

Performing Vulnerability and Resistance in Spoken Word Poetry

Kosal Khiev, Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt, and Martina Pfeiler

Abstract

This article explores the duality of Kosal Khiev's poetry performances as performing vulnerability and resistance within global cultural contexts. While his live performances vocalize several forms of systemic racism that he experienced as a refugee, in the US foster care system and with the US prison-industrial complex, his live-streamed performances reach beyond national borders that have jeopardized his very existence. Over the past few years, his livestreams and social media posts have most succinctly served as creative channels through which Kosal Khiev addresses his vulnerability. His poetry included in this article not only acknowledges and comments on his vulnerability as interconnected with US politics but also writes himself back into the national discourse from the perspective of an exiled poet.

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Performing Vulnerability and Resistance in Spoken Word Poetry

Kosal Khiev, Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt, and Martina Pfeiler

This article explores the duality of Kosal Khiev’s poetry performances as performing vulnerability and resistance within global cultural contexts. While his live performances vocalize several forms of systemic racism that he experienced as a refugee, in the US foster care system and in the US prison-industrial complex, his live-streamed performances reach beyond national borders that have jeopardized his very existence. Over the past few years, his livestreams and social media posts have most succinctly served as creative channels through which Kosal Khiev thematizes vulnerability as “an embodied performance that encodes . . . multiple dislocations” while registering and commenting on US politics from afar and writing himself back into the national discourse from the perspective of an exiled poet.¹

Kosal Khiev was born at the Khao-I-Dang Holding Center, a Cambodian refugee camp in Eastern Thailand in 1980. A year later, his family fled to the United States as survivors of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. His biographical details chronicle multiple vulnerabilities connected to genocide, racism, and the jeopardy of US immigration laws. Raised by a single mother and several older half-siblings in Santa Ana, California, as a young teenager, Kosal Khiev was physically abused and exploited at The New Bethany Home for Girls and Boys in Louisiana. After his return to Los Angeles, at the age of sixteen, he was involved in a gang fight and subsequently went to prison for fourteen years for attempted murder. Upon his release, he spent a year in a detention camp and was deported to Cambodia in 2011, where he managed to establish himself as an internationally renowned spoken word artist, receiving notoriety through accomplishments such as winning the “Best Performance” award for his short film *Why I Write* at the Zebra Poetry Film Festival in Berlin, representing Cambodia at the London Cultural Olympiad in 2012, and being featured in the award-winning documentary *Cambodian Son*, which was screened internationally and in numerous locations in the United States.

Raising the question as to how Khiev’s poetry speaks to the complexities of his life as well as the perceived and systemic vulnerabilities he was exposed to, in her article “Iterations of War and Its Literary Counterforces” (2015), Y-Dang Troeung sums up Khiev’s situation: “Incarceration and subsequent deportation has amounted to a legal double jeopardy.”² Hence, Kosal Khiev’s spoken word poetry evokes a range of questions connected to the US prison system, thereby also bringing to mind Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), which came out the same year that Kosal Khiev was sent to a deportation facility. The following quote describes some of the profound social implications that thus call for the urgency of establishing a new system of intersectional mindfulness and empathy in the US and replacing a system of white supremacy:

If the movement that emerges to challenge mass incarceration fails to confront squarely the critical role of race in the basic structure of our society, and if it fails to cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion and concern for every human being—of every class, race, and nationality, —within our nation’s borders (including poor whites, who are often pitied against poor people of color), the collapse of mass incarceration will not mean the death of racial caste in America. Inevitably a new system of racialized social control will emerge . . .³

In this light, contextualizing Khiev’s work serves as a crucial lens through which his vocalizations of vulnerability in an age of systemic racism can be confronted. Three of Khiev’s spoken word poems, titled “God’s Nightmare of Me,” “Love borne,” and “Walk with me,” are printed below. “God’s Nightmare of Me” belongs to the “lost poems from Folsom level 4 c-yard,” rediscovered by Khiev’s friend and mentor, Robert Albee. In this poem, the speaker constructs the image of a sleeping God, who is perceived to be having a nightmare of the speaker. Khiev paints striking images of a semi-conscious, yet widely awake, lyric self. The poem alerts its listeners to the speaker’s vulnerable status that is inextricably intertwined with social determinism, if not internalized racism:

My thoughts were
conceived in the
womb, born with the
concept of my
doom.

