

Unsettled

*Cambodian Refugees in
the New York City Hyperghetto*

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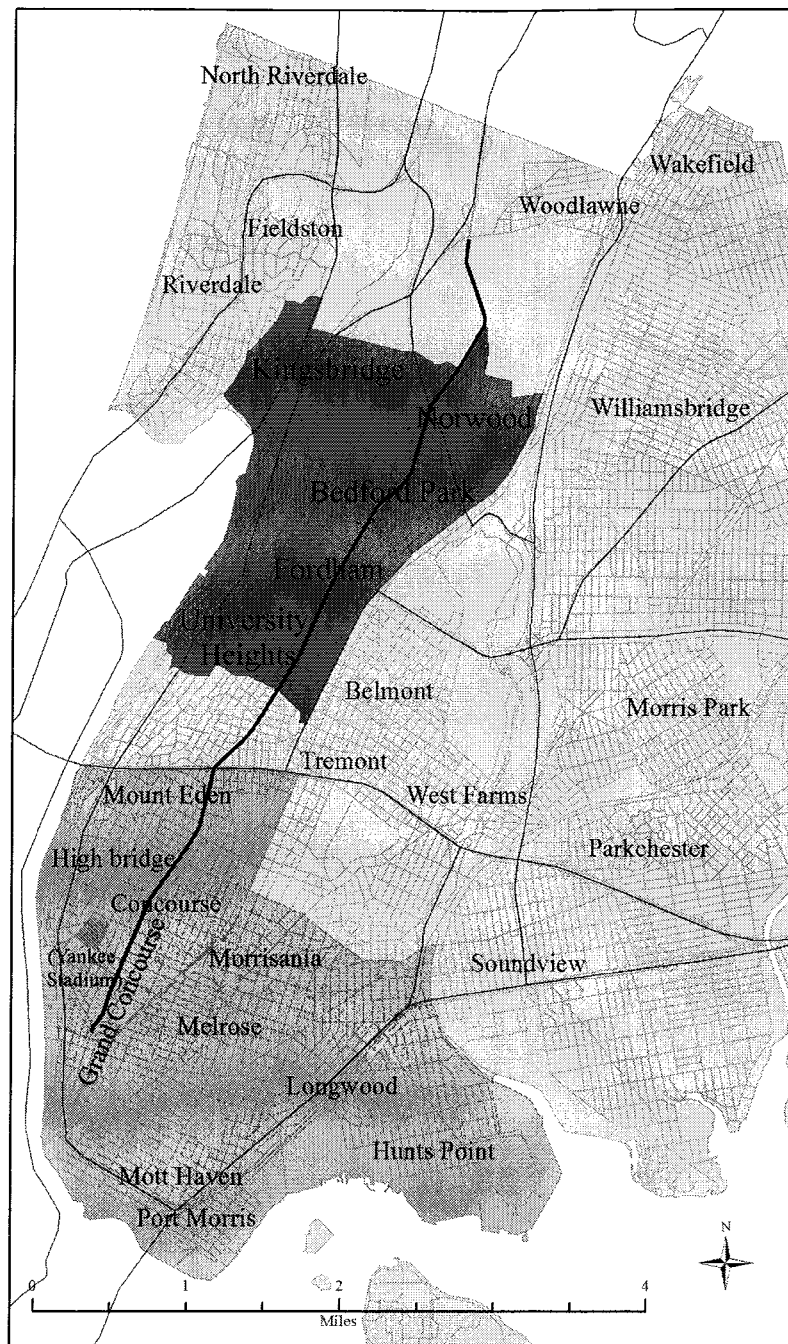
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Introduction: Refugee in the Hyperghetto

The Refugee

Ra Pronh tells me that she wants to stay in this apartment for as long as she can, which strikes me as ironic because we have been discussing how often she has moved since her arrival in the Bronx two decades ago, in the spring of 1986. On this May 2009 afternoon, we are sitting in the living room of the apartment she has occupied for almost two years. We are creating a record of the many Bronx residences she and her Cambodian¹ family have occupied since their arrival. By our count, Ra has lived in twelve different homes across the Northwest Bronx—some she describes as mere stops. Ra's twenty-three-year-old son Rith concurs with our findings: Ra's length of stay in each Bronx residence has averaged slightly less than two years, and Rith seems taken aback by this figure. He is certainly cognizant of how difficult his mother's life has been over the past twenty-two years,

FACING PAGE. The Bronx. The darkly shaded areas are the Northwest Bronx neighborhoods where Cambodian refugees were resettled during the 1980s and early 1990s. The lightly shaded areas are South Bronx neighborhoods. The South Bronx was the site of a devastating arson epidemic during the 1970s and early 1980s. Map created by Loraine Ng.

and yet these numbers reveal to him a pattern of unsettledness that even he finds surprising.

Ra is a fifty-year-old survivor of the Cambodian genocide. From April 1975 to January 1979, Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime—run by the communist Khmer Rouge party—subjected Cambodians to execution, starvation, disease, and forced labor. One-fourth of the Cambodian population was killed.² During these years, the Khmer Rouge led a revolution that called for cleansing the country of those perceived to be “contaminated” by the West and for the creation of a national program of ultra-agrarian socialism.³ Ra was only twenty years old when Khmer Rouge cadres took control of her farming village in the northwestern province of Battambang. It was January 1975, just a few months before they took the capital city of Phnom Penh on April 17, inaugurating the era of genocide. From that point forward, Ra became a captive, forced to work in a massive program of indentured servitude that the Khmer Rouge euphemistically described as a cooperative. She was also forced to marry a complete stranger, a man named Heng.

The Cambodian genocide—known to many as the “zero years” or the “killing fields” era—came to an end following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on December 25, 1978. Within a few weeks—by January 7, 1979—Vietnamese forces had overpowered the Khmer Rouge fighters and taken control of Phnom Penh, installing a new government known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Vietnamese leaders claimed that its objectives were twofold: to stop Khmer Rouge offenses in Vietnamese border communities and to liberate Cambodians from a homicidal regime—one that it once considered an ally in the war against U.S. imperialism.

Not all Khmer Rouge captives were immediately released following the events of January 1979. Realizing that his armies did not stand a chance against the Vietnamese, Pol Pot ordered his cadres to retreat into the western border territories and take as many hostages with them as possible.⁴ Ra and Heng were among the thousands of villagers taken into the forests of western Cambodia on the Thai border. Held at gunpoint, they remained under Khmer Rouge control for nearly a year before they were finally able to escape.

At our May 2009 meeting, Ra does not share with me how she and Heng ultimately freed themselves. She only tells me that as time wore on her Khmer Rouge captors, lacking provisions and worn down by illness, eventually lost control of their captives. By December 1979, Ra, her husband, and their newborn daughter Rann crossed into Thailand.

Ra and Heng spent nearly six years in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines before moving to the Northwest Bronx in May 1986 as part of a refugee resettlement program. Now divorced, the couple had seven children together—four sons and three daughters. Rann, their oldest child, was born in October 1979 just before the family crossed into Thailand. She is the only one of their children to have been born in Cambodia. While living in Khao-I-Dang, a United Nations refugee camp in Thailand, Ra gave birth to two sons, Rasmey in 1981 and Rom in 1982, as well as another daughter, Rorth, in 1984. In 1986, in preparation for their departure to the United States, the family was sent to a U.S. refugee processing center in the Philippines where Rith was born. After they arrived in the United States, Ra and Heng had two more children—daughter Sonya, born in 1990, and son Vanna, born in 1992.

Between 1975 and 1994, 150,000 Cambodian refugees were resettled in the United States (since then the Cambodian population in the country has nearly doubled owing to U.S. births and the regular immigration of approximately 1,000 Cambodians per year).⁵ These were the years of a major Southeast Asian resettlement program—the largest such program in the nation's history—which granted asylum to nearly 1 million refugees from the wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. During the 1980s, up to 10,000 Cambodian refugees arrived in the Bronx, according to local leaders and service providers, but the majority stayed in the area for only a short time, quickly leaving in search of better housing and opportunities in other northeastern cities. By the early 1990s, the Bronx Cambodian population had leveled off at approximately 4,000.⁶ Virtually all of them were part of the “second wave” of Cambodian refugees who, having survived the genocide and the refugee camps, were granted asylum under the 1980 Refugee Act. By and large, these

second-wave Cambodian refugees were poorer and less formally educated (most came from farming backgrounds) than those of the much smaller first wave that resettled in the United States before 1980.⁷ The first-wave refugees had been evacuated from Cambodia immediately after Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge so they had been spared the horrors of the genocide.

Resettlement in the Bronx was supposed to mark a new chapter in Ra's life, but it merely continued her itinerancy. After four years of hard labor under the Khmer Rouge, followed by six years of carving out a meager existence in overcrowded camps where the rations were never enough to feed her family, Ra moved to a Bronx neighborhood beset by poverty, crime, and derelict housing. She survived on welfare and by piecing together odd jobs. This period of her life was also shaped by intertwined personal and structural upheavals: Ra divorced Heng, was convicted of a felony she committed in defense of her daughter Rann, battled multiple times with the city's child welfare agency, and was forced to stay for a time in a city homeless shelter with her youngest child Vanna. All of this instability can be traced back to her several housing displacements.

After reviewing her list of residences, Ra, Rith, and I determine that the family's longest period of continued residency in a single Bronx home—a house she rented in a relatively quiet section of the neighborhood—lasted three years and nine months. This interval was shorter than the four and a half years the family spent in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, where she spent more time than in any single place between 1975 and 2009, when we began our interviews for this book. Despite the camp's popular representation as temporary, it was the most permanent, settled home Ra has had since 1975. Looked at in this way, the camp seems slightly more stable than the Bronx.

Most sociological accounts of immigration depict a transition timeline from immigrant to permanent resident to citizen, with each phase supposedly bringing greater stability. Ra's journey tells a different story. For her, instability persisted as a result of woeful housing conditions, unabated working poverty, punitive welfare regulation, and a justice system that would sooner criminalize poor women than protect them from interpersonal violence. More than half of her dis-

placements occurred between 2002 and 2007 alone. With each year in the United States, Ra's situation became more and more precarious.

As Ra's story demonstrates, the cycle of uprooting, displacement, and captivity that defines the refugee experience persists long after resettlement. *Unsettled* traces this cycle, documenting the latest stage of Ra's long history of displacement and captivity. In so doing, it demonstrates that the refugee's racialized and gendered fugitive status persists despite U.S. insistence that the refugee condition is temporary and provisional. *Unsettled* troubles political-juridical uses of the term "refugee" as well as the assumed inevitability of refugee crossing, transfiguration, and settlement. It joins "critical refugee studies," an emergent field that, as Yen Le Espiritu states, refuses to locate the refugee as an object to be studied, a problem to be solved, or a legal classification to be dissected.⁸ Rather, critical refugee studies deconstruct the refugee concept as an ideological and discursive formation, tracing the forms of power that are reinforced and extended through the "refugee" label. In particular, Espiritu critiques the construction of the "good refugee" who represents the "solution" to the nation-state's failures.⁹ She speaks specifically of Vietnamese refugees who were rescued from communism and then delivered into U.S. liberalism, or so it has been said since 1975. For forty years, this good refugee has served as the solution to America's troubled war in Southeast Asia, according to Espiritu—indeed, the only war the United States has ever lost. Throughout *Unsettled*, I argue that Cambodian refugees have also been hailed as a solution, not only to the bad war in Southeast Asia but also to the veritable war against the poorest residents in contemporary urban America.

Unsettled is not another portrait of refugee suffering highlighting the failures and hardships of resettlement that only ends in redemption. Rather, it argues that refuge is never found, that discourses on rescue mask a more profound urban reality characterized by racialized geographic enclosure, displacement from formal labor markets, unrelenting poverty, and the criminalization of daily life. I resist the terms of resettlement that require one to first acknowledge that a threshold has been crossed, that the displaced have entered entirely new conditions and matrices of power. If the refugee is never allowed

to arrive, if refuge is a fiction, then to what extent is crossing itself a mere abstraction? How, instead, does the refugee experience the unclosed sojourn, the open interval? How, in other words, does she remain a captive in late-capitalist urban America?

When I first met Ra in 1999, she had been in the United States for twelve years and I was a community organizer in the Northwest Bronx. I directed the Southeast Asian Youth Leadership Project (YLP), a program that trained refugee teenagers to become community organizers around issues of housing and welfare discrimination. Because of their bilingual and bicultural skills, many young refugees were already advocating for their families. The goal of YLP was to support and enhance their work, to turn their individualized efforts into collective action. Three of Ra's children—Rom, Rorth, and Rith—were YLP members. The program was founded by the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV), a Manhattan-based group formed in 1986 to address the growing number of racially motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans during the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, the organization had expanded its definition of violence to include the multiple forms of state, economic, and environmental violence that disproportionately affected the immigrant poor. In so doing, it shifted its work from anti-hate crimes advocacy to community and labor organizing. To signify this political shift, the organization changed its name during the late 1990s to CAA AV: Organizing Asian Communities.¹⁰

In the spring of 1995, after learning of the deplorable housing conditions that Southeast Asians in the Northwest Bronx were living in, CAA AV formed a team to learn more about these and other issues facing local refugees. The goal was to determine the viability of a refugee-focused organizing project in the borough. I was an undergraduate at the time, and I joined this team as a volunteer. A year later, in 1996, I was hired to direct YLP's first full-length summer program.

By the time CAA AV began this work, refugees from Cambodia and Vietnam had been living in the Northwest Bronx for well over a decade. The area was at that time home to the largest concentration of Cambodians in New York City (seconded only by a small enclave in Brooklyn),¹¹ but few New Yorkers outside of those in the immedi-

ate vicinity knew of the community's existence. The refugees seemed hidden. Save for two small Cambodian grocery stores, there were no visible signs typical of an immigrant enclave—restaurants, beauty salons, clothing shops, and the like. Even the local Cambodian Buddhist temple was merely a nondescript house. Most refugees lived in racially mixed buildings that offered no sign of their presence. One had to search for the public spaces where the refugees congregated: a particular stoop, a distinct corner of a local park, a pool hall. Indeed, the Northwest Bronx's Southeast Asian refugee community was one of the few Asian immigrant enclaves in New York that exhibited absolutely no characteristics of an "ethnic economy"—the term sociologists give to immigrant neighborhoods that produce economic activity through self-capitalization and coethnic employment.¹²

Instead, the overwhelming majority of Cambodians in the Northwest Bronx survived on public assistance, with approximately two-thirds receiving a monthly welfare check during the mid-1990s. Even after enactment of federal welfare policies that sought to drastically cut welfare, YLP found that approximately 80 percent continued to use some form of safety net program to survive—food stamps, Medicaid, or Social Security for the disabled and elderly.¹³ To supplement these meager benefits, Cambodians found work in New Jersey factories; as home-based garment workers; or by selling food to fellow residents in the park. All of these supplemental streams of income went unreported because they feared losing their welfare benefits if the state determined that they were "overearning."

Our CAA AV team noticed that the Cambodian community consisted of a very large number of teenagers, most of them born in the refugee camps during the 1980s, a period in which many refugee adults were attempting to make up both for time and for the many children lost to the zero years. This observation led to the creation of YLP.

The youth I worked with spoke of the indignities of poverty, the anonymity of new immigrant life, and the street violence that kept many of them in a constant state of fear. They lived in apartments that were borderline uninhabitable, and their lives were marked by routine trips to local welfare offices, where they watched bureaucrats humiliate their parents. At home, they worked alongside their parents, completing orders for hair accessories, for which their families were

paid only a few cents per piece. Some worked after-school and evening jobs in New Jersey factories, where they packed perfumes, candy, or pet food.

All of the Cambodian youth I worked with believed that society was indifferent to them and their families. “Cambodians walk around here invisible, like a bunch of ghosts,” one said, and whatever attention they did receive was often unwelcome. During the early resettlement years, Black and Latino teenagers saw their Cambodian counterparts as easy marks, to be routinely disrespected and attacked. Some, particularly the young men, responded with their own propensity for violence. Not only did they fight back to earn the respect of their tormentors; they even joined the Black and Latino “sets” that robbed and sold drugs in the neighborhoods. Cambodian teens were not spared the intense monitoring and harassment of local police. Along with African Americans and Latinos, they were routinely “stopped and frisked” on their way to school or work. At times they were caught up in building drug sweeps and taken into custody on charges of possession and selling. During my years directing YLP, I spent countless hours in precincts and courtrooms. Before long, I became adept at writing letters to judges, probation officers, and parole boards, requesting leniency for neighborhood youths who had fallen into trouble. Cambodian youth were not spared the spasms of street violence that seriously injured and occasionally took the lives of their siblings and friends. I recall the deafening silence that routinely followed news that somebody close to our program had been a victim of a stabbing or a shooting.

All told, YLP members described a life that was anything but the peaceful future their parents had hoped for when they left the refugee camps. The repose and stability portended by the refugee resettlement program was a fantasy. Most were too young to have their own memories of the war their parents had lived through, but they now claimed to be living through a war of their own. Over my nine years of working in the refugee neighborhoods of the Northwest Bronx, I came to realize that this invocation of war was not metaphorical but real; although new immigrants from around the world had resettled in working-class and poor communities throughout New York City

during the 1980s and 1990s, only Southeast Asian refugees had arrived en masse in the “hyperghetto.”

