

Postmemory work in the Cambodian diaspora: using the past to access the  
present

by

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## Abstract

This thesis calls for a change in the way we think about articulating suffering and its meanings. It is an analysis of 1.5 and second generation Cambodian postmemory work in North America. I describe the music, film, visual art, poetry and performance art that have been produced by these generations as “postmemory” work because the creators invoke memory that they have not lived themselves or have forgotten. The work of these generations that relate to the Cambodian genocide relies on intergenerational communication with their parents to retell family stories. In their countries of resettlement, Cambodians have faced a lack of social capital, economic hardships, underrepresentation and generational dissonance. In these contexts, reconciling past and present has not been a priority, particularly in a culture which has been found to attribute weakness to discussing violent pasts (Kidron, 2010). Silence on a past of genocide has been a consequence of these factors. While silence on violent pasts is a dominant trait in the diaspora, there are those who choose to speak out about their family’s experience. Using their family stories of genocide, 1.5 and second generation Cambodians explore multivalent issues that impact their present lives. I use the works of Socheata Poeuv, Prach Ly and Anida Yoeu Ali as well as my own to exemplify how the past is engaged in the present. When we bear witness to the postmemory work of Poeuv, Ly and Ali we see a bridging of generations and beliefs and the continual development of a Cambodian diaspora identity. Silence is linked to the maintenance of cultural ideas. By examining instances of 1.5 and second generation public expression, I show the diaspora as a community that also has shifting ideologies. I recognize that silence and speaking out can both exist within the North American Cambodian diaspora. Bringing together the literature on silence while analysing postmemory

work allows for an understanding of the variation in ways that individuals and families within a community engage and make meaning of the past.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Chany Chea. The interviews referred to throughout were covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H13-03125.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Prologue .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Don't give up on the winding road.....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 A personal journey .....	7
1.2 Psychoanalytics and talk therapy .....	15
1.3 Collective memory .....	18
1.4 Postmemory .....	21
<b>Chapter 2: Generation after generation our culture is passed on from soul to soul .....</b>	<b>24</b>
2.1 Historical context .....	24
2.1.1 <i>Samai a-Pot</i> : the Pol Pot era .....	24
2.1.2 Resettlement.....	30
2.2 Introduction to the memory producers.....	36
2.2.1 Continuity .....	36
2.2.2 Belonging.....	37
2.2.3 Fusion.....	38
2.2.4 Memoir.....	39
<b>Chapter 3:Memory was never silent .....</b>	<b>42</b>
3.1 Alternatives to narrative healing.....	42
3.1.1 Expert cultural brokers vs. family.....	42
3.1.2 Cultural conceptions of silence.....	47
3.1.3 Fragmentation .....	49
3.2 Collective postmemory facilitating reconciliation.....	54
3.2.1 The Cambodian self-hood in diaspora .....	54

3.2.2 Generational dissonance .....	58
3.2.3 Representation.....	63
3.2.4 Empowerment .....	68
<b>Conclusion:I want to be worthy of the suffering.....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Appendix A: Memoir of Descent .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Appendix B: Pre-revolutionary Image I.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Appendix C: Pre-revolutionary Image II .....</b>	<b>87</b>

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Last but not least special thanks are owed to my parents, who have supported me throughout my life and in my years of education. They have given me the inspiration and strength to see things through. Thank you for your ever-present love.

## Prologue

Amy Tan's historical fiction *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, tells a story of an American born Chinese woman Ruth Young and her immigrant mother LuLing. Their relationship had always been tumultuous and this was exacerbated when LuLing was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and began to lose her memory. Determined to keep the facts of her life from vanishing, she set down a record (two packets of paper written in Chinese entitled 'Things I know are True' and 'Things I Must not Forget') of her birth and family history. Ruth hired a translator to decipher her mother's story and she discovers her mother's past and begins to understand their relationship in new ways. She resolves to "ask her mother to tell her about her life. For once, she would ask. She would listen. She would sit down and not be in a hurry or have anything else to do" (Tan, 2001). Ruth learns how her mother's past has shaped their present circumstances and finds love and forgiveness. Tan's work exposes the intricate dynamic that exists between first-generation Americans and their immigrant elders. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* acted as warning to document oral history before our living archives can no longer pass on their stories. As a daughter of survivors of the Cambodian genocide, born and raised in Victoria, B.C., Canada, with what seemed to be an incomplete grasp of my family history, I contemplated, 'what are the things my parents know to be true?' and 'what are those things that we must not forget?'

This thesis includes the journey of exploring my family history. My parents expressed that they wanted their stories to live on and be heard by future generations. They wanted their children and grandchildren to know that our family's history is one that has been burdened by suffering. Most importantly, they want us to appreciate who we are, what it took for us to be here and what we have. When I was growing up I was envious that everyone seemed to have grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. I only knew my immediate family, my parents, my sister



and my brother. For much of my childhood my extended family only existed as people that I occasionally heard news from but had never spoken to. There are also those in my family who I will never speak to, those whose lives were lost before I was born. I embarked on this journey to learn more about them, more about my parents and what had happened to them, ultimately, to learn about my roots.

Apart from standard discourse analysis of pre-existing textual and visual resources, research for this thesis includes interviews with public figures in the Cambodian diaspora and with my parents, as well as my own narrative of personal experiences. Understanding that the Cambodian genocide is a difficult topic that many families have not openly confronted together, I limited my interviews to public figures who have already been through the process of discussing family histories in the public sphere. My research consisted of five interviews. Three with public figures, Socheata Poeuv, Anida Yoeu Ali, and Prach Ly and two with each of my parents. The interviews were conducted with each individual separately. Given our geographical locations, the medium of my interview with Poeuv and Ali was online via Skype. I was in Vancouver, Poeuv in the United States and Ali in Thailand. Ly and I spoke over the telephone when I was in Vancouver and he was in the U.S.

The process began by interviewing my parents. I felt a sense of hesitation when interviewing them. I visit their home in Nanaimo once every couple of months but the timing of many visits seemed inappropriate to start my interviews. I had already spoken to them about the prospect of the research over the phone. Eventually I settled for a date long enough after the Christmas holidays so as to not put a damper on my parents' enjoyment of the festivities by drawing them into speaking about an inevitably mood altering past. As expected there were times in these interviews where feelings of sadness swept over me as I was drawn into my

parents stories of being separated from their families. After conducting the interviews over a weekend I returned to Vancouver with a sense of relief because post-interview my parents began to tell me things about their past as it came to them. It seems that involving my parents in this project has allowed for more open lines of communication.

Our interviews were held in their home in Nanaimo, BC. Knowing that my interviews with my parents would be slightly uncomfortable because they would share with me things they rarely discussed, my interviews took place in their home. With my mother we sat face to face on our couch with the TV quietly playing in the background. She made eye contact with me the entire time as if this sustained connection steadied her, but at times it unnerved me and I was overwhelmed with emotion. I sat beside my father in the computer room; after work, he sits there catching up on the latest news about Cambodia. He looked ahead and rarely at me as if he was seeing before him the exact way he would narrate his story. As with my interviews with Poev, Ali and Ly, my interviews with my parents were semi-structured and open, allowing them to elaborate as much or as little as they chose. Questions were framed chronologically and included: “What was life like before the Khmer Rouge era?” “What was it like during?” and, “What was it like after?”

I intend to write a collective work with my parents using our transcripts and my memories of stories they have recalled throughout my life. However, for reasons of privacy this project will remain within my family. Our interviews sparked their recollections of events, many of which do not appear in this thesis. Instead, this research focuses on the meanings behind recollection and the intergenerational, cultural and diasporic dynamics of the process. After reviewing my parents’ transcripts and beginning this thesis, I transformed the experience into visual art. Admittedly, I was afraid of tackling this deeply personal research project. I have always kept a

personal distance from my research on Cambodia, writing in ways that I did not position myself within the Cambodian diaspora. Being a private person, I was hesitant to enter into the auto-ethnographic genre, to expose my thoughts and my relations to those close to me. These reservations are also tied to being raised in a Cambodian community where it is out of the norm to discuss personal matters outside of the family. However, when I started my Master's I was committed to producing something that was meaningful to me, to my family and my community as well as those who may relate to these broader issues in other communities.

From my perspective academic articles about Cambodians in diaspora seem to examine them under a microscope and produce generalisations, a process in which I am not interested. Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (2005) state “we all have internalized dominant ideas about what constitutes “research” and “acceptable” research practices” (2005, p.2). I had internalized the idea that research included a statement; evidence (including a large enough sample size to make it ‘legitimate’); and, a conclusion that encapsulated the ‘truth’ behind the statement. My idea of acceptable research practices included methodological objectivity and neutrality. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (2000) describe the autobiographical genre of research as one “that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). Working with memory and identity there is neither a ‘true’ way that people remember nor a formula which people use to construct their identity. Including my own subjectivity, I acknowledge and examine my location and how that location permeates my inquiry, my sense of identity and my personal and collective memory. The appeal of this autobiographical or reflexive genre is its nature of producing “multiple paradigms [which] are an evolutionary necessity and part of a commitment to social justice...” (Brown and Strega 2005, p. 10).

Through my perspective and those with whom I worked, I critique the literature on “traumatized populations” and offer a nuanced perspective on memory practices among post-genocide communities. Including my own narratives requires introspection. By positioning myself within the social context of second generation diaspora member, I gaze back and forth: first, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of my personal experience then inward, exposing a self that may resist those cultural interpretations. Telling my experience is not simply an attempt to explain or to seek a singular truth but rather to bring attention to the complexities of lived experiences.

Interviewing public figures in the Cambodian diaspora exposed commonalities of experience that I am careful not to generalize, particularly given my small pool of interview subjects. The experiences within a diaspora community vary according to location, class, ethnic background, etc. Generalizations of people’s experiences may be compacted into bits of “truth” which can be easily consumed. From these, scholars may then prescribe remedies for social issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder. However, nothing is so easily packaged and presuming that one can do so risks individual stories being engulfed by dominant narratives.

I have included the narratives of Socheata Poeuv, Anida Yoeu Ali and Prach Ly in my analysis to further understand the social context of how their work was produced. Poeuv is a filmmaker and genocide activist; Ali is a performance artist, writer and global agitator; and Ly is a rap artist. Poeuv was born in a Thai refugee camp and Ly was born in a Khmer Rouge concentration camp, neither of them old enough to remember the experience. Ali, born in Battambang just before the official Khmer Rouge take over, describes only having memories of things like dirt and foliage (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014). They represent generation 1.5, a generation of child survivors “too young to have an adult

understanding of what happened to them” (Suleiman, 2002, p. 277). I represent the second generation, born after resettlement, disconnected by location from what had happened in Cambodia. What we have in common is that we hold memories of the events which exiled our families from Cambodia. These memories are not recalled from our own experience but rather have been shaped by interactions with our parents, siblings, community members and media. I carry the realities of my parents’ experience in my skin. It is a visible difference which prompts people to ask about my ethnicity, reminding me that my identity in Canada is tied to an origin story in Cambodia.

What follows is a study of intergenerational memory work interspersed with memoir. It is a culmination of the informal and formal conversations I conducted through research and it serves as a collection of insights into how memory is generated among 1.5 and second generations. Regarding oral history, Alessandro Portelli (1998) writes, “The narrator is now one of the characters, and the telling of the story is part of the story being told. This implicitly indicates a much deeper political and personal involvement than that of the external narrator” (p. 41). By including aspects of auto-ethnography, this thesis reflects the personal and political practises involved in producing a work about familial memory.

## Chapter 1:

### Don't give up on the winding road

“I recall a Cambodian proverb that I heard grown-ups quote among themselves: *Don't give up on the winding road, but don't tread the straight one.*” – Chanrithy Him

#### 1.1 A personal journey

I often wonder how I would define myself if my identity wasn't already assumed. Questions of identity surround most introductions that I have with people and the answer that becomes the highlight of conversation is not the fact that I was born and raised in Victoria, BC but that I am Cambodian. If this were not so, perhaps I would consider myself Canadian Cambodian rather than Cambodian Canadian. I stepped foot on Cambodian soil for the first time when I was twelve years old, yet the fact is that as a visible minority, my “Cambodian-ness” completely encompasses my experience as a Canadian. This experience has been a springboard for exploring my identity as the second generation of survivors of the Cambodian genocide living in Canada.

It's hard to recollect what being Khmer meant to me when I was younger. I remember watching *The Killing Fields* and briefly hearing about the genocide in high school social studies. Before I had entered middle school, my exposure to Cambodia and Cambodian culture was limited to Khmer holidays, my mother's cooking and the blaring Cambodian karaoke that my father would play. Even after that, my engagement with Cambodia's history was self-directed and limited.

Every year we had two Cambodian events, one for the New Year and one in September to honour our ancestors. Every year we periodically received letters in writing I could not read from our family in Cambodia, people I had never met. I knew it was a letter from Cambodia when the envelope was bordered with red and blue dashed lines. While my family was happy to hear news

from Cambodia, these letters were also notices of illness, family passing's, of hard times and requests for financial assistance.

The letters were reminders that lives once intertwined in everyday interactions, continued on opposite sides of the world. Growing up, my friends all had cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents but all I knew was my nuclear family. I had seen nothing except photos of my very large extended family and had never spoken to them because of the language difference. When I was twelve years old, I made my first trip to Cambodia. It was my parents' second trip back. I can remember the overwhelming heat, the unfamiliar smells and yet there was a comfort in the simultaneously recognizable, yet unrecognizable faces. I understood every word, yet the language did not roll off my own tongue. I felt like I should belong but I didn't, that belonging had been stripped away from me. It was stripped away by genocide and resettlement, I couldn't escape the fact that my position in this place, my ancestor's homeland, was determined by an event in time that I had not lived. Like the layers on my canvas<sup>1</sup>, Cambodia's history was inscribed on my body but the details were blurred and haphazardly strewn together.

The endeavour to understand my identity began at a young age. My parents have always nurtured my desire to learn; I love books and our weekly trips to the library were an enjoyed routine. Once my curiosity about Cambodia began, I sifted through everything the library could offer — cookbooks, ancient history, architecture etc. A turning point was my reading of *When Broken Glass Floats*, a childhood memoir of the Cambodian genocide written by Chanrithy Him. At the age of twelve this memoir haunted me; my parents had never expressed much about what they had gone through only that it was tough times. I imagined my family had lived through

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A

Him's experiences and realized that this dark history had brought together my family and borne me with it. It is this history that connects me to other Cambodians.

I have explored academic research surrounding the Cambodian diaspora as well as the memory work created by Cambodian diaspora members. This work includes film, literature, visual art, performance art, and music – all of which invoke shared experiences, yet also contain intimate memories. My preoccupation with biographical literature on the genocide led my mother to ask, “Why don't you write my story?” The work produced within the diaspora and my mother's contention foregrounded my expedition into expressing memory and recording family history.

