I was sitting with Lt. Somsy and an interpreter in a small, spare room at a community center in a U.S. city. A tape recorder sat on the beige formica-topped table between us. The lieutenant was describing how he and his unit in the Royal Lao Army handled the bodies of those killed in combat during the wars of the 1960s and 1970s.

We tried to get rid of the body, to hide it from the enemy. We took off the ID. If we had time, we buried the dead person. One thing we knew we should never do was steal anything from him. If I took anything for myself the spirit might harm me. There are many people who stole things from the dead and were shot and killed.

I was speaking with Lt. Somsy as part of hospital-sponsored research about the perspectives of Lao and Cambodian emigrants toward death. Like other conversations, this one eventually gravitated to a conjunction between violence and material relations with the dead. The lieutenant’s memory of the directive not to steal from the dead presumes that the dead are enfolded into a material exchange with the living that is characterized by an expectation of gifts, a presumption of debt, and an acknowledgment of sacrifice. Deprived of the ceremonies that would inform him that he was dead, ask him not to trouble the living, and supply him with provisions for his journey, a dead soldier was already disoriented and apt to harass the living. If, in addition, he were robbed, he might extract the very lives of the thieves.
The demands of the dead continue to weigh on emigrants from Laos and Cambodia living in the United States, particularly as these demands are mediated by biopolitical institutions. As material engagement with the dead has become entangled with welfare rules and mortuary protocol, survivors are often unable to fulfill obligations to the dead, not because of the violence of war, but because of the structural violence enacted through lowered economic means and minority status in relation to institutions that regulate the disposition and mourning of the dead according to dominant U.S. assumptions about matter and spirit. While it is difficult anyway to settle debts with those who died violent deaths, it is harder still for those who owe their lives, as they say, to the benevolence of the dead. The difficulty is recast in political exile, as socially marginalized survivors are less able to define the terms through which they relate to communities of the dead.

The present essay grapples with the implications of the frequent conjunction in emigrants’ stories between past violence and material engagement with the dead. The stories inspire a rethinking of the biopolitical management of death from the perspective of the reciprocity of living and dead. I argue that the biopolitical protocol of hospitals and funeral homes negates the social existence of the dead in ways that echo violations of the dead during wartime. I further suggest that institutionalized violations of the dead are informed not simply by sciences of sanitation and death causation, but by latent theological presumptions about matter and spirit that are largely Protestant in genealogy. The separation of matter and spirit that organizes the management of death from the sidelines is also manifest in dominant U.S. mourning practices that emphasize memorialization over material intimacy with the dead.

**SOCIAL WORLDS OF THE DEAD**

Much contemporary literature on mourning is driven by a psychodynamic narrative of the healing of historical trauma through a public discourse in which the dead are evoked through monuments and eulogy. If the dead in this narrative often serve as stand-ins for historical violence—the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, or the events of September 11, 2001—such that spectral relations are transformed from concrete exchanges to vague legacies, the dead in the stories told by Lao, Khmer, Hmong, and Kmhmu emigrants suggest another semiotic spin whereby certain historical events become signs of extraordinary violence toward the dead. Here the dead work less as symbols of injustice, than as tangible participants in violated socialities of living and dead. Arguably, the emphasis on memorialization of the dead as a means of addressing or redressing
collective injustice is the liberal political elaboration of a dominant Protestant mourning style. On the one hand, cemetery conversations with the dead (Francis et al. 2005), letters to the dead posted in cyberspace (Gilbert 2006) or placed against the Vietnam memorial (Sturken 1997), and fundamentalist insistence on a literal resurrection of the body, all suggest a persistent material entanglement with the dead on the part of modern Christians. On the other hand, this entanglement is often manifestly refused within that part of a Christian ethos that is institutionalized in funeral discourse, psychologies of mourning, and public discourses of reconciling past violence, which all suggest that the value of interactions with the dead lies in the consolation of the living, rather than the comfort of the dead.

Perhaps precisely because of the material entanglements of modern Christianity, there is often a self-consciously therapeutic, symbolic, or sardonic cast to North American interactions with the dead. The point is not that these interactions are empty of genuine belief. After all, relations with the dead among Lao, Khmer, Hmong, and Kmhmu emigrants are equally complicated by skepticism. The point, rather, is that the messages and gifts to the dead in much U.S. mourning appear to be largely unhinged from an imagination of the material needs of the dead in an ongoing existence. Such an imagination may also be denied within doctrinaire Theravada Buddhism and Christianized versions of ancestor worship, as I show below. Certainly it would be a mistake to consider Christian and Southeast Asian mourning practices as illustrations of representational and material engagements with the dead, respectively. However, I suggest that a certain insistence on the separation of matter and spirit at work both in the bioethics of hospitals and funeral homes, and in public discourse on honoring the memories of the dead, is a sign not of the secular banishment of religious sentiment from public institutions, but, rather, of the institutional enshrinement of a particular religious sensibility (cf. Keane 2007).

An inability to conceive of a material indebtedness to the dead may be integral to a biopolitical regime that is not only focused on the management of human life (Foucault 1990), but also based on a division of that life into materiality and spirit. Agamben has glossed the material aspect of human life referenced by European philosophy as “bare life,” life that is stripped of social and political value (1998; cf. 2002). His analysis of the ways that institutionalized violence demarcates a category of “bare life” is powerful in grasping the gestures of social exclusion that affect refugees, racially marked minorities and those hovering at the edge of life and death. However, the stories I retell here resist interpretation through a theory of “bare life” in two ways. First, by conflating extreme violence with a
desubjectification that reduces its victims to the status of living dead, the concept of “bare life” seems to preclude any sociality in the existences imagined for the dead. Second, in arguing, following Primo Levi, that those reduced to “bare life” are unable to testify to their own dehumanization (or death), Agamben forecloses the imagination of a communicative interface between living and dead (2002).

For Agamben, testimonies of violence register an internal contradiction by marking what is unspeakable, a lacuna at the heart of the subject’s speech. An account of extreme violence inevitably bears witness to a time when the person could not articulate her suffering (2002:162). The testifying survivor is therefore in perpetual tension with her own “bare life” that is stripped of speech. The material relations with the dead that structure the stories of Southeast Asian emigrants sidestep this (im)possibility of testimony, replacing a focus on narration with a focus on bodily intervention. These stories suggest that a theory of “bare life” is inadequate to address the violations of a social community that embraces both living and dead as part of one material-spectral world, and that addresses the effects of violence less through testimonial memory than through physical encounters with the dead.

Finally, Agamben’s critique of biopolitics, although insightful about the devaluation of the living, precludes the imagination of concrete socialities of living and dead, or the violation of those socialities. Yet emigrants’ stories suggest that participation in such socialities affords powerful possibilities for apprehending the material reverberations of past violence in the present. For violence pursues the dead into their very afterlives, violating them in ways that do not simply terrorize the living or desecrate the corpse in a symbolic reference to future or past violations, but that materially wound and rend social worlds in the present. In his memoir of life under Pol Pot, Pin Yathay recalled his first experience of Khmer Rouge contempt for the dead. He and others were being transported to a work site packed tightly in trucks with no food or water. When two women died en route, the driver ordered their bodies to be dumped at the side of the road, over the weeping and protests of their families. “The idea of leaving them there by the roadside was unthinkable, sacrilegious. I thought: Now I must not hope any longer” (1987:73). Until then, Pin Yathay had struggled to perceive the cruelty of the Khmer Rouge as an excess of revolutionary fervor. It was the willingness to negate the dead as social beings that exposed the radical devaluation of both living and dead.

