

## Interwoven Temporalities Reading Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the Perimeter*

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# Interwoven Temporalities: Reading Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the Perimeter*

GUY BEAUREGARD

**T**HIS ESSAY INVESTIGATES the meanings produced by and around one recent Asian Canadian text: Madeleine Thien's second novel, and fourth book, *Dogs at the Perimeter* (2011). This text — which could be situated within a broad set of texts engaged in what Smaro Kamboureli calls “narrating humanitarianism” (111) and, more narrowly, as part of what Y-Dang Troeung identifies as “outsider novels’ about Cambodia” (“Witnessing” 152) — tells the stories of various characters whose lives have in distinct ways been shaped by the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979, a time when an estimated 1.7 to some 2 million people (a number comprising at least twenty percent of Cambodia’s population) were killed or died as a result of state action (Ciorciari 11-12). After taking on this challenging material and crafting it in fictional form, Thien stated bluntly that *Dogs at the Perimeter* — the result of five years of writing and repeated trips to Cambodia — was “the hardest book I’ve ever written” (Thien, “Author”). A crucial part of this process, according to Thien, was “a realization of just how many stories there were, . . . how many stories belong to one person, how many new families were created, how many people were lost, how many entire families were lost. . . . There’s just something here that was demanding to be heard” (Thien, “Author”). But in what ways, and toward what ends, could such stories “be heard”? The argument I wish to make is that reading Thien’s novel — including its representation of devastating forms of individual and collective loss as well as its powerful and sometimes unexpected moments of “*joining together*” (Chun 11) — opens up space for us to rethink the critical language we need to read difficult histories across the North and the South, even as such a language remains persistently out of reach.

Despite taking on such challenging subject matter — or, as we shall see, perhaps because it attempts to do so — *Dogs at the Perimeter* was not always given a warm critical reception. Reviews in Canada, for example, have variously characterized the novel as “sometimes confus-

ing reading” (Lalonde), “difficult to follow” (Grubisic), “convoluted” (Gordon), “abrupt” and “bewildering” (Foran), and “disjointed, impressionistic, almost incoherent” (Marchand). One could speculate that some of these responses may have been related, in part, to preconceived notions about Thien’s writerly style, notably the stripped-down language used to great effect in her debut collection of short stories, *Simple Recipes* (2001). In other words, one might suspect that these reviewers may have wished that Thien’s latest recipe were more “simple.” Yet regardless of whether such preconceived notions have or have not influenced the judgements of these reviewers, it is crucial for us to foreground the politics of the knowledge that has been produced so far around Thien’s novel. One way to do so is to attempt to unpack some of the assumptions informing these initial critical responses, even as we must note that the potential meanings produced around Thien’s novel are not limited to published reviews and criticism alone. Taken together, many of these reviews seem to assume that the difficult histories represented in Thien’s novel could or should be told straightforwardly. One critic — Brett Grubisic writing in the *Vancouver Sun* — has, for example, called the “labyrinth of flashbacks” in Thien’s novel “perplexing and intermittently confusing.” Grubisic’s review goes so far as to describe this book as “[n]ot a novel with a reader’s enjoyment anywhere in its agenda,” signalling through the negative the curious assumption that a book representing the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and its aftermath in Canada and elsewhere could or should be crafted to produce readerly “enjoyment.”<sup>1</sup>

Faced with these initial critical responses, one might be tempted to conclude that *Dogs at the Perimeter* has fallen, in Michael Warner’s memorable phrase, under the “enormous shadow of *uncritical reading*” (15), even as we must also acknowledge, as Warner underlines, the great difficulties involved in determining what exactly a properly “critical” reading would or could look like. Thankfully, some critics have attempted to grapple with these difficulties. In a detailed and engaging review of Thien’s novel, for instance, Dionne Brand observes that “Madeleine Thien’s project is a bold and difficult one. It is the project of our age, one 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.” It is with this awareness of the limitations of narrative — and more generally of

language — that Brand arrives at an especially resonant point. In discussing the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime, Brand suggests that “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*” (emphasis added). Part of the work performed by Thien’s novel, in Brand’s account, is to attempt to forge another such “means of transport.” Yet, while it is crucial to recognize the importance of this *writerly* project, we also need to be attentive to the meanings being produced — and potentially contested — through our *critical* projects, too. How can we discuss literary texts (following the work of Troeung) “as a rich site for mediating difficult questions about justice in the aftermath of genocide” (“Witnessing” 151), a site where the terms of such mediation, and the meanings produced by it, are not settled?

