



Bearing Witness from the Frontier: Necropolitics, Statelessness, and the Karen Testimonio in Zoya Phan's *Little Daughter*

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Abstract

This paper reads Zoya Phan's co-authored memoir Little Daughter (2009) as both historical testimony and a critical object in its own right, arguing that Karen borderland experience and Western life-narrative convention jointly determine what the text can say and how it is heard. Drawing on Jason Cons and Michael Eilenberg's theorization of the resource frontier as a contested assemblage, the paper first shows how Phan's account of Manerplaw before its 1995 collapse illustrates the layered, plural sovereignty that characterizes Southeast Asian borderlands. It then situates her family's decade of statelessness within Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, arguing that the memoir extends Mbembe's largely abstract theorization through its attention to gendered bodily targeting and to the durable social practices, kinship, religious syncretism, small-scale commerce, that persist inside conditions of bare life. Finally, drawing on testimonio theory, life-writing studies, and paratextual analysis (Beverly, Schaffer and Smith, Whitlock, Sandeman), the paper argues that the memoir's hybrid, collaboratively authored form and its conformity to a recognizable arc of refugee uplift literature make it a distinct kind of evidence: not a transparent window onto lived experience, nor raw data to be mined for fact, but existential testimony that illuminates the affective texture of frontier violence while requiring the same source-critical scrutiny as any historically situated document.

Keywords: necropolitics; frontier assemblage; testimonio; statelessness; Karen borderlands

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Zoya Phan's *Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West*, co-written with journalist Damien Lewis and published in 2009, narrates the author's childhood in a Karen village inside Myanmar's eastern borderlands, her family's repeated displacement during the 1995 collapse of the Karen National Union's (KNU) headquarters at Manerplaw, her decade as a stateless refugee moving between camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, and her eventual transformation into a London-based human rights advocate following the 2008 assassination of her father, PadohMahn Sha, the KNU's General Secretary. The memoir belongs to a genre that has become increasingly visible in Anglophone publishing over the past two decades: the collaboratively produced refugee testimonio, in which a survivor's first-person account is shaped, often with a professional co-author, into a narrative arc legible to readers who have no independent knowledge of the conflict being described. Read in isolation, such a text risks being treated either as raw data, mined for facts about a war most Western readers cannot locate on a map, or as inspirational literature, consumed for its arc of suffering and uplift and then set aside. Read instead alongside the conceptual vocabulary developed in critical frontier studies and in Achille Mbembe's theorization of necropolitics, the memoir becomes something more analytically productive: an embodied, granular account of what it feels like to inhabit a borderland organized around the contested, plural exercise of sovereign power and the calculated, administratively mediated production of death.

This paper argues three connected claims. First, Phan's depiction of Manerplaw and the surrounding Karen frontier, before and during its 1995 collapse, illustrates with unusual precision the kind of layered, contested sovereignty that Jason Cons and Michael Eilenberg identify as constitutive of Southeast Asian resource and conflict frontiers rather than incidental to them. Second, Phan's decade inside refugee camps and her family's experience of the Myanmar military's Four Cuts counterinsurgency doctrine offer a sustained, longitudinal case study of what Mbembe calls the necropolitical production of "death-worlds," while also revealing dimensions of gendered, bodily targeting and of improvised social survival that extend and complicate Mbembe's largely abstract theorization. Third, the memoir's testimonio form, in the specific sense theorized by

John Beverly, its collaborative authorship, which situates the book within what Matthew Boswell calls “hybrid testimony,” its explicit advocacy aims, and its narrative debts to a recognizable arc of refugee uplift literature, mean that the text occupies a discursive borderland of its own, one in which Karen experience and Western humanitarian narrative convention jointly determine what the book can say and how it can be heard. Taken together, these three claims suggest that first-person borderland testimony of this kind is neither a simple repository of empirical fact nor a transparent window onto lived experience, but a distinct kind of evidence, closer to what Sybille Krämer calls existential rather than discursive truth, one that illuminates the affective and social texture of frontier violence in ways that policy documents, satellite imagery, and structural analysis cannot, while requiring exactly the same kind of contextual and source-critical scrutiny that any other historically situated document demands.

