

Introduction

This voice from the grave urges itself on our hearing. For . . . the life-and-death discourse of the twenty-first century is unambiguously the discourse of fanaticism and intolerance.

—Wole Soyinka¹

The funeral procession carrying King Norodom Suramarit made its way in reverse circumambulation, as deemed by royal custom, toward Veal Men, the sacred ground at the center of the capital. High-ranking officials in white court attire (*sampot chang kben* and *av kot*) moved silently along the float of golden *neak*² upon which was placed the gilded urn. Atop the royal elephants sat members of the court ballet in full regalia.³ No one who beheld this ritualized event in 1960 could deny the sense of continuity that it imparted despite the paradoxical sense of finality that it connoted. Certainly, no one reflecting upon that moment could have envisioned that less than ten years later, Cambodia's age-old monarchy would be abolished and the country engulfed in a fratricidal war that paved the way for a revolution so radical in its transformative vision that it left in its wake an indelible genocidal imprint. As the "dominoes" fell to communist forces that fateful spring of 1975—first Phnom Penh, then Saigon, and finally Vientiane—the promise of postwar peace and prosperity gave way to the horrors of forced labor camps, mass graves, flight, and exile. For Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge march into Phnom Penh on April 17 marked the beginning of a spiraling descent into one of the nation's darkest eras. The "oasis of peace" that was Cambodia in the 1960s became the killing fields of the 1970s, its tranquility replaced by the silence of the death of almost a quarter of its people.

Even in a century of mass atrocities, the Cambodian experience under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979) stands out as one of the most extreme and traumatic instances in human history. What emerged in the aftermath of this genocidal encounter was a nation fractured by death

and dispersal. In less than four years, almost two million of the country's estimated seven million people had perished from hard labor, disease, starvation, execution, and "disappearances," leaving in the wake of the regime's collapse in 1979 a population comprised mostly of women and children. Another 600,000 Cambodians fled their ancestral homeland,⁴ of which over 100,000 found refuge in America.

The Cambodian nation, now bifurcated by dispersal, bears the indelible stain of auto-genocide⁵ that continues to register in the Cambodian culture, institutions, and psyche both in Cambodia and in diaspora. While scholars and jurists debate whether or not the term "genocide" could and should be applied to what took place in Democratic Kampuchea (DK),⁶ there can be no disputing the magnitude of human loss under the Khmer Rouge, or the irreparable tear that it has left on the Khmer nation, at least for the survivor generation if not beyond. The ancient practice of generational deracination—*samlab muy pouch*, which literally translates as the killing of the seed (*genos*)—reared its contemporaneous head in the mass killings of Democratic Kampuchea. For Cambodians, it is this notion of *geno-cide*, in the simplest and most literal terms, that resonates.

It has been said of Cambodia that "it rarely happens that a historian can look back over the recent past of any contemporary society with the feeling that a curtain has been rung down on a play, and that what happened up to that time may be studied without regard to what is going on at present, or what may happen in the future."⁷ As it is with Africa in the Western imaginary,⁸ the various preconceptions and myths⁹ that enveloped prerevolutionary Cambodia had kept this small Buddhist kingdom suspended in antiquity, frozen in time, and fixed in the imaginary of the outside world. The scenes captured in the displays at the Exposition Coloniale in France in 1906 have held the colonial gaze and that of successive generations in a mesmerized rapture: "In these fantasies, Cambodia would always be a beautiful and graceful country, veiled in mysterious exoticism of divine kingship and dancing *apsaras*."¹⁰ Fixing the gaze on the ruins of antiquity makes it possible to disregard the ruins of empire. Orientalism, to borrow from Said,¹¹ thus conspires with the instinctually human temptation to regard horrific political developments such as those of Democratic Kampuchea as an eruption of the irrational, an undisciplined nation running amok. The absolute secrecy and virtual

autarky that shrouded the country after 1975 reinforced this view of the Khmer Rouge period as historically compartmentalized, an aberration unmoored to the country's historical continuum. Even Khmers speak suggestively of their experiences of the *samay a-Pot* (Pol Pot era) as being ahistorical, often with the refrain *khmer yoeung men del sos* (never before for us Khmers). For Cambodian diasporas, the disconnect is made even more emphatic by exile.

While historical instances of mass atrocity do reveal features and patterns that transcend narrow cultural or historical frames, we cannot fully understand genocidal violence without locating it within the sociohistorical contexts that produced it. Underscoring the importance of contextualization, Mark Levene posits that “blaming ‘mad’ or ‘evil’ regimes alone for genocide will not suffice if this fails to take heed of the circumstances in which those regimes arise.”¹² While culture informs survivors’ understanding of the genocidal experience, Khmer Rouge extremism was not lodged in any cultural disposition to violence, despite the temptation to fix our gaze on the cultural script. Rather, it was embedded in the sociohistorical conditions from which the movement emerged that not only informed the desire for totalistic change but also accounted for the trajectories toward radical solutions and the permissibility of unbridled violence. Though it may have been catapulted to power by external forces and drawn inspiration from larger intellectual traditions, the Khmer Rouge regime was shaped by both the movement’s own political histories and those of the nation, and by the circumstances under which the Pol Potist faction conspired and battled its way against both foes and allies internally and externally to total power in 1975.

