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Towards a Fiction of Memory:
Cambodian Photography, Orphaned Intentions, and Mundane Imaginations

THESIS

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Towards a Fiction of Memory:

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By

Ravi Seng Ly

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

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Professor Dorothy Fujita-Rony, Chair

ABSTRACT: Cambodian American scholarship has largely interpreted Cambodian history and people within frameworks of violence and implicitly claims that today's Cambodian diaspora is legible only against the backdrop of unimaginable horror. The epistemological and ontological stakes of defining the Cambodian experience within structures of violence has profound impact on the personal and institutional understanding of Cambodian subjecthood. Through visual culture and photographic analyses of my family's own photographs from the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Thailand circa 1980s-1990s, I introduce the concept of *fictions of memory* to reimagine my family's social life following the Khmer Rouge. *Fictions of memory* is a partial analytic designed for second-generation Cambodians facing the generational trauma that often structures their relationships to family and history. With a silence-informed approach offered through *fictions of memory*, such trauma can be respected while also becoming a site of speculative reimagination. This reimagination is facilitated through a reading of photography as selectively "orphan", or removed from their narrative intentionality, which is often generationally inaccessible due to silence. Furthermore, the *mundane* reimagination of this

silence shifts away from conventionally violent interpretations of Cambodian legibility. This reframing does not intend to replace extant scholarship on Cambodian subjectivity by dislocating the real and often violent conditions of the Khmer Rouge and refugee camps, but hopes to exist alongside such theorizations as possible alternatives for understanding Cambodian being.

INTRODUCTION

When I was nineteen, for a family history project I asked my grandfather about what he did during his time in Cambodia. He dismissively answered that he did not do anything. His silence regarding our homeland is characteristic of the many who lived through the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. It was through my mother that I learned how particularly "lucky" my family was – when there was word that communist forces might take over the Cambodian capitol Phnom Penh, my grandfather immediately took a bus to Thailand with my grandma, uncle, and mom, wary of the prospect of Communist insurgency. Only when the film adaptation of Loung Ung's *First They Killed My Father* was released did he soberly confirm that the film accurately depicted what life was like during the regime. "Except no one in our family died," my mother solemnly said. She filled in my grandfather's terse words to collectively add to an unfinished remembrance.

Through a careful examination of silence, we can begin to retrieve lost, forgotten, or even disremembered refugee memory. Cambodian scholar Khatharya Um has called silence "an analytic site for culturally informed reflection and theorizing about despair and resistance, reconciliation and healing."[1] I began with a small vignette about my grandfather to highlight how intergenerational silences can complicate interfamilial remembrance, and how second-generation refugees often have to piece together family and community history through disparate sources – other family members, primary and secondary education (often untenable considering the United States' vested interest in Southeast Asian war politics), or chance encounters with popular culture that allow for selective remembrance or affirmation.[2]

[1] Um, Khatharya. *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora.* New York: New York University Press. 2015. 6.
[2] Espiritu, Yến Lê. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es).* Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. 17.

I will do a close reading of three of my family's own photographs from Khao-I-Dang, a Thai refugee camp near the Thai-Cambodian border, where my family stayed for over a decade. Notably, none of the photos feature my grandfather – but all selected photos prominently feature my uncle Jhon. If the very act of creating a photo album is also an act of narrative-making, then these photos, by their placement in the album and their physical proximity, also tells a story. This precise story, this intentionality, sits within my grandfather's silence, and it is this intentionality that I render orphan in order to respect that silence. Through a requisite orphaned intention can I begin to imagine an alternative intention. Across three generations – my 1st-generation grandfather, my 1.5-generation uncle, and my 2nd-generation self – I explore the variable degrees of silence that are informed and transformed by the experiential proximity to the refugee experience.

By piecing together my family's history through a composite of fragmented stories of camp life from my uncle and institutional knowledge of Southeast Asian (war) history and refugee movements, I attempt to reconstruct a silence-informed history of what my grandfather *would have possibly said* about the life he led before coming to the United States. Scholar and literary critic Isabelle Thuy Pelaud has discussed how Southeast Asian refugees face "the enormous pressures of being associated with the Viet Nam War" and has asked whether or not such an association can ever be removed from the refugee identity.[3] While she poses this question in reference to Vietnamese American identity, we can ask the same about Cambodian refugees, the discourse of which is saturated in violence. I hope to answer this question through a contrivance of the mundane. Through an intentional analysis of mundanity in my reconstruction

[3] Pelaud, Isabelle Thuy. *This is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2010. 4.

of a silence-informed history, I hope to shift conventional understandings of Cambodian subjectivity away from war and violence and towards a mundane fiction.

