"Lives on Paper": The Terms of Refuge in the Life Writings of Ariel Dorfman and Kao Kalia Yang

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As opposed to the literary tradition of the Modernist exile, which is usually attached to solitary intellectualism and artistic expression, refugee writing has often been linked to "the refugee condition," which is that of a silent, backward mass of helpless persons. The rise of critical refugee studies, particularly in American studies, has been challenging the idea of refugees as helpless victims, but there is still work to be done around refugee narratives. In looking at previous traditions of reading displacement narratives, of which Ariel Dorfman's *Heading South, Looking South* is emblematic, it is clear that such models do not account for contemporary refugee situations, many of which have arisen from U.S. efforts to democratize other nations. In particular, the Modernist exile tradition is inadequate in encompassing the issues of scale and silence that have been especially attached to post-Vietnam War refugees. Thus, it is vital that we consider broader and more fluid terms of literary representation for the refugee, terms that begin to encompass the silencing effects of refugee treatment and the nature of collective narratives. In this article, then, I draw attention to the need for new, critical forms of representation that can begin to discuss this liminal figure within the genre of life writing, tracing Kao Kalia Yang's refugee narrative against a moment in the autobiography of the self-proclaimed exile, Ariel Dorfman. When Dorfman turns to a Modernist exile tradition of isolation and singularity at a crucial point in his displacement, he unwittingly relegates the refugee to a position of silence. It is against this silence that I read Yang's *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* as a text that negotiates the interconnected relationships between the writer and the collective, that works through the

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challenges of writing from a "void." In placing these two texts together, I make a larger argument that refugee narratives require moving beyond the Modernist exile tradition to more contemporary and indigenous movements like *testimonio*, which provides an example of how those who have been marginalized, who have been characterized as a silent, desperate mass can claim a voice and assert agency not despite of but because of an explicit sense of collectivism.

In bringing together Dorfman, Yang, and *testimonio,* I am not only questioning the assumed position of erasure and silence attached to refugees, but am also drawing necessary connections between Southeast Asian and Latin American experiences of displacement and disempowerment within a U.S. context. As scholars continue to think about the impact of U.S. imperialism, particularly clandestine acts like recruiting Hmong soldiers to fight in the neutral country of Laos during the Vietnam War, it can be beneficial to establish meaningful correlations between other instances of erasure and marginalization that are also linked to U.S. diplomatic efforts. Indeed, both Dorfman and Yang appear among other writers in a recent collection entitled *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives.* In that text, the editor, author and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen, offers up "this book of powerful voices, from writers who were themselves refugees" as a small remedy "to the ongoing silencing of millions of voices."[1] Similarly, in turning to *testimonio* as a way to think beyond traditional Western and masculinist models of life writing, which often leave little room for collective representations and acts of erasure, I am proposing a way to listen to silenced voices. Using Dorfman's earlier text as an impetus, I move to Yang's more recent memoir in order to draw attention to how the rhetoric around refugees is beginning to change. Although both authors are pushed from their homelands and share a similar need for refuge, only Dorfman has the ability to strategically take on the label of "Exile" instead of "Refugee."[2] And, in doing so, he presents the "Exile" as the more legible status, one that allows for an intellectualized and singular retelling and that, inadvertently, creates a false dichotomy between the intelligible exile and the voiceless refugee. With John Beverley's notion of *testimonio*, which draws together the issues of representing voicelessness and collectivity and which is rooted in Latin American literature, I argue that Yang provides an example of how to represent what is often portrayed as a silent and marginalized group. Ultimately, by giving some voice and agency to a peripheral collective, Yang's memoir, which is both a testimony to her and her family's life as refugees and Hmong Americans, provides different models for thinking critically about refugee literature, particularly as it confronts Western and imperial traditions of understanding forced displacement and the construction of refugees as a mass of silent, grateful victims.

Within critical refugee studies, both Yên Lê Espiritu and Viet Thanh Nguyen, among others, have discussed the important role silence has played in defining refugees, especially those who emerged from the long Euro-American colonial interest in Southeast Asia. Of special note is how the Vietnamese subject in American refugee studies has been most visible when portrayed as the helpless

victim who is ready to be rescued. As Nguyen writes, "One of the most important representations of the Asian American body politic in the post-Vietnam War period is that of the victim."[3] Espiritu also echoes this popular representation, arguing that most of the work produced around the Vietnamese subject "cast[s] Vietnamese refugees as objects of rescue . . . as [persons] 'incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care.'"[4] This formation of Southeast Asian refugees not only provides a convenient way to recuperate failed U.S. military efforts, but also presents the refugee as a disempowered and voiceless figure.[5] This silencing is exactly what pushes Dorfman to identify as an exile rather than a refugee. His choice seems even more inevitable within the specific context of Modernist Western literature where there is little viable space for the refugee subject. While much of Dorfman's body of work has championed the cause of displaced persons, the moment in which he eschews refugees for the exile is emblematic of the "problem" of refugee-hood.[6] For in that decision, Dorfman continues to imbue the label "Refugee" with a sense of mass disempowerment, continues to portray refugees as "problems" that burden and, then, through resettlement, replenish imperialist nation-states. On its own, that moment in Dorfman's text does little to question this construction of refugees as silent, victimized masses waiting to be saved and turned into grateful new citizens. But, read alongside Yang's text and through the work of Beverley and Mimi Thi Nguyen, that moment pushes us to see the limits of the Modernist exile and to recognize the failures, not of refugees, but of empire.

The Pull and Limits of the Modernist Exile

Although most scholarly work on Dorfman's autobiography *Heading South, Looking North* has focused on his interest in his shifting identification with Spanish and English and the trauma of his displacement, my own interest rests in his choice to identify himself as exile rather than refugee.[7] Published in 1998, Dorfman's text centers around the 1973 coup of Allende's government in Chile and reflects back on his multiple experiences of displacement in the United States, first as a child moving from Argentina with his parents and then later in life when he is forced to leave Chile. His ultimate exilehood is, thus, complicated by multiple relocations, but his status is almost always intellectualized and romanticized. Indeed, Dorfman was already a writer and precocious reader when, after the fall of Allende's government and months of precarious and humiliating journeys and detentions, he found himself seeking refuge in the Argentine embassy. The chapter in which he declares his exilehood opens thusly:

> The woman from the United Nations clears her throat, barely throws a glance at me sitting across from her at a resplendent antique table in the Argentine Embassy, and proceeds to read from the UN statute of 1951. A refugee, she drones, is any person who, "owing to well-found fear of being persecuted for

> reasons of race, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."
>
> She looks up briefly, "Is that understood?"
>
> I nod, saying nothing. What is there to understand?[8]

In Dorfman's cold representation of the UN, the anonymous and uncaring worker, neatly and safely tucked behind her "resplendent antique table" can only parrot the refugee statute, which he explicitly provides word-for-word in his retelling. For Dorfman, there is little about the woman's droning that he understands since there is nothing about the refugee that points to a real future for him. In "a split second," Dorfman must decide "not *who* I am, but who I *intend* to be" (emphasis mine).[9] While he fully recognizes himself as a refugee—"that person" who has "that fear"—, Dorfman asserts his remaining agency by choosing who he wants to be and not who he is in that moment of vulnerability and displacement. In the end, he denies refugee status in order to be immediately recognized as "somebody different, somebody distinct, somebody real."[10] This scene, while capturing the alienating effects of his encounter and the desire to be disassociated from its disempowering formality, also reveals Dorfman's inability to see other forms of categorizing displaced persons. In an attempt to be more visible, to be heard, he reaches out to an intellectualized tradition of displacement. Thus, by denying *himself* refugee status, Dorfman subtly yet importantly denies status *to* refugees and, instead, upholds a specific type of asylum seeker: the Modernist exile.