The Karen Frontier as Assemblage: Manerplaw and the Politics of Layered Sovereignty

Cons and Eilenberg's framing of mainland Southeast Asian frontiers as “assemblages” rather than peripheries provides a useful corrective to readings of the Thai-Myanmar borderland as a marginal extension of either the Myanmar or the Thai state. For Cons and Eilenberg, frontiers are spaces in which multiple, overlapping, and frequently competing projects of rule, resource extraction, and territorial control converge, producing zones in which sovereignty is neither absent nor singular but plural, provisional, and continually renegotiated among state, insurgent, religious, and commercial actors (Cons and Eilenberg 4-9). This framework resists two older tendencies in border scholarship: the tendency to treat frontiers as simply lawless voids where the state has not yet arrived, and the opposite tendency to treat them as fully governed extensions of a single sovereign center. Phan's account of Manerplaw before its fall in 1995 demonstrates the assemblage model with unusual clarity, precisely because she narrates the settlement not as a battlefield abstraction but as a place where her family built a house, planted a flower garden, and sent their children to a missionary-influenced village school, even as the same physical space functioned as the military headquarters of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the diplomatic seat of the KNU's parallel civil administration, and, after the brutally suppressed 1988 uprising in Rangoon, an informal sanctuary for Burman-led democracy activists fleeing the central regime.

Phan recalls that her father, fluent in Burmese, religiously “neutral” as an animist rather than committed to either of the Christian or Buddhist factions within the resistance, and educated at a university in Rangoon, was deliberately positioned by KNU leadership to coordinate the arrival of non-Karen democracy activists after 1988, eventually being appointed Special Adviser to KNU President General Saw Bo Mya specifically to manage this influx (Phan, ch. 7). This appointment is itself a small but telling illustration of assemblage governance: a Karen organization, fighting an ethnonationalist war for autonomy, found it strategically necessary to absorb, shelter, and eventually formally integrate an entirely different national movement with its own leadership, ideology, and external relationships, producing at Manerplaw what was in effect a composite, multi-constituency polity rather than a single ethnic stronghold. The frontier's governance, in other words, depended on brokering relationships across ethnic, religious, and political lines rather than on the vertical enforcement of a unified chain of command, and Phan's father's biography exists at exactly the seam where those negotiations had to be performed daily.

This assemblage quality intensified, rather than diminished, as the conflict escalated toward Manerplaw's collapse. The 1994 schism that produced the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), as Phan narrates it, was deliberately engineered by Myanmar military intelligence through a Buddhist monk who toured Karen frontline positions criticizing the absence of pagodas and implying that Christian-dominated KNU leadership discriminated against Buddhist soldiers (Phan, ch. 11). Whatever the precise balance of organic grievance and external manipulation, the episode fractured what an outside observer might assume was a unified ethnic resistance into competing armed factions, one of which then allied with the very regime the Karen had fought for nearly half a century. Phan's father was captured and held in an underground prison beneath a monastery at Thu MweHta during the resulting crisis, and a KNLA rescue operation, in which Phan's own brother Say Say participated, was called off specifically because DKBA forces had positioned civilian villagers as human shields around the prison, a calculation by the KNU command that the political and moral cost of civilian casualties outweighed the tactical benefit of a rescue (Phan, ch. 11). This single episode compresses nearly every element of frontier assemblage theory into a single narrative unit: a state intelligence service operating indirectly through religious provocation; an insurgent organization fracturing along confessional lines; a faction-switching armed group instrumentalizing civilian bodies as shields; and a parallel resistance command structure weighing humanitarian cost against operational gain in something approximating real time. No single sovereign decided the outcome; the outcome emerged from the friction among several partial, competing sovereignties operating in the same physical space.

The eventual fall of Manerplaw in January and February of 1995, precipitated in part by this DKBA defection, which opened a path for the Myanmar Army's State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) forces to take ground the KNLA could no longer hold on every front simultaneously, illustrates the same logic at

a larger scale. Phan's narration of the evacuation, the boats crowded with refugees, the distant glow of the burning settlement visible from the village to which her family first fled, the discovery that her mother, even while abandoning the family home, paused to plant coriander seedlings because she could not bring herself to fully relinquish the idea of return, renders the frontier's collapse not as a single military event but as a cascading failure of an entire assembled order: military, civil, religious, and domestic structures unraveling together because they had never been separable in the first place (Phan, ch. 12). The infrastructure corridor at the center of contemporary Kaladan-related scholarship exhibits a structurally comparable layering of state, militant, and local-livelihood claims along a single transport route through Chin and Rakhine states; Phan's narrative is valuable to that broader frontier-assemblage literature precisely because it supplies the affective and experiential register, the felt texture of contested sovereignty as it is lived by a child and her family, that document-based or infrastructure-centered analysis structurally cannot.

Necropolitics and the Manufacture of Death-Worlds

Mbembe's concept of necropolitics extends and revises Michel Foucault's account of biopower by insisting that sovereignty's defining capacity is not merely the power to foster and manage life but the power to dictate, often through indirect and bureaucratically mediated means, "who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 11). Necropower, in Mbembe's formulation, operates through the creation of what he terms "death-worlds": "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe 40). Phan's memoir offers extended, granular description of precisely such conditions across nearly two decades, and the text is most analytically productive when it documents not the spectacular violence of bombardment and gunfire, though that violence saturates the narrative from her earliest childhood memories onward, but the slower, structural, and administratively organized violence of denied medicine, denied food, and denied legal personhood that wears down displaced populations over years rather than instants.

