

6 Refractions of home

Exile, memory, and diasporic longing

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The practice hall was nothing more than the concrete courtyard of an office building, wedged in invisibility amidst a row of neighborhood stores, noodle houses, and *taquerias* that dotted the busy Anaheim Street of Long Beach, California. Cambodian American youths, adorned in their silk *sampot* (Cambodian dress) and *ao lakhaoun* (a blouse dancers wear during practice), bustled around, exchanging snacks and gossip. A bit of America peeked out through the laced-up sneakers that some of them were still unwilling to shed before class. Like a colorful tapestry, rolled out in one undulating ripple, the students moved into position on the floor and proceeded, with disciplined regimentation, with the ritual salutation of the *kru* (teacher). Witnessing this scene unfolding, one finds oneself standing at a portal to a different world, impermeable to the noise of inner-city America, to that moment when tradition and modernity, past and present, intersect. What was exhibited was more than artistic impulse. It was the indomitable spirit of a nation, struggling to survive in diaspora.

On any given weekend, in places such as Long Beach and Lowell,¹ it is not uncommon to see young Cambodian Americans seated in makeshift classrooms at the local temple or at a community center earnestly studying Khmer or practicing traditional dance and music. The sound of religious chants from the Buddhist *wat* co-mingles with the chaos and confusion of the inner-city neighborhood. Elsewhere, in ethnic markets, young Cambodian Americans peruse the stock of transnationally produced Khmer-language videos and CDs. Though the words and nuances may elude them, they are drawn to the music by a certain intangible, but undeniable force. As a young Cambodian American college student puts it: "I am not sure what it is. I don't really understand the words. But there is something about the music, the sound. Outside I am American, but the music, it speaks to my Khmer soul."²

In fundamental ways, the Cambodian refugee community is a legacy of the nation's tortured past. War, auto-genocide,³ and exile have left deep and lasting imprints on this refugee population in America. Virtually no Cambodian household is left untouched by the death or disappearance of a family member. Of Cambodian households in California, close to 25

percent are female-headed—most of the men killed or missing during the Khmer Rouge period (US Census Department 2000). For most first generation refugees, the genocidal encounter and circumstances of flight—abrupt, secretive, and further fracturing of family and community—have left a gaping void: “We all have a part of us that has been torn away, something special, precious that is gone” (Iep 1991: 27). A Cambodian woman described herself as “damaged,” like “a broken vase that has been mended . . . [but] will never be whole . . . again” (Samnang Wu cited in Afkhami 1994: 188). Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, foreign occupation, and the Communist regime’s disavowal of its diasporas, further widened the psychological distance from the homeland. Against the historical backdrop of territorial erosion, the loss of sovereignty under a decade-long foreign occupation evoked a deeply held anxiety about national survival and, for refugees, the permanency of exile. Compounded, the impact on individual survivors and on the families is long-term and multifaceted. According to a 1994 study of the community in Long Beach, trauma-related disorders are found to persist in roughly 50–85 percent of Cambodians who were traumatized as children.⁴

In diaspora, Cambodian survivors inhabit this “land of absence,” which Gabriela Mistral described as “born to me of things / . . . / That I had and I lost / Of all things livin / that I have seen die / of all that was mine / And went from me” (cited in Kaminsky 1999: 11). The trauma lives on in that “discontinuous state of being” (Said 1994: 140), the “permanent residence in the state of the flux” (Kaminsky 1999: XVI) that accompanies a forced and unexpected severance from the ancestral homeland and somnambulant re-insertion into an alienating context. It is also amplified by the marginalization that refugees continue to feel in the adopted country.

In the shadow of these deeply born dislocations, Cambodian refugees have carved out new homes mostly in America’s blighted neighborhoods, and begun the long and arduous process of rebuilding tattered lives. The stores and coffee houses that line Long Beach’s Anaheim Street, many bearing signs of ornate Khmer scripts etched alongside Vietnamese, Chinese, and English wordings, announce the beginning of “Cambodia Town.” They edify a certain permanence that belies the disconcerting reality of the surrounding neighborhood of dilapidated apartments and hidden flux of a sub-population in constant search of elusive security. Wedged into this socioeconomic topography of poverty and marginalization, nonetheless, is a community determined to reconstitute, anchoring itself to that insistent call of the home/land to drown out the cacophony of displacement and rupture.

