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Epiphytic Lives

Cambodian American Nonmemory and the Value of Silence

Jolie Chea

“We are the literal manifestation of Pol Pot’s attempt to erase Cambodia’s history and culture,” writes Pete Pin, a Cambodian American photographer and author of *Time* magazine’s photography project “Displaced: The Cambodian Diaspora,” which chronicles the lives of Cambodian communities in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Lowell, Massachusetts; and the Bronx, New York.¹ Pin’s work highlights a silence maintained among Cambodian survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime. It is not uncommon to hear second-generation Cambodian Americans lament the absence of familial and collective historical narratives. “Such conversations [about the Killing Fields] were non-existent at home,” attests Pin, for whom histories come in the form of “a long shadow cast on the lives of Cambodians.” He adds, “It bleeds generationally, manifesting itself subtly within my own family in ways that I am only starting to comprehend as an adult. It is ingrained in the sorrow of my grandmother’s eyes; it is sown in the furrows of my parents’ faces.”² Certainly, the weight of this silence manifests itself in myriad ways and forms, not only among the survivor generation but also beyond. Using photography to capture, document, and transform the “shadow” into a material form, Pin’s work can be placed within “a growing movement of young and empowered Cambodians—academics, artists, musicians, and activists—who are trying to bridge [the] generational chasm”³ between survivors and the postwar generation(s), and against what Cathy Schlund-Vials has termed the “Cambodian Syndrome.”⁴

Motivated by a concern that this history might slip through the fingers of time, young Cambodian Americans have endeavored to “break the silence” of the survivor generation. One notable effort of this campaign is

Socheata Poeuv's 2006 documentary film *New Year Baby*, which claims title as the first documentary film to be made by a Cambodian American woman. Poeuv, whose (now defunct) website states "there is a culture of silence surrounding the Cambodian genocide. And we're taking steps to break that silence,"⁵ contends that for survivors, telling their own stories promotes agency, as they become authors of their personal histories instead of objects being written about. While Poeuv herself was born in the Thai refugee camps and arrived in the United States as a refugee, her project encourages second-generation US-born Cambodian Americans to take up storytelling by interviewing their parents who were survivors of war.

Contrary to efforts that aim to break the silence, this essay offers a way of reading *New Year Baby* that calls attention not to the silence of Cambodian survivors but to Cambodian American second-generation treatments of survivor silence. Because I understand survivor silence to be deliberate, cautious, and careful, I begin by providing context for what we who are not survivors of that war understand as an absence of narrative among those whom we have labeled Khmer Rouge survivors. In doing so, I intervene in narratives that have, whether consciously or inadvertently, resulted in the pathologizing treatment of silence as a social plague that must be filled with (English) words, made legible to and consumable for a (Western) audience, and eradicated at all costs even if at the expense of the wellbeing of survivors.

This essay takes the position that Cambodian survivors are neither silent nor passive victims, but rather actors of volition living in fascist regimes, or as Michel-Rolph Trouillot puts it, "actors in constant interface with a context."⁶ My reading of the film highlights moments that often slip our detection—as perhaps they were intended to—but nevertheless challenge the narrative of the "Khmer Rouge victim/survivor," which I view as distinct from "Cambodian survivor of war" because the former performs a tactic befitting what Yen Le Espiritu has termed the "'we-win-even-when-we-lose' syndrome":⁷ a tendency to erase US culpability in the destruction of Cambodia and Cambodian lives, in Cambodia and throughout its diaspora.⁸ In this way, my reading belabors what Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung describe as flashpoints where Southeast Asian–American writings and other cultural productions "confront and complicate, in varied ways and with different political implications, the narratives and political rationales that mold and are molded by refugees."⁹

Troubling the application of Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post-memory" to the Cambodian postwar generation's alleged ownership¹⁰ of the Khmer Rouge regime and war memories, I propose the term *nonmemory* as a conceptual description of the Cambodian postwar generation's relation to the war.¹¹ Nonmemory refers specifically to a general impossibility to know the true experience of that war without having lived it.

One can know *of* the war, but one cannot know a war that one has not personally lived and endured. In this way, the concept of nonmemory calls into account efforts and demands that the postwar generation makes of survivors to speak about experiences which survivors have not themselves voluntarily nor consensually elected to share, which might be described as assaultive even if well-intentioned (the road to hell is, after all, paved with such). Against this impulse, I offer in the following section a contemplation of the figure of the kapok tree, reputable and fabled to Cambodians, toward a concept of the epiphytic, which I understand to be a multilayered life-giving, anti- and de-colonial force in the natural world.

The Value of Silence

There is a saying among Cambodians, *dam doeum kor*, which means “plant a kapok tree.” Using wordplay to transpose *kor* (kapok) with *ko* (mute), this saying advises one to “plant a mute tree,” or keep still and silent, in the face of danger. Testimonies given by those who survived the Khmer Rouge regime corroborate the necessity of *dam doeum kor* / planting a mute tree as a means to persist and of self-preservation. While vocalizing, particularly in opposition to the regime, was sure to guarantee death, it was also true that a steadfast commitment to silence would not be enough to protect oneself nor save a life. Under the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodians indeed devised creative methods of communication and relied on age-old survival tactics such as speaking with one’s eyes and body; utilizing the dark of night as cover to forage for food or to travel without detection; cooking rice buried in the earth underneath a fire (as opposed to atop) to avoid giving oneself away aromatically; producing idioms and other metaphorical sayings; and a multitude of tricks to outsmart armed cadres. To plant a kapok/mute tree was not simply to abandon one’s agency nor to lose one’s will to live. To the contrary, to plant a kapok meant that one had to do whatever it took to survive.