The Four Cuts counterinsurgency doctrine that Phan's father describes to her as a child exemplifies necropower's logic of indirect killing with almost textbook clarity. Rather than killing combatants directly, the doctrine instructs the Myanmar military to systematically sever supplies, information, recruits, and food to any area suspected of supporting the Karen resistance, producing famine, disease, and exhaustion among the surrounding civilian population (Phan, ch. 1). This is a strategy whose lethality is administratively deniable precisely because it operates through engineered deprivation rather than through the bullet: villages are not massacred so much as starved, and the resulting deaths can be attributed to disease or hunger rather than to a chain of command. Phan's brother Say Say, deployed years later to Papun district as a KNLA soldier tasked with guiding displaced civilians to safety rather than fighting on the front line, returns describing entire villages reduced to eating the pith of banana trees, children dying of malaria, cholera, and simple starvation faster than enemy soldiers could otherwise kill them, and captured porters worked past the point of survival and then discarded (Phan, ch. 19). The repeated image across the memoir of a bloated body discovered floating in a river, its back lacerated by beatings inflicted on a forced porter before he was killed and dumped, functions as a recurring visual emblem of exactly this necropolitical logic: violence calibrated to produce maximum civilian attrition while remaining bureaucratically distant from any single identifiable act of murder (Phan, ch. 6).

The refugee camp itself occupies an ambiguous, doubled position within this necropolitical order, and Phan's narration captures that doubling with unusual clarity. On one hand, the camps at Mae Ra Moe, Noh Poe, and later Mae La offer a measure of protection from direct attack and, eventually, formal United Nations registration and the rationed access to rice, salt, and fish paste that registration confers. On the other hand, Phan repeatedly characterizes camp life using the explicit language of imprisonment and suspended existence. When the Thai authorities ordered the construction of a perimeter fence around Mae Ra Moe, Phan writes that the barrier "sent out a clear message... at all times we were supposed to remain within the confines of the fencing," and that anyone caught beyond the perimeter became, in the Thai authorities' own administrative vocabulary, a "non-person" liable to imprisonment or to deportation back into the hands of the regime from which they had fled (Phan, ch. 13). This produces a strikingly literal illustration of Mbembe's living dead: a population kept biologically alive through rationed humanitarian provision while being denied the legal, political, and economic personhood that would constitute full membership in any polity, Thai or Burmese. The term Phan uses for camp residents who exist without UN registration, "ghost refugees," names this condition with unusual precision: present in flesh, entirely absent in law, surviving by quietly sharing rations that were never officially allocated for them (Phan, ch. 21). At its peak, Phan reports, as many as one in four residents of Mae La camp existed in this unregistered, ghost-refugee condition, meaning that an already insufficient ration had to stretch across a population the controlling authorities refused to acknowledge existed at all.

Phan's account also demonstrates, in a way Mbembe's largely gender-unmarked theory does not anticipate, that necropolitical death-worlds are organized along explicitly gendered lines. She describes systematic sexual violence as a deliberate instrument of the wider counterinsurgency, narrates her own near-encounter with an armed Thai camp guard who follows her home from a water-collection queue and has to be

deterred by the presence of her family rather than by any institutional protection, and records that her father, after intercepting a Myanmar military plot to assassinate him through a captured and tortured former child soldier, learned that the boy had been explicitly instructed that if he could not kill PadohMahn Sha he should instead rape Zoya, since destroying or defiling “his heart”, meaning his daughter, would constitute an attack on the father nearly equivalent to killing him outright (Phan, ch. 26). The daughter's body is here instrumentalized within the regime's necropolitical calculus as a proxy target, a vector through which power can reach a resistance leader without confronting him directly in armed combat. This detail substantially extends Mbembe's theorization: in the Karen case as Phan narrates it, necropower operates not only by allowing populations to die through engineered deprivation, famine, disease, denied medicine, but by treating women's and girls' bodies as transmissible sites of harm circulating within kinship and political structures, where an assault on a daughter functions politically as an assault on a father's authority and, by extension, on the resistance movement he represents.