While my family's tenure in Khao-I-Dang was the direct result of war, they existed as more than just crises to be managed. During their long decade in the camp, they rebuilt a home and a community as they attempted to move on with their lives. Even against the backdrop of trauma and violence, they found ways to learn, to create leisure, and to bond with friends and fictive family. These moments are captured in the photographs that make up my family archive, dormant in the silences of my grandfather.

As a second-generation Cambodian American, I face the problem of this silence. Shortly after the publication of *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto* – a book which documents the movements of survivor Ra Pronh against the duress of the Khmer Rouge and ostensible resettlement, scholar Eric Tang visited my undergraduate Southeast Asian American studies class to talk about his academic trajectory. Because he had worked with an older generation of Cambodian refugees for a number of years, I asked him about my grandpa's own intentional silence, and how to go about discussing the events of the Khmer Rouge with him. He told me that I should not. The trauma of the Khmer Rouge was not a topic that could be lightly approached, and the possibility of experiencing trauma through the phantom of painful remembrance was too cruel for any theoretical gain. He told me that it is up to the survivor whether or not they want to share their experiences, in whatever capacity they choose. Even if I am Cambodian American, even if I am a grandson, my grandpa's own stories are not yet mine to know, if ever. I never considered such silence until I was nineteen, and even then, only for a school project. My lack of knowledge and interest in my family's own history during and after the Khmer Rouge is reflective of my generational positionality.

According to a 2008 population survey conducted by University of California – Berkeley, over 81% of Cambodian American respondents born after or away from the Khmer Rouge described their knowledge of the period as "poor or very poor".[4] Because this particular survey is already over a decade old, it is possible that the statistic may be even more severe. Long Bui similarly comments on this generational disconnect in the Vietnamese American community, saying that many first-generation subjects "did not wish to tell their stories, owing to a sense of reluctance with regard to difficult political or family matters."[5] This absence of cultural-historical communication is defined by the silences of the first-generation. In order to respect these silences, second-generation diaspora subjects like myself must find alternative ways of learning family and community history.

Community Archives; Collective Memories; State Memories

While acknowledging absence-through-silences, community archives are possible sites for reconstructing a cultural epistemic that has been functionally erased by trauma and sadness. Andrew Finn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd defined *community* as "any manner of people who come together and present themselves as such" and *community archive* as "the product of [such people's] attempts to document the history of their community."[6] However, as institutional sites, community archives are highly susceptible to nation-state directives. Consider the photograph of the family archive, what scholar Marianne Hirsch in *Family Frames* calls "fragmentary sources and building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of postmemory"[7]

[4] Vinck, Patrick et al. "After the First Trial: A Population-Based Survey on Knowledge and Perception of Justice and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia." (2011).
[5] Bui, Long T. *Returns of War : South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* . New York: New York University Press, 2018, 138.
[6] Flinn, Andrew, Stevens, Mary, and Shepherd, Elizabeth. "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream." Archival Science 9.1-2 (2009), 75.
[7] Hirsch, Marianne. 2002. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 23.

– we must acknowledge how the discursive scripting and re-scripting of such a photograph evidences the ways in which personal experience and state-contrived history are in a constant, and often contradictory, dialectic. In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch describes postmemory as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."[8]

Archivist Michelle Caswell discusses this dialectic in her work on the Tuol Sleng mugshots in relation to Cambodian memory directives. Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, was the most infamous prison camp operating in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge. Caswell's analysis of its mugshots, as axiomatic punishments, as war propaganda, and finally as evidence of Khmer Rouge-era injustices, engenders how the imbrication of structural power and social needs lends to narrative instability.[9] Amnesiac state-sponsored directives operate in tandem with U.S. selective remembrance to suffocate a survivor-focused Cambodian memory. Furthermore, the extended campaign launched by the occupational government following the takeover of Phnom Penh in 1979 discursively re-scripted occupation with ostensible liberation.[10] The rendered invisibility of U.S. culpability for the Angkar state worked in tandem with the tactical reframing of the Cambodian civil war, which became used as an extreme example of American *nonintervention.* Such a reframing allowed the United States to discursively turn the brutality of the Angkar regime into a useable past for the assertion of U.S. democratic virtue, an "aggressive