On the trail of mainstream misperceptions of Cambodian muteness is the lament by younger Cambodian Americans that our parents “never talked about the war.” While feminist women of color have pushed back against the dispossessing nature of being forced to keep silent, or choosing to be silent, they also point out that vocalizing one’s concerns is not guaranteed to set one free either. For example, in the early 1990s Asian American literary scholar King-Kok Cheung wrote, “Many women and racial minorities, growing up in an America where voice is tantamount to power and where they have been traditionally muzzled, have also forsworn silence in order to have a say in society.”¹² And yet Cheung reminded readers that silence speaks many tongues: “While the voice is indisputable, pronouncing silence as the converse of speech or as its subordinate

can also be oppressively univocal.”¹³ David L. Eng, in observing an “utter silen[ce],” an “inescapable silence,” and a “complete silence” in New York City following the collapse of the World Trade Center,¹⁴ wrote about “the value of silence,” arguing that it is “not the opposite of speech but, indeed, its very condition of possibility, the precondition of knowing and meaning.”¹⁵ The ensuing silence, varying in form, that briefly encapsulated the typically bustling East Coast metropole quickly dissipated and gave way to an “incessant and increasing noise,” he wrote, perhaps the noise of everyday life resuming to business as usual in the United States’s largest metropolitan city. “In this mute space, the shock of trauma slowly transforms into the reality of loss, and in this regard, silence might be considered that moment before—that liminal space from which—loss is expropriated into its symbolic meaning.” These scholars thus demonstrate that silence is not antithetical to speech, but rather what precedes the act of speaking and the production of (political) narratives.

The varying interpretations of *dam doeum kor* point to a deeper meaning of what it meant to be mute during the Khmer Rouge regime. As Khatharya Um notes, “the diaspora is one site where individual and collective memory is incubated, enhanced, edited, and transmitted.”¹⁶ Memories of the regime, the war, and the homeland take different forms, she writes, rendering the space of silence that continues to cloak Cambodian families pregnant with meaning and matter.¹⁷ Viewed as such, Um argues, silence becomes “an analytic site for culturally informed reflection and theorizing about despair and resistance, reconciliation and healing.”¹⁸ Thus I challenge the framing of silence as a problem by suggesting that it may not be an indicator of defeat or surrender, but rather the basis of survival strategies and a foundation upon which *something else* becomes possible. Taking inspiration from the idiom “plant a kapok tree,” this essay aims to clarify and correct the ways this lifesaving and life-giving mantra has been misunderstood and how its misinterpretation has led to an infantilizing and paternalistic characterization of Cambodian survivors as mute and traumatized solely by the atrocities of communism that they are unable to speak of their own experiences, and that survivors must be led by the hand through their own self-debilitating fear and shame and ultimately denounce their national pasts in order that their American-born progeny may “know” their history and celebrate their arrival in the West and specifically to the United States.

The Great Kapok Tree

A giant of the rainforest, the kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) is home to epiphytes—plants that grow on other plants but are not parasites and do not harm the structure on which they fasten their roots. Rather, they derive

their nutrients from other sources, such as the air, rain, and debris that accumulate around them. The word “epiphyte” comes from the Greek root *epi*, meaning “upon,” “surface,” or “in addition”; and *phyte*, meaning “plant.” Countless species of animals and plants live and feed upon the kapok tree, demonstrating its importance to the rainforest.

Kapok trees are typically among the tallest in the forest. Often their trunks and branches are armed with thick conical spines to protect them from animals that might chew at their bark. These thorns fall off as the trees get bigger and become older and as they firmly establish their roots in the earth. In dry conditions, the trees can adapt and store water in their trunks, giving off a swollen or pregnant appearance. In their branches above, the trees produce large ellipsoid capsules constituted by five valves, which split open to disperse silky fibers and small seeds. Their fibers are lighter than cotton, buoyant, and resistant to water. Their limbs have been described as a complex infrastructure of highways on which mammals move about in the rainforest.¹⁹

These characteristics point to the ways an idiom such as “plant a kapok tree” harbors and points to layered, overlapping, intersecting, parallel, even hostile life forces. Epiphytes who find a home on the tree, however, “are not parasites but simply rely on their host trees for support. In return, they collect enough light to manufacture energy and also provide food and shelter for many organisms living in the treetops, such as insects, birds, and other small animals.”²⁰ Unlike aphids, which are parasitic bugs that feed by sucking the sap out of plants and thereby causing extensive damage to crops, epiphytes model an example of living within and in relation to a biological community of organisms that rely on, depend on, and interact with each other and their physical environment in productive rather than destructive ways.

This essay’s title features the concept and framework of the epiphytic to propose a model of relations for second-generation Cambodian Americans to the survivor generation—and for Cambodian communities in the United States to other racialized and Indigenous populations. Margaret D. Lowman’s explanation points to the myriad ways epiphytes exist and rely upon one another interdependently, as foundation and support, and for mutual benefit as part of a greater ecosystem. To be sure, epiphytes do not exist nor thrive by taking what is not theirs, by stealing for their individual gain or profit. They do not destroy, tear down, pillage, or plunder that which gives them life. Cambodian refugees have elsewhere been described as the “scattered human debris of a failed US imperial project” or the “dust” of wards between more powerful nations.²¹ Rendered silent, they are often spoken of and for. But the kapok tree, which so many have accepted as the symbol of a self-imposed silencing and self-imposed oppression, is not only a home for epiphytes but also a producer

of seeds that are carried elsewhere by wind, affixing themselves in the soil or on other trees, growing to provide sustenance for other life forms around them. This revelation has led me to see with new eyes Cambodian survivors of war—who became kapok to survive—and the second generation born in the United States not as debris or dust but as seeds, carried across an ocean and dropped into the concrete jungles of a settler colonial nation many of us now call home. In the following section, I provide a reading of the documentary film *New Year Baby* to intervene in potentially harmful consequences of wrecking the carefully crafted silence of survivors—the “ghosts that are best left undisturbed.”²²