The Hyperghetto

According to historian Sucheng Chan, approximately 55 percent of the 150,000 Cambodians resettled in the United States between 1975 and 1994 were sent to inner cities beset by extreme poverty, joblessness, and crime.¹⁴ Along with the Hmong, Cambodians are among the poorest ethnic groups in the United States. According to 2000 census data, 42.8 percent of Bronx Cambodians were living in poverty, 23.9 percent were unemployed, and 62 percent had less than a high school education.¹⁵

These statistics were evident in the urban landscape. There were few if any immigrant communities in the urban United States that exhibited the economic homogeneity found in the Cambodian community of the Northwest Bronx. Bronx Cambodians were overwhelmingly impoverished; their welfare participation rates, as mentioned, were as high as 80 percent; and the community did not include capitalized entrepreneurs or professionals. These realities were rooted not just in decades of Southeast Asian warfare but also in the specific tragedy of the Cambodian genocide, in which the majority of the country’s middle class—businesspeople, teachers, cultural workers, physicians, technicians, and other professionals—were destroyed. In this sense, to speak of “Southeast Asian refugees in the United States” as a common category is somewhat misleading (to say nothing of lumping Cambodians under the broader Asian American rubric). Indeed, the economic, political, and geographic trajectories of Cambodian refugees are distinct from those of Vietnamese refugees, whose ethnic economies and professional classes are prevalent. This is not to say that Vietnamese refugees do not share the hyperghetto status with Cambodians; on the contrary, the Northwest Bronx is home to a significant number of Vietnamese refugees whose struggles are almost identical to those of Cambodians—most are on welfare, and working poverty is still the rule. However, their economic heterogeneity remains far greater than that of their Cambodian counterparts.¹⁶ The

overwhelming presence of the Cambodian working poor and unemployed in the Bronx and other cities, and the concomitant *absence* of a Cambodian middle/entrepreneurial class elsewhere in these cities, is what makes the Cambodian experience in urban America unique. Few if any other immigrant and refugee groups resettled so exclusively and in such large numbers in the poorest urban areas during the era of post-1965 new immigration.

The two largest Cambodian communities in the United States are in Long Beach, California, and Lowell, Massachusetts, with populations of approximately 20,000 and 14,000, respectively. However, the majority of Cambodians are spread out among much smaller and homogeneously poorer enclaves—some numbering only a thousand. In addition to the Northwest Bronx, enclaves can be found in the poorest sections of northeastern cities such as Providence, Danbury, Camden, and Philadelphia.¹⁷ On the surface, these neighborhoods appear to conform to the common, troubling images of the twentieth-century inner city: blight, infrastructural decay, economic divestment, crime, and joblessness. Since the late 1960s, however, they have also been sites of a distinct form of low-intensity warfare that represents the conversion of the traditional ghetto into what sociologist Loïc Wacquant terms the “hyperghetto.”

The hyperghetto names not only the intensification of intractable inner city problems but also the way in which the traditional ghetto has become what Wacquant refers to as a space of “naked relegation.” It is reserved for the isolation and enclosure of the poorest urban residents who are no longer regarded as those to be recruited and disciplined into the lowest rungs of the workforce; rather, they are seen as subjects to be warehoused.¹⁸ In particular, the hyperghetto has functioned as a site of captivity for a decidedly post-Civil Rights and, more significantly, *postinsurrectionist* Black subproletariat.¹⁹

The origins of the hyperghetto can be traced to the wave of urban unrest in the late 1960s, a period in which Black urban communities engaged in hundreds of insurrections protesting the failure of Civil Rights legislation to address segregation, poverty, and relentless police brutality. The U.S. state and private capital responded to urban unrest not with social, economic, or police reform but with strategies aimed at dispersing Black communities to prevent future rebellions and en-

closing and criminalizing those who remained in the ghetto. These strategies were carried out in several ways: local and federal governments refused to rebuild and reinvest in destroyed areas and engaged in “planned shrinkage”—the removal of key public institutions and services such as firehouses, schools, and garbage collection—to drive residents away. Those who remained were isolated and monitored by an increasingly militarized police force that saw little difference between extreme poverty and criminal behavior. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these sites became hyperghettos, areas reserved for the “hard-core” urban poor, who, in the wake of urban unrest, were viewed as a population to be criminalized, detained, and punished. According to Wacquant, these punitive measures were carried out by the state’s fusing of its social welfare and penal arms. Indeed, he calls attention to how “welfare and criminal justice are two modalities of public policy toward the poor [that] must imperatively be analyzed—and reformed—together.”²⁰ He shows how this marriage of welfare and penalty has been apotheosized by “workfare” programs: no-wage worksites that compel the labor of welfare recipients.²¹

In Wacquant’s rendering, the hyperghetto is formed as a hybrid of the impoverished and racially segregated neighborhood and the hypertrophic expansion of the prison system, one that includes jails, juvenile facilities, probation, parole, and criminal databases. In this way, the neighborhood serves as a gateway (and then as a revolving door) for hyperincarceration, particularly Black incarceration. For more than four decades, it has steadily fed the prisons, contributing to the United States becoming home to the largest prison population on earth.²² To say that African Americans are disproportionately incarcerated is a gross understatement. As legal scholar Michelle Alexander states, there were more Black adults under correctional control in 2010 than there were enslaved in 1850.²³ Alexander is one of a diverse group of contemporary scholars who have proven that mass incarceration is the primary mode through which white supremacist governance and the forms of captivity and punishment endemic to slavery and Jim Crow are revisited on the Black population during an age in which state and civil society avow statutory racial equality. The difference between the hyperghetto and the traditional ghetto is not a matter of varying “degrees” of racial oppression between two periods in U.S.

history; rather, it marks the celebration of the ongoing capture and punishment of Black bodies as an act of “colorblindness.” In sum, the hyperghetto signifies the failures of racial liberalism to resolve white supremacist rule.

It follows that Wacquant conceives of the hyperghetto as slavery’s fourth iteration, preceded by slavery itself, Jim Crow, and the segregated ghettos of the industrial North.²⁴ In this, he echoes Hortense Spillers, who has long maintained that the “time of slavery” is unending and always pervasive. According to Spillers, slavery did not end with abolition, but has carried forth as that irrevocable “American grammar” through which the U.S. citizenry continues to understand its value—both metaphorically and literally—against the captive and violated Black body.²⁵

The challenge for the scholar in studying the hyperghetto is to recognize slavery’s permutations without representing its residents as monolithically abject and isolated—as those who are unable to engage complex and meaningful political and economic practices. As anthropologist Steven Gregory reminds us, to the extent that terms such as “Black ghetto” and “inner city” have been useful in “heightening recognition of the ferocity of racial segregation and urban poverty,” they can also “obscure far more than they reveal.”²⁶ This is certainly true if such terms are deployed as tropes characterizing those who reside in these communities—that is, to mark their false autonomy or separation from the rest of society. Throughout *Unsettled*, I use the term *hyperghetto* to identify the workings of the regime, not of those who are subjected to that regime’s violences. I demonstrate that Cambodian refugees who are held captive in the hyperghetto engage in complex forms of survival and resistance that evince their centrality to (as opposed to their separation from) the main currents and contradictions of the state and its economies.

The Convergence

Unsettled poses several overarching questions: What does it mean for the Cambodian refugee to resettle in this distinct time and space of slavery’s continuance?²⁷ How do we understand her movement from one space of captivity to the next? And how does the racial and gen-

dered project of the hyperghetto come together with the racial and gendered project of asylum and refugee resettlement, particularly for Cambodian refugees in the Northwest Bronx?

If we begin by viewing the Cambodian refugee as merely a subject of humanitarianism, we might conclude that her presence in the hyperghetto marks a major programmatic failure, as if something went terribly awry in the resettlement process. However, my first objective is to reveal the refugee as the subject of a long, unresolved colonial and imperial project carried out by the United States in Southeast Asia, a white supremacist project that wrought unprecedented death and destruction on Vietnam and turned Cambodia into the most heavily bombed country in history. Refugee resettlement in the hyperghetto, I argue, represented not the end of this project but its continuance. Specifically, I demonstrate that Northwest Bronx Cambodians were routinely enlisted as figures to be “saved” from a new theater of war: liberal warfare in the hyperghetto. And just as these refugees were once “incidentally” violated by the destruction wrought by their ostensible saviors, so they continue to function as collateral damage in the war against the hyperghetto’s long-standing residents, specifically African Americans and Puerto Ricans.

In calling attention to the specific role that Cambodians have been enlisted to play in the hyperghetto, I argue against two overly simplified and diametrically opposed readings of the racialization and gendering of Southeast Asian refugees. First, I challenge the notion promulgated by the mainstream media and some policy makers that Southeast Asian refugees, following other Asian Americans, were “model-minority” figures who achieved economic success despite having arrived penniless in the United States. The model-minority argument is rather easy to dispense with because there is very little evidence to support it. Cambodians and other Southeast Asian refugees never achieved the levels of ostensible economic success associated with Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, and Indian American groups in the United States. Suffice it to say that model-minority tropes never effectively applied to most Southeast Asian refugees; indeed, Asian Americans who sought to challenge such stereotyping often invoked the economic and educational struggles of refugees as their first line of rebuttal.

Second, I challenge the opposite notion postulated by some scholars that impoverished Cambodians have been racialized and gendered as a new “underclass.”²⁸ The term underclass is a pejorative one—coined by academics but wielded in a wide discursive field—that refers to those whose poverty is said to be the result of cultural and behavioral deviance and dysfunction, not structural inequality. As historian Michael Katz and others argue, underclass has been used as shorthand for “undeserving” Black urban poverty—poverty that should be either neglected or met with punitive public policy.²⁹

In *Unsettled*, I demonstrate how Bronx Cambodians were discursively removed from underclass status by policy makers, landlords, social workers, and researchers. I show how these agents routinely cast refugees as those who would eventually achieve the successes portended by liberalism even as all empirical evidence pointed to the contrary. I term this discursive removal *refugee exceptionalism*—the ideologies and discursive practices that figure refugees as necessarily *in* the hyperghetto but never *of* it. It is the process whereby refugees are resettled into and then recurrently “saved” from the hyperghetto and its attendant modalities of captivity: uninhabitable housing stock, permanent exclusion from the labor market, and punitive social policy. However, refugee exceptionalism never actually removes the refugee from hyperghetto spaces and institutions (certainly not in any material sense); on the contrary, it requires that she be held in perpetual captivity so that she can be used over and over again.

The goals of refugee exceptionalism are twofold. First, it masks the systemic inequalities and violences of a refugee resettlement program that, as an extension of the U.S. colonial and imperial project in Southeast Asia, proclaimed Cambodians and other Southeast Asian refugees to be the beneficiaries of American liberal freedoms that the United States could not successfully deliver through its acts of warfare. By casting refugees as subsisting in an unending state of arrival at liberalism, whose struggles with poverty in the urban United States are deemed perpetually temporary and “adaptive,” refugee exceptionalism preserves and extends the narrative of the Southeast Asian subject’s salvation through U.S. intervention. Second, by insisting that refugees be saved from the grips of the underclass, it reinforces the

terms that produce African Americans (and to varying degrees Latinos) as the undeserving poor, “domestic minorities” for whom the underclass concept was formulated. In other words, refugee exceptionalism preserves and extends the justification for punishment of certain populations in the hyperghetto. We might say that, taken together, the Cambodian refugee presence in the hyperghetto, mediated through refugee exceptionalism, represents the convergence of two distinct yet *relational* genealogies of white supremacist governance: colonialism and slavery. Ra’s presence here elucidates the hyperghetto as slavery’s afterlife. In turn, the hyperghetto reveals the contours of an unfinished colonialism.

In Chapter 1, I draw out the connections between the refugee’s life as a subject of imperialist warfare and her life as a subject of the hyperghetto. I begin by reviewing the United States’ role in enabling the rise of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, drawing briefly on Ra’s experiences under this genocidal regime. Despite this history, the United States publicly positioned itself as the champion of displaced Cambodians, passing the 1980 Refugee Act and casting it as a global freedom project and Cambodian refugees as needing rescue by U.S. liberalism. In this way, refugees were persistently called on to perform as rescued victims of an unending war—what some have termed “liberal warfare.” I conclude the chapter by demonstrating how Ra understood the nature of ongoing warfare; that is, she read her movement from the Cambodian war zone to the Thai camps and eventually to the Bronx hyperghetto not as moments of transition and transfiguration but as one long and unbroken state of captivity.

This continuity between past and present warfares is elucidated in Chapter 2, where I discuss how the Bronx hyperghetto served as the new site of liberal warfare from which Cambodian refugees were to be saved. I begin by tracing the origins of the hyperghetto to the urban insurrections of the late 1960s and the Bronx arsons of the 1970s. I then demonstrate that this warfare continued to play out in the poor housing conditions and many housing displacements to which Ra and other Cambodian refugee tenants were subjected. I draw on the recollections of housing organizer Blanca Ramirez, who organized in refugee neighborhoods several years before Ra’s arrival

in 1986. I note the landlords and social workers in the hyperghetto who confined refugees to substandard housing units, simultaneously insisting that these newcomers did not belong among their stigmatized neighbors.

In Chapter 3, I turn to another front of hyperghetto warfare: the punitive U.S. welfare state. Since the 1980s, the Bronx welfare bureaucracy has thoroughly and arbitrarily governed the lives of Ra and other Cambodian refugees. This chapter explores how they understood the notion of welfare “rights” in relation to such arbitrary rule. Here I pay particular attention to how welfare regulation took a decidedly punitive turn in 1996, with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Euphemistically described as “welfare reform,” this law completely overhauled the modern welfare state by setting a time limit on cash assistance, requiring mandatory workfare, removing noncitizens from key programs, and tightening verification requirements. To community organizers, the new law epitomized U.S. social welfare policy’s “neoliberal turn.” By removing welfare recipients (or compelling their self-removal) from the rolls, welfare reform pushed the poorest of the poor into the precarious low-to-no wage work that defined late twentieth-century capitalism. However, Cambodian refugees in the Bronx experienced this not as something new but rather as a continuation of a previous form of arbitrary rule and entrapment. I discuss a distinct form of refugee knowledge about the welfare state and how it interrupts not only the dominant story of neoliberal capitalism but also the discourse of “rights” that was central to the community and labor organizing that sought to challenge welfare reform.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how workfare played out in the lives of Bronx Cambodian refugees. Workfare was a mandatory no-wage work program that welfare recipients were compelled to attend in exchange for their monthly welfare check. Departing from Ra’s story, I describe the travails of another Cambodian single mother, Kun Thea, who was trapped between workfare and low-wage factory work. There were few organizing strategies that could free Kun Thea from her entrapment—that is, without reinscribing her captivity. From here, I turn to the work of Chhaya Chhoum, a young Cambodian community organizer, who proposed alternative ways of

thinking about resistance beyond the narrow purview of community organizers’ strategies and tactics.

Such alternative forms of resistance were grounded in the daily survival tactics of refugees. In Chapter 5, I turn to these practices by exploring Ra’s labor as a low-wage home worker in the global garment industry. From one of her many Bronx apartments, she and her family were plugged into an assembly line that stretched from the free trade zones of the Third World to the hyperghettos of the United States. Here I discuss the fact that the hyperghetto is too often left out of globalization discussions, and I locate the “neoplantation,” described as such by geographer and Black studies scholar Clyde Woods, as indelibly inscribed in the global economy.

The hyperghetto is a distinctly gendered space of captivity, and in Chapter 6 I analyze the unbroken line of gendered violence that held Ra captive from her days under the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s through her days in the Bronx in the mid-2000s. This gendered violence took many forms: forced marriage, a felony charge for defending her daughter, run-ins with the child welfare agency, and eviction from her home. Ra’s experiences, though certainly tethered to her colonial past, also resonated powerfully with the gendered violence shaping poor Black women’s lives in the hyperghetto. In the 1980s and 1990s, Cambodian refugee women were depicted in political, economic, and cultural discourses as maintaining relative privilege over refugee men—seemingly the same depiction that demonized Black women through the figure of the Black matriarch. However, I argue that Cambodian refugee women were not subjected to the matriarchal trope but rather to the discourse of refugee exceptionalism that cast them as foreign subjects to be saved by liberalism, specifically by liberal feminism. Here, again, refugee exceptionalism was mobilized to separate Cambodian refugee women from other women in the hyperghetto—a move that at once obscured the realities of the former while normalizing violence against the latter.

In the Conclusion, I argue that, through her constant spatial and temporal movements, Ra rejected stasis. Like many other Cambodian refugees in the hyperghetto, she used movement as a strategy to resist final captivity. In her escape to Thailand, her migration through the refugee camps, her many Bronx relocations, and her maneuverings

within welfare and work confines, Ra's constant movement kept open the possibility of future redemption. Movement is how she sustained what Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best describe as the "interval between 'the no longer and the not yet,' between the destruction of the old world and the awaited hour of deliverance."³⁰ Lastly, I discuss Ra's children's adoption of their mother's penchant for movement.

Methodology

As an ethnographic study, *Unsettled* draws on two main sources: notes from my years as a community organizer in the Northwest Bronx's refugee neighborhoods (1995–2004) and extensive interviews with Ra Pronh conducted from February 2009 through December 2012, with several follow-up interviews conducted in 2014.³¹ The former, which include participant-observer reflections and unstructured interviews with refugee community members and community advocates, provide valuable information on the political and economic contradictions defining the hyperghetto as well as the responses of various activists and advocates to those conditions. The latter serve as the empirical evidence that allows me to conceptualize refugee temporality. In this sense, they critique my earlier notes. Ra's understandings and representations of her long captivity correct established political and economic analyses as well as my own and other activists' rendering of it.

As a participant-observer study, *Unsettled* is part of a rich tradition in Southeast Asian American refugee studies that have adopted ethnographic methods to study impoverished, urban-based refugees. Aihwa Ong's *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, Sucheng Chan's *Not Just Victims: Conversations with Cambodian Community Leaders in the United States*, Nazli Kibria's *Family Tight Rope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*, and Lynn Fujiwara's *Mothers without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant Families and the Consequences of Welfare Reform* are but a few works that draw on interviews (unstructured and structured), conversations, and, most significantly, shared experiences with the refugees being studied. Across each one, refugees' viewpoints come across with a breadth, complexity, and heterogeneity worthy of their struggles.

