

Unmarked, Undocumented and Un-Canadian: Examining Space in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *FOUND*

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If you knew
love

these
do not say

but of life
your life

it was small and brief

Souvankham Thammavongsa, "Untitled," *FOUND*

"I believe," Michel Foucault argued in 1967, "that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space" (1). A turn of the century later, Foucault's words still ring true. Space matters, perhaps now more than ever, as the contemporary world "is on the move like never before" (Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees* ix). Yet while everyone occupies space to one degree or another—whether political or social, physical or cyber—not all occupy equal positions within it. There is a hierarchy of space, a privileging of access that is inextricable from the vast power differentials of shifting global capital and the politics of movement. In his book *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*, Peter Nyers argues that the "politics of moving bodies must be analyzed as being implicated in—indeed immanent to—the movement of body politics" (x). With this in mind, what, then, do the recent reforms to Canada's Immigration and Protection Act, in which Canada has "introduced laws designed to disappear refugees—via mandatory incarceration, deportation or immediate and irrevocable denial of their claims" (Dawson, "The Refugee's Body of Knowledge" 68), say about the privileging and ordering of Canadian space? How do Canada's increasingly restrictive immigration policies evict "Third World peoples"—the racialized, the disenfranchised, the stateless and the undocumented—"from the realm of common humanity" (Razack 8) by denying them access to the markers of a First-World identity: citizenship, gainful employment, health care, human rights? Through an analysis of contemporary poet Souvankham Thammavongsa's 2008 collection *FOUND*, this essay examines the

politics of space as inextricable from the performance of a nation and argues that *FOUND* works to critique and interrogate the state policies and practices that function to exclude, dehumanize, and evict the “nation-less” subject from national space.

I. Found Spaces

Space is everywhere in *FOUND*. The print is small, the poems sparse. The collection begins with a brief autobiographical 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.
(Thammavongsa 12)

The note reads like a whisper, a tiny voice emanating from the bottom of the page. As Rob McLennan states, “Thammavongsa is a poet of the miniscule, and nearly microscopic” (1). Indeed, in its very design, Thammavongsa’s *FOUND* performs an aesthetics of smallness. Even *FOUND*’s material origins—a father’s discarded scrapbook—speaks of smallness, of remnant, of insignificance. Yet Thammavongsa’s retrieval of the scrapbook, her foray into the trash to salvage her father’s “doodles, addresses, postage stamps, maps, measurements” (12) from oblivion, tells a different story. Given the recent changes to Canada’s immigration practices and policies, including the significant reduction of the narrative component of a refugee protection claim,¹ the metaphor of smallness becomes a particularly potent site through which to explore the increasingly limited space(s) afforded asylum seekers, “illegals” and undocumented migrants seeking refuge within Canada’s borders. To the extent that *FOUND* is in itself a “found” object—a poetry collection inspired by Thammavongsa’s discovery (and recovery) of her father’s scrapbook—it functions as a record of his life, a small “proof” of his identity. Yet as the first untitled poem of *FOUND* indicates, the “proof” is insubstantial, the record incomplete:

I took only
bone

built half
your face

left
skull and rib

as they came

If you knew
love

these
do not say

but of life
your life

it was small and brief (Thammavongsa 13)

Thammavongsa's poetic construction, or reconstruction, of a life "small and brief" is fragmented and incomplete, a skeleton of meaning, "only/bone." Despite the fact that she equates *FOUND* with her father's scrapbook in the collection's autobiographical preface ("I took it and found this" [12]), Thammavongsa warns the reader not to mistake the words on the page for the presence—or absence—of a life. "These/do not say," she writes, "but of life/your life."

Yet, in *FOUND*, nothing is superfluous; every word (and space) matters, every letter, every absence, is carefully chosen. The radical economy with which Thammavongsa employs—even eschews—language throughout the collection, highlights her ongoing interest in returning "the metaphor of the border to the material reality of barbed-wire fences, entrenched prejudices, and powerful economic interests that regulate the flow of human bodies" (Kumar x) across national and international boundaries. In other words, Thammavongsa's "small and brief" (13) prose invites the reader to consider the ways in which the lives and bodies of those without status or documentation are relegated to "small and brief" spaces: refugee camps, detainment centres, dangerous pathways, slim hopes. "I'm thinking about space and time and language," she says of her writing in a recent interview with *Postcolonial Text*: "What happens when someone gives you this narrow space or this little time, how do you move within it with language?" (Thammavongsa qtd. in Ganz 3). To an extent, the minimal print and small physical size of *FOUND* answer the poet's own question. How does one move within "narrow space[s]" and "little time" with language? By being small.