If the Soul Seems at Peace, Let It Rest

New Year Baby is a film about a young Cambodian American woman who learns of a family secret one Christmas evening in a Dallas, Texas, suburb. The film’s title refers to Poeuv’s birth on the day of the Cambodian New Year in a Thai refugee camp, making her “the lucky one” since she was born after the regime ended. In her project summary, Poeuv conveys that her parents never told her how or why she was born in a Thai refugee camp, until one Christmas when her mother “gathered the family to reveal a secret” (though Poeuv and her brother appear to be the only members of the family not privy to the information). Poeuv learns that her older sisters are her cousins who were adopted by Poeuv’s parents after their own died during the Khmer Rouge regime. She also learns that her brother is her half brother, born from their mother’s first marriage to a man who, along with another daughter, also died during the regime. Lastly, she discovers that her parents, whom she describes as a “mismatched couple,” met in a labor camp where they were “forced together by a brutal regime that attempted to obliterate class differences by mandating marriages between people who, in normal circumstances, would not have ended up together.”²³ Though by no means extraordinary to most families, all of the above revelations prove to be sensational storylines effective in enticing and appealing to audiences (namely, Western) who wish, perhaps, to discover vicariously the details of this apparently inconceivable and allegedly unique family scandal.

On the film’s webpage (now defunct), the filmmaker writes, “*New Year Baby* is my personal documentary—a search for truth about how my family survived the Khmer Rouge genocide and why they buried the truth for so long.”²⁴ In addition to perpetuating the occlusion of US culpability, the film is marketed using language such as “the family left the past behind” or “desperately [tried] to forget their past.” Such wording describes a supposed natural trajectory of the Cambodian refugee in the

United States in terms of their “journey to becoming American,” without even a minuscule gesture toward the history of war and colonial violence in the region as well as the central role that America and Americans played in facilitating the rise of a regime that would come to produce a “Cambodian American” diasporic group. The filmmaker’s declaration regarding a search for a buried truth suggests, or claims, first, that there is an unknown waiting to be discovered; second, that there is a collective “we” who are not privy to a “truth” about how Cambodians survived the Khmer Rouge regime; and, not least or last, that it is Cambodians themselves who have actively sought to bury and withhold from others a “truth” that would simultaneously shed light on communist crimes and stand as “fact” in the dominant US narrative of military rescue and liberation.

First, through suggestive power, the film’s taglines forward the assumption or false impression that knowledge of survivor experiences during the regime is nonexistent. While I am, in this essay, arguing that true knowledge of survivor experiences is in fact chimerical—that we can know *of* the war but cannot truly *know* that war unless we have lived it—to suggest that there exists no knowledge of the past is a treacherous political move intended to give the impression of an empty and blank slate upon which to project prevailing American narratives whereupon the Cambodian refugee figure is constructed as a passive and voiceless victim incapacitated by trauma and deep shame. The alleged shame experienced by survivors is attributed to having survived what some have described as an autogenocide and somehow severed from the violence unfurled by centuries of colonial abuse or behemoth military nation-states. “They would kill you just for wearing eyeglasses” is a popular refrain among Cambodian survivors and others that unfortunately reduces the bases of Khmer Rouge policies to a much too facile disdain of aesthetic impressions and values.²⁵ While the regime did, unfortunately, reproduce more of the same violences they claimed they sought to eliminate, they were at their inception a group of revolutionaries cohered by shared anti-capitalist and anti-colonial politics, and eyeglasses, for them, were associated with Western elitism, wealth, and the upper class. With its focus on crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge, *New Year Baby* consequently celebrates the United States as a dreamland and “the best country in the world” upheld by grandiose projections of freedom and democracy even if such notions have been blatantly fabricated, illusory, and utterly contradictory in reality.

Also on the film’s webpage, Poeuv states, “The truth is that my parents carried me further than I can imagine—across a border, over landmines and across the ocean to a new life in America. My birth [in

the refugee camp] marked the end of the horror and the beginning of a future.”²⁶ The *Internet Movie Database*, a popular reference website for information on films and television shows, offers the following description for *New Year Baby*: “Born on Cambodian New Year in a Thai refugee camp, Socheata never knew how she got there. After her birth, the family left the past behind and became American.”²⁷ Whereas Poeuv has been described as part of a movement of “Cambodian filmmakers, writers, and artists [who] labor to make whole . . . a historical truth that moves beyond the amnesiac registers and politicized reaches of the Cambodian Syndrome,”²⁸ I read the film and Poeuv’s work contrarily—as constitutive and exemplary of what Schlund-Vials critiques as the “amnesiac registers and politicized reaches of the Cambodian Syndrome.”²⁹ While the film offers never-before-seen prime video footage and live interactions with former Khmer Rouge cadres, it gives little to no attention to US policies and military excursions that made possible the full effect of violence and devastation to Cambodia in the latter half of the twentieth century. Because *New Year Baby* neatly highlights the four-year Khmer Rouge regime as the central if not sole reason for Cambodian migration to the United States, the film contributes to a confounded understanding of how and why Cambodians emerged on the American political landscape before they ever set foot on US territory, and not as immigrants, but as refugees of a US-waged war. This film about breaking silence is, I argue, itself wholly silent regarding a central thread in this war’s history.

