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"Treaty to Tell the Truth"
The Anti-Confessional Impulse in Canadian Refugee Writing

The world is in the midst of an enormous refugee crisis. Harrowing images and stories of refugee suffering have been media mainstays for nearly a decade. In Canada, such stories have been particularly prominent since November 2015, when the federal government embarked on a high-profile initiative to resettle 25,000 Syrians in four months. So, Canadians have become accustomed to stories that construct refugees as pitiable victims who are subject to the state's scrutiny and beholden to its largesse. Whether or not such narratives are designed to generate sympathy, they underestimate and undermine the agency of their subjects, whom they tend to construct as passive objects of analysis rather than complex objects of knowledge. In response to popular stories of pitiable and passive refugees, this article considers how refugee writers shape their own stories. Paying particular attention to the work of Laotian Canadian poet and former refugee Souvankham Thammavongsa, I explore some of the forces that constrain the stories told by refugee writers and examine the rhetorical and aesthetic strategies these writers use to resist and reshape readerly expectations.

By necessity, refugees are storytellers. In the process of seeking refugee status, they are asked for particular kinds of stories. Indeed, their well-being often hinges on their ability to tell verifiable stories of persecution and trauma in a manner that satisfies the state. But those who succeed in getting refugee status also get called upon—by the media, the academy, and the publishing industry—to repeat those stories, to offer confessional accounts of trauma that serve First World catharsis and shore up pleasing national

myths. By way of example, Guatemalan Canadian multimedia artist and former refugee Francisco-Fernando Granados recalls the difficulties he encountered as a teenaged migrant-rights activist in Vancouver:

> Talking to the *Vancouver Sun,* Global News and documentary crews became increasingly frustrating as it became obvious that their interest in our stories had less to do with creating some kind of discussion around our work in the community and more to do with repeating an idealized version of Canadian multiculturalism. . . . Refugees are meant to be grateful, and talking about the struggles of institutionalized discrimination or the brutalizing refugee certification process would not fit into these frames. (30)

Earlier this year, Dina Nayeri, an Iranian American novelist and former refugee, made a similar point: "Month after month, my mother was asked to give her testimony in churches and women's groups, at schools and even at dinners. I remember sensing the moment when all conversation would stop and she would be asked to repeat our escape story. The problem, of course, was that they wanted our salvation story as a talisman, no more." With the arrival in Canada of more than forty thousand Syrian refugees since late 2015, the mainstream Canadian media has devoted significant amounts of space to the sorts of salvation stories referenced by Granados and Nayeri. And no wonder: the confessional narrative that begins by testifying to foreign persecution and concludes by thanking the Canadian state and citizens is gratifying for its audience, who are invited to see themselves as the benevolent gatekeepers of a benign, manifestly multicultural nation. As Vinh Nguyen puts it, "these narratives help to confirm liberal ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality," and "function as proof of the inclusive, tolerant, and fundamentally non-racist constitution" of Canada ("Refugee Gratitude" 18).[1]

With reference to the representation of Vietnamese American refugee narratives in American literature and popular culture, Mai-Linh K. Hong explains the American demand for salvation stories this way: "[T]he sentimental rescue-and-gratitude tale, now a dominant mode of representing refugees, deflects attention from the destructive effects of past US military actions by refiguring the war-torn Vietnamese civilian or refugee as a grateful, rescued subject and the American military as a care apparatus" (20).[2] In Canada there is comparatively little need to deflect attention from the destructive effects of our military actions because, as Sherene Razack has argued, our military actions are rarely figured as such, but are instead framed as peacekeeping missions.[3] So, if there is a "care apparatus" presented in our refugee salvation stories, it is not the military so much as the state itself. For example, consider the image that accompanied the many print and television stories about