Like all dislocated communities, re-establishing a sense of continuum in their lives is a key preoccupation especially of first-generation refugees. Emerging from a history of devastation and disconnect, this struggle to recollect and heal the fissures is, for Cambodians, an integral part of the overarching struggle to survive as a people. It is a process that has been

thwarted, however, by the persisting intrusion of politics and by the exigencies of daily survival. In essence, it was politics that created the rupture, and it is political trauma and exile that sustain the dis/connect.

In this context of fragmentation and uncertainty, the memory of the homeland, though filtered and refracted by time and distance, presents itself as the sinew of an otherwise dispersed community. Where differentiation and marginalization are the lived experiences that contradict the loftier rhetoric of pluralistic democracy, the affixation of diasporas' hopes and preoccupation with the "homeland" is an effort to rationalize and cope with their present condition. Nostalgia becomes a way of reclaiming history and identity amidst the loss, disorientation, and liminality of their refugee condition. However intangible the prospect may be, for many diasporas, return is "the only answer we have, the only battle cry, the only way of knowing that we were destroyed but not defeated" (Poli Delano cited in Kaminsky 1999: 42).

For some, particularly during the period of occupation, attachment to the homeland and longing for return took on the form of long-distance nationalism and engagement in the struggle for national self-determination. Diasporic politics became infused with a moralizing purpose, with overseas Cambodians viewing themselves, and being viewed by others, as the voice of the Cambodian nation that had been silenced by a captured state and as the vestigial hope for a colonized homeland. Nationalism, in effect, enabled the diasporic community to transcend the internal fissures and the ambivalence that auto-genocide had engendered.

For others, the struggle is against the peril of forgetting. In San Diego, California, between multiple shifts at a local machine shop, a French-trained pilot, driven singularly by his love for traditional arts and his memory of home, fashioned a traditional Khmer violin out of a baseball bat purchased from a local K-mart, and carved scenes of the *Ramayana* from discarded paper boxes salvaged from neighborhood dumpsters. Pointing to the intricate tableau of princes and epic battles hanging, as if frozen in time, on the garage wall among well-used tools, he commented modestly:

As a child, I used to go to the ancient temples, and run my fingers over the bas-reliefs. Now I just let my fingers remember. I am not an artist and these are not really arts. They are just memories. My children have never seen Cambodia. This may be the closest to their roots they will ever get. That's all that is left of Cambodia that I have to give them.⁵

Prior to 1993, when access to Cambodia was seriously constrained and imports from Thailand prohibitively costly, musical instruments and other accoutrements produced in the Cambodian American community were often the only items available. However imperfect as replicas, they enabled the community to keep the cultural heritage alive.

Reflecting on her own life in exile, Florence Simfukwe noted that it is an existence devoid of "the warmth of home and the history that gives meaning to every part" (cited in Afkhami 1994: 121). Exile thus involves not only a forcible spatial and physical dislocation but also a spiritual disjuncture. What is missed, therefore, is not so much the physical state of being in a country but "the community and togetherness, food and laughter, and the calm that comes from knowing one's rightful place and the right thing to do in all circumstances" (Afkhami 1994: 123). Above and beyond the more metaphysical aspects of exilic longing, it is, as Mario Benedetti puts it, the "grayer, more opaque, nostalgias"—"the route home. A tranquility, a calm, to know what comes after each corner, each lamp-post, each kiosk" and freedom from "the surprises [that] made me tired" (cited in Kaminsky 1999: 38)—that compel return.

In diaspora, surviving Cambodians sought refuge from the recent history of loss and suffering in their reminiscence of the Sangkum period (*samay sangkum*), which many considered to be Cambodia's "golden era," of a time when they were "secure and happy" (*sok hay, sabay teat*): "Think back; happiness was in the country / Lake, stream. Flowering tree, Cicadas sounding their melodies / All this gone, past" (Luoth 1998: 24).