During political asylum in the United States, survivors of the covert war in Laos or the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia are no longer asked to dump bodies of friends and family members by the roadside. Violence in the United States is experienced largely as the structural violence of racial minoritization and economic
hardship. As the sociality of the dead is forcibly translated, within the terms set by poverty and minority status, into the representational economies of medical and mortuary institutions, it is desacralized in ways that echo the desecrations of war and state terror. Wartime devaluation of the dead therefore finds an uncanny counterpart in autopsy labs, cemeteries, and crematoria where bodies are handled as inanimate matter with only an intermittent and symbolic relation to spirit. One of the sites where emigrants experience the violence of minoritization most acutely, therefore, is in institutional settings that effectively negate the social existence of the dead.

MATERIALITIES OF CARE

If not only the violence of war, but also biopolitical governance interrupts the sociality of living and dead, it does so, I suggest, less as a bastion of rational secularism interfering with religious values, than as the institutionalization of a particular afterlife imaginary. I recommend, therefore, that the economies of care from which wartime dead were excluded, be read less as cultural description than as eschatological and ethical possibility. Although the Theravada Buddhism of Lao and Khmer and the modern animism of Kmhmu and Hmong offer a dynamic range of eschatological possibilities, their death rites share a presupposition that the spirit tangibly receives the care given to the body. Once entangled, body and spirit remain contiguous, still participating in one another’s substance. Lao and Khmer supply the dead with ID cards and passports, placing jewelry in their mouths to enable them to bribe the immigration officers who police the border between hell and heaven. In Laos people sifted through the bones after cremation, keeping jewelry or teeth as good luck charms, a trace of the gift to the dead returned as a talisman for the living. In Cambodia, relatives gathered the bone fragments, purified them with coconut water, and placed them in an urn in the wat (Buddhist temple) to be cared for in an ongoing way.

Lt. Somsy remembered small houses for the dead built by Northern Lao and furnished with household goods: “In there you put pots and pans, and other things to ensure that the dead person has what he needs for everyday life.” When I visited a Lao wat in a U.S. city in 2006, gifts for the dead were piled several feet deep along one wall (see Figure 1). “Let’s say you have offered more than enough for the person to use,” one man, Major Thao, explained. “Then the person will also reserve some things for you when you die.” In the circulation of gifts, a surplus returns to the giver. During Boun Khao Padap Dinh (or, for Khmer, Phchum Ben), the annual feast for the dead during which spirits residing in hell are temporarily released, families bring household items such as cooking utensils and clothing to
the wat and offer them to the monks. “It’s for all spirits,” Lt. Somsy said. “First for the closest relatives and then for any spirit who is starved out there, like a homeless person.” The vagrant dead include those for whom full ceremonies were never performed, like Lao soldiers who died in battle or Khmer civilians dumped in mass graves under Pol Pot. As Major Thao reflected, “The spirit of someone who has died and has no relatives to do the ceremony, will wander around like a bird without any tree branches on which to perch.”

Those who understand death practices strictly in accordance with Buddhist doctrine, philosophize that money is placed in the mouth not to bribe the border guards of the next world, but to demonstrate that no earthly possessions can be taken into death. They say that the coins that remain among the ashes after cremation are evidence that boun (Khmer: bon) or merit is the only gift that circulates between the living and the dead. Every ceremony for the dead produces boun, which is doubly offered to the dead and rebounded back to the living, as an investment in improved afterlives and future incarnations (cf. Keyes 1983:267). Richard Gombrich argues that the practice of transferring merit to the dead developed as a Buddhist accommodation of a prior practice of feeding the dead through the mediation of the monks. “Sensible Theravadin monks decided that food being
visibly consumed by a monk could not possibly be eaten by someone else, so that, if people persisted in their habit of feeding dead relatives, the custom required reinterpretation. What the relatives were really getting was something else—merit” (Gombrich 1971:213–214). Here Theravada ideology almost approaches the “semiotic ideology” of certain modern Christians (Keane 2007) wherein the difficulty of imagining spirits in need of nutrition necessitates a more symbolic reading of physical offerings. Note, however, that in the Theravada reasoning, the problem lies less in the inability of spirits to digest food, than in the inability of food to be ingested twice.

Furthermore, in defiance of the illogic detected by Gombrich’s hypothetical monks, Lao and Khmer emigrants suggest that food and goods offered to monks are transformed into both merit and gifts consumed by the dead. The Khmer ceremony of bangskaul, performed at the funeral, at a ceremony 100 days after death, and then again at Phchum Ben, transfers the merit of the living to the dead, even while, through the very generosity of that gesture, it simultaneously produces more merit for the living. Yet bangskaul transmits not only merit, but also matter, sending ethereal forms of food and money to the dead and leaving physical forms for the monks, while retaining a karmic residue—the good intention motivating the gift—as merit for the giver (cf. Klima 2002:269). The ambiguity of these gifts prompts reflection, but not necessarily logical foreclosure. As one Khmer woman mused, “According to Buddhist doctrine, when someone dies, there is nothing left—no soul, no spirit—so how can they [the deceased] accept something like that [objects such as stoves and refrigerators]? But we believe those dead souls are suffering and we need to help them” (Smith-Hefner 1999:61). An acute awareness of the distress of the dead overcomes any logical objections to material reciprocity.

For Hmong and Khmu, the flow of material assistance between living and dead is unmediated by a notion of merit. Hmong dress the deceased in the burial clothes that will identify him to the ancestors, placing a butchered rooster, bottle of alcohol, crossbow, and other provisions near the body. As the Qhuab Ke (“Showing the Way”) is sung, directing the dead person back along Hmong migration routes to the place of birth, and then on to the place of the ancestors, rice wine is offered to sustain him on his way. He is continuously questioned as to whether he has received the gifts or arrived at particular destinations, his answers read through the position assumed by the kuam (two halves of a buffalo horn or piece of bamboo) when tossed onto the ground. “We give [the deceased] money to hire a boat to cross the river to his home,” Mr. Vangay said. “We tell him to show his appreciation to the country where he’s living now, to the water, and wood, and fire he used, before he leaves.
He needs to say thank you for that.” The spirit repays the landscape with “spirit money” (specially fashioned strips of paper) and incense offered to him by funeral guests. Some Hmong refer to a marketplace on the bridge between the world of the living and the spirit world, where the living and dead “trade, deal, and bargain with each other” (Tapp 1989:64).

Guests stay at the home of the deceased for several days, playing cards and gambling until early morning to “keep the family warm,” as one man said. These gambling parties are, as Klima observed for Thai funerals, “the gift of camaraderie . . . company for the deceased spirit” (2002:251). If the deceased Hmong is a revered older man, the day before the burial is devoted to the settlement of debts to assure that he is not so poor in the next world that he demands assistance from living relatives by making them ill. On the night before the burial, messages are delivered from him through the txiv xaiiv, the “father of words” (Symonds 2004:142–144), instructing the descendents to be kind to one another and to remember to feed the ancestors. “If you do not want to remain healthy and prosperous,” one translation specifies, “it does not matter, but if you want to, you must give charity to your father by giving him three joss sticks, and three amounts of paper money . . . You must take your father and bury him in a good place and then you will have a lot of children. They will live together as crowded as the bamboo clump” (Chindarsi 1976:156–157). An essential gift to the dead is the correct orientation of the gravesite, derived from geomantic principles, and translated by some emigrants as the dead person’s desire for a “good view.”