It is worth noting, too, that the memoir documents necropower's reach into spaces nominally outside the conflict zone altogether. Phan's account of working as an undocumented “non-person” in Bangkok, of avoiding Thai police checkpoints by dressing and cutting her hair to look ethnically Thai, and of her friend's account of a Burmese domestic worker held in unpaid, confined labor until she took her own life, indicates that the death-world Mbembe describes is not confined to the literal frontier but extends, in attenuated and bureaucratically laundered form, into the heart of a regional metropolis (Phan, ch. 22). The same administrative logic of deniable, indirect harm that operates through the Four Cuts doctrine in rural Karen state reappears in the Thai capital as a logic of unregistrable labor exploitation, suggesting that necropolitical ordering is not simply a feature of war zones but a portable technique of governance that migrates wherever stateless populations move.

Statelessness and the Limits of Bare Life

Phan's decade inside the apparatus of statelessness, from her family's first flight from Per He Lu village in 1995 to her receipt of full refugee status in the United Kingdom in August 2007, offers an unusually long and continuous account of what Giorgio Agamben, in a theoretical lineage Mbembe explicitly engages and revises, calls “bare life”: existence stripped of the political qualifications that would allow it to register as fully human within a juridical order. Phan describes herself bluntly as a “non-person” in Thailand, ineligible to leave camp perimeters, to enroll in further education beyond high school, or to be treated by police as anything other than a deportable, bribeable body (Phan, ch. 22). Her account, read closely, complicates a purely Agambenian reading at nearly every turn, however, by documenting forms of internal social organization, hierarchy, and even small-scale commerce that persist stubbornly within the condition of bare life rather than being extinguished by it. Her mother, despite being formally a ghost refugee with no UN registration of her own at Mae La, is nonetheless drawn into informal community leadership, adopting orphaned and abandoned children, including a Wa boy named Ah Sai whom Phan's father brings home from a diplomatic mission, two former child soldiers who escape Myanmar Army conscription, and several Karen orphans and widows, until her household functions as an unofficial sanctuary nested inside an already unofficial camp section (Phan, ch. 21). Phan herself sells home-grown vegetables door to door inside the camp to help finance her mother's medical care, and the Karen University Students Group she later co-founds in Bangkok manages to fund a small prize and dictionary scheme for refugee-camp schoolchildren entirely through membership dues collected among other stateless students (Phan, ch. 23). Statelessness, in Phan's narration, is total and crushing in its legal effects, yet never total in its social ones: communities continue to generate norms, mutual aid, craft knowledge, and even humor under conditions that formal political theory might otherwise describe as an absolute vacuum of agency.

This matters considerably for how a comparable frontier, such as the Indo-Myanmar borderland traversed by contemporary transport infrastructure projects, might be theorized using the same conceptual toolkit. Necropolitical and bare-life frameworks are indispensable for naming the structural violence that borderland populations endure, the engineered deprivation, the denial of legal personhood, the conversion of survival itself into a precarious daily achievement, but Phan's testimony suggests that such frameworks risk flattening the texture of frontier social life if applied without corresponding attention to the ordinary, adaptive survival practices that continue inside even the most constrained spaces. The repeated motif of rebuilding, a shelter built and abandoned and rebuilt at Mae Ra Moe, a bamboo house constructed twice over at The New Village before her father's assassination, a school physically destroyed and reconstructed four times in a single Papun-district village Phan visits as an adult researcher, suggests that the death-world is not a static condition into which populations simply fall but an ongoing contest in which displaced communities continuously reassert minimal forms of settlement, education, and dignity against a counterinsurgency apparatus equally committed to denying them (Phan, ch. 24). The death-world and the lived, adaptive community are not, on this reading, mutually exclusive descriptions of the same space; they coexist, often within the same household, on the same afternoon, and a frontier-assemblage analysis attentive only to the violence of dispossession without equal attention to these reconstructive practices would miss half of what Phan's testimony actually documents.

Religious Syncretism as a Borderland Survival Strategy

One of the memoir's most ethnographically rich threads concerns the deliberate coexistence of animism, Buddhism, and Christianity within Karen village and refugee-camp life, a syncretism that operates less as passive cultural inheritance than as an active social technology for surviving a frontier defined by competing external claims on religious and political loyalty. Phan describes her parents as committed animists who nonetheless brought their children to Buddhist water festivals, sent them to a Christian-influenced Sunday school, and explicitly told them that "they never preached" and that each child was "free to choose" a faith of their own (Phan, ch. 5). The family's home village of Per He Lu is itself described as religiously mixed in an entirely unremarkable, taken-for-granted way, with animist, Buddhist, and Christian households living side by side and sharing in one another's ceremonies, including the touching-of-the-pig ritual that the family adapts, in the absence of an affordable pig, into a turkey-based substitute when separation from extended family makes the full traditional rite impossible (Phan, ch. 3).