the Canadian arrival of the first plane transporting Syrian refugees: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau presenting a small child with a new winter coat. One might also look to the many news articles celebrating the Hadhad family as model refugees: the Hadhads are chocolatiers who established a thriving business in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, months after arriving from a refugee camp in Damascus, but news stories celebrating their success have tended to figure it as the product of state succor, as is suggested by the headline of the most widely circulated of those stories, "Syrian Refugee Says His Family Proves How Canadian Openness Pays Dividends" (Bresge). At the same time as such stories construe refugee success "as the nation's own success at multicultural, collective-building projects" (Vinh Nguyen,"Refugee Gratitude" 18), they also downplay the fact that the refugee resettlement process is typically characterized by what Jana Lipman calls "a stark absence of choice" (qtd. in Espiritu 2), and by an enduring sense of ambivalence and loss. Thus, Yến Lê Espiritu notes, "[t]he messiness, contingency, and precarious nature of refugee life means that refugees, like all people, are beset by contradiction: neither damaged victims nor model minorities, they—their stories, actions, and inactions—simultaneously trouble and affirm regimes of power" (2). And yet, because the stories that are asked of refugees and told about them typically get simplified and reoriented so as to shore up "regimes of power," it is important to investigate the contingencies and contradictions of refugee writing. Doing so can help us better understand how popular narratives of state succor disguise and perpetuate social inequities. Equally importantly, it can help us heed the claims made by writers who "possess and enact their *own* politics as they emerge out of the ruins of war and its aftermath" (Espiritu 11, emphasis original). So, rather than foregrounding the discourse of the good and grateful refugee in Canada, I foreground the figure of the "ungrateful" or recalcitrant refugee who is disinclined to represent past trauma as "easily consumable spectacle" (Granados 31).

Elsewhere I have considered refugee recalcitrance in Francisco-Fernando Granados' multimedia art and essays: beginning with his argument that "the dominant paradigms of nationalism and capitalism fail to recognize the humanity of those who are not legible within its [*sic*] structures" (32), I have considered how he uses illegibility as a strategy to resist the expectation that refugees will make past trauma legible—and "easily consumable"—for a variety of audiences.[4] Here, I want to extend that argument by examining the anti-confessional impulse in recent refugee writing, asking what we might learn from the representation of silence and subterfuge in that work. Poems

by Souvankham Thammavongsa feature prominently because, as Christine Kim notes, Thammavongsa's work "eschew[s] the mode of the confessional replete with large gestures and chest-beating in favour of subtle probings of the world" (153), but also because those "subtle probings" have much to teach us about the relationship between fidelity, truth-telling, and self-determination in writing by and about refugees.

This is "Earwigs," from Thammavongsa's 2003 collection *Small Arguments*:

> EARWIGS
> are born
> holding out their limbs
>
> to a world that will not
> hold them
>
> They know
> this is a world
>
> that will not return
> this gesture
>
> but they make it,
> aware that
>
> a limb, empty
> still has its weight. (53)

The poems in *Small Arguments* are rendered in tiny type surrounded by a great deal of white space. The very smallness of the font helps communicate the intense vulnerability of their subjects, many of which are bugs. Though Thammavongsa's bugs are dignified in all their "bugginess," these beings—typically imagined as invasive, dirty, and threatening—are also posited as metaphors for refugees, illegal migrants, and, perhaps, all racialized migrants who might be said to "hol[d] out their limbs // to a world that will not / hold them." This is made clear by the poet, who was born in a refugee camp, and who likens *Small Arguments* to a collection of identity documents or citizenship papers: "I was never given a birth certificate when I was born. . . . We need documents to prove that we are alive and real. It isn't enough that I happen to be right here—a piece of paper needs to prove this. *Small Arguments* makes me feel real in that sense. It feels like I've been granted a place of belonging" ("Interview"). Unlike a birth certificate, passport, or iris scan, *Small Arguments* is not designed to make its subject legible to the state. Indeed, a number of its poems can be understood as indictments of the invasive technologies and sometimes brutal processes designed to "fix" migrant identities:

THE WORM
found, sliced
into its body, metal

we do not know
how so simple

a creature
can manage

a world
in which we invent so much

Here, in a display case
we lay out

its simple form;
name and label
what we know

Its face,
its face, wherever it is,
pinned back from view. (54-55)

There is a wonderful instability in the first lines, which present the worm as both subject and object: the creature is introduced both as a sentient being capable of making a finding and as a found object of violence. Either way, the worm is resilient: it "can manage." On the other hand, "we" appear less capable. Despite the violence we inflict upon the worm in our bid to "name and label" it, we "do not know" much and the creature remains enigmatic, "its face, wherever it is, / pinned back from view."