[8] Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 106.
[9] Caswell, Michelle. *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia,* The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014, 13.
[10] Ibid., 23.

humanitarianism" that, as scholars such as Yến Lê Espiritu and Mimi Nguyen have formulated, involves greater troop deployments and increased militarization in the Middle East.[11]

As evidenced by Espiritu who wrote on the "highly organized and strategic forgetting" of the American archive on the Vietnam War, Southeast Asian diasporic memory is a site of constant political negotiation.[12] Espiritu roots her analysis in the field of Critical Refugee Studies, which, through the figure of the refugee, "calls into question the established principles of the nation-state and the idealized goal of inclusion and recognition within it."[13] The American archive on the Vietnam War was curated and interpreted through the de facto philosophy of Vietnam Syndrome, which, according to Bui, "resuscitated [South Vietnam's legacy] in sporadic fashion to justify U.S. incursions in distant places that are supposedly going to collapse from terrorism."[14] Accordingly, American discourse on the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge testify to the success of the U.S. nation-state's contrivance of Southeast Asian history.

If memory constitutes identity, then the U.S. and Cambodian government's self-serving efforts towards a contrivance of history also categorizes an epistemic and ontological regulation of Cambodian selfhood. Through such appropriation by the nation-state project, community archives risk becoming state archives, invested in memory work only insofar as they bolster a usable history. Against this political architecture of memory, remembering and reclaiming Cambodian selfhood occupies a distinctly political valence. Cambodian American Studies scholar Cathy J. Schlund-Vials writes in *War, Genocide, and Justice* that so long as "memories are organized in a framework of nations and states there will always be attempts to recount even genocides and families as triumphs and their victims as having sacrificed their lives for future

[11] Ibid., 13.
[12] Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 18.
[13] Ibid., 10.
[14] Bui, *Returns of War*, 13.

generations."[15] These historical memories are necessarily mediated by the historical condition from which it arises, and the political demands for which it needs to be. While the surface narrative of my family's own photographs may fall within these conditions, I read against such a memory mediated by nations and states and towards a fiction of that memory. The narrative genealogy of my family photographs in Khao-I-Dang, even as they are informed by the Cambodian state and U.S. historical contrivances, can be read against fictions of crisis and resettlement to provide a possible avenue for reparative memory work.

The potential for a reading of diasporic photographs, conscious of Cambodian state directives and U.S. politics, to facilitate this memory work is explored in Khatharya Um's essay "Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asian Diaspora." Um engages in a Cambodian memory work fraught with contestation and contradiction, but which is nevertheless crucial to personal and collective identity. In a culture dominated by systemic silences on two distinct fronts, she argues that photographs function as an unstable history that invites remembering on the terms of the individual survivor, which Um proposes as a counterhistory that "challenges the false generalizations of 'History.'"[16]

By further understanding family photographs through the vernacular framework offered by visual cultures scholar Julia Lum – how we can "trace" history even in silence – along with Hirsch's generational formulation defined through postmemory, we can arrive at an analysis of Cambodian refugee archives that work against a historically violent discourse.[17] Against this dialectic, the majority of family photographs exist in a distinct, domestic realm. Our family

[15] Schlund-Vials, Cathy J. *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work,* University of Minnesota Press, 2012, 5.
[16] Khatharya Um. "Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Diaspora." *positions* 20.3 (2013): 846.
[17] Lum, Julia. "'Familial looking': Chinese Canadian vernacular photography of the exclusion period (1923-1967)," 2017.

archive was little more than anonymous albums sequestered in nameless boxes, their narrative only as violent or as mundane as we can imagine them. Similarly, Lum has said that vernacular photography can "[build] a material trace of family presence in the face of absence and loss."[18] Like diasporic remembrance, family photographs do not have to be substantiated within the framework of a nation-state, but can be understood through individual and interpersonal remembrances. Yet, how can the children of refugees foster such a remembrance when their family histories are impeded by language and fractured by silences?

