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### Creating Peace Through Cambodian American Literature

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## Creating Peace Through Cambodian American Literature

MARY THI PHAM AND JONATHAN H. X. LEE

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory (sic) of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

—William Faulkner's Nobel Prize Banquet Speech

Literature, when written or performed correctly, can yield what Faulkner refers to as the “pillars [in which] to help [us] endure and prevail.” It is this type of literature that this essay seeks to excavate from a troubled Cambodian past to illuminate an American society that has long misunderstood and misrepresented the Cambodian American communities. Through this compilation of Cambodian American healing narratives, this essay attempts to undo the internal colonization, defined by Gayatri Spivak as “the patterns of exploitation and domination of disenfranchised groups *within* the United States” that have been a part of the narratives of Cambodian Americans. Since Cambodian American literature is starting to grow, the scope and breadth of this essay is limited to selective works by Cambodian American poets and Sharon May's published interviews with Cambodian American writers in a journal called *Manoa*.

This essay is about retiring Cambodian American victim narratives and promoting the production and distribution of healing narratives. First, a definition and example of a victim narrative will be provided. Second, it is helpful to pose the question: “What's at stake in the continual production and perpetuation of Cambodian American victim narratives in society?” Then, a definition of healing narratives is provided with an examination and explication of several Cambodian American literary texts that fall under this category. Next, this essay actively engages in expanding the concepts of language as a

healing agent and its functions to raise awareness, seek justice, and transmit hope to the next generations.

Before exploring alternative Cambodian American literature, it's useful to examine a victim narrative and inspect how its features differ from a healing narrative. There are no clear markings that determine whether a text is a victim narrative or a healing narrative and each reader experiences a text differently. In this essay, a text's valuations of whether it's a victim narrative or a healing narrative are based on Faulkner's criteria in the way the text lifts or squashes the human heart.

One example of a victim narrative can be found in Sharon May's interview with Soth Polin. The tone of this particular interview dampens the human heart. Throughout the interview, Polin shares his love for literature and his writing career, but even within these narratives, they are clouded by fear and despair, and lingering visceral haunting(s) of the Khmer Rouge. Polin tries to explain to May the crippling effects the Khmer Rouge has on the imagination and states:

Even if we had more writers of my generation, we could not succeed if we continued writing as we did. There is something that we cannot get past. It just kills the imagination. It is the atrocity of the Khmer Rouge. Even if you are reaching in your imagination for a new destination, you cannot get past their cruelty. When you try to write something without mentioning the Khmer Rouge, you can't. The next generation will forgive that, they will forget, but for us, we cannot forgive it.

Polin's answer speaks to his generation's creative energies being stymied by the memory and trauma of the Khmer Rouge regime. He also distinguishes between the experiences of his own generation, who actually lived through the autogenocide, and juxtaposes it against that of future generations who may still be affected through intergenerational trauma. Unlike his generation, however, they are still able to transcend the loss through literary production; Polin no longer has any hope left for his generation.

**T**his sense of hopelessness is further reflected when May asks Polin: "What advice do you have for young writers?" He replies with a hopeless question, "That is difficult to answer. I cannot give advice to myself. How can I advise other people?" Although Polin's answer is honest and authentic, it also reflects a feeling of despair and lack of personal agency. When May probes Polin to disclose how the Khmer Rouge affected him, he concludes by saying:

As I said before about the Khmer Rouge: you cannot get past it. You resuscitate a painful past, and you have to talk about it. You cannot pass over it. That is a lesson for humanity: not to let it happen again—that atrocity and that cruelty. Maybe this is why I cannot finish my writing: because of this story. Because of this, I lost my inspiration. Because the reality surpasses the imagination.

Polin has admitted defeat as a writer and cultural producer. The Khmer Rouge won. There are no stories of victory, healing, or moving forward in this text. The personal and collective pain is so strong it has incapacitated Polin's imaginative and narrative power. The best that he can do is talk about it with May in an interview and hope that she will take up the work that he is no longer capable of performing on his own. Polin's reality engulfs the reader's optimism and deflates the reader's spirit. Based on Faulkner's criteria, eliciting this reaction from the reader indicates that this text is a victim narrative.