Relayed in internal rhyme, the rhythmic flow of the spoken word poem offers an implicit critique of the American Dream by exposing and challenging one of the United States’ most persistent myths, when the speaker states: “Happiness eludes my clutch, so I bust back at life.” Rather than becoming a victim of his circumstances, however, Khiev’s lyric reflection of the speaker is *on par* with a sleeping God, wondering if the superior role of the United States and the national myth of the pursuit of

happiness is inextricably intertwined with his nightmarish situation.

In his poetry, Khiev creates his personal agenda of self-empowerment to overcome his personal conflicts, fears, and dangers that arise from his social vulnerabilities. As Kosal Khiev states, at the time he was writing the poem, he was in solitary confinement for about one and a half years, which he perceived as “being in a prison within a prison.”⁴ In this confined space, he was forced to reflect on his own life, arriving at a more innocent version of himself as a young child that changed after he came to the US, where, rather than experiencing a version of the American Dream, he became involved in gang culture and violence on a daily basis. While growing up, as well as through his years of imprisonment, he was exposed to a culture of systemic racism, to which refugees and immigrants are frequently subjected after their relocation to the US. In fact, the Cambodian population in the United States has shrunk immensely since 2001, due to the Homeland Security Act that followed the 9/11 attacks and as the result of an agreement between the US and Cambodia, which facilitates the deportation of Cambodians who were imprisoned in the United States.⁵ Edward J. W. Park and John S. W. Park discuss this issue in more detail in their book, *Probationary Americans: Contemporary Immigration Policies and the Shaping of Asian American Communities* (2005), criticizing that “a few thousand persons facing final orders of deportation were refugees who fled Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia as children—some as young as one year old—to be sent ‘back’ to nations of which they have no memory.”⁶ In this context, Kosal Khiev’s poetry becomes even more significant, as it not only reveals issues of vulnerability as a victim within one’s social environment, but the same environment also claims that the individual nonetheless has the power to determine one’s own future and way of life and can therefore overcome difficult—if even impossible—circumstances in the process.

“Love borne” opens with the line “I was conceived,” which, in the passive form, indicates that being born is not something we can influence. The subsequent images construct an infant human in their most vulnerable state. This young child is even more fragile, as it is “too weak / malnourished from / the hunger.” Yet, he survives, only to be brought up in an oppressive system, after relocating to the United States, which ultimately presented itself to him as a far cry from the land of freedom and opportunity. However, instead of being broken by these circumstances, the final image portrayed to us is that of a bonsai tree, which was supposed to grow in a certain direction and only to a limited height—defying the circumstances and literally outgrowing itself:

I was born crazy with
a destiny that
refused to lay lazy
So the state raised

me like bonsai
trees wrapped in
steel wire with
shackles on my feet.

In this poem, the speaker relays the various challenges he had to face, including multiple constraining environments that he eventually outgrows. The poem connects Kosal Khiev more directly to Cambodia, dealing with his early beginnings at a refugee camp at the Thai Cambodian border in 1980, fleeing the genocide of the Khmer Rouge. The Indochina Wars, especially the Vietnam War and the US interventions in Southeast Asia, led to one of the most massive flows of refugees since World War II, uprooting millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians.

More recently, an increasing number of Southeast Asian refugee authors in the United States have started writing about their memories and experiences of having to flee their home countries and living as former refugees in America. One of the many aspects that their narratives have in common is that they all hint at the vulnerability and resilience of refugees while at the same time reimagining concepts such as “home” and “identity” within a US and global context. Authors such as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, Bryan Thao Worra, and Krysada Panusith Phounsiri offer substantial counternarratives to the otherwise dominant American perspective on the Second Indochina War and its aftermath, “enriching the discourse about war, genocide, displacement, and reconstitution.”⁷ In this context, representation is crucial, as the question of vulnerability is connected to having (or, rather, not having) agency. Thus, telling their stories from their perspectives is a form of empowerment, as these authors write themselves and their versions of war experiences and their vulnerabilities into existence.

