

Book Review

Yang, Kao Kalia (2008). *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press. 296 pp. \$14.95 (paperback). ISBN-13: 978-1-56689-208-7.

By

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Hmong Studies Journal, Volume 10, 10 Pages

ABSTRACT

This book review follows Kao Kalia Yang and her family from their beginnings in the jungles of Laos, their years in Thai refugee camps, and their eventual immigration to the United States. *The Latehomecomer* is an engaging, poignant memoir about a family's experiences while searching for a place to call "home." The reviewer offers questions, critique, and highlights from the story including glimpses into the history and culture of Hmong people.

"We don't have a country. We are here looking for a home (p. 4)."

In 1975, Kao Kalia Yang's teenaged parents fled into the jungle. They were not yet her parents, had not yet even met one another, but life in their villages had become too dangerous to stay. The war in Southeast Asia had ravaged their houses, their communities, and their country and now the Hmong people were being hunted anew because they had helped the U.S. fight its war on their soil. Like the centuries-long history of the Hmong before them, they found themselves once again without a place to call home.

So begins the Yang family story in this engaging memoir written by the second child of those survivors who took to the tenuous protection of the jungle, met only briefly the day their paths first crossed, and married one another shortly thereafter under that same jungle canopy. This story is about the search for home and the varied steps the Yangs were forced to take in that quest. This story is about family, its faith in working for the collective good, and the paternal matriarch grandmother who held the family together by the sheer force of her will. Finally, this

story is about the belief that the sacrifices of today will pave a smoother road for loved ones' journeys tomorrow.

People of the Sky: Chapters 1-3

As a baby learning to talk her mother and father often asked, 'What are you?' and the right answer was always, 'I am Hmong.' It wasn't a name or a gender, it was a people. When she noticed that they lived in a place that felt like it had an invisible fence made of men with guns who spoke Thai and dressed in the colors of old, rotting leaves, she learned that Hmong meant contained (p. 1).

In their search for safety and shelter Yang's family moved – often forcibly – many times. They survived by foraging in the Lao jungle; always on the run from Pathet Lao soldiers who hunted them. They owned only what could be collected quickly and carried with them as they moved from place to place. Eventually the Yang women, including her pregnant mother and beloved paternal grandmother, were captured. They knew that if the soldiers caught male family members it would mean their certain death. The female family members, then, sacrificed their own freedom and allowed themselves to be rounded up and detained in a prisoner of war camp. This selfless act meant the men could go free.

After several months enduring hunger, rape, disease, isolation and fear, the Yang women were liberated by the men during a daring, high-risk rescue. Once the family regrouped it was decided the time had come to seek alternatives from this life on the run, of enemy soldiers and the constant threat of rape or death; Laos could no longer be called home.

The family fled toward the sanctuary of neighboring Thailand. There they would join the tens of thousands of other Hmong who had sought asylum in the years following the American withdrawal from Laos. The road to Thailand would not be easy: there was the wide, fast-moving Mekong River to traverse, language barriers to surmount, and the brand of poverty that

comes from years of living with nothing. Yet asylum in Thailand was literally the family's only recourse. Thus, their arduous journey for place recommenced.

The Little Girl with the Dimples: Chapters 4-7

They would be sent to a fenced compound where they would stay until further arrangements could be made. They were told ... that the refugee camp there was full...they were refugees now... people fleeing for a home (p. 43).

Kao Kalia Yang's family eventually found a Thai camp that had room for them. In their six years at the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp her immediate and extended families eked out a humble existence. Yang was born in Ban Vinai, which she describes as "a place where kids kept secrets and adults stayed inside themselves (p. 55)." In the camp her older sister Dawb suffered various serious illnesses including polio that weakened one side of her body. Yang's mother carefully watched over the preparation of their rations, taking care to keep the family as healthy as possible, yet she miscarried several babies herself. The grief, death, and despair among those in the camp are difficult to imagine for those of us who have never known such a life. The camps' Hmong inhabitants expressed these experiences and emotions in song lyrics like, "Why are you dying here? In this place where we cannot stay. Why are you dying here? This is not your home (p. 65)."

