

# Southeast Asian Diaspora in the United States



Southeast Asian Diaspora in the United States:  
Memories and Visions  
Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Edited by

Jonathan H. X. Lee

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P U B L I S H I N G

Southeast Asian Diaspora in the United States:  
Memories and Visions, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow  
Edited by Jonathan H. X. Lee

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For my son, Owen Edward Jinfā Quady-Lee



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## PREFACE

*Southeast Asian Diaspora in the United States: Memories & Visions, Yesterday, Today, & Tomorrow* is the culmination of the *Re-SEAing Southeast Asian American Studies Conference* held in March 2011 at San Francisco State University. It was the third tri-annual interdisciplinary *Southeast Asians in the Diaspora* conference.

For two-days, conference presenters and audiences explored *memories* (e.g., memories of homeland; memories of war; memories of childhood and growing up American; historical memories; embodied memories; intergenerational memories; technologies of memories; and imagined/created memories) and *visions* (actual sightings and sites of Southeast Asian Americans and their communities, both real and imaginary). Several conditions and goals guided the planning of the conference: First, we wanted the conference to be inclusive of the diversity of Southeast Asian American communities and subjectivities, since the first two *Southeast Asians in the Diaspora* conferences were dominated by Vietnamese and Vietnamese American scholars, scholarship, and perspectives. We not only wanted inclusive representation of Southeast Asian American diversity, but also heterogeneity within ethnic specific heritage and national groups. One of the central goals of the 2011 conference was to separate Southeast Asian Americans from the automatic association with “refugees” from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia following the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Second, we wanted to give graduate students, community activists, artists, and young scholars an opportunity to share their work-in-progress in a safe and nurturing, yet critical environment. Third, we wanted to build bridges between academe and our communities: To open up dialogue, reconnect on shared issues and visions for positive social change. Although the conference succeeded in actualizing diverse and heterogeneous representation from among the Southeast Asian American communities, this volume did not achieve this goal to the degree that the Editorial Board had hoped.

The conference had diverse coverage and representation of Southeast Asian American communities and subjects, but readers may see a higher ratio of Vietnamese and Cambodian Americans represented in this publication. This reveals several important conclusions that we must acknowledge and address: For one, there is a paucity of available published

resources that comparatively examine Southeast Asian Americans and their communities. For another, more effort and purposeful work must be undertaken to increase diversity within Southeast Asian American studies in particular, and Asian American studies in general. Finally, as scholars, we need to aggressively promote newer Southeast Asian American communities and subjects, as well as non-Vietnam War refugee populations. Disclaimers aside, this is the first interdisciplinary and multi-methodological volume that is solely dedicated to Southeast Asian Americans.

The review process for this volume was vigorous. It included two rounds of blind-reviews. First, after the *Re-SEAing Southeast Asian American Studies Conference*, a call for papers was announced: sixty-four papers were submitted for consideration. The first round of blind-reviews consisted of double-blind reviews by members of the Editorial Board as well as invited specialists. From this round, twenty-two papers were provisionally accepted with revisions. The second round of blind-reviews was also a double-blind review by members of the Editorial Board and invited specialists. From this round, seventeen papers were accepted, with request for additional revisions. The chapters and contributors represent the disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, Asian American studies, religious studies, art, queer studies, health, literature, visual studies, education, and American studies.

It is my hope that this volume will start a tradition of robust and diverse publications following future *Southeast Asians in the Diaspora* conferences.

Jonathan H. X. Lee  
Berkeley, CA

## FOREWORD

MARIAM B. LAM

“Socrates: serious discourse... is far nobler, when one employs the dialectic method and plants and sows in a fitting soul intelligent words which are able to help themselves and him who planted them, which are not fruitless, but yield seed from which there spring up in other minds other words capable of continuing the process forever.”

—Plato, *Phaedrus*

“The maroons know something about possibility. They are the condition of possibility of the production of knowledge in the university—the singularities against the writers of singularity, the writers who write, publish, travel, and speak. It is not merely a matter of the secret labor upon which such space is lifted, though of course such space is lifted from collective labor and by it.”

—Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, “The University and the Undercommons” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013)

In 2005, the first Southeast Asians in the Diaspora conference, held at the University of California at Riverside (UCR), found its formulation and its funding at the intersection of Viet Nam studies, Southeast Asian area studies and Asian American studies. That first conference title, “30 Years Beyond the War: Vietnamese, Southeast Asian, and Asian/American Studies,” and its triangulated conceptualization, in part, highlighted the new initiatives and diverse methodological approaches of UC Riverside’s then young Southeast Asian studies research program, SEATriP: Southeast Asia-Texts, Rituals, Performance, with its openness to critical terrain in arts and culture, diaspora and globalization, gender and sexuality, and race and ethnicity. The co-organizers of that conference, Fiona Ngo and I, wanted to provoke conversations between established Southeast Asian studies research agendas and, alternatively, strong ethnic studies analytics that could take both fields beyond familiar Vietnam War and Cold War paradigms, challenging existing epistemes about Southeast Asia with new engagements from the diaspora and beyond. At the same time, we wanted to recognize and highlight the divergent and circuitous

intellectual and institutional paths Southeast Asian transnational and diasporic studies had to traverse at that moment in time.

We were excited by both the diversity of the presentation proposals submitted and the variety of disciplinary locations from which the scholars arrived at their research. We were also struck by the coeval enthusiasm *and* frustration of what appeared to be a new generation of interdisciplinary thinkers struggling to articulate their wide ranging academic interests within the familiar traditional area studies and ethnic studies models of Kant's Universitas. The former often elided concerns with acculturation difficulties, mainstream/minority politics and geohistorical amnesias, dismissing them as simplistic obsessions with "identity politics," while the latter often chose projects with only very recent historical timelines that began in the West and neglected larger global political and older transnational entrenchments to avoid dealing with the war altogether.

In 2008, Fiona Ngo and Mimi Nguyen organized the second Southeast Asian Diaspora conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), shifting its interdisciplinary identification toward ethnic studies and Asian American studies, with an emphasis on transnational cultural studies informed by critical theories of gender and sexuality, principally due to UIUC's institutional academic strengths and sponsorship. Many of the pieces from this venue were collected and edited by Fiona, Mimi, and myself in a Southeast Asian American Studies special issue of the journal, *positions: asia critiques* (2013). Together with the third tri-annual conference in 2011 at San Francisco State University (SFSU), organized by Jonathan H. X. Lee and from which this Southeast Asian diasporic critical anthology developed, the intellectual momentum marks a significant leap forward in this emerging field. All three events saw a critical mass of often younger scholars engaged with the past decade's concerns with the neoliberal university and their own professionalization, historical omissions and silences, affective archives, continued dislocations, and cultural nationalist negotiations.

Even in 2005, however, we had to assemble opening and closing keynote speakers and a plenary panel comprised of scholars who had contributed disparate, but necessary, early work in creating the conditions of possibility for the inception of Southeast Asian diasporic studies. An ethnic studies matriarch, Yen Le Espiritu, our opening keynote speaker, spoke of the intellectual, infrastructural, social and emotional difficulty and isolation of the early years of ethnic studies, the near impossibility of even imagining a Vietnamese American cohort. On the Plenary, Southeast Asian/Americanist and education scholar Khatharya Um reframed earlier work to show its shortcomings; sociologist and Asian Americanist Hien

Duc Do cautioned us against the failures of institutional memory and a lack of self-referentiality about our community, oral history and activist projects; and U.S. Cold War historian Mark Bradley called upon the audience to continue vigilant pursuit of more scholarship around Southeast Asian ethnic diversity, gender, and sexuality.

The only moment of heated exchange arose when a Viet Nam historian suggested that Southeast Asian Americanists, and more specifically Vietnamese Americanists, did not adequately engage with Southeast Asian languages or the more controversial internal ethnic politics around such incidents as the Vietnamese American community protests of the Oakland Museum's curatorial exhibit that took place a few years earlier, with regard to the history of the Vietnam War. To the Asian Americanists in the room, this assessment recalled the historical refusal of traditional Asian area studies to conscientiously engage with ethnic studies scholarship and Asian American politics over "heritage" or "native" language politics, or any depth of understanding about race relations, or the institutionalized educational, economic biases and privilege complicit with the military-intellectual-industrial complex.