Of the weightiness of the past, Marx wrote, “Men make their own history, but . . . they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”¹³ Despite the seemingly apocalyptic break that Democratic Kampuchea connotes, no change, no matter how much it may have been desired, is ever so total and no severance ever so complete that it nullifies the historical preface. The vanguards of the Khmer Rouge revolution were, after all, historical subjects, and even in their rejection of it, the past informed and shaped their vision of the alternative. Flawed as it was, the Khmer Rouge did have a vision of change that they pursued with blind resoluteness, one that was not incubated in isolation

but within the “ruins and ruination”¹⁴ of empire. If the compounded traumas of colonization, territorial loss, and betrayal fostered an intense longing for national revival, communism presented itself, at least to a committed core of Khmer communists, as the vehicle for change. From under the rubble of imperial debris,¹⁵ and against a post-independence montage of entrenchment, disenchantment, and decay, Khmer Rouge utopia, as an emanation of “postcolonial politics of resentment,”¹⁶ was deemed possible only through the annihilation of the old order.

Of the conflagration that consumed Cambodia, Michael Vickery wrote, “The war did not begin suddenly in 1970, and the conflict which seemed to explode at that time proceeded naturally from trends in the country’s political history over the preceding 25 years.”¹⁷ I posit that the analytic gaze needs to be cast even further back, into the nation’s colonized past, for the political and ideological struggles enacted on the political stage in the two decades following independence reflected not just new power dynamics but colonial legacies. As Derek Walcott asserts, “The rot remains with us, [though] the men are gone.”¹⁸ Of this provocative reflection on imperial ruination, Ann Stoler asks, “What does it corrode, from what interior spaces does it take hold?”¹⁹ Emerging from almost a century of colonization, postcolonial Cambodia, not unlike many newly independent countries that emerged on the international scene in the 1950s–1960s, reflected both promise and disillusionment. In fundamental aspects, the growth and eventual radicalization of the Cambodian Left, then largely unseen by external observers, were a response to the persistent entrenchment and stagnancy of the old order, a “counterpoint to the dominant theme of Cambodia’s modern history.”²⁰ Ironically, what Milton Osborne describes as “the failure of open politics to provide stable government”²¹ ultimately brought about one of the world’s most closed and opaque regimes of all times.

Internal developments alone cannot account for the Khmer Rouge victory in Cambodia. From the initial formation of the communist movement in colonial Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge seizure of power and the regime’s eventual collapse, the history of Cambodian communism was shaped by different imperial formations that spanned three “Indochina Wars,” of which the destruction levied upon Cambodia during the “Vietnam War” (a geographically bounded reference that invisibilizes this very destruction) was but one chapter. That the previously

insipid Khmer communist movement was able to acquire political momentum only with the exportation, by both the Americans and the Vietnamese communists, of the Vietnam War into Cambodia had significant implications both for the Khmer Rouge victory and for the genocidal consequences. These early years of subjugation and betrayal seeded the uncompromising political culture that came to govern both the internal workings of the Khmer communist organization and its interactions with the outside world. These relational histories²² infuse density and texture into Southeast Asia as an analytic terrain that is often vacated of local histories, interests, and power relationships by the preoccupation with East-West conflicts, and complicate the discourse of war and empire with attention to the plurality of imperial formations. The implicated roles of externalities also curtail the explanatory power of the term “auto-genocide” with the implied self-infliction of the historical injury, despite its usefulness in distinguishing the Cambodian experience from other genocidal moments in history. They also inform our understanding of the Cambodian diasporic community, including the copresence of refugee gratitude and ambivalence toward the America that connotes both abandonment and rescue.

Locating the extremism of Democratic Kampuchea within this larger and longer historical frame is to build upon Ann Stoler’s contention that ruins are not just found but also made.²³ Ruins also beget new ruins, as the vision of hopeful alternatives that fed Khmer Rouge utopian aspiration gave way to genocidal ruination and the remains that it bequeaths. Genocide does more than wound the nation physically. It also injures it metaphysically, and tears asunder the normative fabric that gives coherence and cohesion to the social order. Like colonialism, which Achebe describes as having “put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart,”²⁴ genocide engendered “not a temporary disturbance” but “a once and for all alteration of . . . society.”²⁵ In the Cambodian experience, this wounding encounter is made even more injurious by the self-implicating nature of auto-genocide and the ever-present absence of disappearances and mass graves, the implications of which are profoundly different from many other instances of state-sponsored terror.