The diacritical emphasis on "happiness" rather than mere security conveys the void that physical refuge has failed to address. The resurgence in the Cambodian American market of re-mastered old music favorites, pirated reproductions of the period's popular films (including Prince Sihanouk's cinematographic *oeuvres*), revamped menus in local eateries such as "Phnom Penh noodle," and other familiar markers of the pre-war era can thus be seen as attempts at reclaiming the past, thereby validating the uninterrupted continuity with the present. Similarly, names emblazoned on neighborhood storefronts hark back to familiar sounds and places of belonging—Pailin, Tonle Sap, Battambang—etching into the ethnoscape of urban America an imprint of "home" that refugees carry with them in their exilic imagination. In earlier years when the Khmer nation was kept bifurcated by a geographical and political divide, the cultural memory of home was incubated and nurtured within these enclaves.

Through the prism of time: home/land imagined

Where the land has been rendered synonymous with the killing fields and with compromised sovereignty, the image of "home," for many Cambodians, was reduced to one constructed out of treasured fragments of pre-war memory, preserved in nostalgia and kept frozen in time, a place accessible only to the imagination: "I wade through solitude / To the cottage where we used to / Gather to drink rice wine / Enjoying false peace" (U 1998: 35).

Similarly, for Vann Nath, one of the seven survivors of the notorious S-21 extermination center, the longed-for future is a return to a refracted,

bucolic past, memorialized on canvas in his painting entitled *The Village of My Birth*. Memory of home and history, however, is a site fraught with contestation and contradictions. Under the layers of historical trauma, and despite the visceral resistance of the forcibly uprooted, the "home-land" for many Cambodians becomes a hyphenated notion, problematized by physical and psychological dislocation, by memories too painful to relive and even more painful to let go. The tension that is felt is in part a function of the complex, triangulated relationship that diasporic Cambodians have vis-à-vis the ancestral homeland, with the history that they embody, and with their adopted country of America. Unlike other experiences of mass violence, auto-genocide involves a historical injury that is made even more acute by the fact that it is self-inflicted. The complexity of the issues notwithstanding, to the average Cambodian who had experienced deprivation and decimation of kin and families, there was little denying that Khmer hands had taken Khmer lives. This, in turn, engenders among surviving refugees a certain ambivalence towards the homeland. The source that connotes the solace of belonging and the "security of sameness" also evokes the memory of death and deprivation, signifying both an indelible connection and, simultaneously, a rupture: "Want to return, but no / Can't, yet still want to go as / Slim hope grows slimmer still that the homeland / Will ever rest from war" (Luoth 1998: 24).

For young Cambodian Americans this ambivalence is inflected, furthermore, by the generational distance. For those born in refugee camps or in the US, their memory of, and connection with, the ancestral homeland consists primarily of that nurtured within the family, and perhaps reinforced within the community with which they may have but a tenuous tie. Most attend schools and colleges where their own history and cultural identity are not validated:

We . . . live trying to break the silence that keeps us unknown, invisible . . . I read about the Vietnam War that killed so many of my ancestors and left the rest seeking refuge in strange and dangerous places. I don't see or hear the history of my people. My history is a blur [*sic*] kept secret.

(Asian and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health 2000: 8)

For many of that generation, the image of Cambodia is solely one filtered through the narratives of mass atrocities, with the nation's history compressed into the two-hour long movie, *The Killing Fields*. By extension, their sense of their own historicized identity and connection to the originary source are largely spun of a collage of stories, pieced together from speech interrupted and broken by the loss of the heritage language.

Without direct ties to, and memory of, the pre-war period, there can be no refuge in nostalgia for that generational cohort, no solace in the self-denial