## I.

The narrative proper of *Dogs at the Perimeter* begins with the first of many sections labelled a “[fragment],” presented in this bracketed form and told from the point of view of a character named Janie:

On November 29, 2005, my friend Dr. Hiroji Matsui walked out of Montreal’s Brain Research Centre at 7:29 in the evening. On the security video, his expression gives nothing away. For a brief moment, the camera captures him in passing: greying hair, neatly combed. Silver-framed eyeglasses, intense brows, a stubborn chin, the softness of an old man’s face. He wears no coat, despite the freezing temperatures, and he carries nothing, not even the briefcase with which he had arrived that morning. He exits through a side door, down a flight of metal steps. And then Hiroji walked into the city and disappeared into air. (1)

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. In the novel’s narrative present, Montreal in the depths of winter acts as a site of reckoning, where at the outset of Janie’s account “freezing rain has left the branches crystalline” and where a “twisting staircase” leading to her apartment has “white paint chipping off, rust burnishing the edges” (5).

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" (833). 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. They don't accuse me or call me to account, but I am unable to part with them. . . . They grow so large, and we so empty, that even the coldest winter nights won't swallow them" (9). At this point, the narrative cuts — stunningly, in mid-paragraph — to the moment of her departure from Cambodia via the coast of Vietnam: "I remember floating, a child on the sea, alone in the Gulf of Thailand. My brother is gone, but I am looking up at the white sky and I believe, somehow, that I can call him back" (9).

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 as she acknowledges the impossibility of this task. For Janie, "Time had to be held, twisted, cut wide open" (25). And, indeed, Thien's novel holds together, even as it pulls apart, different times and spaces, ambitiously cutting across the cityscape of Montreal, the west coast of Canada, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos, folding in memories of Japan and glimpses of characters living in diaspora in France and the US. Encountering these interwoven temporalities, and the distinct yet overlapping stories of different characters, is no doubt a challenging readerly experience, as we have seen in the novel's initial critical reception. But it is also an opportunity to confront some of the limits of our reading practices. In doing so, we might attempt, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's phrase, to "go beyond the self-identity of nationalism towards the complex textuality of the international" (281).

What would this entail? In proposing this form of critical work, Spivak acknowledges "the cliché that imagination feeds nationalism" (281). But she also contends that "an imagination trained in the play of language(s) may undo the truth-claims of national identity, thus unmooring the cultural nationalism that disguises the workings of the state" (290-91), providing as one example the loss of civil liberties in the US "in the name of the American 'nation' threatened by terror" (290). Spivak is quick here to underline the key word *may* — emphasizing,

as always, that this is a critical project without guarantees.<sup>2</sup> But while for Spivak “Nationalism is the product of a collective imagination constructed through remembrance,” in her view, “[i]t is the comparativist imagination that undoes that possessive spell” (288). Thus, for Spivak, “a multilingual Comparative Literature of the former empires” (293), working across languages and in alliance with the social sciences, may help extend this sort of critical work.

Spivak’s project as it is articulated here has recently been subjected to careful scrutiny and sympathetic critique, notably by Jean Franco, who observes that “[t]he global changes that [Spivak] endorses — a regional coalition of the global South, the strengthening of the humanities, responsible reading — are put forward again and again, but a road to their realization cannot be traced” (506). Spivak’s “obstinate hope” that aesthetic education and “rigorous reading and understanding” may somehow help us move forward is certainly no quick fix, but this may be, as Franco concludes, a “more honest assessment” (506) of current crises in the humanities. This may also be part of what we need when reading texts such as *Dogs at the Perimeter* that push at the limits of our varied critical imaginations, demanding at times perhaps unforeseen forms of strenuous work without a clear route forward. When confronted with texts representing difficult histories across different times and spaces, what would constitute an adequate form of critical engagement?

## II.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, I wish to build on Spivak’s project by discussing some routes that I do not believe will help us to extend our engagement with Thien’s novel. The first route I want to discuss involves addressing the way in which *Dogs at the Perimeter* attempts to stitch together the various threads of its narrative through the eventual meeting of Janie and Hiroji, along with Hiroji’s long-lost brother, James, in the mountains of Laos. Following this reunion and on her way back to Canada, Janie sits next to Hiroji on an eleven-hour bus ride to the airport, thinking of her brother and father and mother — all disappeared. Janie remembers the stories her mother used to tell, “stories that had been handed down by her own grandmother’s grandmother” — stories that underline how the soul, the *pralung*, is “a slippery thing” that can be lost yet also returned (253). “We did not come in solitude,” Janie