Although Dorfman only has a split second to decide how he is to answer the refugee question, the illusion of the Modernist exile is too appealing for him to resist. Upon saying "no" to the offer of refugee status, Dorfman "blurt[s] out: 'I'm an exile'" even though he is aware that "the term ha[s] no legal significance, no international or technical meaning, no guarantees, no protection."[11] Materially, there are no benefits to being an exile. As Dorfman has already pointed out, the UN statute of 1951 was created so that displaced persons would have specific and guaranteed privileges before entering their new country of asylum. Although refugee status would afford Dorfman formalized legal and social passage, which he desperately needs, it is a threshold that he refuses to cross. Going into further detail on his decision he writes:

> Yes, that definition of refugee might fit me perfectly; but I did not fit snugly into its image, the self it suggested I was to become. It is true that my existence had been swept up in a historic catastrophe which differed only in degree from those that had uprooted and would continue to dislocate millions of others in this miserable century of ours; yes, but I had the means, no matter how slight, to rescue a certain control—or

> was it the illusion of control?—over my existence, over my self-image.[12]

Dorfman, fearing the loss of control over his individuality and the ensuing power that others will have in replacing his existence, his self-image with that of the refugee, makes a conscious effort to deny any alliance with refugees even as he recognizes that his situation is not very different from theirs. Instead, he hopes that, as an exile, people "will recognize [him] as an individual and not part of the helpless masses that flood the newsreels and the TV screens and appear in photos in far too many books and newspapers, overwhelmed by forces outside their control that they do not seem to comprehend."[13] Even more than this image of "helpless masses" and totalizing victimization, Dorfman also conjures up another familiar refugee trope: "the camps in which people without a country stagnate amid the filth and the flies."[14] These immediate and broad portraits of the refugee provide little mental comfort for Dorfman, who, at this point, puts image-preservation over self-preservation and proclaims himself an exile. Even though Dorfman briefly recognizes that the claim to exile might only present "the illusion of control," he clings to it in order to separate himself from the mass of refugees and the stagnation of the camps.[15] In the end, he insists on that "degree" of difference, that knowledge of the romantic idea of displacement and subjectivity that is attached to the Modernist exile for it allows him the possibility of creating a legible self-image rather than being subjected to silent victimization.

Images of refugees, which Dorfman invokes in his rejection of refugee status, *have* become an integral aspect of transforming displaced persons into global victims, securing funds and raising awareness for humanitarian intervention while also establishing and reifying refugees as a volatile mass of helpless, abandoned, and stateless persons in need of immediate international care. These images of refugees move easily around the world and provide a speechless representation of the people who are confined to detainment sites. Such images have come to represent refugee conditions and experiences and have helped construct refugees as speechless, desperate persons in the global imaginary. It is no wonder that Dorfman recalls these pathetic images when eschewing refugee status. In his mind, refugees are not complex characters carefully constructed through textual narratives, but archetypes that must match the still photographs of a silent, desperate, and unclaimed mass. However, Dorfman's choice not only stems from this popularized image of refugees, but also from his own education in which exilehood is a marker of cosmopolitan mobility and legibility.

Not simply representing a final act of agency, but also a desire to claim intellectual status and aesthetic value in the face of displacement, Dorfman instinctively pronounces himself an exile and aligns himself with literary figures and heroes who have constructed a clear and rebellious path for him. Picturing his "emigration as part of another tradition—a more literary one, perhaps," he felt that "there was something Byronic, defiant and challenging, about being an exile, something vastly more romantic and Promethean than the fate embodied in that

recently coined word *refugee*…"[16] For Dorfman, there is a gulf between the bold and historic tradition of exile and the passive and undeveloped newness of being a refugee. There is little comfort or prestige, nothing defiant and challenging in the "recently coined word *refugee*." Refugee-hood is not a tradition but a mere word, a title conferred on those without history, without stories, without Byronic poetry. At a time when he is vulnerable and lost, Dorfman believes that "by rejecting the passive term and opting for the more active, sophisticated, elegant one, [he is] projecting [his] odyssey as something that originated in [himself]."[17] Joining the "more active, sophisticated, elegant" party, Dorfman not simply constructs, but "projects" himself as yet another exile who has been expelled for ideas and writings that make him an enemy of the state. His displacement is not simply tragic happenstance, but an epic "odyssey" worthy of being recorded and retold. Denying the immediate physical need for refuge, Dorfman places himself in a romantic lineage where he is free to roam the world as a "rebellious, solitary, persecuted angel," a term which we can easily replace with "writer."[18] For, in the end, and throughout his text, Dorfman never concedes to think of himself as anything besides an intellectual, an educated and privileged writer, and maintains, perhaps even heightens, this identity by placing the status of exile upon himself. In deciding to be an exile over refugee, Dorfman naturally reaches for an older and seemingly more prestigious embodiment of forced displacement that originates in his early education and understanding of literary production: the exile writer.[19]

Outlining the symbiotic relationship between the exile and the solitary, persecuted intellectual, Caren Kaplan in *Questions of Travel* places this figure within Euro-American modernism while also discussing various representations of displacement in modern and post-modern models. Tracing this specific idea of the exile back to the modernist movement, Kaplan highlights its tendency to "celebrate singularity, solitude, estrangement, alienation" and to represent the "artist in exile" as "never 'at home,' always existentially alone, and shocked by the strain of displacement into significant experimentations and insights."[20] The conscious and necessary singularity and estrangement of the exile laid out by Kaplan is evident in Dorfman, who emphasizes his solitude and separation, particularly in his notion of being "ex-cluded, ex-pelled, ex-iled."[21] What is also important about Kaplan's analysis is the identification of the teleological relationship between isolating displacement and creativity. In her analysis, the creative potential of the exilic state, which is rooted in displacement and its effects, led "the Euro-American middle-class expatriates [to adopt] the attributes of exile as an ideology of artistic production."[22] That is to say, Euro-American modernist writers began to see displacement, particularly exile, as a necessary element of the creative process. Thus, "exilic displacement occupies a privileged position, legitimating points of view and constituting a point of entry into a professional domain."[23] Being in exile, then, is a gateway to authorship and a claim to a literary tradition that champions singularity and estrangement, a trope that Dorfman wishes to emulate and is careful to set up in his text. Dorfman, priming

himself from a young age to be a celebrated writer, understands the power of being seen as an intellectual and recognizes the same potential in being an exile, a potential that is seemingly nonexistent in being a refugee. Indeed, unlike the disempowered refugee, the exile provides a "privileged position" that can help legitimize literary pursuits.

