gone, but I am looking at the white sky and I believe, somehow, that I can call him back. If only I am brave enough, or true enough. Countries, cities, families. Nothing need disappear" (Thien, 2011, p. 9). Here the narrator reflects on her family's grievable bodies, and takes us to Butler's reflection on dispensable populations and necropolitics:

> The capacity for reflection amid urgent times is a political necessity. They also bring forward some of the psychoanalytic complexities of care work by reminding us that, etymologically, care come from *caru*, a term that includes concern, anxiety, sorrow, grief, *and trouble* ... once we recognize the unequal distribution of the grievability of lives, our debates about equality and violence will be transformed, and the link between the two domains, more firmly understood. For equality and livability to become pervasive features in our world, they must be asserted and claimed by precisely those bodies who endeavor still to live, to secure the conditions of living, whose living endeavor becomes the very substance of thought - and of transformative protest. (2022, p. 107, italics in original)

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In addition to Thien's use of neuroscience to show Western workings of diasporic historical trauma, the novel suggests evaluating the efficiency of both the contemporary Western trauma-attending frameworks and self-developed trauma-coping mechanisms in the context of such trauma. Accordingly, the Western talking cure method may not be successful in trauma attending on the example of Janie, as her traumatic memories could be triggered by language. Since language possibly proved counterproductive in the case of Janie as a tool to process or heal her trauma, she adopts other trauma-coping methods, such as taking an interest in neurobiology. However, it becomes apparent that these self-developed mechanisms are not wholly reliable and effective, at least without proper prior medical trauma attention, if the possible trauma triggers have been previously left unattended (Pärn, 2019).

We learn that Janie –then named Mei– had arrived in Canada aged 12, after being saved from a shipwreck by fishermen and adopted by Lena, a woman living in Vancouver. Janie had seen her father taken away, witnessed people tortured and killed, and observed her brother align himself with the Khmer Rouge, then use his trusted position to enable himself and his sister to escape. She had been subjected to sexual and physical assault when the boat taking the siblings to Malaysia was hijacked, and had seen her brother float away from her in the sea to his death. The dead or lost also include Mei's biological mother, who dies alone surrounded by rats in an infirmary run by children. As Morgan argues (2018, p. 43), many of the novel's "disappeared" refuse to remain in the past, with Janie telling Hiroji, "some ghosts could never be put to rest" (Thien, 2011, p. 53). This *sramay* or ghost haunting is caused by the visitation of spirits of family members or other loved ones who were murdered and not given proper burial rites. Even if Western understanding of trauma is not appropriate for understanding this text, it is very revealing how the narrative intertwines Janie's experience of *sramay* with her work as a brain research neurologist (Troeung, 2013, p. 157, p. 161). In an effort to narrate the gap between Canadian and Cambodian forms of knowledge, *Dogs at the perimeter* "works against the framing of the … genocide as an isolated case in world history by positioning this within a broader context of Western imperialism" (Troeung, 2013, p. 156). In this respect, "the overlaying of Montreal and Phnom Penh is not only a symptom of Janie's being overwhelmed by her traumatic past, but also a reminder of the connections between West and East, and the material - as well as imaginary and symbolic - impacts of the actions of the more powerful on the less so" (Morgan 2018, pp. 45–46).