Unsettled departs from these ethnographic works in one crucial respect, however: it centers on the story of a single individual, Ra Pronh. My interviews with Ra began in the winter of 2009. At the time I was beginning the first phase of research on a book about refugee exceptionalism, which I envisioned as demonstrating how this concept played out in the U.S. settings in which Cambodian refugees found themselves: the housing market, the welfare state, the helping professions (including social work and counseling agencies), and community organizations. I wanted to analyze how the organizing work I was involved in during the late 1990s and early 2000s both challenged and contributed to refugee exceptionalism. For there were certainly moments when, in working to address the myriad ways in which the resettlement program had failed Bronx Cambodians, I was guided by the notion that something else should have awaited them on their arrival to the United States. In this way, I discussed refugee resettlement as a broken promise as opposed to an impossible one, contributing to the notion that refugees were somehow misplaced in the hyperghetto, that their resettlement in urban abjection represented the exceptional circumstance.

Among the first community residents I interviewed for this project was Ra. We first met in 1999 when I helped her and her family with their welfare troubles. At the time, her daughter Rorth and son Rom were members of YLP. Her son Rith joined the group two years later. Ra made an immediate impression on me. She was talkative and quick-witted and possessed a bold sense of humor. She held strong opinions on why the welfare state was mistreating her and other recipients, and she often challenged my framing of the state's actions. Ra's personality allowed us to develop a quick rapport; I found it challenging yet engaging to advocate for someone who not only excoriated those in power but also questioned the remedies proposed by those who sought to help her. At the same time, Ra brought levity to our relationship. She often joked about her predicament and occasionally ribbed me about my life choices: Why did I spend so much time working on welfare cases and hanging out with teenagers in the neighborhood? When was I going to start a family of my own?

I fell out of contact with Ra after I left community organizing and moved out of the Northwest Bronx in 2004. As I explain, Ra lived

nomadically during the first half of the 2000s, moving from one friend's or family member's apartment to the next, and this made it difficult for me to locate her when I returned to the refugee neighborhoods for routine visits. For a time she even lived in a homeless shelter. Still, I remained in regular contact with her son Rith, with whom I often talked about his ongoing political commitments as he continued as a YLP youth organizer while branching out to citywide organizing efforts. We also talked of his decision to either stay in college or pursue a career as a hairstylist (he eventually chose the latter). In the summer of 2007, Rith told me that Ra had finally secured an apartment of her own.

I paid a visit to Ra approximately a year after she moved into her new apartment, and was quickly reminded of our dynamic. By then I was a sleep-deprived father of a three-year-old daughter. I marveled as Ra gave verbal instructions to her two-year-old granddaughter to take a nap. Without any assistance, the toddler climbed onto a bed in the corner of the living room, covered herself with a blanket, and fell asleep. Perhaps picking up on my disbelief, Ra asked me how I was enjoying fatherhood. I confessed to her that my daughter still did not sleep through the night, much less put herself to bed. It seemed like years since I had enjoyed a full night's rest. Ra feigned a lack of sympathy as she chided me for being a pushover: "Train them early."

Several months after our reunion, I asked Ra if she would allow me to interview her for my book project. I explained my objectives and why I believed she would be an important informant. I told her that my questions would focus on her perception of those who were responsible for her resettlement from the camps to the Bronx and the years that followed. Ra agreed, and we held our first session in February 2009. Because I do not speak Khmer, I asked Rith to interpret when needed, believing that he could also share his own perspective on his family's struggles with housing, welfare, and low-wage work. However, Ra was quick to point out that for the previous three years she had made a steady commitment to improving her English—she took classes and made sure to "go here and there, talk to new people." She would speak in English during the interviews as much as she could.

In light of our existing relationship, I anticipated that our first unstructured interview would be a free-flowing and relatively

comfortable exchange. However, I did not expect Ra to be as open and engaged as she was. With very little prompting from me, she spoke about her arrival in the United States and her first days in the Bronx. She offered rich accounts of her dealings with landlords as she moved from one apartment to the next in her first few years of Bronx unsettlement. I was so riveted by her tales that I lost track of my questions. Beyond the objectives of my research, Ra was letting me know that she had a story to tell, and midway through our first interview she instructed me to tell it. "I've gone through a lot," she said. "I want people to know my story. Everything I did—I want people to know it."

By our second interview, in May 2009, it became clear to me that my book about refugee exceptionalism would be a story about Ra's sojourn. I saw a political project to be shared between my desire to explain refugee resettlement in the hyperghetto as a continuation of a long history of warfare and Ra's desire to tell her story of a life in the United States that defied dominant narratives of refugee resettlement as deliverance and redemption. I would write not an exhaustive biography but an analysis of her experiences over several distinct captivity sites in the urban United States. I would focus on how she understood what had happened to her over three decades of Bronx unsettlement. Although I did not know it at the time, Ra presented me with a theory complementary to that of refugee exceptionalism, one that spoke to how the refugee herself understood the long and unbroken time and space of her captivity. I term this understanding *refugee temporality*.

Refugee temporality names the refugee's knowledge that, with each crossing, resettlement, and displacement, an old and familiar form of power is being reinscribed. It is the knowledge that Ra drew on as she engaged in forms of survival that disavowed the state's insistence that she had been simultaneously saved and redeemed by its refugee resettlement program. Through refugee temporality, Ra resisted the ways in which various powers enlisted her in the service of the salvation narrative both abroad (imperial and colonial warfare) and at "home" (warfare in the hyperghetto).

From the outset, Ra had only one condition for me as an author. She wanted me to focus on how she survived, on how she got as far as she did. She was going to share the story of how she *maneuvered*—across

the border, into the camps, and through the U.S. welfare state and low-wage economy. In this, Ra was implicitly setting a boundary. She would not go into detail about her traumatic experiences under the Khmer Rouge and other state and paramilitary forces; she would not recount the atrocities she had witnessed. I was more than accepting of these terms. My goal was to examine the complex forms of refugee survival and resistance over the course of nearly three decades of unsettlement in the U.S. hyperghetto. Such a project did not require that informants provide a detailed account of their past traumas. Moreover, conversations with (and published work by) Richard Mollica of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma convinced me that those who listen to and record a refugee's trauma story should do so with one goal: contributing to her long-term healing.³² According to Mollica, the trauma story should be told as part of a process in which the survivor is invited to analyze and reinterpret what she shares. Anything short of this amounts to an unproductive "debriefing therapy"—a rehashing of brutal and ultimately unrepresentable events that runs the risk of retraumatizing the survivor.³³ Whether or not Ra would have found sharing her trauma story with me therapeutic, I cannot say. (That she ultimately chose not to seems a rather resounding answer to this question.) What is certain, however, is that I was not trained in the techniques of listening to and providing feedback to the trauma story and so did not solicit one.

My unstructured interview questions were typical of those used in most oral history projects. I began with the widest frame: "What do you remember most about the camp?" or "Describe your first days in the Bronx." Ra then elaborated, presenting a sequence of events, scenes, and impressions. This was the text from which we worked, and my follow-up questions hewed to it. I asked her to clarify dates and locations. I asked her to interpret what she had just described. For instance, after she explained to me that she was placed in derelict housing by a resettlement agency, I asked her why she believed the agency made this decision. I then offered my own interpretation of the agency's handling of refugees, and our dialogue ensued.

In following Ra's lead, I was making a distinct methodological choice, one that, in the words of Sandra Harding, seeks to "maximize objectivity . . . [by] 'starting off thought' from the lives of marginal-

ized peoples."³⁴ According to Harding, "beginning in those determinate, objective locations in any social order will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant groups' lives."³⁵ She argues that this is neither an ethnocentric nor relativist claim but rather one that recognizes how oppressed groups' worldviews tend to be less partial and distorted than those of more privileged subjects who often, avowing objectivity, leave uninterrogated their own social values, interests, and biases.

In a similar vein, Robin D. G. Kelley exposes the racial and gendered biases found in ethnographies of the twentieth-century U.S. ghetto and hyperghetto. He claims that many ethnographies on postwar Black urban life, particularly those conducted after the 1960s urban insurrections, are so steeped in the racist fantasies of white male ethnographers that they amount to "playing the dozens" on the Black urban poor.³⁶ That is, they reproduce essentialist, voyeuristic, and ultimately damaging portraits of Black survival, which anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney describes as "street corner exotica."³⁷ Kelley points to Gwaltney's *Drylongso: A Self Portrait of Black America* as one of the few exceptions to this otherwise troubling field of urban ethnography. What distinguishes Gwaltney's study is the way in which his informants frame their lives against various systems of oppression and challenge and redirect the researcher's questions to meet their own priorities, speaking openly about the racism of the social sciences while knowingly participating in his study.

Throughout *Unsettled*, I discuss how Ra challenged my presumptions, contradicted my claims, or simply demurred. However, in demonstrating how she took the lead in these instances, my intention is not say that I was somehow able to exert minimal influence over my informant's responses. To the contrary, grounding this study in Ra's epistemological standpoint meant locating my own positions of power in relation to her. Some specific terms of this power-laden position are middle-class professional, second-generation Chinese American, English speaker, cisgender male. Although Ra never used these terms to describe me, they represent coordinates of power that fundamentally determined what Ra would share with me and how she would share it. Two important aspects of our differences stood out during the interview sessions: language and gender.

My inability to speak Khmer delimited Ra's statements because she knew that whatever she said in Khmer would be mediated through her son. (Throughout, italics indicate where Ra is speaking through Rith's interpretation.) And although Ra clearly took pride in her English, her direct statements seemed at times carefully parsed. She spoke English not at length but in shorter clips when she wanted to emphasize a certain point or main idea. These statements were poignant yet very concise, especially when compared with the lengthier statements of fluent English speakers who are quoted in the book.

How might Ra's points of emphasis in English have come across differently (both qualitatively and quantitatively) had she spoken them in Khmer? That she spoke to me in English at key moments in our interview sessions was not a choice *per se* but a political negotiation with my positionality. Ra had no choice but to speak in English if she wanted to make an uninterpreted point.

Beyond the language constraint, my position and performance as a heterosexual male interviewer also determined what was possible for Ra to share. She spoke in detail about her struggles with housing, the welfare state, the home-based sweatshop economy, and factory work. In contrast, she spoke only in general terms about her interpersonal experiences with patriarchal power. Under the Khmer Rouge, sexual violence against women was epidemic; as I discuss in Chapter 6, Ra's Khmer Rouge-arranged marriage should be understood as part and parcel of such violence. During our second interview, Ra made sure to underscore the importance of this event: "I want to talk about when I was forced to marry Rith's father." We had been discussing her final days under the Khmer Rouge when she suddenly pivoted back to this defining moment in her life, suggesting that, if I was to fully understand her Khmer Rouge captivity, it was important for her to return to the day she was separated from her family of origin and forced to become a wife and mother.

As Ra spoke of this pivotal moment, however, she struck a careful balance: describing how she felt about what happened to her and how she was forever changed by the event, but not describing any specific acts of violence committed against her by the men who orchestrated it. So, too, beyond the forced marriage she never talked about any other instances of sexual violence that she might have suffered or

witnessed under the Khmer Rouge, in the camps, or throughout her Bronx unsettlement. Perhaps this was in keeping with her decision not to share her trauma story, but it was clear to me that she was also making an explicitly gendered and sexualized negotiation in consideration of her interviewer. To say that she felt uncomfortable sharing such information with a man is to state the obvious. Underlying this discomfort, however, is a more complex rendering of how patriarchal power works: if Ra was a survivor of such crimes, then sharing this particular information with me—unlike sharing the details of her exploitation and abuse as a worker or welfare recipient—posed the potential threat of male judgment and misrepresentation complicit with the gendered and sexualized logics in which violence against women is rooted.

Rith's presence added a complex gendered dimension to the interview sessions. I am sure that having her son in the room influenced what Ra ultimately decided to share about her family life, particularly her relationship with Rith's father. At the same time, Rith seemed to put Ra at ease during our interviews because of their close and trusting relationship. During the interviews, the two often went back and forth, giving our sessions the feel of a family conversation. There were also times when one or more of Rith's siblings decided to join our sessions. Here I tried in vain to facilitate a group interview as Ra and her children volleyed over key facts and dates, laughed about the things they once said and did, and reminisced with one another about a childhood that was by turns tragic and tender. These exchanges granted me a fuller understanding of Ra's influence on her children: how she imparted to them her humility and her truculence as well as her belief that as refugees they had to keep things moving, that they could never settle. It goes without saying that the presence of Rith and of Ra's other children during our interview sessions fundamentally shaped my findings.

I offer these methodological reflections neither to qualify my findings nor to make axiomatic claims about the possibilities and limitations of ethnographic research.³⁸ Rather, my point is a political one: our interview sessions, like our advocacy sessions years earlier, were political negotiations. Ra and I certainly held a personal affinity for one another based on a mutual trust developed over several years.

However, feelings of friendship and trust should not be misconstrued as factors mitigating power differentials. Rather, I am persuaded by sociologist John Brown Childs, who asserts that trust is the precondition for engaging in shared practice across those differences.³⁹ In expounding the theory of “transcommunalism,” Childs proposes that autonomous political subjects should pursue trust not for the sake of leveling differences and arriving at political uniformity (what he describes as a politics of “conversion”); rather, trust should be the starting point from which subjects begin the process of determining “what kinds of relations are possible, but also . . . what kinds of relations are *not* possible.”⁴⁰ Indeed, working through such impossibilities to arrive at an “ethics of respect” is one of the most important social justice projects one can undertake.⁴¹ To this, I would add that it is also the very meaning of activist scholarship.

Because *Unsettled* emerged from my political commitment to the refugee community, it can be characterized as the work of an activist scholar. By this I mean a scholar whose research produces new knowledge through direct political engagement with the issues being analyzed. In this way—and within the field of Southeast Asian refugee studies in particular—it builds on activist-oriented works such as Bindi V. Shah’s *Laotian Daughter: Working toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice*, in which Shah, working closely with the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, studies the activism of Laotian teens resisting economic, racial, gendered, and environmental injustices.⁴² *Unsettled* also owes a debt to the community-engaged scholarship of Peter Kiang, Shirley Tang, and their colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Boston, who for decades have set an example of politically engaged and collaborative research through their work with Southeast Asian refugee communities in the greater Boston area. In *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Research*, Kiang and Tang describe how they developed horizontal relationships between researchers and those being researched, how they welcomed refugee community residents to both shape and challenge their research, and how they viewed their scholarship as fundamentally committed to social equality and justice.⁴³

These and other examples teach us that activist-oriented scholarship is not so much about chronicling and analyzing activism (either one’s own or that of one’s group) but more about developing processes whereby the knowledge of the researcher and the knowledge of those directly affected by injustice shape one another in a shared political project. George Lipsitz and Barbara Tomlinson describe this form of activist scholarship as “accompaniment”: it allows differences and disagreements between the researcher and those he or she studies to “be seen as evidence of problems yet to be solved, discussions yet to be conducted, understandings yet to be developed.”⁴⁴

At various points throughout *Unsettled*, I show where my views and analyses—on organizing, neoliberalism, the notion of redemption, and the like—were challenged and ultimately transformed by my critical engagements with Ra and others. In this sense, the book is less concerned with highlighting what I accomplished as an organizer than with reflecting on what escaped me, on understanding my gaps. We might say that as a work of activist scholarship *Unsettled* exhibits three temporalities: the time of the refugee, the time of the community organizer doing his work, and the time of the researcher looking back to recover what he missed.

However, Ra offered no indication that she was reaching back. Her captivity in derelict Bronx apartments presented her with conditions of captivity that resonated strikingly with her life in the camps, but she did not consider this a reversal of fortune or a betrayal of what life should have been like after escape. She never spoke of what it is like to *once again* inhabit spaces of violence because there had been no temporal break between past and present.

3

Welfare Resistance

When Ra and other Southeast Asian refugees began arriving in the 1980s, U.S. federal and local resettlement agencies struggled to fit them into existing economic, political, and cultural systems that could not account for them. They were told by social workers to apply for livable-wage jobs that did not exist or that were completely mismatched with the refugees' skill sets. They were also told that welfare programs—specifically, cash assistance and food stamps—were only stopgap measures, and that refugees were expected to become economically self-sufficient soon after their resettlement. However, as their years in the United States wore on (and as federally funded resettlement assistance programs either dried up or were discontinued), chronic unemployment among Bronx Cambodians persisted, and most of the refugees continued to subsist in the welfare state well into the 1990s.

By the fall of 1999, two of Ra's teenage children had joined the Southeast Asian Youth Leadership Project (YLP), and they encouraged Ra to see me about her welfare troubles.¹ YLP recorded the experiences of Southeast Asian refugee families who had been sanctioned and denied their benefits. It discovered that those who attempted to remedy their situations were being misinformed by caseworkers about

their rights and due process. Making matters worse was the absence of interpreters at the welfare centers; refugees who did not speak English were unable to make headway.

When I first met with her about her welfare issues, Ra had just received a notice stating that her monthly welfare check would be discontinued because she had failed to properly declare who among her older children were dependents. The household welfare check would be discontinued until Ra brought her case “into compliance.”

This was actually the second time in less than a year that Ra had been sanctioned by the HRA. Three months earlier, the HRA had withheld her food stamps, claiming that she had failed to properly recertify for them. “I did the same thing [then] that I do every time. The same exact paperwork,” she told me. It was clear that in 1999–2000 Ra had more welfare problems than she had had in her prior fifteen years in the Bronx.

I suggested to Ra that her new troubles stemmed from the recent overhaul of the federal welfare system. President Bill Clinton had signed the 1996 welfare reform laws that radically reorganized and retrenched a modern welfare system in place since the Great Depression. The new federal law targeted poor women in the hyperghetto—particularly young Black women—who were demonized by both Republicans and Democrats as cheats and “welfare queens.” They were accused of fraudulently collecting welfare benefits while hiding other income streams and birthing multiple children out of wedlock to augment their benefit checks. These racist and sexist tropes constructed women in the hyperghetto as the undeserving poor; their poverty was attributed to cultural deviance and criminality.