On the day of burial, animals are given to the dead by an opposite-gender sibling of the deceased. A song the night before informs the descendants: “Tomorrow morning the oxen and pigs will be killed for your father but your father can have only their souls, so you divide the meat and pork among the people who have come to help work in the mortuary rite” (Chindarsi 1976:156–157). The dual form of the gift is explicit here: the deceased receives the souls of the animals, while the mourners consume the flesh. Pao Chang, a funeral specialist, emphasized, “The meaning of the sacrifice is love . . . I’m your brother, you’re my sister and we love each other. I’m not going to leave you alone even though you’ve died.’ It is strong, strong support. This is a kindness, not a demand.” Perhaps fending off anthropological or Christian interpretations of animist rites, he insists that gift exchanges with the dead are not rote cultural rules or self-interested transactions, but communications of love.

The dead continue to be offered food for several days following the burial. Some conjecture that by the fifth day the dead “may be able to find his own food”
GIFTS INTERCEPTED

(Thao 1993:67). Hmong speak of a spirit of the deceased *(plig)* who travels to the land of the ancestors, another who remains with the body, and a third who is reborn (Johnson 1992:60; Lemoine 1996; Symonds 2004:20–21). By directly referring to a spirit that remains with the corpse, Hmong afterlife lore formalizes a contiguity of body and spirit, which, for Khmer and Lao Buddhists, is simply ritually enacted. Mr. Vangay’s family invited his dead father’s spirit to the ceremony known as *xi plig* on the 13th day after the burial. He drove to the cemetery, picked up a handful of dirt, called the spirit, and brought the dirt home for an offering of chicken, water, and liquor. “We sat beside his father,” Mrs. Vangay said, “beside the dirt.” Here the intermingling of the soul with the soil of the grave enables both material closeness and reciprocity. During the *tso plig* to release the plig for rebirth, the deceased is again invited home and fed. “We offer food and liquor,” Mrs. Vangay said, “and everyone cries.” Her comment is a reminder, once again, that these feasts are not simply formal rites but enactments of love and grief.

Whereas even Christian converts butcher animals at such times, one Catholic leader, Mr. Lo, explained, “We just kill it for a celebration for the ones who are living. We do not believe that we give the animal to the dead person. In the Christian teachings you don’t need to take anything with you. So we as Christians do not really feed our ancestors.” Note that Mr. Lo’s understanding of Christianity, like doctrinaire Theravada Buddhism, works against the possibility that the dead participate in a material gift exchange with the living. As Christian converts, most Kmhmu in the United States are also careful to dissociate themselves from material reciprocity with the dead. “We don’t pray to ghosts,” one man assured me. “We pray for the person to get into heaven. During the mass the priest names the things that people are offering. The diocese allows us to do that.” Yet the hybridity of this practice is suggested by other accounts. “We know what kind of food our ancestor likes,” one woman said, “so we buy that kind of food and offer it to him. If someone offers that and eats that, then the ancestor will receive it.” The materiality of the gift to the dead still haunts this Christian offertory. Cheuang, a Kmhmu healer, whose conversion to Christianity did not prevent his conscientious pursuit of non-Christian rites, described the preparation of his mother’s body after her death.

We said, “Here’s some money. Whatever you want, you take, and leave us what you don’t want.” We wrapped the coins in black and white cloth and put them in her hand. In one hand we put sticky rice, and in the other meat. We put other coins in her mouth for her to buy her way to *miang rôoy*
If we put them in a pocket we’d worry that somebody would steal them. In her mouth we know they’re safe.

His story signals again the concreteness of the gift, the return of part of the gift to the giver, and the care taken to avoid any interference in the exchange with the dead. The heart of these rites is not memorialization, but material reciprocity.

It is tempting to imagine that the materiality of such relations with the dead is in tension with their emotional charge. The exchange with the dead referenced here, as Pao Chang emphasized, is rooted less in rational self-interest, than in persistent connection and love. However, a confessionalist witnessing or expressivist remembering is not what the dead primarily ask of that love (cf. Chakrabarty 2000:118–148; Foucault 1990). They ask instead that it be manifest in meticulous physical care. The dead are affected by the handling of their bodies and the conditions of their graves. They are hungry or thirsty, distressed at their nakedness, in need of cash and visas to cross the border to the ancestors. They require less the expression of feeling and the exercise of memory, than company, hospitality, food and cigarettes, a good view from their burial sites, stainless steel pots and pans.

Yet this materiality of relations with the dead signals not a utilitarian connection, but a continuous flow of care.

Drawing Heidegger’s and Bataille’s thoughts on the gift into dialogue, Rebecca Comay (1990) writes of an indebtedness that is simultaneously an infinite gratitude (for time, for other beings, for being itself). Comay suggests that this indebtedness marks a sociality prior to exchange and a responsibility prior to law. It is gratitude so profound in the face of generosity so extravagant, that no payback can be thought. Within the limits of European philosophy such an exuberant gift, and the infinite gratitude it provokes, is imagined as a gesture toward an immaterial abstraction, rather than as a moment of material exchange. Although the gift exchanges with the dead traced here hold some of the resonance of that radical Heideggerian gift, they simultaneously exhibit a gritty physical existence: mung beans, rice wine, the washing of the bones, or polishing of the urn. Jean-Luc Nancy and Richard Livingston (1991) note that for “Western” thinkers, the concept of sacrifice is “spiritualized” such that true sacrifice is necessarily figurative, rather than literal. They point out that philosophers from the Greeks through Bataille consider the more literal sacrifice practiced by peoples around the world a vulgar economism.

Yet they observe:

When someone says to his gods: “Here is the butter. Where are the gifts?” it may be that we do not know what he is saying, since we know nothing of...
the community in which he lives with his gods. . . . We need to admit that what we consider as mercenary exchange (“here is the butter . . .”) sustained and gave meaning to billions of individual and collective existences, and we do not know how to think about what founds this gesture. (We can only guess, confusedly, that this barter in itself goes beyond barter.) [Nancy and Livingston 1991:26, 35]

For “gods,” in this statement, we might substitute “the dead.” The parenthetical caution that barter may go beyond barter is provocative but enigmatic. Must academics resign ourselves to the absolute foreignness of a more literal sacrifice imagined by “billions” of humans? Instead might we not recognize in the stories told by our neighbors other possibilities of rapprochement with the dead?

These stories are not told in an innocence of a more figurative interchange between living and dead, but, rather, in the face of it; Southeast Asian emigrants are no strangers to the symbolic economies of modern Christianity, cosmopolitan Buddhism, or academic thought. But if a modern reason or Christian conversion tends to constrain the dead to a metaphorical existence where they are only symbols for the grief of the living, the dead themselves insist on a more bodily presence. Charles, a Khmer man in his forties, recalled that once, as a young man living in the Cambodian countryside with his family, he fell ill after a visit to the city. Having tried several remedies to no effect, his mother consulted a krou teay, a fortune teller, who ascertained that Charles’s dead great-grandmother was angry with him. “Her spirit was upset because I went away from her without letting her know. My mom did a ritual and the next day I got better. Maybe I should have gone to the grave and said, ‘Grandma, I’m going to go away.’” He laughed. “I don’t really believe in it, but it happened.” His skeptical comment registers his journey not only away from the burial site where his grandmother lingered, but also toward a civil society swept clear of spirits, where relations with the dead are subject to a more symbolic status. With such a seismic shift in the terms of reality, his great-grandmother demanded of him not just sticky rice, cooked with mung beans and pork, presented at Phchum Ben, but an acknowledgment of her capacity to participate in impromptu (and not only prescribed) physical exchanges with the living. It is such exchanges that are evoked by survivors of war and state violence who speak of their indebtedness to the dead.