recalls. “Inside us, from the beginning, we were entrusted with many lives. From the first morning to the last, we try to carry them until the end” (253). At this point in the narrative, Janie turns to Hiroji and asks, “When everything is finished here, will you come home?” Hiroji simply responds, “Yes, . . . I will” (253), leading to the novel’s powerful final paragraph, narrated from Janie’s point of view: “I imagine awaiting [Hiroji’s] arrival, remembering my own. The sky is such a pure and fragile white, filling all the space between the trees and the road” (253). The apparent resolution of the narrative here is a point we need to address: a powerful and apparently transcendent moment in which the novel’s two main characters, each dealing with distinct and nonidentical forms of loss, can sit side-by-side, and imagine (from Janie’s perspective) the possibility of arriving “home.” Yet while this powerful and apparently transcendent moment may arguably enable Janie to make sense of her story, as well as the stories of others, foregrounding the language of resolution may be less helpful for us as critics if it is simply a means of putatively “resolving” our own varied and necessarily incomplete points of engagement with the difficult histories represented in this text. Even during this bus ride, Janie readily acknowledges that her “childhood is full of images . . . , passing moments [she] didn’t understand” (252), “a world [she] couldn’t enter” (252), with “intimacies and dreams [she] cannot know” (252). The points of incompleteness signalled here and elsewhere make it clear that an attentive engagement with Thien’s novel cannot be satisfied with a “resolutionary” reading alone.<sup>3</sup>

So this route — the sort of “resolutionary” reading practice that was forcefully identified and critiqued by Roy Miki back in the 1990s in his classic essay on “Asiancy” — is one that will not help push forward our critical engagement with this text. A second route I wish to discuss is one that was also identified by Miki in the same essay: a “revolutionary” reading practice that he proposes to engage with the jarring, and productively disruptive, document at the end of Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* — that is, the “Excerpt from the Memorandum Sent by the Co-Operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada, April 1946.” Miki describes this as “a matter-of-fact document asking the government [of Canada] not to deport Japanese Canadians, signed by three white men” (116). In his reading of *Obasan*, he notes that “Naomi’s tentative hold on her (now) unrecoverable past . . . stands in sharp contrast to the objectivity of the document signed

by three men from the same white society that inflicted such violations on her family and community” (116). Miki asks, “Where is the subjectivity of Japanese Canadians in this document?” (116) before underlining how, through this document, “Japanese Canadians are still *spoken for*” (117).

With its many breaks and fissures, *Dogs at the Perimeter* would seem to invite an attentive “revolutionary” reading as put forward by Miki. Indeed, such a reading could be pursued by investigating the work performed by the various documents and archives that appear recurrently in Thien’s novel: the file containing documents and maps and letters from James found by Janie on Hiroji’s kitchen table in Montreal following his disappearance (18); the “towers of research notes, clippings, books, interview transcripts, recordings” (22) assembled by Janie’s new mother, Lena, in Vancouver — materials that, intriguingly, Janie as a child helps to organize; the obsessive collecting of biographies recorded by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, a process through which individuals were coerced into repeatedly dictating or writing down their life stories, “naming family and friends, illuminating the past” (25), thereby facilitating what Meng-Try Ea has called the Khmer Rouge’s “chain of terror”; and the purposeful reordering of these and other documents by DC-Cam (i.e., the Documentation Center of Cambodia), “cataloguing prison records, photographs, biographical information, and witness statements, documents that might be used in the upcoming War Crimes Tribunal” or perhaps to “help Cambodians trace their missing family members” (52).<sup>4</sup> Readers encountering these cumulative references to such files and documents and archives may find themselves agreeing with Troeung’s observation that “[w]ith astounding attention to historical precision and detail, Thien’s novel goes to great lengths 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” (“Witnessing” 162). And there’s no doubt that the vastly different ways in which the documents represented in Thien’s novel have been mobilized and deployed (to justify and facilitate state violence *and* to attempt to locate the missing and the disappeared as well as attempting, however belatedly, to bring perpetrators to justice) help to reinforce Miki’s injunction to carefully scrutinize the fraught relationship between textuality and the exercise of power. In doing so, we could follow Miki’s



lead to ask, are Cambodian Canadian and other Cambodian diasporic subjects simply being “*spoken for*”?