On Extant Cambodian American Refugee Scholarship

I propose the mundane analytic in response to literature on Cambodia and theorizations of its people within the last decade, where there has been a noticeable tendency to interpret Cambodia within a narrative of violence. I join the scholars who have contributed to Cambodian memory work, but focus on a mundane, silence-informed approach to work against this tendency. Given the history of American bombing campaigns, the particularly brutal nature of Khmer Rouge reign, and the variegated displacements of refugee subjects, such a tendency is warranted, and perhaps even unavoidable. However, for a community to have an archive largely defined by violence has profound epistemological and ontological repercussions on that community's notion of being and selfhood. In an essay on the social and political efficacy archives engender, Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook propose that content of archives "wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies."[19] Accordingly, the

[18] Ibid.
[19] Schwartz, Joan, and Cook, Terry. "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory." Archival Science 2.1 (2002).

abuse of memory by the Cambodian and United States governments against Cambodian history engenders a regulation over identity.[20]

Schlund-Vials has written that "Cambodian memory work – which necessarily commences with unimaginable human loss and encompasses contested practices of remembrance – represents a specific archive shaped by and revised according to co-opted narratives, politicized curatorial agendas, and controversial nation formation."[21] She argues that the Cambodian governmental apparatus is actively invested in the re-scripting of Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and Khmer Rouge genocidal remembrance, and goes on to describe Cambodian memory work as "practices of imagining otherwise that make possible a different articulation of survivor agency".[22] If Cambodian memory work "necessarily commences with unimaginable human loss" then such an agency can never be imagined outside of a "politicized curatorial agenda". Memory work formulated within "insurmountable human loss" becomes pre-emptively co-opted into conventionally violent understandings of Cambodian being. In such a purpose-driven framework, memory cannot exist as just remembrance, but rather, is made legible only within a framework of "insurmountable" and violent subject-formation.

Khatharya Um wrote against this violent subject-formation, this myth of a mad Cambodia, with her historical-dialectical analysis of the conditions and preconditions that made the Khmer Rouge possible. She supplemented this writing with a series of memoirs and recollections to counter state discourse. As the first Cambodian refugee and scholar to write a book foregrounding survivor-refugees of the Khmer Rouge as experiencing subjects, Um's metanarrative on Cambodian history leading up to Khmer Rouge occupation relies on refugee

[20] Ibid.
[21] Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 52.
[22] Ibid., 66.

experiences as "countermemory and counternarratives."[23] She, like many others studying refugee memory, acknowledges silences – the experiences that are not spoken about – as valuable but still, as Vietnamese American scholar Long Bui on war memory says, "to be discovered."[24] Um has sketched a profound, dialectic history of Democratic Kampuchea and its politics from a survivor-informed narrative. I hope to contribute to the history she started through a silence-informed reimagining of the rebuilding of Cambodian social life within the refugee camps.

The silence-informed analytic is necessary because of the temporal distance between first and second-generation Cambodians, which accounts for the "generational disconnect that registers both in Cambodia and in the diaspora."[25] Um's proximity to the experience of the Khmer Rouge in tandem with her ability to navigate around and respect such silence, with willing Cambodian refugees with whom she can speak and learn from their first-person accounts, is exemplified through her distinct positionality; she is a 1-1.5 generation Cambodian refugee, a Khmer speaker, and prominent community member. She acknowledges the rupture 2nd-generation Cambodian-Americans face, where communication and learning are disrupted by "gaps and ellipses…Of [a] silence that compels" children of the diaspora to remember a silent/silenced history through creative reinterpretation. From this acknowledgment of silence is where I begin to understand my family's own history, from the positionality of a 2nd-generation child of refugees.[26]

Within the refugee community, silences exists in a multitude and multiplicity of degrees and conditions. The particular silences I am interested are those of the first generation who choose to be silent and the second-generation haunted by that silence. This moment does not

[23] Um, *From the Land of Shadows,* 16.
[24] Bui, *Returns of War,* 138.
[25] Um, *From the Land of Shadows,* 208.
[26] Ibid., 231.

have to be a moment of lost communication, but rather, can become a site of speculative reimagination that need not be rooted in pain. Bridging this generational silence is my uncle, of the 1.5-generation like Um, who can help me understand my grandfather's history similarly to how Um has helped many others understand Cambodian history. While my uncle's experience with the Khmer Rouge may overlap with my grandfather's, his willingness to speak about such experiences, incomplete as they are, markedly contrasts my grandfather's silence on the same matter.