While the 1996 welfare act was designed to target those racialized and gendered as the underclass, refugee exceptionalism did not spare Southeast Asian refugees from its most damaging effects. Ra’s experiences are but one example. I proposed that Ra pursue what is called a fair hearing in which she could argue her case before a state administrative law judge.² The city would also present its case, but I was confident that Ra’s chances for a favorable ruling were good if she arrived with all of her documents in order. The city’s representatives were often unprepared for fair hearings because they lacked the time and staff to carefully review every case in advance. They often won

on technicalities, relying on mistakes made by welfare recipients who, unfamiliar with administrative law, either failed to bring the proper documentation or presented irrelevant arguments. I insisted that Ra could avoid these common pitfalls, and I would help her.

The more I explained, however, the more Ra withdrew. She wasn’t intimidated by the fair-hearing process. She was simply unwilling to invest in what she considered a false negotiation. As example after example had shown her, from the Khmer Rouge soldiers in her village to the Thai military at the border to the aid workers in the refugee camp to the slumlords in the Bronx, those in power acted arbitrarily, withholding her means of subsistence at will. Although Ra would welcome a favorable ruling, she was not convinced that this would diminish the ability of those in power to act with impunity. In fact, she believed that the process only emboldened such power. Ra proposed that I manage the details of the case. In the meantime, she would do what she had always done—keep her family afloat by piecing together what the state was arbitrarily denying her.

U.S.-based community organizers insist that meaningful social change occurs only when the oppressed confront institutional power directly. This confrontation is expressly *political*, distinguishing community organizing from “direct services” programs set up to assist those in need but which fail to challenge the forms of power and systemic inequality that created the adverse conditions to begin with.³ The assertion of one’s statutory rights is considered the crucial first step in community organizing: the oppressed must complete the know-your-rights phase before they can adequately speak truth to power. For this reason, my initial meeting with Ra left me feeling uneasy. By agreeing to her proposal that I take care of the hearing without her participation, was I preventing her from moving from victim of the welfare state to agent of change?

Or was I instead being challenged to question the rigid line between political action and daily survival? In other words, was Ra making a more deft critique than I had initially realized of how state power actually operates arbitrarily? She recognized that the law’s purpose was to punish and that this foreclosed fair negotiation, whether at the hands of a craven regime in Southeast Asia or a racist and sexist welfare system in the United States. Ever the consummate organic

intellectual, she arrived at her own assessment of what Loïc Wacquant, in his conceptualization of the hyperghetto, refers to as the fusing of the penal and social-welfare wings of the state.⁴

By exploring the ways that Ra and other Cambodian refugee welfare recipients resisted the U.S. state's arbitrary abuses in the wake of the 1996 welfare overhaul, this and the following chapter return to refugee temporality—the refugee's knowledge that her present hardships are a reinscription of her past captivities. In this, Ra and others challenged the periodization of welfare reform as emblematic of a new turn in late capitalism. Scholars and activists often describe welfare reform as the paragon of neoliberal domestic policy in the United States. Neoliberalism indexes a new, transnational alignment of economic and social policies aimed at dismantling the main barriers to an unfettered global free market: organized labor, market regulation, environmental protection, and social welfare. However, as Wacquant notes, welfare's rapid retrenchment worked hand in hand with the expansion of state apparatuses aimed at managing poverty through penal statutes and geographic enclosure in the hyperghetto.

Cambodian refugees in the Bronx like Ra certainly understood this. It came across in the way they referred to the welfare state as a distinct site of captivity, one that welfare organizers' political strategies, tactics, and statutory demands did not often account for. Indeed, what some considered a new neoliberal turn in social and economic policy did not adequately explain Ra's and other refugees' distinct sense of subjection. Were they experiencing a *new* moment in statecraft or merely the continuation of a form of captivity from which they had never been fully released?

Rethinking the Neoliberal Turn

That a Southeast Asian youth program became a welfare advocacy group surprised me. It was not my original intention to become a welfare-rights advocate and organizer. The role grew directly out of my work with neighborhood youth. I was part of developing a leadership program for Southeast Asian refugee teens like Ra's children, to develop their skills as community organizers.

When I asked the youth organizers to identify and mobilize around an issue that commonly affected refugee teens, I assumed that they would pick school reform or juvenile justice—something traditionally youth-focused. Instead, many spoke of their families' sanctioning by city welfare programs and of being pulled from school and other activities to accompany their parents to welfare offices to serve as interpreters and advocates. Before reaching puberty, many of these youths were already adept at filling out welfare applications and explaining the recertification process to their parents.⁵ They seemed to take their role in stride and often joked about welfare-office escapades, but their anger was palpable. As long as these teenagers could remember, their families had been subjected to the whims of welfare bureaucrats.

Their families had originally been placed on welfare by local resettlement agencies immediately after their arrival in the Bronx. Following the mandate of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the agencies insisted that the refugees use welfare only as a temporary and adaptive measure, predicting that they would inevitably secure gainful employment and economic independence. After more than a decade, however, no such jobs had materialized. Refugees remained on the welfare rolls, illegally supplementing their meager monthly checks with a string of informal, off-the-books jobs. The resettlement agencies and the ORR never admitted to the failures of a resettlement program that once boldly predicted refugee self-sufficiency. Nor, in keeping with the terms of refugee exceptionalism, did the state alter its narrative to suggest that Cambodian refugees had become shiftless, unmotivated, or deviant—terms reserved for the vilification and ridicule of Black welfare dependents. Instead, Cambodian and other Southeast Asian families were simply forgotten, left to linger in the welfare state indefinitely. Every so often a refugee family faced harassment from a bureaucrat who claimed that the household was no longer eligible for welfare but, with the help of a bilingual child, managed to keep their benefits. This common routine would undergo a major change, however, with the passage of the 1996 welfare reform law.

Reflecting the new consensus that welfare contributed to social irresponsibility and complacency among the chronically unemployed,

the 1996 law was suggestively titled the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), and its main provisions were unmistakably punitive. It introduced mandatory work programs known as “workfare” in which recipients were required to work 30 hours a week in no-wage city-approved jobs that took time away from off-the-books jobs; it limited the total number of years for which recipients could receive welfare to five; and it changed the name Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF). The new law also originally called for the denial of food stamps and Supplemental Security Income to permanent residents, and it tightened eligibility and verification requirements across the board.⁶ Local caseworkers in the Bronx and elsewhere were often unsure how to implement the new rules because the federal government allowed state agencies to interpret the provisions in a variety of ways. Confused, misinformed, or simply overwhelmed, caseworkers could easily forget to ask for required papers or request the wrong ones. Either way, recipients like Ra and other Cambodian refugees paid the price in the form of sanctions.

Once the new law went into effect, even before families had reached their lifetime limits or entered workfare programs, many found themselves summarily removed from the welfare rolls. This happened because welfare reform was an exercise in political devolution—“devolution” being code for “state’s rights”—which underscored the extent to which welfare’s rollback was part of the dismantling of New Deal- and Civil Rights-era entitlement programs.⁷ By granting state and municipal agencies wide latitude, the law allowed them to tighten eligibility criteria and create more onerous verification requirements that dropped many recipients from welfare programs, particularly TANF.⁸ If a local agency acted precipitously, if it went too far, the burden fell on welfare recipients and their advocates to prove that the original intentions of the federal law had been transgressed.

New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani took full advantage of devolution. As the first Republican mayor to govern New York City in twenty-five years, he garnered national attention for how quickly his administration cut the city’s welfare rolls in half.⁹ In addition to wielding the mandatory workfare requirement as his primary welfare

deterrent (a point I elaborate on subsequently), he also sanctioned those who failed to meet the city’s strict verification standards. A culture of sanctions soon defined the city’s welfare regime in the wake of PROWRA, and this deterred many refugees and others from submitting recertifications and new applications. Welfare recipients were constantly threatened with benefits cuts for failing to provide paperwork: proof of income, utility bills, school records, and medical records. Even when such paperwork was properly and promptly submitted, the recipient was often told that something wasn’t quite right, which of course resulted in a sanction.

It was difficult enough for fluent English speakers to advocate for themselves under these conditions. For non-English speakers, the task proved insurmountable. If not for the Cambodian community’s bilingual and bicultural teenagers, many refugee households would have been unjustly denied crucial benefits.

One of the first youth organizers to join YLP was Chhaya Chhoum, a seventeen-year-old Cambodian woman whose family had resettled in the Bronx in 1984. At barely five feet tall, she stood out immediately with the latest in mid-1990s hip hop couture and an impeccable Puerto-Rican-inflected Bronx accent. Like many of the Cambodian teens old enough to recall life in the camps, Chhaya was fully bilingual in both Khmer and English, but for one as fully steeped in Bronx youth culture as she, her Khmer was unusually strong. This had much to do with the language skills passed on to her by her mother Sara, who worked full-time for Montefiore Hospital’s Indochinese Mental Health Program—the only such program in the city. Sara had studied English intensively during her years in the camps, and by the time she arrived in the Bronx she was one of few refugees over the age of thirty who spoke fluent English. Her bilingualism, combined with her deep solidarity with fellow Cambodian survivors, made Sara a vital community resource. She spent countless hours accompanying friends and neighbors to meetings with welfare caseworkers, medical appointments, and parent-teacher conferences. When Montefiore Hospital decided to create a mental health program dedicated specifically to Southeast Asian refugees, it knew exactly who to hire as part of its counseling team.

Considering what her mother did for a living, one might assume that Chhaya had never had to step foot in a welfare office as an

interpreter, but quite the opposite was true. Following in Sara's footsteps, Chhaya had volunteered her time to help the adults in her community, providing translation for them in a number of settings. Although my efforts must have seemed redundant when I began recruiting in her neighborhood, offering teenagers an opportunity to serve their broader community, she was one of the first to join YLP and quickly became a leader.

From the outset, youth organizers such as Chhaya challenged the notion that YLP should organize around "youth issues" such as school reforms and funding for neighborhood youth programs.¹⁰ Instead, they wanted to focus on the economic issues that affected the community at large, recognizing that such matters had a direct impact on their own lives. The amount of time many of them were already spending at welfare centers advocating for their parents underscored this point. YLP decided to turn its full attention to welfare-rights organizing, and in so doing it moved beyond the narrow purview of youth issues to face head-on a nationwide, cross-generational crisis.

Moreover, YLP joined a movement that was an extension of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The very concept of "welfare rights" had been spawned in 1966 by the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), which had organized nearly 25,000 members—90 percent of whom were Black women—into a movement demanding adequate income as a right, not merely as a charitable state benefit.¹¹

According to the NWRO, because capitalism necessitated extreme poverty it was the state's responsibility to establish antipoverty measures. A guaranteed adequate income also would compensate poor women for their unpaid labor in the domestic sphere.¹² NWRO's analysis of racialized and gendered capitalism placed it at the cutting edge of U.S. racial justice and feminist struggles of the time. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., drew on its ideas as he developed his poor people's campaign in 1968. We might say that intersectionality politics writ large, emphasizing the inseparability of race, gender, and class oppressions, owes a debt to the NWRO's theoretical and practical work.

Our group joined a national welfare-rights coalition, Grassroots Organizing for Welfare Leadership (GROWL), which saw itself in

the tradition of the NWRO.¹³ GROWL developed a national strategy of coordinated direct action against local welfare agencies that were implementing the 1996 welfare reform law in ways that violated recipients' civil rights. Thirty years earlier, the NWRO had pioneered an organizing model that promoted local chapters, providing resources to those on the ground in order to promote coordinated actions across different cities. GROWL adopted a similar model, working with local organizations to implement a national organizing campaign that would expose the most damaging effects of the 1996 law.

YLP began by protesting the lack of translators at Bronx welfare centers. By failing to provide adequate interpreter services, the centers violated federal equal-access laws designed to protect people with limited English proficiency from national-origins discrimination. We challenged New York City's workfare program on similar grounds, arguing that if participants could not communicate with their supervisors, equal program participation was impossible and the program goals fundamentally unachievable. In both instances, our tactics included threatening civil rights complaints, flooding the system with fair-hearing requests, organizing direct action protests, and conducting media exposés.

However, there was a discernable difference between our organizing efforts and those of the NWRO. Whereas the NWRO had spoken of the right to a guaranteed adequate income as a means of redress, our efforts exposed the extent to which refugee welfare recipients were being treated unequally and abusively through federal welfare reform's local implementation. Our efforts were less about restoring Keynesian policy than about "equal access" and the recognition of difference and plurality in the welfare state. What did it mean to demand such things from a state that so readily conveyed its racialized and gendered contempt for the poor and chronically unemployed? Indeed, welfare reform was the coda to nearly three decades of relentless racist and sexist portrayals of the poorest of the urban poor that were embedded in terms such as "welfare queen," "culture of poverty," and of course "underclass."¹⁴ By the mid-1990s, public poverty discourse was so implicitly (and often explicitly) racist and sexist that it left no room for compassionate discussion of the poor, much less for talk of redress.

In light of these conditions, the demand for interpreters seemed only to mask the deeper economic, racial, and gendered violences being carried out through welfare reform. In other words, the focus on interpreters seemed to imply that the “postreform” welfare state had the potential to treat all parties fairly if only it made adjustments aimed at granting everybody equal access as mandated by civil rights. Looked at from that angle, our efforts appeared to conform to a logic in which the state was respected as a redresser of all manner of social and cultural inequalities so long as such inequalities were abstracted from a critique of capitalism and its violent uses of difference (racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia). During the 1990s, a key term emerged among labor and community organizers to name this logic: “neoliberalism.”

Neoliberalism generally describes new global economic and social policies, driven primarily by the United States and Western Europe, that guarantee global capitalism’s unimpeded growth. From the 1970s onward, the hallmarks of neoliberalism have been market deregulation, privatization of public resources and public space, an assault on organized labor, and the dismantling of the welfare state.¹⁵ In carrying out these measures, neoliberal regimes avow the language of equality for all: because unfettered market growth is said to grant every sector of society an equal opportunity to accumulate resources, to improve its quality of life, it follows that neoliberalism must simultaneously disavow the statutory discrimination of difference, specifically that based on race, gender, ethnicity, or religion (sexuality has been left largely unprotected by the neoliberal regime). This disavowal is precisely what distinguishes the expansion of the U.S. empire through liberal warfare: the protection of supposed universal rights and freedoms that serves as justification for the state to carry out all forms of violence—often against those it claims are the subjects of such rights and freedoms.

In the late twentieth century, the neoliberal assertion of equality often took the form of multiculturalism, the celebration of ethnoracial difference accompanied by calls for legal nondiscrimination against minority groups. In some instances, multiculturalists advocated special state protections for certain groups to ensure their equal treatment and inclusion, but under the neoliberal regime such protections

must steer clear of the market because the market is said to be neutral. Multiculturalism as policy and practice can only conceive of “culture” when it is abstracted from the political economy; as soon as issues of race, gender, and sexual difference are coupled with a critique of capitalism’s dependency on the exploitation of difference, these issues lose their status as cultural categories to be celebrated and protected.

As Lisa Lowe notes, this splitting of culture and capitalism is the very *raison d’être* of multiculturalism during neoliberal times: it “asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented, while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion.”¹⁶ In other words, within the multiculturalist frame, the assertion of difference—including a dissident’s call for a specific set of group rights—can immediately be re-presented as reinforcing hegemonic claims about the unwavering promise of American plurality and inclusion.

To what extent, then, did our efforts at asserting language accessibility rights for Southeast Asian refugees actually reinforce the very power we sought to challenge? Was our campaign for interpreter services at welfare centers merely a call for inclusion, a piece of the neoliberal multicultural pie, that foreclosed a critique of the fundamental, irrevocable racism and sexism undergirding welfare reform? These challenging questions had to be posed, even if they did not jibe well with community organizing’s daily exigencies. To a certain extent, YLP could put off the challenge by arguing that our efforts were aimed only at holding on to whatever remained of the welfare safety net, that we were biding our time to wage a more comprehensive fight down the road. However, this line of argument failed to account for the fact that, in “winning” our short-term demands we actually bolstered the welfare regime we sought to resist.

As it happened, Ra and other Southeast Asian refugee welfare recipients—many of them the mothers of the youth organizers—felt ambivalent about YLP’s demands. Even as they participated in the YLP campaign, testifying about the abuses they experienced or protesting on the front lines, I often sensed that their activism had less to do with a firm investment in our specific demands than in their desire

to engage in some form of collective dissent. Moreover, their political critique had little to do with the neoliberal turn, a dubious multiculturalism, or even the shifting role of the state. Instead, it emerged out of their distinct transnational and decades-long experiences with a power that operates arbitrarily yet presents the illusion of a negotiation.

Organizing the Adults

Knockoff designer handbags, the ones sold in Chinatown, were popular among the Cambodian mothers of the Northwest Bronx in the early 2000s. A faux Gucci or Prada was a status symbol—although not the type one normally associates with designer wear. Such bags were the preferred carrying cases of the mothers who “worked” the welfare state. Unusually large, they provided ample room for a multitude of welfare documents, identification cards, and health records. “It’s their welfare bag,” Chhaya joked.

When these women took their seats in YLP meetings, their welfare bags were often propped prominently on their laps. The Cambodian mothers were a formidable group. YLP members spoke to them of strategies, of pressuring those in power. Such strategies required people to believe in a set of rights and have faith that civil society could deliver them. Ra and the other welfare mothers seemed unconvinced.

According to the youth organizers, the hardest part for them wasn’t the direct confrontation with those in power—welfare center directors, workfare supervisors, local elected officials—nor was it speaking to the media once they had overcome their initial anxieties. Rather, the hardest part was organizing the adults, in many instances their own parents. It was hard for the obvious reasons: family dynamics, ageism, and patriarchy. It was also hard because of the older generation’s understanding of its relationship to state power.

The youth refugee organizers drew up thoughtful agendas that included icebreakers and small-group discussions. They created flowcharts of the welfare bureaucracy so that the adults could differentiate between those in power and those who merely did the bidding of high-level administrators. They went through detailed scenarios and role-plays to distill common grievances among adult refugees. All

told, they worked diligently to develop a process for adult community members to arrive at a clear strategy.

