Uncertainty & Identity: Anthony Veasna So's Afterparties

John Wegner

1Angelo State University

Published on: Oct 30, 2022
URL: https://www.sareview.org/pub/42pvqgy0
License: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0)
By now, most readers of Anthony Veasna So’s 2021 *Afterparties* know he died of a drug overdose shortly before his debut collection went to press. His death, in some ways, has created a narrative of a writer taken too soon, and many reviews of his collection, in fact, focus on Veasna So’s personality first and the stories second. Certainly, Veasna So was a gregarious personality: queer, a relentless self-promoter, active on social media, and the son of Cambodian immigrants who fled the Khmer Rouge. Veasna So was, by all accounts, a talented, promising writer driven to succeed.

His cult of personality notwithstanding, *Afterparties* is an impressive debut collection of stories. Winner of the National Book Critics Circle John Leonard Prize for Best First Book and the Ferro-Grumley Award for LGBTQ Fiction, the collection of stories became an instant *New York Times* bestseller and best book winner from *The New York Times, Kirkus, The LA Times Book Review* and others. The stories in the collection give us a sense of a writer on the cusp of great skill. Whether knowing about his death clouds our judgment is hard to say, but there’s certainly a melancholic feel to certain stories: intimations, if you will, that the writer’s personal struggles are leaking into the stories themselves.

The nine stories in the collection capture the experiences of a generation of young Americans trapped between their parent’s violent, genocidal past under the Khmer Rouge, their status as second-generation immigrants, and American ideals about success. The parents in the stories are so focused on survival that introspection is a luxury. The girls’ absent father in “Three Women of Chuck’s Donuts” “from across the room, would bellow, ‘There were no ice cubes in the genocide!’” Sothy, the owner of Chuck’s Donuts, is “tired of thinking about other people, especially these customers from whom she barely profits.” In “The Monks,” our narrator shaves his head and enters the wat in the hopes he can learn some rituals that will help his dead father’s “spirit not be restless. Something that would guarantee him a peaceful new life, anything nicer than the shitshow that was his last one.” “We Would’ve Been Princes!” is told in seven sections, one titled “The Drunken Conversations...
Cambos have at 3:42 A.M” and in “Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly”, our narrator is a nurse on the Alzheimer’s and Dementia floor who tells us, “I understand how it feels to live with a past that defies logic.”

These are characters tired of the past but unable to engage with the present. So crafts narratives with wry commentary that belie the lurking danger and sadness of characters displaced from their homeland but who stand just outside acceptance in America. The narrator of “Human Development” struggles with his plans to teach *Moby Dick* to “rich kids with fake Adderall prescriptions... at a private high school” in San Francisco. He’s [g]ay, Cambodian and not even twenty-six, carrying in my body the aftermath of war, genocide, colonialism. And yet, my task was to teach kids a decade younger, existing across an oceanic difference, what it means to be human. How absurd, I admitted. How fucking hilarious. I was actually excited.

There’s a kind of Sisyphean irony throughout these stories, but the absurdity of the moment doesn’t deter the characters. Raised by parents who “didn’t have ice” during the genocide, So’s characters recognize that happiness is less important than simply moving forward and meeting the day. Danger might lurk around the corner, but sometimes there’s nuance to the days and the past. His characters are survivors doing the best they can, and there seems to be hope in that possibility.

Certainly, the Cambodian voice dominates the collection. Still, the narrative voice in many of these stories is a queer man in a culture that believes “You can be as gay as you want after your life is established,” as someone tells the narrator in “The Shop.” In his essay “Baby Yeah,” (published online in *N+1 Magazine* shortly before his death and the publication of the collection), Veasna So writes that in graduate school he embraced

an aura of queerness described by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia* as ‘a mode of ‘being-with’ that defies social conventions and conformism and is innately heretical yet still desirous for the world.’ We were hungry for connection, a constant state of ‘being-with,’ as others failed to empathize with us, and we failed to act normal.

“Baby Yeah,” So’s raw, unfiltered memoriam to a friend who committed suicide, a friend who felt he never fit in or achieved enough. Reading the collection, the melancholic sense of loss we feel knowing Veasna So died too soon is exacerbated because his characters realize they, like So, don’t fit in. The narrator in “Maly, Maly, Maly” knows he’ll never see every iteration of Maly’s life and ends the story packing to leave. The world where the past and present clash, it seems, is too much with Veasna So’s narrators. Defying social convention sounds good on paper, but not acting normal leaves one outside and isolated, feelings that are keenly felt by those already living Others in a nation that sends mixed messages about immigration and orientation. In some ways, one of the strengths of Veasna So’s collection is his willingness to write characters who eschew convention and who also recognize they are outsiders who wonder how their lives “fit into the equation.”
So’s collection isn’t perfect. The raw emotion of his stories is a strength, but his early death appears most keenly in some inconsistencies. *Afterparties* is not a story cycle, but some characters seem to appear more than once without any pattern. We see the difference in quality between stories like “Three Women of Chuck’s Donuts” and “Superking Son Strikes Again” and “Human Development,” a story unpublished prior to the collection. There are stories, as with any debut collection, we might wish were tighter and more focused. Readers can see slight differences in stories edited by major magazines prior to their inclusion and stories that might be original to the collection.

These small complaints notwithstanding, Anthony Veasna So’s work embodies the uncertainty of identity in the 21st century. In particular, negotiating these spaces becomes increasingly complex as you add layers of identities and the weight of expectations, but unlike many works that wallow in introspection, Veasna So’s narrators seem to accept the contradictions and conventions while hungering for connection. Walt Whitman in “Song of Myself” writes

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Like Whitman’s poem, a large sweeping examination of what America means and what it means to be American, So’s stories embrace the same contradictions, the same recognition that we all contain multitudes. Despite what are some uneven stories, Veasna So’s collection is worth reading if, for no other reason, to wonder what we might have seen next from this talented writer.

*John Wegner is a Professor of English at Angelo State University in San Angelo, Texas. He’s published scholarly articles and book reviews on Cormac McCarthy, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Juan Felipe Herrera and others. He’s also published short fiction and Love is Not a Dirty Word and other Stories from Lamar UP.*