While I do not wish to malign Dorfman's personal choice or his attempt to find agency in a disempowering situation—a point I will return to at the end—, I do want to emphasize how his decision further negates the refugee writer. For, in the end, Dorfman's choice to be identified as an exile is a genuine reflection of his Western education and his position as a writer and cultural critic. Claiming exile is a state of mind for him and a way of escaping his physical surroundings, but it is also an ideal that has been presented to him through the Western canon. It seems natural, then, that under the humiliating scrutiny of the UN worker, he declares exile status in order to see himself as a Byronic hero. In every instance where he is made to feel like a refugee, Dorfman can fall back on his literary heroes in order to align himself with the exile writer and, thus, remove himself from the situation. In a moment of retrospection, Dorfman remarks, "I had chosen instinctively to exploit my difference, thankfully reached out for the first jetsam that washed up from my personality, tried to set myself mentally apart from the multitudes I had sworn to fuse forever."[24] Staying true to his "personality," which has been drawn to a romanticization of displacement, Dorfman holds on to a modern Euro-American notion of authorship and is able to set himself aside, to remain separate from "the masses" even as he lives among them. Stripped of his identity and agency, Dorfman makes the only choice that remains to him. Yet, what is decisively problematic is not simply Dorfman's decision to "exploit" his difference, but his outright rejection and reification of the unintelligible refugee, the unflattering collective image mirrored against that of the cultured, "rebellious, solitary, persecuted" exile writer.[25] For, if the displaced figure Dorfman chooses is relatively autonomous, heroic, and rife with artistic prowess, then the refugee must be denied all these things.

While Dorfman is quick to dismiss the place of refugees, especially in the realm of culture and literature, scholars such as Kaplan and Viet Thanh Nguyen, among others, are careful to note the dangers of excluding such groups of displaced persons. Returning to Nguyen later in this article, I want to focus here on Kaplan who calls for "an examination of the power of representation in 'high' culture in general, an examination that will reveal myriad ways in which the 'unhoused' and the powerless are disenfranchised by social formations that include but are not limited to arts and letters."[26] Kaplan's wish to examine how "arts and letters" and "'high' culture" silence marginalized groups is aimed precisely at such texts as Dorfman's, where elitist assumptions, especially the oppositional presentation of the intellectual exile and the dumb refugee, are rampant. Further recognizing this simplified dichotomy, Kaplan writes, "The representation of mass displacement as irrevocable and beyond cultural expression reduces the refugee to ultimate victim, pinned in lumpen opposition to the recoverable memoirs

and fictions of the exiled, bourgeois modernist."[27] When Dorfman chooses the exile for its literary legacy and cultural prestige and simultaneously describes refugees as "helpless masses," "overwhelmed by forces outside their control that they do not seem to comprehend," he does not allow himself to see beyond the gaze of the UN worker and her like, or allow himself to imagine a space for their narratives.[28] This passive characterization as well as the image of stagnating people imprisoned within camps not only present refugees as powerless, but also as frozen, forever linked to their forced displacement. It is, as Kaplan notes, a reduction "of the refugee as ultimate victim," as someone, as a group totally without agency and voice, "beyond cultural expression." Indeed, it seems natural for Dorfman, whose life ambition is to be a writer and who has been taught to admire exile authors, to separate himself from the speechless refugee, and yet, it also seems unnatural to deny the refugee the ability to speak. His rejection of the silenced and absent refugee pushes him toward the exile, thus allowing him to embrace the autobiographical genre that champions the creation and expression of one's self. This emphasis on the singular and agentive self does not easily accommodate the refugee who, as Dorfman argues, reflects a passive and silent collective other. Yet, although Dorfman's detailed characterization of the refugee as passive, collective, and dumb is unfavorable, it does serve as a provocative starting point to study refugee narratives, to dwell in their impossibilities.

"Lives on Paper:" Refugee Life Writing in Yang's Text

Born in 1980 inside one of the stagnant refugee camps Dorfman imagines, Yang, who is not given the choice to declare herself an exile, embodies many of the refugee markers that Dorfman fears. Even in her description of the refugee camp where she is born and spends her first seven years of life, Yang does not deny the dirt, the poverty, and the feeling of imprisonment. Indeed, from the moment Yang's family is processed as refugees, they easily stand in as a perfect representation of Dorfman's characterization of refugees as helpless and silenced victims. After horrific experiences in the Laotian jungles and a dangerous crossing over the Mekong River into Thailand, Yang's family, a "tattered group" that consisted of 13 adults and an unspecified number of children, are essentially forced to register as refugees.[29] Yang describes this registration as a quiet affair with little hint of the political angst Dorfman feels during his interview: "They stood in line, one family and then another, while the UN people, all Thai, wrote their names on paper, gave them numbers that would replace their names, and asked for their birthdays."[30] The idea of exile is nonexistent as names are replaced by numbers and birthdays are merely guessed at. Like many Hmong refugees, Yang's family provided their best estimates on birthdays since many did not follow formal calendars. As Yang remarks, "For many of the Hmong, their lives on paper began on the day the UN registered them as refugees of war."[31] In this moment, the family's past, the lives that did not exist on paper, seems to hold little meaning as they are transformed into refugees. Dorfman's image of the

refugee, then, is seemingly correct and we see Yang's family as many around the world see them: hungry, poor, and helpless to the point where their births must be fabricated. The act of registration is ironically silencing, erasing individuals while at the same time producing a legible record. For Dorfman, the idea of beginning his "life on paper" as a refugee is impossible to imagine, but, for Yang, it is a reality and an inherited history that she does not have the luxury to deny.

The virtual absence of a text-based literary practice in modern Hmong culture as well as the secrecy around Hmong involvement in the Vietnam War compounds the issues of silence and erasure often attached to refugees, making Yang illegible three times over. Unlike Dorfman, who was able to use literature and writing to anchor his identity, Yang and most Hmong refugees had no recognized texts to house them.[32] In a survey on Hmong American literature, Kong Pheng Pha and I dedicate a whole section to the lack of a textual literary history and the silence of the "Secret War," marking it as a pivotal aspect of reading Hmong American narratives. Ma Vang argues that this absence, which she characterizes as part of a "literary, historical, and geographic erasure," means having to "assert writing as a political project of existing and being."[33] And, in her text, Yang addresses these erasures directly, writing in her epilogue, "Because her people had only been reunited with a written language in the 1950's, in the break of a war without a name, they had not had the opportunity to write their stories down."[34] While the silence and erasure evoked by Dorfman may be very real for Yang, she does not let it stop her from imagining a path to writing. In line with Vang's argument that writing has become a "political project of existing and being," Yang reacts to erasure, to "the diminishing memories of her mother and father," to saying "good-bye to her grandmother from Laos, from Thailand, from America" by writing their stories onto "sheets of white paper."[35] Instead of letting their "lives on paper" begin with the silencing effects of refugee registration, Yang uses her memoir to tell a richer, fuller story, to commemorate and testify to her family and peoples that Dorfman dismisses.