Photography and Fictions of Memory

A family's photographs may reflect that family's history, but what happens when such a history does not want to be remembered? To respect the chosen silences of my grandfather and others like him, I propose reading family photographs as what scholars Thy Phu and Elspeth H. Brown would call orphan images. According to Phu, editor for the Americas region for the *Journal of Photography and Culture*, and Brown, professor of the history and theory of photography at the University of Toronto, orphan images are commonly described as "materials whose provenance is unknown and whose hallmark, accordingly, is a seemingly irretrievable sense of loss, particularly when it comes to contextualizing information…whatever stories they tell can only be partially gleaned from what remains in them."[27] Hence, the orphan optic is a crucial tool for interpreting Cambodian refugee photography, where "silence…continues to envelop the Cambodian family."[28] In the case of the family photographs I selected, their context may be known, but should be read through such a lens. Photographs are assumed to facilitate remembrances – what happens when something does not want to be remembered? The fact that

[27] Phu, Thy, and Brown, Elspeth H. "The Cultural Politics of Aspiration: Family Photography's Mixed Feelings." Journal of Visual Culture 17.2 (2018): 152–165.
[28] Um, *From the Land of Shadows,* 6.

my grandfather has never commented on any of them, despite being in his possession for decades, is telling of his disposition; his silence speaks volumes.

The albums were rediscovered one summer day in 2018 as my mother and I were cleaning out the garage. They were in a nondescript box and their wear over the years was apparent from the multiple moves with my grandfather, who held custody of them for decades. Of the four albums we found, approximately fifty pages per album, the oldest photographs came from the early 1990s and the photos in them were few and far between. The three photographs I have chosen to look at have no obvious narrative structure, nor are they particularly exciting in content. It is their mundanity, however, that allows for the Cambodian narrative to be shifted away from a discursive history of violent subject-formation. While there is a wealth of stories to be told about the Cambodian diaspora – a community archive written by such scholars as Um, Caswell, and Schlund-Vials – reading my family's own camp-era photographs as orphan images cultivates a more immediate and more intimate family knowledge, while respecting silence, that many second-generation children of the Cambodian diaspora struggle to know.

In placing these photographs as the objects of my analysis, I hope to understand what it means for a family to live in a series of refugee camps for nearly two decades following the Khmer Rouge, of how one is allowed the conditions of remaking intimate space, and how the mundane can be used to index Cambodian social life post-Khmer Rouge. While a refugee camp is a symptom of crisis, it does not necessarily mean that its tenants are always *in* crisis - social life must resume. While the photographs I look at offer only a brief glimpse into this life, their greater implications allow me to recreate a narrative unremembered.

The Photographs

Figure 1. Photograph of three young Cambodian men taken in Khao-I-Dang. Author's personal collection.

The man on the right smiles conservatively with hidden teeth but stares directly at the camera. Wearing a gray button up shirt with a paisley pattern, he clutches a folder with paperwork in his toned arms. Man number two stands in the center, displaying a big smile with his gums showing. He wears a blue V-neck tipped with white, his shoulders are squared, and his arms hang to his side, hands obscured. The last man, all smiles and collarbones, wears a purple V-neck shirt featuring a film graphic with the text *F H N LONDON ZEBRA.* On the table before him, he holds a series of notebooks with both hands.

Close by lays the fraction of an obscured, wired apparatus with a series of dials. Immediately behind the young men is a white wall, with dirt accumulated in its crevices. In the upper-left most sill is a picture of a snowy mountain. At the center of the wall, behind the third

man, exists a square placard, approximately 1' by 1', packed with electronic devices whose wires feed into the wall. Behind the man in the center is a calendar over a newspaper clipping, which is partially obscured, but the headline reads "Refugees find no –". Behind the first man is an open entranceway leading to the outside, where a lime tree can be seen. Across the way there is a building with a metal sheet roof and room with a crudely built wooden table not unlike the one in which we see these men.

My uncle tells me he's sixteen years old when this photo was taken, only, he was lying about his age at the time. At the time, he was teaching middle-school mathematics, and he his cohort are being recognized as the teachers of the month. In order to be a teacher in Khao-I-Dang circa 1988, you had to be at least eighteen, which is what he told the encampment. During the refugee crisis following the Khmer Rouge, personal documents were often destroyed or lost during perpetual unsettlement, as refugees like my uncle moved from temporary shelter to temporary shelter. The two men posing with him were also teachers, but despite their ostensible kinship, he does not remember who they were. He mentions this matter-of-factly, without seeming pain or sadness.

