

Unmarked, Undocumented and Un-Canadian:
Refuge(e)-less Space in Souvankham Thammavongsa's *FOUND*

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Submission to the Mushkat Memorial Essay Prize

Abstract

With the recent reforms to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the image of Canada as a safe and welcoming nation is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Laws authorizing the mandatory detention, deportation and exclusion of refugees from Canada challenge ideas of the nation as an inclusive and tolerant space. Analysing Laotian Canadian poet Souvankham Thammavongsa's 2008 collection *FOUND*, this essay argues that the articulation and performance of space is inextricable from the articulation and performance of a nation, and that the establishment of goodwill among nations and peoples requires a critical re-thinking of the privileging and hierarchizing of space, as well as a critique of the practices that exclude or dehumanize the 'nation-less' subject. While I argue that Canada's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers is performing Canada as an increasingly refuge(e)-less nation, my focus on the poetics – as well as the politics – of space posits language as a site of dissent and resistance against static representations of sovereignty, citizenship and subjectivity, and thus articulates space as a site of potential and possibility.

1. Introduction

"I believe," Michel Foucault argued in 1967, "that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space" (p. 1). A turn of the century later, Foucault's words still ring true. Space matters, perhaps now more than ever, as the contemporary world "is on the move like never before" (Nyers, 2006, p. ix). Yet while everyone occupies space to one degree or another – whether political or social, physical or cyber – not all occupy equal positions within it. There is a hierarchy of space, a privileging of access that is inextricable from the vast power differentials of shifting global capital and the politics of movement. In his book *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*, Peter Nyers (2006) argues that the "politics of moving bodies must be analyzed as being implicated in – indeed immanent to – the movement of body politics" (p. x). With this in mind, what, then, do the recent reforms to Canada's Immigration and Protection Act, in which Canada has "introduced laws designed to disappear refugees – via mandatory incarceration, deportation or immediate and irrevocable denial of their claims" (Dawson, 2012, p. 14), say about the privileging and ordering of 'Canadian' space? How do Canada's increasingly restrictive immigration policies impact Canada's ability to practice tolerance and goodwill both within and outside its national borders? Through an analysis of contemporary poet Souvankham Thammavongsa's 2008 collection *FOUND*, this essay examines the politics of space as inextricable from the performance of a nation, and argues that Canada's current immigration and refugee "protection" policies are writing (and performing) Canada as a progressively refuge(e)-less nation.

2. Found Spaces

Space is everywhere in *FOUND*. The print is small, the poems sparse. The collection begins with a brief autobiographical note:

In 1978, my parents lived in building #48. Nong Khai, Thailand, a Lao refugee camp. My father kept a scrapbook filled with doodles, addresses, postage stamps, maps, measurements. He threw it out and when he did, I took it and found this.

(Thammavongsa, 2008, p. 12)

The note reads like a whisper, a tiny voice emanating from the bottom of the page. As Rob McLennan (2013) states, “Thammavongsa is a poet of the miniscule, and nearly microscopic” (para. 1). Indeed, in its very design, Thammavongsa’s *FOUND* performs an aesthetic of smallness. Even *FOUND*’s material origins – a father’s discarded scrapbook – speaks of smallness, of remnant, of insignificance. Yet Thammavongsa’s (2008) retrieval of the scrapbook, her foray into the trash to salvage her father’s “doodles, addresses, postage stamps, maps, measurements” (p. 12) from oblivion, tells a different story. Given the recent changes to Canada’s immigration practices and policies, including the significant reduction of the narrative component of a refugee protection claim, the metaphor of smallness becomes a particularly potent site through which to explore the increasingly limited space(s) both allowed to and imposed upon the refugee body. As the first, untitled poem of *FOUND* reads:

I took only

bone

built half

your face

left
skull and rib

as they came
If you knew
love

these do not say

but of life
your life

it was small and brief

(p. 13)

Thammavongsa's poetic construction, or reconstruction, of a life "small and brief" is fragmented and incomplete, a skeleton of meaning – "only/bone." Yet in *FOUND*, nothing is superfluous; every word (and space) matters, every letter, every absence carefully chosen.

The radical economy with which *FOUND* employs – even eschews – language highlights the collection's interest in returning "the metaphor of the border to the material reality of barbed-wire fences, entrenched prejudices, and powerful economic interests that regulate the flow of human bodies" (Kumar, 2008, p. x) across national and international boundaries. Language, for Thammavongsa (2008), is neither an arbitrary nor immaterial space, but a site of being, of corporeality. In "MY MOTHER, A PORTRAIT OF," she explains, "There are/no photographs/of/my mother here/just her

name/her real name” (Thammavongsa, 2008, p. 31). While the image of Thammavongsa’s mother is missing from her father’s scrapbook, the written record of her mother’s Laotian name, “her real name,” becomes a living portrait: “Her/real name/looks like her/Quiet and reaching/for my father’s” (Thammavongsa, 2008, p. 32). In the absence of a photograph, language constructs an image of a life. But it is only an image, “Quiet and reaching,” and, like a photograph, tells only a partial story. Thammavongsa (2008) is careful not to elide the meaning of language with the materiality of it. A name is not a person, she suggests; it just “looks like her.”

(Excerpt Ended)