Language, for Thammavongsa, is neither an arbitrary nor immaterial space, but a site of being, of corporeality. In "MY MOTHER, A PORTRAIT OF," Thammavongsa indicates the importance of restoring to people the incalculable, incommunicable worth of their lives, even when the "proof" of those lives is missing.

There are

no photographs

of
my mother here

just
her name

her
real name (31)

While the image of Thammavongsa's mother is missing from her father's scrapbook, the written record of her mother's Laotian name, "her real name," becomes a living portrait:

Her
real name

looks
like her

Quiet
and reaching

for
my father's (32)

In the absence of a photograph, language constructs an image of a life. But it is only an image, "Quiet and reaching," and, like a photograph, tells only a partial story. In this way, Thammavongsa protects her mother from public scrutiny, shields her from public view, and keeps her, as it were, off the record. A name is not a person, Thammavongsa suggests: it just "looks like her."

II. Claiming Truth

This kind of narrative ambiguity, however, would constitute grounds for the immediate and irrevocable dismissal of a refugee claimant's application for state protection. In filing an application to Canada, the refugee claimant or asylum-seeker is expected to tell not only a complete but also a *credible* story:

In those countries that are signatories to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, an individual must establish her ongoing fear of persecution in order to be granted refugee status. Her ability to do so is very much contingent on the perceived credibility and coherence of the story that she tells. (Dawson, "The Refugee's Body of Knowledge" 57)

Under current legislation, Canada's Refugee Protection Division can reject any claim that is perceived to lack sufficient credibility or "trustworthy

evidence” (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2015, Sec. 106). While the Refugee Protection Division’s dismissal of claims determined to have “no credible basis” (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2015, Sec. 106) is not in itself a problem—after all, the maintenance of national borders requires the policing of them—the issue lies, rather, in the politics and processes involved in determining what—and who—is credible. The process of “reading” the veracity of a refugee’s claim or identity is neither a neutral nor an apolitical practice. As Dawson notes, many factors “impede a refugee claimant’s ability to tell her story in a manner that satisfies the state,” not least of which include language barriers, geographic distances, the “difficulties of testifying to trauma” (“The Refugee’s Body of Knowledge” 57), and the complexities of negotiating the bureaucratic labyrinth of Canada’s immigration laws. Yet an even larger impediment faces the refugee claimant in producing a “trustworthy” claim: Canada’s distrust of *her*.

In 2003, Denis Coderre, former Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, stated that Canada is “a place where immigrants will find hope, hospitality and opportunity” (qtd. in Nyers, “Abject Cosmopolitanism” 1075). With the unanimous passing of Bill C-31 in 2012, however—the Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act (nicknamed by dissenters “The Refugee Exclusion Act”)—Canada’s articulation of itself as a safe and welcoming multicultural space shifted to a rhetoric of Canadian victimization and national vulnerability. Former Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Jason Kenney, defended the aggressively exclusionary reforms to Canada’s Immigration and Refugee Protection Act by claiming that “our generous system has been abused by too many people making bogus refugee claims” (qtd. in Dawson, “The Refugee’s Body of Knowledge” 56). Though framed in a binary relationship of legitimacy versus illegitimacy, of Western generosity versus foreign deceit, it is clear that, for Kenney, it is the system—not the refugee or asylum seeker—that needs protection. Kenney’s attack on those “bogus” claimants “fleeing oppression not quite horrific enough to satisfy the standards required by the jurisprudence defining and applying the refugee definition” (Macklin and Waldman qtd. in Dawson, “The Refugee’s Body of Knowledge” 56), gestures towards the criteria of “truth” demanded of all “stateless persons” (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act 2015) claiming asylum: a confession of graphic violence, poverty and abjection, “the telling of a retelling of a story that is told again and again in repetitive trauma” in compliance with the state’s “Treaty to Tell the Truth” (Hua qtd. in Dawson, “On Thinking Like a State” 71). By acknowledging the veracity of only those claims conforming to state-sanctioned “discourses of survivorship” (Brown 94), the state in turn denies refugee claimants the right to the space of personal experience, the “zone of privacy in which lives go unreported... free from surveillance” (94) and public scrutiny. The mandate is clear: tell the “truth,” or risk being found “bogus.”