In contrast to the apology “invested as a means to a reconciled American end” featured in *The Killing Fields*,³⁰ Schlund-Vials argues that *New Year Baby* “pointedly refocuses the attention of reparation and reconciliation on survivors of the Killing Fields era.”³¹ Unlike other films about Cambodians which highlight and privilege American subjects and experiences, Schlund-Vials credits *New Year Baby* for centering the perspectives and experiences of Cambodian survivors. Moreover, she argues that *New Year Baby* falls under the work of Cambodian American cultural workers whose messages comprise the articulation of “a collected historical truth through narratives involving family stories of war, genocide, and relocation” crucial to the work of undermining erasures of US culpability.³² However, as Mariam B. Lam has suggested, “Other viewers might find Poeuv’s tactics naïve, uninformed, and insensitive.”³³

The scene in question—the scene most notable for its centering of Cambodian survivors—is also one of the film’s most controversial moments, which occurs when Poeuv surprises her father with a visit to the home of a former Khmer Rouge cadre despite her father’s vehement protests. Snuggled intimately with her father after a shaking and deeply emotional visit to Preah Mliu, where Poeuv’s parents met and where Poeuv’s aunt was buried, Poeuv finds an opportune moment to ask her father:

“Did you ever talk to a Khmer Rouge? Is there anything you would want to say?” At its mere mention, Pa immediately and reflexively shakes his head and looks away. He states very clearly: “I don’t want to talk.” Suddenly forming only incomplete sentences punctuated with absent words, he uses hand gestures to convey: “Because I need to—(*covers his mouth as if he is bound from speaking*). I’m scared. I’m—(*covers his mouth again, to demonstrate going mute*).” Pa’s attempts to convey to his daughter that he does not want, and is unable, to speak with the former soldier whom they have found to participate in the film’s making are willfully rejected. The plans have already been made, and canceling appears to be a non-option; indeed, it could be argued that the climactic peak of the film relies on the production of this very encounter. Still en route to their meeting destination, Poeuv continues to prod:

Poeuv: If you could talk to one, right now, would you? Right now.

Pa: Right now? Talk with Khmer Rouge?

Poeuv: M-hm.

Pa: (*Laughs* [My interpretation is that he laughs because the question, at this point, is still hypothetical.]) But I don’t even know where the Khmer Rouge are. I don’t know any. Who is red? Who is blue? At this time in our life, I don’t know which is which.

Poeuv: But if you could . . .

Pa: (*No longer laughing, speaks sternly*) I don’t want to talk with them. I don’t want to talk, I don’t want to hear, I don’t want to see. I hate.

Despite Pa’s clearly articulated protests, the film crew proceeds with the visit. Their van stops outside a home. We hear the van door slide open, but Poeuv and Pa remain seated. It is only after they have arrived at the home, presumably of the Khmer Rouge cadre, that Poeuv nervously informs her father of their plans: “Um, I need to tell you what we’re doing.” Visibly and notably scanning his surroundings, Pa replies, allowing his daughter the opportunity to explain. “Tell what?” he says, and she replies, “Um, right now we’re, uh, we’ve found a Khmer Rouge cadre.” Pa’s demeanor has changed. It shifts from emotional, vulnerable, and open, to one of cunning and skill—hinting to the observant viewer that this is not the first time he has had to deal with danger, fear, or anger under surprise and perhaps unfavorable circumstances. He loosens his shoulders, as would a boxer upon entering the fighting ring. “Right here?” he asks, stretching his neck to see, as if to better assess the situation he is about to enter. By this point, Poeuv has become skittish, almost searching for words to justify their predicament.

Poeuv: M-hm. I just want to talk to him.

Pa: (*Keeping his eyes on the house, he nods an acknowledgement.*) Mm.

Poeuv: I just want to see his face.
 Pa: To see what he's like?
 Poeuv: Yes (*in Khmer*).
 Pa: (*He nods, in a composed and sober demeanor.*) Okay. Go ahead.
 Poeuv: You okay with that?
 Pa: (*curtly*) Yeah.
 Poeuv: You come with me?
 Pa: I can come with you. It's okay.

While the inclusion of this staged encounter between “perpetrator and victim” sets the film apart from other older and perhaps by now mundane explorations of the Cambodian survivor experience via its feature of an “actual” former Khmer Rouge soldier, the question of ethics remains: How far are we willing to go to procure footage, or testimony, that might be considered exciting for documentary production? At whose expense do these procurements occur? Are we exploiting others’ pain and trauma for “educational” purposes, or for our own gains, or both?

This scene follows a particularly poignant moment (mentioned above) shared between Poeuv and her father at the site of her aunt’s grave adjacent to an outdoor latrine that serves as an example of alterity and a compassionate investigation of precarious memories. As they have come to honor their deceased family member’s memory and pay their respects, Pa shares with Poeuv that the last time he and Ma visited Cambodia, “Ma wanted to unbury her [sister, to give her a proper burial], but they often say if the soul seems at peace, then we should let her rest.” If Poeuv, or the viewer, were looking to bridge generational chasms and fill emotional voids, assuming this is what fulfills political desires for some, this moment could have been it (I return to this below). The film pursues instead something worthy of reality television, and Pa is transported to the next stop without full disclosure of who or where is their next destination. As Poeuv admits, “He had come along for the chance to spend time with me. I invited him [and not Ma] because he was easier to direct.”

