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Transcending Traditions: Reading Kao Kalia Yang’s *The Latehomecomer* as Testimonio

Born in a Thai refugee camp, Yang dedicates her work to her grandmother “Youa Lee, who never learned how to write” and to her “baby brother, Maxwell Hwm Yang, who will read the things she never wrote.” Opening in this manner, Yang simultaneously calls attention to the collective nature of her text and the pressing difficulty of and desire for expression. Its gesture to a mediated past and a textualized future serves as an appropriate introduction to a story that captures the communal struggles of the Hmong, the resilience of her family, and her personal ambition. My paper dwells on the challenge of representing refugee experiences, like Yang’s, that span multiple generations and travel across multiple countries, drawing from the Latin American tradition of testimonio as a model for reading and understanding this Hmong-American memoir.

Although John Beverley’s outline of testimonio literature was based on the movement to record indigenous experiences of oppression in Latin America, its emphasis on collectivity and the complexity of representing the voiceless provides useful and preliminary terms for thinking about Yang’s text. Reading through this lens highlights her individual struggle to assimilate to American culture and also gives equal attention to the struggles of her family as they adjust to life on the run from Communist Lao soldiers, life in the Thai refugee camps, and finally life in America. Although Yang’s memoir tells the specific story of her family, as testimonio, it also serves to tell the wider story of Hmong refugees and the experience of being Hmong-American.