**DEBTS TO THE DEAD**

In his memoir of life under the Khmer Rouge the musician Daran Kravanh says, “I cannot tell you why or how I survived . . . love and music and invisible
hands, and something that comes out of the society of the living and the dead, for which there are no words” (LaFreniere 2000:3). In Kravanh’s rumination, the debt to the dead emerges as a form of sociality, less a transaction to be completed, than a relationship to be cultivated. Even if no words can capture this sociality, stories offer glimpses and approximations, singular moments in the social interchange of living and dead. When Kravanh first heard his brother play a certain song, he watched his spirit drift out of his body “like steam rising from a bowl of rice.” Long after his brother had died, when Kravanh was in trouble, he heard the song again and sensed his brother nearby, offering him protection.

With the destruction of the wats and the murder and forced defrocking of monks by the Khmer Rouge, the gift exchange with the dead was severely disrupted. “When the Vietnamese took over,” Sodoeung, a Khmer counselor, said, “people were supposed to look for their relatives’ bodies and bones. But how could they look?” One young woman, like many others, had lost her entire family. “She didn’t do any ceremony,” Sodoeung recalled. Then one day her family sent a message through a neighbor’s dream. “‘If you don’t go to the wat, we won’t have any food or clothes to wear.’ She didn’t believe it, because she was one of the kids who grew up under the communists. Later on she got sick.” Even as the Khmer Rouge officially nullified all responsibilities to the dead, their violence, like the violence of the relentless U.S. bombing campaigns that preceded it, inflated the debt, prompting the dead to request recompense through bodily forms of haunting.

In stories of war and terror the unsettled dead frequently intermingle with the landscape, as the ground where extreme violence occurred is reimagined. With so many sudden and untended deaths, Cambodian forests were teeming with restless spirits. There is still public discussion of whether to cremate the anonymous remains of those who were summarily piled in mass graves. Meanwhile unfinished ceremonies pull at emigrants in the United States. “They have regrets,” Sodoeung said. “Every time they go to the wat they say, ‘I wish I could find where my parents’ grave is, or their ashes, so I could put them in the wat.’” Sodoeung’s own grandmother’s ashes were housed in a wat that was later converted to a torture site. “[The Khmer Rouge] took a lot of people to that wat to kill. They buried them there. People told me it was just like a ghost town. When you stepped you could feel that the ground was mushy. It was not really solid.” In that place the restless dead made themselves known, not with dream appearances or slammed doors as in the United States, but with an unnerving tactility. The sponginess of the earth suggested the presence of dead who were beyond the reach of civility.
Not having made the transition to benevolent ancestors, their abandonment was embodied in their still decaying bodies.\textsuperscript{13} The disturbing possibility went unspoken that Sodoeung’s grandmother’s ashes were absorbed into this blood-soaked earth.

Yet it was also the dead submerged in the landscape or emerging from it, who offered a haphazard protection during war or state terror. Kravanh recalled childhood hours spent under a fruit tree where his grandfather was buried, listening for advice. “The voice I heard from him,” he said, “was not a human voice but one of nature—of that place where my grandfather had returned” (LaFreniere 2000:10). At the 100-day ceremony, when the family brought food to the grave, a lizard crawled out from under the tree and ate a few morsels. Some years later, on the run in the forest, wounded from a fight with Khmer Rouge soldiers, Kravanh took consolation from a lizard that appeared in his path, telling his companions, “It is my grandfather come to help us” (LaFreniere 2000:68).

Charles’s soldier brother sought protection from a spirit known simply as Yeimao (grandma). According to legend, she declared that she would only marry a man who could defeat her in combat. After many men died in the attempt, she herself eventually died, still chaste, on the mountain where she had lived. “Hundreds of people cross the mountain,” Charles said, “and before they cross they buy some fruit and offer it to her spirit, so that they can pass safely. Otherwise they end up in a car accident or falling off the mountain.” Charles’s brother took a rock from the mountain. “He went down on his knees and asked for it. Now even a bullet can’t hit him. During the war, people would shell him, his clothes would burn, be all ripped, and no bullet touched his body. He brought this rock when he visited, and showed me. It’s black. It changes color according to the temperature.” Again skepticism wavered in the face of the physicality of the rock and of his brother’s survival. Human dead who take the form of animals or minerals, merging into and emerging from the landscape confound a biopolitical division of human beings into animality and spirit, biological and sociopolitical existence. Through such situational transmigration, the dead simultaneously exemplify, like rocks or animals, both intimate ordinariness and ontological alterity. They are both communicative and mute, but their (im)possible testimony is shaped less by a tension between inarticulateness and speech, than by bodily exchanges between human and nonhuman matter. The indebtedness to such dead extends to the entire nonhuman realm, as articulated in the Hmong funeral song in which the deceased is advised to compensate the landscape for water and wood with the spirit money given her by the living.
In addition to the rock, Charles’s brother carried a human skull in his backpack. “That skull protects me,” he told Charles. “When I sleep I just put the skull on a stick standing next to me. I tell it, ‘Any harm that comes, please wake me up.’” “He’s been in the army for ten years, fighting in combat,” Charles marveled. “And he still survives.” During an escape from her work unit under the Khmer Rouge, Sodoeung also sought protection from human remains. “I saw a monk’s body in a stupa, sitting close to the Buddha’s foot. I slept next to the monk’s body. By that time it was just bones. I didn’t smell anything. I saw the Buddha’s picture and the monk and they both are very gentle people. I thought they would protect me.” Here the lack of odor works against the swampy muck of the killing fields, indicating the auspiciousness of the dead. The spirit’s purity and merit is evidenced by the cleanliness of the bones. The homology of spirit and corpse evoke a tangible sense of protection.

Hmong and Kmhmu emigrants also speak of debts to and protection from the dead under conditions of violence and displacement. Mysterious death in sleep among Hmong and Lao men (common enough to have earned a diagnosis, Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome, SUINDS) is associated with nightmares of a suffocating spirit who sits on the sleeper’s chest. Hmong say that those who have been deserted by their ancestors are particularly vulnerable to such attack (Adler 1991:59). “[My brother and I] are susceptible,” one man said, “because we didn’t follow all of the mourning rituals we should have when our parents died. . . . We have lost contact with their spirits, and thus we are left with no one to protect us from evil spirits. . . . I had hoped flying so far in a plane to come to America would protect me, but it turns out spirits can follow even this far” (Tobin and Friedman 1983:444). Pao Chang told a story of a man who returned to Thailand to tend his father’s grave.

When he came home, his son got cancer. He had radiation treatment but was still ill. The family called the txiv neeb [shaman] even though they were Catholic. The txiv neeb diagnosed: “You people have been Christian for a long time. You haven’t done laig dab [the feeding of the ancestors] for 30 years. And one of you went back and damaged your father’s house. He’s not happy so he’s punishing you for it.”