of Cambodia's sobering present. To many, the country that is exalted in exilic memory is also one stigmatized by a bloody history and an equally bloody present, a country "advertised in disgrace" (Anonymous, "My Khmerness"). A young Cambodian American poet exposes the complex, ambivalent, and conflictual position that Cambodia occupies in the imagination of many of his generation: "I hear people speak of Khmer pride—The same people who kill and die" (Anonymous, "Cambodia"). Thus, whereas the elder Vann Nath sought to remember pre-war life as marked by the freedom from fear and the simple self-determination of a cow-herder, Chath Pier Sath, a young Cambodian American poet and social activist, spoke of "the past in Cambodia's present" ("The Haunting Present"), of power, greed, poverty, and classism, of the real and symbolic violence that once characterized the *ancien régime* and that persists despite regime change: "as the politicians bicker and fight for power and social status. I am going back to the pre-Khmer Rouge social class, where the rich spit on the poor, and the poor resented the rich, wanting another Khmer Rouge to spill their blood again" ("The Haunting Present"). In the same vein, while many Cambodians, old and young, look to the nation's antiquarian glory for the reminder of the country's potential and promise of self-restoration, others see Angkor Wat as nothing more than a "glorified pile of rocks" (Point_Dexter 2004)⁶ and make reference to the country's imperial past as an opiate that lulls the nation's consciousness, and conscience, from its contemporary stagnancy.

In her essay "Insistence of Memory," Tsvetaeva spoke of the homeland not as "a geographical convention but an insistence of memory and blood" (1994: 99). Despite the ambivalence, and though they have but a fragmented understanding of the nostalgic preoccupation that consumed their elders, young Cambodian Americans often recount those hi/stories with an assumed poignancy, and inhabit those family narratives with a vividness and an immediacy of those who had lived through them. In a fundamental way, they have. Theirs is a childhood nurtured in the shadow of trauma, oppressive in its unshakable omnipresence. Though born after the genocidal period, Prach Ly, whose music centers on the theme of loss and healing, refers to his work as an "autobiography." In his words, "[the story of the genocide] was inside of me" (Sadiq 2002).

For some, the rupture is the connection: "Father was shot, mother was rape [*sic*], but yet my Khmer soul / Escape to this adopted home . . . / . . . my Khmerness is untouchable / But not out of sight / You ask if this is Pride, I answer this is what have keep [*sic*] my Khmerness / Alive" (Anonymous, "My Khmerness").

The pain, palpable in the family and community, is an insistent reminder of the interconnections that defy time, space, and politics. In his autobiographical poem, entitled "The Haunting Present," Chath Pier Sath wrote: "I still want to go home, even though I would be going to the graves of

my parents, my brother who died of AIDS, my brother-in-law, and my brother who was murdered by the Khmer Rouge . . .” (“The Haunting Present”).

Unable to avert their gaze either from the ancestral source or the consuming present, they are of a “bifocal of oneness” (Pier Sath, “I am Bifocal of Oneness” 1999) tugging at, and being tugged simultaneously by the bond and the disconnect. Graphically captured in the split images on the cover of his CD *Dalama* of Angkor Wat juxtaposed with the White House, and flowers with skeletons, this lived contradiction reverberates in Prach Ly’s poetry, rapped in English to the accompaniment of the traditional xylophone: “I love my land to death / A child of the Killing Fields” (2003). However intuitive, tenuous, and conflicted, the connection to the ancestral source is, for most, undeniable: “I have never seen the Mekong but I have heard it cries [*sic*]” (Pier Sath, “The Mekong River”).

For Kassie Neou, a returning Cambodian American and renowned human rights advocate, it is this insistence of blood, the fact that “we cannot deny one another” (Reed 2002: 3) that makes reconciliation necessary and possible despite the deep schisms created by a long absence and an even longer history of distrust. For Chath Pier Sath, as for many returning Cambodians, the nation’s present suffering at once repulses and captivates him: “I wanted to leave, but I stayed” (Reed 2002: 3). Orphaned and marginalized in his adopted country, that link, however painful and oppressive, is his sole connection to a past, a history, a family, and a sense of belonging, to a self, however frayed by trauma, and an identity beyond that of a disenfranchised refugee: “My life in exile, homesick for the sentimental miseries of things I had known even pain is desirable whenever I need to redefine my own humanity” (“The Wilderness of Pain”). Without any memory of his father, his “yearning all those years to have one” had to be quenched by nothing more than the facial resemblance of his uncle. It is a tragically eloquent metaphor for Cambodia in exilic imagination.