Read against the 1994 DKBA schism, this studied religious pluralism takes on a sharper, retrospective significance. Myanmar military intelligence, as Phan's father explains it to the family after his release from captivity, deliberately engineered the schism by sending a monk to Buddhist Karen frontline units to suggest that the absence of pagodas at their positions, an absence dictated by simple operational secrecy rather than by doctrine, proved that Christian-dominated KNU leadership discriminated against Buddhist soldiers (Phan, ch. 11). The tactic succeeded in part because it exploited a genuine, if previously latent, confessional fault line within an organization that had otherwise functioned, at least at the level of ordinary village life, with remarkable interreligious comity. Phan's family's earlier and ongoing practice of moving fluidly among animist, Buddhist, and Christian ritual space, appears in this light less like simple open-mindedness than like an intuitive, lived defense against precisely the kind of sectarian fracture the regime would later attempt, and partially succeed, in exploiting. The frontier's necropolitical order, on this reading, targets not only bodies through famine and bombardment but the social fabric of solidarity that might otherwise resist it, and religious syncretism functions, however imperfectly, as a fragile bulwark against that more insidious form of targeting, one aimed at the connective tissue of resistance rather than at its combatants directly.

The same syncretism reappears, transformed, in the religious landscape of the refugee camps and of post-resettlement life. Phan describes attending Buddhist ceremonies in Thailand, being offered training as a Buddhist nun she declines because it requires shaving her head, and continuing to invoke animist beliefs about her father's spirit persisting in the landscape after his assassination, scattering his ashes "under trees and at the bottom of a mountain" in keeping with Karen animist practice even as a formally mixed Buddhist-Christian funeral service is also held (Phan, ch. 30). The persistence of this plural religious vocabulary across displacement, village to camp to diaspora, suggests that syncretism functions not merely as a frontier-specific survival tactic but as a portable resource of identity maintenance under conditions of repeated rupture, allowing Karen refugees to carry a coherent cosmology with them even as every other marker of settled life, land, house, legal status, is repeatedly stripped away.

Testimonio, Co-authorship, and the Politics of Audience

Little Daughter belongs to a recognizable genre of human rights life-writing that John Beverly, theorizing the Latin American testimonio tradition, distinguishes sharply from conventional autobiography. For Beverly, testimonio is defined not by its content but by a structural urgency internal to the act of narration itself, "an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival," in which the reader occupies a position closer to that of a juror than a literary consumer (Beverly 14, qtd. in Stone and Woods 173). Crucially, testimonio renounces what Beverly calls the "ideology of individualism" at the heart of bourgeois autobiography by situating the narrating subject in explicit relation to a collective: the witness speaks as a representative of a group's struggle rather than as a singular self seeking literary immortality (Beverly 23, qtd. in Stone and Woods 173). Phan's text fits this model with unusual precision. Its first-person account is produced, in collaboration with a professional writer, with the explicit aim of mobilizing outside audiences on behalf of a collective political cause, the Karen people and the wider Burmese democracy movement, rather than narrating an individual life as a self-contained end in itself. The book's peritext, to use Gérard Genette's term for the paratextual material physically bound into a book as opposed to material circulating outside it, signals this orientation unmistakably: an epilogue listing partner organizations, a timeline of Burmese political history beginning with the founding of the KNU in 1947, biographical notes on the Phan Foundation that Zoya and her siblings establish in their parents' memory, and contact information for Burma Campaign UK all appear alongside the narrative proper, and Phan closes the text by explicitly instructing readers not to feel sympathy for her but to "take action" on behalf of the Karen and the wider Burmese democracy movement (Phan, Epilogue).

The collaboration with Damien Lewis, a journalist with a substantial record of conflict reporting in Myanmar's border regions, situates *Little Daughter* within a broader and increasingly visible practice of Western-mediated witness literature that Matthew Boswell terms "hybrid testimony," in which a co-author's narrative facility and existing access to Anglophone publishing markets is exchanged for a survivor's

authenticating first-person presence (Boswell, qtd. in Stone and Woods 172). This is not a hypothetical category for Lewis specifically: his earlier collaboration with the Sudanese former slave Mende Nazer on *Slave: My True Story*, in which Lewis crafted the narrative from lengthy interviews conducted through a dictionary and his own probing before condensing and reframing the material with the Anglophone literary market in mind, is one of Boswell's central case studies of the form (Boswell, qtd. in Stone and Woods 172). The parallel matters beyond mere biographical coincidence. Smith and Watson describe the "complex nexus of telling, translating, and editing" inherent to this kind of co-authorship as raising genuine risks of appropriating and overwriting the original oral narrative and of wresting interpretive control of its meaning away from the witness (qtd. in Stone and Woods 173). Against that risk, Leigh Gilmore's standard of the "adequate witness," a reader or collaborator who receives testimony "without deforming it by doubt, and without substituting different terms of value for the ones offered by the witness herself," offers a benchmark against which Lewis's practice across both texts can be assessed rather than assumed (Gilmore, qtd. in Stone and Woods 173). Reading *Little Daughter* alongside this precedent does not impugn Phan's testimony, but it does mean that the specific literary shape the book takes, its pacing, its selection of incident, its argumentative emphasis, bears the discernible imprint of a co-author whose professional method had already been formed, and is independently theorized elsewhere, on a structurally similar prior collaboration.