Janie's speechlessness thus pertains to multiple traumas: her experience of genocide in Cambodia, the drowning of her brother at sea, and her rape by pirates. Janie's survival constitutes an act of both willfulness and refusal against a necropolitical regime that subordinates refugees to a slow death (Berlant, 2007). This "diseased inner world" is the state defined by Elie, one of the characters in Thien's novel: "I am dwindling, aren't I? ... almost completely mute ... Her disease is degenerative … impending speech, movement and finally breathing itself" (2011, pp. 14–15). This muteness is decisively political for the narrator, who wishes "to be the one to describe it. To decide on the dreams that took root in me" (Thien, 2011, p. 171). Thien again interrogates the efficiency of Western talk therapy by creating a suggestive comparison between the patient named Elie and Janie herself. Both scientist and patient struggle with language loss and aphasia, fighting their own *sramay* with science and art (Thien, 2011, p. 3). Elie finds a suitable strategy to cope with language loss, and painting becomes her main means of expressing thoughts and ideas (Thien, 2011, p. 12). This type of creativity, very common also in those with hearing disability, makes the inner world accessible when verbal speech is flawed because of her brain damage. For Elie, "the image could say everything that she could not" (Thien, 2011, p. 12). Such an example of a visual outlet can be contrasted with Janie's "memory theatre", introduced to her by her friend Hiroji. This term describes Janie's use of ornaments and images to express her wish to find a coping strategy

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that would help her intertwine her past and present in order to contain her many selves peacefully: "If such … [a] memory theatre existed, I could be both who I was and who I had come to be. I could be a mother and a daughter, a separated child, an adult with dreams of my own" (Thien, 2011, p. 147).

Janie's muteness also emerges from the direct effects of state control during the years of the genocide. Once again, as Troeung argues (2013, p. 158), silence is a mode of survival during the rule of the Angkar. Such a state of partly self-induced silence and numbness is described by Janie, a child under the oppressive rule: "[her] hands, [her] body, remained in the world, but slowly [she] released [herself] into the quiet grief of [her] thoughts" (Thien, 2011, p. 125). This numbness is also evident 30 years later in Janie's adulthood, when the novel describes her response at the news of her husband and her son leaving her; Janie then goes into a state of "numb grief" (Thien, 2011, p. 7). Mute mothers are also a recurrent strategy in *Landbridge* and other afterlife writings by Southeast Asian women writers such as Thammavongsa and Thúy, who brilliantly explore the ruptures of the refugee's personhood, language and speech in the afterlife of war and genocide. Characters in these texts fight a war within while living in a world marked by a collective silence around Southeast Asian Cold War history (Thien, 2011, p. 147). These female figures unsettle the disabled/nondisabled binary, following Puar's idea that "while some bodies may not be recognized as or identify as disabled, they may well be debilitated" (Thien, 2011, p. xv).

Besides, Janie's self-fragmentation is also partly caused by the banning of the spiritual practices of the Buddhist community during the genocide. As the Angkar prohibits Buddhist burial practices, Janie suffers "spiritual disruption" for not being able to honour the transit of the dead, so the "ghosts" of the loved ones who are not properly buried or are condemned to a violent death visit their family members in their sleep. Nonetheless, the response to such trauma is the same –the inability to convey thoughts or express emotions. Once again, the portrayal of language loss has to do not only with the standards or behavior that were prescribed during the regime, but also with cultural specificities. The former means that the Khmer Rouge pressured people into conforming to the ideals of the regime by using language, e.g., in the form of praise.

Dedicated to Thien's late mother, *Dogs at the perimeter* is partly framed by a grieving for the maternal. Janie's sadness at the death of her adoptive mother overlays her continuing sorrow over the loss of her biological mother, as well as her concerns that she is unable to be an adequate mother herself. This mass sorrow disrupts the present in unbearable ways and yet offers hope through other positive ghosts. Thus, the unsaid and the unsayable in *Dogs at the perimeter* contribute to a set of troubling textual hauntings, which nevertheless offer some politics of hope (Morgan, 2018, p. 41). These silences are suggested not only narratively but formally, through the underwritten and fragmented prose, to articulate what Janie is unable to speak. The text silently "speaks" in that it offers a fictionalized witnessing of terror to raise awareness of the Cambodian genocide and "what was done" (Thien, 2011, p. 137). Even if "it is vital that certain specters remain restless to remind readers of the continuing tragedy of Cambodia" (Morgan, 2018, p. 47), the text carries out a kind of healing when we are offered a degree of reconciliation with certain ghosts: Hiroji is reunited with his brother James/Kwan, and Janie seems to promise increased contact with her partner Navin and son Kiri. Memory remains, and, in so doing, "offers a haunting of hope by reminding us of our collective responsibilities to each other" (Morgan, 2018, p. 50).