In this respect, the final poem under discussion here, titled “Walk with me,” opens with an invitation to the reader to join the lyric persona on a walk. The first lines, “from the fields to the hills / where the pastures /ever greener,” create a pastoral atmosphere that is suddenly disrupted when the narrator starts to speak about the killing fields. The poem addresses the beauty of Cambodia, which is often overshadowed by the dark history of this country. Like many of Khiev’s poems, it is extremely powerful, yet painful at the same time. The speaker recalls an unspeakable memory of a father who was forced to kill his own daughter and thereby turns metaphorically into a zombie himself, bringing to mind how human beings are often labeled as “monsters” without ever looking at the roots of their behavior or without even taking their vulnerabilities into account. The poem is not only about trauma but also about coping with trauma. As Khiev suggests, moving forward in Cambodia means that “the older generation needs that forgiveness of the younger generation.”⁸ The poem hints at the many (forgotten) memories and stories of Cambodians who have suf-

ferred from the Cambodian Civil War and the Pol Pot regime. This raises the questions of what role the poets may play and what kind of an impact they may have on their audiences (as well as what kind of audience) when it comes to questions of forgetting and remembering.

In a world of global flows and “ethnoscapes,”⁹ and their painful limitations, Kosal Khiev’s digital appearances via livestreams create new forms of “writing/streaming” back “home,” particularly when dealing with his post-traumatic stress and trying to cope with everyday struggles in Cambodia as an internally displaced refugee, deportee, and former prisoner. As Judith Butler puts it in “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance” (2016): “Media can function as part of ‘infrastructural support’ when it facilitates modes of solidarity and establishes new spatio-temporal dimensions of the public including not only those who can appear within the visual images of the public, but those who are, through coercion, fear, or necessity, living outside the reach of the visual frame.”¹⁰

Depicted by the media and producing narratives from a “Western” perspective, refugees are continually rendered as distressing figures without agency, who have to flee from non-democratic governments, suggesting that their tragic fate will not befall “Westerners,” while completely ignoring the role of the West in the postcolonial history of many Southeast Asian countries. This observation feeds into the notion that the West still claims a certain superior, powerful, and certainly less vulnerable position (except when, ostensibly, being “flooded” with waves of refugees while so many of them drown in actual waves in their desperate and vulnerable attempts to reach the coast lines and shores). This viewpoint has most recently been called into question, as millions of refugees from the Ukraine flee the Russian invasion. Kosal Khiev’s poetry not only calls supposed given power relations into question, but he shares his volatile experiences as a refugee, displaced person, twice deprived of his home country, showing not only how vulnerability can be turned into speaking out against social injustice and creating counternarratives, but also how it can turn into social empowerment and, ultimately, exude extreme strength.

God’s Nightmare of Me/Greyblue

Greyblue
Lost in my reverie, I
find myself wading
through the deep
end of the ocean.
Floating face up,

hoping God wakes
up!
Because of this nightmare, He's
dreaming of me.
Have me swimming
with the fishes in the
murky sea,
deeply affected!
My empty carcass, stripped, gutted and
heartless, remains
partly alive.
pleading to who
cares,
while waiting for a reply from the
barren air.
Revive what is dead,
love is only asleep in
its dungeon bed.
Release my soul
from its chambers.
I've lived in danger,
been hurted and
deserted, so I let go
in anger.
My thoughts were
conceived in the
womb, born with the
concept of my
doom.
To live in agony, to
survive all tragedies.
Nothing can
compare or prepare
me on what has
happened to me.
Happiness eludes
my clutch, so I bust
back at life.
But is it enough to
erase such a deep
pain?
can I attain love
again?
The questions

bombards my mind,
with an answer so
hard to find,
because in my mind
I'm a sleep walking
talking humanoid
with a conscious to
suffer,
inflicted with the
disease to love you.
I'm consumed with
rage to do battle
with my faceless
demons
when they escape
from their cages.
Flip the pages of my
unseen revelations!
I'm pre-ordained a
sinner,
who has yet to figure
the meaning of my
existence.
Who listens when I
talk?
Who answers when I
question?
Hoping I can get lost
into your seduction,
seduced by how
your body functions.
So let me begin by
letting my spirit
descend.
When it was pure
and not obscure or
tainted by the world.
I'm sure this is God's
nightmare;
to dream up this
love affair,
then tear me away from those I care.
Stare at my life!
Study my odyssey!

See all the ghosts
that haunt me, and
all the evil thoughts
that bothers me.
Take a shot at me
and examine my exit
wounds,
while the fumes of
blood hangs thick in
the air,
let me share with
you my dreams, bare
you my soul!
Help me bury my
past and give me a
future to hold.
It all unfolds now!
The power to be free
and fly!