Rarely did the youth organizers make it through an entire meeting agenda. Somewhere along the way, a small mutiny would occur and the agenda would be discarded as the adults took the conversation in their own direction. This was especially true when it came time to discuss campaign demands. Deciding on concrete demands was the crux of the agenda—the main “takeaway” in community-organizing parlance—but the adults did not grant it easily. They carried on elliptical conversations of being misled by caseworkers and sanctioned and their plans to make ends meet in the interim. They reached into their welfare bags to share letters from the welfare agency that had little to do with the topic at hand.

Some YLP members found these moments frustrating. I did, too, feeling that we had lost control of the meeting and were failing to make headway. Chhaya, however, saw it differently. In her view there was something politically productive in the way the adults took the meeting in their own direction to give expression to their own understanding of welfare-state power. Indeed, Chhaya interpreted it as a sign of their investment, not necessarily in the precise demands, strategies, and tactics proposed by YLP but in the opportunity to collectively reflect on what was happening to them and to explore the possibilities of resistance. Chhaya reflected back on those years:

Sometimes it seemed like the meeting got out of hand, and people were confused. But I never saw it that way. I saw that people were angry, but they knew exactly what was happening to them. You had to let them take it. They came to these meetings and they wanted to express that anger, to talk about their mistreatment. For them, the goal of the meeting was [to] express their frustrations and tell the story of what was happening to them. You can’t always facilitate that as part of your agenda.

Ra seemed to affirm Chhaya’s assessment. She did not attend these meetings consistently, but when she did she made important contributions. Her outspokenness and sharp wit were on full display—

qualities she seemed to pass on to her three children, who each took a leadership role among the youth organizers. Ra was supportive of the youth, commending them for their efforts even as she offered criticisms. Her critiques were not always explicit, but came across in muted responses, in the way that she and the other adults interrupted discussion of our “concrete” demands.

I raised this point with Ra during one of our interviews years later. Why were she and the others reluctant to assert their statutory rights? “Because they [welfare agency workers] will tell you anything,” she said. “They make a mistake, but it’s your fault. Then they do it again.” According to Ra, it was impossible to hold the welfare regime accountable:

They cut the welfare first, and you can’t do anything to stop it. You have to wait until they correct the mistake. You can hand in the right papers and show them everything, but it doesn’t matter. You still have to wait. Even if they make a big mistake, it doesn’t matter. Nobody gets in trouble.

Here Ra was acknowledging that, even if welfare bureaucrats conceded that a particular sanction was unjustified, they did not admit to the damage it unnecessarily inflicted on the welfare recipient. Benefit discontinuance, which could last anywhere from one to three months before resolution, took a serious toll on poor families. It determined whether they had enough to eat, if their utilities were shut off, or if they could afford winter coats. If the welfare agency was proven to be in error, the recipients’ benefits were simply restored (with losses recouped), and the matter was closed. None of what the family had suffered, however, was subject to redress. The welfare agency, in other words, had the power to throw the most vulnerable families deeper into crisis and to do so with impunity. Ra refused to be naïve about those terms. Just as the state and its adjuncts once arbitrarily placed the refugees on welfare (at first insisting that it was a temporary and adaptive measure before leaving them there indefinitely), so it arbitrarily removed them if those in power decided that the system was broken. Moreover, Ra and other welfare recipients who made supplemental income through off-the-books jobs were scrutinized and

sanctioned by the welfare state for doing precisely what the state, specifically the Office of Refugee Resettlement and local agencies, had promised yet failed to do years earlier: find a way for refugees to scrape together a living in an environment that offered few opportunities for livable-wage work. How, she wondered, could anybody negotiate with power that acts so arbitrarily?

They [welfare state] can’t make up their mind. First they say apply for welfare, you need it. You can’t live without it. Then they say “okay, no more welfare”—you have to get out, find a job. Okay, there’s no job so now you go to workfare. But then they will still cut your welfare. You can’t believe anything about welfare.

Although Ra thought it was futile to negotiate with the state, she did not object to YLP’s organizing strategies; rather, she signaled that such efforts would not be her primary mode of engagement with welfare-state abuses. Instead, she believed that she had to keep things moving when confronted with arbitrary power. This meant finding alternative sources of income—homework, factory work, and odd jobs.

Other adults who attended our meetings shared Ra’s perspective. Over the years, many of them had grown accustomed to the occasional sanction that resulted from language barriers, a caseworker’s clerical error, a notice to attend an interview that went astray in the mail, or sudden changes in local welfare regulations. These sanctions chastened welfare recipients. However, after 1996 they sensed that something qualitatively different had taken hold; something akin to abuse and calculated malfeasance that left no room for negotiation.

One of the adults whom YLP worked with was Linh, a sixty-year-old Vietnamese woman who cleaned the streets each morning for the workfare program. In critiquing the welfare state, she assigned it a gender: “He is pushing me too far,” she said of workfare. “I cannot survive the program. If I stay, I don’t survive. If I am kicked out [of welfare], I will not survive. I don’t know what to do.” Working through the idiom of domestic violence, Linh proposed that the welfare state ensnared women in an economically and legally abusive relationship. She was confronted with an impossible choice: tolerate the conditions

or get out. She had no rights to claim; the terms of civil society were as irrelevant in the welfare state as they were in the domestic sphere.¹⁷

Trevy, another woman with whom YLP worked, was a mother of five and among the first Cambodian refugees to resettle in the Bronx. She contrasted her post-1996 experience of welfare with her experience under the previous regulations. After 1996, she felt certain that she was being driven from the welfare state. When she first arrived in the Bronx, she recalled, social workers seemed overly eager to sign her to a range of benefits programs. Trevy survived on some of these programs for nearly two decades, yet always wondered how long the support would last. "They want us out," she said. "[It's] not like before . . . when we first came. They want to hurt us now. I remember they once said to us, 'Apply for this [program], apply for that one. You need to *eat welfare* to survive.' Now, they want to put us out." According to Trevy, welfare reform was forcing refugees off welfare arbitrarily.

Both Linh and Trevy spoke of welfare-state abuse in terms of confinement and forced removal. That is, they related to it in spatial terms: across the public and private spheres, welfare was not so much a set of benefits and regulations as it was a *location*. It followed that Linh, Trevy, and Ra responded by moving through space—by hustling to find alternative sources of income and in-kind donations. In addition to homeworking and factory work, some sold homemade food in local parks, others collected and redeemed aluminum cans, and all sought extra "rations" from local food pantries. Indeed, if Ra and others preferred to rely primarily on their own movements as opposed to community-organizing strategies to survive and resist the welfare state, these were tactics they refined while living in the camps. Ra recalled that, although she received rations and was told by camp workers that her basic needs would be met, she was never under the illusion that she could rely on what they were offering, that she could rest. She always had a side operation and it was invariably one that violated camp rules: peddling rice wine or betel nut (an addictive chew popular among Cambodian women).

I wasn't allowed to sell these things, but I had to make sure that we had enough in case something didn't go right. You're like a prisoner in there, so you can't believe what they [those running

the camps] tell you. You just find work. What if there wasn't enough food? Sometimes other people tried to get me in trouble for doing these things. They wanted wine and I wouldn't give it to them so they tried to give me trouble. But I had to be tough and stand up to them.

In returning to her camp experiences while reflecting on her problems with the U.S. welfare state, Ra was suggesting that she did not conceive of the neoliberal welfare regime as a *new* historical period in U.S. capitalism and statecraft. Rather, welfare was yet another location in the ongoing cycle of rupture, displacement, and confinement that characterized her unclosed sojourn. Her hustles in the camps and in the Bronx were a direct response to her unambiguous status as a captive. In this sense, Ra, along with Linh and Trevy, exposed a key truth about the hyperghetto: it, too, functioned primarily as a site of captivity and stigmatization.

Loic Wacquant argues that the welfare regime of the past four decades, and particularly since the passage of welfare reform, has fully meshed with the penal state. The revolving door between prison and the urban neighborhood—the defining feature of the hyperghetto—has been constructed primarily through social-welfare policies. The objective of this construction is not merely to maintain and regulate capitalism's surplus labor pool but also to renew specific social stratifications and symbolic orders—namely, the captivity of Black bodies that serves as both a continual "fount of social instability" and a symbol of racial domination.¹⁸ This side of neoliberalism is too often misunderstood or overlooked, according to Wacquant. He notes that most analyses tend toward the "thin conception of the economists" rather than a "thick sociological characterization of neoliberalism" that discusses welfare discipline (particularly supervisory workfare), the police and prison apparatus, and racial stigmatization.¹⁹

The difference between the thin and the thick, I argue, is not merely scholarly or conceptual but epistemological. In other words, it marks the distance between the scholar's (or activist's) rendering of new developments in capitalism and the captive's *knowledge* that what is happening is not a new phenomenon but a reinscription of her captive status, a return to a familiar place. For the Cambodian

refugees in particular, their experiences of captivity and forced labor allowed them to intimately know what Wacquant describes as that “double regulation” of the poor—the merging of the penal and social-welfare arms of the state—that is endemic to the hyperghetto.²⁰ This knowledge ultimately determines the refugees’ survival and resistance strategies as well as their relationship to the notion of rights.

I often asked Ra and other refugees how they pulled it off. After fleeing Cambodia, they made their way into the Thai camps (often unauthorized), secured dwellings and rations, convinced UN workers to grant them an asylum interview, applied for and received resettlement in a third and final nation of asylum, landed in the United States, and now had to navigate a racist, sexist, and classist power matrix that just wanted them to disappear. How had they survived when so many others had not?

Ra and the others refrained from heroic recounting: there were no saviors, no major turning points in their stories. They spoke only of steady movement. They hardly spoke of rights at all—of the supposed restoration of legal personhood that finally grants refuge and resettlement. In their telling, the manner in which a given regime—the Khmer Rouge, Thai soldiers, the United Nations—shuttled refugees between near death and the granting of asylum had nothing to do with right and legality. It was unattributable. The refugees never possessed anything with which to negotiate. *Demands? What could one possibly demand from these spaces?* All they could do was *move*. They never stopped looking for the next opening that might grant them a reprieve—a commutation of final capture. This is not to say that Ra and the others evaded power. They were always its unequivocal subjects. They just never stayed in one place long enough for arbitrary state power to make a final determination on what to do with them.

Nowhere was the refugees’ reliance on movement more relevant than in their dealings with the city’s mandatory workfare program. In the next chapter, I describe the experience of a Cambodian welfare recipient who survived a Bronx workfare program while holding on to her job as a low-wage factory worker. Her survival strategies worked at cross-purposes with YLP’s attempts to challenge the workfare regime, however, and this dissonance ultimately proved productive, compelling YLP to reconsider how resistance takes shape among refugees.

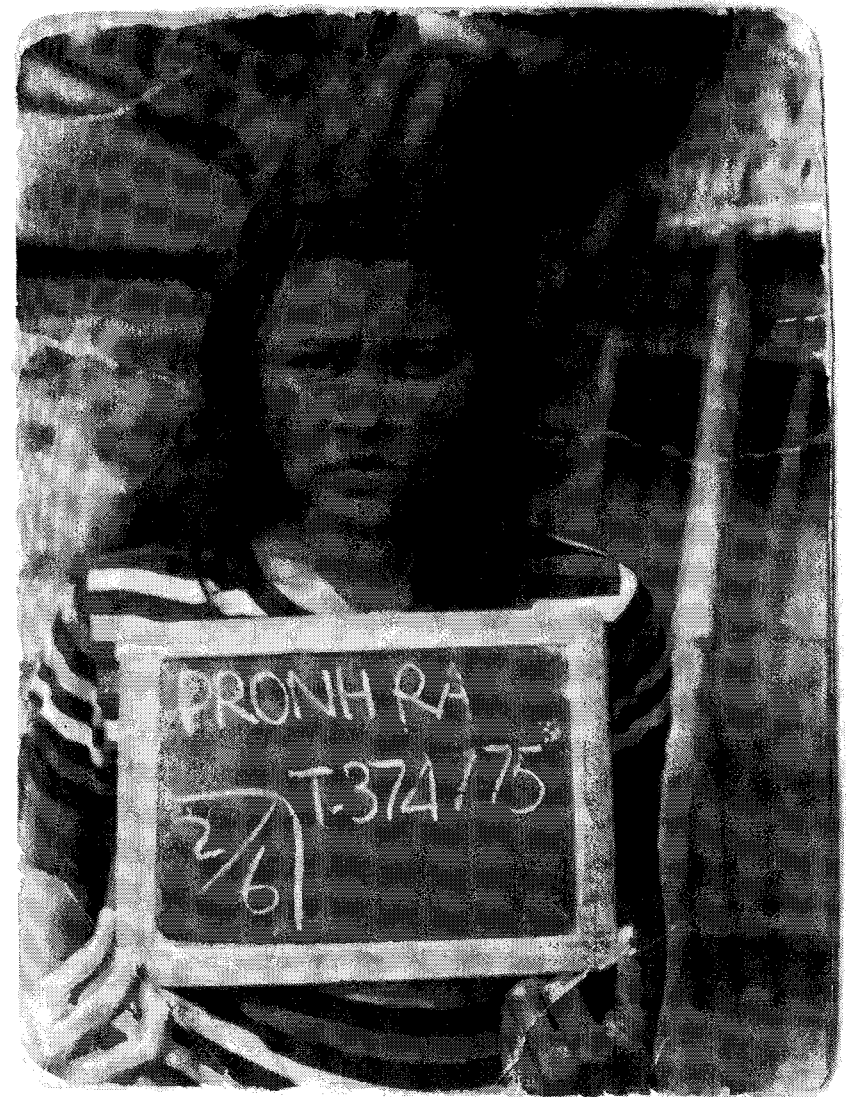
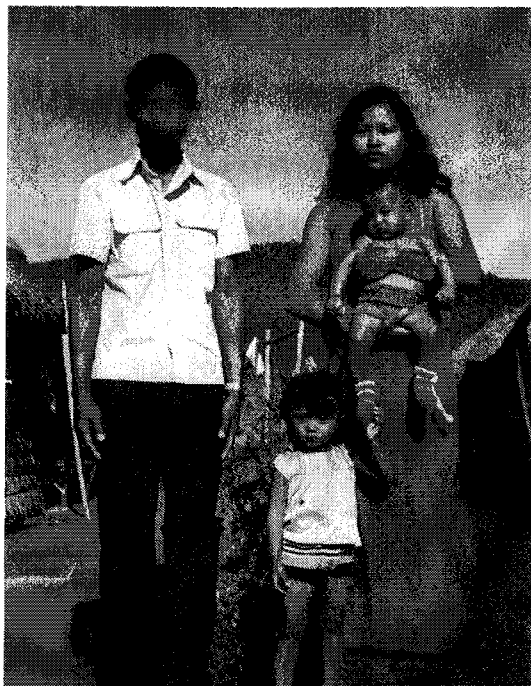
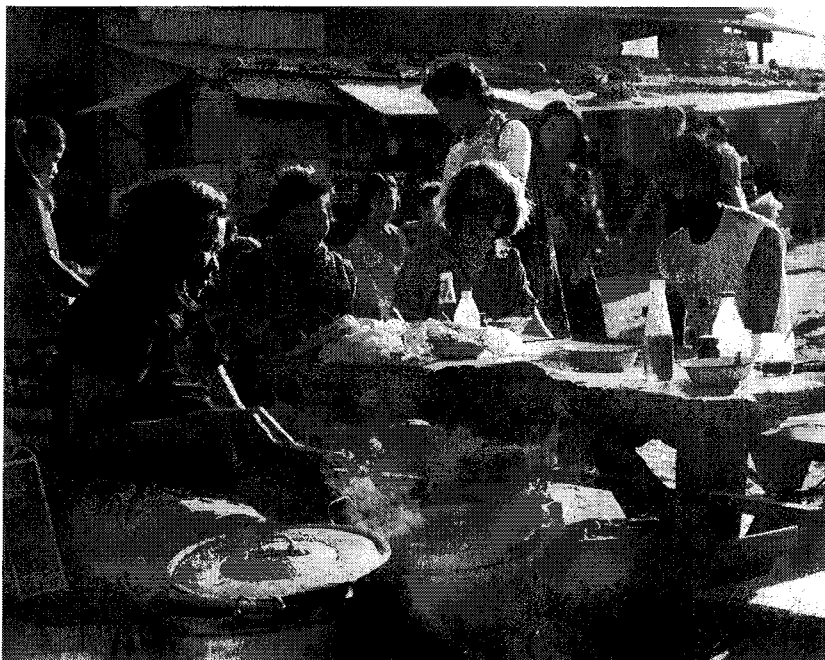


Figure 1 Ra Pronh in 1980 at the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, Thailand.
(Collection of Ra Pronh.)



BOTTOM: Figure 3
Ra in 1986 selling porridge at the U.S. Refugee Processing Center in the Philippines and visibly pregnant with her son Rith, her fifth child. Throughout her time in the refugee camps and her life in the Bronx, Ra supplemented camp rations and welfare benefits with income generated from her informal labors. (*Collection of Ra Pronh.*)

[illegible]

T-374775

ACVA STATEMENT OF UNDERSTANDING

You are applying for resettlement in the U.S. If you are found eligible, you will be sponsored and assisted by one of the voluntary resettlement agencies.

Your sponsoring agency will arrange for a local sponsor or will itself provide initial resettlement services.

The goal of the sponsorship is to bring you to economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. The purpose is to help you to help yourself.

To signify that you understand the terms of sponsorship, please sign the following statement:

- 1.) I understand that if I have close relatives in the United States, my sponsoring agency will make every effort to resettle me with them. If that is not possible, I will accept resettlement anywhere in the United States.
- 2.) Once I am resettled in one city, after arrival I cannot expect to be transferred to and assisted in another city.