Understanding refugee narratives through the specific genre of life writing, specifically *testimonio*, not only points to the exclusionary tendencies of genres such as the western and masculinist autobiography and the Modernist exile tradition, but also introduces a way to analyze and address the limitations placed specifically on collective forms of self-representation. Drawing from feminist critiques of the masculinist tropes of autobiographical writing, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call attention to the role that Western thought and gender play in rendering the colonial subject silent, arguing that "Where Western eyes see Man as a unique individual rather than a member of a collectivity, or race or nation, of sex or sexual preference, Western eyes see the colonized as an amorphous, generalized collectivity."[36] Much like that moment in Dorfman's text, which denies the refugee a mode of expression by presenting her as the antithesis to the solitary and expressive exile, "Western Man" silences the colonized by seeing them "as an amorphous, generalized collectivity" and the opposite of the articulate individual. Instead of thinking of self-representation as granted, Smith

and Watson describe the colonial subject's "process of coming to writing" as "an articulation *through* interrogation, a charting of the conditions that have historically placed her identity under erasure."[37] That is to say, self-representation of the colonized subject is always simultaneously an expression of identity *and* a mapping of a collective oppression. As Smith and Watson go on to argue, this "articulation *through* interrogation" sparks narratives that "do not necessarily fall into a privatized itinerary" or "secure the 'individual' rather than the collective character of self-representation."[38] In essence, writing from a collective and silenced position is not simply about articulating an individual's erasure, as in the case of Dorfman, but a communal one, producing new and hybrid forms of life writing that move beyond masculinist traditions like Modern exile narratives.[39] Instead, models like *testimonio* can provide a way to approach life-writing that directly addresses collective displacement, precarity, and erasure.

John Beverley's *Testimonio* largely concerns the movement, beginning in the late 70s, to record indigenous experiences of oppression in Latin America, but his characterization of *testimonio*, particularly its connection to an oppressed collectivity and expression and its emphasis on urgency, provides useful and preliminary terms for thinking about refugee narratives such as Yang's.[40] As Beverley defines it, *testimonio* not only "serves to bring subaltern voice and experience into civil society and the public sphere" but also "constitutes an affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode."[41] Here, it is easy to see the similarities between refugee texts and *testimonio* as both are forms of subaltern expression, which, as Smith and Watson also argue, highlight the collective nature of the individual. Once again, the text not only gives voice to marginalized experiences, but simultaneously recognizes the interdependent relationship between the individual and the collective. Another aspect of *testimonio* that bears significance to refugee narratives is "a desire not to be silenced or defeated, a desire to impose oneself on an institution of power, such as literature, from the position of the excluded or the marginal."[42] Inherent in both *testimonio* and refugee texts like Yang's is the desire to speak and, especially, to speak out, often by representing the conditions of oppression. Beverley's reference to literature as an "institution of power" is especially apt in the case of Dorfman's dismissal of refugees because of their lack of literary lineage. Even more than speaking out against marginalization, *testimonio* challenges the deligitimization of stories that belong to those forced to live in precarity. The specificity of the term testimonio, which in "Spanish carries the connotation of an act of truth telling in a religious or legal sense—*dar testimonio* means to testify, to bear truthful witness," highlights a form of self-representation that emerges from poor, marginalized, grossly disempowered and, often, illiterate communities.[43] Testifying is an act weighted with authority that is not often granted to refugees once they enter into the dehumanizing circus of humanitarian care and detention. Thinking of Yang's text in terms of *testimonio*, then, draws attention to the necessary expression of oppressive conditions and the manifestations and importance of collectivity and testimony in refugee narratives.

From its earliest pages, Yang's *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, instead of aggrandizing the solitary and privileged intellectual, emphasizes the collective and the exigency of expressing refugee experiences. The text opens with a dedication to her grandmother "Youa Lee, who never learned how to write" and to her "baby brother, Maxwell Hwm Yang, who will read the things she never wrote." Beginning with a reference to her grandmother and her youngest sibling, Yang simultaneously calls attention to the collective nature of her text and the pressing difficulty of and desire for expression.[44] Because the grandmother "never learned how to write," she cannot leave a text that Yang's brother or family can read. Instead, Yang takes it upon herself to write for and on behalf of her family. This dedication not only emphasizes that this is a family memoir, as promised by the title, but also marks Yang as the recorder, the writer, the person who will publish the older generation's words so that the subsequent ones can read them. Its gesture to a mediated past and a textual future serves as an appropriate introduction to a story that captures the communal struggles of a small minority group embroiled in America's interest in Southeast Asia, the strain and resilience of a family chased into refugee camps, and the personal ambition of a young author. Born and partially raised in a refugee camp, Yang largely grows up in Minnesota before attending Carleton College and then obtaining an MFA from Columbia, and her position as both a refugee and a Hmong American helps her tell her story alongside that of her family's and Hmong peoples.[45] Acknowledging her collective voice from the very beginning, Yang gestures to both the possibility of silence and the ability to speak against it. Her text, in the fashion of *testimonio*, accepts and embraces the terms of her and her family's refugee identity, drawing inspiration from the collective story and not simply her own.

Like the dedication, much of Yang's text is interested in narrating both an individual and collective narrative of displacement. Indeed, Yang cannot write about herself without telling the larger story of Hmong people, especially since many of the events that make her a refugee happen before she is born.[46] Though her immediate situation has been caused by America's hushed involvement in Laos during the Vietnam War, she goes back even farther and recounts the oral history of Hmong displacement: "She had heard stories of how Hmong people did not have a country, how we always had to leave places behind. First China because the Chinese didn't want us on their land—how they took away our written language, and how they tried to turn us into slaves, and so we spoke our fears to our ancestors and made our way to Laos."[47] Her and her family's displacement, then, is part of a much longer history of removal and erasure. She goes on to explain the Hmong's cooperation with the US government in the 60's and 70's and how when the Americans abruptly left in 1975, they were persecuted by the Lao Communist government, forcing them to live in the jungles for years until finally making their way into the Thai refugee camps and then to countries like America, France, and Australia. It is only after recounting all of this information and establishing a communal history of persecution that she begins to delve into her own family's experiences, presenting yet another form of collectivity.