From a silence-informed perspective, war and genocide do not have to be coterminous with the refugee subjectivity. Such a paradigm reifies refugees as inevitably tragic subjects. In this photo, my uncle merely identifies as a middle-school teacher, never mentioning the "legitimacy bestowed on teachers…[which made] them one of the most influential forces in Khmer society" and how, on such grounds of cultural memory, were specifically eradicated by Democratic Kampuchea.[29] Rather, he remembers his occupation in Khao-I-Dang through the mundane and practical lens that he simply needed a job, and that he lied to get it, and that, given

[29] Um, *From the Land of Shadows,* 130.

the circumstances, people believed him. In the aftermath of war and genocide, people like these three young men were essentially erased from documented visibility. As functionally anonymous subjects, they could only ever be the people that they claimed. While I modeled the concept of a *fiction of memory* to reimagine my grandfather's silence, the fiction within my uncle's memory changed the literal circumstances of his refugee camp life. Violence inevitably shaped these circumstance, but within it, people like my uncle had the chance to rebuild their lives from a fiction of themselves.

Figure 2. Before a soccer match in a field in Khao-I-Dang. Author's personal collection.

This photograph measures roughly 8"x12" and is more visibly damaged than the rest, most likely due to the difficulties of preservation due to its large size. The large, center-field tear, numerous microscopic tears/spots, dried dirt, etc. testifies to its neglect. Fourteen young men,

dressed in their soccer team uniform, pose for a photograph. Most wear a blue jersey embroidered with the letters *JSRC* along with an eagle emblazoned in the upper left corner, along with a pair of blue drawstring shorts, thigh-length, blue-and-white tipped socks, and blue soccer cleats with three white stripes. They pose on a field of dead grass in front of a soccer goal made from PVC piping. A series of houses and bamboo trees can be seen in the background, along with telephone poles/wires. A mountain looms in the distance.

My uncle stands in the middle of the back row. The curly-haired man, second to his left, currently lives in Virginia. The man to his right resides in Lowell, Massachusetts. The man bottom row, third from the left, died from complications related to AIDS a few years back. My uncle tells me that the man front-and-center, holding the soccer ball, is back in Cambodia. His name is Heng and his wife (not pictured) is Nary, and they were my mother's best friends in Khao-I-Dang, and they were the only ones he named. The rest are unremembered.

This photograph was taken right before a soccer match. I asked my uncle if there were many soccer teams in Khao-I-Dang back in the day, and, dumbfounded, he answered that of course there were. He said that there were approximately 150,000 people in the camps, and that over thirty soccer teams existed and often played against each other. This one photograph of my uncle's soccer team signals the existence of a vast social network that in Khao-I-Dang. Even in the (ostensibly) temporary and less-than-ideal conditions of the camp, *of course* social life commenced, *of course* there were community organizations, and *of course* there were not one, but thirty soccer teams. I had been attempting to establish the existence of a Cambodian social life in Khao-I-Dang, what I initially assumed would be a difficult endeavor given the lack of such evidence within my own family archive. My uncle's incredulity, *of course* such a thing existed, was a distinct reminder that, perhaps, my grandfather did not have the means to

excessively (or even comfortably) document his or his family's life in the camps, or that he did not even want to remember such a time. Whatever the case, with my uncle I can reimagine this narrative elision in our archive as a site of inevitable community, as a fiction for my grandfather's memory.

Figure 3. Last day at Khao-I-Dang for some people. Author's personal collection.

A grainy photograph documents seven young men in two rows. Five stand in the back and look directly into the camera, while two sit at the fore looking away, posing in front of a single, thin tree. The left-most man of the back row wears a white button-up with white pants and sandals. He currently lives in Lowell, Massachusetts. The person to the right of him stands half a head taller, in a black and red baseball T-shirt and olive pants. The man in the center with sunglasses is my uncle, who wears a white button-up that partially exposes his chest, tucked into

waist-high jeans. A blue bag is slung over his shoulder. The man to his right wears an all-white outfit almost identical to the first man, with a hand resting on his hip. This man is missing.

The last three men were denied third-country resettlement and sent back to Cambodia. The man on the far right wears a red T-shirt tipped with white at the sleeves and collar, with beige pants and sandals. In the foreground, the man on the left wears a blue polo with dark pants and sandals. He looks away into the distance, with an arm leisurely over his leg, watch shown. The man on the right wears a shirt similar to the right-most man in the background, red T-shirt tipped with white. He also wears a yellow M A R L B O R O hat.