When I begin to think about my mother's pre-revolutionary life, two images come to mind. In our home, two worn photographs were tucked underneath jewelry and family videotapes. My parents kept these items together in a grey metal box. They were their most valuable items and that is how I knew the photographs were precious. According to Hirsch (1997) photographs establish a connection across generations, she states:

Photographs in their enduring “umbilical” connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first and second generation remembrance, memory and post memory. They are the leftovers, the fragmentary sources and building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of post memory. They affirm the past's existence and, in their two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance. (p.23)

The two pre-revolutionary photographs are objects of memory. They unearth imaginings of my family in pre-revolutionary Cambodia which are co-constructed by recollections between mother and daughter. When I look at the photos I envision a loving family, but these thoughts are ruptured by the knowledge of loss and separation. My mother has more memories of war than she has of her pre-revolutionary life. She was separated from her family when she was eleven 10 years old, she lived through the genocide devoid of a childhood, starved and overworked. When



she made her way to the Thai refugee camp she got married and had a child. These photos aid my understanding of my mother as they represent the mourning of her childhood. My imaginings are attempts to bridge the unbridgeable, to create a narrative for scenes I had not lived.

In a rich sepia tone, the photos were damaged by the elements and by time. I gently handled the tattered edges and as I held these images, I stared at each relative's face to see if I could find traces of myself. The first image<sup>2</sup> is of four relatives; an older woman and man are seated and flanked by a woman on the left and a young boy on their right. Perhaps once my mother knew them as a child, but now their faces have lost all connection to their identities. My mother used to tell me that when she was separated from her family she would cry along with the Koel birds, envisioning her mother's face so that she wouldn't forget, but overtime that image began to lose shape. Denise C. Lewis (2008) describes refugee lives as a 'fabric' "interwoven, frayed, overlapped and held strong. The warp and weft were an intricate assemblage of events, people, places and times that were, all at once, part of past, present and future lives" (p.710). However, at times, our memories betray this continuity, pieces of this fabric, the memory of 'events, people, places and times', become obscured or burnt out of our minds. The *krama* which spreads across the bottom right corner of my canvas represents the fabric that connects myself to 'past, present and future lives', the imperfections of the cloth recognize the precarious nature of memory.

The second image<sup>3</sup> is a snapshot of my mother as a baby, sitting in a wicker chair, with my grandmother and grandfather standing at each side of her. Through this photo, I imagine my mother as a rambunctious little girl who was a favourite in the family. She is the only one to have

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C

had a photo taken as a baby and the only one of her family to resettle outside of Cambodia. She told me that one day her cousin looked at her and said, “Those feet will walk you to places far and wide.” Little did they both know that they would take her to a foreign country, across seas, thousands of miles away. When I look at my grandmother’s face in this photo, her youthful face is someone hardly recognizable. I first met her in her elderly years. She is the kindest soul I’ve had the chance to meet. Her ceaseless smile does not show signs of all she has lived through. She has raised ten children, suffered the loss of a son to disease and the loss of a brother in law, nephews and her own husband to genocide. For all that she has gone through, I admire her strength. When I look at my grandfather’s face, I imagine a complex man. From what I’m told, he was the stern parent to counterbalance my grandmother’s gentle nature. Before marrying my grandmother he was a monk, and after he left the Sangha he became involved in village politics. Ultimately, his involvement in politics led to his suspicious death in the years before the Khmer Rouge took power. The details of his story are unclear to my mother and I believe, too painful to ask family about. These photographs are all that remain of my mother’s life from pre-revolutionary Cambodia.

My personal stories are reflected in my artwork. However, the artwork contains symbols of larger themes common to the Cambodian diaspora experience. On the right side there is a *krama* and on the left is the Canadian coat of arms, symbolizing my dual identity. My sense of selfhood is inscribed with obfuscated stories of ‘where we came from’ and ‘how we got here’.

The effect of having the canvas look like an airmail envelope conveys movement from one side of the world to another. It recognizes distance, but also the networks of connection that remain. Images that depict Cambodia’s countryside, Khmer Rouge cadres and concentration camps draw from a common experience, yet the personal photos of pre-revolutionary Cambodia,

life in the refugee camp and life in resettlement, position the piece as an individualized experience.

My experience of memory relating to the Cambodian genocide is partially constructed from the works of literature, film, visual art, performance art and music as well as intergenerational knowledge shared among my parents, myself and my siblings. I interviewed my parents to get a broader understanding of their sparse accounts. It was as if I was opening doors which I had previously only had glimpses into. I conducted the interviews with my parents separately, not wanting one account to overshadow the other. My father has the propensity to steer clear from talking about the past, whereas I felt fairly well acquainted with the narratives I heard from my mother. Conducting the interviews separately allowed me to explore that dissonance. Something I had never considered was that perhaps my father never shared his past with me because he did not feel that it was as important as other accounts. He said “Your mom is the worst one [with] what she went through and me I was just only a guy who was lucky enough to escape all of that trouble. I never seen any killing. I never fight either. So my life is... I got away from those times, those things in that time. That time was terrible.” (T. Chea, personal communication, January 10, 2014). Movies like *The Killing Fields*, documentaries, museums and memorial sites such as *Tuol Sleng* and *Choeung Ek*, all rightly depict scenes of mass atrocity. However, my father contends that he was lucky, he had mechanical skills that he had learned from his uncle and the regime had him fishing as well as fixing vehicle engines, boat motors and generators. During that time he was kept away from starvation and seeing people killed, it was not until the regime fell and he fled to Thailand that he came across the darkness that had befallen the country. Even if this was not what I had expected to hear, I grasped at the images of

my grandparents and of my father as a resourceful young man. Even if he didn't see it as a "grand narrative," it was important to me.

Our interviews exposed a vulnerability that had been masked when the topic of genocide would arise in brief passing. In that vulnerability was the understanding that the emotional wounds of witnessing genocide would never heal. When I asked what they would like to pass on to their children and future generations my mother said she wanted them to "know everything I've been through, a hard life. Maybe that's why from that stuff I stress too much, bad dreams all the time. Oh it's too much...and I don't have a good life like you... it's okay" (T. Long, personal communication, January 10, 2014). My father told me "we just want everybody to have peace but you know in the future all I want the kids to know is we went through a lot of sad things" (T. Chea, personal communication, January 10, 2014). My mother's statement expresses that she has not healed, painful memories are a recurring affliction. Together, my parent's narratives convey a desire for intergenerational understanding, for an awareness of how their experiences have affected their lives post-genocide. Entering into their experiences would give greater insight into my parents as individuals. The recollections are also perceived as a moral lesson for future generations to understand their privilege.

The path has not been without its obstacles. I spent the first year of my Master's degree plotting my research methods and getting over my initial reservations. Once I felt that my methods were appropriate for my relationship with my parents and my community, strong emotions arose from conducting interviews with my parents, transcribing them and analyzing them. Conducting this research has changed intergenerational dynamics within my family. In the same visit I had made to interview my parents we sat down and watched the documentary *Enemies of the People* together. This film was written and directed by Rob Lemkin and Thet

Sambath. It documents Sambath's journey to find truth and closure by speaking to the perpetrators of murders during the genocide. I immediately noticed a continuous dialogue from my parents throughout the film. As we watched, my parents told me things that sparked their memory, things they had not mentioned in their interviews, perhaps imagery they felt they had missed. In those moments I felt that embarking on this journey had allowed for more open lines of communication about the past. I discussed this with Socheata Poeuv, Anida Yoeu Ali and Prach Ly who all stated that their work had opened up permission for inquiry into their families' past. I felt that without having a 'project' in which to base my inquiry, I wouldn't have been able to approach my parents about telling their story.

Our collaboration was predicated on our beliefs about what such a project would offer. For my parents it allowed for their children and the next generations to comprehend the struggles they had gone through for us to live in Canada and to appreciate what we have. Similarly, I had always considered how lucky I am to be given the opportunities I have and all the more so with this research.

*For me, the project was an exploration of identity that highlighted the importance of embracing self-definitions by attaching meaning to memory.*

In this thesis I position myself within the Cambodian diaspora community however, my ideas and beliefs are not either from "Cambodian culture" or "Western culture," they are syncretic of the two. In this sense, my interpretations of my family narratives are an expression of diaspora identity, of straddling the term Cambodian Canadian. Everyone's construction of Cambodian Canadian, Cambodian American -- or whatever it may be -- is different and this research examines the complexity that researchers and service providers must acknowledge when considering memory in diaspora communities. There are multiple ways that people choose

to engage with their past inter-generationally. People may choose to keep silent about the genocide and some people may choose to express their postmemory of the past such as Poeuv, Ali and Ly. In Carol Kidron's (2010) research she shows that there can be indirect references to the past, passed on from survivors to their descendants, which take the form of moral lessons rather than the recollection of violent memories themselves. Forms of expression are dependent on the particular values and beliefs that are held by individuals, families and communities. While this thesis examines public postmemory work, I recognize that this is not a process which all families choose to engage in, nor should they if it does not provide them with meaning.

My research focuses on the meaning and value given to memory work on the Cambodian genocide by 1.5 and second generation Cambodians in a North American context. Given the intergenerational nature of projects involving memories of genocide, these are deeply personal explorations of truth, identity and belonging. Cambodian memory works stand as evidence of personal/ familial journeys, yet they are also grounded in the contexts of refugee experiences, genocide and dislocation. I argue that memory work contributes to a collective memory that has the promise of subverting mainstream knowledge about Cambodians as an ethnic group; that it empowers youth and bridges an intergenerational divide. Drawing on recollections of the past, memory work is a site that engages the present.

## **1.2 Psychoanalytics and talk therapy**

Research on Cambodian North Americans has almost exclusively been in the field of psychology and genocide studies (Kidron, 2010, Danieli, 2010; Münyas, 2008; Hinton, 2005, 1996; Becker et al., 2000; Kiernan, 2002; D'Avanzo et al., 1994). These studies are indicative of Western conceptualizations of the individual and society and are in keeping with the nineteenth century research of Freud and Janet. The works of Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet signal the

origin of pervasive ideas about trauma and PTSD (Schramm and Argenti, 2012, p. 255). By their accounts, keeping silent about violent pasts is unhealthy and is a sign of dissociation between past and present.

Freud and Janet's research in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century showed that some trauma patients became amnesiac while others reported a lack of emotion in connection to violent memories (*ibid.*). They suggested that the experience of violence is placed outside of the normal processes of memory. Moreover, they noticed that traumatic experiences were embodied, causing patients to act in ways that re-enacted their crises. Therefore, trauma generates amnesia and cycles of repetition in which patients are unable to narrate traumatic events causes a split between past and present where the two are unable to be reconciled (Schramm and Argenti, 2012). According to this model, psychosocial wounds are passed through generations to the children of patients (*ibid.*). Silence is pathologized, narrative remembering represents 'normal' or 'healthy' forms of memory, and trauma constitutes an independent force, acting upon a subject with no agency.

Authors such as Peter Van der Veer (2002) have pointed out that this paradigm is connected to a dominant psychoanalytic concern with closure and therefore it cannot appropriately represent the experience of extreme violence as it can be shattering and enshrouding. Psychological research on trauma suggests a shared legacy of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) between the survivors of genocide and their descendants (Danieli, 1998; Rousseau & Drapeau 1998). Talk therapy is believed to allow descendants to integrate their past narratively and heal through historical reclamation (Leys, 2000; Herman, 1992). Retelling the past is formed as redemption, as healing from "trauma." This research shows that the engagement of memory serves multiple purposes, which can include healing, for artists and their

audiences. There is a practical motivation for people to work outside of the confines of talk therapy. Artists and their audiences may consider memory work as a tool to build a collective identity, to bridge generational conflicts and to critique government policies. Analysing postmemory work alongside literature on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), talk therapy, silence, collective memory and postmemory develops an understanding of memory as multivalent. Memory has multiple meanings which serve a purpose in the present day lives of the diaspora and its method of expression changes as the beliefs of communities, individuals and families shift. In bringing together this literature, my thesis attempts to convey how the past is fused with the present in endlessly complex ways.

Talk therapy is a universalising discourse which does not take into account healing methods alternative to narrative remembering. Makeshift memorials, commemoration ceremonies, private mourning, and family narratives can provide relief for the survivors of genocide. The idea of trauma as the independent variable constructing memory does not account for social or cultural connections that impact remembering (Shramm and Argenti, 2012). Such a paradigm pathologizes survivors and constructs them as patients. Including analyses of social and cultural factors allows for insight into how remembering can be an intentional political act of individuals and communities, particularly in the construction of identity (Um, 2012; Radstone and Hodgkin, 2006; Hirsch and Smith, 2002). Furthermore, culturally contextualized meanings of silence and memory are denied in dominant medical discourses, as silence is perceived only as an unhealthy dissociation with the past and narrative memory stands as the prime route to mental health. According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Western “ideas suggest that relationships between or among groups of people are basically causal and can be observed and predicted” (p. 47). This assumption resonates with the fact that many Cambodian survivors, including my



parents, have often times insisted that talking about their memories does not help them – still the nightmares persist. Therefore, the problem/ solution pathway is not a path from point A (PTSD) to point B (Talk therapy = healed), point A and B might not even be on the same teleological spectrum.

The rejection of talk therapy suggests that among Cambodians (Kidron, 2010), silence is not seen as ‘unhealthy’ and that the community may have other cultural means to reconcile their past with their present. Rather than presuming silence as unhealthy and narrative remembering as healthy, literature on collective memory examines memory as an act in which certain recollections may be consciously expressed or forgotten. Acknowledging the conscious nature of recollection conveys that narration can have multiple meanings and purposes which move beyond improving mental health. This is particularly relevant given that narrative memory does not represent an accepted path to healing for all Cambodian’s.

### **1.3 Collective memory**

More than ninety per cent of all Cambodian refugees, regardless of age, gender, religion, ethnicity or class status, have experienced trauma and inhumane conditions (McLellan, 2009). It is not surprising then, that Cambodian people have been labelled the “most traumatized” of all Southeast Asians according to the psychosocial stressor severity classification for mental disorders of the American Psychiatric Association (D’Avanzo, Erickson, Frye, and Froman, 1994, p.101). During the genocide, relations of trust, notions of self-esteem and the practise of social values were damaged to the point that most Cambodian refugees carry reactions of depression, anxiety and fear. The acute and chronic symptoms are recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The genocide caused other sources of stress for Cambodians: fleeing their homeland, living in refugee camps, losing familiar social and cultural networks and having to adopt and integrate into foreign countries. In Canada and the United States Cambodians in resettlement were positioned as a religious and ethnic minority which were socioeconomically under-privileged (Smith-Hefner, 1999; McLellan, 2009). Keeping the family afloat during resettlement often took priority over addressing the effects of trauma. The psychoanalytic prescription for trauma suggests that survivors of violence who are traumatized have no control over how their memories are expressed, once they gain narrative control they are seen as healed. However, the placement of survival priorities in resettlement over mental-health concerns displays a considerable amount of control over how and when memories are expressed. Considering this, Cambodian genocide survivors have not been passive subjects; they have the ability to regulate memory. Carol Kidron and Khatharya Um explain that in Cambodian diaspora communities, inter-generational memory is passed on in fragmentary narratives shared through family interactions (Kidron, 2010; Um, 2012). Memory is also supplemented by limited media sources. There is control over how and when memory is transmitted conveying that memory is collective and produced by social intercourse.

Scholarship on collective memory began with the work of Emile Durkheim ([1912] 1995) (although he never used the term ‘collective memory’). Durkheim noted that the preservation of social unity is sustained by a continuity and connection with the past (ibid). His student, Maurice Halbwachs, later coined the term collective memory wherein individual memories do not exist on their own, but rather are a result of regular interrelations with others ( [1952] 1992). He suggested that individual memory is constructed within social structures and institutions thus,

‘private memory’ may only be understood within group contexts such as families, organizations and nation-states.

