



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 43
Issue 1 *March*

Article 13

2016

Review of *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. Eric Tang. Reviewed by Robert Farrant

Robert Farrant

University of Massachusetts Lowell, robert_farrant@uml.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Farrant, Robert (2016) "Review of *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. Eric Tang. Reviewed by Robert Farrant," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 43 : Iss. 1 , Article 13. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol43/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



is the finding that shame is not necessarily always negative, as it can promote social cohesion in some contexts. Luckily, the text offers clues on how to deconstruct the shame/poverty nexus when it does cause harm, and it makes a considerable contribution to understanding a meaningful sphere of human existence.

Mary A. Caplan, University of Georgia, Athens

Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. Temple University Press, (2015), 220 pages, \$24.95 (paperback); \$70 (hardcover).

Researching and writing *Unsettled*, Eric Tang could not have predicted the 2015 refugee crisis, which makes his work oh so timely. Tang spent fifteen years as a community organizer in the Northwest Bronx's refugee neighborhoods, and his experiences permeate the pages of the book. Importantly, though, the knowledge produced through this political engagement with the subject matter only intensifies the bite of his research. The book offers readers an evocative look into an earlier refugee crisis, that of the thousands of people who fled Cambodia at the conclusion of the Southeast Asian War.

In the first part of the book, Tang offers a history of how the Southeast Asian War, in particular the U.S.'s widening of the war through a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia that destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of peasants. He points out that President Richard Nixon ordered the carpet-bombing of eastern Cambodia. From the late 1960s into the early 1970s, the U.S. dropped nearly 2.8 million tons of explosives there, "exceeding the total tonnage of such devices used during the six years of World War II and rendering the tiny nation the most heavily bombed in history" (p. 30). Individuals who survived this raining death then suffered through the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, years in refugee camps, and a new kind of confinement in cities across the U.S. that became home to refugee populations. Between 1975 and 1994 approximately 150,000 Cambodian refugees were settled in the United States; some 10,000 of these refugees arrived in the Bronx.

Unsettled describes and sharply analyzes how Bronx

Cambodians fared, while closely following one woman and her family for several years as they make their way in what the author calls the *hyperghetto*. A site of extreme isolation, punishment, and confinement, refugees become captives in late-capitalist urban America. The majority of refugees were resettled in inner cities where violence, unemployment, and lack of opportunity were endemic. "Racialized geographic enclosures, displacement from formal labor markets, unrelenting poverty, and the criminalization of daily life" awaited the Cambodian displaced (p. 5).

Ra Pronh, the book's central subject, escaped the Cambodian genocide in 1979, lived in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines for six years, and moved to the Bronx under the direction of a resettlement program. The popularized story of resettlement depicts, in Tang's words, "a transition timeline from immigrant to permanent resident, to citizen, with each phase supposedly bringing greater stability" (p. 4). The generalizable Cambodian refugee story and Pronh's specific story are far from such idyllic imaginings. A mother of seven, she moved numerous times and was forced to contend with poor housing, bad landlords, and several negligent housing agencies. With each such displacement, the resettlement agency "failed to move Ra and her family to another neighborhood with better housing, and less violence, and merely relocated them to the next vacant apartment in the same troubled area" (p. 70).

Thus (un)settled, Pronh worked at home for fifteen years to supplement her inadequate welfare income in the home-based garment industry, a throw-back to how turn-of-the 19th century immigrants made a living. She and others engaged in the work, were paid 90 cents per dozen for scrunchies, \$1.50 per dozen for hair bows, and \$2.00 per dozen for hair clips. Home workers sew and assemble hair accessories under exploitative conditions, sometimes even sewing "Made in China" labels onto products, perhaps to mask the fact the fact that such domestic sweatshops exist. This reminded me of Lewis Hine's photographs of tenement homeworkers and Jacob Riis's images of immigrant sweatshop labor in late 19th century Lower East Side walk-ups.

Tang believes his book poses questions relevant to the

present moment about living and working in a part of the U.S. where numerous refugee populations reside. I agree. It is the case that, for the first time since the Southeast Asian refugee crisis of the late-1970s and 1980s, migrants are risking their lives in significant numbers in search of safety and stability. Refugees produced today as casualties of wars on terrorism and drugs:

are immediately cast as threats, not victims. Today's refugees are construed as an entirely unique racial problem that reflects the public's anxieties over national security and is managed by practices such as racial profiling, surveillance, and detention, rather than humanitarian resettlement. (p. 176)

What Tang has given us with this book is a clear warning that refugee resettlement, if practiced as usual, will not offer the new refugees what they so desperately seek and what indeed they ought to have: safe resettlement.

*Robert Farrant, History Department,
University of Massachusetts Lowell*

Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, *The Hero's Fight*. Princeton University Press (2015), 422 pages, \$21.00 (hardcover).

I come to this review of *The Hero's Fight* from a unique vantage point. Soon after I met Fernandez-Kelly in 1994 when I joined the Johns Hopkins faculty (where she still practiced), we became friends, and that meant learning to keep up with this very active, vivacious woman who spent a good deal of her time traveling around the city in a cab driven by D. B. Wilson (Chapter 1). I observed her first-hand interacting with the urban black families in a way I had never seen—maintaining a professional and scholarly posture, while all the while displaying close-up compassion in a myriad of ways. Now I fully understand the excellence of her ethnographic method: rich field notes on each and every encounter in the field that has ultimately resulted beautifully here in "ethnographic narratives while honoring theoretical analysis" (p. 13). The final product is also an accurate description of the world of West