Janie finds solace at work, which gives her "a feeling of order, of cheer" (Thien, 2011, p. 28). She has been unable to maintain full control over the traumatic events of her past, so her choice of profession manifests also as a self-induced coping strategy. She seems to have

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chosen neuroscience as her area of expertise partly to allow her to make sense of her trauma in the present. Neurobiology is a tool to study her own trauma and thus creates parallels between structural trauma and non-structural trauma, the latter of which is based on deeply distressing or disturbing experiences. This parallelism between brain damage and diasporic historical trauma makes Thien explore the synaptic connections of the brain through the intimate relationship between Janie's trauma and neuroscience, as a tool to decipher her trauma. The various descriptions of the brain diseases or medical stories that are represented in the novel, such as Alzheimer's disease and aphasia, serve as an instrument to visualize how diasporic historical trauma can cause language loss due to the malfunctioning or breaking down of the neural networks. *Dogs at the perimeter* illustrates, based on the similarities between structural and embodied trauma, how the Khmer Rouge regime used different techniques to subdue people, as in the case of being forced to adopt new identities as a control device. Consequently, Janie comes to inhabit different selves, which she is unable to reconcile as an adult.

Through her devastating depiction of Janie's fraught relationship with her son Kiri, Thien also foregrounds how learned fear responses not only can compromise the ability of subjects to start anew in the aftermath of trauma, but also can perpetuate trauma across generations. In other words, Thien suggests how the fear responses that take root in traumatized subjects can spawn transferential processes, cognitive and affective, through which the past [will be] internalized by new generations without fully being understood (Hirsch, 2008). This problem is not lost upon Janie, who recognizes that, despite her efforts to protect Kiri, the boy has internalized her learned fears: "Our son didn't understand, and I saw that he blamed himself, that he tried so hard not to be the cause of my rage, my unpredictable anger. He aspired to a sort of perfection, as if it were up to him to keep us safe" (Thien, 2011, p. 153). In a similar way, the narrator of *Landbridge* creates a flexible, knowledgeable, and breathable space for her son in the future, to make him remain open "to the possibility of contingent and incomplete knowledge - and to refugee knowledge of injury, impairment, and survival" (Thien, 2011, p. 111). Through Kai's letters, Troeung also encourages her son's willful subject to uphold his own storyline: "whaling and learning and understanding … Stories of the dead and suffering need not drop you in stillness. They can instead show us that our very lives are miracles, that every day since Pol Pot time has been a gift" (Troeung, 2023a, p. 169).

4. CONCLUSION

Refugees have developed significant and durable ways of being in and moving through the world that constitute acts of both willfulness and refusal against a necropolitical regime that obliges refugees to die a slow death: "where an upsetting scene of living that has been muffled in ordinary consciousness is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all, like ants revealed scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock (Berlant, 2007, p. 761). This aesthetic discourse surrounding the refugee is undergoing a profound transformation, as a number of Southeast Asian authors are currently embracing the refugee position to document the lingering contradictions of being able to construct "integral subjectivities and modes of aesthetic and social production" (Nguyen, 2019, p. 110). This position of 'refugeetude' implies a relationality, and, as Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, the act of speaking of the dead is an ethical obligation of the refugee writer, even if this ends up "perpetuat[ing] the haunting, rather than quell[ing] it" (2006, p. 9). While memory reveals the "psychic flux" of refugee-survivors, it

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also provides a path toward recovering humanity, subjective coherence, and the possibility of justice (Um, 2015, p. 189).