What purpose lies in making distinctions between a victim and a healing narrative? In Kelly McKinney's article, "'Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence': Testimony, Traumatic Memory, and Psychotherapy with Survivors of Political Violence," she raises challenging questions for psychotherapists who use the "testimony method" to heal survivors of political violence and critiques the reframing of the trauma story in the way it attempts to portray "historical truth" by casting patients as "innocent victims, paradoxically denying a sense of their full moral and psychological agency rather than restoring it." Victims are being painted in a one-dimensional lens untainted by evil intentions or vengeful thoughts. The creation of this "false, pure victim identity" that some of the clinics practice in their healing sessions are detrimental because the patients lose their "authentic selves" and must suppress their desires for revenge or violence—out of shame. This suppression is ultimately destructive because the patients have been retarded from tapping into their personal agency. McKinney's findings are significant because it challenges popular beliefs that the simple re-telling of a victim narrative elicits liberation and results in fewer victims to burden society. This is the effect of the victim narrative that this essay exposes and cautions against. The creation and re-creation of these victim narratives perpetuates a cycle of helplessness and victimization in which the patients may not be able to move forward or access their personal agency.

In addition to perpetuating victimization, the production and reproduction of Cambodian American victim narratives uses Cambodia's historical past as a scapegoat and simultaneously legitimates that the United States is based on meritocratic values while denying the existence of racial inequality. In the *New York Times*, Patricia Leigh Brown reports on sex trafficking of Southeast Asian–American minors with a focus on Cambodian American girls. She does not explicitly show that there's a direct correlation between high crimes and poverty, however. Instead, she links the vulnerability of Cambodian American girls to being raised by emotionally distant parents affected by the Khmer Rouge. While this is not to understate the posttraumatic stress disorder of those who have been affected by the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror and genocide, we are showing how the framing of this reporting is misleading. She not only briefly mentions poverty, but Brown relays that "the Polaris Project, a national advocacy organization, estimates that a stable of four girls earns over \$600,000 a year in tax-free income for the pimp. Drug dealers here

are increasingly switching to prostitution, inspired by the bottom line and fewer risks.” This huge figure gears readers’ mindframes toward profit rather than poverty. This kind of reporting elides the real issues that many Cambodian American communities are facing: high poverty and crime and low funding. Furthermore, Brown cites organizations like Asian Health Services and Banteay Srei, which suggest that the Cambodian American girls are already getting all the social help they need, and, therefore, no further resources are required for “impoverished” Cambodian American communities.

It has been over 32 years since the Khmer Rouge regime, and yet, they are still being blamed for all social unrest within Cambodian American communities, including poverty, unemployment, social maladjustment, educational underperformance, and discrimination. This tendency to use the Khmer Rouge regime as scapegoats is disproportionate from the actual Cambodian refugee experience in the United States and must be challenged and re-examined critically in order to assess the situation accurately and aid Cambodian American communities in ways that are effective. Ownership of our social problems is necessary to ensure a society based on democratic values. Furthermore, since we are all interconnected, this can only profit all communities and society as a whole because empowerment has a direct correlation with victimization.

**H**ow is social responsibility related to literature? Does literature have the capacity to incite social change? David Morris posits that suffering exists beyond language, but that literature is a safe, alternate space that’s more distant from the writer and reader, and hence, suffering becomes more accessible. According to his assessment of the functions of literature, it can be used to tap into suffering in ways that are inaccessible through the basic “transmission model.” If suffering can be accessed, then, it also allows for the opportunity of healing. Morris suggests that voice is a promising tool for healing because it opens up a portal for the suffering to finally be released. He asserts that literature, then, becomes the perfect medium to take on this type of work. Morris’ assessments of literature, coupled with Faulkner’s assertions regarding the role of the poet, are good measures for recognizing healing narratives. Morris warrants that studying certain elements of literature can aid us in the way we think about suffering within and beyond literature. This essay deviates from Morris’ hypothesis in the elements that it examines. Morris suggests studying voice, genre, and moral community, whereas this essay examines the interplay among history, literature, subjectivity, cultural production, and social suffering, justice, healing, and empowerment for self and community.

