Reviews

Cathy J. Schlund-Vials


*Image courtesy University of Minnesota Press.*
While scores of books have been published on the topic of the Cambodian Genocide of 1975–1979 and its aftermath, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials’ *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* represents one of the first scholarly books to examine how the Killing Fields era has been understood, remembered, and creatively reconstructed by Cambodian American writers and artists themselves. Amid all the historical, legal, and anthropological studies of Cambodia’s modern history, it strikes me that the perspective of Cambodian survivors has been somewhat neglected, submerged beneath the voices of Western experts speaking on their behalf. The people who have written the most influential scholarship on Cambodia to date include David Chandler, Ben Kiernan, John Tully, Peter Maguire, and Elizabeth Becker. To this list, we can now add Schlund-Vials, who self-identifies in her acknowledgements as “a biracial adopted Cambodia American” (195).

Beyond its foundational significance in this respect, *War, Genocide, and Justice* is a remarkable book on many levels. Over three decades after the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodians continue to seek justice for what happened. But, as Schlund-Vials argues, this reconciliation has remained perpetually elusive within a post-genocide milieu characterized by juridical belatedness and “hegemonic modes of public policy and memory” (13). Despite its high-profile role, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) has so far proven to be limited in its capacity to deliver justice. As Schlund-Vials points out, only one single Khmer Rouge leader has been successfully prosecuted so far (7) while “former Khmer Rouge members still occupy multilevel positions of governmental power” (8). In an analogously harmful way, the United States government has remained unaccountable for its illegal bombing campaign of Cambodia from 1969–1973, and furthermore has repeatedly converted the memory of its past military actions in Cambodia into “justification for militarization and occupation abroad” in the present (10). Schlund-Vials therefore employs the term “Cambodian Syndrome” to describe the tactical manipulation of public memory employed by both the present-day authoritarian Cambodian state and the US imperial state to evade responsibility for past genocidal and war crimes (13).

Schlund-Vials argues that, against such transnational, hegemonic frames of remembrance, “Cambodian American memory work” labours to resist “state-authorized erasure through individual and communal articulations about the Killing Fields era” (17). This creative and political work by 1.5 generation Cambodian American artists—those who survived the genocide as children or who were born in the refugee camps en route to America—reflects both James Young’s notion of “memory work” in Jewish holocaust studies and Lisa Lowe’s...