Nevertheless, despite the challenges of poverty and disease as well as having nothing to do and not much to tend or call one's own, Yang and her grandmother were happy at Ban Vinai. People paid for her grandmother's shaman services which kept the matriarch busy and gave her a sense of purpose. More importantly, the family was safe, loved ones were together in the same place. While life in a refugee camp means a dependence on others' generosity and good will, the

rations and donations they received were decidedly an improvement over the constant danger and subsistence foraging they had survived on in earlier years.

Yang's grandmother was therefore the most distressed and anxious when the family was told it would have to move once again. The family was being relocated, this time because the Thai government was closing Ban Vinai and evicting all of its refugees. Yang's family got their names onto the list of those who would be relocating to the United States. Once again they braced themselves for the grueling process of resettlement. This time their move would include an additional seven-month stay in a Transition Camp before the trip to America could be made.

The American Years: Chapters 8-9

In the food and in the stories, our home emphasized America in different Hmong ways (p. 149).

In the summer of 1987 Kao Kalia Yang was almost seven years old when her family finally relocated to the United States. On this journey the water to cross was not the wide Mekong River, but the infinitely vaster Pacific Ocean. During this move there would be continued language barriers and the ever-present, persistent poverty borne of never having anything to claim as one's own. "Training" for a new life in America had been provided in the Transition Camp by people who had likely never been to the U.S. themselves and included instructions for how to turn on a stove, flush a toilet, and cook chicken sandwiches that, they were told, were what Americans ate (p. 109).

Friends who had arrived in the U.S. years before sponsored this latest Yang family journey. The first nights in America were spent on the floor of that "uncle's" home in a St. Paul, Minnesota housing project. For Yang, these projects evoked a "symmetry ... that was similar to

the sameness of our lives, each family caught up in school and English, each family visiting thrift stores and driving used cars, living on the monthly welfare and disability checks from the government (pp. 131-132).” After some time in their “uncle’s” residence Yang and her family moved into their own place in those same projects where, soon after, she would first experience the racism and “forever refugee” status that would define her youth in the unwelcoming United States. Here, too, the all-consuming American obsession with money would become an issue, something that was always worried about (p. 119) and was “the nightmare that kept love apart (p. 135).” Yang’s father would also evolve, from gratitude toward a generous American government (p. 143), to embarrassment in ignoble work that forced the family to remain on welfare, and, finally, to paranoia caused by years of racism and disadvantage and the belief that his lack of education resulted in substandard medical care for his dying mother (p. 243).

The American Years: Chapters 10-11

And the adults kept saying: how lucky we are to be in America. I wasn’t convinced. I saw them walking in the snow drifts, their backs bent, their hands curled to their sides...But when I saw how hard they all worked to keep us in school, to put warm food on the old tabletops, I could not, no matter how discouraged, say: This is not enough (pp. 178-179).

Through everything, despite many years in their new homeland, the family’s opportunities remained restricted to substandard housing and backbreaking labor. The Yangs decided to pursue U.S. citizenship because they had no other options:

We had no more lands to return to...the camps in Thailand had closed. Hmong people there were repatriated, sometimes without knowledge, back into Laos. Families went missing in the process. Lives were lost. Children were killed. Ours [Yang’s younger, American-born siblings] were only beginning to raise their eyes to a country of peace,

where guns at least were hidden and death did not occur in the scalding of grass or rains that drizzled death. We could not handle any more death. In wanting to live, we were willing to try becoming Hmong Americans (pp. 202-203).

As Hmong Americans the Yangs would know more homes including a believed-to-be-haunted low-income, subsidized house; an apartment from which they hoped to escape that haunted house; and, later, a molding home that was much too small for their growing family. At eleven and twelve years old Kao Kalia and her older sister Dawb were expected to attend school during the day and then raise younger siblings in the evenings. Meanwhile, their parents worked second and third shifts at menial jobs “trying to be American enough to get into the system so that they could feed us and our dreams (p. 157).” Yang and her parents were living proof of the sacrifices they believed were required to pave the way for younger children’s future successes.

The Latehomecomer: Chapters 12-15

The Hmong had traveled farther to America than we had to any other land. We would live here longer than we’ve ever lived in another country. The only way to live in America was to learn of its possibilities, and the way to do that was school (p.139).

