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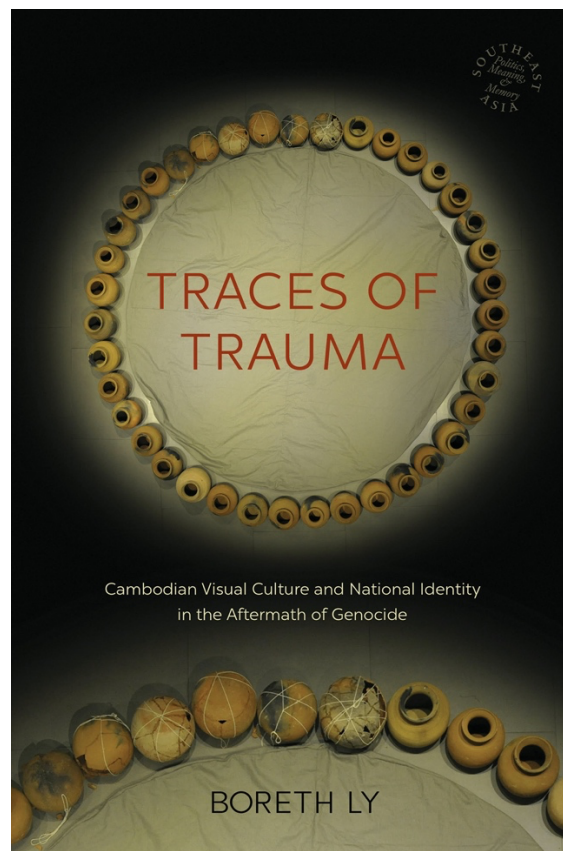
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**Interview with Boreth Ly on Her New Book, *Traces of Trauma***

Boreth Ly, Catherine Ries, Michelle Yee, and Christina Ayson Plank



*Figure 1* Cover of *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide* by Boreth Ly (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020). Image courtesy of Boreth Ly.

Boreth Ly's latest book is *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020.) This is a complex book, to say the least. It is not the type of book just anyone could write. Professor Boreth explores how the artistic practices of contemporary Cambodian artists at home and in the diaspora—including installation artists, painters, photographers, filmmakers, poets, and court dancers—give voice to a culturally specific understanding of trauma and how they found ways to live after the civil war, US secret bombings, and Khmer Rouge genocide. Her background, experiences, and intellectual fortitude make her uniquely capable of formulating discreet and meaningful connections across different art forms and objects. We admire the way Professor Boreth can intellectualize and theorize but not erase the emotional anguish that grounds the creation of these works of art. She is not afraid of her humanity. Moreover, she is not afraid to make it personal.

That is why we, Professor Boreth's graduate student advisees, came to work with her at UC Santa Cruz. She emboldens us to ask difficult questions and challenge the status quo. She asks us to test disciplinary boundaries by expanding our perceptions of the visual both materially and experientially. We are encouraged to embrace the fragmentation inherent in all subject matter and to reject the belief that knowledge and knowing are clean, complete, and finished. Professor Boreth's scholarship is founded on the idea that leaving scholarly inquiry open and unresolved creates pathways for more meaningful and profound understandings. And we agree.

In this way, *Traces of Trauma* is emblematic of our relationship with Professor Boreth. The shattering of traditional notions of what is considered "fine art" in *Traces of Trauma* reveals the culturally specific ways that art and its histories are oftentimes structured. For us, as visual studies students, the book is an innovative example of how visual culture, as a field of inclusive yet critical study, can manifest in a way that not only reveals the arbitrariness of hierarchies but actively works to dismantle them.

While the three of us maintain some similarities in our scholarly approach, we study vastly different subject matters. Yet for all of us, *Traces of Trauma* is a relevant launching pad from which to theorize and approach our respective research interests. This book can be used as a comparative study with other histories and cultures as a way to theorize and understand visual culture, trauma, its effects and affects, in both homelands and diasporas.

