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Between Home and Homeland: Redefining Cambodian American Identity Through Transnational Youth Activism

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In 2002, the U.S. Government and Cambodian officials negotiated a repatriation agreement granting authorization to deport Cambodian refugees in some circumstances, a practice that had previously not occurred. This repatriation agreement has become particularly salient to the Cambodian American community since Donald Trump became president in 2017. The Trump administration has pressured countries to expedite the removal process, even amidst the Coronavirus pandemic.¹ These efforts have caused a substantial increase in deportations to Cambodia, more than at any other time in history.² Living under threat of deportation, for oneself or family, can detrimentally impact a child's sense of identity and belonging, among many other health and well-being implications.^{3 4} On top of that, young Cambodian Americans must also navigate the landscape of intergenerational trauma resulting from one of the most devastating genocides in human

1 Fritze, John. 2020. "Trump Cracks Down on Nations Hesitant to Accept U.S. Deportees Because of Coronavirus." *USA Today*, April 10. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/04/10/trump-sanctions-countries-blocking-deportees-over-coronavirus/2874395001/>

2 Immigration and Customs Enforcement. 2019. *Yearbook of Immigration statistics, FY 2018*. <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2018>

3 Dreby, Joanna. 2012. "The burden of deportation on children in Mexican immigrant families." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74: 829-845. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00989.x

4 Zayas, Luis H. 2015. *Forgotten Citizens: Deportation, Children, and the Making of American Exiles and Orphans*. New York: Oxford University Press.

“The Trump administration has pressured countries to expedite the removal process ... causing the highest number of deportations ever in history to Cambodia”

history. Given the many challenges facing refugee families, that are now compounded by the threat of deportation, how then, do Cambodian refugee youth foster a positive sense of identity and belonging when both the present and past - home and homeland – instill a sense of danger?

This policy brief draws on the work of BIMl-affiliate and Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies Khatharya Um to understand how youth navigate these burdens while living in an era of heightened anti-immigrant policy and rhetoric. In a chapter from her book, *Southeast Asian Migration: People on the Move in Search of Work, Refuge and Belonging*,⁵ Um describes the evolution of Cambodian diasporic politics over the last four decades. Integrating survey data, ethnographic research, and publicly available personal accounts, Um's work suggests that transnational political engagement and activism through art help connect Cambodian youth to their ancestral homeland and foster a greater sense of identity and belonging. This policy brief will focus on three main themes in Um's research: 1) the notion of “home” and belonging, 2) youth activism, and 3) artistic and creative expression as pathways to empowerment and healing. These main themes will be illustrated by

5 Um, Khatharya. 2015. "Crossing Borders: Citizenship, identity and transnational activism in the Cambodian diaspora." Pp. 197-214 in *Southeast Asian Migration: People on the move in search of work, refuge and belonging*, edited by K. Um and S. Gaspar. Chicago, IL: Sussex Academic Press.



two case examples from California’s own Cambodian community. This policy brief provides important recommendations based on Um’s research not only for community-based and other organizations serving Cambodia American communities but other refugee communities as well.

The Khmer Rouge and the Ambiguities of “Home”

Um describes how the Khmer Rouge regime, otherwise known as the Communist Party of Kampuchea, maintained power over the people of Cambodia for roughly four years following the Vietnam War. The regime was responsible for the loss of an estimated two million lives (approximately 25 percent of the Cambodian population) as a result of genocide, forced labor, starvation, and torture. The Vietnamese army removed the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979, leading to an exodus of over half a million political refugees settling mostly in France, Australia, and the United States. Now, some 40 years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, approximately 300,000 Cambodian Americans make their home in the U.S., over one-third of whom reside in California.⁶

According to Um, the ongoing trauma sustained by Khmer Rouge survivors is not only experienced differently *between* generations, but also *within* generations. We commonly think of immigrants in generational terms: the first-generation typically refers to people who live in a country different from their birth, and second-generation usually refers to the children of first-generation immigrants born in the place of resettlement. However, Um indicates the need for more nuance to account for a key group of child refugees who were born and/or raised in refugee camps. For those whose earliest memories of domestic life consist of a temporary, nationless refugee settlement, the concept of “home” may have an ambivalent or ambiguous connotation. The Department of Homeland Security’s increased efforts to deport Cambodian American refugees adds yet another layer of complexity. The idea of “return” for this distinct group is not so much an act of repatriation, but more akin to exile, as some potential deportees may never have actually set foot

in Cambodia. In addition to the painful and traumatic impact of forced migration, the threat of deportation for oneself or family diversifies the manner and magnitude of one’s integration, sense of belonging and relationship with the ancestral homeland.