In the diaspora, this historical trauma, which registers its presence in the refugee body, the fractured families, and the destabilized institu-

tions, is made even more acute by what is, for most, not only a forced severance from their homeland but also permanent exile. As the body moves, where does memory live? If memory is spatially constituted, as Halbwachs and Nora have argued, then the diaspora is one site where individual and collective memory is incubated, enhanced, edited, and transmitted. In its travel across space and time, memory takes on different forms, manifesting traces of transgenerational haunting in the silence that continues to envelop the Cambodian family. Silence thus becomes an analytic site for culturally informed reflection and theorizing about despair and resistance, reconciliation and healing.

Be it in Cambodia or in the diaspora, it is also in the gaps and interstices that survivors' resilience and agency reveal themselves, not in loud registers but in the daily acts of living and repair. For many in the diaspora, rebuilding lives and community means weaving meaning and continuity from fragments and disorder, and transnationally re-stitching relational fabrics that have been frayed by time, distance, and politics. This process is compelled as much by their past experiences in Asia as by their present encounters in diaspora. As Sau-ling Wong reminds us, this "perpetual turning of [the] gaze towards the lost homeland" is a poignant critique both of the assumed linearity in immigration discourse and of American triumphalism.²⁶ In that sense, the national and the transnational are not just complementary, but mutually constitutive. Though not without disillusion or ambivalence, "return," in its multifarious forms, is for many a reparative act, a step toward reconciliation, not in the sense of forgiveness and healing, but perhaps of transcendence.

From the Land of Shadows is an analysis of revolutionary violence and the effects of the "spiral transgressions"²⁷ of politics and state power on individuals and social systems, and specifically an analysis of the causes and consequences of the Cambodian genocide and of the post-genocide struggle of Cambodians to make meaning of this historical trauma and to move forward. The study is thus an interrogation not only of revolutionary violence, but also of the ways both survivors and successive generations, individually and collectively, understand and work through this experience long after the genocide, including how exile mediates remembering and reconnections with the ancestral homeland. The book argues that explanations for Khmer Rouge extremism are to be found in various intersections—between ideology and structure, internal-

ties and externalities, continuity and rupture. The genesis of the violent and tragic syllogism was in the spaces of contradiction, specifically in the unlikely contexts from which the Khmer Rouge were catapulted to power and which accounted in large part for their utopian ambitions and self-consuming paranoia. In their millenarian pursuit, violence emerged as paramount both in the enforcement of policy and in the response to the failure of policy, as a purposively deployed coercive implementation of change and an unintended consequence of the irrational stress levied upon the system by unrealizable ambitions, excess zeal, and corrosive fear.

The pathology of power—genocidal and implosive—in turn leaves deep and enduring traces on the Cambodian individual, community, and nation that defy temporality. This history casts its shadow over the present and, in many families, even transgenerationally. In essence, this study echoes and recasts the provocative questions that Mimi Nguyen raised in her study of war, refugees, and the “gift of freedom”: “How do people live with debt? How can debt disturb our sense of history or inform our critique?”²⁸ In this discussion of refugees, the notion of debt is that which defines their relationality not only with America but also with the dead and the disappeared, a debt in both instances accrued through the granting not just of freedom but also of life. The quest for and discourse about justice and accountability necessarily exceed legal and juridical premises that currently prevail, provoking in the process an interrogation of the assumption that justice, reconciliation, and healing are necessarily causally connected and mutually reinforcing.

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With its sociohistorical and multidisciplinary approach, and an analytic multifocality that spans Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian America and that moves between past, present, and future, the book provides a richly historicized and holistic context necessary for understanding the complexity of diasporic lives and the sequelae of trauma that remains neither fully present nor fully absent, as Derrida contends, in refugee lives and homes.²⁹ It builds upon, complements, and enriches the discourse about war, genocide, displacement, and reconstitution. With its concerns and approaches, it also pushes against many disciplinary boundaries, particularly the intellectual binary between Asian Studies

and Asian American Studies. For Asian Studies, which has been and remains fixed in its gaze on Asia, diasporas are outside the geographical and cultural frame of “authenticity,” hence beyond its intellectual concerns. This disciplinary boundedness largely confines studies of the Cambodian genocide to a certain geographical framework, namely, Cambodia/Asia. Scholarship on the Cambodian genocide is also challenged by the tension embedded in area studies as a product of the Cold War, that is now called upon as a discipline to address the remains of that war. Despite these shortcomings, those interested in historicizing the Cambodian American experience are limited to texts in area studies, mostly history and anthropology, for the contextualization needed to understand the trauma, liminality, and resilience of the diasporic community.