For instance, Christina Ayson Plank studies contemporary art of the Filipinx diaspora. She is interested in the effects of Spanish and American imperialism on the displacement of contemporary Filipinx communities as it relates to issues

of labor. Her work necessitates a fragmentation of Asian American studies in order to explore how an interrogation of race, empire, and labor disrupts an inclusion/exclusion binary. Studying the Filipinx diaspora expands and disrupts nation-state categorizations and American exceptionalism. She is interested in translating this research into a critical curatorial practice.

Catherine Ries studies Islamic art, material culture, performing arts, and gender in Southeast Asia. Her current focus is the theorization of female representations and self-representations in light of changes in Javanese Islam. The impetus of her inquiry stems from her curiosity in materials and materiality, the connections between performance, religious identities, and its expression, as seen through both the lenses of globalization and localization of Islam in Java.

Michelle Yee studies race and representation in American art and considers how notions of Americanness are inscribed in visual production from painting and sculpture to Hollywood movies and stand-up comedy. Her focus on Asian American visual production seeks to interrogate the racial definitions that define “Asian Americanness,” an impossible identity that nevertheless finds its marks and its signifiers in the lived experiences of the artists and performers. This focus forces Americanness itself—as a national identity, a way of living, a type of appearance, and so forth—into stark relief, thus revealing its shattered and complex reality.

It takes an intellectually versatile and interdisciplinary scholar to advise students across such diverse areas of focus. Professor Boreth’s fierce embrace of interdisciplinary work, and aversion to disciplinary restrictions used to create intellectual boundaries, makes her an adviser who can deftly guide each of us in our respective areas. We believe this comes across in our interview, as we draw our questions from our individual perspectives and scholarly inquiries. The flow of this interview may indeed feel fragmented, but fragments do not mean there is no continuity or connection. By understanding the world through fragments, we are forced to confront the spaces in between, to engage beyond one moment, one object, one event, and think about how the pieces are in conversation with each other—a way to confront the existential implications for any subject of scholarly inquiry and eventually arrive at catharsis.

We are delighted and honored to engage with our adviser about her haunting yet inspirational book. We hope that our questions illuminate the profound reach of her scholarly endeavors and encourage you to explore her inquiries on trauma and visual culture in the Cambodian diaspora. This interview cannot fully express our gratitude for the opportunity to work with Professor Boreth and the concerted effort she puts into forming a meaningful bond with each of us. Our time as her advisees is defined by critical discourse, deep belly laughs, and the kind of conversation that evokes and inspires intellectual inquiry all against a backdrop

of beauty and pleasure. Over the summer of 2020, a year marked by social distancing and digital gatherings, our introduction and this interview unfolded over several collaborative online Zoom meetings between ourselves and Professor Boreth. Even though we cannot be physically together right now, we are grateful for the emails, online meetings, and phone calls that keep us connected. We look forward to the future when we can once again enjoy tea and conversation in her patio garden.

**Christina Ayson Plank, Catherine Ries, Michelle Yee:** This particular issue of *Refract* is devoted to “traces,” and your book is titled *Traces of Trauma*. How do you define *traces* in your particular context?

**Boreth Ly:** Thank you for these thoughtful and provocative questions.

My book considers local Cambodian understanding and definitions of trauma. *Traces* in this context encompasses a translation of the Khmer word *snarm*, which means both a scar and footprint. Traces also include the Khmer concept of *baksbat*, literally meaning “broken body,” leading to the broken spirit or mind. Importantly, my discussion of traces of trauma in Cambodia is grounded in both local Cambodian and continental theoretical understandings of these residues.

**CR:** The word *traces* suggests the subtle indication of something; *traces* can also refer to origins. Can you expand more on the traces that are left in the archive and how destruction, invisibility, and these vestiges of trauma amalgamate to rewrite historical narratives?