After meeting with Son Soeum, the former Khmer Rouge cadre who was the district chief in charge of the three-hundred-family camp where Ma and Pa labored during the regime, Pa collapses in exhaustion. Standing above him with a hand-powered fan, Poeuv questions, in a voiceover, her own motives. Reflecting on the decision to corner her father into meeting with a former Khmer Rouge cadre, she narrates: “I thought about calling off the rest of the journey. Maybe I’d pushed him too far. I began to question my reasons for this trip. Was it to understand my parents or was it just to ease my guilt about being the lucky one?” While genuine inquiries into traumatic events oftentimes occur through trial and error, efforts classified under “error” require greater and more serious considerations.

Cambodian American Nonmemory

I have discussed thus far the Cambodian “silent past”³⁴ as a site of contestation and ideological struggle where histories are written, and never are they apolitical or objective. The term and concept of “survivor silence” appears to have been widely accepted without question, seemingly without considering another possibility: that perhaps survivors are not silent but rather have been silenced. As Trouillot writes, “History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.”³⁵ What I have discussed pertains to the construction of the Cambodian refugee figure as American. This construction thus produces a “Cambodian American” origin story and the consistent and persistent circulation of this origin story within the nation and globally, which has had the effect of inscribing and reinforcing social roles for Cambodians in the United States in the American imaginary. By rendering the survivor population silent, a population that contains pockets of refugees who may in some form possess “the potential to upset the well-worn narrative of ‘rescue and liberation’ in US history and to refocus attention on the troubling record of US military aggression,”³⁶ the reproduction of US hegemonic narratives becomes immensely dominant, prominent, and far-reaching, and occurs through a postwar/second-generation mouthpiece.

The narrative espoused by Poeuv’s documentary film gives shape to what has been called Cambodian American “postmemory.” The concept of “postmemory,” coined by Hirsch, has been prominent not only in the field of Holocaust studies but beyond. Applied far beyond the context of the Holocaust, others have utilized the framework in research concerning intergenerational transmissions of trauma.³⁷ In tension with the argument that Cambodian survivors have maintained a death-dealing silence about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge regime and within the larger Vietnam War, the concept of postmemory holds that it is possible for a postwar generation to bear relationship and connection to the survivor generation and their experiences without having experienced those events themselves. I find Hirsch’s definition, which explains 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 constitute memories in their own right,”³⁸ troubling in the case of Cambodian Americans for the assertion that we who have not endured the traumatic experience in question might nevertheless lay claim to ownership of memories resulting from that experience.

Elaborating further on the relationship of children to their parents’ trauma, Hirsch argues that postmemory is “powerful . . . precisely

because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.”³⁹ It is “the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, [and] shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated.”⁴⁰ Whereas Hirsch asserts that traumatic events that have passed may be neither understood nor recreated, I wish to trace the proliferation of US-centered Cambodian American narratives to their respective moments or spaces of silence. If these narratives, and the “mania of nationalism”—which Eng describes as “the externalization of a nation’s grief,” to which I would add guilt—are made possible by the condition of silence, might we be able to write, and demand, “another story, another history”⁴¹ by tracing the stories that are told about us to their respective original injuries, in order that these silences can speak for themselves?⁴² The answer is yes, and the admission of nonmemory makes this possible. The “post” in postmemory can be understood in (at least) two ways. In one reading, “post” refers to that which comes after an event or thing. In another reading, “post” refers to something that has successfully registered, as in a published post. Taken in this light, postmemory can be understood as a memory that may or may not be true but passes, has *posted*, is registered, and is widely accepted, as official (national) narrative. I thus offer the term “nonmemory,” for which the “non” is intended to describe an absence, perhaps a false or incomplete narrative taken as a whole truth, or perhaps to state a refusal to participate in nation-building efforts based on strategically constructed narratives. Nonmemory can be understood as the refusal to perform the act of remembering histories of colonial nations at the expense of colonized and aggrieved populations. While second-generation Cambodian Americans’ relationship to the survivor generation can at times be described as postmemory, it is also true that there are moments when our lack of connection to the survivor generation constitutes a nonmemory. To admit that it is possible (and okay) for us to not know the most intimate details of the most significant historical events that happened to those who came before us but remain informed nonetheless, or that it is okay to not know any details at all but still feel ethically and compassionately obliged to the propagation and protection of human rights here, there, everywhere—this is “the precondition of knowing and of meaning” of nonmemory that founds the condition of possibility for laying claim to our variable futures.⁴³

Speaking from my own experience and as a member of the post-war generation, I personally do not have memories of the Khmer Rouge regime or the war that came before it. I was not there, and I do not believe I can even begin to imagine life during or before the Khmer Rouge regime. When I visited with my parents their labor camp in Battambang,

located in Cambodia's northern region, I felt a yearning to grasp at something that was no longer there, a something that I had difficulty trying to imagine. My mother, stricken, wanted to leave almost as soon as we arrived even though it took almost ten hours to reach the site, and even though she wanted to see the place where she and her compatriots literally moved mountains with their bare hands and where she cradled a loved one as they lay dying in her arms. She said she would wait in the van while I surveyed the site and as I strained to imagine the landscape full of black-pajama-clad Cambodians, hunched over from baskets of dirt hanging from their shoulders and backs, with rifles pointed at them underneath the tropical sun.