Asian American Studies, on the other hand, notwithstanding its increased orientation toward transnationalism and diasporas, remains, for political and other reasons, primarily U.S.-focused, despite the fact that Asian American lives have always defied national boundaries. Where transnational concerns have emerged, they remain largely moored to the exigencies of economic migration, which continues to dominate migration studies in the United States. The preoccupations and opportunities afforded through flexible citizenship,³⁰ for one, however, are not necessarily those of liminal citizenship that refugees represent. Moreover, for the politically displaced, the exigencies and features of transnationality extend beyond the prevailing concerns with economic remittance to include the many forms of reconnection and repair, for the imperative is less about gain than regain. Through their reengagement, refugees remind us that they are not just those “who fought and lost” but those who in fact “lost out and fought.”³¹

The widening of the intellectual lens of this study is by no means an abandonment of, or even a shifting away from, the Asian American genealogy. Rather, it is a step, necessary and critical, toward making more holistic, textured, and nuanced the scholarly rendering of Asian American lives. It is not possible to discuss the Cambodian diaspora without referencing the historical tragedies that make transnationality not just a strand but *the* strand in Cambodian American discourse. Whereas many existing works on Cambodian Americans address war and genocide as historical background, this study uses pre-migration history not simply

as a temporal preface for community formation in the United States, but as fundamentally linked to the prevailing challenges facing Cambodian Americans. In its emphasis on the continuum of experience, it focuses not just on the “there” and the “here,” but how the “there” informs the “here.” History is neither just a prelude to nor just a cause of migration, but threads through and informs post-migration experiences in the diaspora. Critical issues such as citizenship and transnational belonging cannot be disentangled from the histories that produce the liminality and bifocality of the Cambodian American reality.

By embedding the Cambodian diaspora not only in the genocidal chapter of Cambodia’s history but also within the entangled histories of the wars in Southeast Asia, the book threads global politics with local manifestations, and the brutalizing logic of empire with the ravages on local lives. In critical ways, the Southeast Asian refugee figure, the scattered human debris of a failed U.S. imperial project, disrupts classical immigration narratives into which refugee discourse in the United States has long been collapsed. Taking the analysis of migration and resettlement beyond the customary framing of push-pull forces, exit-resettlement, and the paradigmatic binary of assimilation and alienation, it looks at the textured lives of refugees and of the generations that grew up or were born in the diaspora as they struggle to reconcile with this vexed history and negotiate between remembering and forgetting, between the intrusive past and the seemingly elusive future, between the “here” and the “there.” In the everyday, the hyphen in “Asian-American” is blurred, and connects as much as it separates.

Such density of refugee experiences, however, is often obscured in the dominant discourse about Cambodian Americans. Though refugee studies as a field is invested in understanding (and intervening in) the conditions and processes that engender mass displacement, the form that it has taken in the United States, prompted in no small way by the Southeast Asian resettlement, is largely centered on the refugee body—the concerns for shelter, food, health, and mental health. As Malkki points out, extant scholarship on refugees often fails to locate the problem “first in the political oppression or violence that produces ‘massive territorial displacements of people.’”³² Often labeled “a crisis,” refugee resettlement is a “situation” to be managed, and the refugee figure, to be rescued, rehabilitated, salvaged. This premise provides for little

consideration not only of the larger contexts of their displacement and re-emplacment, but moreover, of how the former informs and even collides with the latter. Discourse about trauma, for instance, though a topic of research and policy interests, is largely relegated to mental health professionals and approached as individual pathology rather than a historicized collective phenomenon. It also omits reflections about the ways historical subjects navigate and negotiate “macro forces with micro strategies,” including how survivors have lived with, transmitted, and even transformed their history of victimization into that of resilience and fortitude.

By extension, other than Cathy Schlund-Vials’s book on Cambodian American artistic production and a few other studies of the “1.5” generation,³³ we know little of the ways young Cambodians, particularly those of the post-genocide generations, receive and make meaning of this history that is filtered down to them. With the exception of the Killing Fields Memorial in Chicago, the absence of public commemorative sites for Cambodians in the diaspora relegates acts of mourning and remembrance associated with this historical experience to other realms, often “below the thresholds at which visibility begins,” as Michel de Certeau would have it, less legible from the outside. As a result, the different and multiple registers of agency that refugees and refugee communities exhibit, including their political and philanthropic lives, often presumed to be absent in immigrant communities, are unnoted. It is thus not sufficient to merely reposition our scholarly inquiry “in the ‘Third World frame’ . . . that acknowledges the link to empire,”³⁴ as Yèn Lê Espiritu rightly proposes; we must also illuminate the ways refugees negotiate and, in many instances, defy the ruinations of empire at and from the center of empire.

In its multilevel and multifaceted analysis, this study places theories and concepts drawn from the corpus of work on comparative revolutions, totalitarianism, diaspora, transnationalism, and memory works in conversation with survivor narratives culled from ethnographic research and over 250 interviews with a cross-section of survivors and their children between the ages of sixteen and eighty-two, which I conducted in Khmer and English, mostly in the United States, but also in France and Cambodia. The multi- and trans-locality of the interviews strengthens and deepens the analysis. Of the interviews, approximately

200 were of first-generation survivors, of which 150 were randomly selected. Data on “1.8-generation”³⁵ and second-generation Cambodians came from structured questionnaires and “circles of conversation” conducted in key Cambodian communities in the United States in 2012 and 2013.