Pierre Nora (1996) expanded upon Halbwachs’ ideas stating that collective memory is used to interpret the past as well as detach us from the past. He contended that commemoration also includes collective amnesia where those in power select what is to be preserved and what is to be forgotten. John Bodnar (1993) added that collective memory is focused on the needs of both present and future. It may be approached as both a tool and an object of power and may therefore, work as a “regime of memory” (Radstone and Hodgkin, 2006). Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin’s model of social memory positions it as an agentive act of representation and identity formation. Their work intersects with feminist approaches which assume that content, sources and experiences that are recalled, forgotten or suppressed are of profound political significance (Hirsch & Smith, 2002).

Home and host states have considerable control over how the Cambodian genocide was remembered but Socheata Poeuv, Anida Yoeu Ali, and Prach Ly’s work are displays of individuals reacting against hegemonic collective memories and developing their own narratives, shifting notions of collective memory in the diaspora community. Halbwachs (1992) contended that collective memory depends on specific groups that construct memory. While individuals recall in different ways, acts of remembering shift given the needs of the group at the present point in time. Remembering, Halbwachs (1992) argued, facilitates change in society.

Collective memory in all of its iterations is a process through which thoughts; ideas and attitudes are continually being debated, formulated and reformulated. James Werstch (2002, p. 4-5) stresses that collective memory is primarily “textually mediated;” that different forms of media, textbooks, word of mouth etc. are acts of transmission. Any number of combined

resources related to an event that an individual has access to, shapes his or her thoughts and feelings about the event (Werstch, 2002; Portelli, 1998). Wertsch's conception of the formation of collective memory accounts for the ability of people who have never experienced a past event to have a memory of it. In essence, individuals remember with the aid of "cultural tools" (Werstch, 2002, p. 12-13). Wertch's observation connects collective memory to popular memory, that which has been recalled and forgotten in media has an influence on an individual's memory. Postmemory in the Cambodian diaspora is particularly affected given the legacy of silence and fragmentation of recollection between generations. According to Portelli (1998) oral history is,

...destined to transmit historical information; historical, poetical, and legendary narratives [which] often become inextricably mixed up. The result is narratives in which the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns the individual and what concerns the group, may become more elusive than in established written genres, so that personal truth may coincide with shared 'imagination' (p. 35).

When first generation survivors of the Cambodian genocide relay stories to their children, historical facts, and the ways in which they are recalled are influenced by different media and these collective narratives may find their way into individual stories. Collective memory is relevant to postmemory because popular media affects second generation knowledge of the Cambodian genocide. Poouv, Ali and Ly recognize how mainstream depictions have affected their notion of identity and challenge mainstream and state notions of what should be remembered and what should be forgotten.

#### **1.4 Postmemory**

Marianne Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory complements Werstch's (2002) idea of remembering via cultural tools. Hirsch (2008) describes postmemory as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that precede their births but that

were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (p. 103). Regarding intergenerational research, Diane L. Wolf presents the conundrum of representation in her discussion about Katherine Borland’s work (Wolf, 1996, p. 33). Confronting the written text which came out of her oral history interviews, Borland’s grandmother said to her: “The story is no longer my story at all...but has become your story” (Ibid). Borland’s article demonstrates the obfuscation of memories through public images and stories. Private family memories and public images become hard to distinguish; Hirsch describes this kind of projection as a part of postmemory. According to Hirsch (2008): “Family life, even in its most intimate moments is entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and familial remembrance” (p. 114).

Postmemory becomes significant for the descendants of genocide survivors because what is at stake is a “personal/ familial/ generational sense of ownership and protectiveness” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 104). Given the intergenerational nature of post-memory, familial approval / consent must be considered, otherwise tension is inevitable. Descendants must consider the family and negotiate boundaries around what may be made public and what must remain private. Second generation researchers, writers and artists often negotiate relations of power that ground the family structure. While it is generally understood that the older generations hold positions of authority in the Cambodian family, within the researcher-participant relationship, the researcher ultimately has power over what is made public. Generational dynamics of resettlement add to an imbalance of power. Youth in North American diaspora are pulled into western society faster than their parents causing a change in familial power dynamics as they become resources for older generations in the navigation of resettlement. Given these circumstances, the relationships

between postmemory work producers and their families make for complicated negotiations around representation.

Since many Khmer youth do not remember the genocide it has become important to find ways to relate to the events that frame our present by reconstituting memory. Due to the inability to draw on precise recollections, imagination and creation play a more significant role (Hirsch 2008). Art has a major role in postmemory work because it offers subsequent generation's imaginative access to the lives of their predecessors.

The body of memory that are represented by the artists I interviewed – Socheata Poeuv, Anida Yoeu Ali, and Prach Ly, are refracted by a generation. Their postmemory is an integral part of this research. 1.5 and second generation Cambodians have been finding their voice in the public sphere and it has come at a time where families have established roots in their countries of resettlement. A Cambodian Canadian participant in Kidron's (2010) research stated, "as the community grows stronger they may not fear the weakness entailed in articulating their historical suffering" (p. 211). The success of Cambodian artists in diaspora and community support for them, suggests that we are witnessing this change that is developing a narrative for Cambodian's in diaspora. As a body of collective recollections, postmemory constructs narratives about the past as complex, political, and present oriented.

## Chapter 2:

### Generation after generation our culture is passed on from soul to soul

#### A Khmer Monk's Poem to Cambodians in Canada

For thousands of years our ancestors have passed on our culture to guide us through the hardships in life.  
Generation after generation our culture is passed on from soul to soul –and we invite everyone to join us, whether young or old.  
Our rituals are sacred and real, pure and true. But it is up to all of us to treasure them and make sure they are not forgotten.  
Never forget who you are and where you come from, for it is your culture and religion that makeup the moral fibre of your soul.  
Be proud of what you have. Cherish every moment. Accept today for what it is, treasure tomorrow for what it may bring.  
Happiness is deep within you. You will find it when you look past your despair; for life is a journey that never ends.

(McLellan, 2009, p.vii)

## 2.1 Historical context

### 2.1.1 *Samai a-Pot*: the Pol Pot era

*My family on my mother's side still lives in the same village where my mother grew up. My grandmother and two aunts still reside in the house where she was raised. That house stands on the red soil of Cambodia in a small village that up until a couple of years ago did not have electricity. It is a wooden stilt house set back from the road, with fruit trees scattered along the entrance; behind it are rice fields and various crops of neighbouring properties (now interrupted with a road running along the backside), and beyond the front road lies the Mekong River. At the river my mother would play and bathe.*

*The first signs of disruption began with large explosions, plumes of smoke rising in the air as Cambodia was bombed. Just as she had routinely done, she had gone down to the river to bathe. Then it began. It was so loud that it seemed as if the bombs were landing all around her.*

*Senses tingling and heart pounding, her small body went into flight. Naked and afraid she threw herself on the banks of the river, little did she know that this sense of fear would become a regular part of her life for years to come.*<sup>4</sup>



The Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia on April 17, 1975 and remained in power for three years, eight months and twenty days. However, Cambodia's troubled history began far before that day and it extends far beyond what my parents refer to as samai a-Pot or the Pol Pot Era. While historical precedent to any event makes it difficult to find a 'beginning', I will start with the Cold War politics of the 1950s and 1960s. Norodom Sihanouk, prince and Prime Minister at the time, approached foreign policy by trying to maintain neutrality. He played the United States and the Soviets by accepting aid and appearing to be cooperative without committing to either side (Heder and Ledgerwood, 1995; Chanda, 1986). However, in 1955, Sihanouk rejected the anti-Communist South-east Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) (Chanda, 1986). In the political climate of the Cold War, this rejection distanced Cambodia from the United States while strengthening support from China and Vietnam (ibid). Cambodia's political alliances were a cause of concern for the West given its geography (bordering Vietnam), its strong economy and lack of colonial ties (having gained independence from France in 1953). Simultaneously, Sihanouk was weary of US involvement in Cambodia and the political strings that might be attached to their aid funding and began to isolate Cambodia from the West and nationalizing Cambodia's banks and trade (Heder and Ledgerwood, 1995; Chandler, 2000). This increasing

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<sup>4</sup> This is my recollection of a story which I have recalled it from my mother telling to me several times. No specified date in time, however it can be assumed to have taken place somewhere between March 18, 1969 - 1971 when the United States were secretly carpet bombing the countryside of Cambodia and before the point that my mother was separated from her family.



isolation and the growing war in Vietnam contributed to socio-economic decline (Heder and Ledgerwood, 1996).

The socio-economic decline combined with corruption and political intimidation led to a growing internal resentment against Sihanouk's regime (Chanda, 1986). Militia groups began to form and they retreated to the countryside to organize (Chandler, 2000; Chanda, 1986). Khmer Serey (serey meaning 'free'), a Cambodian independence group located in the northern jungles, was developing close ties to Vietnam and was supplied weapons and training by the Chinese (Gottesman, 2000). Dubbed the 'Khmer Rouge' or 'Communist Khmer' by Sihanouk, they did not appear at that time, as a serious threat (Chan, 2003; Chanda 1986). Sihanouk could not have known that the lack of trust that had been building between Cambodia and the U.S. would lead to the U.S. financing of Khmer Serey training camps in South Vietnam and Thailand (Soonthornpoc, 2006). The U.S was suspicious of Sihanouk's government as well as paranoid of the strategic advantage the Cambodian terrain could offer Vietnamese communist guerilla fighters (the Vietcong). By 1969, the U.S. ordered a secret bombing of Cambodia in the hopes of driving out and killing the Vietcong (Kiernan, 1993). The dropping of upwards of 2.7 million tons of bombs on Cambodia, led to the deaths of anywhere between 150 000 – 500 000 civilians, while perhaps hundreds of thousands more died from the effects of displacement, disease or starvation during this period (Kiernan, 2002).

By March 1970, given the increasing Vietnamese presence and violence in the north of the country, the population became increasingly unhappy with Sihanouk's policies (Gottesman, 2003; Kiernan, 2002). In 1970 he was overthrown in a 'bloodless coup' while in France. The prince's regime was replaced by a US supported military government headed by General Lon Nol. The carpet bombing of Cambodia that had begun in 1969 continued until 1973 as the

Khmer Rouge controlled the northern and eastern zones, increasing the communist threat. The bombing severely de-stabilized the already shaky economy and the military (Gottesman 2003; Kiernan, 2002).



*In 1971 the Khmer Rouge took my eleven year old mother away to another village to sing as a part of a propaganda performance group. Young children performed concerts, singing songs such as “The Society of the Future.” The prior years of death and devastation became fertile grounds for the Khmer Rouge to recruit discontent peasants into their armies.*

#### The Society of the Future

Stand up all the slaves!  
Stand up the wretched of the earth!  
We suffer cruelly, we stifle,  
our chest is about to burst!  
From today, life or death, no matter!  
Let us at once make a clean sweep of the past!  
Crowds of slaves, stand up!  
Tomorrow our new regime will be restored:  
We shall be masters of all the fruits of our labor!

#### *Refrain*

Now this is the final struggle:  
Let us band together and tomorrow  
The *Internationale* [Angkar] will be the society of the future!  
Let us all band together and tomorrow  
The *Internationale* [Angkar] will be the society of the future!  
(Locard, 2004, p.38)



*While my mother was performing propaganda songs, in another village some distance away a young boy was being lectured by his parents, my father. His family was familiar with the social upheaval of a revolution, his mother’s family had left China to flee communism and now*

*Cambodia was facing a similar threat. As Cambodia's political unrest became apparent his father warned him to stay out of politics and made him promise to not hold weapons. However, as the Khmer Rouge was rapidly taking a hold of the country, recruiting young soldiers, it became apparent that perhaps these promises could not be kept.*



As the Khmer Rouge gained more and more ground Lon Nol, American personnel and other foreigners left the country. In 1975 the Khmer Rouge expunged the last of the government forces and took control of the entire country renaming it Democratic Kampuchea (DK) (Chanda, 1986). This marked the start of the genocide. Headed by Saloth Sar, who went by the nom-de-guerre Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge began to implement its systematic and genocidal policy against the Cambodian people; its plan was to establish a classless communist state based on a rural agrarian economy. The calendar was re-set to 'Year Zero' and anyone or anything that had existed before this date was considered tainted and therefore disposable. 'Angkar' (or 'the Organisation') was a newly invented term by the Khmer Rouge that was used to refer to the communist party organisation (Ledgerwood, 2002; Chandler, 2000).

Under Angkar, the entire urban population of the country were evacuated to the countryside to work camps, they were categorized as 'new people,' while they worked alongside the rural populations referred to as 'old people' (Chan, 2003; Chandler 1992). Many people died from poor conditions, cruel treatment and annual purges. Educated people, urban dwellers, members of the military and government employees were among the first to be killed. Those of Chinese or Vietnamese descent, and indigenous groups such as Muslim Chams as well as Buddhist monks faced special antagonism (Gottesman, 2003; Kiernan, 2002). The regime

radically altered the social structure of the country. Everyone wore black so that there were no visual signs of class (Chan, 2003). Families and communities were split up and dispersed. Roads and other means of communication were cut off, the hospitals were cleared out; schools, factories, libraries and monasteries were closed down. The economic system was destroyed (making money worthless) and markets, banks, private property, Western medicine, schools and religions were outlawed (Chan, 2003; Kiernan, 2002; Chanda, 1986).

Backed by China in the late seventies, the Khmer Rouge began conducting border raids and brutal massacres of villagers over the eastern border into Vietnam (Chanda, 1986). Ethnic tensions which increased during the Khmer Rouge's reign also led to the expulsion and murders of ethnic Vietnamese from Cambodia. Concurrently, the DK government was experiencing internal strife, which resulted in purges and violence towards party members (ibid.). While the Khmer Rouge were in this weakened state, in response to the treatment of its Vietnamese citizens, the Vietnamese forces took over Phnom Penh in a matter of two weeks (Chandler, 2000). January 7th 1979 is officially recognized as the date of the end of the genocide. During the genocide an estimated one to three million people died. The official number is 1.7 million, or one-fifth of the entire population (Chan 2003; Kiernan, 2002; Chandler, 2000; Chanda, 1986). Following the liberation of Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge by Vietnam, Vietnam's occupation lasted for over a decade.

The Vietnamese occupation signalled the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Cambodians into Thailand. The route to Thailand involved a gruelling hike over two mountain ridges which create the border between the two countries. Traversing jungles rife with landmines and crossing rivers while battling sickness and starvation, both my mother and father made it to Thailand. So did the families of Socheata Poeuv, Anida Yoeu Ali and Prach Ly. By April 1979, over forty 30

thousand Cambodians sought refuge in Thailand with that number reaching nearly 500 000 by September 1979 (McLellan, 2009, p. 30). Those who had risked their lives found their way to refugee camps that were very basic, offering only bare essentials for life (Gottesman, 2003). Thailand was sheltering more refugees than any other Southeast Asian country. Life in the border camps was uncertain and dire, people were repeated targets of bombing attacks and raids, some settlements were run by paramilitary from various organizations or members of the Khmer Rouge (Smith-Hefner, 1998). People often experienced sickness, death was frequent and residents were routinely subject to rape, robbery and extortion (ibid.). The lack of land or resources to support the population of refugees overwhelmed Thailand and this resulted in worsened conditions and harsh policies against them (Gottesman, 2003)

### **2.1.2 Resettlement**

Resettlement was a difficult process, encompassed by red tape. There were two main concerns in the immigration of Cambodian refugees to Western countries. Cambodians were expected to be unable to integrate well and there was a fear of Khmer Rouge infiltrating Cambodian candidates. In Canada and the United States the few Cambodian immigrants who arrived before 1980 from Southeast Asia were urban and educated. In Janet McLellan's (2009) research, in regards to Cambodian's seeking refuge after the genocide, a private sponsor stated that the Canadian government "identified Cambodian's as being uneducated, having nothing to offer Canada" (p. 33). It was presumed that Western foods, technology and values would be too overwhelming for those who had come from rural settings. Therefore, the Canadian government focused on relief for Cambodians in Thai refugee camps rather than considering them for government sponsorship.