- 3.) I will accept the initial housing arrangements provided for me and my family.
- 4.) If I am of working age and able to work, I will accept whatever work may be offered, whether this work is my specialty or not. I understand that I may change jobs at a later date, but that the voluntary agency or sponsor is not expected to assist me with finding a different job.

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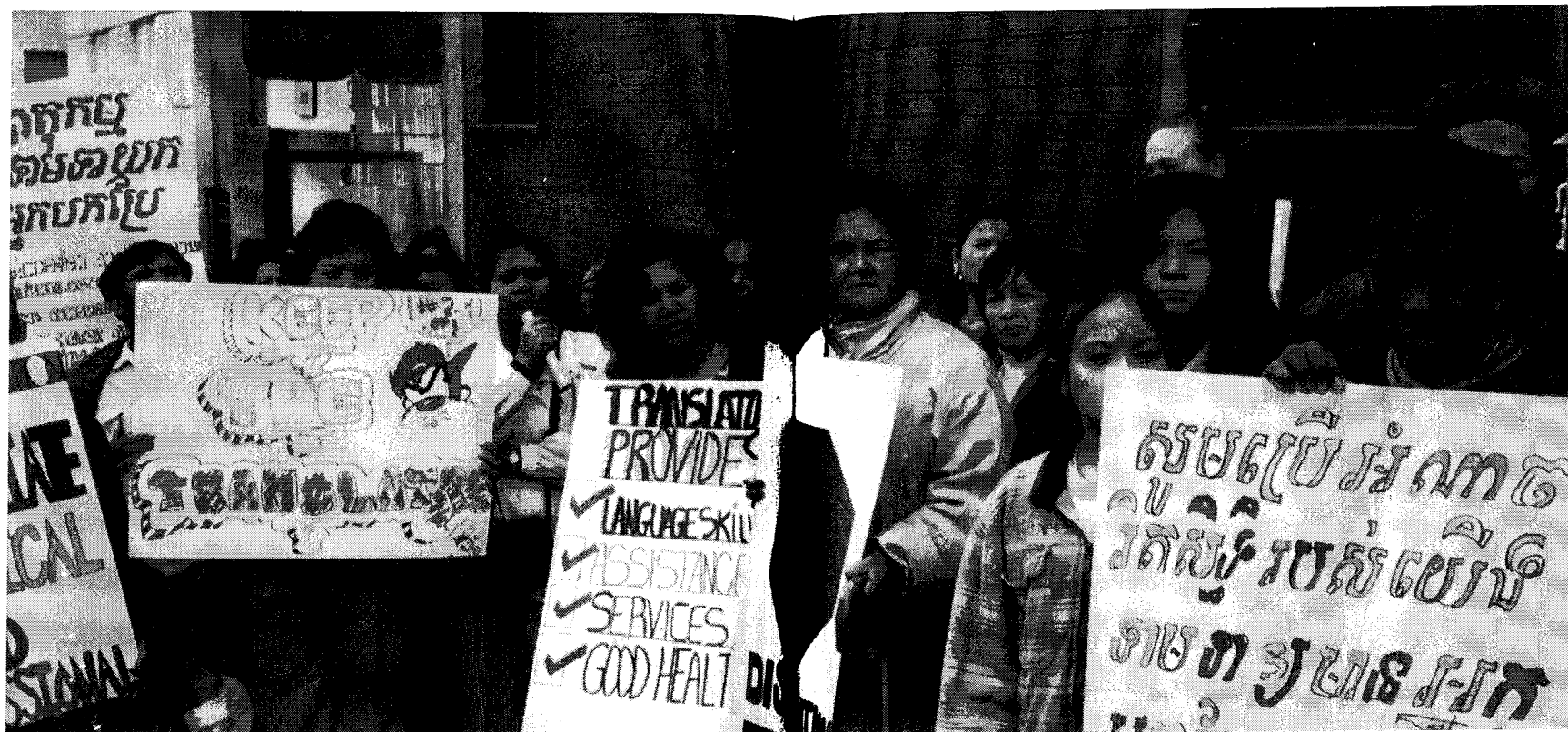
Rev : Aug. 83

Figure 4 ACVA Statement of Understanding. Before departing for the United States, Ra was issued this document by the American Council of Voluntary Associations (ACVA), the collective body of nongovernmental organizations contracted by the U.S. State Department to manage the resettlement of Cambodian refugees in U.S. cities. ACVA's main task was to arrange housing and assist refugees in finding employment. (*Collection of Ra Pronh.*)



FACING PAGE: **Figure 5** Broken Promises/Falsas Promesas, 1980. Charlotte Street stencils by John Fekner. Charlotte Street was decimated by the South Bronx arson epidemic of the 1970s. In October 1977, President Jimmy Carter stood amid the rubble, pledging to rebuild America's forsaken inner cities. (Photo © John Fekner Research Archive.)

BELOW: **Figure 6** Cambodian residents of the Northwest Bronx protesting cuts in translation services at a local health clinic, 1998. The protest was organized by members of the Youth Leadership Project (YLP) of CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities. (Collection of Chhaya Chhoum.)

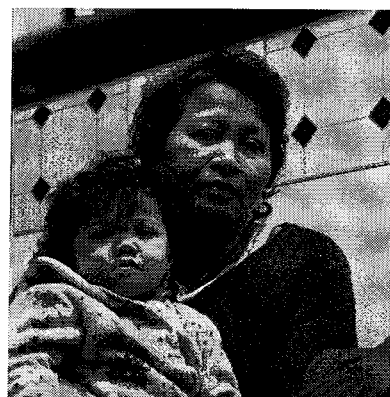


4

Workfare Encampments



ABOVE: **Figure 7** Chhaya Chhoum and members of Mekong NYC in 2013. From left to right: Alicia Rivera, Khamaly Srey, Thanna Son, Chhaya, Khamarin Nhann. (Photo © True Yee Thao.)



LEFT: **Figure 8** Ra Pronh and her granddaughter Jade in 2008. (Photo © Bud Glick.)

RIGHT: **Figure 9** Ra with four of her children in 2014. Standing (from left to right): Rann, Sonya, Rith, Rorth.



Several of the Cambodian mothers who participated in the Youth Leadership Project (YLP) insisted that welfare “rights” were just another fiction that the refugee was asked to accept and uphold. It was a fiction that masked their persistent state of captivity in the context of the U.S. welfare state, particularly one undergoing radical retrenchment, if not complete collapse, following the implementation of new federal policies in 1996. The refugees exposed this fallacy by revealing how the political and economic time in which they were resettled—characterized by the scholar and activist as neoliberalism, postindustrialism, late capitalism, and so forth—was continuous with the time from which they came: the time of the camps.

Community organizer Chhaya Chhoum clearly understood this. During one of my interviews with her, she posed the following question: “What does it mean to organize a group of people who have never really left the camp?” Her question was neither rhetorical nor metaphorical, nor was it blithe commentary on the refugees’ inability to let go of the past. Rather, it offered an accurate reading of the refugees’ condition, acknowledging their belief that they were living under a regime that wielded its power arbitrarily, just as power was wielded in the camps. At the same time, her question genuinely sought an

understanding of what it takes for the community organizer to nevertheless engage refugees in collective action. It suggested that, although the refugees had little use for the discourse of rights, they believed that resistance remained both necessary and within their power.

To explore the complex meanings and practices of refugee resistance during times of ongoing captivity, I begin this chapter by describing the entrapment of the refugee by the Bronx welfare state of the late 1990s, particularly within the confines of the city's mandatory workfare program. Here I draw on the experiences of Kun Thea, a Cambodian refugee mother and widower who worked thirty hours per week as a part of a sanitation crew in exchange for her monthly welfare check. Kun Thea was well aware that the point of the workfare program was not job training but to compel her self-removal from the welfare rolls by burdening her with unreasonable work demands. She refused to capitulate, deciding instead to attend workfare while also keeping her off-the-books job as a factory worker. In addition, she continued to raise her five children. To some, her strategy for economic survival could hardly be construed as resistance. In Chhaya's view, however, the difference between survival and resistance for those who had never left the camp was rarely as simple as it seemed.

The Welfare Trap Revisited

Beginning in the late 1960s, New York City welfare offices were called "income support centers." In 1998 they were conspicuously renamed "job centers" to reflect the city's "bold re-organization of NYC's welfare system and emphasis on work first."¹ Although welfare-to-work programs had existed in the city since the 1980s, they had been reserved mainly for adults with no dependent children. The 1996 welfare reform law, however, mandated that everyone receiving a monthly welfare check be required to participate in workfare. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was determined to make New York City a national model for how quickly and effectively a municipal agency could reduce its welfare rolls by leveraging this mandatory requirement.² His administration proclaimed that the city's Work Experience Program (WEP), in which participants worked thirty hours per week cleaning city parks and offices, would encourage thousands to quit welfare.

Others would be removed because of noncompliance with WEP.³ By 2001, the mayor's strategy seemed to be a remarkable success: more than 50 percent of those receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families (monthly cash assistance) prior to the "work-first" doctrine had been removed from the rolls.

Not everybody quit WEP so readily, however. Kun Thea was a mother of five: two teenage boys and three grade-school-aged daughters when I met her in 1999. She and her family were living in a small two-bedroom apartment on 193rd Street. Vietnamese by nationality, she considered herself "Khmer Krom"—a name given to a region of southern Vietnam that remains contested territory. Most Cambodians view it as land stolen from them by the Vietnamese. Many of those from Khmer Krom, including Kun Thea, speak Vietnamese, Khmer, and the Khmer Krom dialect. Along with her parents, Kun Thea fled Khmer Krom for Cambodia in 1970 to escape the escalating U.S. war in Vietnam. She never anticipated the nightmare that would befall Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975. As a teenager, Kun Thea spent two years in a Khmer Rouge labor camp before escaping to Thailand in 1979. She was granted entry into Khao-I-Dang, where she later met her husband. The two of them applied for and were approved for asylum in the United States and settled in the Bronx in 1984.

Since her early days in the Bronx, Kun Thea and her family had survived on a combination of welfare benefits and under-the-table wages earned from factory jobs in neighboring New Jersey. In these light manufacturing firms, they sorted and packed small merchandise: pet supplies, perfumes, and candies. During the early 1990s, Kun Thea's husband became gravely ill with a liver disease, and he was no longer able to work. Kun Thea had no choice but to pick up extra shifts at the factories in order to make up for his lost wages; she also earned supplemental income by assisting neighbors who were "homeworking"—subcontracting themselves as home-based garment workers. (As I discuss in Chapter 5, Ra participated in this economy as well.) As her husband's condition worsened, Kun Thea worked anywhere from twelve to fourteen hours per day at an array of factories. She jumped from one to the next, depending on where she could find the best wages, keeping up this pace even after her husband passed away in 1996.

In the fall of 1999, Kun Thea received a letter from the city's welfare agency stating that she was required to report to WEP. She was assigned to the Department of Parks and Recreation to clean parks in the Bronx's Belmont neighborhood, an area once known as the borough's Little Italy. She was ordered to work thirty hours per week in exchange for a monthly \$1,000 welfare check.

The letter from the welfare agency intimated that she could avoid WEP by going without her monthly check. To be sure, one of the objectives of mandatory workfare was to encourage welfare recipients to remove themselves from welfare and to enter the low-wage labor market full-time. Kun Thea, unwilling to make this deal, became determined to keep both her welfare benefits and her factory job. She described her daily routine:

I walk three miles each day to and from WEP. It's very good to walk, better than taking the bus. The city gives me a Metrocard but I save that for my son. At seven in the morning it's a very peaceful time to walk. This is my one time alone all day. The supervisor arrives late on most days. We're supposed to start at seven-thirty, but he comes close to eight. One time, he asked me why I got there so early. He said that I was trying to make him look bad. I don't know if he was joking. I told him I have to start on time so that I can leave by two thirty in the afternoon. But I don't think he understood what I said. I don't think he cares. My daughters come home from school by three thirty, and I need at least one hour to cook for them. That is the only time I have to cook. After I cook, I go to Devoe Park and wait for the factory van. It comes at five. If you arrive to the park late, the van will leave without you. The nightshift at the factory goes from six to one in the morning. On a night with no problems, I get back home by two. I sleep for four hours, and then get up with my youngest daughter. At seven, I leave again [for WEP].⁴

Kun Thea's daily routine sheds new light on the notion of "welfare trap," the phenomenon of welfare recipients caught between the vagaries of the unskilled-labor market and an inflexible welfare

bureaucracy. Often they refuse to find work because their welfare will be reduced by the amount they earn from official employment. They fear being dropped from benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid if they "overearn." To understand why more people do not escape the welfare trap, ask yourself a few questions: Why would anybody voluntarily enter conditions of working poverty when the welfare state offers more protections? Why would anybody opt for official employment when they have the chance to earn unreported income that does not reduce their monthly welfare grants (even if these are informal jobs that pay below the minimum wage)?⁵

State-driven countermeasures to the trap—such as raising the minimum wage or the wage-income threshold for welfare recipients—are of course anathema to neoliberal logics. The 1996 welfare reform law took a punitive approach to "resolving" the trap. Although the new law claimed that the purpose of the mandatory workfare requirement was to move welfare recipients from dependency to economic self-sufficiency, it completely failed to deliver on this goal. New York City's own data revealed that only a miniscule number of WEP participants were actually trained in a new skill and fewer still transitioned from workfare into stable, nonpoverty-wage jobs.⁶

It was clear to YLP that the point of mandatory workfare was, unequivocally, to entrap recipients more effectively by making life in the welfare state as difficult as life on poverty wages. Moreover, because workfare consumed so much time, it purposefully made refugee adults unavailable for work at the off-the-book jobs that supplemented their welfare benefits. Simply stated, after 1996 entrapment took on a more literal meaning: welfare recipients were ostracized, punished, and confined to a designated space of compelled labor. Because the youth organizers saw nothing redeeming in the WEP program, they decided against an organizing campaign focused on reforming it, taking the position that workfare should ultimately be abolished. Our immediate efforts focused on moving as many refugee adults out of WEP as possible, either by securing medical exemptions or by exploiting loopholes such as alternative educational programs to satisfy the workfare requirement.

YLP's stance on WEP stood in contrast to that of some groups in the welfare-rights and labor organizing community who proposed

that workfare participants should be unionized. These groups sought to take city officials at their word: they insisted that those in workfare were truly “workers” (or at least workers in training) who should be compensated and protected as such.⁷ However, this position failed to recognize that the undergirding logic of workfare was to discipline and punish, not to exploit vulnerable workers for profit. Although the state certainly took advantage of the low-to-no-wage labor provided by WEP participants, it wasn’t motivated by purely economic incentives—capitalism’s unfettered drive for profit. Here I argue that economic reductionism effaces the central role of racialized punishment and stigmatization in establishing the social order. As Loic Wacquant suggests, such reductionism can mislead us into believing that U.S. neoliberalism was rationally designed by a few pulling the strings, when in fact it is a pervasive racial and spatial logic of enclosure that extends from slavery into the postindustrial landscape.⁸ Contemporary permutations of this logic are now mediated through the social welfare programs once spawned by the New Deal, the Great Society, and the Civil Rights movement.

Kun Thea, in her own way, recognized this broader logic of entrapment to which she was subjected and from which she could see no true exit, no outside. Perhaps this is why she chose to keep both workfare and factory work, recognizing that neither would ever be capable of pulling her out of poverty. It would be all too easy to read her actions through the model-minority stereotype, to reduce her to the trope of the Asian immigrant who, even under intense welfare-state scrutiny, maintained her knack for generating income at any cost and under any conditions. This facile reading, however, ignores the epistemological standpoints of Cambodian refugees for whom captivity and forced labor were not new phenomena.

Kun Thea seemed unsurprised by any aspect of the trap in which she found herself. As she described her daily routine of shuttling between workfare, home, and factory, she gave the impression of having been there before—indeed, of one who had never quite left captivity. By this I mean that she possessed an intimate knowledge of the spaces to which she was confined and knew what she had to do to survive them. The challenge for YLP organizers was to rec-

ognize this knowledge as the basis of political action, but we often occluded it in our attempts to outmaneuver and outwit neoliberal governance.

The Workfare Workaround

In its effort to release refugee welfare recipients from the WEP requirement, YLP pursued several avenues: medical exemptions for those suffering from war’s lingering physical and emotional effects, childcare exemptions for those with small children, and educational exemptions for those who might be better served by an alternative job-training program. The first two exemptions were contingent on individual circumstances, but the educational exemption potentially applied to all adult refugees being called into WEP.

Kun Thea, along with the majority of workfare participants, bristled at the suggestion that WEP provided on-the-job training. “What kind of training or instructions do I need?” she laughed. “You just sweep the sidewalk and the streets, and then gather the trash inside the parks. Who doesn’t know how to sweep?” It puzzled her that the WEP supervisor talked as much as he did, barking what seemed like orders and complaints to a crew of Black, Latina, and Asian women. Kun Thea felt fortunate that her limited English shielded her from understanding most of it.

He yells at them to do this and that. His tone is bad. But he leaves me alone because I don’t speak English. Even if I understand what he is saying, I pretend I don’t understand, and I just keep doing what I’m doing. But why is he yelling? What can he really teach us?

Kun Thea described the futility of it all; she seemed amused by these daily workfare interactions, but such scenes of miscommunication presented a unique organizing opportunity for YLP. Because WEP was funded in part by a federal grant, it was required to ensure equal access to participants as mandated by federal civil rights law. That Kun Thea and other limited-English speakers were unable to

communicate effectively with their supervisors meant that they were not treated equally. What possible training could take place in the absence of basic verbal communication? YLP's initial exploration into the issue suggested that the city's workfare program violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act Title VI ban on "national origins discrimination."⁹ If this could be proven, the city would be required to either hire translators (or supervisors who could adequately communicate with all participants) or grant refugees an alternative to workfare that accommodated their language needs. The first option, of course, spelled self-defeat. Certainly YLP's goal was not to *enhance* workfare with translators, but the Giuliani administration was unlikely to increase workfare resources by hiring them. There were far too many languages spoken by New York City welfare recipients, and hiring interpreters for all of them would have been incredibly costly.