In her poem “NA,” Thammavongsa indicates the potential for language to be a place of hiding and indeterminacy:

We use
the same word

place
its second sound

in a different
part

of the mouth
to make

what it means
change (40)

As Lao is a tonal language, the definition of “Na” changes based on the speaker’s intonation. With only a slight shift in the placement of a tongue, the shape of a mouth, “Na” takes on decidedly different, even contrasting, meanings. Produced at “the back/of/your throat,” Thammavongsa explains, “Na/is a face” (38). Later in the poem, she states the exact opposite:

Na
is not a face

looking
back at you

or
a body

you can
remember (40)

The poem invites the reader to consider how language can hide “a face,” “a body,” a memory or a meaning, just as easily as it can expose them. In this way, the language of *FOUND* functions as space—space for a body to hide, for a word to change, for a poet to write of lives “no one knows or cares about” (Thammavongsa qtd. in Ganz 6), for those same lives to disappear.

III. Private Spaces

According to Rob Walker, modern politics is premised on a foundation of binarisms and principles of exclusion. “Modern politics,” he writes, “is a spatial politics. Its crucial condition of possibility is the distinction between an inside and an outside, between the citizens, nations and

communities within, and the enemies, others, and absences without” (qtd. in Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees* xi). Though Walker’s assertion that modern politics is a spatial politics is apt, the conception of space as a juxtaposition of inside/outside, insider/outsider is not a “crucial condition” of modern politics but, rather, a reinforced and reified construct. For instance, “irregular arrivals” to Canada do not exist outside national borders; they are, in fact, detained *within* national and provincial borders. But because of their “irregularity,” their spatial indeterminacy, they are denied the very right to space within those borders, within, in fact, *any* borders:

Denied access to legal, economic and political redress, these lives exist in a limbo-like state . . . the refugee, the political prisoner, the disappeared, the victim of torture, the dispossessed—all have been excluded, to different degrees, from the fraternity of the social sphere, appeal to the safety net of the nation-state and recourse to international law. They have been outlawed, so to speak. (Downey 109)

The mandatory and indefinite detainment of “designated foreign nationals” (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act 2015) is nothing short of incarceration. But “what threat? What crime?” (Johnson 103). As the Canadian Bill of Rights states, “. . . no law of Canada shall be construed or applied so as to authorize or effect the arbitrary detention, imprisonment or exile of any person” (Canadian Bill of Rights and Freedoms, 2015, Sec. 2a). It is clear that the Canadian government’s notion of *any* person, however, does not apply to *every* person—only those deemed to belong.

So who belongs? As outlined in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, “the burden of proving that a claim is eligible to be referred to the Refugee Protection Division rests on the claimant, who must answer truthfully all questions put to them” (Sec. 101.1). While this seems like standard procedure—and indeed it is—the notion of truth, and the refugee’s ability to respond truthfully, is again troubled by national and cultural expectations of what constitutes a refugee’s truth. As Dawson notes, “Whatever the forum—courtroom, screen, stage, page—the refugee is expected to tell the same kind of story, one which testifies to trauma” (“The Refugee’s Body of Knowledge” 58). The repetition of the narratives Western audiences have come to expect, even demand, of refugees—stories of horror and poverty, of brutality and loss—locates the refugee within a tidy and homogenous discursive framework wherein discussions of “institutionalized discrimination or the brutalizing refugee certification process” (Granados 2) are circumnavigated, or simply ignored. Throughout *FOUND*, Thammavongsa refuses to produce (or reproduce) the “proof” of trauma, to proffer the types of “confessed truths [that] are assembled and deployed as ‘knowledge’ about [a] group” (Brown 92), identity, or experience. Refusing to tell, to confess one’s trauma or experience, is not only an aesthetic choice but also a viable and often potent strategy with which to counter the reading and interpretative practices that seek to secure identities and narratives in confinable and

definable spaces. Indeed, Thammavongsa's only direct reference to her family's experience(s) living in war-ravaged Laos, the "Land of a Million Bombs," is presented as bare, literal fact. In a poem simply entitled "LAOS," the speaker provides only the most minimal information:

When bombs
dropped

here
we buried

the dead (Thammavongsa 33)

The poem resists the cultural injunctions to stage public and, to borrow a phrase from artist and former refugee Francisco-Fernando Granados, "easily consumable spectacles" (1) of trauma. Trauma, the poem asserts, is a private space.