In the spring of 1979, as tensions were high in Thailand, the strain of massive numbers of Cambodian refugees in camps led to a forced repatriation of forty thousand refugees (Smith-Hefner, 1999). According to reports these refugees were either killed by mines, shot by Vietnamese soldiers or faced starvation (*ibid.*). In the face of this tragedy a number of Western countries agreed to relieve Thailand of the burden of a permanent refugee population. Smith-Hefner (1999) highlights the efforts of the United States, France and Australia.

It was after 1979 that the majority of Cambodians arrived in Canada and the U.S. In contrast to the urban, well-educated Southeast Asian refugees who arrived prior to this time (which included few Cambodians), later arrivals tended to come from rural and less educated backgrounds (McLellan 2009; Ong 2003; Smith-Hefner 1999). McLellan (2009) noted that there was a fear of Khmer Rouge infiltration of applicants and Aihwa Ong (2003) further details those suspicions on the part of U.S. officials. Ong (2003) states, that the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), “determine[d] who deserved to emigrate to the United States and who did not. The criteria, never very clear to the refugees themselves, seem to have been to distinguish bona fide political refugees from others, as well as non-communists from communists” (p. 58). Despite the challenges of Western suspicions, approximately three hundred thousand Cambodians found resettlement in Western countries. Nearly half of the Cambodian refugees went to the United States, more than fifty thousand to France, while Canada (with almost 20 000) and Australia received the third and fourth largest Cambodian refugee populations (McLellan, 2009).

Resettlement distribution differed in Canada and the United States. In Canada resettlement was unevenly distributed across the country, with Cambodians being resettled in small towns and cities as single individuals or small groups ranging in size from two to fifty

families (McLellan, 2009). Cambodians were most concentrated in the large urban centres of Montreal and Toronto, with smaller numbers in Ottawa, Hamilton, London and Vancouver (ibid.). In the U.S. the government's policy was to disperse Southeast Asian refugees throughout the country; under this policy every state except Alaska received at least a hundred refugees and they were placed in small groups rather than concentrated settlements (Smith-Hefner, 1999). In both Canada and the U.S. secondary migration within the countries occurred. Families moved to reunite with other family members and friends, to access better employment opportunities, support services and Khmer cultural activities and to avoid uncomfortable climates (McLellan, 2009; Smith-Hefner, 1999). At present, Toronto is said to have the largest population of Cambodians in Canada and Long Beach has the largest population in the U.S. (Schlund-Vials, 2012; McLellan, 2009; Ong, 2003).

In Canada, assistance was provided for approximately one year to cover living costs, medical treatment, and transportation (McLellan, 2009). Settlement services provided assistance with a number of services such as translation, registration for health insurance, school registration for children and access to education (particularly ESL training). By the 1990s funding for Cambodian resettlement services ended. In the U.S., the Refugee Act of 1980 which allowed for the arrival of 50 000 refugees from Southeast Asia per year until 1983, tried to balance refugee assistance with the expectation of gainful employment (Ong, 2003). As in Canada where services varied by province, settlement services varied by state in the U.S. Refugees in California, (where over half of the Southeast Asian refugees lived) received a three year provision called Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), which was later cut back to two years in 1987 (ibid.). In order to receive RCA funding refugees had to enroll to study ESL or receive vocational on the job training (ibid.).

Welfare dependency and poor education in schools has been well documented amongst Cambodian refugee populations in Canada and the U.S. (Chhuon and Hudley 2010; McGinnis, 2009; McLellan 2009; Ong 2003; Smith-Hefner 1999). Researchers have pointed to low levels of human capital upon arrival of Cambodian refugees in both Canada and the U.S. because of a lack of education and transferable job skills (McLellan, 2009; Hein, 2006). McLellan (2009) largely attributes the early socioeconomic conditions of Cambodian's in Canada to education; she notes that the Cambodians who were accepted for resettlement in Canada were among the least educated of all Southeast Asian refugees. According to immigration statistics, eight per cent of Cambodian refugees reported some fluency in French and English. Of the 18 602 surveyed, 5678 had no education, 9980 had some primary school education, 624 completed equivalent of grade 9, 1513 had some education (unclear of level) and 393 had completed secondary, 488 had some post-secondary (McLellan, 2009, p. 45). Statistics show that over half of the Khmer men and majority of women were functionally illiterate in Khmer (ibid). As mentioned, the Canadian government offered newcomers English language training classes, primarily in the first six months after their arrival. However, this was problematic as this was a period of immense culture shock and initially these classes were offered to the 'heads of household' which were presumed to be men.

People working with the influx of Southeast Asian Refugees in the U.S viewed Cambodians as less likely to achieve economic success (Ong, 2003). This assessment however, was attributed to not only their agrarian background and experience of war but also to an essentialist construction of cultural difference. Cambodians and Laotians were explicitly differentiated from Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants as being more "Indian" than "Chinese" by scholars; this was included in a report to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. This



sociocultural distinction identified (falsely) that Cambodian society because of its more “Indian” roots is loosely structured as opposed to the rigidly organized societies of East Asia (ibid.). They were therefore, less successful Asians because they were more individualistic and more prone to place emotions above obligations (ibid.). Ong (2003) describes this as a widely held viewpoint that became “received wisdom.” Cathy J. Schlund-Vials reports that in the 2000 American Community Survey census “41.1 percent [of Cambodian Americans] admitted that they spoke English less than “very well.” For those aged twenty-five and older, 38.5 percent had less than a high school diploma and only 11.3 percent completed a bachelor’s degree. Socioeconomically, 15.4 percent of Cambodian American families live below the poverty line (compared to 10.5 percent for all U.S. families)” (2012, p. 151). The perception of cultural difference held by early service providers did not place any significance on how the recent decades of war, social upheaval, and life in refugee camps, which led to a lack of education, could have a large part to play in welfare dependency.

The political climate at the time of arrival largely affected how refugees were perceived. In the U.S., Southeast Asian refugees were compared unfavourably to the European intellectual elite who fled Nazism in Europe; they were also reminders of the U.S. defeat in Vietnam (Ong, 2003). New refugees arrived to escape conflicts that the public felt had little to do with American interests, in an economy slowed by a recession (ibid.). Ong (2003) describes their reception as an ‘ambiguous welcome,’ she describes a ‘compassion fatigue’ as an influx of refugees of colour arrived from Asia, Latin America and Africa. The arrival of Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S came as the policies were shifting away from a welfare state form of governance, which encouraged collective support of the weak and poor, towards an individual duty to reduce their burden on the state (ibid). Antagonism and political shifts influenced the socioeconomic

conditions of Southeast Asian refugees and Cambodians began to be viewed as an underclass being unable to meet the racialized expectations of Asians based on the idea of the model minority.

McLellan (2009), documents the socioeconomic conditions of Cambodians in Ontario. One participant in her research stated, “In public housing... Cambodian parents complain that the Cambodian children are being beaten up in the school playground and in the streets... Also there is the problem of drug trafficking, noise all night, and parties which disturb sleep patterns” (p. 44). McLellan (2009) states that the structural and racial conditions of subsidized public housing in rundown neighborhoods in Toronto were similar to Ong’s (2003) documentation of conditions for American Cambodians in Oakwood and San Francisco. Ong (2003) notes:

The everyday chores of earning, buying, spending, and distributing resources among family members required a great deal of work on the part of people who mostly couldn’t drive, or didn’t own cars, or didn’t even understand the morphology of the cityscape. Older women told me they were afraid of venturing out because they might get disoriented, lost, or mugged. Fathers walked to the bus stops to meet their children coming home from school, to protect them from being jumped on and pummelled by other kids. Initially, there were tensions with what was seen as competition for welfare support. (p. 123)

The early years of resettlement were an uneasy time where Cambodian refugees struggled with racial biases, navigating unfamiliar systems and poverty. McLellan (2009), however makes note that starting in the late 1990s families began to move to suburbs, purchasing homes in new family developments, a sign of upward mobility but also resulting in different financial pressures associated with the middle class.

## 2.2 Introduction to the memory producers

### 2.2.1 Continuity

Born in a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Cambodia, Socheata Poeuv did not have any personal memory of those times. Socheata Poeuv describes her film *New Year Baby* as initiated by a desire to learn more about her family's history (S. Poeuv, personal communication, January 23, 2014). In the film Poeuv narrates:

We are part of a baby boom generation we were born after our parents lost everything in Cambodia. Once they came to America, our parents put the past behind them and never talked about it. In my family, I am known as the lucky one. Years later I realized how lucky I really am. (New Year Baby, 2008)

*New Year Baby* consists of archival footage, real time interviews and animation. The composition of Poeuv's film speaks to the use of secondary sources to supplement fragmented memory in order to produce a sense of continuity. Continuity with the past became particularly important when Poeuv's family secret was revealed. One Christmas day, in Dallas, Texas, her mother held a family meeting and she was told that her two sisters are her deceased aunts' children and her brother is from her mother's pre-revolutionary marriage. Poeuv goes on to say "My parents and even my sisters kept this secret from me for twenty-five years. I felt like I didn't know my own family and I wondered, 'what other secrets had they left behind in Cambodia?'" (New Year Baby, 2008). Connecting with her family's past became a way to reconcile the revelations she was faced with. By attempting to uncover the details of her family formation, Poeuv's postmemory work maintains continuity essential to preserving a familial origin story. *New Year Baby* documents a journey in reconstituting family relations and coming to terms with a new truth.

Poeuv continues her work engaging with the Cambodian genocide as the founder and CEO of Khmer Legacies, an organization which records the testimonies of Cambodian survivors

with the younger generation interviewing the older generation. Her story, and the stories of over 115 Cambodians who have recorded their testimonies, exemplify the fact that there are people within the diaspora community who find value in relaying memories of the genocide.

### **2.2.2 Belonging**

Anida Yoeu Ali is an artist who represents a minority within an already minoritized group. Ninety percent of the population of Cambodia are ethnic Khmer and the Cambodian ethnic minority includes the Vietnamese, Chinese, Burmese, Lao, Cham Muslims (Sunni Muslims known as Khmer- Islam) and several hill tribes (such as Khmer Loeu) (McLellan, 2009, p. 21). Ali is a first generation Muslim Khmer woman born in Cambodia and raised in America. Her works present a “hybrid transnational identity.” She elaborates on this, identifying herself within a pan-Asian spectrum: “I’m a quarter Khmer, a quarter Thai, a quarter Malay and I’m a quarter Cham and that’s not really recognized in our diaspora” (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014). Anida describes her work as a declaration of self and as breaking stereotypes.

In her performance *Palimpsest for Generation 1.5* her body is painted with family memories, lines of ‘I witness her last breath’, ‘No end in sight’, ‘No choice but to leave’ are inscribed onto her back one by one and are subsequently wiped off. The damp cloth causes the black ink to drip and stain Anida’s dress, she then removes her dress, places it on the wall, stands for a few moments to take in her surroundings and bows her head down as she exits. “When the gestures end and the body leaves the installation, detached roots, a disembodied dress, and faint traces of a performed history remain” (Palimpsest for Generation 1.5, 2010, <http://vimeo.com/9101487>).

After twenty-five years of absence, Ali returned to Cambodia for the first time. Her poem, “Visiting Loss” details the depth of emotions, images, and senses that were felt during this visit. The poem accesses sites of identity politics, family recollections and personal memories. While Ali’s performance of *Palimpsest for Generation 1.5* and her poem “Visiting Loss” are powerful demonstrations relating to generational experiences of the Cambodian genocide, Anida’s other works also include commentary on post 9-11 Islamophobia as well as US deportation policies. She represents a minority identity in a multi-issue political struggle which highlights the complexity of the diaspora experience.

### **2.2.3 Fusion**

Cambodian-American rapper Prach Ly was born in a Cambodian concentration camp, raised in Long Beach, California and began his career in his parents’ garage. Ly spent most of his teenage years in Long Beach, California, a “socioeconomically unsettled locale,” it has been called a breeding ground for criminality and violence (Schlund-Vials, 2012). Ly states, “To save my life [my parents] had to ship me elsewhere” (ibid., p. 152). It was in this period of time that he began to explore his identity. He was sent to live with his older brother in Jacksonville, Florida. Ly’s brother played bass guitar in a wedding band, while listening to their rehearsals Ly began to think of his own lyrics. In an interview with Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (2012), Ly recalls:

I heard the bass, and when I heard the rhythm I just started freestylin’ along... Later that night, my brother took me aside and said, “I sense some type of [the] artistic in you but what you’re sayin’ is in your words but not you. For you to be an artist, you have to project yourself” (p.152).

Ly began an exploration of his surroundings and his family history. He wrote lyrics based on the stories he had heard. Ly’s albums have sampled Khmer Rouge propaganda speeches; they include lyrics in English and Khmer, and are based on stories told to him by family members and community elders who had survived the Killing Fields (Schlund- Vials, 2008, p.12). Ly’s

multivolume series addresses issues such as U.S. foreign policy, contemporary Cambodian politics, and present-day American deportations. The *Dalama* trilogy is an artful depiction of the way in which past and present construct the lives of first generation Cambodians and their children.

#### **2.2.4 Memoir**

I was born in Victoria, B.C., Canada five years after my parents had arrived from a refugee camp in Thailand. I consider my relationship to my parents to be very close, they spoke at times about their experiences in Cambodia and Thailand, always very short stories and only once in a while. Sometimes stories would come up if the news was on, or as moral lessons for me and my siblings to understand our privilege. One of the stories that I hadn't heard much about was how my family began.



*Within a few months of my mother and father arriving separately in Kamput Refugee Camp, an older man in the camp named Bou Vuth acted as a matchmaker. He liked my mom and knew my dad was an industrious man. In the refugee camp my father wove baskets to sell to the Thai people, one basket sold for 10-30 baht depending on the size. Other people saw this and tried to do the same. He also made money from fixing watches. After Bou Vuth had spoken to him, one evening he asked my mother to marry him. She said, “no” and he replied “oh that’s okay, take a night to think about it.” At five in the morning he came running and asked again and this time she said “okay.” After my dad sold a somewhat counterfeit Rolex (fixed with cheap parts from other watches), for fifty baht he split the money with his friend and my parents were married in a wedding that cost twenty-five baht (which today is eighty-five cents).*



It's not the most romantic story but as my mom told it we laughed at the simplicity of it all and the image of my father, in his younger years, eagerly waking up first thing in the morning, to run to where my mother was staying, to ask for her hand in marriage, for the second time. After all that they had been through, starving, being overworked in concentration camps, witnessing death and disparity and traversing mountains and jungles to get to the refugee camp, my parents came together, resettled in Canada and raised a family. I cannot express how much I appreciate the struggle they had to go through to get us to where we are today.