In our view, the city's only logical choice was to offer limited-English-speaking refugees an alternative—in all likelihood an educational program. Some of our allies in the welfare rights and labor organizing community saw this as a narrow solution that helped only refugees and other immigrants while leaving nonimmigrants unprotected.¹⁰ YLP responded that dismantling the workfare behemoth required multiple "small hits" from numerous contributors—labor unions, community groups, immigrant and refugee groups, and so forth. Securing workfare exemptions and alternatives was not YLP's ultimate goal but a finite tactic to frustrate the system while temporarily alleviating the workfare burden for some. However, we were so singularly focused on workfare's punitive nature—"anything but WEP" was the line that guided us—that we never considered the dangers of alternatives.

In response to YLP's language discrimination complaints, the city proposed that non-English speakers, in lieu of workfare, attend a welfare-to-work program called Begin Employment Gain Independence Now (BEGIN). BEGIN programs were managed by nonprofits and community colleges and offered job training, basic literacy, and GED preparation classes. Because of the Bronx's large Latino population, many BEGIN classes were taught by certified English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instructors, and the city suggested that the

refugees avail themselves of this resource. Whether or not the Cambodian refugee and the ESL instructor could effectively communicate was irrelevant to the bureaucrats. The city needed only to demonstrate that it had made an effort to match the non-English speaker with a certified ESL instructor to satisfy any federal complaint.

It was a vexing proposition. On the one hand, YLP did not consider this a political victory. On the other hand, it seemed to have met the short-term objective of temporarily challenging the mandatory workfare requirement. From here, we rationalized: the BEGIN program appeared less taxing than workfare, and it involved no physical labor; also, it required slightly fewer hours than WEP, which would free up participants for factory or homeworking jobs. However, many refugees, including Kun Thea, took the opposite view.

Kun Thea was familiar with BEGIN. In 1998, a year prior to her workfare placement, she had been sent to a BEGIN program at a local community college. At the time, her caseworker claimed that new policies mandated that recipients attend job-training sessions. Kun Thea complied, and thus began several difficult months of confinement:

They wanted me to go to classes where I would learn English. They also had counselors who would help me look for a job. I went to the classes, and of course I didn't understand anything. I know how to speak three languages—Chinese, Khmer, and Vietnamese—but not English. Most of the other students spoke Spanish, and so did the teacher. There was another Vietnamese woman there. She spoke English much better than me. I think she even spoke it better than the Spanish students.

The teacher didn't know what he should do with me. And the counselor gave up on me the very first day. Finally they decided that every day I would sit in front of an English-learners video. "At the end of this video, tell me three new phrases you learned."

Kun Thea felt detained. Her testimony suggests that there are different forms of captivity: the kind that restricts movements and the

kind that grants mobility within a given confine. The BEGIN program was certainly the former:

I felt like I was being locked in a room for “reeducation.” I had a lot of bad experiences like this before. You sit in rooms and you wait. You listen to somebody speak, but you don’t understand. You are not allowed to leave. But I would just stare out of the window. The BEGIN program gave me a lot of time to think. This was soon after my husband died, so I would just stare out the window and think about [him]. I would think too much, and I couldn’t stop. Around the same time we got the news that Pol Pot died. And then I think a lot about my family back in Vietnam and Cambodia, about everything . . . the Khmer Rouge, the camps. I became very sad, so I just stopped going.

Kun Thea described feelings of isolation and stasis—immobility that led her to “think too much,” to become overwhelmed by the weight of her past. She desired movement, but was denied it not only by ostensibly “kinder” social welfare policy but also, potentially, by community organizers determined to challenge neoliberalism.

The classroom proved no less a space of captivity than the workfare site. A genocide survivor, Kun Thea found the “educational” space intolerable because it summoned specters of the past. Although the educational exemption was supposed to provide a useful skill, it also functioned punitively because Southeast Asian refugees were scolded for not knowing enough English to catch up and for not being able to communicate with the mostly Spanish-speaking students and instructors.

Kun Thea and other refugees possessed a wealth of knowledge about compelled labor and captivity, and this is precisely what informed them as they navigated the radically transformed post-1996 welfare state. In this they read the bureaucratic field of the Bronx welfare state as yet another location along an unclosed sojourn of captivity, one that required them to remain mobile and resourceful and to avoid being lured into an arrangement in which they were complicit in their own punishment.

YLP’s attempt to secure a potential workaround for Kun Thea and others trapped in workfare yielded several lessons on community organizing. The most immediate one concerned the pitfalls that organizers encounter when they pursue a short-term remedy for a problem they already consider irredeemable, a problem for which the only solution is abolition, not reform. Indeed, at what point should YLP have determined that no alternative was suitable? Should it have refused to pursue any alternative, recognizing that any negotiation only legitimized the workfare regime? This conundrum was similar to the situation discussed in Chapter 3, where YLP demanded language interpretation services at welfare centers. In that example, a successful organizing campaign for interpreters certainly addressed an important community need but also potentially reinforced a form of neoliberal multiculturalism that, in its affirmation of plurality, equal access, and inclusion for all, obscured the more profound economic, racial, and gendered violences of welfare reform. In the end, the demand for interpreters did not work at cross-purposes with the daily needs and desires of the refugees. (To the contrary, I would argue that most refugees benefited from the reform even as they remained skeptical of the notion of “welfare rights.”) Kun Thea’s situation with BEGIN was different in that it brought into sharp focus a situation in which the organizers’ pursuit of an alternative had the potential of deepening her daily crisis.

All of this points to an existential problem for community organizers: What kind of organizing refrains from concrete demands of power? Community organizing, as a distinct methodology, centers on a clear demand issued against a specific powerbroker or target: the director of a welfare center, the commissioner of the Human Resources Administration, the mayor. On identifying the demand and the target, organizers plot measured strategies and tactics that put them in the best position to “win.” However, as Kun Thea’s quandary exemplified, there are moments when there is nothing to be won.

Sometimes a particular political demand suddenly proves to be a liability, if not an impossibility, because of an unexpected shift in political conditions. In these instances, organizers are left without a core issue on which to focus. Such was the case for YLP and its allies in the movement for national welfare rights discussed in Chapter 3.

In the fall of 2001, Grassroots Organizing for Welfare Leadership (GROWL), of which YLP was a member, was at the height of its national campaign to challenge reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform laws. Its efforts were suddenly neutralized by the events of September 11, 2001. Indeed, in the post-9/11 era, GROWL's demands could no longer gain traction in a public sphere that had turned its attention entirely to the issue of national security. For the coalition to pursue its agenda in this context would have proven not only futile but politically costly, delegitimizing the group as politically tone deaf and considerably setting its work back.

Responding to the new reality of post-9/11, some in the welfare rights movement believed it was best to take a hiatus, to wait for the exceptional moment to pass, but for Chhaya and other young Cambodian community organizers, moments such as these—marked by war and crisis—represented not the exception but the rule. They saw this moment of disjuncture as an opportunity to address the most challenging contradictions the community organizer could confront.

Giving Up the Demand

The national movement for welfare rights came to an abrupt halt on September 11, 2001. GROWL had scheduled a briefing that morning for members of the House of Representatives on Capitol Hill on the adverse impacts of federal welfare reform. The data had been culled from various member organizations, including YLP, and Chhaya was slated to testify. However, as we approached the steps of the Rayburn House Office Building, we encountered congressional staff running in the opposite direction. One stopped just long enough to explain to us why everyone was evacuating the building: "The Pentagon was hit by a plane. I think we're under attack." Less than an hour earlier, two commercial airplanes had crashed into the towers of the World Trade Center.

Needless to say, the hearing did not take place that day. Although GROWL continued to exist as a coalition, the national political climate had shifted so dramatically that the group's original strategy of changing public opinion on welfare reform—moving the discussion from vilification and ridicule of the poor to a critique of an ineffec-

tive and unconstitutional policy—no longer seemed tenable. In the wake of 9/11, there was simply no room in the national dialogue for the plight of the urban poor and the policies that affected them. The welfare reform law was reauthorized by Congress in 2002.

In this context, many local activists and community-organizing groups, particularly those in New York City, were forced to rethink their work. In the four years between the 1997 implementation of federal welfare reform and September 11, 2001, YLP had carried out several protests and sit-ins at local welfare agencies and one impromptu sit-in at the offices of the regional health and human services agency, located only blocks away from the World Trade Center. In the years to follow, however, such actions became inconceivable. Not only were these buildings now on virtual lockdown but, in the climate of fear and insecurity that gripped the city, the public had little tolerance, much less sympathy, for direct political action of this sort. In light of these conditions, what was one to make of the concrete political demands so central to community organizing?

According to Chhaya, at times one had to be willing to let go of strategies that amounted to a set of discrete demands. Chhaya became director of YLP in 2004, and under her leadership the group initiated several new programs focused on refugees' holistic health—economic, physical, and emotional. These programs were not always centered on making key demands of those in power, nor were they based solely on an organizing model of identifying and applying pressure on targets that could concede to certain measures. Instead, they met the direct needs of community members by providing welfare and housing advocacy, locating legal and health resources, and creating space for peer-to-peer reflection and storytelling about past traumas.

To the passing observer, such programs might have appeared identical to the those offered by "direct service" organizations that seek to help people cope with life's challenges without addressing (or even acknowledging) the systemic inequalities that are at the root of those challenges. For Chhaya, however, these initiatives were expressly political in both form and content. They reflected her belief that those who sought to organize refugees had to first account for the refugees' complex daily realities. She was convinced that meaningful participation flowed from the organizer's deeper appreciation for the ways in

which refugees “move through their day-to-day reality with dignity” despite all they had suffered:

For me, the question isn't about community organizing versus direct services. What I care about is doing things that support and restore the dignity of people—especially people as traumatized as Cambodians. The community organizer says, “Come to meetings. Go to protests. Now you're part of something.” But how true is that? If you really want people to feel part of something—and keep in mind some of these people have never felt part of anything in their entire lives—then you need to have respect for their day-to-day situation. . . . Show them this respect by supporting them with their immediate needs [and by] just stopping and listening to what they have to say. That's how you support them—just hang out and listen to them, let them go on. See what kind of political action comes out of that.

Here Chhaya was echoing some of the principles and methods of popular education theorized by Paulo Freire, who argues that resistance is a matter of liberatory praxis—a cycle of critical reflections followed by actions that yield deeper, more pointed reflections. In Freire's view, meaningful political action is measured not by stated goals but by the extent to which oppressed peoples engage in praxis collectively, by their capacity to think critically with each other about their common condition and then enact/create an alternative to that reality.¹¹ When Chhaya said, “Just hang out and listen to them,” she was describing a very important political activity, the very challenge to power. During my tenure as director of YLP, we sometimes used popular education methods. The youth organizers facilitated small-group discussions to draw out community members' political analyses of the welfare state. They also used scenario and role-playing exercises to explore the political tactics that were most appropriate for a given situation. At the time, I viewed these methods only as means to an end, relying on them to move the organizing campaign along, to grant our efforts the ostensible “consensus” needed to press forward with a specific demand or a certain tactic. Chhaya, however, seemed to be

saying that the organizer should create room for praxis without the guarantee of an immediate takeaway, of “concreteness.” The work of grasping the refugee welfare recipient's understanding of power and affirming that understanding is politically urgent in itself. Perhaps the organizer who carefully plots out a campaign strategy cannot see its immediate benefits, but such praxis nevertheless stands as a necessary challenge to power.

This difference in perspective might explain why YLP's most effective welfare center protest was the one that I felt most uncertain about. In August 2000, YLP carried out an action against a local welfare center known as “Bainbridge” (located on the corner of Bainbridge Avenue and Fordham Road). The caseworkers there had discontinued the benefits of numerous refugee families that summer. Several of those sanctioned blamed language discrimination because they did not have a bilingual family member to interpret for them, believing that they could get by with their limited English. As it turned out, however, they were unable to effectively answer the caseworkers' questions during routine recertification interviews. On behalf of YLP, I left messages and sent letters to the director of Bainbridge calling for a meeting on the issue. All of these communications went unanswered.

YLP held a series of meetings with adult welfare recipients to gauge their support for a direct-action protest at Bainbridge. We proposed marching on the welfare center and then occupying the waiting area just outside the director's office until she agreed to negotiate with us in person. As discussed in Chapter 3, however, these planning meetings were often unfocused and inefficient—at least by traditional community-organizing standards. The adult participants preferred to engage each other and not the meeting agenda, sharing stories about their current financial and familial predicaments that did not deal squarely with welfare. Youth organizers had to squeeze in their questions: What should we do if the director of the welfare center refuses to meet with us? What if somebody other than the director is sent to negotiate on the director's behalf? What if the police are called in to have us removed? None of these questions were sufficiently answered, but the adults assured us that we should go ahead with the action and that they would back us up.

The adult refugees turned out in strong numbers for the Bainbridge action, exceeding my expectations. They never balked when the director initially refused to negotiate with us or even when the police were called in to “observe” the situation. Because the center was a public space, and because virtually all of the protesters were families with cases at the center, the police had no grounds to remove or arrest anyone for trespassing. However, they remained throughout the sit-in, at times threatening to arrest YLP members for disorderly conduct if they continued to display their placards.

To my surprise, the adults suggested upping the ante by holding the sit-in for as long as possible. This buoyed the youth organizers, granting YLP greater leverage so that in the end the director agreed to meet YLP’s demand for interpreters. She would either reassign Cambodian recipients to a welfare center with a Khmer-speaking caseworker or provide interpreters at Bainbridge over the phone through a third-party service.

Such reforms—limited to the framework and logic of neoliberal multicultural inclusion—did not necessarily diminish the local welfare state’s ability to implement draconian federal welfare reform measures, particularly removal from the welfare rolls. Indeed, YLP’s larger concern was that refugee families not be sanctioned arbitrarily by caseworkers—a concern that did not lend itself to a precise policy demand. But, as it were, the resolve of the protestors that day—particularly the adults—seemed enough to make a difference in how caseworkers would handle refugee cases moving forward. It appeared to have put the administrators on notice that the refugees could effectively mobilize around an issue. Immediately following our action, YLP members observed a drop in the number of reported sanctionings at Bainbridge.

Going into the action at Bainbridge, I was convinced that our group was unprepared, that our demands were not specific enough, and that we lacked solid contingency plans. However, the space that the adult community members created for themselves during the planning meetings proved a vital form of political preparation that allowed them the time and space to frame questions about state power on their own terms, not on those circumscribed by the organizer’s agenda. These questions were a form of meaningful participation

through which the refugees began to see political possibilities that, although inchoate, pushed the action at Bainbridge ahead in ways that I had not anticipated. Freire might describe this as the moment when the oppressed begin to approach the “untested feasibility” of political action: “Untested feasibility [is] the future which we have to create by transforming today, the present reality. It is something not yet here, but a potential, something beyond the ‘limit-situation’ we face now.”¹² Freire is proposing that a group’s movement toward this “potential” is carried out through the enactment of a new reality—in this instance, a group’s collective reflection on conditions followed by their occupation of a space that they previously associated with arbitrary rule. Such movement is at times enough to achieve the political objective at hand.

This is not to say that Frederick Douglass’s well-worn adage “Power concedes nothing without a demand” is incorrect; rather, it is to say that a demand does not always have to be clearly articulated, finite, and measurable to *move* power. This lesson guided Chhaya in her years as director of YLP, and it would form the basis of her new initiative in the Southeast Asian refugee neighborhoods of the Bronx.

In 2011 Chhaya started an independent organization, Mekong NYC, many of whose core programs are carryovers from YLP (as are many of its members). However, the new organization makes no distinction between youth organizers and adult community members and, according to Chhaya, it is entirely intergenerational. Through Mekong, Chhaya has developed a slate of arts-focused programs that encourage the kinds of collective reflection, action, and imagining that had been the foundation of YLP’s most productive political actions. Mekong partners with local artists who conduct photography and mask-making workshops, and there is a community theater project. Taken together, these initiatives provide an opportunity for the refugee community to express its understanding and analysis of its present condition in creative ways that do not privilege the autobiographical statement or traditional testimony. This is crucially important for a community that is semiliterate and for whom storytelling is not only a cultural practice but a means of healing from trauma. According to Chhaya, telling one’s story is not so much about “setting the record

straight”—indeed, she notes that with each retelling of a particular survivor’s story certain dates, sequences, and locations may change—as it is about “truth telling” that counters the official, state-sanctioned accounts of what happened to the genocide survivor:

First the war, then the genocide, then the camp, and now here in the Bronx. Sometimes I sit in my office and wonder, *How are they supposed to come out of all of this?* I mean, what do we expect them to say after all of this? Making things worse are all the people who try to speak for them, all those people along the way who said to them, “This is what happened to you” and “I’m here to save you”—soldiers, camp people, the social workers. These people only made [the survivor] crazier. The very least we can do now is give our people a space to give language to their own trauma. Provide them some programs where they can tell their stories.

Cathy J. Schlund-Vials speaks to something very similar in her analysis of Cambodian “memory work.” She notes that Cambodian genocide survivors and their progeny in the post-killing fields era have been subjected to state-sanctioned narratives and representations of the genocide that do not square with what survivors know to be true. Schlund-Vials calls attention to diasporic Cambodian visual, literary, and performance artists who tell a different story, who produce a different memory through their work that opposes nationalist abstractions and erasures.¹³ She quotes Cambodian American political scientist Khatharya Um, who asserts that, for survivors of the genocide, remembering is “the ultimate resistance.”¹⁴

Considering Chhaya’s turn to this form of resistance, I asked her if she has given up on community organizing: “No, not at all. You always need the part where you demand something from those in power. You don’t ever give that up.” After pausing, she added, “What I have given up is my fear of losing. I think community organizers are too often motivated by a fear of losing. I want to be motivated by something else.” This alternative motivation is a keener understanding of resistance that does not assume the organizer’s role is to bring adult community members to a given political project (enlisting them

for training in organizing, bringing them up to speed on the working of neoliberalism, helping them to understand a law or policy that must be demanded from the state). Such an approach assumes that political action is external to the refugees’ routine acts of survival or that these acts of survival, on their own, are insufficiently political. Mekong’s arts-based programs allow the community organizer to see the terms of justice, reconciliation, and ultimately resistance embedded in the refugees’ stories and movements. Before charging headlong into any new organizing campaign, Chhaya and others give these stories and movements full expression. This helps the members of Mekong to determine what, if any, demands should be made of those in power in a given situation. Indeed, they allow for a clearer rendering of what refugees such as Kun Thea *already know* about their present condition—about this camp that they have yet to leave behind.