Formalistically, Yang's text, by speaking to communal and familial experiences of displacements and by countering popular misconceptions about refugees with personal photos, is more *testimonio* than the traditional Western, masculinist autobiography. The first part of Yang's memoir, told in the third person, is entirely devoted to her parents and her extended family as they journey towards Thailand, and then shifts to the first person in Part II, when she is finally born and able to enter into the narrative. As she retells her family's stories in Part I, she expresses their thoughts and actions in her own words, and though her narration is chronological and fluid, it is clear that certain thoughts and fears were shared much later after the event.[48] The entire book is spotted with statements, such as "my mother recalls," "He [Yang's father] would tell me, years later," "my aunt remembers," that introduce personal memories.[49] Yang also inserts direct comments and memories that she translates and includes as quoted lines as well as personal photos. The pictures, especially the ones taken in the Thai camps which show her smiling and well-groomed or in her father's arm among the tree tops as he holds her "up to see the world," provide a glimpse into the private and real conditions of Hmong refugees.[50] This particularization of the "refugee experience" directly opposes the image of "helpless masses that flood the newsreels and the TV screens and appear in photos in far too many books and newspapers" invoked by Dorfman in his text.[51] Providing her own images, Yang takes control of her story and gives voice to the individuals who are silenced in the widely circulated photos of refugees, which Liisa Malkki argues "are now a key vehicle in the elaboration of a transnational social imagination of refugeeness."[52] Instead of seeing photos that Malkki describes as having "No names, no funny faces, no distinguishing marks, no esoteric details of personal style . . . " and that displaces refugee agency, Yang gives her readers photos that capture a particular family and, in the case of the tree-top photos, a sense of imagination and futurity.[53] These photos as well as the inclusion of multiple voices are examples of alternative forms of refugee life writing that help establish the importance of recovering and retelling stories like that of the Yang family and of Hmong peoples.

Although the recovery of memories is crucial to *testimonio,* its importance is largely connected to the urgent nature of writing from such marginalization and absence, of wanting to survive in some form. If the purpose of *testimonio* is to testify, to bear witness, then, as Beverley argues, it should follow that "the situation of narration . . . has to involve an urgency to communicate."[54] This urgency, stemming from "a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival," is what drives the authors of *testimonio* and should "be implicated in the act of narration itself."[55] For Yang, the exigency not only comes from her own desire to remember and retain her Hmong culture and identity, but also from a communal desire to be heard and understood. Yang's text, then, directly challenges the fear of illegibility that plagues Dorfman when he is faced with the decision to declare refugee status. Although Yang is very much aware of her people's history and her own family's attempts to rebuild their lives, it seems that Hmong are invisible in American culture. She writes, "In American

history we learned of the Vietnam War. We read about guerilla warfare and the Vietcong. The Ho Chi Minh Trail and communism and democracy and Americans and Vietnamese. There were no Hmong—as if we hadn't existed at all in America's eyes."[56] The marked absence of Hmong history and their involvement in the Vietnam War pulls Yang closer to a unified idea of being Hmong and makes her "[burn] for our stories, our poverty, and our cause."[57] This sentiment of a necessary and collective memory is reiterated in the epilogue, which takes place four years after her traditional chronological retelling ends with the death of her grandmother.

In its transparent acknowledgement of the challenging responsibility of representing refugee experiences in life writing, Yang's epilogue serves as both a reminder of the sometimes untraceable experience of being a refugee *and* the urgency and collectivity of *testimonio*. Preceded by a photo of Yang and her parents at her graduation from the Columbia MFA program, the epilogue begins with her observations and a conversation between her and her father as they drive from St. Paul to Northern Minnesota. Discussing the long road towards publication, Yang is aware of how much has changed since she first began working on the book. Her father has developed Type 2 diabetes and she, thinking of her grandmother's skill with herbal medicine, regrets not knowing "how to boil herbs, how to find them, how to prepare them, how to have him drink them."[58] Yang makes it clear that certain aspects of her culture have disappeared with the absence of Grandma, that there will always be a foundation of loss in the refugee experience. Though she has spent the previous chapter charting her grandmother's life and death, there are multiple levels of knowledge that remain incommunicable. Alongside this admission to the failure of remembering, Yang also affirms the necessity of bearing witness, of telling the story of a self that is meaningfully intertwined with the collective.

Although Yang has included numerous other voices in her family memoir, she returns to the idea of collectivity more explicitly at the end of the text, heavily emphasizing her father's own ambitions for the telling of Hmong American history.[59] As they drive home and discuss the book, her father gives her special instructions on what should be included:

> "It is very important that you tell this part of our story: the Hmong came to America without a homeland. Even in the very beginning, we knew that we were looking for a home. Other people, in moments of sadness and despair, can look to a place in the world: where they might belong. We are not like that. I knew that our chance was here. Our chance to share in a new place and a new home. This is so important to our story. You must think about it, and tell it the way it is."[60]

Including her father's directions into the epilogue, Yang gives readers a final reminder that she is not simply telling the story of herself, but also testifying for

many others. And, though it has been clear that she, in order to transcribe this Hmong family memoir, has relied on other tellers throughout the book, it is now apparent that they also rely on her. In her father's directions, there is a constant back and forth between his own ideas and "our story," but he begins and ends with a clear implication of Yang as the author who "must think about it, and tell it the way it is." She must balance her own intentions, her own story with that of her father's and that of Hmong American's. As the author of a refugee text, Yang cannot simply write about the self, cannot simply separate her own displacement from other Hmong. Whether or not she is able to capture what is specifically important to her father, she does include his desires and his words; thus, the "it" of "the way it is" remains fluid and accommodating to other Hmong American narratives and experiences. The transparency of this symbiotic relationship makes the merging of collectivity and life writing possible and establishes the text as testimonio, as one refugee response to Modernist exile writing. The openness of "it" also points to the inherent but generative problem of *testimonio*, which is the impossibility of having one voice fully represent large-scale disenfranchisement.

Addressing the Limits of *Testimonio*

Indeed, *testimonio*'s heavy emphasis on marginalized collectivity and testimony as a means to political and social change has been met with both extremes of idealistic enthusiasm and antagonistic skepticism, neither of which fully recognizes the network of relationships that are crucial to its success. While some scholarship—most famously that of the anthropologist David Stoll, who questioned the veracity of the seminal *testimonio I, Rigoberta Menchú*—has discredited the genre, others have emphatically heralded *testimonio*, as with William Westerman who writes, "Testimony is about people rising from a condition of being victims, objects of history, and taking charge of their history, becoming subjects, actors in it. History no longer makes them; they make it, write it, speak it."[61] On the one hand, the former works to dismantle the collective by discounting an individual's ability to represent it, and, on the other hand, the latter assumes an easy unity by over-simplifying the very same idea of representation. However, as Beverley argues, "Testimonio is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated [metonymically] can have a kind of representational value. Each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences."[62] *Testimonio* does not place more value on the exceptional individual because it wants to displace that value among a collective, a sentiment supported here in Beverley's idea that *testimonio* "evokes an absent polyphony of other voices." Doris Sommer in "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's *Testimonio* and the Plural Self" also argues that *testimonios* insist on revealing the communal connections and that it is precisely this "insistence on showing relationships" that marks the genre's turn to plurality.[63] For Yang, her text, though largely centered on her individual experiences, actively incorporates many voices while maintaining

this idea of "other possible lives and experiences."[64] Through the largely absent voice of her older sister Dawb, Yang's text demonstrates how *testimonio* can represent a collective not only by retelling the stories of a community, but also by invoking the silent presence of other lives.