In discussing a novel written by a non-Cambodian, such a fundamental critical question cannot be sidestepped, even if we are persuaded by Troeung’s assessment that *Dogs at the Perimeter* represents “acts of responsibility and epistemological humility” in ways that should matter greatly to readers in Canada (“Witnessing” 164) — and, I would add, elsewhere, too. Yet, while I acknowledge the forceful critique enabled by such a “revolutionary” reading, here we also hit another limit and, for me, a significant point of discomfort: insofar as Thien’s novel explicitly represents the devastating effects of what Elizabeth Becker has called “a revolution of unprecedented terror and destruction” (14) and its enormous impact on people in Cambodia and in the Cambodian diaspora, it is not easy to re-mobilize this term to describe a reading practice, however urgently needed. I want to be clear: I am *not* saying that, since Miki uses the word “revolutionary,” he somehow supports forms of state-directed violence performed in the name of revolution. Nor am I suggesting that Miki’s powerful critical intervention in the 1990s should be expected to account for the workings of a novel published in 2011. Instead, I am concerned with the demands that Thien’s text places on us as readers, demands that I wish to suggest cannot in this context be fulfilled with appeals to “revolutionary” reading practices alone. This is especially the case when reading a novel that seeks to represent how, in Um’s account, “social memory was systematically undermined as [Southeast Asian] regimes worked to revolutionize language, culture, and traditions and to destroy what they could not transform or suppress” (833). What sort of reading practices could adequately engage with a text that sets out to represent, in such a fragmentary manner, such histories of destruction and loss?

### III.

To understand the stakes involved in reading *Dogs at the Perimeter*, it may be helpful to acknowledge the perhaps obvious point that Thien’s novel is by no means a singular or isolated attempt to represent the individual and collective forms of destruction and loss that characterized the Khmer Rouge regime. There is, in fact, a growing body of narrative and filmic texts that have attempted to represent the varied aftermaths of state-directed violence in Cambodia during the 1970s.<sup>5</sup>

In Canada, community projects have produced oral histories and organized events to create space for discussing Cambodian Canadian and other Cambodian diasporic histories and cultures and community needs.<sup>6</sup> And specific memorial sites, both in Cambodia and in the diaspora, have attempted, in varied and sometimes uneven ways, to initiate conversations about what Roger Simon has called “practices of remembrance related to conflict, violence, loss and death, topics often characterized as ‘difficult knowledge’” (432).<sup>7</sup> While Simon is concerned with, among other topics, various curatorial strategies related to the exhibition of photographs from the Khmer Rouge’s notorious S-21 detention and torture centre (a site now accessible to visitors as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum), I wish to briefly turn to some of the narratives put forward in another memorial site: the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, a key stop in what Cathy Schlund-Vials has called “Cambodia’s emergent atrocity-driven tourist industry” (58). I wish to do so not because the narratives that circulate at such memorial sites are straightforwardly equivalent to, or interchangeable with, meanings produced by and around literary texts. Instead, as I suggest below, my goal is to clarify what exactly reading a literary text such as *Dogs at the Perimeter* might enable us to reconsider.

Commonly known as “the killing fields,” and located on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center is a charged site of memory that is, like the Tuol Sleng Museum, “committed to memorializing the genocidal crimes of the Democratic Kampuchean regime” (Schlund-Vials 44). Amidst the shallow sunken mass graves and a modest two-room museum is the site’s visual focal point: a seventeen-story stupa built in 1988 in which “the majority of Choeung Ek’s victim remains were relocated and placed in the glass-enclosed cenotaph, which currently allows visitors open-view access to ordered rows of skulls and bones” (Schlund-Vials 46). In Schlund-Vials’s account, through this controversial display of human remains, Choeung Ek “was and continues to be a contested site with regard to Cambodian-centric remembrance” (46) — “killing fields” that have become what Kevin Doyle has sardonically called Cambodia’s new “revenue fields” (qtd. in Schlund-Vials 64) with distinct neoliberal characteristics.<sup>8</sup> Despite the evident complexities of this site, the small museum located at the edge of the memorial attempts to effect a form of discursive closure on this difficult history.<sup>9</sup> The exhibit provides information about the state

structure of Democratic Kampuchea; a chart showing the leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime; and short biographies of these leaders. Moving counter-clockwise, visitors encounter faded photographs drawn from the DC-Cam archive showing some of the damage done to sites in Phnom Penh as well as images of people at work. One panel displays twenty-three biographies and photos of victims drawn from the vast collection of documents found by invading Vietnamese forces in 1979 at the abandoned S-21 site; another panel displays maps showing the location of the estimated one hundred and twenty-nine mass graves at the Choeung Ek site and photographs taken in 1980 documenting the remains of these killings. Toward the end of the displays, the museum provides information about the ongoing Khmer Rouge tribunal (formally known as the Extraordinary Courts in the Chambers of Cambodia, or the ECCC), presenting its as yet incomplete mandate with an uncomfortable note of triumph: “At the End, Justice is Found for Cambodian People.”<sup>10</sup>

In the midst of these varied attempts to represent — and, in one key memorial site, to contain — such difficult histories, the act of reading *Dogs at the Perimeter* takes on additional urgency. What, then, can reading Thien’s novel bring to the table?