The interviews I held with my parents and my internalized experience of Cambodian memory work resulted in a 30'x 24' sized mixed media painting entitled "Memoir of Descent."<sup>5</sup> The painting itself is somewhat of a palimpsest with effaced layers and traces of earlier forms which once stood boldly where faint traces remain. I laid copies of photographs of my family after resettlement and pre-revolutionary photos of my maternal side of the family on the canvas. Interlocked with those images are images of Khmer Rouge cadres, plantation workers in Cambodian concentration camps; scenes of the Cambodian countryside and images of ancient Cambodian architecture. These images overlap and blend into each other inside a frame of Cambodia's borders. Within the borders there remains a large section that is empty. This signifies respect for my father's family whom we have no pre-revolutionary photos of, and it represents the fragmented, imperfect and incomplete nature of memory. All of this is set within a background of lines of text from my parents' transcripts that are hand-painted onto canvas. Layers of tissue were placed overtop their words, the words do not stand out boldly, but they

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A

remain as traces of my identity. The way that the words are made to be indiscernible marks their personal and sensitive nature. In one corner is a symbol of Khmer identity, the krama (scarf) and in the other, a symbol of Canadian identity, the Canadian coat of arms. In the midst of it all is a faint image of a bomber plane, dropping bombs on top of the layered photographs. Bordering the canvas are the red and blue dashed lines of an air-mail letter.

Our story is not just a story of pain, loss and separation; there are slivers of light which find their way in. Genocide brought our family together and our love for each other is one of those beautiful things that can come from suffering. I have always believed that you can't let your past determine your future. However, it's important to understand the struggles we have come from; it makes us appreciate what we have even more.

My beliefs are grounded in a Buddhist conception of suffering. Buddha called suffering “a Holy Truth, because our suffering has the capacity of showing us the path to liberation. Embrace your suffering, and let it reveal to you the way to peace” (Nhất Hạnh, 1999, p. 5). Thích Nhất Hạnh teaches that:

If you have experienced hunger you know that having food is a miracle. If you have suffered from the cold you know the preciousness of warmth. When you have suffered, you know how to appreciate the elements of paradise that are present. If you dwell only in your suffering, you will miss paradise. Don't ignore your suffering, but don't forget to enjoy the wonders of life, for your sake and for the benefit of many beings (Nhất Hạnh, 1999, p. 5).

Research on collective memory considers recollection as providing insight into the past's relevance for our current lives. I conceive of my work not as dwelling on the past but acknowledging suffering and appreciating the present, reclaiming identity and developing an ethnic legacy.



## Chapter 3

### Memory was never silent

“The story was always there and it wouldn't go away. *My memory was never silent.*” – Loung Ung

#### 3.1 Alternatives to narrative healing

##### 3.1.1 Expert cultural brokers vs. family

In terms of mental health in resettlement, scholars have noted that depression, guilt and grief weigh heavily on the minds of many Cambodian's (McLellan 1995; Rumbaut 1991; Tenhula 1991). However, mental illness is taboo and often misunderstood (ibid). John Tenhula (1991) asserts that emotional problems are seen as private issues, he writes:

talking about them indicates a lack of discretion and taste. Because hardships and suffering are considered as givens that are a part of everyone's life, there is no point in complaining. To do so is a sign of weakness that denotes a lack of character. If in the end help is sought, it should be from a close relative, never a stranger. ‘For a Cambodian to talk with a psychiatrist about such personal problems,’ said former professor and judge Phat Mau, ‘is unthinkable, it just does not happen. That is strictly a Western thing to do.’ (p. 86)

Talking about suffering is a private matter, which requires a large amount of trust to invoke.

Ideas about how personal problems are to be dealt with are also evident in the lessons taught in in *Chbap Srey*, the Cambodian code of conduct for women. It advises women to “not bring ‘fire’ (conflict) from outside into the house, not take fire inside the house outside, and should take care not to spread or overheat fires” (Brickell, 2013, p.264). This has implications for remaining silent in cases of domestic violence (ibid.) but it also explains conflict resolution through familial channels. This can explain the rejection of narrative healing in the North American Cambodian diaspora which as Kidron (2010) notes “is dependent upon the interventions of expert cultural brokers – the therapist, political activist, historian or even the anthropologist” (p. 193).

The descendants of Cambodian Canadian survivors in Kidron's (2010) research did not exhibit a desire to document their family history of genocide. However, Khmer Legacies, Socheata Poeuv's organization which records the stories of survivors by having descendants interview their parents, has collected approximately 115 testimonies (S. Poeuv, personal communication, January 23, 2014). Poeuv's own work as well as Ali and Ly's express a desire to document the history of their families and the Cambodian diaspora community. Ali describes 1.5 and second generation curiosity about the past as a result of exposure to a western rhetoric of trauma, she explains:

I think the second generation diaspora, in many ways we tend to fall back on the trauma and we've grown up in the society that recognizes that in order for a people to move on we have to identify that trauma, talk about that trauma, talk again about the trauma and never forget the past. That's kind of the rhetoric and also ideology that we've been around and that's what we promote. (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014)

She also recognizes that there are other reasons beyond healing for valuing recollections of the past, she told me:

Oral history is so important to archive, for personal reasons. You can start with that factor— we're already losing our grandparents generation. Our parents' generation, they will be the last of it in terms of people who hold these memories of what happened. It's always important to write it down, to pass it on, to preserve all of that. (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014)

Ali says that the second generation has gone through an identity crisis: "They have to go through a soul searching and those issues with second generation are very grave in their eye" (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014). She explains that the first generation had more pressing concerns upon resettlement:

My parents' generation who came to America were preoccupied with survival priorities. They didn't have time to worry about their emotional well-being, nor their kids identity crisis' because they were so busy working, assimilating and making ends meet for the welfare of the family. (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014)

However, after families have established themselves it appears that Cambodian's in diaspora are willing to recollect and contribute to the development of Cambodian diaspora identity. The importance of documenting oral history is perpetuated by a western rhetoric of trauma. 1.5 and second generation Cambodian's who choose to engage with public recollection and contribute to this rhetoric must negotiate how they do so in a way that is respectful of our elders. Although silence has been distinguished as a mode of being for the Cambodian community (Kidron, 2010), first generation, family and community support for artists such as Ali, Poeuv and Ly implies that there is not a singular Cambodian way of being.

After asking Prach Ly how prevalent memories of genocide are in his life, he explained:

It's me. It makes me who I am, it's my root, it's where I came from. I see it all around me, I see these living documents meaning the elders, the people that survived and lived through it. It's a very thin line between talking to them and trying to get all this information from them because you don't know if they're still fragile or not. (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014)

What he says here shows a deeply personal connection to his material as well as his concern for the wellbeing of community members who may be accessed as "living documents." He points out the precarious nature of accessing stories of violence, loss and separation that are familiar to first generation Cambodian refugees. As someone who works with memory, Ly understands that there is a fine line to balance between probing for information, respecting privacy and considering mental health. Projects in postmemory often involve a sense of protectiveness given the second generation's strong connection to the past (Hirsch, 2008) and Ly's warnings of working with elders that have lived through genocide demonstrates that this extends past the personal and familial to the community.

Working with family presents a number of ethical issues. Like Ly I feared overstepping lines of privacy. I did not want my parents to be compelled to express things out of an obligation

to help me with my research. I found that with my open questions the narratives began to flow with pauses every now and then. Some pauses were distinctly uncomfortable; at points, we reached a crossroad where we decided either to continue going deeper into painful memories or to move-on to another recollection. It was in these moments of silence where I was conflicted. As a daughter who cares about the wellbeing of her parents, I wanted to interject, to change the subject and expel them from whatever scene they were lost in. I felt an obligation to guard my parents from having to dig up painful emotions. However, as a researcher, I stood back reminding myself that they have the ability to decide for themselves what they want to share and it is in these moments that they can take the time to consider how they will continue their narrative. I paused, allowing my parents to hold the reins, never digging for more, nor preventing processes of thought, though my own position as researcher/daughter could have done just this.

In these moments I realized that narrative remembering is fragmented for good reason, there are moments that should not have to be recalled if they cause pain or discomfort. Research and curiosity do not outweigh emotional wellbeing. Instead of trying to fill in every detail of the past, my work, as well as that of Poeuv and Ali's, seeks to document absences in memory. I do so by leaving spaces on my canvas blank and obscuring the words I have copied from my parents' transcripts by overlapping layers of tissue. The impressions that are left behind are indicative of the genre of postmemory, the selective narratives from my parents' stories surrounded by absences. Ali's performance of *Palimpsest for Generation 1.5* recognizes the absences of memory by having short narratives of memories painted on her body, none telling a complete story. The words constitute both the presence of recollection and the absences that are present in memory.

Poeuv's film is partially reliant on a creative imagination given *New Year Baby's* inclusion of animation. In an interview with Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Poeuv says:

...the reason why I decided on animation—that I would want animation in the film—was because there were certain stories that I wanted to tell, and there was no raw material for me to work with... There were no photographs of that story. I didn't want to use archival footage, because we were specifically using archival footage to set up the historical background. Re-enactments were out of the question (Schlund-Vials, 2012, p. 106).

Animation serves as 'imaginative access' (Hirsch, 2008) for Poeuv where there was a lack of cultural production (films, documentaries etc.) and a contention that re-enactments were out of the question. Given the under-documented nature of Cambodian memory during the genocide and the nature of postmemory as filtered through a generation without precise recollections (Hirsch, 2008), animation was seen as a necessity for the film. Marianne Hirsch states that such memory work is "powerful...precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (1996, p. 662).

Negotiating postmemory work can be a delicate process because of 1.5 and second generation concerns for the emotional wellbeing of their elders. The form in which postmemory work develops is also a concern because as in Poeuv's film, visual forms of re-enactment can be inappropriate. The first generation may also be concerned about traumatizing their kids with stories of genocide; there exists assumed risks for both generations. It takes particular circumstances, an ideological acceptance of recollection as meaningful, strong relationships and bravery on both sides to bridge the lines of silence.

Tenhula's (1991) statement that "If in the end help is sought, it should be from a close relative, never a stranger" (p.86) displays that there is a lack of desire for intervention by "expert cultural brokers" (Kidron, 2010) in the Cambodian diaspora community. However, there can still be a space for familial inquiry. Ali told me that talking about the past is not part of our "cultural

toolbox,” (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014) while she contends that her work is well supported by her family and the community, as is the work of Poeuv and Ly. Although articulating stories of genocide is a practice that is not common, Poeuv stated that there is a desire to do so, and she says: “projects, school projects can actually help to facilitate a conversation that may not have happened otherwise” (S. Poeuv, personal communication, January 23, 2014). Initiating conversations about sensitive topics can be uncomfortable; a project can ease the narrativization of suffering. Postmemory work also eases the process because it is mediated through intergenerational relationships where the delicate nature of remembrance may be understood.

### **3.1.2 Cultural conceptions of silence**

Anida Yoeu Ali spoke to me about her experience of silence that is often attributed to Cambodians. She said:

I know the importance of talking to people and I wasn't able to do that as a young person growing up in my family. You know *it wasn't part of our cultural baggage. It's not the tools we work with in our culture.* I grew up in a house that was very silent and family dinners were very quiet unless you turned on the TV or something. *People just did what they had to do.* Which is, if food is there you eat and after you eat you help with the dishes and then you go sit on the couch and you watch TV and everybody's silent. You know, you don't have discussions. (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014)

The Cambodian descendants in Kidron's (2010) research have claimed that their parents (and they themselves) do not wish to speak of the past. A Cambodian Canadian participant in the study explained, “The older generation in Canada, they don't talk. It's taboo. It's problematic to ask them questions, that's just who we are. It's not that we're traumatised or something, we don't talk about it because that's just Cambodian culture” (Kidron, 2010, p.210).

Kidron (2010) makes note of the priorities of resettled Cambodians, as a descendant says, “Cambodians do not openly share their problems, they just deal with it ...there's a lot of pressure

just to survive and there's no time or energy to share your feelings anyway..." (p.210).

According to Kidron (2010) silence is a culturally specific 'mode of being' where it is viewed as empowering, showing vulnerability through discussing violent pasts is seen to exhibit weakness. One of Kidron's research participants said, "silence is strength," (ibid., p.211).. Kidron debunks the contention that silence leads to a transmission of PTSD to further generations and notes that descendants of survivors respect the cultural propensity towards silence, while also viewing it as a sign that the genocidal past has been overcome. While silence is conceptualized in this way, there is not a complete absence of intergenerational knowledge sharing on the Cambodian genocide, there can be indirect and fragmentary references

Instead of passing on stories, parents may choose to pass on the enduring values and lessons that have come from their experience. Kidron's (2010) research showed that the Cambodian Canadian descendants that she had interviewed find meaning, not in the documentation of events that happened, but in the values that carry on. A Cambodian Canadian descendant, referred to as Ken, stated:

I guess it would have been important for us to document our parents' story, but parts of the story would always get lost anyway and what's really important is not the story but the themes and universal values that are under the surface, that's what we need to pass on. (Kidron, 2010, p.214)

The conception of silence as strength omits the fact that silence can exist because of the passage of time and distance from locations where those memories originate. Khatharya Um's (2012) identification of the scattered nature of refugee memory considers these factors, she says:

The evacuation from the original source denies refugees and diasporas of a *milieu de memoire*, where memory can be enveloped and anchored. Instead, memories like the refugee body they inhabit, are fractured, dispersed, multiple, and diverse, foregrounded and invisible. Memory shards necessarily locate themselves and are located in different scattered places, spaces, and acts – in makeshift memorials, in public commemoration and private mourning, in family narratives, in cultural practices and habits, in the *here* and the *there*. (p. 835)

Um's statement does not position the absence of a Cambodian refugee grand narrative as a consequence of cultural modes of being. She draws in separation and location as contributors to a scattered repository of memories. Another consideration is the socio-political circumstances of resettlement. The Shoah foundation has collected over 53 000 testimonies of Holocaust survivors and Khmer Legacies has collected the testimonies of approximately 115 Cambodians. A part of the disparity in numbers could be due to the fact that the European's who fled Nazism were intellectual elite refugees compared to the largely rural population of Cambodian's that had resettled in North America (Ong, 2003). Differences in socio-economic status, the unfavourable view of Cambodians relative to the view of Europeans in North America (Ong, 2003) and the fact that the survivors of the Holocaust have settled for longer all contribute to the disparity in documentation of the Cambodian diaspora experience.

Research on the cultural conception of silence limits our view of the socio-political and socio-economic dynamics at play in diaspora communities. There are multiple factors that have resulted in the fragmentation of memory, besides cultural explanations, consequently the reasons or factors that are involved in the retelling of memory are multiple. Silence and Fragmentation do not have to be limiting for 1.5 and second generation Cambodians, fragmentation has become a part of the personal stories of my own, Poey, Ali and Ly. There is an acknowledgement of family recollection and of its limits in Cambodian postmemory work.