**BL:** Cambodian artists at home and in the diasporas turned to their personal and collective memories of the atrocities (the American bombing, civil war, and the Khmer Rouge genocide) to remember and address the legacy of trauma. Memory is one of the intangible archives and thus the repository for these obdurate traces. The arts discussed and analyzed in my book are inspired by and made of both collective and personal archives. For example, in her art, Amy Lee Sanford integrated letters that her late father wrote to her adopted white American mother. Likewise, Rithy Panh, a Cambodian French filmmaker who is a survivor of the genocide, relies on his own memory of the historical events as well as making use of the Khmer Rouge filmic archives. Sarith Peou, a Cambodian American poet who is incarcerated in a US prison, recounts his memory of those brutal years under the Khmer Rouge regime. Moreover, Cambodian artists also looked at bomb craters left by the American bombing of Cambodia, scars of the land that are equally potent parts of the national archive.

**CAP:** Your book analyzes different visual materials from performance, painting, film, and material culture. Can you explain your process in selecting these materials?

**BL:** Since the subject of my book considers historical and culturally specific ways of understanding trauma, my selection of media and materials was based around two focal points. First, I turned to what Cambodians value most as artistic expressions. In this case, that meant court dance, textiles, sculptures, and poetry, as well as film and photography. Second, since the production of Cambodian arts and culture underwent great interruption and erasure under the Khmer Rouge regime (when many artists were murdered), my choice of artistic materials was limited in the postgenocide period. As I mentioned in the introduction to my book, global contemporary art in Cambodia and the diasporas started in the 1990s, so we are considering relatively new art forms.

**CAP and MY:** In light of recent events in the United States and the world related to Black Lives Matter, it has become evident that historical traumas are simultaneously both of the past and of the present. How does the Cambodian American experience speak to the relationship between trauma and race?

**BL:** Even though the historical conditions for these events are different, the legacy of these deeply politicized forms of historical traumas continue to haunt the lives of survivors, perpetrators, and their descendants. As I discussed in my book, one of the difficult challenges for survivors and their descendants is to see the perpetrators of the genocide living and holding high positions in the current Cambodian government. I see a parallel between the commemorative statues and monuments celebrating the racist regime in the United States and the erection of monuments and statues to celebrate members of the current political regime in Cambodia who participated in the Khmer Rouge genocide.

**MY:** Theories of trauma have always been predicated upon complex temporalities. Similarly, in your last chapter on Cambodian court dance, the simultaneous expansion and collapse of time is evident in this art form, which harks back to a past while also being reimagined for the present and the future. It is contemporary and historical. Can you speak further to the transcendence of static notions of time in both Cambodian court dance and in Cambodian art production more generally?

**BL:** I think in the West, there is an accepted understanding that history belongs to the past and the exact tenses as precise markers of time are arguably inherent in many European languages (such as the present, past, and future), but in the Khmer language (and I believe in many Asian languages) the measurement of time is not as precise. Moreover, what I was trying to articulate is embodied by what is commonly referred to as “tradition,” art forms that are passed down from generation to generation with or without written words. Despite the fact that the Pol Pot regime interrupted artistic traditions by murdering a majority of the nation’s artists, Cambodian artists managed to remember and to retrace traditional court dance through the memories and bodies of a few survivors. Court dance is transmitted through the body, using both mental and muscle memories, so it is truly an embodied experience. In addition to memory and the body, Cambodians draw upon ancient arts and legends as inspiration for their arts and dances. In brief, the line drawn between myth, memory, and history is cheerfully blurred.

Clearly, the production and understanding of arts and temporality are different in Cambodian culture. I was academically trained in the discipline of art history, and I had to unlearn in order to relearn. Aesthetically, there is a close relationship between court dance and the visual arts. However, in Euro-American universities, dance belongs to the fields of theater or performing arts departments, and not art history. I had to learn the history and practice of Cambodian court dance in order to write about it and do justice to what Cambodians value as arts. To this end, the interdisciplinary and decolonized space within the History of Art and Visual Culture Department at UC Santa Cruz allows me to carry out this much-needed decolonization of methods and approaches to the writing of arts and visual culture.

**CR:** Given the Khmer Rouge’s rejection of the arts and intellectualism, and that they murdered anyone perceived as belonging to one of those categories, I find it curious that they did not destroy national artistic treasures, such as the collection at the National Museum, ancient monuments, and the Royal Palace. Do you have a theory as to why these monuments were spared?