“...connecting with Cambodian politics “activistically” enables a process where one can begin to confront the source of past trauma while envisioning a better future for all Cambodians.”

Identity, Art, and Political Engagement

The concept of identity for transnational first-generation Cambodians, as Um explains, may be “de-territorialized” but not “de-nationalized.” In this sense, Cambodian citizens may not live in their home country, but still identify as a citizen and for whom active engagement with homeland politics is an essential part of maintaining that identity. When Cambodian American youth engage politically, Um discovered, it can encourage a redefinition of one’s personal narrative from one of victimhood and survival to empowerment and action in which “the past/end is read as the present/beginning.” By this, Um means that connecting with Cambodian politics “activistically” enables a process where one can begin to confront the source of past trauma while envisioning a better future for all Cambodians. Many focus their efforts on building democracy and addressing human and environmental rights issues in their ancestral homeland, yet Um says others are driven to pursue civil rights advances for Cambodians currently living in the U.S. Concern for these domestic issues are often rooted in the United States’ obscured role in Cambodia’s past tragedies and linked to the current circumstances of Cambodian refugees in the U.S. As such, reclaiming and making visible this history and asserting their historicized identity is for many young activists a way of reclaiming place and belonging in both the U.S. and in Cambodia.

⁶ Census Reporter. 2020. *Asian alone or in any combination by selected groups*. https://censusreporter.org/data/table/?table=Bo2018&geo_ids=01000US&primary_geo_id=01000US#valueType|estimate

Domestic and transnational political engagement can extend beyond traditional organizing methods through the power of artistic expression. Throughout the centuries of human civilization, art has been a meaningful vehicle for oppressed peoples to share prohibited knowledge and political messaging and the same can be said for youth of the Cambodian diaspora who take up many different artforms. Art can provide a meaningful connection to the past but can also serve as a way to shape the future. Many young Cambodians, as Um explains, “find their political voice not through national politics, but through the arts,” even though some do not necessarily consider their work as “activism.”

The Internet and social media are also a convenient and cost-effective way to organize politically and raise awareness about social justice concerns. For the youth of the Cambodian diaspora, the Internet has become a powerful tool not only for sharing art by activists, but also a means to connect with the homeland and foster transnational relationships. For many Cambodian American youth, who may only know their ancestral home through the stories of elders and media outlets, this virtual connectivity as Um puts it, “provides new forms of cultural and political literacy, and more meaningful connections, especially for the younger generations, to an otherwise abstract, imagined ‘homeland.’”

Evidence in action 1: Domestic and transnational political activism

When using the lenses provided by Um’s work, we can identify examples of the youth advocacy Um describes among California’s own Cambodian communities. For pro-democracy Cambodian Americans living in the U.S., there is much work to be done in their ancestral homeland, where Prime minister Hun Sen has recently cracked down on activism and jailed political opposition.⁷ In 2017, nearly 300, mostly first-generation Cambodian Americans organized demonstrations at a park in Long Beach, California, to oppose Prime Minister Sen’s arrest and imprisonment of political leader Kem Sokha.⁸ The protests were among many other political demonstrations held by Cambodian diasporas across the world. The barriers

of racism and discrimination present in American society that continue to impede the socio-economic advancement of many immigrant communities, remain a prominent and necessary focus of local youth activism in the Cambodian diaspora. A Cambodian American youth organization from Long Beach, California, Khmer Girls in Action, has not only taken on anti-deportation activism, but also organizes for gender, economic and racial injustice in their community.⁹ Within this work, youth activists of the Cambodian diaspora connect the marginalization of refugees in the U.S. with social injustices occurring in Cambodia.



Cambodian Americans protest in Long Beach, CA. Source: [Los Angeles Times](#)



Khmer Girls in Action in 8th annual Cambodian New Year parade, Long Beach, CA. Source: [Press Telegram](#)

7 Human Rights Watch. 2020. *Cambodia: Events of 2019*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/cambodia>

8 Shyong, Frank. 2017. “Cambodian Americans Protest in Long Beach Over the Jailing of a Political Leader in Their Homeland.” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 September 2017. <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-cambodian-protest-20170910-story.html>

9 Das Gupta, Monisha. 2019. “KNOW History/KNOW Self: Khmer Youth Organizing for Justice in Long Beach.” *Amerasia Journal* 45(2): 137-156. doi: 10.1080/00447471.2019.1671755



praCh (Prach Ly) performing at Cambodia Town Film Festival. Source: [Long Beach Post](#)



praCh (Prach Ly). Source: [HuffPost](#)