Love borne

I was conceived
between the tree
trunks of my
mothers knees.
I imagined she
screamed our
peace with a belly
swollen holding on
to me.
See back then I was
just a seed.
Thoughts have yet to
formulate
I was too weak.
Malnourished from
the hunger
I felt her hunger
speak
But she couldn't
weep yesterday's
sorrows cause
tomorrow's were full

of woes.
So the story goes..
My father came back
from the dead,
But I was hidden.
Forbidden from his
keep,
I was the youngest
brother of 7.
Born in The
eighties.
A refugee camp
baby.
I was born crazy with
a destiny that
refused to lay lazy.
So the state raised
me like bonsai
trees wrapped in
steel wire with
shackles on my feet.
That day it rained
sheets of ice snow.
I remembered
clearly how I
shivered
It was so ice cold.
And there, I heard
for the first time
I heard the beast
breathing.
And like spoils of
war we was offered.
Into the land of
fathers with no
fathers.
Fatherless sons who
got lost within these
deep waters.
Clearly we were boys
playing to be men.
In pursuit to be
warriors bathed in
sin.

We were boys taught
by boys claiming to
be men.
So my rights of
passage came
through the devils
den.
But I was destined not
to die
So what didn't kill
me
Made me stronger in
my eyes.
You see, I was
loveborne
Conceived between
the #treetrunks of
my mothers knees.
And as I grew like
bonsai trees
wrapped in steel
wire.
I grew and broke
free
And rose even
higher.

Walk with me...

From the fields to the
hills
Where the pastures
ever greener.
Them killing fields
was real
With a slave posture,
and demeanor.
All black everything.
So you know,
we all looking similar.
Red sash for a blood
bath.
It was all familiar.
And you can almost

hear her.
Inaudible,
due to bombs
dropped
encroaching ever
nearer.
Very possible,
she pleaded for her
life.
But that scythe cut her
down
like she was made
out of rice.
Kill her or be killed.
He was told twice.
So when that blade
made way,
And fear took hold.
His eyes turned
opaque,
As his fear went bold.
Rage aimed at Self
hatred,
for he was too scared
to say.
I would rather die,
but it was all too late..
So he said goodbye
to his shadow,
And zombied off into
battle.
His appetite was
ravenous,
With the gait of a
scavenger.
Came across a ravine,
Full of downstream
passengers.
Felt like a dream
if not, for that scream
filled laughter.
And in between, came
piercing.
A cry for a, happily

ever after.
It was a scene of
serene peace.
Far from this
maniacal chapter.
But as pages turn
years roll.
Sages burned into
cursed scrolls.
He grew old with an
opaque soul.
With eyes oblique,
brimming with tears,
That never unfroze.
Accompanied by a
million ghosts.
All speaking in a
silent code.
Asking how does life
goes
We've been waiting to
be floated upstream.
Down that dream you
thought once saw.
Syllables you caught,
and once heard.
The wind had
whispered.
Free her.
Let her go.
So she can return
home
And be at peace..
And you can finally
sleep.
Cause them haunting
memories is
daunting.
He can forever see
the gauntlet.
Covered in blood of
the slaughtered.
Worst,
he can never escape,

the face of his
daughter.
Bubbling out,
From
underneath that
Water.
Daddy I love you!
I forgive you.
It wasn't your fault.
You was never meant
to falter.
But evil men came
with fiery flames,
And their bodies
became your alter.
You sacrificed your
life thinking to be a
martyr.
Instead, you became
one of the walking
dead,
With nothing left to
offer.
So here's my offering
Your offspring
Here to reclaim your
honor

Your honor,
Pardon me,
for my artistry.
But this picture makes
it hard to speak.
The framework of this
hurt,
Makes it hard to
reach.
Those that are so far
out of reach.
Out of speech.
I beseech!
Out of peace.

How do we begin to
live
How do we forgive
Time has been calling
me
To be linear.
The minute, and
minuscule
The micro that
expands beyond the
physical,
digital age of
informational
sage,
being burn
to awaken our human
spiritual molecule.
This is the miracle.
Individual experiences
laid bare,
Where moments
becomes critical
Shift the spectrum.
The other end is
meaningful.
Full of dreams,
And I'm catching
every syllable.
Can you see the
invisible?
Visual so vivid.
Feels like it's video
scripted.
But this life,
depicted image
Is the way we live it.
So livid,
red hot from all the
friction.
Strategically divided.
Then left a remainder
after division.
Each boxed in, and
replicated.