**BL:** Indeed, this is a very interesting contradiction. Fortunately, they did not destroy these national treasures. Likewise, neighboring countries such as Vietnam and Laos, with histories of their own communist revolutions, did not eradicate the arts belonging to the previous regimes. Today, this older art and architecture attracts tourists. In the Cambodian context, the Khmer Rouge regime lasted three years, eight months, and twenty days: it was short-lived and only started to produce art that served its own political ideology in 1977, mainly portraits of Pol Pot, the

face of the regime that I discussed in one of the chapters in my book. We know that a colossal statue of Pol Pot was to be placed on top of the hill called Wat Phnom, an important landmark in Phnom Penh with Buddhist temple perched on top. There was a plan to destroy this Buddhist temple and replace it with this monumental statue of Pol Pot. This plan suggests that the regime had intended to replace some of the public monuments and temples belonging to the previous regimes with their own art. I think had the regime lasted longer, one might imagine that the city of Phnom Penh would have looked more like the capitals of North Korea or China, with buildings and statues celebrating its victory and its leaders such as Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il and Mao Zedong.

**CR:** As you mentioned in your book, the Khmer Rouge genocide is a recent traumatic event, meaning there are people alive today who survived this horrific era. There is also a younger generation who did not live the trauma, but instead inherited the trauma. There are similarities between the Khmer Rouge genocide and the 1965 mass killings in Indonesia, not only because they are recent traumas, but because both are autogenocide. Many Indonesians who survived the trauma are still not willing to talk about their experience, mostly perhaps because of suppression during Suharto's regime; this horrific event is still largely absent from textbooks and official history. In Cambodia, is the Khmer Rouge genocide incorporated into the national narratives and history? In general, is there a desire to talk about these events as a method to assuage trauma, or is there a generational divide between those who lived it and those who inherited the trauma? Are the artists in your book who use their work openly as a form of healing representative of the cultural ideology at large, or is that openness more of an anomaly?

**BL:** This is a provocative question in that it provokes comparison with other atrocities around the world. Even though my book is about historical trauma and its legacy in Cambodia, I hope it will be read widely and comparatively with similar genocides in different parts of the world.

In the post-Khmer Rouge era, Cambodia markets two major tourist attractions: the ancient temples of Angkor and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the killing fields. Yes, the history of the genocide is taught in schools in Cambodia, but as it is expected, the "official" version of history is written by the victors, so it is highly politicized. Naturally, there is still a strong resentment and conflict between the perpetrators and their descendants and survivors and their descendants who live in Cambodia and the diasporas. Interestingly, the younger generation of Cambodians (who did not experience the genocide firsthand but were born in the refugee camps or in the US and European countries) are strongly affected by



the trauma that their parents experienced. I think their parents' displacement might be the reason for this experience of inherited trauma, especially some of the younger generation of Cambodian Americans who were born in the refugee camps.

The artists included in my book are those whose lives are affected and changed forever by the atrocities, so they have chosen to address the legacy of trauma and healing in their works. Of course, there are Cambodian artists who have chosen to move forward and address other social issues such as ecology and climate change or attempt to come up with formal innovation such as their own localized versions of minimalism and abstract expressionism. There are also Cambodian women artists who address the issue of gender in Cambodian culture, a topic that I considered in a recent article.<sup>1</sup>

**CAP:** Your book analyzes the ways Cambodian artists of the diaspora negotiate the history of genocide, displacement, survival, and the resulting trauma. Do you think these histories necessitate a new understanding of Asian America that attends to these diasporic communities?

**BL:** Yes, absolutely. Arguably, many Americans' initial exposure to Southeast Asia is through the Vietnam War. It was a war that had a great effect on American visual culture, especially film and photography. It is this and other civil wars in Southeast Asia that engendered the emergence of Southeast Asian American artists in the US who are great players in the national and global art world: I am thinking of Dinh Q. Lê, Sopheap Pich, Binh Danh, Amy Lee Sanford, Anida Yoeu Ali, and many more emerging artists from the Hmong and Laotian American communities. These Southeast Asian American artists interrupt the narrative of "Asian American art history" in that they stretch beyond the fight for inclusion; they are creating and exhibiting their work in their respective homelands, diasporas, and global spaces. To wit, they inhabit multiple spaces, and their ethnic and racial identity is not fixed—they are cosmopolitan Asian and American or American and Asian.