To the extent that it underscores the unknowability of its subjects in poems that are also about the processes and practice of citizenship, Thammavongsa's collection might be understood, in Amitava Kumar's phrase, as "an act of fabrication against the language of government agencies" (ix). In the preface to his book *Passport Photos*, Kumar embraces the language of forgery, saying that it allows him to recognize the immigrant's refusal to yield wholly to the strategies and codes that (over)determine her identity and either silence her or trap her in "narrow accounts" (xiv). This matters here because Thammavongsa's 2007 collection, *Found*, can be read as a forgery of sorts. *Found* begins with this prefatory note: "In 1978, my parents lived in building #48. Nong Khai, Thailand, a Lao refugee camp. My father kept a scrapbook filled with doodles, addresses, postage stamps, maps, measurements. He threw it out and when he did, I took it and found this." The "this" can be understood to characterize *Found* as found poetry, suggesting that what

follows is a reproduction of her father's scrapbook. But this is not the case. Many poems describe scrapbook entries, but they do not reproduce them, and the collection does not include any of the scrapbook's drawings and photographs. Also, the narrative voice shifts throughout the collection: some poems are rendered in her father's voice; others align the speaker and author, addressing the father as "you"; and, crucially, some poems meditate on the limits of the poet's ability to understand her father's journal, which was written in Lao, a language she does not read. For example, in the poem "What I Can't Read" the speaker suggests that spoken Lao feels intimately familiar to her ear, but the "tiny / and landlocked letters" on the page are as inaccessible as the ear's inner workings (26), curling inwards like "small dark / hole(s)" (26). This meditation on "landlocked" letters changes the way we read the following poem, which offers a confident translation of a scrapbook entry that identifies parts of the body, explaining that the Lao text describes "what / each part / of the body / did / bent / like the part / it was" (27). With transitions like this, Thammavongsa underscores the difficulties, limits, and, crucially, the excesses of her translation. Thus, she reminds readers, as Kumar does, that "to forge" has "among its meanings the sense of forming, making, shaping" through the application of careful effort and in extreme circumstances, including "the heat of history" (Kumar xii).

"I took it and found this," declares Thammavongsa. To the extent that the word "this" encourages us to evaluate *Found* as found poetry, it asks if the repurposed or forged text is faithful to the source material, and to its author. At the same time, though, Thammavongsa's introductory statement raises questions about context, inviting us to consider how the scrapbook resonates differently outside of its original context in a refugee camp on the edges of a "tiny / and landlocked" country embroiled in a vicious civil war. Here, too, it is useful to recall Kumar's suggestion of forging as a metaphor for a creative and scholarly practice that tries "to restore a certain weight of experience, a stubborn density, a life to what we encounter in newspaper columns as abstract, often faceless, figures without history" (xi). Forging is a particularly attractive metaphor here because media references to Laos often note that the country has the distinction of being, per capita, the most heavily bombed nation in the world; so, as Thammavongsa emphasises, forging continues to be a crucial and dangerous industry in Laos, where people routinely risk their lives searching for bombs to take to smelting centres, and bomb casings are used "to lift / our homes / above / the ground" (33). Those lines are taken from "Laos," a poem which begins thus: "When

bombs / dropped / here / we buried / the dead" (33). The poem's very short lines and its vertical arrangement visually reproduce both the violent act of dropping bombs and the later repurposing of those bombs for stilts to support homes, and thus can, perhaps, be seen to "restore a certain weight of experience, a stubborn density" to ugly facts found in newspaper columns. But because the poem's "we" is unspecified and any attempt to align the speaker with Thammavongsa's father is complicated by her admission that she could not read his original text, "Laos" is not so much found as forged, that is, simulated or replicated. Notably, it is a peculiarly faithful forgery that acknowledges what it owes to "the heat of history" and to the people for whom it speaks.

Given that the refugee determination process often hinges on the state's ability to determine the credibility of claimants and the veracity of their stories, my decision to harness the metaphor of forgery when discussing refugee writing may seem counterintuitive. By keeping both meanings of forgery in play, I hope to suggest that the narrative representations of past trauma by the refugee claimant and the refugee writer are—like all historical accounts—inevitably creative acts, more or less faithful simulations. At the same time, though, I mean to underscore the ugliness of asking the same thing of both kinds of stories, of valuing refugee writing for its veracity rather than its ability to forge something new from "the heat of history."

