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Following the Way:
Worlding Connections in Contemporary Cambodian Performance

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

Allan Zheng

December 2025

Dissertation Committee:
- Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson
- Dr. Liz Przybylski
- Dr. Emily Hue
- Dr. María Regina Firmino-Castillo
- Dr. Amy Skjerseth

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The Dissertation of Allan Zheng is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Acknowledgments

An incredibly large community made this project possible, and many people have shaped my ideas and thinking from the start of my graduate coursework to the last few months of writing. If I fail to acknowledge anyone, my sincerest apologies in advance. This project shifted so many times. I began with a vested interest in queer dance and performance in Phnom Penh, Cambodia and an interest in how queerness was in/visibilized and im/mobilized through music and dance. At the same time, I was attending numerous arts events, and I was drawn to what people were doing in contemporary performance. It's hard to say when exactly I made a targeted shift during my fieldwork, or if I had always been interested in addressing the contemporary in Cambodia. Looking back, my graduate school application materials and personal statements indicated that the contemporary grabbed my attention, but it wasn't until being in Cambodia where I could pursue it. I knew for certain by June 2023 that my project "Following the Way" would be about contemporary Cambodian performance. During the process of organizing the performance event Amogkhabas – The Next Generation and the curation of four contemporary works, I came to understand that I was no longer only attending to queer music and dance in Cambodia but thinking broadly about what contemporary performance could accomplish.

I could not have done my research without funding from the UC Riverside Chancellor's Distinguished Fellowship, which supported my graduate coursework. I received multiple Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships to study Khmer

language. I am endlessly grateful for the support from the Center for Khmer Studies Dissertation Research Fellowship and Society for Asian Music Small Grant Fund during my fieldwork from 2022 to 2023. During the writing process, I was fortunate to have earned the UC Riverside Graduate Research Mentorship Program, UC Riverside Dissertation Completion Fellowship Award, and the Center for Ideas and Society Summer Dissertation Writing Fellowship. Thank you to all these funding networks and channels for sustaining this project to this stage.

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Vihear and for our continued conversations about Cambodian culture, especially sharing with me information about what people are doing in Surin. If you decide to pursue a PhD, I wish you all the best. Jenna Grant, thank you for welcoming me into your home for events and I hope for future continued conversation in Cambodian Studies. Sotheavy (Tia) Nou, I cannot remember how or when we met but our collective obsession over Stray Kids was always a welcome respite when I was at a loss during fieldwork. You introduced me to more wonderful folks including Dahlia Phirun and Nicolas Thevenet. Together, I really saw how small of a world Cambodia can be. Tia, thank you for guiding me through the arts community and being a wonderful elder sister. I will always treasure the time I spent with *Aum* Yoo, my landlady, and our many kitchen table conversations about anything ranging from psychology, pedagogy, and food as well as our evening walks to and around the market. This was perhaps the most unconventional of friendships considering I was in my 20s you were in your 60s, but you made your home my home and brought me into the family. I am eternally grateful to you.

I am ever appreciative of all my faculty mentors at UC Riverside. Deborah Wong, my dissertation advisor, has been instrumental to my success at UC Riverside for her numerous close readings of my writing and endless patience as I worked through ideas and concepts. This project would not have been possible without your support and mentorship. I think at least half of my courses were taught by Liz Przybylski and I am eternally grateful for your seminars and pedagogy, especially during the global pandemic. Your expertise and guidance continue to shape my approach to scholarship. Emily Hue was crucial to my journey and success in graduate school for always being a bright and

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Southern California has been home for several years and, as a settler-arrivant in the region, I am eternally grateful and indebted to the Cahuilla, Luiseño, Serrano, and Tongva peoples in Riverside. Because I currently reside in Koreatown Los Angeles, I believe it is necessary to rearticulate my indebtedness to the Tongva peoples again for my continued presence and occupation of their unceded land, water, and air. In my commitment to relationality, I owe an immense debt to the vibrant community around me in Southern California. My Long Beach dance family and the dancers at Modern Apsara Company continue to be a major source of inspiration and camaraderie. I especially wish to cheer on Rane Prak as they continue their graduate studies at UCLA. Chakra Sokhomsan, it has been a pleasure to write about your work, and I hope to continue our collaborations in the future. Phung Huynh, you are such an incredible human, and it is an

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Following the Way: Worlding Connections in Contemporary Cambodian Performance

by

Allan Zheng

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Music
University of California, Riverside, December 2025
Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson

My dissertation "Following the Way: Worlding Connections in Contemporary Cambodian Performance" examines how Cambodian performers express ongoing issues and personal experiences with LGBTQIA+ discrimination, globalization, diaspora, and social change. Drawing from year-long ethnographic fieldwork from 2022 to 2023, I apply creative and embodied approaches from music, dance, and performance studies and my training as a Cambodian classical musician and dancer to my analysis of contemporary Cambodian performance. I discuss different staged contemporary Cambodian performances by Cambodian and Cambodian diasporic artists in relation to questions around identity, cosmopolitan formations, displacement, and worldmaking.