However, in the past two decades, there is a tendency in the US to focus on Asian American and diasporic artists in the transpacific region. I think it is important to avoid perpetuating an American imperialism, regionalism, and an Asian colonial settlerism. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to include Southeast Asian diasporic communities in Europe and other continents in our discussion, writing, and exhibition. With the exception of Thailand, all Southeast Asian countries were colonized by European powers. Thus one cannot discuss the Cambodian or Filipinx diaspora without considering diasporic artists in France and Spain. I often imagine a traveling art exhibition by Filipinx diasporic artists from different

diasporas around the world and how it would lend itself for a comparative study of art, labor, migration, and diasporas.

**MY:** For many scholars of color in the United States, it feels unspoken and yet imperative to maintain a mantle of positive representation because of the continual marginalization of minority narratives. In your book—particularly, in the preface—you are brutally honest in your critique of contemporary Cambodian society, a refreshing positionality that offers a nuanced, antimonolithic consideration of a multidimensional culture. Can you speak to the value—and the risk—of being honest about the societies from which we come? How can scholars of color maintain and build political strength while resisting the tendency to overgeneralize?

**BL:** Indeed, how to negotiate and nuance this politics of racial and ethnic representations is a great challenge. While it is important to form a political coalition to resist ethnic, racial, and gender marginalization, there is always a sense of nesting “an other within an other”; it is thus necessary to resist any kind of racial generalization and racial and ethnic sovereignty. I think one can embrace what Gayatri Spivak has called “strategic essentialism” and, at the same time, vigilantly resist hegemonic and monolithic racial or ethnic voices. For instance, Southeast Asian Americans are obviously not members of a homogeneous community but are divided between social class and ethnic groups. In brief, not all Asian Americans are a minority model of success.

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Boreth Ly is an associate professor of Southeast Asian art history and visual culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She coedited with Nora A. Taylor, *Modern and Contemporary Art of Southeast Asia* (2012). In addition, she has written numerous articles and essays on the arts and films of Southeast Asia and its diaspora. Academically trained as an art historian, Ly employs multidisciplinary methods and theories in her writings and analysis, depending on the subject matter. Last, she authored, *Traces of Trauma: Cambodian Visual Culture and National Identity in the Aftermath of Genocide* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).

Catherine Ries is a Ph.D. student and a Eugene Cota-Robles fellow in the Visual Studies program in the History of Art & Visual Culture department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her current research focuses on Islamic art, material culture, performing arts, and feminine identity in Indonesia. She is preparing for field research that will lead to a dissertation on female representations in the Islamic courts of Java.

Michelle Yee is a Ph.D. candidate in Visual Studies in the History of Art and Visual Culture Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her dissertation examines race and representation through the visual culture of Asian American artists and performers. Michelle holds an MA in Art History from the University of Connecticut and a BA in Art History and English from Georgetown University. She has taught at Queens College, UC Santa Cruz, and the San Francisco Art Institute. Her writing can be found in *Third Text*, *Panorama*, *Art*, *Etc.*, and various exhibition catalogues.

Christina Ayson Plank is an emerging scholar, educator, and curator based in San Jose, California. She is a Ph.D. student at UCSC in the Visual Culture Studies department. Her research focuses on contemporary art of the Filipinx diaspora as it relates to issues of neocolonialism, labor, and migration. She received an M.A. in Asian American Studies at UCLA and a B.A. in Art History and Studio Art at Marist College.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Boreth Ly, "The Politics of the Pot: Contemporary Cambodian Women Artists Negotiating Their Roles In and Out of the Kitchen," *SUVANNABHUMI* 12, no. 1 (2020): 49-88.