As Peter Nyers has argued, the state tends to smile only on the most demonstrably abject of refugee claimants, those able to prove that they are utterly powerless, hopeless, and innocent. Where they are deemed to have any agency, that agency is typically understood as "unsavoury" (they are economic migrants or queue jumpers) or "dangerous" (they are criminals and potential terrorists) (1070-71). But, as Nyers suggests, the fetishization of refugee innocence is equally damaging because it reifies the paternalistic idea of the refugee as a helpless guest of the state, thus undermining their political agency and underestimating their social and economic contributions. Besides, the idea of refugee innocence is increasingly untenable given the recent proliferation of Canadian laws and practices that make it very difficult for people from poor or war-torn countries to get to Canada legally.[5] So, underscoring the trope of forgery and related forms of fabrication in creative writing by and about refugees is about scuppering the demand for, or expectation of, a demonstrably true salvation story by emphasizing the agency and creativity of individual authors and, more generally, of a group of people who are too often understood as only abject.

As Kumar argues, "Forgeries work only when they recall what is accepted as real" (xi). Accordingly, his "forged passport" mimics the presentation of information on an official document closely enough to draw attention to the ways in which its "rich ambiguities" can "resist a plain reply" or "demand a more complex though unequivocal response" (xi). The excessiveness and complexity of that reply frustrates "the language of government agencies" and the reading practices of their representatives, whom, he argues, typically seek to make a direct, one-to-one connection between the text and its subject.[6] Though *Found* is not presented as an identity document in the same way as *Passport Photos* or, perhaps, *Small Arguments*, it, too, is designed to frustrate the one-to-one connection that demands fidelity but understands it as naked, incontrovertible fact, rather than as an ethical obligation to one's forebears that can refuse the representation of fact or necessitate the forgery of fiction. In an essay entitled "My Father's Scrapbook," Thammavongsa explains:

> I don't know how to read or write Laotian but I do know how to speak it. Everything I found and everything in *Found* is about what I felt, discovered, put together while reading through the scrapbook. I never asked my father to translate or explain anything he put in there. That belongs to him, even the questions themselves. What I wanted most was to protect my parents, to respect and honour their private and personal experience. I wanted to tell our story but not to exploit or polish it.

Ultimately, she concludes, "*Found* is about where I came from and am coming from and what I can do with that." Thammavongsa's emphasis on what she "can do with" past experience—on her ability to forge something that is both new and faithful from the "heat of history"—emphasizes agency and creativity, countering the tendency to demand that refugee writers tell particular kinds of stories. Equally important, it challenges the troubling tendency to evaluate those stories for their rendition of unburnished truths in a manner that edifies a First World audience while reinforcing their own nation's "success at multicultural, collective-building projects" (Vinh Nguyen, "Refugee Gratitude" 18).

In order to understand the tension between the creativity and licence suggested by Thammavongsa's emphasis on what she "can do with" where "[she] came from," on the one hand, and the commitment to fidelity implicit in her avowal "not to exploit or polish" her parents' experiences, on the other, it is useful to consider Nam Le's much-lauded, self-referential short story "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" from his 2008 collection *The Boat*.[7] Therein, the narrator, who is also called Nam and is also the Australian child of Vietnamese refugees, struggles to complete

the story that is the final assignment for his writing class. A classmate chides, "How can you have writer's block? Just write a story about Vietnam" (8). The "just" reverberates, suggesting that writing from experience, and especially from an ethnically particular experience, is both easy and expedient.[8] A writing instructor corroborates this, urging, "Ethnic literature's hot. And important, too" (9). "*Fuck it*," thinks Nam, and he decides to write "the ethnic story of [his] Vietnamese father" (17), who witnessed the My Lai massacre as teenager. Recognizing that a narrative's apparent truthfulness means that there is "a better chance of selling it" (24), Nam pens a version of a violent, traumatic story he once heard his father recount to a group of old friends. In the interest of "selling it," Nam takes some liberties with that story, admitting, "Maybe he didn't tell it exactly that way. Maybe I am filling in the gaps" (17). Significantly, that "filled in" story is superseded by two other stories that exist as pivotal gaps or absences at the heart of "Love and Honor." The first of these is told by Nam's father, who disavows his son's interest in writing for a North American audience that will "read and clap their hands and forget" what they have read (24). So, he tells his son stories that are "not something [he]'ll be able to write" (24):