Kao Kalia Yang did chase the American dream through education. Beginning in a classroom for English Language Learners she struggled to find her voice in her adopted country’s tongue. Raising her siblings and attending school defined her adolescence the way survival and jungle subsistence defined her parents’. Later, home for Yang meant college dorm rooms where, “I explored the campus. I explored myself as a cultural identity and as a Hmong person on a college campus without many [other Hmong people]. I explored how it was to be first generation, financially challenged, and living within the American immigration experience

(p. 214).” Eventually that American dream borne of education led Yang to a Master’s of Fine Arts from Columbia University and the subsequent publication of *The Latehomecomer*.

Yang’s exploration of home and self also included regular visits to her family’s moldy East Side home, particularly during the months her grandmother spent living – and dying – there. She writes beautifully and movingly of the loss of this woman, the family matriarch that held them all so firmly together for so many years; the book is as much memoir as it is tribute to her grandmother’s spirit. Ultimately, Yang concludes that she and her family,

Had learned from their years in the jungle that when no other peoples could help, Hmong people would help Hmong people. They had found that it was not necessary to have a country to stand together as one people...without a country, finding a place to sleep was difficult ...even in the very beginning, we knew that we were looking for a home...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 (p. 47, 273).

Reviewer’s Experience

As a reader, I observed my own thoughts and emotions while wending through *The Latehomecomer*. Yang’s prose was often rich and poignant. She made the Lao jungle come alive, the poverty and frustrations of the refugee camp palpable, and the grief over losing her grandmother so real that I, too, was moved to tears. I caught myself constantly flipping through the pages to gaze at the photographs that helped animate and enlarge the people and places Yang was writing into my mind’s eye.

I appreciated Yang’s willingness to offer Hmong history to her readers; her openness and eloquent honesty were in stark contrast to the ways her family was constantly made to feel cast aside, unwelcomed. Yang opens windows onto her personal family experiences that are deeper

and broader than the narratives Lillian Faderman retells in *I Begin My Life All Over*. As a first-person account, Yang offers points of view that are sorely lacking in other, more journalistic versions of the Hmong experience like Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.

As an American, I was often ashamed of the stories Yang had to tell about her family's attempts to integrate here. I wondered what happened to the family's counterparts who also left Ban Vinai but landed in other countries such as Canada, Australia, and France. Were their migrations less unpleasant? Were their paths less rocky, less clouded by poverty and racism? Were they ever able to feel as though they belonged? Yang's story is an important mirror for all of us who call the United States "home" yet do not recognize there are many more people who wish to do the same.

Perhaps my greatest appreciation for the book is found in the Hmong culture stories that Yang offers her readers. I delighted to learn where babies are believed to reside before they are born (p. 56), the importance of possessing something of our mothers (to help us find her again, p. 17), that children cannot begin school in Thailand until they can reach their right hand over their head to touch their left ear (p. 66), that tripping in the presence of a dead body is bad news (pp. 107-108), the various rituals followed by women who have just given birth (p. 164), regular extended family meetings designed to help them become "better people" in America (p. 169 and 171), and the way the people value and cherish their children who are never considered a burden, financial or otherwise (p. 191). These vignettes all enriched *The Latehomecomer* which is a strong, welcome addition to the growing body of Hmong literature and memoirs that includes *Trails through the Mist* and *Bamboo among the Oaks*.

Some questions I have for Kao Kalia Yang include why she spoke so little of her grandmother's brand of shamanism and why she never mentioned the "elders" who are typically consulted for major issues and decision-making in the Hmong community. I might also ask where (and why) she and her father were going during a car ride on page 271 – why was that ride significant enough to mention yet not important enough to elaborate upon? I also wonder why she calls her older sister "Dawb" throughout the entire book but identifies that sister as "Der" in the acknowledgements (p. 276). Those quibbles aside, what I most wish to know are her ideas for how to improve. What can/must we in the U.S. do to create a more welcoming space and provide more opportunity than is currently extended to new immigrant arrivals? What can, and should, be done for future sojourners who, like her family, simply wish to find their home?

Kao Kalia Yang's affecting family memoir reminds us that most of us are part of a lucky minority, that many more people live in a world where safe shelter and plenitude are *not* the norm. This story challenges me – and all its readers – to never assume an immigrant's experience includes a good night's sleep. It is because we cannot assume that kind of peace that we must demonstrate compassion and nurturance toward those who struggle to find their own safe homes.

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