Gillian Whitlock's term for this category of text, the "soft weapon," captures the duality that the Lewis-Nazer precedent and the Beverly-derived account of testimonio together establish. Life narrative of this kind, Whitlock argues, "can personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard," making powerful interventions in debates about sovereignty and human rights, but it remains a soft rather than a hard weapon precisely because "it is easily co-opted into propaganda," absorbed into the careful management of opinion and emotion that characterizes consent-engineering in modern democratic publics rather than its coercive alternatives (3). *Little Daughter* is a soft weapon in exactly this double sense. It performs real advocacy work, demonstrably shaping British public and parliamentary awareness of the Karen cause, while simultaneously functioning as a commodity in what Whitlock calls the global market for cross-cultural life narrative, a market with its own appetites, formal expectations, and capacity to recuperate testimony of radical difference into comfortably familiar shapes (54). Neither function cancels the other; Phan's text does its political work in part because, not despite the fact that, it is also a marketable book.

Judy Sandeman's study of the paratext of Burma-themed books in English gives this market a precise name and a specific set of mechanics. Drawing on Graham Huggan, Sandeman identifies the operative category as the "postcolonial exotic," defined as "the global commodification of cultural differences as an object for consumption" (Huggan, qtd. in Sandeman 1), and she traces how publishers manufacture that commodification through recurring paratextual devices, titles, cover iconography, blurbs, and the framing of authorial legitimacy, across genres as different as travel writing, political analysis, and the novel (1–2). One of those devices, the choice between "Burma" and "Myanmar" in a book's title or subtitle, is itself a paratextual signal of political alignment rather than a neutral descriptor: Sandeman notes that authors who use "Burma" typically do so deliberately, following the usage of the democracy and ethnic-resistance movements over the official name adopted by the ruling military government in 1989 (3–4). Phan's subtitle, *A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West*, makes exactly this choice, and read against Sandeman's account it is not merely descriptive but a small act of allegiance legible to readers already familiar with the genre's conventions before they open the book. Sandeman's discussion of gender and paratext, drawing on Richard Watts, adds a further dimension directly relevant to this paper's second claim about Phan's necropolitical testimony: Watts argues that paratextual framing of women's life writing works specifically to affirm "the reliability of the woman writer and of her appropriateness as witness," a labor of authentication that male authors in the same genre are not required to undergo to the same degree (qtd. in Sandeman 10). That a woman's authority to testify must be paratextually secured, rather than simply assumed, is the publishing-industry correlate of the gendered vulnerability this paper has traced inside the narrative itself, in which Phan's body becomes a legible target for political violence precisely because of, not despite, her gender. The cover and back matter of *Little Daughter*, in other words, are doing some of the same cultural work that the Myanmar military's targeting logic does inside the story: each treats the legitimacy of a Karen woman's voice as something that requires external certification before it can be heard.

This collaborative structure should not be read as evidence of inauthenticity, and nothing in the argument advanced here suggests that Phan's testimony is anything other than substantively truthful; the narrative's major claims, the Four Cuts strategy, the 1995 fall of Manerplaw, the 1994 DKBA schism, the 2007 Saffron Revolution, and the 2008 assassination of Padohmahn Sha, are all independently corroborated by external journalism and human rights reporting contemporaneous with the events themselves. But the collaborative, advocacy-oriented structure of the text does generate specific interpretive obligations for anyone using it as a scholarly source. The narrative's organization, moving from an almost folkloric, sensorily rich account of village childhood, replete with mango-stealing expeditions, an elephant named Mo Ghay Bay, and a

father who builds his children a tree house, through escalating crisis and repeated flight, to a triumphant arc of refugee-to-advocate transformation culminating in a standing ovation at a Conservative Party conference and a personal phone call from the British Prime Minister, follows a shape that is recognizable, even somewhat conventional, within the broader genre of refugee memoir aimed at Anglophone audiences: childhood paradise, violent rupture, prolonged statelessness, rescue through education and resettlement, and finally rights-advocacy work that retroactively redeems the suffering recounted by converting it into political capital (Phan, ch. 29).

Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's analytic vocabulary for what they call the field of human rights, production, circulation, and reception, offers a way of tracking precisely where in this process Phan's narrative shape gets fixed. Production concerns the conditions enabling and constraining the initial telling: in Phan's case, the collaborative interview process with Lewis, conducted after she had already spent a decade rehearsing her story for Western audiences as a professional advocate. Circulation concerns how the narrative travels once told, through which channels, repackaged for which markets, gaining or shedding meaning as it moves; Phan's account explicitly narrates its own circulation, from speech to Conservative Party delegates, to demonstration outside an embassy, to a private audience with a sitting Prime Minister, each venue exerting its own pressure on what the story could say and how. Reception concerns how audiences interpret what they receive, a process Schaffer and Smith insist is never fully predictable or controllable by the teller, however skilled (15, 31–32). Schaffer and Smith's own central case, Rigoberta Menchu's testimonio *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, supplies a sobering parallel to Phan's. Menchu's narrative, also produced through a collaborative interview process, with anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray credited as the volume's listed author, became, in the authors' words, the "exemplary testimonio" of indigenous resistance literature in the United States, propelling Menchu to a Nobel Peace Prize and a UN ambassadorship, before American anthropologist David Stoll's subsequent challenge to specific factual details of her account triggered what Schaffer and Smith, following Leigh Gilmore, call an "extrajudicial trial" conducted in newspaper columns and academic journals rather than any court (29–31). Schaffer and Smith's verdict on that controversy bears directly on how Phan's testimony should be read: a narrative's value to a human rights campaign and its strict, point-by-point factual verifiability are governed by different logics, and conflating the two, treating contested or imprecise detail as evidence against the narrative's larger claims, mistakes the genre's terms of evidence for those of a courtroom or an archive (31–32).

None of this invalidates the testimony's substantive claims, but it does mean that the text's persuasive power for the specific Western audiences Phan describes addressing directly, a Conservative Party conference hall in Bournemouth, a London demonstration outside the Myanmar embassy, a meeting with Prime Minister Gordon Brown at 10 Downing Street, depends partly on its fluency in a narrative grammar that the receiving culture already recognizes, expects, and rewards (Phan, ch. 28). Anthea Vogl's analysis of credibility assessment in asylum adjudication, though developed for a juridical rather than literary context, names precisely this requirement: an applicant or narrator is judged authentic to the extent that she adopts the "narratorial voice" of the realist novel's omniscient narrator, someone who "can confidently account for herself and others," while still appearing sufficiently spontaneous and emotionally legible not to seem rehearsed (qtd. in Reed and Hayes Laughton 551). Agnes Woolley extends this point to literary representation specifically, arguing that the asylum narrative's need to appear authentic produces an "idealized version of refugeehood" that circulates in a "narrative economy" setting the very terms on which refugee experience can be enunciated and heard (qtd. in Reed and Hayes Laughton 552). Schaffer and Smith's account of the Western market for life narrative helps explain why this particular narrative economy takes the shape it does: a postwar expansion of educated, affluent Western readerships created sustained commercial demand for stories of "individualist triumph over adversity," the very arc, of childhood rupture, suffering borne, and eventual vindication, that organizes Phan's narrative and that publishers have learned, across many such books, will reliably find an audience (24–25). Phan's text, read against this framework, is not merely shaped by audience expectation in a general sense; it is shaped by the specific, recognizable genre conventions, what Leigh Gilmore elsewhere calls the "neoconfessional" mode, situated at the crossroads of memoir, self-help, and travel narrative, that determine which refugee stories receive a hearing at all and which are denigrated and drop from view (Gilmore, qtd. in Stone and Woods 174). Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "autoethnography," as Whitlock develops it in her own reading of life narrative from conflict zones, names the specific maneuver this enables: a text in which a colonized or marginalized subject represents herself by engaging the dominant culture's own discursive models, so that the resulting narrative is constructed in dialogue with, rather than simply addressed to, metropolitan expectation (qtd. in Whitlock 48). The memoir is therefore most productively read as occupying the same contested, layered space that Cons and Eilenberg attribute to the physical frontier itself: a discursive borderland in which Karen testimony and Western humanitarian narrative convention jointly produce the text's final form, neither fully autonomous from the other, and in which the very success of the advocacy project depends on a kind of code-switching, in Pratt's terms an autoethnographic appropriation of the receiving culture's own narrative models, between Karen cosmology and animist storytelling on one hand and the redemptive arc expected by a British political audience on the other. Phan's own narration of her first major public speech, in which she opens by joking that the green backdrop of

the conference hall's holding room makes her "feel like I am back home in the jungle," before pivoting immediately into an account of mortar fire and her father's assassination, dramatizes this code-switching almost too neatly, suggesting that Phan herself is acutely, strategically aware of the rhetorical work the text is performing (Phan, ch. 28).