Contrary to the depiction of Cambodian refugees as “wealthy, urban, educated and often of military backgrounds [whose] experience of the revolution does not match those of workers and peasants,”³⁶ the respondents came from diverse socioeconomic and regional backgrounds, and included factory workers, small subsistence farmers, and landless and illiterate peasants, as well urbane professionals, high-ranking officials, former students, and rank-and-file soldiers. If they can be said to be “privileged,” it is in the fact that they had survived and, in some cases, had left, a particularity that was balanced by information gathered on individuals who remained in Cambodia. In the same vein, whatever concerns may be engendered by the significant representation of refugees from northwestern Cambodia is mitigated by the fact that their life histories reflect multiple displacements from different parts of Cambodia prior to and during the Khmer Rouge era; for many, the Northwest was simply the last region to which they were relocated prior to their cross-border flight. To further countenance criticisms of refugee bias,³⁷ I note that the interviews were conducted after their exit from the refugee camps, thus allowing for geographical and temporal distance from the trauma source, but not so long after as to be compromised by forgetfulness.

Additional information and insights were culled from “conversational narratives” that emerged organically from years of living in and working with Cambodian diasporic communities and, as such, are enhanced by longitudinal perspectives. Unless cited, all quotes throughout the book are from all these various encounters. Materials from French, Khmer, and English-language archives at Aix-en-Provence, Washington, DC, Maryland, Berkeley, and the Documentation Center of Cambodia, along with the corpus of secondary materials on Cambodia and Cambodian diasporas, provide supplemental information and contextualization. The findings are further enriched by my own experiences as a Cambodian refugee and native Khmer speaker who has lost virtually all of her family to the genocide.

Seeking History

Almost twenty years after the Khmer Rouge fateful march into Phnom Penh, I made my first trip back to Cambodia. Tottering through a slow recovery, the country still bore the pockmarks of its recent trauma. Shadows loomed everywhere—over old buildings that stood frozen in time despite new ownership; in the outline of neighborhoods where shards of their former identities still protruded through the seams of a new socio-political cartography; and in the ingrained fear that continues to grip a generation battered to near extinction. In the faces that I had searched in vain for signs of recognition, there were lingering shadows of innocence robbed and childhoods denied, of lives that could have been. It was only at the killing grounds of Choeung Ek, when I looked down at fragments scattered throughout and, after a stunned moment, recognized them to be pieces of human remains, that I confronted the magnitude of the loss and the profound, incomprehensible nature of what had taken place in this country that was once home. A torn piece of pale blue cotton with a long-faded label bearing the word “Arrow” was the only remnant of a life that refused oblivion. The mental image that it conjured of a civil servant, dressed in his crisp short-sleeve dress shirt of a brand so popular during that time, walking toward a future that he could not have suspected would end in a shallow mass grave, was surreal in its ordinariness.

Even in a century that had seen two world wars, nuclear attacks on populated cities, two major revolutions that changed the world, and countless armed conflicts, the Cambodian experience stands out both for its own particular features and as a metaphor for the afflictions of the modern age. As William Shawcross opined,

Cambodia has an importance beyond itself, because there in its fragile heart paraded, throughout the 1970s, many of the most frightful beasts that now stalk the world. Brutal civil war, superpower intervention carelessly conducted from afar, nationalism exaggerated into paranoid racism, fanatical and vengeful revolution, invasion, starvation and back to unobserved civil war without end.³⁸

Here on the parched killing fields, hidden behind verdant rice fields that deceived with the illusion of normalcy, the survivors' stories take

on a poignant realism that is possible only when one steps beyond the elegant confines of theory. What *did* happen here? What was the Khmer Rouge trying to do? What accounted for the erosion of moral and other restraints that allowed wanton killings to go undeterred? How does this historical injury imprint itself on the Cambodian person and on the nation? How, if at all, can a nation heal from such extreme injury? These are the questions that set me on a quest for answers to both the causes *and* consequences of the Khmer Rouge regime of terror.

When I first embarked on this study, scholarship on the Khmer Rouge was just emerging. In the United States, newly admitted Cambodian refugees were just settling into their new lives, finding refuge, for the most part, in America's inner-city housing complexes. The trauma of revolution, flight, and exile was compounded by the challenges of rebuilding lives in a foreign and not always embracing country. California cities such as East Oakland and Long Beach were sites of multiple encounters. An area known as "Cambodian Village" in Oakland, where many of the interviews took place, was actually only a square of dilapidated concrete buildings with iron bars on the windows, overlooking a dusty quad where, on any given morning, one could see Hmong women in their colorful clothing walk around with their babies strapped on their backs, while a Khmer woman in her sarong swept the small concrete landing where her entrepreneurial husband had set up a one-stool barbershop in front of the family's cramped apartment. The sound of mortar and pestle and aromatic scent of lemongrass conveyed a feel of a Southeast Asia compressed, transplanted, and reinvented. It was also in these places that refugees, inserted into an already volatile context, were often reminded of their vulnerability as newcomers. Many had not wanted to be here, and were fast realizing that they were not wanted here.