Born under extreme circumstances and the only sibling to have physically crossed the Mekong River, Dawb's individual story and her inner reflections can easily be seen as more compelling and appropriate, in terms of its refugee-ness, than Yang's, and yet, her voice and memories are often not shared. As Yang narrates, their mother "was three months pregnant when the group [seeking shelter in the jungles of Laos] was ambushed by North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers" and, so, Dawb was born in the enemy camp after the group decided that the women would surrender themselves over while the men would flee, regroup, and rescue the rest later.[65] Although this seemed a desperate plan and meant that Yang's father missed the birth of his first child, the strategy, after seven long months, worked. Yang tells us that in the rainy months that followed their escape, Dawb grew sick and malnourished and "became thin—wrinkled skin and small bones" and then almost died when the family crossed the Mekong.[66] Later in the Thai refugee camps, the family would learn that Dawb had actually contracted polio, which resurfaced when Yang was a newborn. Dawb's story, particularly the harrowing experiences in Laos and the pivotal crossing of the Mekong, is, when compared to Yang's, more representative of the larger Hmong refugee narrative, making her later absence particularly revealing.

The two sisters grow up close and share many of the same experiences, but Yang never presumes to know what Dawb is thinking or feeling and performs that sense of removal for readers by leaving Dawb's direct memories unrelated. Once in America, the two sisters come to rely on each other even more, often having to navigate their new world with little help from equally anxious and confused parents. Beyond this shared pressure, Dawb and Kao Kalia's relationship is forged even closer as they are the only children who had actually known a home other than America.[67] However, unlike the early moments in the book where Yang imagines what her father and mother must have been thinking as they fled their villages and attempted to stay together, she never tries to represent Dawb in such a manner. Dawb and the other subsequent children are largely unrepresented in the text. Their non-telling reflects the collective and individual nature of *testimonio*, and also signals the importance of recognizing erasure and absence in refugee narratives.

If earlier, Kaplan called for the inclusion of marginalized voices as a reaction to the privileged exile voice, Viet Thanh Nguyen explicitly pushes for an ethical response to the (self)victimization of the refugee. In his essay on minority discourse, particularly Vietnamese refugee literature, Nguyen writes:

> So far as minority discourse can have an ethics, this is it: the claim to suffering and pain as signs of historical injustice must

> be met immediately with the recognition of the other that one has surely wronged.[68]

While this idea of the "wronged" other seems to denote a form of malice, I would argue that a simple omission or elision can be interpreted as a wronging. However, the notion of recognizing this wrong, whether it be slight or grand, is the crux of Nguyen's argument for the ethical recovery of the silenced or victimized subject. In the case of Yang's text, Dawb's "disappearance" points to the fallibility of the refugee writer, who, in order to claim "suffering and pain as signs of historical injustice," as signs of responsible authorship must also acknowledge the other silenced Other. As the book becomes more focused on the American years, Dawb's life is told only through its affiliation with Kao Kalia's, reminding readers that the author cannot fully speak for everyone, that there remains individuals within a collective, even if their differences are often made invisible by the label of "refugee."

As a refugee memoir, Yang's text provides us with an example of how both the subject and the collective can be simultaneously represented, and also how mass forced displacement does not necessarily lead to complete erasure and silence. Although specifically about the refugee experience of the Yang family, *The Latehomecomer*, especially when read as *testimonio*, highlights Yang's commitment to collective expression and the urgency of telling Hmong American displacement narratives. Establishing a communal history that specifically emerges from large-scale displacement, Yang, by weaving her own story with that of her family's and with that of Hmong Americans, begins to fill in the absent history of a consequent diaspora. Yet, while I have argued that the text pushes us to think of refugee writing as a form of collective representation, I have also tried to present it as a negotiation between a privileged and subjective narrator and an urgently reliant and an orality-based community. And, in explicitly including her family's stories, in not assuming Dawb's voice, and in revealing her own limitations, Yang is generally transparent in her role as representative and largely maintains a testimonial obligation to collective narration and recovery. Collecting and writing the words of her grandmother, of the older generation that experienced the event, sharing them with her brother, with the younger generation that composes the wider diaspora, and publishing her text into the larger public, Yang not only expresses a desire to speak from a silenced position of refugee, but also a desire to be heard. Refugee narratives, then, do not remain silent and are not limited by a lack of literary tradition, but are continuously adapting and claiming voice and space.

Conclusion: The Exile and Refugee Narratives Strike Back at Empire

To conclude, I would like to return to both Dorfman and Yang's text and focus on the choices that each makes surrounding their common ground of seeking

refuge. I began by using Dorfman's elision of refugees to illustrate the limits of both the Modernist exile tradition and masculinist tendencies in Western modes of life writing. In his alignment to the wandering and creative exile, Dorfman paints the refugee as having no choice and no voice, failing to recognize that being a refugee *is* making a choice, a choice that, like his, enables them to survive the violence of nation and empire building. Although I have argued that life writing can look different for refugees and the exile, on this very basic level of survival, both stand on equal footing. When placed side by side, this similarity, this shared desire to live is made clearer. Both Dorfman and Yang's family face U.N. officials because they have no other means to secure their lives, and it is this shared precarity that leaves both exile and refugee open to what Mimi Thi Nguyen has characterized as the debt that follows the "gift of freedom."

Using Nguyen's deep analysis of liberal empires, debt, and refugees, I argue that reading Dorfman and Yang's texts together highlight the ways in which displaced persons are not completely beholden to humanitarian and state powers. In *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and other Refugee Passages,* Nguyen, in essence, puts forward "the gift of freedom" as a way to critique the ironic use of liberalism as a foundation to empire. In the case of refugees, "freedom" is extended as both a form of recuperating the losses of war and as an assurance of gratitude and indebtedness. This double utility of "the gift of freedom" ensures that liberal empires, of which Nguyen argues the U.S. is "an exemplar," never truly lose wars waged in pursuit of liberty, democracy, and capitalism.[69] From the precarious position of forced displacement, refugees seemingly have little choice but to accept this gift, to play the role of grateful victims, to become part of a silenced mass. In part, this looming sense of becoming a subjectless subject is what drives Dorfman to call himself an exile and refuse refugee status. He "chose to salvage the one thing that could guarantee [him] safe passage through the desert [he] was facing," recognizing that, for him, a "safe passage" meant more than mere physical survival.[70] And, in this decision, even if it inadvertently meant reifying refugee silence, Dorfman rejects the "gift of freedom" and the grasp of empire. This act of rejection reveals both the burden of gratefulness that accompanies "humanitarian" efforts and the possibility of subverting empire's exploitation of precarity. Dorfman's relative privilege allows him to outright refuse "the gift," and yet, even Yang and her family, who cannot make that same choice, find their own ways to devalue their debt.