In hindsight, I can see that all of the exhausting Platonic/Socratic seed sowing, the farming or "environmental" dialogic *labor* of these three professional conferences, contributed to the harvesting of alternative critical subjectivities, academic positionalities and intellectual socialities. There have been casualties; professional relationships can become fractured and lines of intellectual political dialogue break down at times, whether due to the jockeying anxieties of professionalization—the insecurities embedded within an insecure state apparatus obsessively compelled to secure itself by ensuring the undercommons stay in line with efficient upward academic mobility—or due to utter fatigue and overdue respite. Despite such absence or perhaps even as a result of it, subjectivities, positionalities and identity formation have become the foci of this critical collection. The university compels its *subjects*—those of us marooned by its restraints and disciplining tactics—to push forward with our fugitive planning. Jonathan H. X. Lee writes in his introduction, "It is our hope that a new discourse on subjectivity will form and follow this volume, one that takes subjectivity into new terrain, exploring new variables—physical and metaphysical, seen and unseen, verifiable and non-verifiable, human and ghostly, logical and illogical, reasonable and beyond reasonable explication."

Southeast Asian area studies have been dominated by military and colonial historians and anthropological designs. Those of us working out of, within, and against the gates of Asian area studies all too often find its



gates shut rather tightly and its altitude somewhat stifling. Meanwhile, we see growing attention being paid to Southeast Asia within several nation or region-specific academic markets—in particular, those of post-Cold War afflicted nations and cultures (Viet Nam, Cambodia and Hmong studies all have newly founded academic journals)—as well as growing attention to Southeast Asia by its East Asian neighbors—Korean cultural tourism throughout Southeast Asia, Japanese comparative war violence and trauma scholarship, and Chinese post-socialist cultural and economic competition. How do the transnational intellectual offspring—the harvest and the marooned—of such histories and the newer interdisciplinary epistemes prove their scholarly worth and methodological rigor *and* maintain a radical political sociality and playful generosity, even with the trials and tribulations of bastardized accounting, shoddy reportage, uneven oral history, and occasional mediocre aesthetics confronting us at every turn?

The positionality of Southeast Asian diasporic studies within Asian Pacific American studies has also been historically unstable when visible. During early periods of 1960s and 1970s anti-war activism and ethnic studies struggles, the focus on U.S. militarization in the Pacific gave some attention to the Philippines and Viet Nam in the form of the Spanish-American War, the Korean War, and the larger than life “Vietnam” televised daily in American households. However, throughout the Asian economic crises and influx of Asian immigration and refugee resettlement in the 1980s and 1990s, an emphasis on “claiming America” deprioritized and further alienated Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants from academic agendas. Pilipina/o American scholarship retained some presence when aligned with U.S. imperial history or early Asian American immigration history, but the other Southeast Asian American ethnic-specific groups were only to be found in sociological studies on population growth, resettlement and assimilation difficulties, delinquency and other dire straits. As the pendulum now swings back to U.S. empire and critical American studies in times of exceptionalism and terror, we also find a return of the repressed and debt-wielding gratitude of Southeast Asian refugees and their further neglected indigenous Pacific Islander neighbors. “Southeast Asia” and “Southeast Asians” are still missing. The rest of the diaspora beyond the United States is still missing.

Similarly, within global cultural studies, there is increasing anthropological and sociological interest in comparative diasporic studies and transnational cultural critique. Nevertheless, this body of scholarship often reveals the unevenness of multi-sited research, in part stemming from a lack of research funding and in part from uneven training in interdisciplinary rigor. Foundations and other research organizations

continue to privilege the most needy and pathetic nation-state victims and the United States' perceived assistance in their rapidly growing individual economies, while turning a blind eye to all the ongoing displacements of Southeast Asians elsewhere throughout the world. Scholarship available on Southeast Asians within the diaspora straddle the proverbial line between representations of their marginalization in relation to mainstream societies and poorly living up to the imposed cult of authenticity dictated by national and ethnic origin. The paucity of diasporic scholarship resides also in the negligible educational development and attainment opportunities for those isolated diasporics who manage to both maintain some language skills for ethnographic field data *and* succeed into higher education.

But to conclude on a more heartening upswing, an end that is but another beginning, a new for(e)ward push, I am optimistic from what we can envision from the very outset of this volume. Part One's three chapters respond immediately to the concerns above, addressing Indonesian memory and migration narratives, Filipino anxieties of return and tourism development, and the language politics of translation and census data for Thai Americans. I delight in the sheer diversity of scholarly interests. From the earliest Southeast Asian Pacific American scholarship by Peter Kiang, Lan Pho, and Thomas DuBois of the 1980s and early 1990s, until the fall of 2014, as Vichet Chhuon and Cathy Schlund-Vials, co-organizers of the fourth Southeast Asian Diasporic studies conference at the University of Minnesota, signal a return to questions of education, institutional memory, professionalization and the archive, we must continue to seek out the joys of intellectual life and radical sociality.