I engage with the word *sahasamay,* meaning contemporary, as an opportunity for creative experimentation in the Cambodian performing arts. As a concept, *sahasamay* involves a reinventing of Cambodian space, time, and identity by interrogating aesthetic practices of rupture and brokenness, breaking away from past conventions of tradition, and negotiating global entanglements. For Cambodian diasporic artists, this manifests through the idea of diasporic dis/connect and the continual slippage of identifying with

Cambodian-ness. Thus, diasporic dis/connect animates the uneasy, liminal qualities of being a person from diaspora. Emerging from the mimetic processes of Cambodian music and dance, I define a practice of following that serves as a methodological framework. Following considers the bodily acquisition of knowledge and the ethnographer's interactions with the community to highlight the co-constructed nature of research and life. Because I was involved with performance production during fieldwork, I developed the idea of doing ethnography from the booth to consider how my ethnography work meant moving beyond performer-audience binaries and towards practicing collaboration in service of the artists and performers and resituating power with the community and their goals. I take contemporary Cambodian performance as a site for cultural critique and worldmaking, invoking generations of discourse on stage. Furthermore, I reflect on my involvement in the performing arts scene as deeply relational and enmeshed with the goals of my interlocutors. Through following, I show the connections between identity, ontology, and performance to express the multiplicities of Cambodian-ness, situate Cambodia beyond histories of genocide and imperialism, and generate new possibilities for exploring contemporary cultural production.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS **IV**

TABLE OF CONTENTS **XV**

LIST OF FIGURES **XVIII**

NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION **XXI**

INTRODUCTION: FOLLOWING CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIAN MUSIC AND DANCE **1**

Looking From Behind **1**
Writing, Researching, and Experiencing Cambodia **6**
Following as Method, Scholarship as Process *11*
Ethnography from the Booth *23*
Towards Contemporary Ontologies of Performance in Cambodia **30**
Cambodian-ness: Performing Technique and the Technical *42*
Chapter Overview and Reflections **50**

REFLECTION ONE: LEARNING KHMER MUSIC **57**

CHAPTER ONE: SOUNDING THE NOW THROUGH CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIAN MUSIC **64**

Intercultural Connections: Experimenting with Taiko **76**
Intercultural Disjuncture and Instrumental Experiments **82**
Inventing the Contemporary: The Vernacular Drum **90**
Contemporary Experimentation as Intervention **94**

CHAPTER TWO: DIASPORIC DIS/CONNECT IN JEAN-BAPTISTE PHOU'S CREATIVE WORKS **102**

Liminal and Linguistic Dis/Connections **111**
Diasporic Return and Desire for Connection *125*
Intimate Dis/Connections **133**
Cathartic Release and Animating Diasporic Ontology **142**
Conclusion **150**

REFLECTION TWO: WALKING DOWN THE STREET **154**

REFLECTION THREE: BEHIND THE SCENES OF AMOGKHABAS **159**

CHAPTER THREE: SPROUTING FROM DIASPORIC MUD IN *BIRTHDAY* (2023) **166**

Part One: Muddy Poetics and Natural Movement **177**
Listening to Sokhomsan's Spoken Word *177*
Natural Movements: Tensions Between Khmer Classical and Somatics *184*
Part Two: Distorted Sounds and Samples **191**
Going Further Behind the Scenes **201**
The Implicated Ethnographer in the Booth *206*

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDING *PHLOV* (THE WAY): CREATIVE POSSIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE **213**

Entering the Stage **224**
In the Shadow of a Tree **228**
Café and Intimate Capital **235**
What Does It Mean to Dance? **240**
Queer Love and Citationality **245**
Citing Conflict and Inner Turmoil **253**
The Lotus Flower: Blessings To and From All **257**
Making *Phlov* (2023) **261**
Conclusion **266**