In the same way that Yang embraces the collective identity of refugees in writing her text, her memoir-self takes advantage of this very homogenization to both defy the authority of the family's "saviors" and to demonstrate the strength of collectivism. Although Kao Kalia and Dawb are quite different in ways that are deeply felt and respected between each other, Yang provides two examples in which their perceived interchangeability proves to their advantage. The first instance occurs in Phanat Nikhom, a transition camp set up to test and prepare refugees for their future lives in Western countries, where Kao Kalia successfully passes as her sister so that the family can clear the medical exams and depart for

America. The second instance takes place in America in a special classroom full of other Hmong refugee children of all ages where Kao Kalia is able to fill in for Dawb, once again, on the basis that "there were so many of us, they [the teachers] didn't know the difference . . ."[71] Unable to tell any of the Hmong children apart, especially two sisters, the teachers do not and cannot recognize the sisters' ability to act as substitutes for each other when one is in need. Ironically, it is the sisters' heightened awareness of their differences that allow them to know when it is advantageous to be the same.

Both sisters, while having their own problems in school, learn to protect each other, using their intimate knowledge of each other to sense when something was wrong. The day of the class spelling bee, Kao Kalia knew that Dawb was nervous and, so, wouldn't be able to perform the task. She "saw the way [Dawb] leaned into her stronger leg, how her body turned higher on the right side."[72] Recognizing these silent gestures for help, Kao Kalia takes Dawb's place in line so that both can pass the test. While the teachers see the two girls simply as a part of the larger mass of Hmong children who have been grouped together based on language deficiencies, the sisters are especially attuned to each other's needs. Even small, imperceptible movements can have meaning when one truly understands another. The paradox is that the two sisters use their individual differences in order to pass as each other, benefiting because those in charge cannot tell them apart. In the end, what is significant about these moments—the medical exam and the spelling bee—is not simply the fact that the nurses and the teachers are not able to discern the two sisters' differences, but that these moments provide readers with a clear example of how the family's success relies on intra-communal support rather than aid from those who represent "help." It is in knowing their differences and how to read them that they are able to take advantage of the homogeneity placed on them and advance their cause. If there is a debt that needs to be repaid than it is to each other and not to empire. This same principle is also true for *testimonio*, in which one is testifying on behalf of a larger group, is speaking out against the violence of empire because of a sense of obligation to one's community.

Finally, I return to Espiritu in order to, once again, draw connections between two seemingly disparate texts. In her call for Critical Refugee Studies, she ultimately insists on understanding the nation-state through refugees, on asserting the intertwined and complex relationship between the two. Thinking specifically about the study of Vietnamese refugees within American and Asian American Studies, Espiritu argues, "As subjects of US war and imperialism, Vietnamese political subjectivity and practice cannot be exclusively defined with the US context; their racial formation also has to be understood within the context of US war in and occupation of Southeast Asia."[73] That is to say, it is not enough to simply study refugees as passive outsiders who must easily conform to U.S. formations of race and migration, to study refugees only after they have crossed physical and ideological borders. To study refugees, then, means studying the longer history of U.S. neo-imperialism as well as national practices of

racial exclusion and subjugation. Later in her text, she writes more directly to the field of Asian American Studies, pushing it to "return" to a framework "that links the modern US racial state to the modern US empire."[74] To this end, I have brought together two texts that speak to the aftermath of the "modern US empire," that reveal the reach of U.S. neocolonialism and its results. In doing so, I have argued that it is not enough to read refugee narratives within western literary traditions that place value on singularity, even if those traditions deal with issues of displacement. While Dorfman and Yang's texts come from different eras and represent different histories of displacement, they share two common discourses: one being a history of U.S. involvement in global politics and the other being a desire to enter into Euro-American letters. Thus, my conclusion sought to read the two texts together in order to point to the larger issue of the refugee's "debt." In their own ways, Dorfman, through his denial of refugee assistance and his assertion of selfhood, and Yang, through her communally empowered subterfuge, take ownership over what Nguyen theorizes as the "gift of freedom." Lastly, in the same vein that Espiritu argues for new understandings of racial formations, I press for new approaches to life writing, ones that push both writer and reader to be aware of the multiple negotiations and impulses that allow for "paper lives" that are always simultaneously privileged and marginalized, collective and subjective, that can begin to testify not to the narrative of empire but to the experiences of refugees.

Notes

This article benefited greatly from the editors and reviewers. I'm especially thankful for the reviewers' thoughtful comments, which showed true generosity and care. Their comments were invaluable and encouraged rather than dismissed my ideas. I am grateful to have such colleagues.

1. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (New York: Abrams Press, 2018), 20.

2. I use the term homeland suspiciously in the case of Dorfman and Yang as both of their displacements are not tied directly to their country of birth, but rather to places that they have called home. For Dorfman, Chile is a third home after being born in Argentina and living in the U.S. For Yang, her birthplace is a Thai refugee camp, which, though located in Thailand, does not imply any formal national affiliation.

3. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Displaced*, 27.

4. Yên Lê Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1.1-2 (2006): 410.

5. Mimi Thi Nguyen's text The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and other Refugee Passages, in particular, critiques the way in which Vietnamese refugees were positioned as "grateful refugees" who were beholden to the U.S. even as the country was seeking redemption by accepting peoples displaced by the Vietnam War.

6. Sophia A. McClennen, "The Diasporic Subject in Ariel Dorfman's *Heading South, Looking North*," *MELUS* 30.1 (2005): 177. Speaking of the connection between his exilehood and his commitment to anti-authoritarian themes, McClennen writes, "This twist of fate, over which he feels no control, leads him to respond with writing, and, over the course of the memoir, it becomes clear that Dorfman's identity as a writer is what saves him from despair and what structures his life. Freighted with guilt over his survival, Dorfman's mission, his calling, is to act as a medium for those who died in his place"

7. For more on Dorfman and language, see Sophia A. McClennen's "The Diasporic Subject in Ariel Dorfman's *Heading South, Looking North*" and Lea Ramsdell's "Language and Identity Politics: The Linguistic Autobiographies of Latinos in the United States"