In large part, the need of the youths to claim this history is rooted in the desire to transcend the generational fissure by validating and honoring the sacrifices of their elders. As Prach Ly puts it: “i’ma use communication as a bridge / first i’ma knock down the walls / between me and my parents / listen to their stories an’ all / without interference” (Stewart and May 2004: 85). For some young Cambodian Americans, acknowledgement of that injurious history soothes the absence that registers in many homes:

A day in the life of a broken home and a broken country
It must have been hard to run around dodging bullets carrying me
You see despite the hardships I am going through
And despite the lack of love I received from you

I can still appreciate what you did for me and my siblings

...

And I do see the scars in your souls, I never asked why
Every time I see the tears in your eyes I too start to cry.

(Anonymous, www.khmervoice.com)

It is in effect the “survivor’s guilt” of first-generation refugees, transmitted through the generational prism, that cements familial bonds across geography and generation:

News of a sick brother and sister, a frail mother fighting to
Stay alive so she could see her children. One death here and one there,
From the distance our tears keep running down.
There’s never enough money to send for a funeral.
Every funeral is like a party, with its ceremonial process of remorse

...

(Pier Sath, “Am’s Last Brother”)

For many refugees, the homeland and the concomitant desire for return serve as an anchor for an otherwise rudderless life in diaspora. Within America’s racial hierarchy, Cambodian refugees occupy a seemingly paradoxical place, simultaneously visible and marginal. The mutually constitutive force of alienation from one context and gravitation towards another is exposed in poignant eloquence in Prach’s “The End’n’ is Just the Beginninn’”: “They act like we (are) slaves / I rather be back where I was born / Than here confused and dazed” (“Resurrec” 1999). Another young Cambodian American poet spoke of the pain of invisibility: “No one understands in America / The stories my grandmother told me . . . / No one cares about the light / Only the darkness” (cited in Tenhula 1991: 31). Reaffirming the historicized tie as such is a way of anchoring their own presence in, and imprinting their identity onto, America’s racial mosaic, and hence of resisting the imposed invisibility.

For diasporic Cambodians, young and old, poor or economically viable, it is in the reconstituted world of familiar sights, sounds, and smells—of aromatic curry blending with the scent of sandalwood incense emanating from Section 8 apartments,⁷ of lemon grass swaying in rhythm with the colorful sarongs hung on clotheslines—that exile ends, and a renewed sense of community is forged in this place “they call ghetto, we call home” (Asian and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health 2000: 23). Amidst poverty and marginalization, reconnection with the ancestral homeland and with one’s cultural heritage becomes an act of resistance against the stigma of the dispossessed, a spurning of the outsiders’ attempt to deny refugees not only a country but also a history. Forged in the condition of estrangement, nationalism is above all “an assertion of belonging to a place, a people, a

heritage. It affirms the home . . . and by doing so it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages" (Edward Said cited in Robinson 1994: 139).

Return and resistance

It is within this accustomed tension of longing and resistance that return must be understood. The experience of return itself is qualitatively different depending on the individuals, the circumstances of migration and resettlement, and the expectations harbored. For the older generation, nation and identity are territorially rooted, and there can be no wholeness without the reconnection between place and being: "Let me live on the dirt on which I stand / Bury me smiling in the rich soil of my homeland" (Vorn, "Together We Stand"). An exile from the then Soviet Union, Tatyana Mamonova echoes this elemental need for connection: "as life progresses, I wait to feel the unquestioning attachment to the land again" (Afkami 1994: 161). For some, such as Ronnie Yimsuth, the literal return to the physical site of the family home was essentially a metaphysical journey to all that it represents. As he puts it, it was essentially a return to "the last place where good memories still exist in my cluttered mind," to "a time when all my family members and my youth were still intact" ("Twenty Five Years Later, The Haunting Nightmares Continue").

To a large extent, however, return can never be fully achieved, for the rupture created by war, genocide, colonization, and, simply, by the steady march of time, is irreversible. The loss of the familiar is fundamentally irretrievable for the changes experienced are simultaneously external in the environment and internal to the returnees. As Kaminsky argues: "the subject produced in and by exile continues to experience the world through the circumstances of exile . . . even after return home has become juridically possible" (1999: 81). She goes on to say:

After years of exile, of alienation and acculturation, of adapting the palate and the ear and the line of vision, the exile—and the exile's palate, ear, and eye—is no longer fully at home anywhere. The end of exile is a richness that must always bear a sense of loss and a desire for what is elsewhere.