My uncle looked at this photograph and told me that all his friends were gone. Alarmed, I cautiously asked him what he meant – he then told me that this photo was taken on his last day in Khao-I-Dang, hence the reason why he was so dressed up – his closest friends in the camp were seeing him off. Our family was approved for Chonburi, a processing center in Thailand that prepared refugees for immigration to countries of first asylum. After naming the current whereabouts of most of the people pictured, he singled out the man to his left and told me that this person had no one. He never explicitly stated that this man's family was missing or killed. He only said that this man had no family, and that my grandmother used to bring him and kids like him over to our family, to come and play with my uncle and my mother. As my uncle stared off into the photo, ever expressionless, he said that grandma was so nice, that she used to be so nice….

Khatharya Um has said that "the family…[is] perhaps the most important [institution] of Khmer society."[30] An aspect of Democratic Kampuchean rule was the systematic elimination of the family unit to produce the ideal Angkar subjects, removed from any loyalty other than that to

[30] Um, *From the Land of Shadows,* 64.

the state. The man that "had no one" became a dear friend to my uncle, because my grandmother *felt* the necessity of rebuilding extrafamilial kinship for a generation that had so little. For them, people who spent over a decade in what was supposed to be a momentary space, this practice of fictive kinship was crucial in supporting and sustaining their social life in the camp. The real fiction was that Khao-I-Dang was a temporary site, only a fleeting chapter in the narrative of resettlement, and that its tenants were only guests in perpetual movement. Variegated fictions of family and space interacted with and against each other, where the historical and material conditions of camp life were transformed by the desire towards a fiction of memory. In Khao-I-Dang, Cambodian family - often severed and frayed against the duress of war - was pieced together and rewoven to create new kinships that were not necessarily defined by blood.

Khao-I-Dang officially opened in 1979 and stayed in operation until 1993.[31] My family arrived at the camp within its first year and remained there for over a decade. My uncle said that our family was on one of the last three buses to leave before the camp shut down. When I asked him why our family stayed in that place for so long, he said that it was because of my grandpa. Contrary to the conventional narrative of refugee resettlement, my grandpa did not want to leave the camp, and to this day no one in our family knows why. My grandpa has always been particularly silent regarding his experiences and feelings during his time in Cambodia, and it is this silence that fills the empty space of my uncle's remembrances.

My uncle was able to account for the current whereabouts of all of the men in this photograph except for one – the man to his right, his best friend. When I asked him how he found the others, he told me that he had posted this exact picture on Facebook, and that through

[31] Tan, Vivian. "Famed Cambodian Refugee Camp Reopens as Educational Centre." UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, 31 May 2016, www.unhcr.org/enus/news/latest/2016/5/574d5f1b4/famed-cambodian-refugee-camp-reopens-educational-centre.html. 2011.

some labored searching and referrals from other strangers or family members, he was able to find most of his old friends. None of them knew about the last person, though. My uncle remembers that this man was also denied third-country resettlement, and before being repatriated back to Cambodia, this man sold all of his belongings and gave the money to my uncle and our family. No one had much in the camps, but his friend said he would need the money more. While today's technology and social media have the potential to aid in reconstructing/reconnecting war-torn families and friends, there are inevitably some people, some histories, that may never be known, fictive or otherwise. To this day, my uncle is still searching for his friend.

Conclusion

The photographs of Cambodian refugee communities in Khao-I-Dang, where my family spent over a decade, index a liminal moment in my family's diasporic movement. These photographs, authorship unknown, were curated into a photo album by my grandfather. The act of constructing these albums, the juxtaposition of photos and peoples and their arrangement into a timeline, is a form of narrative making. However, this particular narrative, unremembered or untold, is also a silence. While silence and memory exist in a dynamic relationship, where there is silence, there can also be a fiction of memory.

Memory analogs the archive and remembering analogs its ab/use. In other words, archival work does not merely archive *things,* but *memories*. If such memories are compromised by political directives, as with Cambodian discourse, then any subsequent discussion must be analyzed against the facile frameworks of Cambodian and American regulatory practices.

The family archive can provide a possible alternative to politicized memory directives. Against the narrative absences, silences, and erasures, there is the contrivance of a photograph. To pose for the camera is a performance wherein the photographed subject and their momentary

act becomes preserved in perpetuity. To pose for a photograph is not only an act of performing, but also an act of meaning-creating. Whether this meaning is consensual or coerced, intentional or captured, is often lost over spatial and temporal elision. Across all three photos traces of camp life can be gleamed, but the camp itself is never front and center. Rather, such traces are visually and narratively subdued into the background, as the human figure is the most present in all photos, and as my uncle rarely, explicitly refers to the camp in our conversation. Khatharya Um has asked "[when] the body moves, where does memory live?"[32] Where does a memory go when all that is left is a photograph?