Distanced from the source of trauma but unable to free themselves from the haunting past, refugees responded to the compulsion to bear witness:

I have lived to see the world turned upside down [*kalab phen dey*]. I have lost everything—my family, my youth, my home, my country. These memories are all that I have left. Those things that happened to us—they are like shadows that follow us always. We have to ask ourselves how is it that such savagery can still exist today.

The experiences they sought to recount, however, could only be snapshots of the realities of Democratic Kampuchea, for most had little information beyond their own immediate experiences of what transpired elsewhere in the country. Survivors' accounts were also punctuated by the constant relocation to which they were subjected, and by the strategic survival imperative of not seeing, not hearing, and not asking. They too wanted to understand.

Against the weight of an uncertain present and a shadowing past, and torn between the desire to forget and the pressure to remember, between the fear of speaking and the need to speak, refugees struggled to give form and meaning to their experiences in a country where few were willing to listen. America then was enveloped simultaneously in the post-Vietnam amnesia of the Right and the self-vindication (and later self-defensiveness) of the Left. Neither side saw refugees as much more than pieces in the political game, as either a living condemnation of a brutal communist regime, collaborators implicated in an imperialist war, or mere opportunists seeking to capitalize on international compassion for the chance to migrate. With post-Vietnam economic retraction and high unemployment, most Americans simply saw them as an unwanted social burden.

In academia, developments in Democratic Kampuchea, especially when they could no longer be denied, provoked scholarly and, to no small extent, ideological debates about Cambodian communism and the postcolonial environment that engendered such virulent response. To a far lesser extent, these events compelled soul-searching among Western academics. The extremism of the Khmer Rouge regime was a staggering reminder that totalitarianism can emanate from all ends of the ideological spectrum, committed by left-wing as well as right-wing dictatorships. This reality was disconcerting to many who had held on to the optimism of the revolutionary promise. For the Asian American movement that was catalyzed to activism by the U.S. wars in Asia, the genocide and mass refugee exodus that followed the long-awaited peace disturbed fundamental assumptions.

In this fraught context, the scholarship that was produced over the last four decades has nonetheless contributed much to our understanding of Cambodian society, politics, and history, especially of the Khmer communist movement, of which little was known prior to 1975. Even

works that have since been invalidated by historical developments were instructive of the politico-intellectual environment of the time. Invaluable as they are to the scholarly world, the theorizing, debates, and questions that preoccupy academics (such as how accurate the body counts are, or whether these experiences constitute genocide or a “rupture”) have little significance for survivors who are struggling to make sense of the incomprehensible experiences that ravaged their lives. If anything, such discourse often acts as a silencing force. As one survivor simply and poignantly asked, “Why [do they] correct my memory?”³⁹

With memory works, recall inevitably involves filters, biases, and the instinct to fill in memory gaps, largely out of the human desire for structure and order. Already present in any probing into such painful histories, these tendencies are particularly accentuated by the nature of auto-genocidal violence. For researchers, the challenge is to wade through these pitfalls of remembering and recounting and to grasp what Schama terms the “chaotic authenticity” of survivor narratives. Engaging this history means moving into the dark areas of abject loss and liminality, the full extent of which can only be understood not by simply observing and analyzing but by living and feeling it. In the community, distrust further compromises discourse, a challenge that Linda Tuhiwai Smith poignantly documented in her seminal work on research and indigenous peoples. Paradoxically, survivors may speak more readily about their experiences with non-Cambodians; what they share, however, may be more superficial or oblique such that the meaning is lost in the cultural translation. Among Cambodians, once long-withheld trust is established, there are nuances and textures to the stories that are conveyed and understood within the cultural framework, that need no translation, and that elsewhere are easily overlooked.

Written from many intersections and interstices of Asia-America, past-present, continuity-rupture, macro-micro, theories-narratives, public-private, collective-personal, this study emerges from the conviction that the theorizing about and understanding of a nation’s collective histories of war and genocide must be grounded in accountings of individual histories, and that the complexity of these issues and experiences can be captured only through prismatic and multidisciplinary lenses that allow “ordinary people’s constructions of their life histories, with their internal silences and mythologies” to surface.⁴⁰ Studies of nations,

communities, and lives cannot be approached in binary terms—war/peace, homeland/host land, refugees/citizens, victims/warriors, traumatized/whole—but in the complexities, layers, and copresence of all these defining markers. It is about simultaneity and interstitiality—the “space between,” a feeling of belonging to many worlds, or to none.