Southeast Asian American and diasporic critique stands out precisely because of its penetrating stance on and familiarity with contentious race relations, state legislation and global regulation policies, and a plethora of community mobilization strategies. A critical mass is now fostering and facilitating new critical discussions and relationships between Southeast Asian studies and Asian Pacific American studies; "but certainly, this much is true in the United States: it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university" (Harney and Moten 2013). Let us proceed together, then, if you're feeling sinister.

## INTRODUCTION

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICANS: MEMORIES, VISIONS, AND SUBJECTIVITIES

JONATHAN H. X. LEE

I resist deliberately citing 2010 U.S. Census data on Southeast Asian Americans as evidence of the pluralism and heterogeneity that exists within and among Asian American communities. Instead, I invite readers to re-think or re-consider Southeast Asian American subjectivities, and the implications that arise from calibrating subjectivities from the intersections and internal-alchemies of memories, histories, and visions. No one I know who is from Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, or Malaysia consciously invokes the identifier “Southeast Asian” in reference to themselves—in Asia or in America. Instead, they invoke nation-state specific identities (i.e. Cambodian, Vietnamese) or ethnic-religio specific ones (i.e. Hmong and Cham). For Americans of Southeast Asian descent, subjectivity is experienced and/or interpreted, more often than not, as being embedded in ethnic-and-nation-state specific references (i.e. Thai American, Hmong American, or Cham American).

As an academic discipline, Asian American studies originated from the demand for Asian American subjectivity, to know Asian Americans through history, art, literature, social sciences, and education, and as subjects of research. Four and a half decades later, matters of subjectivity are still central to Asian American lives—inside and outside of the academe. For instance, a common topic of discussion in my Vietnamese, Chinese, Cambodian, and comparative Southeast Asian American studies courses at San Francisco State University is identity. In particular, many Southeast Asian American youth express frustration with their inability to articulate—clearly and decisively—their entanglement with existential questions about their subjectivity apropos their ethnic, national, and cultural self-awareness. Their struggle between being Asian American and their own specific ethnic identity should not be taken for granted, and should not be dismissed as obvious or superficial. These perennial tussles

with self-awareness, being, existence, and form—are central matters of subjectivity: Subjectivity mattered then, and it matters today, and will matter in the future. Thus, this volume seeks to ask questions about subjectivities in general, but with particular emphasis on Southeast Asian Americans from inside-out as well as from outside-in.

Identity formation is a complex process that is not lineal and not logically temporal. Identity work is the attempt, conscious or not, to define the undefinable. It does not follow a dialectical process of folding, unfolding, and synthesis, nor does it occur in the span of a certain period, but rather, over the course of one's lifetime, and is subject to situational and relational conditions and circumstances. Identity is intelligible, yet sorely unintelligible and difficult to articulate in the vernacular or with academic jargon. This process holds much potential for creativity: from discoveries that stem from the interplay of the real and imaginary: It is the process of making the self.

History, material artifacts, and cultures do not directly or explicitly, although they can, inform and inspire subjectivity, just as awareness of identity, its form and content, does not necessarily inspire creativity or creative works, although it is a potential muse. Identity is formed from the unformed, it is formed from the unspoken, it is formed from the absence of memory, it is formed in the presence of memory—it is revelation, and formed in the process of de-forming self. As such, memory—real, imagined, and faux—is central to identity work. Snippets of oral tales, cultural clues, human encounters, and moments of life are the units of memory that flow through the capillaries of visions of self in the past, present, and future. Our visions of ourselves or of others originate from dreams, trances, or ecstasies, and potentially from supernatural appearances. Our memories are encoded, stored, and retrieved from our minds, from our bodies—buried in layers of muscles and tendons—from history, from community, from institutions, and from a network of human relationships. Our memories are the building blocks of an apparatus: A web of experiences, both real and imagined, both physical and temporal, based on truths and non-truths, that anchors—securely or feebly, our own production of self, or our visions of self. Both visions and memories interface with identity work in a cyclical and multi-directional manner as visions become memories, stored or un-stored, and as memories become visions of self, which are limitless, yet limited by our exposures—actual, direct, indirect, imagined, or created.