IV. Spatial Relations

Space, in Foucault's view, "is fundamental to any exercise of power" (361), but space, like power, is unequally distributed. In titling her collection *FOUND*, Thammavongsa identifies two of the primary ways we conceive of space: lost and/or found. While being found requires the condition of first being lost, the opposite is not true of being lost: one can stay lost forever. The anxiety of space, then, is in part an anxiety of *displacement*. As Foucault writes, "[t]he real scandal of Galileo's work lay not so much in his discovery, or rediscovery, that the earth revolved around the sun, but in his constitution of an infinite, and infinitely open space" (1). Galileo's (re)discovery of the Earth's rotational path thus re-ordered the world by, paradoxically, displacing it. No longer was Earth at the centre of the universe: its borders had, quite literally, dissolved into space. Space became relative, extendable, a constricting and expanding network "defined by relations of proximity between points or elements" (Foucault 2). In "THERMOMETER, A DIAGRAM OF," Thammavongsa subtly plays with space and stanzaic structure to create a poem that is, at once, cyclical and truncated:

The human body
is set

between
two points

The point water boils
The point water freezes

This
is where

it lives
and how

Somewhere between
two points (15)

The poem ends abruptly, seemingly mid-sentence, stranded “Somewhere between/two points.” Upon closer examination, however, the poem seems to loop back to the beginning: the concluding lines “Somewhere between/two points” make logical and grammatical sense only when connected to the opening lines, “the human body/is set.” But where, precisely, does the poem begin? Is it a diagram of a thermometer or a human body? It is unclear what distinctions should—or should not—be made, what information should or should not be included in a reading of this poem. The poem’s evasive structure resists a fixed interpretation, staging a poetic refusal to be read under set guidelines and regulatory conditions, to submit the body—and the body of the text—as evidence of a specific truth or unitary discourse.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler argues that bodies are both individual and communal spaces:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and the instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own...my body is and is not mine. (26)

The “human body” of Thammavongsa’s poem “is set” (15) between discursive possibilities and categorical assignations of identity, meaning, ownership and belonging, of mine and “not mine” (Butler 26), and, by extension, yours and not yours. The poem implies activity, agency—“This/is where/it lives/*and how*” (my emphasis)—enacted between enforced boundaries and “set” designations. “So how do we remove the elements of distinction, challenge the integrity of the wall,” artist, architect and activist Tings Chak asks in *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention*, “how do we make the borders disappear?” (31). In “THERMOMETER, A DIAGRAM OF,” Thammavongsa employs language that is at once precise and ambiguous, pointed and indeterminate, to indicate the movement within “the elements of distinction,” the lives that *live* between borders, undocumented and

unseen, as well as the lives that disappear. “This is where it lives” (15), Thammavongsa writes, pointing nowhere.

But “where/it lives” is also a refugee camp. Given that Thammavongsa’s father kept his scrapbook during the family’s forced stay in a Lao refugee camp, the difficulties of living “somewhere between/two points” (15) is not only a metaphysical dilemma but also a literal site of struggle and hardship. Because refugee camps are situated between “two points”—between borders, sovereignties, and legal jurisdictions—refugees are denied access to the rights and protection of the domestic community. As Johnson argues, the refugee camp “is an actual place where law is suspended, rights are denied and migrants are held in a static temporariness that concretizes exclusion into a permanent state” (127). Indeed, many camps and detainment centres are considered *extra-national zones*, “meaning, space that is no longer considered sovereign and constitutive of the nation (Shay 1). In the poem, “THE WORLD, A MAP OF,” Thammavongsa highlights the anxiety of belonging nowhere:

If
it is round

or if
you can see

the sun
the other way

does
not matter

What does
is

the country
and

the blue dot
inside
(42)

Forced to live in a global halfway house, the refugee dreams of home. But home is inconceivable, unimaginable, only a “blue dot” inside a country, a tiny circle on a map. Yet the distance between the refugee camp and the

“blue dot” is vast and incommensurable. As Homi Bhabha argues, “[t]he Globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers” (qtd. in Shay 1). The irony of Bhabha’s statement is that as the displaced migrant or refugee attempts to negotiate the awesome distance “across borders or frontiers”—the visas, the passports, the wide oceans of uncertainty—she often lives in cramped and confined spaces: the refugee camp, the holding or detention centre, the places where “inside, you lose your spatial bearings and markers. You lose your identity . . . and subjecthood” (Chak 90). Home, then, is not a blue dot on a map. Home is being legal.

Under Canada’s current legislation, anyone found to be a “designated foreign national”—that is, illegal—by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration is subject to mandatory detainment for a minimum of one year, or until his or her identity is confirmed or denied (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2015, Sec. 20.1). “Irregular arrivals” to Canada are detained in provincial prisons or one of three Immigrant Holding Centres (IHC) located in Toronto, Vancouver, and Laval (Chak 4). These facilities, according to the Global Detention Project, “operate as medium-security prisons, with fences equipped with razor wire, central locking door, systems, security guards, and surveillance cameras” (“Canada Detention Profile” 2012). Like refugee camps, the IHC’s are places in which there is little to do but wait for release, sometimes “five, six, seven years without charge or trial” (Chak 4), suspended between borders, caged from public view.