REFLECTION FOUR: I HAVE THIS SCARF **272**

CONCLUSION: LIFE, DEATH, AND PERFORMANCE: REPATRIATING THE STOLEN STATUES **277**

Performing with the Blood Statues, Affirming Spiritual Presence **279**
Returning Home: A "Re-Performance" in Los Angeles **288**
In Gratitude **302**

BIBLIOGRAPHY **303**

GLOSSARY **320**

List of Figures

Figure 1. Khuon Chay (front left), Path Reaksmey (left foreground), Soeurn Chamreoun (front right), and Phon Sonya (right foreground) beginning to pray during a small *sampeah kru*. Photo by author. 2

Figure 2. Video still from Khuon Chay's video of *kbach bat*. Original video courtesy of Path Reaksmey. 3

Figure 3. Photo of author following another dancer's movements during rehearsal on June 19th, 2023. Photo by Panhara Chakrapong. 15

Figure 4. GarageBand screen capture of the audio files for Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023). 26

Figure 5. Ros Sokunthea striking the cymbal during rehearsal on February 15th, 2023. Photo by author. 66

Figure 6. During the first performance night on February 16th, 2023, the performers raised their arms to strike the drums. Photo by author. 77

Figure 7. During the first performance night on February 16th, 2023, the dancers move while covered under a black cloth while Ros Sokunthea manipulates the audio on stage. Photo by author. 84

Figure 8. At the dress rehearsal on February 15th, 2023, Ros Sokunthea plays the handpan. Photo by author. 86

Figure 9. Ros Sokunthea bowing to and holding the drum on February 16th, 2023. Photo by author. 92

Figure 10. Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao holding candles and lighting the messages suspended from a hanging wire frame boat in Java Creative Café Toul Tompong. Photo by author. 103

Figure 11. Sao Sreymao's drawing superimposed over Phou's photo of his living room. Image courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao. 115

Figure 12. Sao's drawing of roots and branches breaking out of the cracks on a photo of the lower half of Phou's face, sewing his lips shut. Image courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao. 124

Figure 13. Sao's drawing of Phou and his mother over a photo of a noodle restaurant. Image courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao. 138

Figure 14. Sao's drawing of a young Phou standing before Phou's photo of his mother and the bridge leading to Angkor Wat. Image courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao. 145

Figure 15. Offering paper and yarn burning above and in a small sand pit. Photo by author. 150

Figure 16. Video still of Sokhomsan falling to the ground. Original video courtesy of Sotheavy (Tia) Nou. 190

Figure 17. Video still of Sokhomsan making a Khmer classical dance gesture with his left hand. 195

Figure 18. Video still of Sokhomsan as he slows down in response to the music..... 196

Figure 19. Screen capture of the different tracks as spliced and sampled in Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023). 202

Figure 20. The sound console (upper left), lighting console (center), and my MacBook Pro with my production notes. Photo by author. 217

Figure 21. Video still of Soeurn Chamreoun (center) preparing to make his exit from the stage while Phon Sonya (left) and Path Reaksmey (right) wander the stage..... 225

Figure 22. Video still of Khuon Chay stands in the spotlight wearing a cloak, giving his monologue..... 228

Figure 23. Video still of Khuon Chay using Khmer dance gestures to mix coffee and cream for customers. 236

Figure 24. The naga as projected on the wall during the café scene. Image drawn by Morn Sopharoth and provided by Khuon Chay. 239

Figure 25. Khuon Chay wearing a crown and flower tucked into his right ear while dimly lit by a spotlight. Photo courtesy of Khuon Chay. 244

Figure 26. Khuon Chay (left) looking at Soeurn Chamreoun (right) as he is being led forward. Photo courtesy of Khuon Chay. 249

Figure 27. Video still of Khuon Chay in fear, wiping tears away as the three dancers begin circling him. 254

Figure 28. Khuon Chay surrounded by the other dancers all raising their hands in prayer as *Sathukar* plays from the speakers. Photo courtesy of Khuon Chay. 260

Figure 29. Photo of the scarf. 276

Figure 30. View from the corner of Phung Huynh's exhibition *Return Home*. Photo by author. 290

Figure 31. Framed head of Buddha from The Met cradled by a sheer image of a small naga Buddha statue from Angkor Wat. Photo by author. 291

Figure 32. Cropped video still Modern Apsara Company dancers performing *robam buong suong preahmn* at Luis De Jesus. Original video courtesy of Rane Prak. ... 292