8. Ariel Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 236.

9. Dorfman, 237.
10. Dorfman, 237.
11. Dorfman, 238.
12. Dorfman, 238.
13. Dorfman, 237. Indeed, Dorfman's decision to reject refugee status reflects real treatment and practices that have characterized refugees as silent and passive victims, as subjects with little literary cache and tradition. Liisa Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11.3 (1996): 378. For more on how displaced persons are marginalized by the refugee processing system, see Malkki's article in which she argues that centers like refugee camps "creat[e] a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims."
14. Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North*, 237.
15. Dwight Conquergood, "Health Theatre in a Hmong Refugee Camp: Performance, Communication, and Culture," *TDR* 32.3 (1988): 195. Once again, Dorfman's characterization reflect the real conditions faced by many refugees. In Conquergood's study of a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand during the 1980s, he notes that the most common term used by agency officials to describe the place was "'filthy,' followed closely by 'dirty.'"
16. Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North*, 238.
17. Dorfman, 238-39.
18. Dorfman, 239.
19. Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 120. Kaplan makes a similar point about noted exile writer Edward Said, arguing that, "rather than elucidating the modes of representation that arise in an age of refugees, immigrants, and the homeless, Said returns to a figure more closely associated with classical Western tradition as well as modernist myths of authorship," and that he "often abandons his reference to a global phenomenon and returns to a mystified figure—the solitary exile."
20. Caren Kaplan, 28. For a reading of exile within the context of contemporary Latin American literature, see Amy Kaminsky's text *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora*, in which she discusses the challenges of shifting from being a political exile to being part of a diaspora. Although her reading also focuses on the feelings of isolation and trauma, because of Dorfman's choice to align himself with the "romantic" exile, I choose to highlight Kaplan's understanding of its modern and Western tradition.
21. Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North*, 239.
22. Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*, 28.
23. Kaplan, 36.
24. Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North*, 239.
25. Dorfman, 239.
26. Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*, 103.
27. Kaplan, 121.
28. Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North*, 237.
29. Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Family Memoir* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008), 42.
30. Yang, 45.
31. Yang, 46.
32. Ma Vang, "Writing on the Run: Hmong American Literary Formations and the Deterritorialized Subject" *MELUS* 41.3, Fall 2016), 90. Vang characterizes this textual absence not as a complete void, but as a trace of hegemonic oppression: "It is not that Hmong lack writing but rather Hmong writing systems have been unrecognized and lost through the group's colonial history of war and displacement."
33. Vang, 90.
34. Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 4.

Rather than a text-based literary practice, Hmong people have used orality and embroidery as a form of record and story keeping. Yang's text recounts many of these folktales and also makes explicit mention of Hmong embroidery.

35. Yang, 4.
36. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Introduction" In *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1992), xvii.
37. Smith and Watson, xx.
38. Smith and Watson, xx.
39. Ariel Dorfman, Interview with Inela Slemović. *Human Rights Quaterly* 34.2 (2012): 577. In a more recent interview, Dorfman is careful to emphasize the danger in securing individuality through exilehood: "What exile can come to mean—if one is fortunate—is growth, the demand to let the outer world challenge us, shake us up, break us down, force us to reconstitute that I, that self. I repeat that such a process can be deadly and dangerous, that there is no certainty that we will survive."

40. Sophia A.McClennen, *Ariel Dorfman: An Aesthetics of Hope*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 141. McClennen reads Dorfman as testimonio and discusses his work in relation to the genre in her study of the author. While there are some instances of testimonio in the text, they are few and often lead back to Dorfman's writing. For example, while on the run in Chile, he is driven by an unknown woman who tells him about her son. Because he knows little about her, he cannot tell her story, but he will, in a small way, include her in his fictional work: ". . .years later, when I am writing Death and the Maiden, I will have my protagonist, Paulina, do something similar in the months after the coup . . ."

41. John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2004), 19, 35.

42. Beverley, 35.

43. Beverley, 3.

44. For more on how Yang includes her family's story to change common narratives of refugees, see my article "Fanciful Flights: Reimagining Refugee Narratives of Escape in Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* in which I read a purely imagined scene in the text as a moment of resistance.

45. Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique," *positions*: Southeast Asian American Studies special issue 20.3 (2012): 932-33. In his article, Nguyen is even more critical of the writer's privileged position. Writing specifically about Yang and other Hmong authors, he argues "By learning to write at all, by learning to write in English, by earning degrees, by publishing, Yang and the Hmong American writers in the anthology Bamboo among the Oaks are now bound by a minority discourse that is both created by minorities and that recreates them." Nguyen proposes a reading of Hmong paj ntaub or story cloths as a way of bypassing this minority discourse.

46. I should note that Yang mostly highlights the displacement narrative of the Laotian Hmong who were involved in the Secret War. Most of the Hmong refugee narratives coming from Western/European countries emerge from this specific history. However, there are numerous Hmong populations across Asia and Southeast Asia who do not share this specific historical displacement, some of whom aligned themselves with the communist movement in Laos rather than the CIA-funded guerilla efforts.

47. Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 2.

48. For a closer analysis of the embellishments in Yang's texts, see my article "Fanciful Flights: Re-imagining Refugee Narratives of Escape in Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*," in which I argue that Yang provides an alternative form of refugee narratives.

49. Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 44, 45, 49.

50. Yang, 88.

51. Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North*, 237.

52. Liisa Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 386.

53. Malkki, 388.

54. Beverley, *Testimonio*, 32.

55. Beverley, 32.

56. Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 201-02.

57. Yang, 203.

58. Yang, 272.

59. Asha Sen, *Postcolonial Yearning: Reshaping Spiritual and Secular Discourses in Contemporary Literature*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 77. For another reading of this scene, see Sen's chapter, "Spiritual/Secular; Hmong/American': Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* and Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer*." Supporting Sen's larger reading of the text as a "form of spiritual witnessing that cannot be accommodated by either [North American nor Hmong cultural practices]," her reading focuses on how much The Yang family has lost culturally with the passing of the grandmother (77).

60. Yang, 273.

61. William Westerman, "Central American Refugee Testimonies and Performed Life Histories in the Sanctuary Movement," In *Migration and Identity*, Edited by Rina Benmayor and Andor Sktones (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 177.

Since many *testimonios* are products of interviews and /or translations, there also exists scholarship on issues of appropriation and exploitation and the relationship between the speaker and the outsider who is gathering the stories. See especially Joanna R. Bartow and Isabel Dulfano, and also Caren Kaplan's essay "Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects."

62. Beverley, *Testimonio*, 34.

63. Doris Sommer, "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's Testimonio and the Plural Self," In *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Edited by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), 129.

64. Beverley, *Testimonio*, 34.

65. Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 20.

66. Yang, 34.
67. For the sake of clarity as I discuss the two sisters, I will use Yang's first name, Kao Kalia, when referring to her as a character within the narrative and her last name, Yang, when referring to her as the author.
68. Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse," *The New Centennial Review* 6.2 (2006): 33.
69. Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and other Refugee Passages*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 6.
70. Dorfman, *Heading South, Looking North*, 239.
71. Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 142.
72. Yang, 142.
73. Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study," 419.
74. Espiritu, 419.