“The world changes the poetry, and the poetry changes the world,” says U Sam Oeur during an interview with Sharon May. Similar to Polin’s previous assertions, Oeur’s statement is also reflective of the victim narratives that were produced after the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime. A sense of

hopelessness prevails over Cambodian and Cambodian American literature. As Oeur notes, before war broke out in Cambodia, poets were preoccupied with pastoral poems that celebrated the female form, blossoms, and beautiful things, but after the war, the poems were bathed in the aftermath of destruction and became about suffering and loss and pain and grief. The second half of Oeur's quote that "poetry changes the world" articulates the potency of poetry to transform ourselves, our communities, and ultimately, the world. Thirty-two years later, although Cambodian American poetry still addresses feelings of hopelessness, some of the poems' tone and landscape are gradually shifting toward healing, empowerment, and justice.

An example of a healing narrative can be found in Anida Yoeu Esguerra's poem "Absence, Part 2: Crying." In the poem, Esguerra begins by trying to capture the essence of "absence" through various metaphors. Absence is: crying for home, leaving, loss of ownership, separation, shadows, silence, mourning deaths, another landmine tragedy, witnessing tears, tightly wound face, remembering home, sacrifice, and so on. These and many more losses and pain are cited as metaphors of "absence." Taking on multiplicitous meanings, "absence" doesn't merely connote a state of being away or a state of deficiency; "absence" is also the consequences of the Khmer Rouge's destructive regime, and this poem serves as documentation of the crimes against humanity.

Initially, the poem may seem like a victim narrative because of the endless depiction of tragedies, but there is hope. Partway through the poem, Esguerra asserts that absence is "the heart's unrecorded ache," but as this is uttered, the poem becomes self-reflexive and creates a space for the heart's unrecorded ache. In the process of telling, Esguerra uses her poem as a means to record these losses; her use of form reinforces and echoes the contents of her message by giving legitimacy to grief and by acknowledging the suffering of the victims of the Khmer Rouge. By revealing the absence that is felt when the suffering of millions continue to go unacknowledged and newborns are brought into a "dying generation/of living memories," the poem becomes a space for healing and seeking social justice for first, 1.5, second, and future generations. In a couple of instances, Esguerra addresses the suffering of her father and unpolitical mother. This poem is reflective of the promising healing narratives that are beginning to emerge from 1.5- and second-generation Cambodian American artists like praCh Ly and Laura Mam.

According to Jonathan H. X. Lee's "ethics of identity formation," 1.5- and second-generation Cambodian Americans have a responsibility to record their family histories because they would be better candidates than the first generation to "lead the way to inter-generational recovery, since they did not directly face the horrors of the Khmer Rouge like their parents did, and can therefore more easily confront the past and move through it." Esguerra

demonstrates the “ethics of identity formation” in the way her poem keeps and produces history so that future generations will not experience the “amnesia of history” that’s prevalent in many race/ethnic groups that have been subjected to severe trauma. In this way, “Absence, Part 2: Crying” is a poem that fits both Morris’ valuations of literature as a portal to social suffering in the way it addresses and heals personal and cultural wounds, and Faulkner’s criteria for being a voice that lifts humanity’s heart and serves as a pillar to “help [us] endure and prevail.”