For all I tried, I was unable to bring the image to life. I do not and likely may never know what it was like to transport pails of dirt to build a canal using only human power, without adequate food; or to run for cover from bombs; or to have no choice but to draw drinking and cooking water from the same river source where countless others have bathed and defecated, and where the dead bodies of my deceased countrypeople have been dumped for convenience to avoid the consuming labors of a proper burial or cremation ceremony. I have never seen dead bodies by the hundreds piled alongside the road while also recognizing a few faces among them. I have never had to rock my baby sister-in-law as she died from starvation and dysentery, only to see Vietnamese soldiers defeat the Khmer Rouge regime just one week later, "liberating" Cambodians from their grip. I have never had to see my sons blown up by a bomb after having reached the "safety" of Thai refugee camps. But what I can be sure of is that those events, for those who survived them, have and continue to shape their lives long after the war "ends"—in the ways they live their lives, how they interact with each other, their loved ones, and outsiders, and the decisions they make—and in different ways. For my siblings and cousins, we came to know of the war by learning: Never waste food. Always be prepared for an emergency. Your body and your life are the most important things to preserve. Know the difference between what you need and what you want. Know how to take care of yourself. Take care of others, if you can. Be smart. Above all, do what is right and be a good person. These were some values that were ingrained in us, while others included: life is short, seek pleasure and indulge in luxuries. I don't believe I can claim my parents' memories as my own, but I can say with conviction that I bear memories of my own as a young person growing up in the immediate aftermath of war and resettlement, in 1980s and 1990s Los Angeles, which is not to be discounted. That is what I work with. So while my family also never talked about the war, I also recognize that I grew up watching and engaging in what I now realize were reenactments of the war and its effects—my father's anger and acts of violence, my grand-

mother's irrepressible nightmares, my mother's wariness, and my own nonmemory.

My point is that I do not feel that my life was overshadowed or overwhelmed by the events of my parents' lives, as Hirsch describes. My parents were among those who rarely talked about the war, as stated above. Most of the time it seemed they had moved forward with their lives and were giving their energies toward making a living—this was not an easy thing to do in America. There were multiple and various reasons for why they did not talk about the war, ranging from being too busy and tired from work, to simply that they didn't feel like it. This is where the concept of postmemory as applied to the Cambodian experience falters. The concept of postmemory posits that the second generation is overwhelmed by a plethora or abundance of narratives (photographs, images, behaviors) as imposed onto them by the survivor generation. But unlike the experiences of descendants of Holocaust survivors, the lives of the Cambodian postwar generation was not, I contend, “dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation.”⁴⁴ For a period of time when I was growing up, it was difficult to encounter a young person outside of my immediate community who had even heard of Cambodia and Cambodians. In my conceptualization of nonmemory, I wish not to highlight the alleged secondary effects of a survivor generation that has not adequately or fully grieved for its own traumas, but rather to name and give shape to the information which the second generation desires to know, and to be motivated by pragmatic, practical, and infinite aims of critical questioning rather than the definitive, decisive, and authoritative nature of hegemonic Manichean, good-versus-evil accounts of history.

History as Riddle

When Syria fell to rebel forces in late 2016, footage of Syrian civilians fleeing the upheaval flashed across television, computer, and cell phone screens all around the world. These refugees compelled empathy from some, sympathy from many, and hostility and opposition from others. The footage (recorded and live) showed Syrian refugees, faces filled with desperation, grief, fear, and anger. They showed Syrian refugees aboard rickety wooden boats inadequate for the weight they carried across the ocean. An image of a child, five years old, who died on the journey, circulated widely. Shortly thereafter, progressive media set to work creating short video commercials featuring an earlier cohort of refugees fleeing war over four decades ago, aiming to highlight the continuities of the United States's involvement and orchestration of racialized warfare and to draw connections between populations similarly impacted by impe-

rial and colonial powers. In a number of these videos and public posts, those refugees, now Vietnamese Americans, commented on the likenesses and parallels of their war and this war. For many of them, the images coming out of Syria struck so deeply as to trigger specific memories over forty years old. But even before then, when the United States was bombing Baghdad in 2006, I remember coming home to my mother standing small and hushed before the television. In my regular pitch, I began to speak when she interrupted me with “Shhh.” With a demeanor I will never forget, my mother, who was in my memory an incredibly resilient and emotionally composed person, who has withstood the most ridiculous and violent of fragile masculinities and greedy bosses drunk with power, whispered, very carefully: “This,” she said. “This.” She explained that this war was just like her war, and if I wanted to know, I should watch, and then she proceeded to have her moment.

Those who lived through this particular regime understood they had to “mind their own business” to avoid execution on the spot. This, however, did not mean people became passive subjects who simply did as they were told, who lost the capacity and ability to feel sadness, fear, or rage at events unfolding around them. On the rare occasion that my mother shares her memories of the war—when she is even able to recall these memories—she recounts how she had to act as though she had no eyes, no ears, and no mouth when soldiers were in sight or within earshot. When I have asked her what that means, she has only replied, “You just had to. You just had to be there.” When soldiers were absent, however, the will to survive quickly surmounted and restored what had been suspended, if only temporarily. This was not true for everyone, evidenced by the fact that approximately two million Cambodians perished under the regime (although the majority of Cambodians died not by political execution but from a combination of starvation, illness, and the exhaustion of hard labor). Against popular representations of Cambodians as an abject, mentally bereft people, as passive victims, I am overcome when I imagine what selflessness it takes for one to forgo a meal so that young children may eat, or to sacrifice oneself to death so that loved ones may live.⁴⁵ When I think of Cambodians of that generation, the image of the forlorn skeletal figure with short-cropped hair and black pajamas is not what first comes to mind. Rather, I think of those who risked their own lives and put themselves in harm’s way to protect another, to feed another, to help another, and who continue to do so, long after the regime’s end.