The family performed laig dab belatedly, but the son did not recover. When a U.S. physician suspected ancestor illness in a young Hmong woman suffering from severe headaches and nightmares about her deceased parents, she and her husband insisted, “We’re Catholic; we went to Catholic school, we don’t know about these
things” (Putsch 1988). Nonetheless they agreed to consult Hmong elders, who traced the illness to the woman’s failure to seek permission to marry from her dead parents. After a meal was hosted for the parents to request their blessing, the dreams and headaches ceased. In these stories, efforts to “assimilate” to more symbolic recognitions of the dead or to “reconcile” past violence are subverted by a physical haunting that initially goes unrecognized. The stories underscore what might be at stake in the shift to a more representational economy of relationships with the dead: the loss of a means to address the past as materially embodied in the present.

Derrida explored an inherent paradox of the gift, that in the very instant it is noticed by either giver or receiver, it is no longer a gift as such. The giver experiences self-satisfaction and the anticipation of a countergift, even as the receiver becomes aware of a debt. The “pure gift” Derrida writes, would be “aneconomic,” outside of all calculations of benefit (1992; cf. 1995). In exchange with the dead, however, there is never final certainty regarding who granted the survivor the gift of life, whether a gift to the dead was received, or whether the value of a gift exceeds or falls short of a prior gift traveling in the reverse direction. It is impossible to erase the risk of dangling and unclaimed gifts, unknowingly accepted gifts, and mysterious remainders of debt that, being beyond calculation, might be neither repaid nor repayable. Gifts offered to the dead, therefore, take on some of the exteriority of a “pure gift” in relation to political economy. The exchange quickly falls into darkness, unfolding in a time out of time, exaggerating the quality of incommensurability that is already inherent to the gift (cf. Comay 1990:67), the mystery of trading rice for survival.

Heidegger observed that the gift of time precedes any process of exchange, exceeding the “measured reciprocity of a debit-credit exchange” (Comay 1990:87). For the storytellers quoted above, the living receive their very lifetimes from the dead, through ancestral bloodlines, and through the permission of spirits for (re)birth. Because a countergift of life (death) can only be deferred, but never finally avoided, all other gifts to the dead can be partly understood as postponements of that gift. In such a gift cycle, the ethical necessity is less to give without expectation of return (already a given in exchanges with the dead) than to participate in an open-ended reciprocity. Klima suggests that the Derridean problem of the pure gift evaporates within a Buddhist economy of karma (2002:269). He asks, “What if the ‘gift without exchange’ already was the state of affairs? What if the practice of exchange were seen through different moral eyes, ones not so full of an unfulfilled desire for the absence of interest, hierarchy, asymmetry, or—and this is
forceful—not haunted by the deep cosmological tradition of the ‘evil’ of money?” (Klima 2002:269).

It is arguable that Derrida himself located the problem of the pure gift in European ethics, linking the valorization of the gift to a Christianity marked by solitude, interiority, and a private contract with God (1995). Nonetheless, following Klima, I want to contemplate further the difference between what Derrida called the “terrestrial” and “celestial” economies of Christianity, and what Klima calls the material–spiritual exchange of Buddhism. In the Christian contract, God sacrifices himself to pay off human debts, but only for those who “believe,” becoming investors or creditors of God, giving alms for the sake of a heavenly reward (Derrida 1995:114–115). In the Buddhist exchange, the living offer gifts not only to ancestors, but also to anonymous crowds of dead, including the hungry, derelict, and abandoned. In this gift cycle, as in the sacrifices theorized by Bataille (1989:43–49), gifts surpass mere productive utility, as the distinction between giving and receiving dissolves in the possibility of abundant, redoubling, perennially flowering gifts, or in the danger of gifts gone awry. The sociality of living and dead is infused with a generosity that is simultaneously a protective symbiosis. Perhaps the most extreme danger in this sociality lies in its institutional disavowal, in an official ostracism of the dead amounting to contempt for their gifts.

**DISAVOWAL: FROM COVERT WARS TO DIASPORA**

In the United States, the disavowal of the gifts of the dead is interwoven with the disavowal of the sacrifices of those who died or nearly died in the U.S.-sponsored wars and their aftermath in Laos and Cambodia. The sacrifices of Kmhmu, Lao, Khmer, and Hmong in the covert wars and their attendant theaters of operation have largely gone unrecognized. Their displacement and diaspora was a direct consequence of U.S. military involvement, which changed the field of regional politics with its capital and armies, as much as it altered the landscape with its bombing campaigns and defoliants. After U.S. withdrawal, emigrants found themselves not only without compensation for their sacrifice, but also without governmental protection. As refugees they were quintessential figures of social exile, recognized citizens of no national community, with no political rights unless to humanitarian charity.

Of his time spent in a Thai refugee camp Lt. Phanha, a Kmhmu commander under the CIA in the covert war, said, “If they saw that someone’s wife was beautiful they would kill him and abuse his wife. Probably whoever did it didn’t actually get an order to do it but they did it anyway, because we were refugees. Who cares if you
kill them?” But the sense of being dispensable, without being explicitly targeted, did not end with arrival in the United States. As one Lao man asked, “What good to come here, USA, if nobody knows my name? Is this not the same as the dead ones?” (quoted in Proudfoot 1990:112). Emigrants found themselves on the fringes of the social world, in a chronic experience of unrecoverable lives. They sometimes speak therefore, not just of their own debts to spirits, but of the U.S. government’s debts to them. “They say the Americans ‘lost’ the war,” one Lao commented, “but really we lost because everything we knew was destroyed. . . . Really they have won because they haven’t been made to pay the damage” (quoted in Proudfoot 1990:117). Those who fought in the covert war remember that the CIA promised to compensate them for loss of families and homes. Lt. Phanha voiced his bitterness that Kmhmu veterans are seldom recognized for the services they rendered to the United States. What refugees receive from the U.S. government is less recognition of their sacrifice, than minoritization and the humiliations of public assistance. The injury is often experienced less as a broken contract than as unreturned hospitality and social exclusion. “Why did the United States invite us here with promises,” asked one Lao, “and then make us feel very low when we ask for these promises?” (Proudfoot 1990:162).

When such promissory notes are ignored, falling outside of a national accounting, they may still be called in by the dead. Klima counterposes those Thai deaths that enabled the ousting of a military dictatorship and the establishment of a neoliberal democracy, against those other Thai deaths that led to no regime change, but only to wandering and dissatisfied ghosts, reminders of the violence buried at the foundations of the liberal state, and the structural violence that still sustains it. The ghosts of the forgotten, Klima writes, watch “restlessly from the outside” (2002:86)—outside, that is, of the cycle of exchange in its politically sanctioned and patriotically legible versions. It is in a similar environment of unresolved debt that U.S. institutions of death have become one of the sites at which the continued devaluation of Lao and Cambodian emigrants is acutely felt. U.S. medical and mortuary settings become the end points of failed gift exchange and discounted sacrifice (cf. Ong 2003:91–121). The possibility that relatives have been permitted to die because of immigrant status or dependence on welfare evokes a bureaucratic “bad death” in which inadequately tended bodies are poised to become restless spirits. The perception of disregard extends to post mortem procedures that tamper dangerously with the afterlife of the deceased.