Evidence in action 2: Artistic transnational political activism

A profound example of how artistic transnational youth activism can impact political thought and address “historical forgetting” can be found in the pioneering work of film producer and Khmer¹⁰ hip hop artist, praCh (Prach Ly) who was born in secrecy during the Khmer Rouge genocide. praCh’s lyrics often combine images of the Khmer Rouge regime’s brutality with accounts of marginalization in urban America. He sees himself as a messenger for Cambodian youth living in the U.S. as well as Cambodia. Born in 1979, he spent his first years growing up in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines, making him too young to recall the atrocities his parents and older brother experienced but maintains that this distance empowers him to broach subjects too painful for others to share. praCh has made an impact in the U.S. and abroad, being featured on PBS Frontline and notably becoming the first Khmer rap artist to reach number one in Cambodia.^{11,12}

¹⁰ Khmer is the official language and largest ethnic group in Cambodia. Over 97% of Cambodians identify as Khmer – the descendants of the Angkor Empire that dominated the region between the 10th and 13th centuries. Central Intelligence Agency. No date. *East Asia/Southeast Asia: Cambodia. The World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html>

¹¹ Public Broadcasting Service. 2002. “Prach Ly – The rapper.” *PBS Frontline, World*. https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/cambodia/ly_interview.html

¹² Sandri, Elisa. 2016. “Remembering Genocide in the Cambodian Diaspora.” *Culture and Capitalism, A Sussex University Anthropology Blog*. <https://cultureandcapitalismblog.wordpress.com/2016/11/07/remembering-genocide-in-the-cambodian-diaspora/>

The Power of Engagement: Recommendations to Empower Cambodian American Communities

Um’s research demonstrates how political engagement may unify and empower Cambodian refugee community members who wrestle with traumas from their personal history while living in a political climate rife with hostility toward immigrants. Beyond adding to the growing body of knowledge in understanding trauma, identity and belonging, these findings have a broad range of valuable implications for both policy and practice.

Community based organizations may increase the effectiveness of their work by incorporating youth civic engagement and organizing while linking past, present and future. Raising awareness of the “hidden” histories that implicate U.S. involvement in Cambodia’s tragedies and the adverse impact of a continued lack of accountability is a key element within this work. Um’s research shows us that incorporating different forms of political engagement, including the use of artistic mediums, will help connect youths with their ancestral homeland and establish a sense of agency in defining one’s identity.

Non-profit organizations serving the Cambodian diaspora may seek to restructure their program offerings to align individuals' interests with a variety of possibilities for civic involvement. For instance, some youth may be more drawn to establishing a connection with Cambodia through domestic political activism as evident in the grassroots organization Khmer Girls in Action. Others may seek to express this connection through creative mediums such as dance, poetry, painting or music as seen in praCh's hard-hitting, spoken word style rap lyrics.

In the context of local policy, governmental bodies where Cambodian communities reside should invest resources to grow outreach efforts and support the development of programs tailored to their unique needs. This may include partnerships with public educational institutions to develop culturally competent curriculum or fund after school programs that bear in mind the unique challenges that Cambodian Americans experience within generations as well as between.

Finally, Um's conclusions are important for researchers studying refugee resettlement strategies, transgenerational trauma, identity, and belonging. More scholarly attention should be paid to investigating the advantages of engaging in

transnational politics and art activism for Cambodian community members as well as other populations who have been forcefully displaced from their homeland. Further interdisciplinary study linking social justice work with the historicized identities among Cambodian American refugee communities will further our understanding of how these complex mechanisms interact and perhaps lead to more relevant supports to empower thriving refugee communities.

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About the Author

Douglas Epps is a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley's School of Social Welfare. He holds a dual bachelor's degree in psychology and social welfare (magna cum laude) and a Master of Social Work from the University of Washington. His research applies a critical, action-oriented framework to interrogate the rise of punitive immigration responses and envision macro alternatives that respect the dignity and worth of all human-beings. His current project seeks to understand how collective action framing can influence public attitudes toward eliminating immigration detention.

Douglas's published work has been featured in Smith College Studies in Social Work, Social Work & Society and the San Francisco Chronicle. He has also co-edited three books: *Detaining the Immigrant Other: Global and Transnational Issues* (2016) and *Health Care Social Work: A Global Perspective* (2019) with Oxford University Press and *The Immigrant Other: Lived Experiences in a Transnational World* (2016) with Columbia University Press.