Another example of a healing narrative can be found in Chath pierSath’s poem, “Reunion.” This poem is about the poet who imagines his own death in order to reunite with his mother. In the first stanza, pierSath paints serene, pastoral images of his homeland the way he remembers it in his childhood before the atrocities of war and autogenocide in Cambodia. Then, in the next stanza, he conjures up strong women who demonstrate against the massacre of their innocence. In the third stanza, the poet asserts that he shall do a celebratory dance in the monsoon for all the loved ones he never got to know while his mother’s embrace shall unite them all. The poem closes with a solo line declaring: “Having known her is my sorrow and my inheritance.” This is also the last line of his book of poems.

pierSath’s poem lends complexity to the healing narrative because it occupies both joy and pain. The title “Reunion” conjures both happiness and sorrow because while it speaks of the possibility of a reunion, it simultaneously connotes separation: the absence of his mother through her death and his survival. Rather than being a victim narrative, however, the poet acknowledges the suffering, but ultimately takes ownership of his inheritance and chooses to celebrate life. Despite the eeriness and morbidity of imagining his own death, pierSath skillfully and successfully uses poetry as a vehicle to imagine a happy reunion with his mother by expanding our familiar notions of “death.”

The theme of death appears four times in the poem and possesses multiple meanings. In each of these instances, death yields positive connotations. The first death refers to the speaker’s mother. Rather than depicting her death, however, he breathes life into his mother through his poetry and through the afterlife. In this way, he is able to memorialize her. Rather than endanger her safety, the speaker conjures his own death. pierSath’s second allusion to death engages in poetic license in the way his death embodies agency through its purpose to reunite him with his mother. Here, death doesn’t take on the traditional meaning of dejection and surrendering; instead, it represents a means to “eternal peace.”

The third reference to death occurs in juxtaposition with the “thatched-roof house full of strong women/raising their fists against the massacre of their innocence.” The “massacre of their innocence” alludes to the Khmer Rouge’s autogenocide, but the speaker does not depict helpless victims in

submission. On the contrary, he uses powerful activist imagery to re-imagine the tragedy in a way that transforms the suffering into demanding justice and empowerment. These images are displays of anger (not despair) that have not been appeased because of the lack of justice. As Frank Stewart explains, the function of writing is a means in which “individuals are able to maintain their humanity and resist evil—and, therefore, why the freedom to write is always a threat to authoritarian regimes.” Last, the poet alludes to death once more when he dedicates a dance in the monsoon for all of his “loved ones [he] never got to know.” In this way, pierSath’s remembrance of these deaths through his writing resists crimes against humanity and re-humanizes the dehumanized by paying homage to the innocent lives that were lost.

May’s published interviews with Cambodian women and Cambodian-American artists are significant contributions to the revival of testimonial discourse the way the participants are claiming their public space. All of the participants May has interviewed voluntarily locate themselves in history and assert their testimonial discourse into a public narrative. In Pamela Sugiman’s research on Japanese Canadian internment experiences, she hypothesizes that ultimately, the “literacization of memories is always a political act.” These acts are significant the way they claim and create their own subjectivity. Similarly, this essay proposes that the act of resurrecting these personal/national memories/histories has the power to move the Cambodian American communities forward psychologically, socially, and ultimately politically. This act makes May’s interview with U Sam Oeur a healing narrative.

When May asks if Oeur believes that poetry or writing can help in healing, he replies with a definitive, resounding “yes” through his response and also through his own poetry. He states, “When we write about loss and wailing, we can heal people’s hearts—the people who cannot write, cannot express their pain. When they listen to my poems, they shed tears.” Self-proclaimed Ambassador of the Silent World, Oeur believes wholeheartedly that poetry and language can heal and liberate social suffering. He aspires to be the Ambassador of the Silent World because he postulates that they have been muted by the oppression of the Indochinese Communists; therefore, he has the “special privilege to express the cry of anguish of the Silent World—the world which cannot speak for itself—and the plight of [his] people and country, balanced by an unflagging belief in [their] imminent return to freedom and stability.”

Championing Walt Whitman’s free-verse form, Oeur encourages writers to experiment with new forms of poetry because culture and art is not static and must evolve. Furthermore, he demands using new poetic forms because he says that the atrocities of the Pol Pot experience cannot be expressed in neat, tight, traditional, Cambodian art forms. Oeur advocates Cambodian poets to



liberate themselves from the “parts of [their] culture impeding [their] spiritual evolution, [their] evolution as members of the human race.”

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