#### IV.

As noted above, one of the striking aspects of reading *Dogs at the Perimeter* is encountering the way it interweaves the stories of different characters, stories that cut across different times and spaces. Involving (among others) Janie and Hiroji and James, this interweaving has perplexed even exemplary readers such as Brand, who calls the inclusion of Hiroji’s story and his pursuit of James — and, in turn, Janie’s attempt to find Hiroji — “an enigma.” Brand observes that, from Janie’s perspective, “[s]o many people have disappeared from her life, but at least she can go and find Hiroji.” Yet she also contends that “we do lose her in this second overlapping story of the disappearance of Hiroji’s brother.” Without discounting the force of Brand’s observation, and her evident readerly desire to keep Janie’s story in sight, I wish to suggest that the interweaving that characterizes Thien’s novel may help us to apprehend, if only fleetingly, distinct yet shared forms of loss that cut across received forms of identity.

One way that *Dogs at the Perimeter* does so is by linking the lives of subjects that have been shaped by, among many other factors, the US

bombings of Tokyo in 1945 and of Cambodia from 1965 to 1973.<sup>11</sup> As perceptively noted by Troeung, James, for instance, recalls at one point how “the air burned his throat in Tokyo when he was small, how he was terrified of fire” — and how, following his family’s arrival in Vancouver in the immediate post-war period, “everything was green, . . . things were young and not skeletal” (182).<sup>12</sup> At first glance, this point in Thien’s narrative risks reinforcing an image of Canada as an apparently history-less place where things are “green” and “young,” a haven that, as Mark Libin has recently suggested concerning the role of Canadian culture, presents itself as “welcoming the battered and destitute guest into its peaceful, secure dwelling space” (75). But subsequent passages in Thien’s text provide alternative glimpses of how the subjectivities of James and Hiroji have been indelibly racialized in this apparently history-less place. In one scene recalled by Hiroji, on a drive up to Squamish north of Vancouver, “they rolled the windows down and listened to the tide, admired the teenaged girls sitting on the picnic tables. ‘Japs,’ one said and the other girl giggled. ‘Sayonara!’” (225). On another road trip, to the western edge of Vancouver Island, facing the Pacific Ocean, Hiroji asks his brother about Tokyo. While James has “little to say,” he nevertheless recalls “the bomb shelters and the charred dog he saw once, and the brief sojourns home his father made, and how the war in China had sculpted his father into someone both powerful and empty. [Hiroji] waited patiently and James just shrugged and said, ‘Fuck Japan’” (190-91). Through these passages, Thien’s text invokes a highly specific instance of Japanese migration to Canada in the immediate post-war period, doing so not simply through images of the destruction of Tokyo by US bombings but also by highlighting the process of racialization on the west coast of Canada (where James and Hiroji are hailed as “Japs”) as well as the history of Japanese imperialism (signalled here through the euphemistic reference to “the war in China”) that eventually precipitated this family’s migration.

The notorious US bombings of Cambodia — which, according to one account, “may well be the most heavily bombed country in history” (Owen and Kiernan 67) — are, by contrast, represented in Thien’s text through their direct impact on the bodies of survivors, including those working as cadres for the Khmer Rouge. In one memorable scene, the

character Prasith lifts his shirt to reveal to Janie (at that point suddenly renamed Mei) and her brother “an unhealed scar”:

“This is shrapnel.”

My brother made a noise of disgust.

I averted my eyes.

[. . .]

“B-52s,” Prasith said. “*Whomp-whomp-whomp*, like that, everywhere.” He tilted his head back and stared at the sky as if it might fall down on us. “The light, it breaks. It breaks people open as if they’re dogs or dirt. I looked up and there were no houses, no people. Just this hole.” (93)

This display of Prasith’s “unhealed scar” as an embodied reminder of the impact of the US bombings of Cambodia, and the instinctive way in which Janie/Mei “averted [her] eyes,” vividly encapsulates Troeung’s reminder (put forward in her discussion of Thien’s first novel *Certainty*) that “the impetus to keep certain wounds open and alive in the public sphere — to keep our gazes focused on a difficult past in order to combat historical erasure — must be tempered by a consideration of the psychic and material costs of such acts” (“Forgetting” 92). In this way, Thien’s text underlines the need, at times, to *look away*.