> He told me about the war. He told me about meeting my mother. The wedding. Then the fall of Saigon. 1975. He told me about his imprisonment in reeducation camp, the forced confessions, the indoctrinations, the starvations. The daily labor that ruined his back. The casual killings. He told me about the tiger-cage cells and connex boxes, the different names for different forms of torture. (25-26)

The use of anaphora—"he told me"—emphasizes the scope of these stories and the fact that they break the strained silence that has beset the father-son relationship for years. But the radical economy of Nam's rendition of that telling—"The wedding. Then the fall of Saigon. 1975."—reminds us that the stories themselves are not for us, readers who might be inclined to "clap [our] hands and forget." Likewise, we are not privy to the story that Nam writes later that night after listening to his father and helping him to bed. All we know of that narrative is that it is imagined as an homage. Referring to his father, Nam thinks: "He would read it, with his book-learned English, and he would recognize himself in a new way. He would recognize me. He would see how powerful was his experience, how valuable his suffering—how I had made it speak for more than itself. He would be pleased with me" (27). In the context of an article that considers how *The Boat* interrogates the demands of "ethnic writing," Donald Goellnicht argues that Nam sees himself as his father's conduit, "adding value to his father's suffering" by "making the story

'speak for more than itself,' making it represent a community" (201). As Goellnicht suggests, "making it" has as many resonances as "selling it." And thus, while Le's story dignifies the notion of refugee writing as an homage to those who have suffered, it also asks about the ethics of "making" a story speak, especially if that story testifies to the suffering of one who thinks, "Sometimes it's better to forget" (24). Whether or not it is better to forget, it is important, Le suggests, to respect the privacy and will of those who have suffered, and to recognize that the viewer or reader does not have the right to know their stories, and may lack the ability to understand them.[9] Because "Love and Honor" is thoroughly metafictional, one might argue that the story Nam writes while watching his father sleep is, in fact, the one we read. But, given Le's emphasis on privacy, it makes more sense to understand Nam's revised story as withheld, existing within gaps that the writers choose not to fill.

While the "ethnic story" in "Love and Honor" is supplemented by pivotal absent stories that affirm the importance of privacy and silence in refugee writing, something very different has happened with *Found*, where a 2009 short film based on the book supplements it by including the photographs and personal narratives withheld in the original. Paramita Nath's film *Found: The Poetry of Souvankham Thammavongsa* begins with a voiceover in which Thammavongsa—whose face is not shown—relays the difficult circumstances of her premature birth while turning the pages of her father's scrapbook. She goes on to recite a number of poems from *Found*, including "My Mother, a Portrait of":

> There are
> no photographs
>
> of
> my mother here
>
> just
> her name
>
> her
> real name
>
> Her
> real name
>
> looks
> like her
>
> Quiet
> and reaching
>
> for
> my father's (31-32)

Nath accompanies the poem with a close-up of a photograph of Thammavongsa's mother with her husband and daughter. However evocative, the effect is to overcome or deny the absence signalled in the poem's opening lines. This matters because that absence is instrumental to the poem: the speaker's insistence that "There are / no photographs // of / my mother here" reminds us of absences within the scrapbook and the absence of the scrapbook itself. Likewise, the speaker's suggestion that the mother's "real name // looks / like her" reminds us that we are strangers who do not know either of the mother's names and are unable to recognize her. While the title of the poem and the image of the "[q]uiet / and reaching" woman in Thammavongsa's collection figure the poem itself as a portrait, the lack of visual details about the mother makes it impossible to imagine her, so that the reference to a "portrait" underscores its own absence. Tellingly, the website for the film foregrounds transparency, access, and "truth" by likening the pages of the scrapbook to "windows into [an] extraordinary past" ("the film"). However, the accompanying "poet's statement" written by Thammavongsa foregrounds the act of looking for something over the more passive experience of seeing it: "I'm interested in things people don't look at but are there. My father is here and no one's looking. When I finished writing *Found*, I saw that it wasn't about my father but about my looking." She continues: "When Paramita Nath talked to me about turning *Found* into a film, I thought deeply about my own decision not to include photographs of the actual scrapbook pages in my book. I wanted to control what a reader was looking at, where they were looking and in what sequence, and how they were looking" ("poet's"). So, Nath's film is about finding and Thammavongsa's *Found* is about looking. Because that looking is structured by multiple absences, the poetry collection underscores the value and the process of trying to grasp what we cannot see and cannot fully comprehend. Like nearsighted voyeurs, readers of *Found* study the poem's small print and engage its details while longing for the big picture—be that the missing portrait with its promise of plenitude and intimacy, or a more thorough understanding of the often traumatic history to which the poems allude and in which the scrapbook was produced. Thus, as Goellnicht argues with reference to Le's collection, we are asked to reckon with the extent to which our own gaze "assumes the right of the dominant culture, the viewing subject, to know the viewed as an ethnographic object of study" (216).

