Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, Lan Duong, Mariam B. Lam and Kathy L. Nguyen, eds.  
One of the more touching stories in this rich collection of poems and artworks is told by the Filipino writer Grace Talisan about the follow-up to a mastectomy (210–11). The woman’s family comes to the hospital bearing cookies in the shape of breasts. Instead of being the object of a sick joke, the so-called “boobie cakes” trigger recollections of her sister’s cancer and childhood games. It is moving because it is not about the cakes at all, but about the pain of moving to another country, learning another language and experiencing one cultural confusion after another. The cakes are a kind of absurd substitute for “normalcy” or cultural assimilation. The story points to the ways in which the sorrow and nostalgia that accompany exile surface at the oddest moments: while lying on a hospital bed, or driving to Salt Lake City. The main reason I liked that story, however, is that it did not dwell on the usual clichés associated with either gender or Southeast Asia. That says a lot about a book that contains nothing but writings and images of work by women of Southeast Asian descent. There are, of course, plenty of references to war, genocide, bombs, displacement, mistranslations, Buddhism and phở but they appear alongside themes of motherhood, sex, school, and travel.

In their introductory remarks, the editors state that their aim is to bring together the voices and visions of women from a region of Asia that is not often heard or seen in the field of Asian American studies. They situate their project within the context of immigration from Southeast Asia to the United States. The volume thus includes narratives by women that arrived as refugees from Việt Nam, Cambodia, or Laos, but there are also those that hail from the Philippines or Thailand, leaving their homelands for economic or personal reasons. According to the editors, the title of the volume, “Troubling Borders,” alludes to the ways in which “these women push the boundaries of their communities and beyond” (4). It also refers to the crossing of borders undertaken by women in exile. But, it could also literally point to the porous borders within Southeast Asia and how the lines drawn around the contemporary nation states do not adequately reflect the multiplicity of languages and cultures contained within them. It may suggest that the borders themselves are troubling and they should be dissolved.

Maps as geopolitical bodies figure prominently in the book. The words to “The Corner of Nguyễn Bình Kiệm and Tuệ Tĩnh (Hà Nội 2005),” a poem by Võ Hồng Chương-Dai (104–105), appear to be displayed following the outline of the map of Việt Nam, with the right margins swelling like the Eastern coastline. Her poem “National Highway 1 (Việt Nam, December 1996)” (100–102) moves up and down the Vietnamese territory with the names of cities peppered on the page like dots on a map. Tiffany Chung’s detailed map of Gò Vấp is drawn with tiny bubbles and, in one of many serendipitous pairings of texts and