Indeed, for many Cambodians, silence was a strategy for survival. Given the dire conditions many Cambodian refugees encountered and continue to confront today, a more productive discussion might emerge from considering the continuities of war and warfare across time and geographic space, as opposed to treating war and trauma as a thing of

the past. The Khmer Rouge risk for us now, especially those of us in the United States, is zero. But the risks of the police, the immigration office, the welfare office, and the federal government, for many Cambodians and Southeast Asians, as well as other racialized populations in the United States, are still present. My parents had very little food to eat during the Khmer Rouge, but they also had very little food to eat even before the Khmer Rouge arrived. Both came from working families in small towns outside the country's busy capital. My mother often comments on how the labor coerced during the regime was relatively easier for people from working backgrounds who were accustomed to toiling for long hours. But my mother has also told me that even after landing in America, land of milk and honey, there was still very little to eat. When social services helped my parents enroll in beginners' English-language courses at Evans Adult School on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, my parents were living in a two-bedroom apartment they shared with my father's sister and her husband. They split their rent of \$400 a month, and even then, their meager welfare checks were not enough. They were responsible to their family still in the Thailand refugee camps. After everything, they were only able to afford only a small pouch of cooked jasmine rice, wrapped in plastic at room temperature, with no meat or vegetables to accompany. Nevertheless, she was grateful to go to school, something she was not afforded in Cambodia. She was hopeful for the opportunities that would come, though they never came. Nearing seventy, my mother continues to perform low-wage labor—what some describe as menial work, though producing sample garments for Los Angeles's behemoth fashion industry hardly counts as menial—in the United States. She has worked this way for as long as I've been alive, being paid as little as \$1,000 a month for double, sometimes triple overtime in the 1990s to as much as \$1,800 a month, with the bonus luxury of health benefits, finally, in the twenty-first century, for a reduced thirty-five hours a week. Capitalism has its pros and cons, it can be said. The pros, however, occur more often for those who have power, who have inherited their wealth, and who have all the "right" makings. The cons, on the other hand, happen relentlessly to those who do not own the means of their own production. It can also be said that the only "thing" they may own is their dignity. That alone is a formula for revolutionary fearlessness.

Cambodian survivor and novelist Vaddey Ratner wrote in her *New York Times* bestselling novel *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, "In the end only the deaf, the dumb, and the mute would survive."⁴⁶ Expectedly, examples are to be found in *New Year Baby*. Unlike most segments in the documentary film in which Poeuv's parents are seated (seemingly reluctantly) side by side for a standard talking-head-style interview, there are two scenes included in the final cut that were shot in their van as their family trav-

eled about the country. Perhaps because they are not positioned in front of camera equipment with formally scripted questions being read off to them, in these moving vehicle scenes Ma and Pa speak with more ease and, to an extent, more freely.

Through whispers and uninhibited laughter, Ma and Pa skillfully avoid answering Poeuv's questions directly and instead skirt around them. In one of the scenes in their rented van, Poeuv asks her parents to explain to her how they survived the regime. "Tell me why you believe you survived the Khmer Rouge when other people died?" With an earned bragadocio, and through easy laughter, Ma simply retorts, "This is my skill. I have good skill." Pa humorously contributes to the response by elaborating, "The person who survives, does not die." Ma then corroborates this statement by explaining that Pa did not die, so therefore he survived. "The reason he [Pa] survive—because he not die," she says through more laughter. Aware that her parents are teasing her, Poeuv playfully exclaims, "That's not a good answer! Expand on that." She prods for them to elaborate further. Pa obliges, and explains:

Pa: You have to think ahead. Don't be too daring, don't be too scared. Take the middle road. That means, when you've got to go, you've got to go—but think first.

Ma: He always—if there's danger, let someone else go first. He stay "in the middle road." That's Pa.

Poeuv: Follow the pack.

Without divulging details or giving in to voyeuristic demands for gory and sensational stories, Pa passes on experiential wisdom and hones in on strategy instead. Yet Poeuv's response, "Follow the pack," though intended to demonstrate she understood the message behind Pa's words, fails to fully grasp what her parents wished to impart. Pa did not follow the pack. Instead, he was keen to avoid being a part of the pack—holding as most important the ability to assess and understand a situation and act accordingly, and swiftly, and with a heightened sense of awareness. Their initial responses—that Ma survived because this was "her skill" and that Pa survived because he "did not die"—capture at once something simultaneously spectacular and mundane. They did not die, and yet their survival was arguably an ordinary feat. That is to say: survival is an everyday act and a global phenomenon not unique to their lives or to their part of the world.

For me, a redemptive moment in *New Year Baby* comes through what I believe to be one of the most compelling moments in the film—its opening scene—which, admittedly, continues to create doubt in my own analytic critique and reflex. At the start of the film, we watch as

Poeuv's parents repeatedly disengage with the film's objective. We are led to believe that they are behaving typically—that they are avoiding the camera because they are avoiding any conversations about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge regime. My reading of these moments, however, turns that interpretation on its head. It is not Ma and Pa who are under scrutiny, but the viewer. Several sequences show Ma and/or Pa peering questioningly directly into the camera lens. They comment: “Why do you keep recording me?” “Why does she keep following us? Day after day—it never stops.”

Then, just six minutes in, viewers are formally introduced to Ma and Pa. Seated awkwardly beside one another, Pa fidgets and readjusts himself as Ma sits motionlessly, occasionally throwing a mischievous smirk at the camera. Poeuv is the interviewer, positioned behind the camera. Hinting at the storyline to come (their forced “mismatched” marriage), Poeuv's first inquiry is directed to her mother. “What do you like about Pa?” Her mother gives the camera a “look” and replies, “[What] I like about Pa? When he not talking [*sic*].” Read: his silence. Pa chuckles and retorts, “When talking, not like?” By now Ma is suppressing her visible laughter. Taking her glance off the interviewer seated beside the camera (her daughter) to look directly into the camera, she states, “Yeah.” Poeuv asks for further clarification: “What do you mean?” Her mother explains, “He's a good listener.” At this, Pa lets out a hearty laugh, while Ma shifts her tone, becoming more serious. She is aware she has our attention. No longer laughing, but in a solemn manner, she repeats, “He's a good listener.” This statement should not be taken at face value. It should be taken as riddle.