Thammavongsa has expressed frustration in response to requests that she tell—repeat and replete—her story of refugee trauma. She laments, for

example, that interviews about her writing typically begin with the question, "What was it like in the refugee camp . . . tell us the conditions[?]" ("12 or 20"). Anh Hua, a scholar, creative writer, and former refugee, refers to such requests as the "Treaty to Tell the Truth." In her fictionalized personal essay "The Blue Tank" Hua tells the story of a young girl's escape from Vietnam with her family in 1979. The story's plot corresponds with Hua's personal history, but the author warns against collapsing the two by introducing her text with an extended meditation on "the telling of a retelling of a story that is told again and again in repetitive trauma and pleasure until the story becomes myth, legend, unbelievable" (110). Likening the process of reconstructing her story of escape to that of dusting and "arranging bones" so as to create the "pretense of coherence" for her audience, Hua's narrator wonders, "Should I tell the story? I fear the trap of the Confessional: Treaty to Tell the Truth. But there was no original story. The story has changed each time I tell it to myself, to others" (110). Hua's characterization of "The Blue Tank" as a "tale-tell" (110) underscores her suggestion that the refugee narrative is mutable, changing depending on the context in which it is told. But, the ways in which "tale-tell" brings to mind the tall tale—with its evocation of imaginative excess and incredulity—is also worth noting because it directs readers to forego any expectations of a linear narrative based on verifiable truths.

Hua's contention "that there was no original story" remembers Stuart Hall's argument that memory exists in and as narrative, that it is shaped by language and by the contexts in which it is recalled. But that argument and related ones about the inevitable partiality of memory are tricky for refugees, because the reliability and fulsomeness of memory often plays a crucial role in the refugee certification process, where success is often contingent on a claimant's ability to tell a verifiably true story of past persecution in a manner that satisfies the state. And, as Viet Nguyen argues, "memory's incompleteness" can be particularly painful for those who left their home countries under duress and who thus struggle with "the contradictory yearning to imagine one's memory as whole" and the desire "to forget altogether" (qtd. in Goellnicht 203).

Whereas Hua uses repetition and variation to refuse the "Treaty to Tell the Truth," Thammavongsa uses silence and restraint to similar ends. For all of its inventiveness, *Found*, is very restrained. Indeed, many of its poems are wordless. For example, the seven poems representing records of the father's journal entries for the months between February and August 1979 contain

only a slash and the poem-records for October through December are entirely blank. In "My Father's Scrapbook," Thammavongsa explains that the liberal use of white space and the use of "personally particular" handwritten marks in these poems are intended to "draw out [a] sense of time, of waiting." For this and other reasons, the slashes are hard to read. As Christine Kim asks,

> Is the slash finally an act of repeated negation, determined to continue crossing out even when there is nothing left to obliterate or even oppose? Or might we perhaps read commitment and futile hope into his act of marking, constant even when betrayed by the forward march of a calendar year that does not correspond to the stagnant state of other affairs? (153)

Other poems more clearly align silence with the lack of political voice. Consider, for example, "Postage Stamp, 31 Cents, U.S. Airmail," which describes the American stamp taken from the letter carrying a negative response to her father's appeal for asylum in the United States. While the plane pictured on the stamp is seen to move between "two worlds" and speaks to the father's dream of leaving "here" for "there," the letter determined that his dream would not be realized; because such a letter came "only once," it indicated the father's lack of recourse (36). Significantly, the poem has fewer than thirty words and uses very short lines. Its brevity and its arrangement on the page underscore the very limited dialogue arising from the father's petitions for asylum, and reinforce what Joseph Pugliese calls "the inadequacy of language to justice."