## V.

The references to the US bombings of Cambodia that recur in *Dogs at the Perimeter* (see, for example, 93, 104, 177) do not simply function as a form of historical context (important as this may be) but also, crucially, as one of the reasons that James, then working as a Red Cross doctor, ends up in the early 1970s in Phnom Penh, where “he sees the damage every day, thousands crawling into the city with missing limbs and missing children, people mutilated by the Khmer Rouge or bombed into hysteria by the Americans” (177). Following the Khmer Rouge’s capture of Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, James disappears as well, while also losing his wife, his friend, and, as we learn near the end of the novel, his son (249). In this way, Thien’s novel narrates what Troeung has called “the impact of genocide not only upon Cambodians, but also upon those in the international community whose lives were shattered by the atrocities that took place” (“Intimate” 102).

But Thien’s novel also does more, narrating, in the aftermath of this

devastation, the possibility of developing friendships that cut across ethnicities, ages, genders, and nationalities. The improbability of such friendships, and the forms of understanding that they might enable, goes beyond the extraordinary circumstances leading to Janie's and Hiroji's and James's eventual meeting in the mountains of Laos;<sup>13</sup> it extends back to the equally extraordinary circumstances through which these characters, against all odds, managed to become *Canadian*. We learn, for example, how Hiroji's and James's father "had been a solemn, determined man, but the supreme effort of getting them out of post-war Japan had ruined his health" (182). The act of immigrating to Canada from Japan in the immediate post-war period was possible but unusual, as during this time Japanese Canadians were contending with (among other issues) the aftermath of internment, forced relocation, dispersal "east of the Rockies," restrictions on movement, and attempted and actual deportation to Japan. The timing of Janie's escape as a refugee from Cambodia was if anything more improbable, a point that has been readily acknowledged by Thien. In her account of a meeting with an older man, in his mid-70s, who had lived through the violence of the Khmer Rouge regime, Thien writes,

he told me that I had written something [in *Dogs at the Perimeter*] that was a near-impossibility in Pol Pot's Cambodia: I had allowed my character to escape in 1976, two-and-a-half years before the regime fell. I told my friend that during the writing of this novel, I often thought that I was writing a story of a girl who had not survived. *I was writing an existence that might have been, had such an escape been possible.* ("What"; emphasis added)

Thien's evocative reference here to "writing an existence that might have been" points to not only the considerable writerly commitment needed to bring such difficult histories into narrative form, but also — as I've underlined in this essay — the renewed forms of critical commitment needed to respond to such narratives.

What might such forms of critical commitment look like? To think through this question, I wish to turn to one of many friendships — both improbable and complex — represented in *Dogs at the Perimeter*: the friendship between Hiroji and a Cambodian boy named Nuong. Of course, simply turning to a fictional representation of a friendship cannot straightforwardly lead to a more just social arrangement in the aftermath of genocidal violence. But it may open up space to consider

how, through our varied reading practices, we might respond to lives that are interwoven in unexpected ways. In Thien's novel, Hiroji and Nuong first meet under vastly different circumstances in the Thai border town of Aranyaprathet in the 1970s. At this point, Hiroji is searching, fruitlessly, for his missing brother, James; Nuong is a refugee who has escaped from Cambodia and is living in limbo, with some assistance from Hiroji, in a UNHRC camp. Following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge by invading Vietnamese forces in 1979, Nuong is suddenly sponsored by a family in the US, set to become (like Janie) a transnational adoptee — in his case, bound for Massachusetts. The grim situation in this Thai border town at that time, when “refugees [from Cambodia] wash[ed] up in their black clothes, so debilitated and disturbed that Hiroji thinks he is walking through an exhumed cemetery” (232), is, in Thien's novel, sharply juxtaposed with Nuong's wit:

“Why are you so sad all the time?” Nuong asks [Hiroji] in his now-melodic English. “Is it so very bad where you come from?”

Hiroji has to laugh.

Nuong doesn't smile. He says, “Thank you heaven I am not going to Canada.” (233)

In this way, Thien's novel extends its narrative scope beyond a simple teleological process of managing “to become *Canadian*” as mentioned above, instead urging us to push our reading practices to more adequately account for “the complex textuality of the international.”

*Dogs at the Perimeter* does so not by positing the US as a simple endpoint to Nuong's story but instead as yet another disturbing point of transit, for we learn via Hiroji's story that Nuong (by this point renamed Nick) is in 2005 about to be forcibly sent back to Cambodia. Following “a vicious fight that ended up blinding a man,” Nuong became marked as a refugee who had committed a felony: despite having “his refugee status in the United States, his high school diploma, his green card,” he became, without American citizenship, subject to deportation (159). Indeed, as discussed in Soo Ah Kwon's account, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), passed in 1996, facilitated “the deportation of permanent residents and refugees to their home countries after serving out their prison sentences,” an Act that began to profoundly impact Cambodian refugees in the US following the signing in 2002 of a formal repatriation agreement with Cambodia

(737). As Kwon notes, “Violations such as urinating in public, bouncing a check, or failing to pay a subway fare became cause for deportation” from the US (740). Kwon’s account does not, however, assume Cambodian Americans or other racialized groups to be passive victims and instead draws our attention to specific forms of youth activism in the San Francisco Bay Area to try to put a stop to the deportations and to repeal the IIRIRA. In doing so, Kwon’s work challenges us to keep our focus on the shifting and contested nature of these legal developments as well as the agency (however circumscribed) of racialized youth.