Dogs at the perimeter and *Landbridge* offer examples of a shift that is currently taking place towards alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric notions of disability and aphasia. They show the need to envision an intersectional politics of disability, which is related to one's positionality in relation to power, and to challenge dominant ways of thinking about "race-ability". Ben-Moshe's concept interweaves the study of race and disability, racism and ableism, in ways that go beyond neoliberal or multicultural systems. As a result, race and disability are here considered intersecting oppressions which are mutually constitutive and cannot be separated (2020, p. 5). *Dogs at the perimeter* and *Landbridge* are written as a refusal to follow a system of able-bodiedness and offer an archive, however incomplete, of mute and maimed characters who bring about other ways of collective healing. The wonderful paradox of these narratives of refugeetude is to enable an "onto-epistemology" of refugee being and knowing that arises in the afterlife of war and genocide (Thien, 2011, p. 44). These are compromised resilience narratives, in which the only way to go forward is through attentive engagement with and adaptation to the other elements, relations, and processes in an environment of disaster. These are collective memoirs of the possibility of surviving present and future disasters (O'Brien, 2017). This new conception of the refugee's physical and psychological space in the afterlife of Cambodian Genocide constitutes a space of collective encounter, of plurality and polyphonic entanglement. It is precisely when these narratives talk about the hostility found in the implementation of political notions of resilience that the political is truly approached.

These subjects bear a burden of silence by making visible the situated practices of emotional resistance of a community who continue to suffer from "crippling" rates of physical and mental health impairment extending from the Cold War (Thien, 2011, p. 109). These works are examples of this ethical turn, which makes readers reconsider the politics of care and assume responsibility. They are "narratives of relocation", which assume accountability and develop "possibilities of identifying commonalities that move beyond state violence and yet attend refuge and connections with others" (Mani, 2023, p. 30). These subjects no longer strive for resilience, often critiqued as being closely knitted to neoliberal, late-capitalist ideas of success, but opt for a willful subjecthood more closely connected to the afterlife for future generations. This is one of the possible ways of challenging the "borderscape"[ii] in current necropolitics and settling in a new narrative space that resists Western epistemologies when analyzing refugee-ness. The paradox and ambivalence of being an abject refugee long before arriving in Canada is present throughout these confessional fragmentary archives, which dignify Johnson and McRuer's concept of crip willfulness (2014, p. 136) by the embodiment of scars and racial markings of people at the hands of the state, and which allow the individual subject "to see that meaning in her life depends on how she is connected to the lives and deaths of countless others" (Nguyen, 2023, p. 40).

Southeast Asian diasporic writers transform the contradictions and violence embedded in their own performance of ethnicity into a political project of refusal and resistance, where they speak as and for a number of heterogeneous voices, as: "to live for the dead is to seek justice, because the refugee subject knows that violence will never end" (Nguyen, 2023, p. 43). Writing as a refugee is an act of refusal, upsetting the way that the Cambodian war is conventionally represented, placed, and considered within the confines of North American concerns. Refugee stories are, definitely, war stories. Accordingly, refugee artists and authors take an active role in remapping their pasts and presents, imaginatively identifying roles and

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spaces where refugees can live, grow, and even flourish in the future (August, 2021, p. 109, p. 125).

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NOTES

[i] Generational trauma refers to the transmission of trauma and its effects from one generation to the next. It means that the emotional, psychological, and even biological impact of a traumatic event experienced by one generation can influence the health, behavior, and worldview of their children, grandchildren, and beyond. The trauma's effects are passed down through learned behaviors, family communication patterns, and, sometimes, biological changes (like stress responses encoded in gene expression). Later generations may show signs of anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, emotional numbness, identity struggles, and/or difficulty with trust and attachment, as Janie shows throughout the text.

[ii] The borderscape is a rich interdisciplinary concept that describes borders not just as fixed lines on maps, but as dynamic spaces shaped by cultural, political, social, and emotional interactions (Schimanski & Nyman, 2021).

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