(1999: 144)

For Vann Vorn, the Cambodia unveiled and exposed in the stark present bears no resemblance to the deeply cherished memories: "Cambodian [*sic*] will never be the same / Innocent souls screaming in pain / The Cambodian soil soaked in puddles of blood left behind by our Khmer people" ("A Dying Breed"). The disconcerting contrast between the actual and the imagined was felt by Chath Pier Sath for whom return brought no refuge in relived memory, only a harsh encounter with post-genocide realities of fractured

families and impoverished relatives, AIDS, and stifling corruption. From the initial euphoric anticipation of return, his "love for that country turned to hate and disgust . . . Cambodia became a place of nightmares and screams" ("The Haunting Present"). It is thus that return brings home, for many diasporas, the realization that even memory is "stolen" from them, "erased," "swept away" (Luisa Valenzuela cited in Kaminsky 1999: 120). The exile's ultimate feeling of alienation from their originary place reverberates in Taras Shevchenko's piercing conclusion about Ukraine under Stalin: "this land of ours that is not ours" (www.davidkilgour.com/mp/two-decades.htm).

Though perhaps never fully realizable, that journey—of return and of turning back—is necessary. While sociologists have described refugee migration in terms of flight, diasporic return, be it literal or figurative, can be seen as an instinctual reaction *to* flight. In that sense, it is a process that is compelled more by the void carried into, and heightened, in exile, than by concrete ideas of what awaits at the destination point. For those survivors forcibly and prematurely aged by the Khmer Rouge experience, the impetus is to reclaim the childhood that history had deprived them of, to recapture their lost innocence:

I remain a child in the body of a man
In his yearning for monsoon's drops
As I think of losses left unresolved
For me to grow old because I keep wanting
My childhood back as a gift I'd have to accompany my death.
(Pier Sath, "In the Womb of Life")

For young individuals such as Ronnie Yimsuth, re-inserting memory into its rightful frame yields that release, however momentary, from the temporal prison of a life abbreviated and punctuated by historical trauma: "I wanted to again relive the good memories before the Khmer Rouge . . . walked into Siemreap . . . I had to dig deep into my shattered memory bank to be able to go back in time for just a moment" ("Twenty Five Years Later . . .").

Return and healing

It is in the interstice of disdain and longing, of the desire and the inability to forget, that many of that generation, too young to understand but old enough to remember, confront their liminality: "I am very much a lost Khmer generation during the day . . . and the Khmer Rouge nightmares still haunted in [*sic*] my dream during the night" ("Twenty Five Years Later . . ."). In prying open a space to "reflect on the good and bad memories from [my] youth," return is the first and necessary step for many of

these young survivors to “heal and to reconcile” (“Twenty Five Years Later . . .”). For Prach Ly, return was initially envisioned as a “soul search”:

[Initially] I want it to be a soul search—not to perform. [But the performance near Bantaey Srei] turns out to be the highlight of my trip. It was just being there at the moment. It was in front of kids and in my homeland . . . It was the first time that Cambodians had a voice. Some places I went to broke my heart, other places healed it. At Phnom Kiev, kids were chasing after the garbage trucks as if they were ice cream trucks. Across the street, there was a casino. At the Tonle Bassac slum, the people were poverty stricken but they had hope. When they practiced [the music], they laughed and joked and their environment disappeared.⁸

In this travel from the imagined to the actual, the traveler is inevitably transformed.

Similarly for Arn Chorn Pond and Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, the key to personal healing lies in the ability to move across the spatial, temporal, and political divide towards the re/discovery of the beauty and richness of the nation’s cultural heritage. Sophiline, a child survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime and a Khmer classical dancer, reflected that:

Every time I think about the tragic [events] that happened to me, to my family and to my people during the Khmer Rouge, I have to think also about something that is beautiful about my culture and about my country. And one thing that is beautiful is the dance and music.

(Sadiq 2002)

It is in remembering and retrieving that aspect of the nation’s past, in re-integrating the “negative and the positive . . . in the web of life” (U 1998: 215) that wholeness can be reconstructed, albeit not seamlessly.