### **3.1.3 Fragmentation**

Kidron and Khatharya Um explain that in Cambodian diaspora communities, inter-generational memory is passed on in fragmentary narratives shared through family interactions (Kidron, 2010; Um, 2012). Although descendants may have an incomplete version of family



history, they understand that their parents have lived through difficult times. Socheata Poev's filmmaking debut, with *New Year Baby* depicts a common situation in the diaspora community, where only fragmentary references are made to memories of the genocide. In our interview, she described not having access to literature on the Cambodian genocide having grown up in a "pre-internet" time (S. Poev, personal communication, January 23, 2014). However, Poev recognized that she had some indirect knowledge of what her parents had gone through, she recalled:

I had a very incomplete picture I would say. I grew up knowing obviously that they were the survivors of something that happened in Cambodia. In our family my siblings would refer to it as the war or the camp which to me, as I learned more, is not entirely accurate and also kind of obscures how unprecedented the level of mass atrocity it was. You know, to just describe it as the war, as the camp.

I remember that my parents took me to see *The Killing Fields* when it came out and I was just a little girl at the time. So obviously I was *incredibly traumatized* by watching that film at a young age. Especially since I had a sense that this is what happened to my family but I had no idea other than that, like how or when or etc.

Then I would overhear stories sometimes my parents talking to their other Cambodian friends about what happened but again I really did not understand what the heck it was. I just got the sense that there was a lot—there was mass starvation, there was no food and there was generally deprivation and hard work but I didn't understand the political context of it or the scale of it or anything like that when I was growing up. I just knew that the Khmer Rouge were bad guys, they were kind of like boogey figures.

I remember the Khmer Rouge being referenced when I was in the seventh grade or eighth grade when we were studying genocide, specifically the Holocaust and that was the first time that I connected the genocide with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. So that was kind of news to me. We didn't go into any depth about it, it was just referenced in passing and I remember being like "oh my god, they're talking about my family" (S. Poev, personal communication, January 23, 2014).

Her recollections show a scattered knowledge of her family's life during the genocide which was partially constructed by secondary sources with the film *The Killing Fields*, in overheard conversations and in school.

Anida Yoeu Ali's personal memories of the Cambodian genocide take form through transmission. She explained to me,

I personally have no memories of the time because I was so young. I was between three and five at the time and the sort of little bits of fragmented memories I have are just really, really tiny fragments of things like the dirt or foliage or a memory that's given to me that's sort of told to me then I would see it in my head as if it was a real memories but it's only because it's been told to me (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014).

Although she experienced these events but has forgotten them, Ali's narrative shows a connection to memory much like postmemory. Her forgotten memories were transmitted to her through a relationship with her parents, not constituting memory described as postmemory (Hirsch, 2008) but rather *reconstituting* memory. Ali describes the transmission of memory occurring in irregular instances when it was suddenly triggered, she said,

...my parents they would tell us things along the way, in terms of when we were growing up in the U.S. but they were always fragmented. It was never one thing where you gathered everybody and you, you know talk about what happened and the details of it, it doesn't work that way. It's sort of odd times when it would come out, just kind of suddenly and that's obviously because something is triggering what they are saying. You know you might be just sitting there in the family room playing video games and suddenly Dad's like "you know I saw a lot of killings" (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014).

The recollection of these instances throughout Ali's life display that the transmission of violent memories can be inconsistent and disjointed.

Prach Ly explains an experience which delineates differences in transmission between generations and genders:

My parents rarely speak about it, they talked a little bit about it but they don't get into details. You know they tell us about losing their brothers and sisters, my aunts and uncles and you know what the war did to the country. They would talk about how prosperous the country was before the war, how beautiful it was but they didn't get into explaining about the killings, they didn't get into detail about that but my brother on the other hand in Florida, he was very descriptive, he was very visual in his description of his life, of what he went through in the camps and what he had to do to survive.

So it's like the complete opposite thing from my sisters, they're very quiet. Once in a while they would talk about it, once something reminds them of it. But on the other hand

when I go stay with my brother, when I lived in Florida, he literally gets into detail. He's like "you want to know, I'll tell you."

This was before the internet so I couldn't type on google or whatever it is to search for information, I had to go to the library. Even in the library they lacked information, there wasn't enough information in school's book or texts. So with that being very limited I had to go and ask people about it cause I was too young. I was born in the war but I was too young to remember anything. (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014)

With limited archival access and scattered information gleaned from his parents and sisters, he dug deeper by speaking to his brother and others in the Cambodian community. His statement shows differences between generations and genders in regards to whether sensitive memories are narrativised. Gendered differences could be due to a fear of disrupting peace by retelling painful memories. This is a lesson taught in the *Chhap Srey* which "specifies women's place in and responsibility for maintaining order and peace within the family and broader society" (Derks, 2008, p. 43).

I had an alternate experience of gender differences. I have two older siblings, all of us born post-genocide, my sister was born in a refugee camp in Thailand but was too young to remember anything. Our family's experience of the genocide is reliant on the memory of my mother and father. My mother had been far more expressive than my father in retelling memories of the genocide. In my interview with her, many recollections had been told and retold to me throughout my life. Some stories were missing from her account during the interview and there were a few narratives that I had never heard. This is an effect of the nature in which my mother would talk about the genocide. She would make short remarks about her experiences when she was triggered, I can't pinpoint what exactly acts as a trigger but occasionally stories would reveal themselves. My father's contention that his suffering was lesser than others' gives insight into his silence. Poev told me of encounters of resistance to people telling their story, she said "one of the reasons they would often give is that 'I don't know what the point of this is' because they

don't see what happened to them as very special or different from what happened to others" (S. Poouv, personal communication, January 23, 2014). My father had internalized an idea similar to this, that his narratives were not "special" enough. As a daughter I wanted to know about anything that had related to his life before my family came to Canada because I felt disconnected from my heritage. To know about my grandparents, my aunts and uncles and what they were like was important to me. Equally as important was to maintain an intergenerational contribution in my imagining of our origins, his input was limited but that became a part of my piece of art. I wanted to present an opportunity but respect silence; this is represented in the blank spaces in my artwork.

The short glimpses into my parent's life before they had arrived in Canada left me little knowledge of the Cambodian genocide. My postmemory is built on scattered recollections from my parents, limited resources and limited engagement in school. Overtime, there has been an ease of access through the internet, where I have been able to engage with public figures such as Poouv, Ali and Ly. Being able to access their work has become a part of my process in understanding that the fragmentation of memory and silences on the genocide are experiences that are characteristic of the Cambodian diaspora. Postmemory work seeks to engage generations but also recognizes the imperfections of memory and the fact that there are pieces of memory that will forever remain fragmented because of time, locational distance and personal and cultural resistance. Projects have allowed Poouv, Ali, Ly and myself access to stories of genocide narrated by our elders. There are boundaries but they become part of our work and a part of a 1.5 and second generation Cambodian self-hood.

## 3.2 Collective postmemory facilitating reconciliation

### 3.2.1 The Cambodian self-hood in diaspora

Western social ethics have proved to be sites of radical disjuncture for Cambodians. Ong (2003) notes:

Cambodian refugees moved from a regime of power over death to a regime of power over life, from a state that governed by eliminating knowledge to one that promotes the self-knowing subject, from a system based on absolute control to one that governs through freedom, from a society that enforced initiative for collective survival to one that celebrates individualistic self-cultivation (p. 18).

McLellan (2009) clarifies the paradoxes, she says, “Western social ethics of individualism, secularism, materialism, self-reliance, and autonomy are distinct from a Khmer Buddhist ethics-regulated society of hierarchy and extended-family dependency” (p. 36). Disjunctures between Western and Khmer social ethics have led to confusion for Cambodian youth in terms of how to balance their identities as Cambodian and American or Canadian. Lisa Lowe (1991) asserts that heterogeneity, hybridity and multiplicity mark Asian Americans, their multifaceted negotiations of ethnicity; religion and ancestry entail a complex process of becoming and being (p.28). Cheran (2006) states, there are numerous ways to belong and to incorporate both ‘home’ and ‘host’ experiences.

The work of Poouv, Ly and Ali, exemplify the development of a Cambodian American selfhood as one which consolidates home and host practises. Prach Ly’s use of traditional Cambodian music emphasizes an interchange. In his second album, *Dalama: The Lost Chapter*, a traditional Khmer music style *pin peat*<sup>6</sup>, is used as a foundation for Ly’s songs. As he mixes the *pin peat* with American beats, Ly demonstrates that the genocide has not destroyed the beauty and on-going creativity of the Cambodian arts.

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<sup>6</sup> “Pin peat is a traditional Khmer music style that includes three singers, two bamboo xylophones, a flute, suspended brass pots, a two-headed drum, a large kettle drum, and a quadruple-reed instrument... It was revived as a music form during the twentieth century and was a cultural staple of the Khmer royal court.” (Schlund- Vials, 2008, p.14)

By using rap as a medium, Prach Ly engages youth. Ly fuses hip-hop with Cambodian music and speaks of a distinct Cambodian American history. Hip-hop has been recognized as an expression of “a politically conscious message that remembers profound acts of state violence, histories of systemic inequality, biopolitical regulation, and necropolitical socioeconomic oppression” (Schlund-Vials, 2012, p. 158). Ly explains his relation to the hip-hop genre, “That was how I grew up and I related to these social commentaries of people talking about violence” (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014). Ly’s exposure to gang violence and narratives of genocide connected him to hip-hop as a medium of expression for the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, and the racially profiled. Ly has asserted that Khmer youth responded to Dalama: The End’n Is Just the Beginnin’ because he was “one of their own” (Schlund-Vials, 2012, p. 157). As “a child of the killing fields but also the L.A. riots,” Ly aimed to create a “musical autobiography” to express his identity (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014). By describing himself in this way, Ly explains a reality embedded in “old world” and “new world” problems. His body of work situates Cambodian Americans in a milieu where past and present interact. The merging with American hip hop expresses a distinctly Cambodian American identity, one which incorporates Cambodian and American culture.

Anida Yoeu Ali’s poem “Visiting Loss” conveys the strength of the memories which were passed on to Ali and the interrupting nature of these memories. In her poem, Ali states that “memories flicker randomly” and just as the line suggests, memories appear randomly within “Visiting loss”. While “Visiting Loss” mourns the loss of home, belonging and a pre-revolutionary life, it is clear that memories of life, before, during and after the Pol Pot era, remain. The transition from stanza four to five in “Visiting Loss” is an expression of how our

thoughts and visions of our current surroundings can suddenly become pervaded by past memories.

will I need to look deeper  
scan for eyes gouged with the same obsidian tint of regret as mine  
consider textures on dry flesh that flinch in a forest of touch  
watch for veins beneath wrists that have stared down the teeth of razors  
trace cracked lines on callous open palms  
do I stitch a patchwork of borrowed resemblances to justify my birthright

will I be at a loss for words  
or will I speak to Loss with what few memories I have kept secret  
stowed away in a glass jar like inescapable fireflies  
these memories flicker randomly  
a dirty-face girl whimpers  
one hand desperately balances a dripping wooden bowl  
as her other scrapes her spilt ration off the floor,  
then wipes her tears, runny nose, and a trail of porridge off her face.  
(Visiting Loss, n.d)

Memory ardently ruptures the current setting, drawing past into present. The memories themselves are fragmented as a series of different scenes follow one another. Stanzas seven and eight jump from the recollection of a father- daughter piggyback ride, to sounds and textures that remind Ali of a previous life. In the ninth stanza she laments that these fragmented memories are all she has of her past.

a child's throat slices dry on piggyback rides  
her tiny fingers slip,  
grip the back of her father's wet neck

this same child's body still remembers  
the tangling of flesh against jungle leaves,  
clothes against barbed wires,  
the night crickets lulling her to sleep,

these memories flicker randomly  
they slide in and out of living thoughts  
they are all I have left of this old home  
Loss is the only proof of our surviving.  
(Visiting Loss, n.d)

These images occur alongside thoughts of arriving in modern day Cambodia. The evocation of memory in this poem is used to navigate current contexts of return. Her memories and the knowledge of the genocide as a common history give Ali a sense of connection to Cambodia and its people. However, as she contemplates her position she questions “do I begin by pulling out remnants of my broken tongue [?]” and with that we see an acknowledgement of the disruption / dislocation that forced evacuation has caused in refugee identity. “Flickering memories” are triggered by location; it connects common histories and illuminates processes of not only finding what it means to be Cambodian, but also what it means to be Cambodian American. “Visiting Loss” is punctuated with statements of a desire to belong and connect to ‘home’ and a Cambodian identity.

Socheata Poeuv’s cinematic debut also depicts a distinctly Cambodian American identity. *New Year Baby* begins in Dallas, Texas, then continues to Cambodian cities and villages. The scenes depicted in Dallas show a distinctly Cambodian American household. Images of American life such as Poeuv as a child blowing out the candles of her birthday cake, and Poeuv and her sisters on a carnival ride are juxtaposed with clips of her parents acting as if “they never left Cambodia.” She narrates:

After my parents escaped and moved us to Texas, they focused on giving us a normal American life. *But who were they kidding?* They never left Cambodia, my mom still cooks on the kitchen floor, my dad prunes trees with a meat cleaver and he lays around watching Cambodian Karaoke. (New Year Baby, 2008)

The film then shifts to a scene with a dancing Santa Claus figurine in the foreground while Poeuv’s parents sit in the background. She continues, “They’re Buddhist but we celebrate Christmas every year” (ibid). Scenes of Poeuv and her family oscillate between Cambodian and American practices.



My artwork displays images of pre-revolutionary Cambodia, life during the genocide, in the Thai refugee camp and in Canada. I draw together these images to show the changing circumstances that my family has undergone. Their scattered placement represents how the past is incorporated with the present all of which contributes to a memoir of how my family has come to be where we are today. I express the desire to connect with both a Cambodian and Canadian identity by including the Canadian coat of arms, images of our lives in Canada, using Cambodia's geographical shape as an outline on the canvas and using an image of Khmer identity, the *krama*. The concept of airmail depicts how distance lays between my life in Canada and my family's history in Cambodia while networks of family and memory exist to connect the two. My identity as Cambodian and Canadian does not exist separately, I am a fusion of the two, in Cambodia I will be distinguished as Canadian, in Canada I will be distinguished as Cambodian. This is a reality that cannot be resisted. As in Ali's "Visiting Loss" a complete feeling belonging is a state of being which is lost. Poouv, Ali, Ly and my own stories' contribute to a narrative of a common experience of separation, loss, fragmented memory and a blended identity. The convergence of identities has not been without dissonance, tensions between generations have occurred while Khmer youth have sought to define themselves in North America.

### **3.2.2 Generational dissonance**

Cambodian diaspora families have experienced a considerable amount intergenerational dissonance. Cultural and generational dissonance occurs when older generations insist on a rigid maintenance of 'traditional' values. According to Portes and Rumbaut (2006), this arises when "second-generation acculturation is neither guided nor accompanied by changes in the first-generation. This situation leads directly to role reversal in those instances when first generation

parents lack sufficient education or integration into the ethnic community to cope with the outside environment and hence must depend on their children's guidance" ( p.241).