While *Dogs at the Perimeter* does not focus its attention on activist groups, it narrates unexpected points of intersection in these diasporic histories, interweaving Nuong’s story with Hiroji’s ongoing search for James. Following his deportation to Cambodia, Nuong ends up managing a small hotel — the Lowell Hotel — purchased with the assistance of funds from his American family. It is here, after his reconnection with Nuong, that Hiroji stays in Phnom Penh, in a room that is “comfortable, cool and sun-dappled,” with a bodhisattva initially kept by Hiroji during his vigil in Thailand and handed to Nuong before his departure for the US (242). Despite the many forms of uncertainty facing Hiroji and Nuong, and despite unresolved notions of justice in Cambodia and elsewhere, this connection, however tenuous, provides one apparent point of stability in their unsettled lives.

## VI.

In contemporary Canada, the lives of refugees have become increasingly precarious following the 2012 passing by the Harper government of Bill C-31, an omnibus bill on Canada’s refugee system that is in Carrie Dawson’s account “designed to disappear refugees” who reside or wish to reside in Canada “via mandatory incarceration, deportation or immediate and irrevocable denial of their claims” (67-68).<sup>14</sup> Along with the 2014 passing of Bill C-24, which provides the grounds for citizenship in Canada to be revoked by a parliamentary minister, it is clear that the lives of refugees in Canada are far from secure.<sup>15</sup> Under these circumstances, what could be gained by reading *Dogs at the Perimeter*? At this point, I wish to return one more time to Thien’s novel.

While in Laos, following her reunion with Hiroji and her conversations with a woman named Vanna and with James, Janie notes that



“[t]he days and nights we remembered began to overlap” (171). Following these conversations, Janie begins to write. She observes,

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, this was where the contours lay, this was the form. Yet I wanted, finally, to be the one to describe it. (171)

This key moment in the narrative, with its references to “overlap[ping]” memories and “[t]errible dreams,” is brought under apparent narrative 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, Chaudière, Assiniboine*. Words to keep him company, to name the world, to contain it” (171). The 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 question of additional “cartographies of violence” (to use Mona Oikawa’s resonant phrase) that are not locatable in Cambodia in the 1970s and beyond *but remain inextricably present in Canada*.<sup>16</sup>

This key point in the text opens up space for us to reconsider the stakes involved in reading *Dogs at the Perimeter*. As I have noted, the interwoven temporalities that characterize Thien’s novel were not — at least initially — always warmly received. I have suggested that Spivak’s injunction to “go beyond the self-identity of nationalism toward the complex textuality of the international” may help guide us through this difficult novel, even as we must recognize (as Franco has pointed out) that what Spivak is proposing here provides no shortcuts. To be sure, learning to read Asian Canadian texts such as *Dogs at the Perimeter* that work across the North-South divide remains an enormous challenge, even as in a Spivakian sense it remains urgently necessary to do so. In taking on this challenge, we might note specifically how the figure of Kiri, as remembered by Janie, sets out to learn words “to name the world, to contain it” — a strategy of containment that we have seen, in a different form, in a key memorial site, too. A careful reading of

Thien's text, however, might also try to engage in what Spivak calls "the persistent de-transcendentalization of such figures" (289), a task that involves interrupting such strategies of containment and instead learning to imagine, however partially, the profound impacts of state-directed violence, historical and ongoing, in Asia and in North America. This imaginative project is no simple substitute for the ongoing need to challenge unjust legislation or other forms of state violence. Instead, as a necessary supplement to such activist work, it requires us to continue learning how to read, from our various locations, what Thien calls "the rough turbulence that joins . . . continents" (167) while also attending to the many ways that our critical work in this respect remains unfinished.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, since *Dogs at the Perimeter* appeared in a UK edition (published by Granta) in February 2012, reviews in the UK press have not appeared to be troubled by the novel's narrative complexity or by the difficulty of its subject matter. See, for example, Turpin; "Stuck"; and Wheelwright; in a Canadian context, see also Chau. At the time of writing, Thien's novel has also been — or soon will be — translated into French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, Estonian, Hebrew, and Turkish. The forms of knowledge that have been, and could be, produced around these translations are significant but outside the scope of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> As Spivak exclaims, "I will never be foolish enough to claim that a humanities education alone (especially given the state of humanities education today) can save the world!" (291).