Each locked in, and
 heavily medicated.
 Speech at a toxin
 level
 of lividity.
 Spinning deities with envy.
 Plenty you see in the
 frenzy.
 Mad feelings,
 They be telling me.
 Drink up! Before your
 cup is empty.
 So here's a toast.
 To those making the
 most out of nothing.
 To Those living with
 ghosts,
 I feel you.
 I feel em too.
 It's haunting.
 So salute,
 Here's a promise.
 If it means, her life, or
 mine
 This time around,
 It's death before
 dishonor...

Acknowledgments

In our joint panel discussion at the 47th conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies (AAAS) and within the context of vulnerability and American studies, we engaged with the spoken word poetry of Kosal Khiev, an exiled Khmer-American poet, refugee, and survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime and the US prison system. Thanks to the generous invitation of the conference organizers, this framework created an opportunity to listen to, and reflect on, Kosal Khiev's poems as he performed them via a livestream. Thereby, the American studies scholars were able to grapple with the concept of vulnerability as a lived experience and creative resource. Furthermore, by including Kosal Khiev's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the midst of a global health crisis, a range of postcolonial perspectives, as vocalized from the position of a vulnerable subject, were brought to the fore.

"God's Nightmare of Me" is one of my lost poems from Folsom level 4 c-yard, recently found by my friend and mentor Robert Albee. Thank u brother! Somehow, these words still ring true. Gave me goose bumps when I re-read these words out loud.

Notes

- 1 Y-Dang Troeung, “Iterations of War and Its Literary Counterforces: Vaddey Ratner’s *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and Kosal Khiev’s *Why I Write*,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40, no. 2 (2015): 108, DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlvo11.
- 2 Troeung, “Iterations of War,” 109.
- 3 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 18–19.
- 4 Kosal Khiev, interview by Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt and Martina Pfeiler, February 17, 2022.
- 5 Hai B. Pho, “Lowell, Politics, and the Resettlement of Southeast Asian Refugees and Immigrants 1975–2000,” in *Southeast Asian Refugees and Immigrants in the Mill City: Changing Families, Communities, Institutions—Thirty Years Afterward*, ed. Tuyet-Lan Pho, Jeffrey N. Gerson, and Sylvia R. Cowan (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2008).
- 6 Edward J. W. Park and John S. W. Park, *Probationary Americans. Contemporary Immigration Policies and the Shaping of Asian American Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.
- 7 Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadow: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 7.
- 8 Kosal Khiev, interview by Laemmerhirt and Pfeiler.
- 9 Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, nos. 2–3 (1990): 296, DOI: [10.1177/026327690007002017](https://doi.org/10.1177/026327690007002017).
- 10 Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability and Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

About the Authors

Kosal Khiev is a spoken word and tattoo artist.

Iris-Aya Laemmerhirt is Assistant Professor of American Studies at TU Dortmund University. She wrote her Ph.D. thesis on transnational cultural interactions between Japan and the USA, which was partly funded by the Wilhelm and Günther Esser Foundation Grant at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum. She worked as a research fellow at the Cluster of Excellence at the Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg and was a Fulbright Scholar in Residence at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise. She is the author of *Embracing Differences: Transnational Cultural Flows between Japan and the United States* (transcript Verlag, 2013). Currently, she is working on a book on Southeast Asian American refugee narratives. Her main research and teaching interests are (trans)Pacific studies, Asian American studies, refugee studies, migration studies, Hawai’ian history, literature, and culture, as well as media studies.

Martina Pfeiler received her *venia legendi* in American Literature and Cultural Studies at TU Dortmund with a habilitation thesis titled “Ahab in Love: The Creative Reception of Moby-Dick in Popular Culture.” She is currently a senior researcher at the University of Vienna (ERC/FWF Poetry Off the Page). Previously, she taught as Interim Commissioner Chair of American Studies at Ruhr-University Bochum, as Assistant Professor of American Studies at TU Dortmund, as Visiting Lecturer at Radboud University and Oglethorpe University. She is the

author of *Sounds of Poetry: Contemporary American Performance Poets* (Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003) and *Poetry Goes Intermedia: U.S.-amerikanische Lyrik des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts aus kultur- und medienwissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Francke Verlag, 2010). Her research and teaching interests include popularizations of US-American literature from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, US poetry, performance studies, media studies, and US protest cultures.

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