Furthermore, generational dissonance is disproportionately more prevalent between Cambodian daughters and their parents. McLellan describes parental involvement in courtship and marriages as "highly significant facets of traditional Khmer culture in resettlement" (2009, p.151). In order to preserve tradition, families arrange marriages to "preserve the moral reputation of their daughters" (ibid.). McLellan (2009) says, "girls who did not act in a traditional manner and wanted to go out after school, have dates, a boyfriend, or multiracial friends were labelled as 'bad' girls" (p.152). A young adult Cambodian Canadian noted the conflict that a first-generation 'maintenance' of traditional values can have in resettlement:

The young girls here are rebelling and this is breaking up the family structure. If parents get tough in discipline and in teaching girls to obey, for example, spanking or beatings, this is considered child abuse and youth know their rights. They report parents and youth leave home and collect welfare to go to school. The young girls say, 'It's my life.' Parents feel helpless to control girls. This cause a lot of frustration, and mothers feel even more depressed because the are blamed for not raising their daughters properly. (McLellan, 2009, p.152)

In diaspora, there is a difficulty in consolidating values especially, as Janet McLellan notes, "Cambodians have had to shift from a Khmer Buddhist ethics – regulated society of hierarchy and extended family dependency to the predominant emphasis on individualism, secularism, materialism, self-reliance and competition" (2009, pg. xi). Her statement conveys very real concerns for diaspora communities, particularly for the youth who find themselves caught between a desire to assimilate and a longing to search for their own Cambodian identity. Concurrently, first generation Cambodians have had to contend with a loss of place within their societal networks, consequently having to reconfigure their lives and their identities. Lewis states that they "face additional challenges when they attempt to teach traditional practices away from

the indigenous society and they often must find ways to redefine their own roles to fit changing circumstances in the new society as they seek to socialize younger Khmers” (2010, p. 7). Lewis (2008, 2010) provides two narratives depictive of the struggle to maintain balance:

Eang: My family is everything. When I come home from school, I just go to my grandma and grandpa and do my homework... But, sometimes I am not sure how to be a good granddaughter, should I study or should I cook for my grandpa? Should I stay home to visit with them or should I be more American and go with my friends? I don't know... I try to do everything for them and for my future in America.  
(2008, p.704)

Vuthy: We have to learn about how to be good Americans and good Khmer. That is not easy because our American friends go places but our parents don't trust us to go with them. We have to be American when we are at school and Khmer when we are at home. Sometimes we get confused and angry.  
(2010, p. 12)

As in Canada, children in the United States are pulled into American society faster than their parents and grandparents (Smith-Hefner 1999) . McLellan's (2009) study on Cambodians in Ontario found that as Khmer children developed identities based on their experiences in Canadian society, they rejected more traditional forms of parental authority. The youth in Ontario identified several factors to generational conflict: parents being unable to help with school homework or participate in school-based activities; strong parental emphasis on Khmer-based models of social behaviour and showing respect; emotional restraint; demands of unquestioning obedience from children towards elders; and harsh reactions towards youth rebellion, especially in daughters (ibid.). Lewis (2010) notes that although youth may “assume more powerful roles because of different degrees of language acquisition, marketable job skills, or simply the ability to drive an automobile” they also “may continue to crave parental approval and assistance” (p. 8). Therefore, despite disrupted power structures, a desire for continuity of intergenerational relations can exist.

Seeking parental approval, 1.5 and second generation Cambodians are faced with living up to their parents' expectations of being Cambodian, while trying to "fit-in" to North America (Lewis, 2008, 2010; Ong, 2003; McLellan, 2009). Generational dissonance has led to confusion in values, which Poeuv describes as contributing to intergenerational silence and fragmentation of narration on the Cambodian genocide. Poeuv stated that there is a "perception from the older generation who survived that well, their kids don't care... 'They won't sit down long enough to even listen.' And then there is also the perception of the younger generation that go 'oh my parents would never talk about that'" (S. Poeuv, personal communication, January 23, 2014).

Postmemory work shows that memories of genocide are in fact important to 1.5 and second generation Cambodians. It is a part of their search for where they came from, why they are here and who they are. Ly expresses generational dissonance in his song "Art of FaCt:"

Beyond the killing field ,  
A quarter of a century after the genocide.  
after 2 million people murdered,  
the other 5 million survive  
the fabric of the culture,  
beauty drips the texture,  
I find myself in Long Beach.  
the next Cambodian mecca...  
here's a gap in our generation,  
between the adults and kids,  
but since I'm bilingual  
I'm-a use communication as a bridge.  
(Ly, 2003)

He conveys a desire to overcome a separation of values between generations and continues on to say that with his music he seeks to "knock down the walls/ between me and my parents" and "listen to their stories on all/without interference" (Ly, 2003).

Ly's music has had the effect of engaging Khmer youth with their family background.

He told me:

I somewhat play a bridge between generations because the younger kids think my music is hip and cool and they can use that to start discussions with their parents and their parents think it's pretty cool because it's talking about their life experience. So there is a bridge between that and I see that they discuss and they talk all the time and it's really rare because music wise—Like when I was in the garage making music my mom was like “it's too loud, turn down that jungle music!” cause all they hear is beats and bass is just pounding the room. Once they start listening to the lyrics they start to understand and they asked me “why are you talking about this? What is it to you? Why are you making it so personal?” Then I would sit down and explain to them.

Even when I lecture, I talk about that and it's fascinating and it's interesting to see the adults bringing in their kids and sometimes the kids are excited to bring their parents. (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014)

His lyrics offer respect and pay homage to those who have gone through the horrors of genocide. In doing so, he exposes a desire for intergenerational engagement. Ly's track entitled “Art of FaCt” juxtaposes current and past events which allow youth to relate their struggle to the struggle that their families have experienced. He raps:

The trauma of the war  
affect the refugee and foreigner.  
Suffering from deep depression,  
post traumatic stress disorder.  
it's a new world order,  
new threats we're facing  
terrorist and INS deportation...  
There's an epidemic that's killing us surely.  
Over things we don't even own,  
like blocks and territories.  
so call “OG” recruiting young ones.  
jumping them in gangs,  
giving them use guns.  
Not even old enuff to speak  
already hold'n heat,  
walk'n a dangerous route  
talk'n about “code of the streets.”  
(Ly, 2003)

His lyrics speak of a commonality of oppression. Ly's postmemory work 'plays a bridge between generations'. By fusing musical forms and juxtaposing experiences he allows for a common appreciation and understanding. Bridging generations is a part of finding grounds where home and host experiences can be reconciled. Connecting youth with their family's stories resists how Cambodians are represented in mainstream North America because it allows young Cambodians to define the meaning that the past holds for their present lives.

### **3.2.3 Representation**

Talking about knowledge of the Cambodian genocide, Anida Yoeu Ali said to me "we knew about it because of everything that was on TV— The Killing Fields movie, you know that was such a big deal. That was really the thing that sort of shaped how American, how other Americans would view the Cambodian American population" (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014). In negotiating identity external media are important secondary sources for youth to understand their heritage. A lack of social recognition for Cambodian refugees has caused confusion regarding the value of claiming Khmer selfhood. Fleeing their homeland and arriving in countries which had limited if any populations of Khmers, Cambodians lacked the social capital to gain public recognition, to prosper and to attain wider political and economic involvement. McClellan's (2009) research on Cambodians in Ontario offers insight into the confusion that youth experience:

Young Windsor man: I think being Cambodian in Canada automatically puts us at a disadvantage because the Cambodian youth in Canada are not necessarily ignorant about their own culture, or it's not the fact that they don't want to learn about their own culture, it's the fact that they have no outlet. They have no resources or things available to them.

1.5 generation Toronto woman: There's an automatic association that always happens, so my general conversation is, 'Oh, you're from Cambodia, so where's that again?' And I say, 'It's between Thailand and Vietnam, and we're a small country.' And they say, 'Oh you mean the *Killing Fields* one, is that the movie?' And then they always go on about

the war, and say, ‘So, are you people okay now?’ This is an original stereotype that I get. It’s always a general comment.

Young Brampton man: Yeah, it’s mostly the only way that people of our generation will be able to distinguish what Cambodian is. It’s basically these token images in pop culture, such as *Tomb Raider*. When they ask, ‘Where’s Cambodia?’ you say, ‘Oh *Tomb Raider*’ and they always get that response... But that’s basically what it is, it’s all just token images in the media and pop culture that distinguishes one from everybody else. But if you’re going to talk to them about the real meaning of our culture, and even the *Killing Fields*, they wouldn’t know. I wouldn’t say all of them wouldn’t, but most of them would not. (p. 170-171)

Invisibility of Cambodians in public representations contributes to difficulties for youth to self-identify, McLellan states “It is especially difficult to identify oneself to others who have no recognition of one’s distinct cultural background beyond token images” (ibid., p. 171).

1.5 and second generation Cambodian youth growing up in the 1980s and early 1990s had limited information about Cambodia. Today information is easily accessible and memorial sites and museums such as the Killing Fields (Choueng Ek) and the S-21 Museum (Tuol Sleng) are recommended (as per travel guides) while touring Cambodia. Information about Cambodia has been heavily focused on the Cambodian genocide making it a part of what Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman (1996) call ‘globalized suffering.’ Those who travel to Cambodia and have visited memorials and commemoration sites, have read about the genocide, or have seen documentaries are drawn into images of suffering which appeal emotionally to global audiences. As an image of suffering that has become familiar in the global imaginary of Cambodia and Cambodians, the genocide represents a ‘regime of memory’ (Radstone and Hodgkin, 2006). As a regime of memory the global imaginary of the Cambodian genocide can shame or empower the Cambodian diaspora, making the construction of memory a tool of power.

To understand how images of suffering have been presented, Sion (2011) provides a concise depiction of the S-21 museum:

Tuol Sleng consists of four three-story concrete buildings around a grassy courtyard planted with palm trees... To the left of the courtyard, next to the hanging pole, are the fourteen tombstones of the dead bodies found by the Vietnamese army... The first building includes the torture rooms, each with a rusty metal bed, some torture instruments such as shackles, and a photograph on the wall that shows the room at the time of its discovery—with a dead body on the bed and blood on the floor... In the second wing hundreds of black and white photographs that look like police mug shots are to be found: these were the prisoners of Tuol Sleng, photographed before, during, or after torture. Many faces reflect physical pain, terror, anger, despair, or panic... The third wing's classrooms were divided with brick walls into minuscule individual cells for important prisoners... The fourth wing includes pictures of the perpetrators and paintings made by survivors, including Vann Nath's depictions of torture scenes. One room is used to display a gigantic map of Cambodia made of skulls and bones, with blood-like streaks representing rivers. "The map is shocking and disturbing, the emotional climax of the tour," wrote Judy Ledgerwood. It was removed in 2002 and replaced by a photograph of the map. However, skulls are still on display at Tuol Sleng, under glass cases. (2011, p. 3-4)

Shame is one consequence of the global interest in the Cambodian experience of suffering. McClellan (2009) notes that during the 1990s, Khmer youth were ashamed of the ongoing conflicts in Cambodia. She asserts, "Some youth wondered if there was something inherently wrong with Cambodians. These experiences combined with the severe shortage of Khmer cultural and language programs and community role models or leaders, inadvertently encouraged youth to renounce their Khmer identity and seek alternatives to develop self-identity, self-esteem, and success" (ibid., p. 153). However, writing about Cambodian Canadian youth visiting Cambodia, McLellan (2011) also states: "Visiting the genocide museums, seeing where people were kept, how they were killed, the pictures, and the skulls is horrific to the Canadian-raised youth, but essential for their understanding, empathy, and awareness" (p.487). Images of suffering are contrasted with the current lives of Cambodian's in resettlement. The resilience of families surviving the Khmer Rouge era and building new lives can provide a source of pride



(ibid.). Cambodian youth have looked towards public perceptions, social interactions and limited media representations to envision Khmer identity.

The invisibility of Cambodians in America is apparent in rapper Prach Ly's statements on his childhood, he remembers, "we went outside, to the stores or the park, no one knew who Cambodians were. We didn't have an identity. They called us Chinese, chinky eyes, gook. I guess that just made me stronger" (Shlund-Vials, 2012, p. 150). Ly discussed this confusion about his identity with me, he said, "when I was growing up I didn't know who I was" (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014). By nature, refugee memory is fragmented, the invisibility of Cambodian's in North America only adds to an incomprehensible collective identity.

As a Muslim minority within the Cambodian American community, Ali's search for belonging is particularly poignant. In an interview with Ali, she described herself as "not fitting in in terms of main stream America, not fitting into the Cambodian American community and not fitting into the Muslim community" (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014). Ali finds her sense of belonging fractured, she is left with a discontinuity. In her poem "Visiting Loss," Anida Yoeu Ali returns to Cambodia for the first time, hoping to find a sense of belonging. Cambodia represents a location which could offer belonging; however, Ali finds that this is lost.

The first and second stanza of "Visiting Loss" speaks to common Cambodian refugee experience.

GIVEN: 20 million refugees  
GIVEN: individuals who return home are not  
the same people they were when they left  
GIVEN: nearly every single family in Cambodia suffered

losses during the time of the Khmer Rouge  
PROVE: the journey never ends for the refugee  
PROVE: survivors must learn to live with the absence of 2 million  
PROVE: it is absence that propels the living to remember

I will return to a country I have never known  
that burns a hole inside my heart the size of home  
when I arrive,  
will I recognize Loss if she came to greet me at the airport  
will she help me with my bags  
usher me through customs  
will she take me to my birth village  
point me to the graves of ancestors  
will she share silence with me  
will she embrace me  
will I ask these same questions  
or will I be asked to prove my belonging  
(Visiting Loss, n.d)

These lines evoke a bifurcated identity.

Khatharya Um (2012) describes Cambodian Americans to have ““one body, but two lives” —one before, and one after Pol Pot” (p. 832). The Pol Pot era represents a point of dispersion for the Cambodian diaspora, a point when they were forcibly evacuated from their homeland. Ali imagines her return to the place her family had called home to be a place that holds the possibility of belonging. However, the line “GIVEN: individuals who return home are not the same people they were when they left” (Visiting Loss, n.d), foreshadows a split in identity to which the individual cannot return. Ali “hunt[s] for similarities in a sea of strangers” yet time, distance, fractured cultural practices and a “broken tongue” highlight that finding belonging is a contentious mission in a country virtually unknown (Visiting Loss, n.d). The final stanzas bring the poem to a close, leaving “Visiting Loss” as a mournful portrayal of involuntary relocation and unresolved grief for belonging.

I often think about our leaving and all we left behind  
imagined our lives without this exodus  
dreamt of days when I could speak to Loss

to tell her we didn't choose to leave  
leaving chose us.

I wonder, once I have visited Loss,  
will she stamp my exit visa?  
(Visiting Loss, n.d)

“Visiting Loss” represents a discontinuity common to the refugee experience. A lack of representation in North America only serves to accentuate the feeling of “not fitting in.” For many in the 1.5 and second generation narrative remembering has not been the primary medium of transmitting memory, intergenerational communication is fragmented and complimented by limited media. Memories are powerful symbols of the self (Csordas, 1994), Poouv, Ali, Ly have used their work as tools to access a greater understanding of themselves as individuals within the North American Cambodian diaspora and develop a greater visibility beyond the limited popularized images of Cambodian's that exist. Their work is also a part of a narrative which represents the Cambodian experience as one of resilience, subverting feelings of shame.

### **3.2.4 Empowerment**

The idea of a model minority has been contentious for the Cambodian diaspora. The term model minority came into being in the 1960s as Japanese Americans managed to gain upward mobility despite their incarceration in camps (Ong, 2003). This ‘advancement’ towards American life and affluence became expanded to include Chinese Americans (ibid.). According to Aihwa Ong (2003) “Asian subjects came to be perceived as minorities who raised themselves up from their bootstraps...embodying the human capital of diligence, docility, self-sufficiency, and productivity” (p. 77). Due to social circumstances and economic and political disadvantages, Cambodians have been considered “a ‘flawed element’ in the Asian American model minority continuum” (Ong, 1995, p. 809). Ong (1995) identifies the social process in which “dominant institutions and everyday encounters teach lessons about how refugees can belong, yet continue

to be differentiated from others” (p. 8). Through ‘minoritization’, Cambodians are lumped into the category of ‘Asian’ which erases their distinct cultural and historical background. As they are differentiated, they have been perceived as not embodying the positive aspects of the Asian model minority.