In “MY FATHER’S HANDWRITING,” Thammavongsa evokes the popular prison (and asylum) trope of writing on a wall:

He carved
every letter

into
the sound

its
shape made

and every one took
a place

where nothing
stood (25)

In this poem, the letters are carved into a wall of absence, into air, “a place/where nothing stood.” The paradox of “a place/where nothing stood,” a place of empty space, gestures towards global practices of relegating non-citizens to nowhere spaces, the “interminable ‘waiting areas’” (Nyers, “Abject Cosmopolitanism” 1074) of uncertainty and exclusion. Yet writing into absence, carving into “the sound/its shape

made,” is at once a futile and agential act, a marking of place, an invocation of presence, however fleeting and ephemeral: “The space could be to the place what the word becomes when it is spoken: grasped in the ambiguity of being accomplished . . . uttered as the act of one present” (Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Augé 65). In “MY FATHER’S HANDWRITING,” the word remains unspoken, the space unplaced. Yet the poem, nonetheless, functions as an utterance of silence, an act in which “every one took/a place” (Thammavongsa 13) but without definition or determination. As Chak argues, “[i]n lieu of papers, supports, security and freedom, objects can build space, and that space can become a refuge, a home for the self” (106). Small, everyday acts of defiance—“hoarded food,” “taped up photos” (Chak 106), letters traced into air—become the detainee’s lifeline, a way to find space within space, to live within walls “too blank, impossible, and violent” (96). “Our bodies,” Chak contends, “always find ways to carve out space, to refocus our attention from the geometry to the lived experience, from the container to the contained” (103). Acts of speaking, of writing, of keeping record, therefore recall the presence of a living, breathing life locked behind “white walls no more than six feet away” (97), housed in a cell designed to meet only the “bare minimum” (Chak 99) requirements of space, habitability, and human life.

V. Body Texts

As the Canadian government becomes increasingly reliant on biometric technologies to “find” and determine refugee identities, the limited forums in which the refugee claimant *can* speak her experience are disappearing. As Dawson argues, “the use of biometric identifications compounds the growing speechlessness of refugees by treating them as bodies ‘without words’” (“The Refugee’s Body of Knowledge” 63). While biometric information is highly corporeal—it is the data of the body, after all—the practice of reading “refugees as bodies of evidence, or data sets” (Dawson, “The Refugee’s Body of Knowledge” 58) runs the risk of reducing the refugee to mere body parts, to hollowed-out human frames, as the refugee’s body is assumed to speak truths that the refugee claimant is not trusted to utter. Analyzed in this context, the poem “IDEAL PROPORTIONS, MALE” takes on a particular resonance. Like the majority of the poems in *FOUND*, “IDEAL PROPORTIONS, MALE” resembles a form or document, the small, typewritten text neatly stacked on top of invisible lines:

He wrote
beside

each part of
the body

its name

its translation (27)

While Thammavongsa is referencing a page of her father's "found" scrapbook (in which he, presumably, translates English words into Lao as a way to learn how to speak and write in English), she does not, in fact, give the reader of this poem, *this* page of her collection, any "real" information. No measurements are provided; no body parts are named. "[E]ach part of/the body" remains unidentified and unidentifiable, *written* but indecipherably.

According to Marc Augé, "words hardly count any longer" (83) in modern processes of identification and securitization: "There will be no individualization (no right to anonymity without identity checks). Of course, the criteria of innocence are the established, official criteria of individual identity (entered on cards, stored in mysterious databanks) (83). In Augé's formulation, innocence—that is, the innocence of any border-crosser (the airplane passenger, the visa applicant, even "the supermarket customer" [Augé 82])—is determined through a speechless trial of paper trails and digital records "entered on cards, stored in mysterious databanks" (83). The proof of identity—the passports, the boarding passes, the identity cards and visas—is concomitant with the proof of innocence: a subject's "truth" is measured and decided in a wordless procedure, wherein "only/the black ink/stamped/across their face" (Thammavongsa 35) is required to prove innocence or confirm guilt. Without proof of identity, however, the subject cannot enter into the space of "anonymity," cannot clear the checkpoints and territorial markers, the tollbooths and border stations, until her identity—and her innocence—is approved.