This dynamic has a direct bearing on how borderland-infrastructure scholarship might responsibly use testimony of this kind as a source. A text like Phan's cannot be mined simply for discrete "facts" about Four Cuts operations or DKBA formation, both of which are independently documented in human rights reporting and academic literature on the Karen conflict; its distinct scholarly value lies instead in what it reveals about the affective and embodied registers through which frontier populations experience policies that planners, military strategists, and counterinsurgency theorists describe in bloodless administrative language. Sybille Krämer's distinction between "discursive truth" and "existential truth" offers a precise vocabulary for what is being claimed here. Discursive truth, in Krämer's formulation, is the propositional truth of a verifiable statement, the kind that can be checked, disputed, and corroborated against other sources; existential truth, by contrast, is "inextricably linked to a person and his or her personal experiences," valid not because it can be independently confirmed but because of its irreducible connection to the speaking subject's own history (Krämer 31). Phan's account of the Mae Ra Moe perimeter fence or the "ghost refugee" designation should be read for its existential truth, what statelessness felt like to inhabit, rather than evaluated solely against the discursive-truth standard of an archival record, even as its datable claims, the 1995 fall of Manerplaw, the 1994 DKBA schism, the date of her father's assassination, remain answerable to exactly that standard. The same methodological caution that applies to using a single journalist's on-record assessment, or a podcast transcript, as a source for a broader frontier-assemblage argument applies with equal force here: testimony of this kind illuminates lived meaning, embodied affect, and discursive self-positioning with a richness that no policy document or satellite image can supply, but it requires triangulation against independent reporting before its specific empirical claims, precise dates, casualty figures, or institutional decisions can be treated as established historical fact rather than as remembered, narrated, and audience-shaped experience.

Conclusion

Little Daughter demonstrates that the conceptual vocabulary developed for analyzing frontier assemblages and necropolitical orders, vocabulary developed largely through abstraction from policy documents, satellite imagery, and structural economic analysis, finds vivid, granular confirmation in first-person Karen testimony, while also exceeding and complicating that vocabulary at several decisive points. The text confirms Cons and Eilenberg's insistence that Southeast Asian borderlands are sites of plural, contested sovereignty rather than peripheral extensions of a single state, evident in Manerplaw's simultaneous function as military headquarters, diplomatic capital, refuge for a separate national movement, and ordinary riverside village. It confirms Mbembe's account of necropower as operating through the engineered deprivation of life's conditions, famine, denied medicine, denied legal personhood, rather than through direct killing alone, while extending that account through Phan's documentation of necropower's specifically gendered operation, in which a daughter's body becomes a proxy target for an assassination plot against her father. At the same time, Phan's sustained attention to kinship improvisation, religious syncretism, and small-scale economic agency inside conditions of statelessness suggests that death-world and bare-life frameworks require supplementation by equally serious attention to the durable social practices through which borderland populations continue to produce meaning, solidarity, and even humor under conditions explicitly designed to deny them political existence altogether. Finally, the memoir's testimonio form in Beverly's specific sense, produced through a hybrid-testimony collaboration for an Anglophone advocacy audience and structured around a recognizable arc of rupture and redemptive uplift, illustrates that borderland witness texts are themselves a kind of frontier: a discursive space in which survivor knowledge and reception-culture narrative convention meet, negotiate, and jointly determine what can be said, and heard, about the violence of the frontier. Krämer's distinction between discursive and existential truth clarifies what is at stake in treating such a text as evidence at all: the memoir's value for frontier-assemblage scholarship lies not in its substitutability for the archival record but in an existential truth-telling that no document-based method can supply, even as its verifiable claims remain, properly, subject to exactly the same corroborative standards as any other historical source. Schaffer and Smith's critique of the human rights regime sounds a final, necessary caution against reading the memoir's reception, the standing ovation, the Downing Street audience, as evidence that the system of recognition Phan successfully navigated is therefore just: that system, they argue, "reproduces a circuit of demand in which the powerful and relatively privileged retain the right to confer or refuse recognition," so that a refugee's access to voice and redress depends not only on the truth of her testimony but on her capacity, or her co-author's, to meet terms of legibility that she herself did not set (232). Phan's success on those terms is real and consequential, but it does not, on Schaffer and Smith's account, vindicate the terms themselves. For scholars working on other contested Southeast and South Asian borderlands, including the infrastructure corridors and militarized frontiers of the

broad Indo-Myanmar region, Phan's memoir offers not a substitute for documentary and ethnographic research but an essential reminder of what such research, however rigorous, risks leaving out: the felt, daily, embodied texture of life inside a space where sovereignty is never settled and survival is never guaranteed, and where even the act of telling that story to the world remains subject to a sovereignty, the West's power to recognize or withhold recognition, that the frontier's own inhabitants do not control.

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