The product of identity work is not final and fixed, yet there is a strong desire for it to be continuous and stable. Identity is important because it is a window into our sense of self, our way to understand who we are in this

world in relation to others, to time, and to our environs. Our memories are encoded, stored, and retrieved from our minds, our bodies, from history, from community, and from our social relationships. From this wellspring of memories and visions we can question (and question the questions we ask of) subjectivity, and engage in what Martin Heidegger describes as a kind of “hermeneutic circle” that relies on progressive acts of interpretations.

This volume provides various exploratory interpretations on Southeast Asian American subjectivities, communities, histories, creativities, and cultural expressions, as they are revealed, informed, or infused with visions, dreams, and or memories of self in relation to others, places, time, and events—historically significant or quotidian. The interaction and interplay of visions, memories, and subjectivities is the focus of examination and interpretation, either directly or tangentially. It is our hope that a new discourse on subjectivity will form and follow this volume, one that takes subjectivity into new terrain, exploring new variables—physical and metaphysical, seen and unseen, verifiable and non-verifiable, human and ghostly, logical and illogical, reasonable and beyond reasonable explication.

## **An Overview of Chapters**

### **Part I: Varieties of Homes**

In Part I, Varieties of Homes, the authors examine how “home” is assembled or re-imagined in light of political, economic, and historical formations. Home is problematically questioned in relation to selfhood. In Chapter 1, Dahlia Gratia Setiyawan examines the ways Indonesian immigrants incorporated the collective memory of late-twentieth century national trauma in their homeland in narratives concerning their reasons for migrating to the United States. Setiyawan questions the way Indonesian migrants negotiated the theoretical and practical implications of self-identifying as either “immigrant” versus “refugee.” Setiyawan questions the possibilities and problems that arise once private and public narratives of self and migration conflict.

In Chapter 2, Eric J. Pido examines the role of balikbayans, specifically Filipinos who return to the Philippines after living in the United States for several decades, and their positions and relationship to the economic development of their “home” country. The Balikbayan Hotel provides an illuminating case for understanding how emerging trends within the Philippine tourism industry, aimed at exploiting return-migration, have become a crucial means for propelling economic restructuring within the

larger Philippine economy. By transforming repatriating Filipinos into “retirees,” balikbayans see themselves as patrons of the state who, through decades of overseas labor, patronage, and performed duties to the Philippines, are entitled to enjoy various luxuries that they could not partake of in the United States. Pido argues that the complexities felt by balikbayans, and the ambivalence that they experience, represent the common challenges and contradictions confronting the Philippines as it attempts to situate itself in an increasingly globalized economy.

Anchoring Thais in America in Chapter 3, Kanjana Thepboriruk investigates political subjectivities of Thai Americans vis-à-vis obtaining accurate Census data. Thepboriruk’s study compares instructions produced by the U.S. Census Bureau with translations produced by THAIS, Inc., a non-profit organization in Los Angeles, California. Thepboriruk shows that, in general, the Bureau preferred direct translations of Census instructions and a formal register, while THAIS, Inc. preferred indirect translation and a less formal register. The difference is critical, as the translation influences the message and the overall success of the Census in the Thai American community.

The authors in this section direct our attention to individual subjectivity as an economic and political strategy of existence and as a means of governance that beckons us to reconsider and recast assumptions about the workings of collectivities and institutions.

## **Part II: Varieties of Religiosities**

The five chapters in Part II: Varieties of Religiosities, provide glimpses of Southeast Asian American religious subjectivities. In Chapter 4, Janet Hoskins presents data based on recent fieldwork among Vietnamese Americans in California, and explores the meanings of the mirror that spirit mediums gaze into, and why it is a required object on altars to the Vietnamese “mother goddesses,” whose worship has just had a resurgence in diasporic communities in California. Hoskins looks at religious ways of mediating displacement and re-forming an identity in the reflected glory of Vietnam’s imperial past.

In Chapter 5, Susan Needham focuses on Cambodian Americans in Southern California. Needham contends that Cambodian Americans have recreated a variety of ritual and ceremonial practices in Long Beach, California, and cites two ceremonies as case studies: a *chumruen preah parit* (blessing ceremony) conducted at the Wat Khemera Buddhikaram in 2000 and; a *pithi sampeah kruu* performed to honor teachers and guardian spirits of dance and music in 2006. Needham explores how Cambodian