Moving "freely" between spaces, bypassing checkpoints and trespassing borders, undocumented and unsanctioned, is, therefore, a pronouncement of guilt. As Nyers argues in his essay "Object Cosmopolitanism," global migrants are typically viewed with a mixture of fear and pity:

Asylum seekers, refugees, non residents, undocumented workers, so-called 'overstayers' and 'illegals'—together, they have come to constitute a kind of 'abject class' of global migrants. Whatever their designation, these migrants are increasingly cast as the objects of securitised fears and anxieties, possessing either an *unsavoury agency* . . . or a *dangerous agency*. (1070)

The notion of an "abject class" of people possessing *any* kind of agency seems paradoxical, if not somewhat ironic. Yet, according to Elizabeth Grosz, refugee bodies (and the bodies of their narratives) "are neither neutral nor passive but, rather, actively reconfigure, reinscribe, and resist" static representations of space, time, sovereignty and citizenship "as they move through, across and between political spaces" (qtd. in Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees* x). Therefore, it is the refugee's political and spatial displacement, her stateless state, that, in fact, mobilizes fears and anxieties of "irregular" bodies entering into—that is, contaminating—the sanctified

space of the sovereign state. Indeed, the host/parasite relationship between the foreign, unpredictable body and the naturalized but vulnerable nation is recurrently invoked to justify, explain, and garner public support for legislation that not only continues to uphold but also actively enforce the “paradigm of Us and Them” (Kamboureli 114) in which “those who are deemed undesirable and dangerous are caged” (Chak 30), if found.

Paradoxically, the refugee claimant’s agency relies on her remaining stateless, permanently impermanent, in-between inscriptions of identity and identification. As Bhabha argues in his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, however, “in between” is a theoretically—and politically—fertile space:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

In living “somewhere between” (Thammavongsa 15)—unmarked and undetected—the refugee occupies the interstices of experience, “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (Bhabha 2). In these sites of movement and transference, of merging and emerging identities, subjectivities form alongside, even in opposition to, concepts of sovereignty and nationality. But as soon as the refugee is “placed and ordered/collected and marked” (Thammavongsa 35) by the state, she is assigned a national meaning (Permanent Resident, Temporary Resident, Foreign National, etc.) and enters into a national discourse and a national position. She becomes, in other words, *subject*, both of and to the state. While being granted legal access into the body politic may locate the refugee outside of a “theoretically innovative” (Bhabha 2) space of nowhere, the fact of the matter is that nowhere affords no rights, no opportunities, no future. “Status,” Chak notes, “is a fickle thing. [I]t can be taken away from you, and at any moment, it can be lost” (92). Yet in spite of its “fickleness,” its revocability, status is paradoxically binding: “it determines your identity, your rights, your access, your freedom” (Chak 92). Therefore, while thinking in-between singular narratives of “originary and initial subjectivities” (Bhabha 2) is critically necessary, living in-between sites of belonging is dangerous territory.

Living in-between markers of status and subjecthood, the refugee’s dream of home becomes just that—a dream, a thin memory. “The constant state of temporariness,” Johnson writes, “stops [the refugee] from investing in anything long term—including the concept of home. Home is only where he has slept today” (105). In “HOME,” Thammavongsa describes home as a scar, a sign of bodily trauma:

HOME

is a scar
just

below
the navel
(23)

Home is a reminder of former lives, former inhabitances; home is a memory, “a scar,” a mark of violence. In the poem immediately following “HOME,” entitled “SCULPTOR,” violence manifests:

To worship

you took
a knife in

cut out
for us

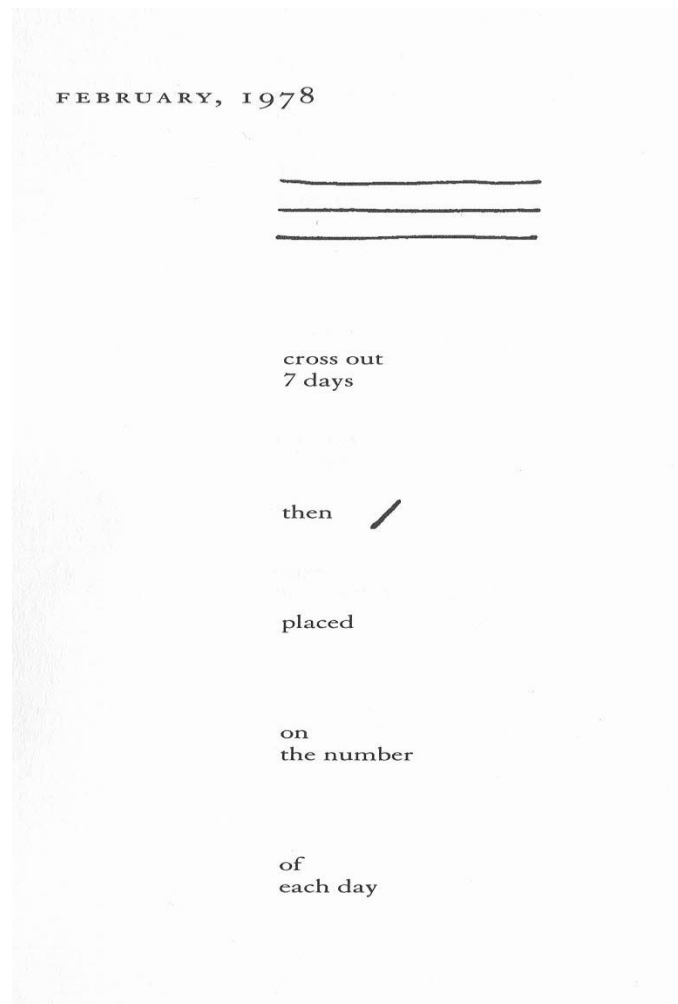
a human face (24)