It is also a process that leads to collective healing. As Arn Chorn Pond, a returning social activist, points out, for Cambodians, “music and culture and their dance is their soul. How can we find healing if we don’t even know who we are” (Letsinger 2004: 2). Pal Vannariraks, a well-known Cambodian author added: “when culture is alive, the nation also survives” (Stewart and May 2004: 171). For Arn, Sophiline, and Prach, arts and advocacy are intertwined. Their works can be seen as acts of resistance, a defiance of the erasure of time. Speaking to the challenges of cultural revival, Sam-Ang Sam, a professor of ethnomusicology, reflected: “In the oral tradition, when the musicians die they take along with them the knowledge and memory . . . before it can be passed on, so it’s gone” (Letsinger 2004: 1). Arn, who has embarked on a mission to locate surviving master musicians, and to retrieve, document, and preserve Cambodia’s dying

musical traditions, understands that he is "racing against time" (Letsinger 2004: 2).

Whereas transnational social activism defines Arn's work, the insistence on remembrance that echoes in Sophiline and Prach's art is intensely political. Sophiline's Khmer classical rendition of Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Samritechak*, is an artist's attempt to extract accountability for the crimes committed against the nation. Though generationally removed from the genocidal encounter, Prach Ly, who laughingly recalls the reference to his overnight popularity in Cambodia as comparable to a "bombing raid of B-52s," sees himself as a "channel" for "the people who wanted to say something but were scared to speak out." Claiming that "politics, I don't understand [and] I don't want to understand it," he prefers to describe his work as aimed at raising "social awareness" rather than as being political. Noting that "in Cambodia, you can't say anything . . . you have a tape over your mouth," he acknowledged capitalizing on free speech in America to deliver his social message. Both in the US and in Cambodia, his art has an intergenerational appeal which he attributes to the fact that:

. . . they can relate to it . . . It is a story not just about me but about them as well . . . "trailing the great escape with flip-flop" everybody can relate to that. It's also because you're a young voice [that makes the message compelling to the younger generation].⁹

As for the passion behind his words and work, he states simply:

It's just justice. That's how I feel. The people have been murdered, they need justice.

Buddhism is not about to [*sic*] forget but to forgive. My parents would wake up screaming names [of dead relatives]. [The music is] self-therapeutic. Things boil up if you don't talk about them.

. . . Some people in Cambodia don't even believe or know about the killings.¹⁰

It's a very dark era and you have to shed light on it.

(Sadiq 2002)

Forced return—where is home?

When the sky turns somber and gray, I miss our country. Never imagined that we would seek refuge in someone else's country.¹¹

In June 2002, six young Cambodians stepped off the plane into the oppressive heat of Phnom Penh. Bewildered, they were told that they were home. In the years to follow, they were joined by a quiet but steady trickle of

Cambodian Americans sent back into exile, this time in their ancestral land. Over one thousand more non-citizen Cambodian Americans await deportation from the US to Cambodia for the commission of felonies. Though they had served the sentences for their crimes, they were handed an even longer sentence upon release, activated by an extradition treaty that was signed between Cambodia and the US in May 2002 that made deportation to Cambodia possible. For many of the forcibly returned, it was, as Tom Mintier puts it, "the third time to start over, not as refugees from Cambodia but Cambodians forced to return" (2002). Intrinsicly, these deportees personify the liminality of the refugee condition—uprooted from the Khmer cultural world and un-rooted in mainstream America. They stand at the edge of both worlds, belonging to neither, symptomatic of the "multitude of bifocal shreds swimming in a bicultural sea of confusion" ("I Am Bifocal of Oneness"). Antithetical to Ong's "flexible citizens" (1999), they embody the failings of politics and society rather than the cosmopolitan adaptability of the transnational citizen.