There is a pervasive concern, for instance, about the engagement of medicine in bodily dismemberment (cf. Scheper-Hughes 2000). When elderly Khmer hear
that a baby has been born without lungs, they say she must be the reincarnation of someone whose lungs were removed in a funeral home. Among Lao, anxieties about organ removal in medical or mortuary contexts invoke stories of bad spirits who eat the internal organs of others, and among Khmer, they invoke stories of soldiers who ate the livers of their enemies (Hinton 2005). Remembered violations of the dead in a context of warfare or state terror still reverberate in manipulations of the dead in a context of medical science. Hmong suggest that dead who are missing body parts seek replacements from the bodies of the living. Even Christian Hmong are opposed to autopsy, insofar as it treats the dead as experimental objects. “People complain that the doctors just use [autopsy] to study the body,” Mr. Lo said. “They are angry about it. They don’t like to have the body cut.” One Kmhmu woman working as a hospital janitor told her community that she disposed of buckets of livers, hearts, and intestines every day. To rob dead bodies of organs is to cut the dead out of a relation of care that would otherwise sustain both them and their survivors.

As if to compensate for possible violations to dead bodies, people organize elaborate funerals. Yet even these fail to shield the dead from institutional disregard. “Here, even though we have everything,” Sodoeung said, “food, cars, VCRs, all hi-tech, material things, still something is not complete. We do a lot of big ceremonies and spend a lot of money, but people feel like they still need something else to add to it.” When her father died, the family performed ceremonies at the wat, but her mother wanted to perform a ceremony at home as well. “She really wanted to do a big ceremony, because she loved my father so much,” Sodoeung said. “People who live in housing projects don’t have space inside the house. We had to do the ceremony outside.” Fifteen monks chanted morning and evening, lining up with their bowls to receive food from the guests. “The neighbors called the police. That’s what made [my mother] upset, when she saw the police come.” The arrival of police cars, and the accompanying sense of embarrassment and harassment, cramped an event that was intended as a lavish act of generosity to the dead.

Before cremation, funeral home staff remove any coins placed in the mouth of the deceased. Later Khmer families argue about whether the spirit will have enough money. “Younger people think it’s just symbolic,” Sodoeung said. “Just put it on and then take it off. He’s not going to know.” But my mom said, ‘No, if you take it off that means you’ve lied. You didn’t do it honestly.’” Whereas those educated in the United States learn to understand the offerings to the dead as symbols, in accordance with Christian theology and anthropology,¹⁹ their elders understand them as gifts that secure the comfort of the deceased and the prosperity of the
family. Some funeral homes prevent the relatives from initiating the cremation. “We want to witness the cremation with our five senses, to touch the button, to see the burning,” Major Thao said. “We want to see the body going in the oven, see the smoke going up. Otherwise we don’t feel good.” Without a sensory engagement with the corpse to concretize the continued relationship with the dead, ceremonies seem empty and incomplete.

Mrs. Sann repeatedly returned, in our conversations, to her sorrow and anxiety about the deaths of two of her daughters, one in Cambodia, another in the United States. Yet she was smiling and animated as she narrated the home video of her mother’s second burial in Vietnam, playing on a small TV in her apartment. Asked about the white string that twined from the coffin through the line of monks and around a pile of food and gifts, she said, “It’s the way of sending goods to the person.” After the body was exhumed she helped to wash the bones. “In that village they say that if you are a good person then, when they do the second burial, no one will smell anything. Before we dug up my mom’s remains, I prayed ‘please don’t let her have any odor.’ And she didn’t. There were no flies and the villagers were happy and spoke a lot about it.” Later she articulated her fears about the daughter who died in the United States.

I asked the person at the cemetery if we would be able to do a second burial and he said I would have to ask the welfare office. Now I’m feeling bad that I buried her. If I had known that I couldn’t do a second burial, I would have cremated her. Back home, we had a house and land. For some people we built a little house outside. Every mealtime, we brought them rice and soup.

In the United States, it is difficult to extend sufficient hospitality to the dead. 20

For Khmer, anxiety about bodily remains in the United States echoes ongoing regrets over the dislocation of the dead under the Khmer Rouge. “My friend’s son was shot to death,” Mrs. Sann recounted. “She put his bones inside the house. Every mealtime she would offer him a little food. My children were scared of the remains. . . . Here, if you want to put the ashes in the temple, you have to know the monk. And it is difficult to build a chedey [stupa].” Sodoeung agreed:

My mother didn’t think the wat was a safe place for my father’s ashes in case of fire. She didn’t want to lose his ashes. When he died she said, “Oh, I wish there was a place to put the ashes.” We said, “Do you want to bury him here?” and she said, “No, we’ll take him home.” Right now his ashes are in the wat. He told me to take them home when I can and bury them over there, build a stupa for him. But my mom says not to take him because she’ll feel lonely.
Again the connection between bodily remains and spiritual presence is acutely apparent. The inadequacies of wats in the United States are reminiscent of the destruction of wats in Cambodia. Diaspora stirs up the wartime dread that the dead will be permanently displaced.

Kmhmu and Hmong also commented on institutional protocol that interferes with care for the dead. John Prachitham recalled that the funeral home that handled his father’s body allowed only a few people to visit him and only for 15 minutes. People brought their gifts for the dead to his home. When I asked whether the elders worried about his ability to receive the gifts at such a distance from his body, John answered with a characteristically Christian presumption of the split between matter and spirit: “No. We don’t care where the body is. We just make offerings for the spirit.” Nonetheless one woman negotiated with funeral home staff to be permitted to place rice in her dead husband’s hand. “If you don’t give him rice,” she asked, “what is he going to eat?” And when Cheuang died of cancer, a friend placed gifts of coins and food in his hands, reciting the route to his ancestors. There was, however, a troubling incident during his funeral. Typically the coffin would have been opened just before burial, to allow mourners to see him once more, and to offer him a last chance to return to life. Cheuang himself had spoken to me a few years earlier about the importance of giving the dead an opportunity to revive: “We made an offering of money, rice, and candles, and said to the röoy [spirits], ‘Tell me if this person is really dead or if he is going to come back.’ People will come back or not.” But the funeral home personnel refused to open Cheuang’s coffin, foreclosing this bodily communication between living and dead.

As one Hmong man was dying, the family dressed him in the burial garments that would identify him to his ancestors. Mrs. Vangay said, “We told the morgue, ‘After you clean him up you should put the clothes back on.’ But they didn’t do that. They wrapped him in plastic.” At the funeral home the family replaced the plastic with burial garments, laboring to turn a depersonalized corpse back into a spirit’s body. In Laos, Hmong calculated an auspicious day and location for the burial, but here they can seldom afford that luxury. “Back there,” Mr. Vangay recalled, “the funeral doesn’t take much money. We did the ceremony at home and prepared everything ourselves. Here everything takes money.” Those whose gravesites are paid for by public assistance are often stacked in layers, resulting in a burial configuration that can spark a hierarchical conflict among the dead, provoking them to send sickness to the living. Such burial practices can prove as risky to the living as the slipshod burials of wartime.
“When you’re there with the dead person,” Major Thao emphasized, “doing the ceremonies with your own hands, you gain a lot of merit, more than you would by donating money.” This insistence on bodily intimacy—to be close to the corpse, to perform rites “with your own hands” is unfamiliar to predominant U.S. conceptions of mourning, which rest on a deeply ingrained assumption that death is a rupturing of body and soul. One physician observed that a man had lingered near his mother for an hour and a half after she stopped breathing. He added that he was “amazed” it took the son so long to “let her die” (Kaufman 2005:109). Hospital discipline appears to operate according to a hidden eschatological assumption that a dead body becomes almost instantaneously an empty shell.

