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Daze of Justice by Michael Siv (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

***Daze of Justice*, directed by Michael Siv. Center for Asian American Media, 2016. 69 minutes.**

Michael Siv's documentary *Daze of Justice* enacts the practice of Asian American cultural memory by documenting the journey of Cambodian American Khmer Rouge survivors who return to Phnom Penh to serve as witnesses in the war crime tribunals. Overlaid with Siv's first-person narration, the film follows Marie Chea, Sophany Bay, and Sarem Neou, Cambodian American women who break their decades-long silence and attend the Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (ECCC)—a United Nations and Cambodian co-established court specifically for trying senior members of the Khmer Rouge for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide committed during its brutal regime in the late 1970s—to testify on behalf of their murdered families and friends at the hands of the Khmer Rouge regime. Led by Dr. Leakhena Nou, an associate professor of sociology at California State University, Long Beach, and founder of the Applied Social Research Institute of Cambodia who works with the Cambodian diaspora in the United States to file grievances with the ECCC, the three women travel to Phnom Penh to participate as witnesses in Case 002. Using a road trip narrative, the film depicts how the subjects, including the 1.5-generation children of survivors and perpetrators, renegotiate their relationship to the trauma of genocide and grapple with active forgetting and the (im)possibilities of justice.

Daze of Justice begins with Nou's outreach work with the Cambodian American community in Southern California. Congregating with survivors beneath the shade of a willow tree in a Long Beach park, Nou asks for volunteers to speak about their experiences: "You guys are witnesses," Nou explains in Khmer. "Pardon me, but if you die, that's it. No one believes me because I didn't live through it. Do you want to address the atrocities?" The group falls silent in response as the camera pans across worried faces. "The silence is familiar to me and most of my generation," Siv narrates over the sound of wind blowing into the microphone. Remembering trauma can retraumatize, but the

importance of remembering drives Nou to persist in her request for bravery from justifiably fearful people who have lived through hell. The recruitment drives continue at a community event at the Long Beach public library where Cambodian American survivors gather. "We are trying to help you find closure to this traumatic history," Nou announces to the group, "not by violence, not by hatred, not by anger but by using the legal mechanism as a way to educate the next generation." They find ways to begin recounting the unspeakable by drawing their lost loved ones and scenes from their memories. Afterward, once-reluctant survivors amble forward to the microphone and share their experiences of loss in an act of communal mourning. The bravery of those still here to commemorate those who are gone makes healing possible. The communal setting of collective memory sets the stage for Chea, Bay, and Neou, accompanied by Nou, Siv, and his digital camera, to embark on their journey to Cambodia to testify against the Khmer Rouge at the ECCC.

In Cambodia, they find little of what they sought through official channels. The scenes at the court chambers waiting room exhibit this "daze of justice," as they wait days on end for resolution when none seems forthcoming. Even the eventual sentencing illustrates how official courts are a means to write history, but repairing a community needs the creation and sharing of memories. Understanding this, Nou takes the survivors to meet with the son of Kang Kew Iew, "aka Duch," the first convicted war criminal and Khmer Rouge leader of the infamous S21 Tuol Sleng prison, where twenty thousand people were tortured and executed. Meeting Duch's son Hong Siu Pheng, who lives in the countryside with his family in poverty, makes evident that the suffering of the Khmer Rouge inflicted on Cambodia extends on all sides. When Nou explains their reparative mission to Pheng, Pheng retorts with an insecure smirk: "My father never acted directly from his own will. It was a complicated time. The way I see it, my father had to obey orders, therefore, it wasn't his fault."

The camera pans across the family members and neighbors of Pheng's village, with happy children playing on the unpaved floor in the background. These scenes imply that his own powerlessness undergirds this naïve joviality, especially when compared with his American visitors, who come in a fancy car with an expensive digital camera to request something he and his family cannot give. Flustered, Nou explains that the aging survivors of the genocide need justice to recover and heal. Pheng responds thoughtfully, "I don't understand how justice can be paid to them." This statement serves as the crux of the film, illustrating the seeming impossibility of forgiving the unforgivable. Inflicting such human misery incurs an unpayable debt, and yet forgiveness is forgiveness only when it forgives the unforgivable. To repair the bonds of a people who have been torn apart by genocide requires something miraculous. This impasse prompts Nou to ask Pheng to accompany them back to Phnom Penh

and attend the trial. By journeying with the son of a war criminal responsible for their family's deaths, the brave survivors demonstrate a commitment to the togetherness and future of Cambodia and Cambodian Americans.

With this surprise twist, the film documents a collective sharing of memory. By joining the group, Pheng adds a vastly different, but necessary, perspective on past events. All memory is fallible and subjective, but that seeming weakness is actually the strength of collective remembrance. Memory grows to encompass different and conflicting perspectives—capacious enough to include those of both victims and perpetrators, as well as their children. The official documentation and assignation of blame cannot remake what has been lost, but as Siv's moving documentary demonstrates, the willingness to understand and share memories with others, even when the particularities of perspectives on events cannot be reconciled, enables new communities to form.

Daze of Justice supplements other films about the Khmer Rouge genocide and Cambodian American refugees, including *S 21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (Rithy Panh, 2003), *Enemies of the People* (Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath, 2009), *Refugee* (Spencer Nakasako, 2003), and *AKA Don Bonus* (Spencer Nakasako and Sokly Ny, 1995), by offering a necessary transpacific perspective of cultural memory. While each of these films locates trauma in a particular region and critiques its inequitable structure of power, *Daze of Justice* makes a further contribution to the field of Asian American studies by historicizing, memorializing, and thereby revitalizing the traumatic but life-affirming connections between Cambodians and Cambodian Americans on both sides of the Pacific.

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***Brokering Servitude: Migration and the Politics of Domestic Labor during the Long Nineteenth Century*, by Andrew Urban. New York: New York University Press, 2018. ix + 355 pp. \$40.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-8147-8584-3.**

Andrew Urban's *Brokering Servitude* provides a well-researched historical perspective of the role of intermediaries in supplying and leveraging domestic labor in U.S. households during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Far from ignoring a labor sector that has been traditionally excluded or elided from labor history, Urban explores the ways in which this class created a support system so that men, and some women, had the relative freedom to earn compensation for their work. He asserts that these domestic servants were the oil that kept the primary labor machine moving.