While diaspora reflects the porosity of national boundaries and the destabilization of the sovereignty of the state, deportation is a sobering reminder of the inflexibility of the state. Silhouetted against America's post-cold war national interests, this measure reveals the confluence of various concerns—America's post-9/11 political retrenchment, the nation's anxiety about immigration and immigrant communities, and the persisting rootlessness of non-citizen refugees. It also exposes the generational, class, and ideological polarization within the Cambodian American community. Those who support deportation see resettlement as a privilege that had been squandered. Opponents of deportation, on the other hand, see permanent resettlement as a right to be extended to refugees from America's war. To them, "we are here because you were there."¹² Significantly, in this regard, their position aligns with that of the Cambodian government, which sees these individuals as the product, and hence the responsibility, of America.¹³ To all, deportees unravel the Horatio Alger myth and remind them of the fragility of resettlement, not only in the circumstances surrounding the social failings of these youths but in the actual deportation itself. Heretofore perceptibly secure in their refuge, deportation strips refugees of that false sense of security. Though deportation affects but a small segment of the community, the anxiety that it engenders has a much wider reverberation. With the majority of Cambodian refugees in the US still without citizenship and mired in economic and social disenfranchisement, there is an unshakeable sense of vulnerability that shadows their daily existence.

Whereas return has been voluntary and even desired by most Cambodian diasporas, deportation complicates and problematizes the notion. Embedded in the term and in the process of repatriation is the concept of *patrie*—the "fatherland." It is a presumption that is destabilized by the fact that many of the deportees had neither a clear recollection of Cambodia nor any

tangible or sentimental connection to it as the "home/land." Most had grown up in Thai refugee camps and came to the US in their pre-adolescence. To them, the notion of "home" conjures images of Stockton, Seattle, Long Beach, and Lowell rather than Phnom Penh or Battambang. Return, therefore, is to a presumed fixed originary source that never was, to a land that is merely a geographical space, and a "home" that signifies banishment rather than belonging. Where the relationship between "home" and "land" is not simply disrupted but where the hyphen symbolizes distinct, geographical domains, the return "home" for the deportees was essentially the return to whatever surviving kin they may have left in Cambodia, however distant or detached. In a land foreign and unreceptive to them, the prospect of re-rooting hinges ultimately on their ability to nurture those fragile ties, real and symbolic, which alone can transform the land into a home.

It rain yesterday and I like it a lot. I was just sitting in front of the house and listening to the rain fall and it got me thinking how much I miss the Seattle rain.

(Kim Ho Ma, a deportee from Seattle, in Olsen 2003: E1)

Notes

- 1 As a result of initial resettlement and subsequent internal migration, Long Beach, California, and Lowell, Massachusetts, have emerged as the two largest Cambodian communities in the US. Estimated at 50,000 in number, Cambodian Americans accounted for 10 percent of the population of Long Beach while Lowell is home to an estimated 35,000 Cambodians, comprising about 30 percent of the city's population.
- 2 My interview with N., Berkeley 1999.
- 3 The application of the term "genocide" to the Cambodian experience as well as the deployment of the term "auto-genocide" have been the focus of intellectual and legal debates. I have opted to use the term "auto-genocide" to refer to the collective wound that resulted from Khmer Rouge state terrorism against its own populace, irrespective of ancestral origins. Without dismissing the brutalization of ethnic minorities in Cambodia and without relieving external actors of the political and moral accountability for the Cambodian tragedy, it is important to note that most of the victims and perpetrators were Khmer. This experiential particularity is an important analytic signifier in the Cambodian narratives of rupture and healing.
- 4 Chhim, personal communication 2001.
- 5 My interview with D. L., San Diego 1996. See also Um 2005.
- 6 I thank my student Viravynne for sharing this exchange with me.
- 7 "Housing assistance, in the form of direct payments to a private landlord, secured from a local housing authority that low-income people can use to rent apartments and homes on the private market. Based on a set formula, determination is made on the tenant's housing allocation as well as the percentage of the rent for which he/she is responsible, with the balance being covered by the housing authority." (www.nhlp.org/html/sec8/index.htm) accessed 9 June 2006.
- 8 My interview with Prach Ly, Berkeley, 2005.
- 9 My interview with Prach Ly, Berkeley, 2005.

- 10 My interview with Prach Ly, Berkeley, 2005.
- 11 My conversation with an elderly Cambodian man at a temple in San Diego, 2000.
- 12 Slogan of the anti-deportation campaign of the Southeast Asian Student Coalition, Berkeley, 2004.
- 13 The delay in reaching an agreement on the deportation was largely the result of the general reluctance of the Cambodian government to receive the deportees.