In this way a particular version of Christian numinology organizes the institutional management of death from the margins. Unlike Lao khwan, Khmer praloeng, Knhmu hrmæal, or Hmong plig, Christian souls are not known to leave the body during severe illness, shock, or fright. After death, however, if post mortem practices are any indication, these souls are thought to effect a swift departure, indifferent to the body left behind. Whereas many Southeast Asian words translated as soul are used also to refer to the “spirits” of various body parts, or of houses or plants, the Christian soul is singular and exclusively human. Its immateriality enables medical and mortuary practices in which human bodies are treated for periods of time as hunks of flesh, even though at other moments (e.g., during a viewing) they are dressed up to represent the social person. The immediate separation of the spirit from the body allows little temporal scope for tangible gifts, denying the dead not only materiality, but also the elapse of time that is essential to reciprocity.

Engaging with the dead for these emigrants is less a problem of memory, than a problem of a past that materially interpenetrates the present, manifesting in mysterious illnesses, spongy gravesites, or the suffocating pressure of a spirit who kills a man in his sleep; as much as in eerie funeral songs of the Hmong qeej (reed pipes), paper inscribed with names of the dead and passed into monks’ hands, rotten flesh washed from human bones, or the smoke of a cremation fire. Mourning involves ongoing relationships with dead who might at any moment intervene in everyday life, leading your son to get AIDS, or your friend to die suddenly in his sleep, or, then again, enabling your brother to survive a battle, or your daughter to have daughters of her own. In these stories the dead “testify” in bodily ways, eating food left for them, demanding new clothes, asserting a contemporaneous presence. They demand less to be remembered than to be re-membered, re-embodied in material practice. U.S. institutions of death intercept this embodiment, implicitly urging emigrants to relegate the dead to the past, replace
bodily engagement with memorialization, and embrace symbolic economies of mourning.\(^{22}\)

Douang speculated that because of ceremonial lapses, people earn less boun making offerings to the dead in the United States than they would in Laos. Anyway, Lt. Somsy reasoned, most Lao spirits surely make their way back to Asia. “There’s nothing here for them, no place to be comfortable.” Even as emigrants adapt their relations with the dead to U.S. protocol, the sense of incompleteness is an endless ellipsis, a vague but escalating debt. What is missing is not any specific gift, but, rather, an uninhibited enactment of the sociality of living and dead. The inadequacies of diasporic ceremonies arise less from unfinished exchange than from the tendency of modern institutional practice to implicitly deny the material presence of the dead, substituting a symbolic presence that should be satisfied with symbolic gifts. This substitution can have the effect of discounting the dead as social beings, evoking the desecrations of wartime.

**DESECRATION AND “BARE LIFE”**

In his account of burial during battle, Lt. Somsy said nothing about the bodies of those he himself had killed. Might they also harm him? Of his brother’s harassment by the dead, Charles said, “He spent a lot of time in the jungle fighting, and he saw a lot of spirits. Ghosts would bother him at night. He would spend the night in his hammock hanging in a big tree and a spirit would make noise, or make the tree branch break.” These spirits undoubtedly included not only comrades whose deaths he witnessed, but also enemy soldiers whose deaths he caused. Lt. Phanha told me, “In this life I know I’ll suffer badly because of what I have done. I had to kill so many people. I don’t think god will ever forgive me.” Here he almost certainly referred to the Christian god he expected one day to worship, because whenever he spoke of the spirits who helped him tend rice fields, heal illness, or escape from prison camp, he referred to róoy, the Kmhmu word used for spirits ranging from paternal ancestral dead, róoy kàang, to spirits of the forest (róoy pri or róoy patay), to those who died violent deaths (róoy he’ép).\(^{23}\) In speaking of forgiveness, he evoked Christianity, as if it promised (and yet might fail) to assume his debts to those he had killed.

Are “enemy” dead also enfolded into a reciprocity with the living then? Or are they deliberately excluded from it? When Lt. Somsy spoke of “hiding” the body of his comrade, he tacitly acknowledged the risk that the dead could become targets for desecration. Katherine Verdery writes of Serbs who machine-gunned the graves of Croatians in post-Yugoslavia (1999:107). Alexander Hinton retells a
story of a group of Khmer Rouge soldiers who ate the liver of a man as punishment for stealing cassava from a collective food cache (2005:290–293). They intended, Hinton argues, to strip the man of his membership in the social community, while simultaneously absorbing his vitality.²⁴ Violation of bodies does more than refer to acts of violence; it reiterates them in mimetic acts of terror. The defaced body is not merely a political symbol, but a violent trace, bearing an intense potency to affect not only mourners, but also possibly perpetrators.

Violence to the dead appears to position them decisively outside a given community as those to whom nothing is owed, whose deaths are, in Agamben’s terms, forbidden to be seen as sacrifice. For Agamben, a sacrificial victim retains his social value insofar as his death is consecrated through a relationship to a deity, or in the more modern and supposedly secular sacrifice, to a political cause. Homo sacer are those, by contrast, whose deaths are permitted, but not meaningful, those who are killable with utter impunity, but not sacrificable. Their dead bodies, purged of personhood, are available as objects for scientific experimentation, commodity extraction, or anonymous disposal. There is surely a difference between casual treatment of bodies as commodities, and intentional desecration, which implicitly recognizes, if only to theatrically negate, the body’s sacredness for others. Shooting into gravesites or eating body parts suggests an attack on the social existence of the dead, while piling bodies into mass graves suggests the preclusion of such an existence altogether. Yet mass graves also tend toward ritual excess in their ability to terrorize and horrify.

As noted earlier, the concept of “bare life” is of little help in interpreting the devaluation of the dead. After calling for an investigation of the “practical and political mystery” of the European separation of body and soul, Agamben, in a rare consideration of the ontological status of the dead, revisits Aquinas’s solution to the medieval confusion over the resurrection of the body. Severing materiality from spirit, Aquinas asserted that in the Christian paradise there would be no need of eat, drink, sex, or sleep (Agamben 2004:16–19). It is noteworthy that Agamben’s compelling discussion, in The Open, of the split between matter and spirit at the root of European definitions of the human, is marked by the recurrent phrase “in our culture” (2004:16, 80, 92). With these words he delimits the salience of the matter–spirit dynamic he so carefully examines. But what is “our culture” in a world where U.S. operatives recruit Hmong and Lao to fight North Vietnamese in the jungles of Southeast Asia; where Khmer, Kmhmu, Lao, and Hmong receive education about U.S. culture in Thai refugee camps and cram for examinations for U.S. citizenship in U.S. housing projects; where Hmong grow vegetables to sell
in public markets to urban middle-class whites; where Hmong and Khmu bury their dead in North American soil and Khmer and Lao burn their dead in U.S. crematoriums; and where everyone forcibly learns the theological lesson of the merely symbolic presence of the dead in U.S. funeral homes and hospitals?