In both poems, the body is a site of extraction, from which lives, faces and memories are “cut out” (24). In “HOME,” the body is scarred, permanently marked by violence. In “SCULPTOR,” the body is rendered faceless, mutilated in an act of sacrificial offering. Yet neither body is shown, detailed or described but for its disfigurement, its scars, its missing “human face” (Thammavongsa 24). Indeed, as Chak argues of Canada’s “booming” (26) prison industry, faces are few and far between: “There are billions of dollars made in the incarceration of human bodies. There are a lot of hands involved in this industry, but there aren’t many faces. In these authorless spaces, we hide the casualties of poverty and displacement, we even try to hide the spaces themselves” (91). The violence inflicted upon refugee bodies and minds, the “casualties of poverty and displacement,” are concealed within “authorless spaces”: detention facilities, deportation flights, court hearings, bureaucratic procedures, the “black lines/thin” (Thammavongsa 29) of endless red tape. “Spaces of incarceration are both nowhere and everywhere,” Chak writes. “But their invisibility is no coincidence. We hide the things that we don’t want to see or that we don’t want seen” (18). Hidden yet ubiquitous, “blended into our landscapes” (18), even the spaces of sanctioned violence disappear from view. “Here,” Thammavongsa explains, “isn’t here” (35).

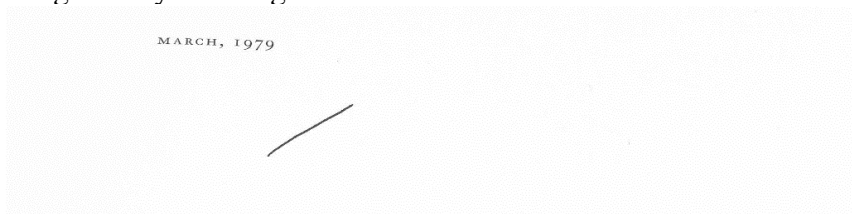
VI. WARNING

Thammavongsa is critically aware of the difficulties of negotiating space. She is, at once, her father's interpreter and archivist, a scavenger of identity, an inventor of facts. Indeed, multiple poems in *FOUND* underscore how little of her father's writing she actually could read, how little was legible. "I can only/read/one word/here" (Thammavongsa 28), she writes in a poem entitled "THE BIBLE, NOTES ON." The polyphony of the poet's roles, and the complexities within those roles, are foregrounded in the collection's epigraph, a quote from Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: "The work of a philosopher consists of assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (Thammavongsa 10). The work of finding and foraging—even forging—parts is a philosophical undertaking, an active construction of memory, of "forming, making, shaping" (Kumar xii). In an interview with *wordsters* in 2006, Thammavongsa discusses the importance of being documented: "You see, 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" (n.p.). The anxiety of being paperless and undocumented in a foreign country (even a home country) is an anxiety with material effects: deportation, incarceration, lack of access to governmental and social supports, etc. And as Dawson indicates, many refugees are forced to travel—that is, flee—without papers and proof of identity ("The Refugee's Body of Knowledge" 63). Space, then, can be dangerous.