Pugliese's phrase is taken from an essay about the mainstream media and the Australian government's response to a 2002 demonstration by asylum seekers incarcerated at Australia's Woomera Immigration Detention Centre. In what would be the first of many such protests, seventy people sewed their lips shut to protest the camp's dire conditions and its isolation. Their suffering was compounded by fact that they were prevented from corresponding with the outside world. In an effort to address the complexities of the prisoners' symbolic gesture, Pugliese writes:

> The act of suturing your lips stages the graphic disruption of the social contract as founded principally on an ethics of speech and dialogue: in the face of a regime that pays no heed to your pleas and petitions for refuge and asylum, that juridically eviscerates your right to free speech, the withdrawal of language signals despair at the very possibility of ethical dialogue. . . . Your sutured lips open up the violent disjunction between law and justice. Your silence signifies the inadequacy of language to justice.

To reference Pugliese is not to suggest that the situation of refugee claimants held at Woomera is directly comparable to that represented in *Found*. But,

Pugliese's reading of the first Woomera protest is relevant because, at the same time as it addresses a silence that signals "despair at the very possibility of ethical dialogue," it also reminds us to consider how refugee silence and—by implication—how silences in writing by and about refugees might be seen as an active, agential "withdrawal of language" that addresses their very diminished access to consequential forums in which to tell stories that are both meaningful and politically expedient.

Silence and agency are also very important in the final poem in Thammavongsa's *Found*.

> WARNING
> My father took
> a pigeon
>
> broke
> its hard neck
>
> cut open
> its chest
>
> dug out
> a handful
>
> and threw back
> its body
>
> warning (60)

Brittany Kraus' reading of this poem focuses on the bird, noting that, like the bugs in *Small Arguments*, it is often associated with pestilence. But the pigeon, she points out, is a carrier of messages as well as disease (19), and thus its violent death may be understood as a protest against the powerlessness of the human being who is caged in the depoliticized space of the refugee camp while waiting for a response to his applications for sanctuary. This makes excellent sense, but it is also true that the poem's economy and open-endedness make it difficult to settle on a single reading. It is worth noting that "Warning" directly follows *Found*'s many wordless poems, and while it returns us to language, it does not disrupt that silence so much as amplify it and insist upon its complexity. Put differently, the wordlessness of the previous pages and the silence of the poem's subject make it difficult to determine whether his violent act is born of hunger, frustration, or fury. Certainly, the poem's arrangement on the page and its use of enjambed lines that begin with active verbs—broke, cut, dug—underscore the father's agency. But beyond that, the poem seems to warn us against overestimating what we know about its subject. Put differently,

"Warning" protects the privacy and autonomy of its subject, who, on the last page of the collection, is seen to exceed rather than accede to anything we think we know about him.

Given that this paper began by considering the figure of the ungrateful refugee and emphasizing the need to heed the contradictions and contingencies of refugee writing, it is important to recognize Thammavongsa's public statements of gratitude. "I am lucky," she writes; "I am the child Canada saved. I am the child of the parents Canada saved. Canada opened its doors to us" ("Souvankham"). These comments were made in 2015 as part of the narrative she contributed to Compassionate Canada: Stories in Solidarity with Refugees, a web-based initiative that collects stories from Southeast Asian refugees, immigrants, and their children living in Canada. Noting that "Canada's role in the resettlement of over 200,000 Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War has been repeatedly referenced as a model of Canadian generosity and humanitarianism," the contributors call upon the state to demonstrate these same attributes in responding to the current refugee crisis: "If Canada's history of compassion towards Southeast Asian refugees is celebrated, then we want to use this public celebration to advocate for those currently in dire need of assistance" ("Call for Stories"). Despite the fact that many of the submissions to Compassionate Canada foreground gratitude and use the language of salvation, they are not paeans, but "petitions" offered "in *support* of and *solidarity* with Syrian, Iraqi, Palestinian, Afghani, Libyan, Eritrean, and countless other refugees" ("About," emphasis original). Put differently, they are political texts that use the personal experience of and popular belief in state succor to call on the state "to live up to its claim as a humanitarian world leader" ("About"). This may also be true of the creative works considered in this paper, but it would be a mistake to read these poems or stories as petitions. Like the stories collected on the Compassionate Canada website, they deserve to be read on their own terms. And yet, readers cannot take any of these texts on their own terms if their readings are overdetermined by expectations of straightforward and demonstrable refugee gratitude, innocence, or abjection. Moreover, heeding the claims made in creative writing by refugees means attending to what those texts invent and what they refuse to reveal. Among other things, this involves recognizing the eloquence, contradictoriness, and intentionality of poetic silences that protest speechlessness and also resist the "Treaty to Tell the Truth."