<sup>3</sup> For a sense of some conflicting critical expectations concerning this point, see Marchand; and Brand.

<sup>4</sup> The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) referred to in Thien's novel is actually an existing organization in Phnom Penh, created in 1995 as the field office of Yale University's Cambodian Genocide Program; it became an independent research institute in 1997. It presents itself as "the world's largest repository of Khmer Rouge-related documents" with a mandate to "contribute to an objective history of the Democratic Kampuchea period [i.e., 1975-1979] and to promote accountability for the abuses of that period" (*Documentation Center*).

<sup>5</sup> In the Canadian context, readers may consult other "outsider novels" representing the Cambodian genocide, including Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared* (2009). Additional key texts include memoirs by Alice Pung, Chanrithy Him, and Loung Ung; Vaddey Ratner's novel *In the Shadow of the Banyan* (2012); Rithy Panh's extraordinary work of creative nonfiction *The Elimination* (collaboratively authored with Christophe Bataille; French edition 2012 / English edition 2013); and Panh's celebrated films, including, most recently, *The Missing Picture* (2013).

<sup>6</sup> A notable example is the work of the Cambodian Working Group / Groupe de travail Cambodge which has operated as part of the Montreal Life Stories / Histoires de vie Montréal project in collaboration with the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University; for more details, see: <http://lifestoriesmontreal.ca/en/cambodia-working-group>.

<sup>7</sup> The best-known memorial sites in Cambodia include the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center. In the diaspora, one notable memorial site is the Cambodian American Heritage Museum and Killing Fields Memorial in Chicago.

<sup>8</sup> As Schlund-Vials notes, the Japanese-owned company JC Royal was in 2005 awarded a thirty-year contract to manage the Choeung Ek memorial site, an arrangement that allowed it to raise admission from US\$0.50 to US\$3.00 for foreign visitors (US\$6 including the rental of multilingual audio equipment at the time of my visit) while also, via a concomitant annual agreement, providing US\$15,000 to the municipality of Phnom Penh (62-63).

<sup>9</sup> The following description of the exhibit is based on my visit to the Choeung Ek memorial site on 19 January 2014.

<sup>10</sup> The text exhibited was in Khmer and English. In striking contrast to this note of triumph is the way the ECCC, in Um's account, "came amidst political compromise, scandals, and protracted immobilism" (839). At the time of writing, the court has tried and convicted three senior Khmer Rouge officials. For circumspect assessments of the workings of the ECCC part way through its mandate, see the essays collected in Ciorciari and Heindel.

<sup>11</sup> In Joseph Coleman's account, the March 1945 US firebombings of Tokyo resulted in more immediate deaths than either of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; they are, Coleman writes, "widely considered to be the most devastating air raid in history." In Owen's and Kiernan's account, data released in 2000 concerning US air force activity in Indochina indicates that from 1965 to 1973, the US dropped on Cambodia 2,756,941 tons of ordnance in 230,516 sorties on 113,716 sites; while the "staggering" implications of this bombing have been the subject of much debate, Owen and Kiernan state that its civilian casualties "drove an enraged populace into the arms of an insurgency that had enjoyed relatively little support until the bombing began, setting in motion the expansion of the Vietnam War deeper into Cambodia, a *coup d'état* in 1970, the rapid rise of the Khmer Rouge, and ultimately the Cambodian genocide" (63).

<sup>12</sup> For Troeung's discussion of this passage, see "Witnessing" 155. I am also indebted to her for drawing attention to the source by Joseph Coleman cited above.

<sup>13</sup> I am thinking here of the role played by Bonny, “the fixer,” who not only locates for Hiroji his missing brother James (by this point renamed Kwan) but also, in a startling act of generosity, hands Hiroji an airplane ticket to Luang Prabang (244).

<sup>14</sup> For a brief inter-ethnic account of why Bill C-31 has “the potential to inflict untold pain and injustice on a whole new generation of asylum seekers,” see Kogawa, Troper, and Wong.

<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing, the constitutionality of Bill C-24 is being challenged in the Federal Court of Canada. For an account of this challenge and varied points of critique of this legislation, see Black.

<sup>16</sup> One way to address this issue would involve scrutinizing the limits of existing forms of knowledge production, especially, in this context, the typical separation of “refugee studies” and “Indigenous studies” into discreet and non-overlapping fields of study (Coleman, Glanville, Hasan, and Kramer-Hamstra xiii) — a critical project that Daniel Coleman and his collaborators have attempted to pursue.

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