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Notes

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read my writing about the epiphytic and then suggested I submit this essay to *Social Text*, where David L. Eng and an anonymous reader provided generous and critical feedback. Through it all, Lucy M. S. P. Burns has been a steady rock of support and friendship. Not least of all, I would like to thank Marie Buck for her pleasant communications and attentiveness.

1. Pin, “Displaced.” Twenty-two in total, the images include a refugee ID card from a Thai-Cambodian border camp; two girls lying beside their grandmother, the only surviving elder member of their family; Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea listening to a translation device at his international trial; and a photograph of football trophies belonging to a young man in the Bronx where, according to its caption, “Cambodian youth in the Fordham area play league football for ‘racial respect’ in the neighborhood.”

2. Pin, “Displaced.”

3. Pin, “Displaced.”

4. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 13. Playing on the term “Vietnam Syndrome,” which refers to the American public’s aversion to US military wars, Schlund-Vials coins the term “Cambodian Syndrome,” a “transnational set of amnesiac politics revealed through hegemonic modes of public policy and memory,” to describe the “strategic deployments, paradoxical conflations, and syncretic collapses of two distinct US foreign-policy moments” (13). She is referring to the ways in which the memory of the US war in Cambodia is used to justify and strengthen the rationale for US military occupation in regions in which the US currently wages war. Moreover, Schlund-Vials argues, mainstream Cambodian American history “contains politicized and selective processes of remembering the genocidal past” in such a way that marks the Khmer Rouge regime as a genocide but is “tactically forgetful of the U.S. role in the making of the Khmer Rouge” (13). Cambodian American cultural producers, on the other hand, confront these historical amnesias, undermine these frames of forgetting, and ultimately “militate against the amnesiac registers of the Cambodian Syndrome by concentrating on the facts of U.S. intervention and Khmer Rouge authoritarianism” (4, 16).

5. Poeuv, “Discussion Guide.” The website is no longer available.

6. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 23.

7. Espiritu, “‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome,” 330.

8. As Michael Vickery has written, “The war [in Cambodia] did not begin suddenly in 1970,” and certainly not with the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975; thus, as Khatharya Um posits, our analytic gaze surrounding genocidal violence needs to be cast deep into the nation’s colonized history. See Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975–1982*, 17; cited in Um, *From the Land of Shadows*, 4.

9. Nguyen and Fung, “Refugee Cultures,” 2.

10. See Hirsch, “Generation of Postmemory”; Felman and Laub, *Testimony*.

11. Drawing from anthropologist Carole McGranahan’s discussion of Tibetan resistance narratives as “nonevents,” or events that cannot be narrated, Espiritu has asked, “Which memories are erased, forgotten, or postponed and archived for future release? Where and how, then, do these ‘nonevents’ fit into the narration of history?” See Espiritu, “Toward a Critical Refugee Study,” 424; McGranahan, “Truth, Fear, and Lies,” 580.

12. Cheung, *Articulate Silences*, 2.

13. Cheung, *Articulate Silences*, 6.

14. Eng, “Value of Silence,” 85.

15. Eng, “Value of Silence,” 86.

16. Um, *From the Land of Shadows*, 6.
17. Um, *From the Land of Shadows*, 6.
18. Um, *From the Land of Shadows*, 6.
19. Woodward, "Ceiba Tree."
20. Lowman, "Epiphytes."
21. Um, *From the Land of Shadows*, 9.
22. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 66.
23. Poeuv, "Discussion Guide." The website is no longer available.
24. Poeuv, "Project Summary." The website is no longer available.
25. For the record, those who wore eyeglasses were assumed to be educated, or of the elite or otherwise privileged class. In this way, one might indeed understand the conclusion of privilege and wealth (symptoms of inequality) to be made based on aesthetic markers, for items and material objects such as eyeglasses, scarves, painted fingernails, and jewelry were often symbols representing a Westernized city life rather than the rice fields of the rural countryside. To assert that the Khmer Rouge killed simply on the basis of eyeglass ownership is superficial and farcical.
26. Poeuv, "Project Summary."
27. IMDb, "New Year Baby."
28. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 17.
29. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 17.
30. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 79.
31. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 79.
32. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 17.
33. Lam, Review of *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 211. I would add that the apology in this scene, from the ex-cadre to the family member of the deceased, who happened to be the film crew's chauffeur-driver, was not self-initiated but prompted by Poeuv and the film crew. Yet the apology is made to appear in the film's final edit as a natural outcome and resolution of the encounter—the healing possibility of such confrontation, even—though viewers may not be cognizant of this backstory if they have not viewed the director's cut containing Poeuv's commentary.
34. I borrow this term from Eng, "Value of Silence," 88.
35. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xiii.
36. Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study," 421.
37. Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory," 103.
38. Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory," 103.
39. Hirsch, "Past Lives," 662.
40. Hirsch, "Past Lives," 659.
41. Eng, "Value of Silence," 94.
42. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 27.
43. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 86.
44. Hirsch, "Past Lives," 659.
45. Memoirist Chanrithy Him writes about this, and Poeuv's sisters also discuss it when being interviewed in *New Year Baby*. Numerous survivors have shared these experiences. See, for example, Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, 101.
46. Ratner, *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, 277.

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