In a meditation on humanity as a troubled counterpoint of animality and spirit, what space is left for imagining relations of living and dead in other terms? The radical separation of matter and spirit found necessary by Aquinas, and all but ineluctable by Agamben, is problematized if not absent within stories of dead who return as lizards to watch over their grandsons, or dead who are in need of clothes and cookware. In the world imagined by those stories, desecration of the dead cannot be simply understood as the treatment of the dead as debased matter devoid of spirit. The stories gesture to a simultaneously corporeal and spectral power of the dead.

For the very actions that radically devalue the dead have the effect of backhandedly acknowledging their uncanny power. Desacralization involves active ritual effort (machine-gunning the grave, carving out the liver), which, as Michael Taussig observed, may stir up “a strange surplus of negative energy . . . from within the defaced thing itself” (1999:1). Many survivors, including those who themselves dealt death, are wary of that spectral surplus. They sense that those whose deaths are denied a sacrificial dimension, are precisely those who return to haunt the living, defying their devaluation, seizing for themselves the mystical power released in their fetishization. Of a death by shooting during a skirmish between CIA-sponsored and Pathet Lao forces in a Khmu village, John Prachitham said, “One communist tried to move into our house for protection. He died right there. After this happened everybody moved away. Later the whole village took a rope and dragged him, because nobody wanted to grab him. Dying that way, he’s a bad spirit.” Ghost narratives make reiterative reference to a dangerous agency that is never dissolved, and may even be intensified through a violent or desacralized death. One way of understanding restless ghosts, Klima suggests, is as those whose sacrifice has not been recognized. “To be a ghost,” he writes, “is to be marginal, to have no role to play in the economy of the living” (Klima 2002:163). Yet the exclusion of ghosts, as he also shows, can never be absolute as long as the dead retain the power to haunt from the margins, impressing their material presence on the living. When emigrants experience ancestor illness or nightmares of the dead, they register in their bodies the violation of the sociality of living and dead that characterizes death, not just in the U.S.-sponsored wars of Southeast Asia, but in U.S. morgues, funeral homes, and cemeteries.
Spectrality is a well-traveled metaphor in recent years, appearing in discussions of economy as a metaphor for commodities and speculative forms of value, or in discussions of historical memory as a metaphor for past injustices whose effects persist in the present. In the stories retold here, the spectral quality of the gifts received from or offered to the dead, although it may lend its power to each of these usages, is not itself metaphorical. The disregarded dead bodies in these narratives are not just the violated property of political citizens, but the material traces of dead who insist on active relationships with the living. At stake in the diasporic disruption of this material sociality of living and dead, are not only particular imaginations of afterlives, but also particular politics of grief. The stories suggest that the dead are not so easily consigned to the past and that calls for reconciliation or forgetting overlook the ways that past violence inhabits the present.

ABSTRACT

Stories of emigrants from Laos and Cambodia living in the United States are charged with an awareness of material indebtedness to the dead, especially those who died violent or inadequately attended deaths during wartime. At stake in this indebtedness is a sociality of living and dead that involves ongoing responsibility and care. Lao, Khmer, Kmhmu, and Hmong emigrants address both wartime violence, and the structural violence of minoritization and poverty in the United States through a reciprocity of living and dead. This reciprocity is intercepted by the biopolitical protocol of hospitals and funeral homes, which negates the social existence of the dead in ways that echo violations of the dead during wartime. In the United States, violation of the dead is linked not just to sciences of sanitation and death causation, but to latent theological presumptions about body and spirit. The presumption of a radical rupture between corpse and spirit enables the treatment of the corpse as inert matter with a purely symbolic relationship to the social person. The separation of matter and spirit that organizes the biopolitical management of death is also linked to mourning practices that emphasize memorialization over a bodily intimacy with the dead as social beings. Furthermore, current critiques of biopolitics following Agamben, although useful for addressing the devaluation of the living, prove inadequate to address socialities of living and dead. It is through their concrete participation in social encounters with the dead that emigrants respond to the material reverberations of past violence in the present.

Keywords: death, mourning, gift, violence, biopolitics, spirits, Southeast Asia, diaspora

NOTES

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1. Speakers’ names are pseudonyms.
2. See also Baudrillard’s discussion of the modern erosion of exchange with the dead (1993:125–194).
3. Hertz notes that in some communities the state of the dead body is considered parallel to the fate of the soul (1960). Subsequent work interprets this connection as a symbolic one whereby the condition of the body works as a metaphor for the adjustments of both the spirit and the community to death (e.g., Bloch and Parry 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1991).
4. Wrestling with the apparent contradiction between transference of merit and individual karma, Keyes concludes that for Theravadin Buddhists, merit is a form of “spiritual currency” that strengthens social community (1983:282–283).
7. The cow’s soul serves to replace one of the souls of the deceased, which has been consumed by Ntxwj Nyoog, the Hmong spirit responsible for sickness and death (Quincy 1988:108).
8. Although these different “souls” are key to the complexities of mourning practice, many hesitate to identify them as taxonomic categories (Tapp 1989:87).
9. The importance of material care of the dead is referenced in a Kmhmu tale of two brothers, one of whom neglects his dead mother to his own detriment (Lindell et al. 1977–95, vol. 3:83–84).
11. See also Chakrabarty (1998) on the persistence of gods and spirits in modern practices.
12. For histories of Khmer Rouge policies toward Buddhist wats and monks see Boua (1991) and Harris (2005:157–189).
13. See also McLean’s (2004:109–110) account of “hungry grass,” a landscape haunted by the dead of the Irish potato famine.
15. This is an insight variously articulated by Bataille (1988:70), as well as Marx, Hegel, and Nietzsche (Comay 1990:66).
16. Khmer speak of spirit families to whom newborn children belong (Choulean 1986; Thompson 1996:18). Hmong speak of “spirit parents” (txoov kab yeeb) who are offered “spirit money” in gratitude or payment for a newborn child’s spirit (Rice 2000).
17. Noting that the dead are the first group with whom humans entered into contract, Mauss commented, “Indeed, it is they who are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world” (1990:16).
22. In a discussion of Japanese mediums, Marilyn Ivy suggests that it is the very slippage in the physical encounter with the dead (the way the voice of the dead speaking through the medium differs from the voice mourners remember) that facilitates an outpouring of grief (1995:180). Perhaps similar slippages in the material exchange with the dead in the stories told above—the
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dirt that is not quite the body, the dream image that is not quite the person, the coin that remains in the ashes—sustain an awareness of the absences in the present that reference the violence of the past. To interrupt these material encounters might be to foreclose mourning of both personal and collective loss.

23. For a description of various rôoy, see Tayarin (1994:20–28).

Editor’s Note: Cultural Anthropology has published a variety of other essays on death. These include Andrew Orta’s “Burying the Past: Locality, Lived History, and Death in an Aymara Ritual of Remembrance” (2002), Robert Desjarlais’s “Echoes of a Yolmo Buddhist’s Life, in Death” (2000), Cecilia McCallum’s “Consuming Pity: The Production of Death among the Cashinahua” (1999), and Jonathan Boyarin’s “Death and the Minyan” (1994).

Cultural Anthropology has also published a range of essays on diaspora and migration, including Leiba Faier’s “Runaway Stories: The Underground Micromovements of Filipina Oyomesan in Rural Japan” (2008) and Peter Benson’s “El Campo: Faciality and Structural Violence in Farm Labor Camps” (2008). For a more extensive list of Cultural Anthropology essays on diaspora, visit http://culanth.org/?q=node/155.

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