Indeed, as *FOUND* progresses, space begins to take over. The text begins to seem crowded, even crowded out, by all the absence, as if words simply cannot cope with so much silence. Dates are crossed out, words scribbled over:



Eventually, the words give way to a single anxious mark:



As the months pass, the space increases. By October, only time remains: a small heading—“OCTOBER, 1979”—marks an otherwise blank page. The pages of “NOVEMBER, 1979” and “DECEMBER, 1979” pass by in the same, blank fashion. Thus, the reader becomes a participant in the refugee’s experience of waiting—for a letter, for a visa, for permission to enter. The space of the page represents the space between correspondences, between letters sent and letters not responded to, between postage stamps peeled “from envelopes” (Thammavongsa 35) and “the exact address of/the International Rescue Committee” (34) written down twice, “the second time in pen” (34). Yet as time is suspended, so, too, does it progress, and in “NOVEMBER, 1978” “the blue ink/runs out/The metal ball/digs/a pit into paper” (Thammavongsa

47). Patience runs thin, but waiting is a condition of being granted or denied access; waiting is written right into the process of legitimation. In Canada, for example, immigrant detainees must wait a minimum of six months between having their applications reviewed (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, 2015, Sec. 7). Even waiting to be deported can take years.

The anguish and uncertainty of waiting emerges throughout *FOUND* as a quiet, simmering rage. In a poem entitled “WHAT I CAN’T READ,” Thammavongsa describes sections of her father’s scrapbook that she struggles to read or is unable to decipher at all (due to the difficulties of reading Lao and/or her father’s handwriting):

Each letter
wound

around itself
drawing

a small dark
hole

an
inner ear

tiny
and landlocked (26)

The poem evokes images of strangulation and suffocation, of being stranded “between two points” (Thammavongsa 15), “landlocked” (26). The anger surfaces and abides throughout the text, but, after pages of silence, finally erupts in the collection’s final and most ambiguous poem:

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)

The violence of “WARNING” is brutal and absurd, seemingly a mad fit, an act of random cruelty. Yet the father’s attack on a bird, a pigeon no less, is telling. Pigeons are carriers—of messages, of disease. They are ubiquitous, inextricable from Western cityscapes, dwellers of eavestroughs and roofs and window ledges, loiterers of public spaces. They are associated with filth and fecundity, infestation and unsanitary conditions, widely and irrationally despised for simply being, like rats and spiders and snakes. The pigeon, however, is also highly mobile and adaptable, building its nest in makeshift places, scavenging scraps of food left over and thrown away; it lives downtown or in the suburb, on the roofs of city high-rises or the dark nooks of back-alleys. The pigeon is a survivor, “and/built/to survive” (Thammavongsa 21).

But pigeons are not people, and, in spite of the similarities that can be drawn between the lives of pigeons and the lives of refugees (transience, marginality, migration, etc.), pigeons enjoy a freedom of movement in public spaces that is inaccessible to the refugee claimant or “irregular arrival.” The father’s disembowelment of the pigeon thus speaks to an inexpressible rage at being denied lesser rights than a common pigeon, of being treated as less than an animal. The violence of the poem invokes images of waste and excess, of bodies emptied out, their carcasses subsequently thrown away, of lives broken, exterminated. As Nyers argues, “[t]he state logic that runs throughout the discourse of refugeeness can also be understood as a power of capture: subjects of the classification regime of ‘refugeeness’ are caged within a depoliticized humanitarian space” (*Rethinking Refugees* xiii). Is the father’s capture and kill of the pigeon, then, a metaphor for the state’s treatment of the refugee? Is this poem a warning to the state (Canada and otherwise) that caging human beings in non-spaces of unsanctioned existences will lead to brutal acts of violence? Or is this a poem that speaks out against designations of refugees as speechless, powerless animals, herded from one cage to the next? A poem that warns against limited understandings of people seeking refuge as “vagrant, homeless, tramp, evacuee and vagabond” (Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees* 58), as anything but human? Although “WARNING” offers no answer, no decisive or definitive response, the poem, nonetheless, ends the collection with, quite literally, a word of warning. Indeed, “warning”—printed in tiny text, off-set and isolated in a space sequestered from the rest of the poem—is the very last word of *FOUND*. Yet warnings look to the future, to the space of possibility and the potentiality for change. Thus “WARNING” offers an injunction to rethink space outside of binary configurations and political boundaries, to imagine

(and perform) space as a site of openings, rather than restrictions, to include, rather than exclude, those on the periphery of society, those who live between discourses of state and citizenry, of being and belonging. “We are in the epoch of simultaneity, Foucault argues, “. . . the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side by side by side, of the dispersed” (1). But who, we must ask, is in between?

Note

1. As part of Bill C-31, Canada replaced the Personal Information Form (PIF) with the Basis of Claim Form (BOC). The BOC form eliminates the narrative component of the PIF in favour of a series of questions, the answers to which must identify—and prove—the claimant’s fear of persecution upon return home (CCR, “C-31 Summary” 2013). Without space to tell her story, the refugee claimant faces a more difficult task of convincing the state of the legitimacy of her appeal.

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