This book is thus about foregrounding the survivor-refugees as experiencing subjects and the integrity of the experiences as they were lived, remembered, and articulated without the mediation of linguistic and cultural translation, as countermemory and counternarratives to state rhetoric and externally imposed recounting. It is to rewrite the individual, the human, back where necropolitics had sought to vacate, and to ground macro discussion of political forces and global machinations in the micro details and nuances of real lives, for to echo Schama, revolutions must be read not just as “a march of abstractions and ideologies but as a human event of complicated and often tragic outcomes.”⁴¹ This “re-storying,” as Achebe points out, is not simply a balancing of narratives but also a balancing of power, namely, the power to describe, to narrate, and to legitimate. As the first scholarly book that approaches these entangled subjects as such written by a Cambodian refugee and scholar with deep and wide connections to the communities both in the diaspora and in Cambodia, it also pries open the intellectual space that has been a monopoly of Western academics. For many of us born of this experience and in exile, it means struggling from beneath the weight of history to write this history, in a language that is not one’s own, and in a country that is not one’s home.

This book is, thus, a step toward re-centering that which has heretofore remained on the margins, to redress the position of multifold invisibilization that Cambodians occupy—that is, to move Cambodia from the “sideshow” of U.S. history and Cambodians from the periphery of American public and intellectual life. The invisibility of Cambodia, in essence, has translated into the invisibility of Cambodians in the United States. If Americans lost during the covert wars in Cambodia were the “missing in action,” Cambodians, to borrow from Helen Zia, are the “missing in history.”⁴² Despite the rapid growth of the Southeast Asian communities in the United States, very little is taught in the schools about these chapters of American history or about the Cambodian American experience. Just as Vietnam became a war and not a

country, so it is that the magnitude of the Cambodian genocide often renders “un-visible” the Cambodian figure. It is, however, a double-layered invisibility. The terror that rained over Cambodia in the form of carpet bombings was overshadowed by the reign of terror that ensued. If Cambodia and Cambodians surface in American public consciousness, it is often only as an ahistoricized genocidal “apparition.” If the Cambodian refugee figure, in many instances, destabilizes the image of the “good refugee,” it is replaced by that of the “saved.” Beyond survival, can this liberatory narrative itself be salvaged in the face of enduring poverty and criminalized raciality, or is it simply replaced with disregard? It is this absent space for remembering and acknowledgment that Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong invokes when she writes that “refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us.”⁴³ Read as such, mourning, that “constant tracing of traces,”⁴⁴ is not submission but a refusal to submit.

By extension, similar to the ways the pan-Asian American framework masks internal differentiation, the pan-Southeast Asian American rubric obscures the more vulnerable communities. With neither the numerical strength of Vietnamese Americans nor the political cachet of Hmong Americans, Cambodians are peripheral despite the not insignificant size of the community. While Cambodian American educational data and mental health statistics are often used to highlight achievement gaps and disparities and argue for resources to assist refugees, very few programs are for or run by Cambodian Americans. In academe and related enterprises, Southeast Asian American studies is often made synonymous with Vietnamese American studies. If Southeast Asians in the United States are politically and otherwise peripheral, as Yên Lê Espiritu rightfully asserts, Cambodians hover on the margin of that periphery. In contrast to scholarship on Vietnamese Americans, who, as Espiritu also observed, are objects “of intense scholarly interest,” and “over documented” as compared to other immigrant groups, scholarship on Cambodian Americans is especially scant, and that *by* Cambodian Americans even more so. Much of the scholarship dates back to the “refugee era” of the 1980s; over the last four decades, only a handful of book-length studies specifically written about Cambodian Americans have appeared. Works by Jeremy Hein, Aihwa Ong, Nancy Smith-Hefner, Sucheng Chan, Susan Needham, and Karen Quintiliani

are foundational in their dedication to the Cambodian American experience. Though not without historical context, most focus on the Cambodian resettlement experiences in the United States and are based on one community, locale, or region. Significantly, though Cambodian survivors have been the subject of research and source of information for researchers, published works by Cambodian Americans are essentially limited to a handful of memoirs and a novel, most produced in the last fifteen years and authored by child survivors now in their adulthood. Heartwrenchingly poignant, they generally provide little in the way of overarching analysis.