Aihwa Ong’s (2003) research among Cambodia refugees from 1988-89, found that some Cambodian Americans deny their origin and claim alternate ancestry because of the negative associations attached to Khmer ethnic identity. She states “Indeed, the negative associations of the term refugee (welfare dependent or welfare cheat) have become so strong that some Hmong and Cambodian Americans have taken to denying their national origins in casual encounters with mainstream Americans, claiming some other ancestry, such as Thai” (Ong, 2003, p. 86).

Negative associations to Khmer identity have been documented amongst Khmer youth. They are lumped into the ‘model minority’ myth, they are able to choose to identify as Asian because of their appearance (Chhuon and Hudley 2010; McGinnis, 2009; Ong, 2003). At the same time, however, as a disaggregated ethnic group, Cambodian students have been evaluated as low achievers by teachers and counselors in school (Chhuon and Hudley, 2010; Um, 2003).

Vichet Chhuon and Cynthia Hudley’s (2010) study examines the way Khmer youth negotiate their identities in response to Khmer stereotypes. Khmer students “adopted, rejected and affirmed certain ethnic identities in relation to perceived advantages associated with different labels across varying school contexts” (ibid., 2010, p. 341). In Chhuon and Hudley’s research (2010) there were several students that embraced panethnicity rather than a Khmer ethnicity.

Vanna, a participant in their research stated:

“Well people always ask me, “What are you?” I say I’m Asian and they say, “No, but what are you?” I think it’s funny to go on and on. Because obviously I’m Asian. I look that way. But like within the Asian community they ask me what are you? And I say I’m

Chinese because I guess I think it like just looks better sometimes. I mean, I'm half anyways" (p. 349).

For students like Vanna, Khmer ethnicity is associated with negative images, some students used the term "ghetto" to describe their Khmer peers (ibid.). Furthermore, students felt more inclined to identify panethnically because of a pride in the academic prowess associated with Asian identity, while others used panethnicity as a way to fit in with Asian American students of ethnic backgrounds other than Khmer (ibid.). Conversely, there were students who acknowledged their Khmer identity. Negative perceptions of Khmer students may act as a motivational tool, as one student states, "Smart people like Asians are more likely to go to college than others but since Cambodians are like more of the dropouts out of the whole of Asians, I want to prove that wrong, I want to go to college" (ibid., p. 352). Rather than becoming empowered by their stigmatized identity, there were students who reacted against stereotypes and held an adversarial stance towards school. These students identified as "real Cambodians," they understood their marginalization and dealt with it by misbehaving and giving up on school (ibid.). A student named Arun explained, "If the people around us treat us that way [ghettoizing] then that's how we're going to be" (ibid. p. 353)

Khmer youth have been represented as "self-destructive," "hopeless," "at-risk" and "vulnerable." These stereotypes are internalized and express themselves in multiple ways. Although Khmer identity has fueled some students to achieve beyond what is expected of them and has led to academic success, the positive interaction is still based on the construction of Khmer identity as incompatible with American education. It is apparent that Khmer identity is attached to a sense of ambivalence.

In this social context, Poeuv, Ali and Ly draw from a common past and a rich cultural heritage to subvert negative stereotypes and present Khmer identity as a source of pride. Prach Ly's brother issued a directive to him early on in his artistic career to "to know where you come from to know who you are" (Schlund-Vials, 2012, p. 150). With this guidance, Ly not only explored Cambodia's history of genocide but he also represented the Cambodian collective memory of genocide as one of resilience. His lyrics explain the struggle of genocide as well as a continued struggle in resettlement. "Art of FaCt" connects the present threats that Cambodian youth are facing to Cambodia's past. Ly's track "The great escape" acknowledges trauma yet highlights the resilience of the Cambodian subject making it past the struggle.

Prach raps:

when there [is] total silence,  
you know danger ahead.  
and when the bomb goes off  
then you know someone is dead.  
but forward ahead.  
we gotta make it further.  
no matter what it takes  
we gotta make it across the border.  
we lost our heart, but found the strength in our soul,  
words can't describe,  
but the stories must be told.  
the fields, the jungles,  
the mountains of death.  
the struggle continues,  
but we're gonna make it!  
(Ly, 2003)

The above excerpt suggests that, despite the loss of homeland and in the face of "the mountains of death" "we" still find strength. Embedded in Prach's music is a sense of agency and defined selfhood for Cambodians. The title of Ly's track 'Pin Peat's Resurrection' suggests not only suggests the *pin peat's* re-emergence and continued livelihood, but also the agency of

Cambodians to reconstruct their identities in diaspora. Resilience is a theme which is demonstrated throughout Ly's Dalama trilogy which includes: *Dalama: The End'n Is Just the Beginnin'*, *Dalama: The Lost Chapter*, and *Dalama: Memoirs of an Invisible War* (2010). His music represents an understanding of violent memories, in which recollections of the past are not solely sources of pain for members of the Cambodian diaspora, but are also a source of pride. While Ly denies a role as a spokesperson or role model (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014), his music empowers Cambodian youth and encouraging youth to identify with a Cambodian American selfhood.

When asked about what she had hoped to achieve with the creation of her film and the work of *Khmer Legacies*, Socheata Poeuv said:

I've always hoped that the film and the project would bring a new kind of conversation into the Cambodian community and into individual families. From brief framing of the history or the narrative from one of being a victim, being a kind of will-less sheep...Toward really identifying and recognizing and celebrating the heroism and the strength that it took to really endure this period.

Which isn't to say that every single story needs to be heroic but I would love for Cambodians to think of themselves you know not just as victims but as very resilient peoples. To be where they are today takes a lot of resilience. (S. Poeuv, personal communication, January 23, 2014)

Artists use their voices to show that recollection may be redemptive and empowering. Both Ali and Ly expressed experiences of marginalization as a source of strength. Anida Yoeu Ali explained:

All of this consistent marginalization has actually made me much stronger and it's just continued to make me kind of resilient and do what I do. Do what I do best which is me...that kind of marginalization at some point you just kind of resist and you just stand on your own two feet and you just continue to do what you do because you're passionate about it and that has really driven me very far. It's been a driving force in my life. (A.Y. Ali, personal communication, February 8, 2014)

Similarly Prach Ly says his experience of being called “Chinese, chinky eyes, gook” only served to make him stronger (Schlund-Vials, 2012, p. 150). Ly stated that, “as an Asian, Cambodian, I had to tell my own story because no one else was going to tell it for me” (Schlund-Vials, 2012, p. 176).

The narratives of Poouv, Ali and Ly use the past to show a journey of heroism to empower Cambodians and subvert notions shame which have developed from a Cambodian association with a low economic status, academic underachievement and violent pasts. Memory is therefore used as a powerful tool (Bodnar, 1993). In my artwork I chose to include photos of our family that were happy moments interspersed with images that depicted genocide. I refrained from making it a story that was only about suffering. It is intended to depict living with the knowledge of what had happened, but learning about the resilience of our parents who survived the genocide and finding inspiration in that. Our work displays minority voices that speak for themselves about a history that has so often been written by others.



## **Conclusion**

### **I want to be worthy of the suffering**

“As a survivor, *I want to be worthy of the suffering* that I endured as a child. I don’t want to let that pain count for nothing, nor do I want others to endure it.” Chanrithy Him

Throughout my thesis I’ve worked under the assumption that public postmemory work is not an approach to recalling memory that is appropriate for every individual or family within a community. I note that silence and indirect references to genocide are other modes of being which are present in the North American Cambodian diaspora. Studying silence is important in order to understand cultural conceptions, but this approach is limiting because it generalizes and does not acknowledge other beliefs and factors that contribute to silence such as socio-economic and socio-political circumstances. I have examined these processes to convey multiplicity. Cambodians in diaspora have different values, beliefs and practices. There are no socio-political, socio-economic, educational, cultural or religious formulae for predicting how families will decide to engage with violent pasts.

I have focused on publicized postmemory because we are at a point in time where the first generation of survivors are still living, where families have developed roots in their countries of resettlement and where 1.5 and second generation Cambodians are developing their voices in the public sphere. I myself and others are at a juncture, where our beliefs about the value of preserving this history provoke projects to document family origins while our first generation of living archives can still contribute.

I have presented the work of my own, Poouv, Ali and Ly to draw attention to postmemory work as a delicate personal process. Speaking for and about ourselves is not only about personal healing. 1.5 and second generation Cambodians have retold the past, a past that they have not lived or have forgotten, in ways which address their own struggles and the struggles of the

community. Memories of genocide hold value in their present lives as a political tool to react against state policies and narratives as well as to develop identity.

Despite the common socio-political circumstance that led to the resettlement of Cambodian's in North America, first generation survivors engage in various ways with their children about their experience of genocide. For many there is a shared experience of exposure to execution, starvation, forced labour, and disease, followed by a long journey leading to a temporary home in refugee camps. After making it through the refugee screening processes Cambodians began to rebuild their lives in their host countries. Prior to the genocide, there had been few Cambodians residing in either Canada or the U.S. Resettlement was a struggle because of a lack of established social capital, education and damaging mainstream ethnic perceptions. Consequently, survival became the main priority for refugees.

Three decades later, Cambodians in North America have established roots in their countries of resettlement. Cambodian Students' Associations have developed in the U.S and Canadian and Cambodian clothing lines outfit the community in ethnically identifying apparel. Socheata Poeuv, Anida Yoeu Ali and Prach Ly have been a part of the process of Cambodians defining and representing themselves in the public sphere. Their public work resists silence but also recognizes silence and fragmentation as a part of their reality.

As I have shown in this thesis: the work of the 1.5 and second generation Cambodians in diaspora is supported by families and communities; cultural beliefs and practices are not monolithic, they are multiple; speaking about the past is not always considered to be taboo, intergenerational projects allow for different meanings and values to be placed on recalling the past.

To refer back to a statement made to me by Poouv, “projects, school projects can actually help to facilitate a conversation that may not have happened otherwise” (S. Poouv, personal communication, January 23, 2014). Projects offer a purpose that may facilitate open lines of communication about an uncomfortable topic. My parents and I embarked on this project together to document a legacy to be passed on to future generations which would develop empathetic intergenerational relations. The positive values attributed to the recollections accessed by myself, Poouv, Ali and Ly contribute to the diverse set of values that can be attached to retelling stories of violent pasts.

Postmemory work gives a glimpse into how memories are shared within families. The process that occurs can be differentiated from talk therapy in that it does not rely on expert cultural brokers and the purpose for projects that access memory extend beyond a desire for healing. Postmemory work is a familial process and so it is necessarily sensitive to the delicate nature of recollecting violent memories.

Memory work about violence needs to be looked at outside of the scope of talk therapy as it is clear that it cannot be used as a universal approach to healing. There are various means which Cambodians in the North American diaspora may seek relief from painful memories, including: makeshift memorials, public commemoration ceremonies and private mourning. I do not deny that people are traumatized or that narration cannot be healing for some people, but I want to highlight that recollection may be much more than that. The experience of genocide holds personal value when it is transmitted and is given meaning in the present. This model of work allows for generational inclusion, empowers youth, and strengthens identities while respecting notions of privacy and cultural values. model of work allows for inclusion, empowers youth, and strengthens identities while respecting notions of privacy and cultural values.

Lewis (2010) describes Cambodian Americans as “bending the tree to fit the environment.” Cambodians in the North American diaspora have had to develop practices and beliefs in accordance to their present lives. Postmemory work provides insight into this process of developing a Cambodian selfhood in diaspora. Families in diaspora must accept and reject which Cambodian and North American practices will be followed and how they will be followed. In any family this is constantly negotiated and a source of tension. In the form and content of their film, poetry and music, Poeuv, Ali and Ly demonstrate identities that blend American and Cambodian practices. Ly’s use of traditional Cambodian music backed by hip-hop beats, is an example of how his self-identification as “a child of the killing fields but also the L.A. riots” (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014) is reflected in the form of his music. Poeuv in her film *New Year Baby* and Ali in her poem “Visiting Loss” describe distinctly Cambodian American experiences.

In connecting past with present, the work of Poeuv, Ali and Ly open an intergenerational dialogue. The construction of memories into meaningful legacies informs the first generation that their struggles are important in their children’s lives. Ly explained that his lyrics about the genocide sparked his mother’s curiosity, leading her to ask, “Why are you talking about this? What is it to you? Why are you making it so personal?” (P. Ly, personal communication, February 21, 2014). Opening these lines of communication bridges a gap between generations allowing for a connection to a collective Cambodian identity when balancing a Cambodian and North American identity has proven to be difficult.

With limited popularized images of Cambodians in the mainstream North American imaginary, youth have felt disconnected from their Cambodian origins. A lack of recognition is apparent in the narratives of Poeuv, Ali and Ly who contend that their access to secondary

information on the Cambodian genocide was limited. These feelings of marginalization have led to a desire to speak out and make Cambodian diaspora experience visible.

Ethnic stereotyping of Cambodians in North America has the effect of shaming youth. Negative associations to Khmer identity, such as ‘welfare dependent’ (Ong, 2003), ‘ghetto’ (Chhuon and Hudley, 2010), and a ‘flawed element’ in the Asian model minority continuum (Ong, 1995) have led to ambivalence around identifying as Cambodian. The work of Poev, Yoeu and Ali debunk these stereotypes by presenting the survival of Cambodia’s violent history as a source of pride. Memory is used as a powerful tool to reclaim identity and empower the community.

Scholars who have written about silence surrounding the genocide in the diaspora seem to overlook memory work perhaps because it does not occur on a wide scale as often compared to documentation of the Holocaust. However, if researchers focus on silence and do not consider small-scale examples when people *have* spoken out, we fail to see the Cambodian diaspora as a dynamic group of people who have multiple beliefs and practices. This research shifts interest from the everyday experience of silence and fragmentation to a process of introspection. Postmemory work delves into the everyday and what is already known. It seeks to interrogate what knowledge is missing and what the search for answers reveals about us. We may not find the answers we are looking for but it becomes a part of the process of introspection.

My own work and the works of Poev, Ali, and Ly ask questions about how our families left Cambodia, how they resettled and ultimately, who we are within the Cambodian diaspora. We contribute to the on-going project of creating transnational links through stories of exiled Cambodians who share a common origin. These connections help maintain Cambodian identities and affirm notions of what it is to be Khmer. Postmemory work resonates as an act that is

produced from social intercourse. The existence of postmemory work denies that trauma has sole control over silencing narration. Despite an absence of Cambodian survivor stories in the mainstream North American imaginary, memories have been transmitted fragmentarily and indirectly through generations. The control over how memories are transmitted privately and publicly exists in individual, family and community perceptions of cultural appropriateness and socio-economic and socio-political priorities. These factors vary in diaspora communities and produce multiple values and meanings placed on memories.

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**Appendix A: Memoir of Descent**





**Appendix B: Pre-revolutionary Image I**



**Appendix C: Pre-revolutionary Image II**