We can possibly understand the investment these photos have in documenting homosocial bonding by accounting for the gendered nature of the Cambodian genocide, where a majority of the two million tortured, starved, and murdered were men. An older Cambodian woman who lived through the Khmer Rouge once told me that everyone used to be suspicious, that Cambodian people could not trust each other. This paranoia was a part of Democratic Kampuchea's social technology, designed to atomize Cambodian people by destroying their trust in each other. Given this, perhaps my grandfather kept so many pictures of my uncle with his male friends because he found such relationships particularly endearing, particularly crucial. Perhaps my grandfather was trying to reimagine his own concept of sociality that had been fractured by living through one of the darkest chapters of Cambodian history, a time he hardly ever speaks about. These photographs index life in Cambodia during refuge, so maybe my grandfather choose to archive them because trust, because friendship, is what he hopes to remember when he looks back.

[32] Um, *From the Land of Shadows,* 6.

My grandfather spent a decade in Khao-I-Dang, and wanted my family to stay there rather than apply for asylum. He never told anyone why he stayed so long, and he never speaks about his time before the camp. After so much movement, after experiencing such inevitable and abject violence for years and years during his resettlement, maybe he thought Khao-I-Dang was the best he could do for his family. After seeing or hearing about lawyers and educators getting executed in the name of Angkar, I can only imagine how he felt about his oldest son becoming a teacher, and I can only hope that he felt a sense of relief when, years after the regime, he saw his son being recognized as teacher of the month and that he was *safe*. He may have even taken the picture himself, by whatever means. He must have known that my uncle was in a soccer team, and he must have known about my grandmother inviting the orphaned children over to play all the time. Even given Khao-I-Dang's stark conditions, maybe my grandpa thought that, for the first time in a long while, this place-between-nations could finally be a home.

To shift the framework of Cambodian subjectivity away from atrocity, we must imagine that people like my grandfather are more than just subjects of war. We must imagine that their livelihoods and mentalities were not so saturated within the architecture of such epistemically and ontologically violent subject-formation that they could never be disassociated from such violence.

This fictionalized memory of my grandfather can only ever be a partial, incomplete, and maybe even wildly inaccurate, speculation of his life in the camps. I used the orphan optic to theoretically suspend what his original narrative intention may have been in curating this family archive, because this intention lies within an ether of silence. Through the help of my uncle and others like him, and through bits and pieces of my own knowledge, I contrived a fiction of memory to help understand my grandfather's life on a more personal register.

The piecing together of these disparate fragments of information parallels the method of knowledge-production through heterotopic sources I introduced through *fictions of memory,* a silence-informed, methodological intervention in the face of generational silence. While a family history learned through collective memory and reaffirmed by affective experience is the best many second-generation subjects can do, a family history learned without direct personal accounts – a family history learned around silences – is family history only in the abstract. Reading family photographs as partially orphaned images, even though their provenance is known and their narrative technically/theoretically available, respects the silences of those who prefer not to share or remember their own stories. This partial fiction of memory parallels Lisa Lowe's assertion that Asian American memory work is formulated "in and through [the] fragmentation, loss, and dispersal that constitutes the past."[33] In this patchwork history, understanding photographs through the orphan optic becomes crucially important because of the optic's investment towards a mundane analytic. The orphan optic is not merely a discursive methodology, but a way for incomplete, second generation memory to move forward.

Silence-informed Cambodian memory work finds its home in partial fictions of speculative remembrance. This methodology does not intend to, nor should it, replace extant scholarship on Cambodian subjectivity, but rather, hopes to exist alongside such formulations as alternative imaginings of Cambodian being. My focus on the everyday lives of Cambodian refugees through mundane photography offers another way of seeing those who have been historically seen in the context of suffering; displaced people, who have been shaped by and understood through the violence of the Khmer Rouge, still have the capacity to recreate their lives and return to a sense of normalcy, even given the duress of refugee camp conditions. The

[33] Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996, 29.

first time I asked my mother about the Khmer Rouge, she smiled sadly and said “Cambodian people don’t talk about that anymore. We move on.” We move on because we can imagine, and thus live, otherwise.

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