Louis Althusser wrote, "there is no such thing as an innocent reading, [so] we must say what reading we are guilty of" (15). Thammavongsa—like Granados,

Hua, and Le—warns against letting readings of refugee narratives be hampered by the ideal of innocence or overdetermined by the trap of the Confessional. Whereas the refugee narrative that emphasizes gratitude and provides explicit, coherently rendered evidence of persecution sometimes allows readers to process its claims in a way that affirms their own benevolence, the stories and poems considered here make a different kind of claim—one that takes some time to process—because they are not salvation stories and are not concerned with apprehending a subject's identity, so much as recognizing their singularity. At a time when refugees figure very prominently in the news and in the social imaginary, these writers challenge us to think about how to read those stories and what to ask of them. In so doing, they ask what it means to read poems and stories "in solidarity with refugees."

NOTES

1 As Vinh Nguyen has argued, Kim Thúy's much-feted, semi-autobiographical novel *Ru* (2012) is the most obvious recent example of the refugee success story in Canada. It is worth noting that Nguyen's article emphasizes the importance of refugee writing that underscores gratitude and success not for the nation, but for the wellbeing of the refugee.

2 Hong draws on Yến Lê Espiritu's foundational work in the field of critical refugee studies and on Mimi Thi Nguyen's suggestion that American refugee narratives have helped cultivate support for overseas American military operations.

3 With reference to the Somalia Affair, Razack demonstrates that Canadian "peacekeeping violence" is largely overlooked in favour of a more palatable myth about an innocent, morally superior middle-power nation obliged to sort out Third World violence. Also see James, who argues that Canadian narratives about Vietnamese Canadian refugees typically ignore Canada's role as a producer of arms and chemical weapons for American military use in the Vietnam War.

4 See my article "The Refugee's Body of Knowledge." On the function of illegibility in writing by refugees, also see Christine Kim's suggestion that Souvankham Thammavongsa's *Found* substitutes "the illegible history for the particular refugee narrative" (148).

5 For example, in the 1990s Canada expanded its interdiction practices by increasing the number of overseas immigration officers employed to prevent people from travelling to Canada without bona fide travel documents; at the same time, amendments to the Immigration Act (Bill C-86) made it necessary for Convention refugees to produce "satisfactory" identity documents in order to be landed; and, in 2002 Canada and the US signed the Safe Third Country Agreement, which required asylum seekers to lodge refugee claims in the first country of arrival.

6 Drawing on Kumar, I elaborate on the implications of such reading practices in "On Thinking Like a State and Reading (about) Refugees."

7 One might also take up Thammavongsa's determination to forego "polish" with reference to her reflections on her preference for the "violence" of minimalism ("Interview"). Punning aside, her very spare story "Mani Pedi" can be said to forego "polish": that story

details the health problems endured by people working in the manicure business, and ends with the two protagonists—manicurists, siblings, and Laotian Canadian children of refugees—sitting in silence, separately ruminating on their shared childhood. Like *Found*, "Mani Pedi" uses silence to underscore and protect the complex interiority of its subjects.

8 With reference to his own scholarly practice, Vinh Nguyen explores this idea to great effect in his essay "Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance."

9 Goellnicht develops this idea with reference to Le's title story, "The Boat," arguing that its insistence on blankness and incomprehensibility works to critique the "voyeuristic gaze" (216).

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