It is in these multiple and intersecting contexts that I deploy the concept of “shadows.” Like the traditional *lakhon sbek* (shadow puppet performance), the internal workings of the Khmer Rouge movement and of Democratic Kampuchea were veiled, mysterious. With unseen forces manipulating people’s lives and thoughts, and being themselves manipulated, the internecine power struggles were reminiscent of the epic battles of the Ramayana, fought in the abstract in a realm beyond the mundane. In the world of the Khmer Rouge, humanity lost its way as individuals were subjugated to the uncompromising exaction of obedience. Humans became puppets, moving in fear of thoughts and hope, and like Mbembe’s rendering of the slave, “the perfect figure of a shadow.”⁴⁵ Shadows are also the genocidal remains, a spectral register of loss, real and symbolic, that casts its presence trans-temporally, in forms distorted by space and time. Shadow also references the war fought as a “sideshow” veiled from the public gaze, the anonymity of the refugee mass, and the marginality of the Cambodian refugee figure, the invisible legacy of an unseen war.

Consisting of seven chapters, *From the Land of Shadows* is organized into three parts, and bookended with an introduction and an epilogue. Part 1 focuses on the question of state power and the necropolitics⁴⁶ of Democratic Kampuchea, drawing on survivors’ accounts to describe life-and-death conditions under the Khmer Rouge. Interweaving analysis with narratives, it maps the political vicissitudes in Democratic Kampuchea as they relate to the emergence of terror and hunger as paramount disciplinary technologies. It also underscores human resilience and agency in the ways that ordinary people navigated, negotiated, resisted, and survived extraordinary conditions.

Part 2 argues for the importance of situating Khmer Rouge extremism within the larger historical context from which the movement emerged and gained power. It posits that Cambodia's colonial and post-colonial history and prewar society created forces and conditions that both deterred and advanced Khmer communist success. The thick description of prewar Cambodian society not only illuminates revolutionary dynamics in Cambodia but also provides an important *entrée* into the sociocultural world of the majority of Cambodian refugees in the diaspora, and a rare context for understanding the nature and scope of the dislocations that predated the "refugee era." In positioning violence within the historical frame, this section traces the roots of many features of Democratic Kampuchea—namely, the deeply felt anxiety about national survival, nativistic impulse, suspicion of and disdain for cities and intellectuals, and destructive self-reliance—to the experiences of colonization and betrayal. Rather than looking at the Khmer Rouge terror regime as an eruption of the irrational, it analyzes the purposive nature of revolutionary violence, providing both structural and ideological explanations for its emergence as a policy instrument by linking it to the twin imperatives of ensuring regime survival and radically transforming Cambodian society.

Part 3 examines the legacies of historical trauma as it registers in Cambodian families and communities, and the individual and collective struggle of survivors to emerge from social death. It looks at the self-implicating nature of auto-genocidal violence, the particular nature of the wounds and void engendered by disappearances and mass graves, and ramifications for reconciliation and healing. It places analytic focus on the tense relationship between speech and silence, remembering and forgetting, both as extensions of trauma and as acts of agency and resistance. It also looks at the different forms that memory, mourning, and memorialization take in the aftermath of this traumatic encounter, and examines the longing for reconnection and the different facets and layers of transnationality that manifest in the Cambodian American community. With the ancestral homeland, for many, connoting both solace and pain, it also reflects on the ambivalence that inhabits the spaces of disconnection and reconnection, and examines the ways memory travels across time, space, and generations. Given the implication of America in these tragedies, the book unpacks and problematizes notions of

citizenship, belonging, and return, and provides a critical analysis of the complex relationship among diasporas, the sending and the receiving countries.

The epilogue opens with the trial of Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, head of the Tuol Sleng extermination center, as a jumping-off point for reflections about one of the most painful encounters of modern history, about justice and healing, and about what the Cambodian experience illuminates of the darker side of modernity. As Todorov posits, “The remedy must not consist in merely remembering the evil. . . . We have to go a step farther and ask ourselves about the reasons that gave rise to the evil.”⁴⁷ The nature of the scholarly enterprise makes it easy and tempting to engage these intellectually, politically, and humanly important issues at a certain level of abstraction and with a certain and perhaps even necessary degree of disengagement. How to do this without losing sight of the fact that behind the statistics are real individuals is a challenge, rendered even more acute for those who live this history and in whom this history continues to live. To honor the stories and the memories of both the dead and the survivors is one small way of restoring humanity to those the system had sought to deny.

Though colossal and extreme, the Cambodian tragedy is not an aberration. Perhaps what is most disconcerting about this history is not its extraordinariness, but how short is the line between “extra-” and “ordinary.” Mass displacement, statelessness, and refugees are features of modernity, conditions that reveal both the vulnerability of the modern age and the resiliency of history’s battered subjects. Just as there is no singular cause of the extremism of Democratic Kampuchea or a singular response to such extreme injury, perhaps there can never be a fully satisfactory answer to the profound questions about, or complete understanding of, such experience. Man’s inherent and seemingly limitless capacity to inflict harm onto his own, as well as the nobility of the human spirit that shines in the face of adversity, has been and perhaps will remain beyond our ability to intellectualize. We owe it to those who are no longer here to continue to ask and to acknowledge nonetheless.

The bones cannot find peace until the truth they hold in themselves has been revealed.

—*Youk Chhang*