Notes

Introduction

1. Throughout, I use “Cambodian” instead of “Cambodian American.” This word choice is driven by the simple fact that the community in the Bronx with whom I worked rarely if ever used the latter to describe themselves. They referred to themselves as either “Cambodian” or “Khmer.”

2. For statistics and historical data on the Cambodian genocide, I draw on the Cambodian Genocide Program (CGP) at Yale University, which is under the direction of historian Ben Kiernan; available at <http://www.yale.edu/cgp>.

3. Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), x.

4. Tens of thousands of Cambodians remained captives of the Khmer Rouge long after Vietnamese forces took Phnom Penh and installed the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The status of these captives after the Vietnamese invasion of December 25, 1978, was ambiguous: some were hostages held entirely against their will; others felt they had no choice but to stay with their Khmer-Rouge-controlled groups for survival.

5. Sucheng Chan, *Survivors: Cambodian Refugees in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 79–81. Historian Sucheng Chan’s *Survivors* provides a comprehensive accounting of the number of Cambodians resettled in the United States between 1975 and 1994, and presents a clear breakdown of Cambodians who were resettled as refugees, immigrants, or parolees.

6. The total number of refugees who resettled in the Bronx during the 1980s is contested. According to some community service providers such as Sister Jean Marshall, founder and director of the St. Rita's Refugee Center, there were as many as 10,000 Cambodians in the Bronx at one point during the 1980s. Photojournalist Leah Melnick, who worked closely with Bronx Cambodians during the 1980s, concurs. See Melnick, "Cambodians in Western Massachusetts and the Bronx, New York," *Migration World* 18, no. 2 (1990): 4. By the end of the decade, the Bronx Cambodian population was in sharp decline, with more than half the population having left for other northeastern cities. Still, the 1990 Census grossly undercounted it (1,603). When I began working in the Northwest Bronx during the mid-1990s, the consensus among service providers (in particular those who worked for St. Rita's Center and the Montefiore Family Health Center) was that the population stood at approximately 4,000. They based their estimate on the number of Cambodian households they served and the average number per household.

7. Chan, *Survivors*, 81–85.

8. Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (2006): 410–11.

9. Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 91, 104.

10. See CAAAV: *Organizing Asian Communities*, available at <http://www.caaav.org>. The team that developed CAAAV's first sets of programs in the Northwest Bronx was led by staff organizer Thoi Nguyen and included members Jane Sung E. Bai, Ngô Thanh Nhân, and Lynn Pono.

11. The first group of Cambodians to be resettled in New York City were placed in Brooklyn between 1981 and 1982 as part of what was known as the Khmer Guided Placement Project or the Khmer Cluster Project. As Sucheng Chan notes, the goal of the project was to place Cambodian refugees across a dozen chosen localities where they would have the best opportunities to achieve economic self-sufficiency. According to Chan, "The only unsuccessful site was New York City" because many decided to leave after being victims of robberies and other crimes. See Chan, *Survivors*, 101. The few that stayed in Brooklyn account for the borough's small Cambodian enclave.

12. For a comprehensive overview of the ethnic economy concept, see Ivan Light, "The Ethnic Economy," in *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 650–77. To understand how this concept has been misapplied to Southeast Asian refugees, particularly Cambodians living in urban poverty, see Eric Tang, "Collateral Damage: Southeast Asian Poverty in the United States," *Social Text* 18, no. 1 (2000): 61–64.

13. In 2000, YLP conducted a survey of over 100 refugee families. In addition to finding that 65 percent continued to receive a monthly welfare check and 80 percent received at least one form of public assistance, it discovered that

93 percent were never provided interpretation services at the welfare centers and 86 percent of the youth had on more than one occasion missed school to translate for their parents.

14. Chan, *Survivors*, 151–61.

15. U.S. Census Bureau. *2000 Census* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2003), available at www.census.gov/html. I am grateful to Chunhui Ren for gathering this data.

16. For an overview of the economic diversity among Vietnamese Americans, see Boat People SOS, *2010 Vietnamese American Needs Assessment: Report on Findings* (Falls Church, VA: Boat People SOS, 2011).

17. On Cambodians in New England, particularly in Lowell, Massachusetts, see Peter Kiang, "When Know-Nothings Speak English Only: Analyzing Irish and Cambodian Struggles for Community Development and Educational Equity," in *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan and M. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 125–45; on Cambodian and Vietnamese resettlement in Philadelphia, see Ellen Somekawa, "On the Edge: Southeast Asians in Philadelphia and the Struggle for Space," in *Reviewing Asian America: Locating Diversity*, ed. Wendy L. Ng (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1995), 33–47.

18. Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh," *Punishment and Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 95–133. In this article Wacquant provides his fullest elaboration of the hyperghetto concept.

19. Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *New Left Review* 13 (January–February 2002): 48, 55. Here Wacquant traces the origins of the hyperghetto to the Black urban insurrections of the late 1960s.

20. Loïc J. D. Wacquant, "The Wedding of Workfare and Prisonfare in the 21st Century," *Journal of Urban Poverty* 16, no. 2 (2012): 242.

21. *Ibid.*, 241. Here Wacquant writes that "the sudden growth and glorification of punishment partakes of a broader reengineering of the state that also entails the replacement of the right to welfare by the obligation of workfare (i.e., forced participation in subpar employment as a condition of public support). The downsizing of public aid and the upsizing of the prison are the two sides of the same coin."

22. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), 1–19.

23. *Ibid.*, 9.

24. Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis," 98–103.

25. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 1–20.

26. Steven Gregory, *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9–10. Similarly João Costa Vargas demonstrates the complex and heterogeneous forms of survival and resistance in the hyperghettos of postinsurrectionary Los Angeles. Moving beyond the popular culture tropes of "South Central LA," Costa Vargas

reveals that residents in some of the most vulnerable areas of the city create political and cultural meanings out of their struggles. See Costa Vargas, *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

27. We might conceive of this as the convergence of two genealogies of “unsettlement.” Here I am reminded of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s invocation of that unending, unsettled condition that originated in the slave hold; I argue that this condition extends into the era of the hyperghetto. Harney and Moten write: “Never being on the right side of the Atlantic is an unsettled feeling, the feeling of a thing that unsettles with others. It’s a feeling, if you ride with it, that produces a certain distance from the settled, from those who determine themselves in space and time, who locate themselves in a determined history.” Their notion of a “thing that unsettles with others” points us to an analysis of Ra’s presence in the hyperghetto beyond the discourse of refugee exceptionalism. See Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013), 97.

28. Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Ong’s ethnography is arguably the most comprehensive ethnographic account of Cambodian refugees in urban America. Here she argues that Cambodian refugees have been racialized as a new underclass. I engage with this argument in Chapter 3.

29. Michael B. Katz, “The Urban ‘Underclass’ as a Metaphor of Social Transformation,” in *The Underclass Debate: Views from History*, ed. Michael B. Katz (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 8.

30. Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 3.

31. In October 2014, I conducted follow-up interviews with Ra and her children. These interviews form the basis of the book’s conclusion.

32. I had the privilege of conversing with Richard Mollica on two occasions in April 2008 while I was visiting assistant professor in the history department at Harvard University.

33. Richard F. Mollica, *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 133.

34. Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 56.

35. Ibid.

36. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo Mama’s Dysfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), 2.

37. John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York: Random House, 1980), xxii.

38. James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 7.

39. John Brown Childs, *Transcommunalism: From the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 63. My emphasis.

40. Ibid., 23.

41. Ibid., 22.

42. Bindi V. Shah, *Laotian Daughters: Working toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

43. Peter Kiang, “Crouching Activists, Hidden Scholars: Reflections on Research and Development with Students and Communities in Asian American Studies,” in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 299–318; Shirley Suet-Ling Tang, “Community Centered Research as Knowledge/Capacity-Building in Immigrant and Refugee Communities,” in *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 237–64.

44. Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz, “American Studies as Accompaniment,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2013): 11.

Chapter 1

1. Created in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is mandated to co-ordinate with partnering nation-states the protection and possible resettlement or repatriation of refugees—displaced subjects who cross into another nation seeking asylum. In addition to setting up and administering refugee camps, UNHCR screens refugees for nation-states that are open to resettling them.

2. For a compelling account of the arbitrary and at times contradictory actions leading to Thailand’s brief “open-door” policy, see Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 114–19.

3. William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). This book is the first comprehensive account of Operation Menu, the U.S. covert bombing of Cambodia under the Nixon presidency. In the fall of 2000, President Bill Clinton, before his visit to Vietnam (the first by a U.S. president since Nixon), released previously classified data on the 1964–1975 bombings of Indochina. The data revealed that the bombing of Cambodia began as early as 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson.

4. See Owen Taylor and Ben Kiernan, “Bombs over Cambodia: New Information Reveals That Cambodia Was Bombed Far More Heavily than Previously Believed,” *The Walrus*, October 2006, 62–69, available at <http://the.walrus.ca/2006-10-history/>, accessed January 8, 2013.

5. According to historian Ben Kiernan, the number of bombing casualties mounted that year and Pol Pot’s most radical claims gained traction

situate one another in a power-laden racial field, each occupying a coordinate that mutually reinforces the other. Therefore, one racial group cannot simply “slide” into the position of another. We might say that white racial dominance is always based on a triangular structure as opposed to a spectrum. In this spectrum, Asians are said to be bookended by white people and African Americans and to slide to one end or the other depending on a given context. See Claire Jean Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38.

32. See Jared Sexton, “People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 31–56, for a generative analysis of how the racial location of those genealogically linked to racial slavery cannot be occupied by other oppressed racial groups, including (or particularly) the refugee—even when the refugee appears to be subjected to identical forms of power. Sexton cautions against the conflation of colonial and slave genealogies, noting that the basis of the latter is the natal alienation of the slave.

33. Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 10.

34. Shiori Ui analyzes the communal networks in Cambodian refugee apartments and their importance, especially for refugee women. See Ui, “Unlikely Heroes: The Evolution of Female Leadership in a Cambodian Ethnic Enclave,” in *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Michael Burawoy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 161–77.

35. I attribute this to the presence of genocide survivors in one of New York City’s poorest neighborhoods, which lent itself to the human-interest stories, neighborhood profiles, and long-form journalism that the *Times* was known for.

36. Noirmitsu Onishi, “University Heights: New Culture; New Stresses,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1994, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/23/nyregion/neighborhood-report-university-heights-new-culture-new-stresses.html>, accessed April 19, 2014.

37. Edward Wong, “Children of the Killing Fields,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2000, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/26/nyregion/children-of-the-killing-fields.html>, accessed April 26, 2014.

38. Sam Dolnick, “After Camps, New Horizons,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2012, available at <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/17/after-camps-new>, accessed April 26, 2014.

Chapter 3

1. As I discuss in the Introduction, YLP was a program of CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, a citywide organization that worked in several Asian immigrant enclaves. The designations “YLP” and “CAAAV” were often used interchangeably throughout my years working in the Northwest Bronx.

At times this conflation was appropriate because CAAAV staff and members who belonged to other relatively autonomous program areas—specifically, Chinatown tenant organizing and labor organizing with Filipina domestic workers—actively supported the community-organizing work in the Bronx and vice versa. Suffice it to say that we took seriously the importance of belonging to a panethnic organization. Still, notwithstanding our organizational synergy, I use “YLP” to describe the work carried out in the Bronx to call attention to the specific organizing conditions and challenges faced by Southeast Asian refugees. I do so, too, to distinguish YLP organizing decisions and practices (and my reflections on the ones I was directly involved in) from those of other CAAAV program areas. Indeed, my thoughts on community organizing, neoliberalism, and multiculturalism refer exclusively to the welfare organizing I was directly involved in during the late 1990s and early 2000s; they certainly cannot account for CAAAV’s political orientations and practices as a whole.

2. For an analysis of New York City welfare fair hearings, see Robert E. Scott, “The Welfare Hearing Process: The Law and Administrative Regulations Examined,” *William and Mary Law Review* 11, no. 2 (1969): 291–370.

3. For an overview of U.S. community-organizing orthodoxies, see Saul David Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971).

4. Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 76–109.

5. This dilemma was captured in the documentary *Eating Welfare*.

6. See Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Pub. L. No. 104-193, 110 Stat. 2105 (1996). The provision regarding the denial of food stamps and SSI to non-citizens was eventually amended by Congress in 1997 and 1998 (Pub. L. 105-18, Pub. L. 105-33, Pub. L. 105-185).

7. For an analysis of the return to “state’s rights,” see Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America’s Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 179–214.

8. For an analysis of the impact that devolution had on recipients, see Joe Soss, Sanford F. Schram, Thomas P. Vartanian, and Erin O’Brien, “Setting the Terms of Relief: Explaining State Policy Choices in the Devolution Revolution,” *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 2 (2001): 378–95.

9. For a comprehensive overview of welfare reform’s implementation in New York City under Rudolph Giuliani, see Demetra S. Nightingale, Nancy M. Pindus, Fredrica D. Kramer, John Trutko, Kelly S. Mikelson, and Michael Egner, *Work and Welfare Reform in New York City during the Giuliani Administration: A Study of Program Implementation* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Labor and Social Policy Center, 2002).

10. For an incisive analysis of the shortcomings and contradictions of some forms of “youth organizing,” particularly those that conform to neoliberal logics, see Soo Ah Kwon, *Uncivil Youth: Race, Activism, and Affirmative Governmentality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 52.

11. Felicia Ann Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 14–38.

12. For an analysis of the right to a guaranteed income and how this is distinct from “welfare rights,” see Theresa Fuciniello, *The Tyranny of Kindness: Dismantling the Welfare System to End Poverty in America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993), 257–64.

13. Grassroots Organizing for Welfare Leadership (GROWL) was initiated in 1999 under the leadership of the Center for Third World Organizing. Its original membership included forty organizations from around the country advocating for welfare rights in the aftermath of federal welfare reform. For a full listing of organizations, see Center for Third World Organizing, *Hear Our Voices: Welfare Reform Exposed* (Oakland, CA: Center for Third World Organizing, 2001).

14. Jill S. Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 117–52.

15. It goes without saying that modern nation-states, imperialist nation-states in particular, have historically conquered markets and removed profit impediments. Under neoliberalism, however, the state is not the main architect of these policies. Corporations and international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund drive what historian and cultural critic Lisa Duggan describes as the “policies [that] reinvented practices of economic, political and cultural imperialism for a supposedly postimperial world.” See Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), xiii. Similarly, anthropologist David Harvey points out that these architects of neoliberalism fashion themselves not as state policy makers or ideologues but as technocrats who believe they are serving the common good by “bringing all human action into the domain of the market.” See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

16. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 86.

17. For a deft analysis of the welfare state’s replication of the patriarchal order of the domestic sphere and domestic violences, see Priya Kandaswamy, “‘You Trade in a Man for the Man’: Domestic Violence and the U.S. Welfare State,” *American Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2010): 253–77.

18. Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “The Wedding of Workfare and Prisonfare Revisited,” *Social Justice* 38, no. 1–2 (2011): 210.

19. Ibid.

20. Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 14–15.

2. For an analysis of how workfare programs such as New York City’s WEP are used punitively to remove people from welfare, see Theresa Fuciniello, “The Work of Women (and the Mistakes of Workfare Organizing),” *Third Force*, no. 5 (1997): 22–25.

3. Vivian S. Toy, “Tough Workfare Rules Used as Way to Cut Welfare Rolls,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1988, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/15/nyregion/tough-workfare-rules-used-as-way-to-cut-welfare-rolls.html>, accessed November 1, 2013.

4. This quote is taken from an interview with Kun Thea conducted in the spring of 2000, in which she spoke through an interpreter. I conducted a follow-up interview with her ten years later on April 17, 2010.

5. On how poor women on welfare secure supplemental income through multiple informal channels, see Kathryn Edin, “Surviving the Welfare System: How AFDC Recipients Make Ends Meet in Chicago,” *Social Problems* 38, no. 4 (1991): 462–74.

6. Alan Finder, “Evidence Is Scant That Workfare Leads to Full-Time Jobs,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1998, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/12/nyregion/evidence-is-scant-that-workfare-leads-to-full-time-jobs.html>, accessed November 7, 2013.

7. Steven Greenhouse, “Wages for Workfare,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1997, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/07/nyregion/wages-of-workfare.html>, accessed November 7, 2013.

8. Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “The Wedding of Workfare and Prisonfare in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Poverty* 16, no. 2 (2012): 236–49.

9. According to the Department of Justice, Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act “prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance.” This information is provided on the United States Department of Justice website, available at <http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/cor/coord/titlevi.php>.

10. From 1999 to 2004, YLP was also part of a loose citywide coalition of welfare rights organizations. Its proposal to remove as many refugees from WEP as possible through complaints over national-origins discrimination (based on unequal language access) was questioned by a few of our allies in the coalition who were invested in broader WEP reforms that they believed would impact all participants as opposed to what they saw as YLP’s “loophole” tactic that seemed to benefit only a few.

11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

12. Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (New York: Greenwood, 1987), 153.

13. Catherine J. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 25.

14. Ibid., 17.

Chapter 4

1. Human Resources Administration website, available at http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/serv_welfarework.html, accessed October 28, 2013.