Notes on Transliteration

I follow the Geographic Department of the Cambodian Ministry of Land Management and Urban Planning's system for transliteration. It is applied to all geographical locations in Cambodia and generally I find it more in alignment with impromptu, everyday transliteration practices. This system is based on the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) which is also based on the United States Board on Geographic Names and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use or BGN/PCGN system. I follow this system for words that have origins from Pali/Sanskrit, though it remains imperfect for capturing the pronunciation of these words. I use this system to minimize excessive diacritic markings that Khmer people would not use in their day-to-day transliteration. It is comparable to colloquial and non-standardized transliteration which is common practice for Cambodian peoples. I appreciate how this system approaches the distinctions between the A-series and O-series vowels compared to how other systems might have conventions that render the word unintelligible from my perspective. I make exceptions for names of people and common terms that have established spelling conventions.

Introduction: Following Contemporary Cambodian Music and Dance

Looking From Behind

It was early in the morning on January 6th, 2023. My preperformance jitters brought me over to Java Creative Café in the Toul Tompong neighborhood before everyone else. Tonight, we were premiering my friend's Khuon Chay's choreography *Phlov* (discussed in chapter four). While I was not performing, I was helping by cuing the music on my laptop and running light changes. It was no small task, and I was grateful to have a role in the production rather than be an audience member or fly on the wall researcher. In the morning, we arrived early so that we could complete final preparations for that night's performance. One part of our preparations was a small *sampeah kru*, teacher's ceremony, so we could present an offering to the teacher spirit *Louk Ta*, meaning grandfather but representative of the master spirit whose knowledge is internalized and embodied by all of us students. From what I could tell, it was typical before public performances to provide an offering.

I begin with the following photograph and what I recall when looking at it (see Figure 1). I chose this image because of where I am situated during the ceremony. I am seated behind my fellow dancers, mentors, peers, teachers, and friends. I look at their backs. The angle of their torsos. The inclination of their heads. The placement of their arms and hands. These are elements that I take in when I am behind them. What must I do while studying Khmer classical dance? Immediately after I snap this photo, I toss my phone to the side and join them, bowing before the offerings placed on the concrete risers

as we prayed to the teacher spirit. In addition to managing technical production for this performance, this moment represents my one of my primary locations during my fieldwork. Being seated behind everyone shapes my perspective and approach to writing about performance.

Figure 1. Khuon Chay (front left), Path Reaksmey (left foreground), Soeurn Chamreoun (front right), and Phon Sonya (right foreground) beginning to pray during a small sampeah kru. Photo by author.

Figure 2. Video still from Khuon Chay's video of kbach bat*. Original video courtesy of Path Reaksmey.*

My placement behind everyone has everything to do with the fact that I am a novice. At that point, I had only four months of Khmer classical dance training and was barely allowed to participate in a *sampeah kru* ceremony held the month prior. I share my status as a beginner to subvert my scholarly authority because there are limits in terms of what I can assert and claim about the Cambodian performing arts. Given my role as a non-performer, I ordinarily would not be a part of the ceremony. Yet, Khuon and the others allowed me to join them. Rather than be a distant observer, I was training with them in studio rehearsals and involved with the performance. I was entangled with the

scene in ways that made my presence almost necessary. As stressed as I felt, I was happy to join them in presenting a shortened version of *kbach bat*, the foundational movements, gestures, and ornaments that make up all Khmer classical dance (see Figure 2).

Watching from behind helped me through providing an offering as a complete beginner. They were all training me, directly and indirectly, though I think I lacked the aptitude for dance. I would make many quick side glances to Path Reaksmey who was in front of me to ensure my movements were correct or in time with the music. Other times, I would complete stare him down when my memory lapsed on the choreography or transitions in the choreography. Even as I struggled to keep up for *kbach bat*, there was something about performing for *Louk Ta*, even in a smaller, intimate setting, that felt important for this weekend's performances. I turn to the second photograph here to show another side (see Figure 2). Though I am on stage here, this is my usual vantage point: a top-down perspective. While a top-down perspective connotates hierarchical power dynamics, from this perspective, I am both an audience member and volunteer in the booth where I manage light and audio transitions while tracing the contours of performance with my eyes. Later, excerpts of *Phlov* were offered to *Louk Ta* and I returned to my main role from the booth. I started to reflect on how much I was learning and what I was yet to learn from everyone. I really began to rethink my fieldwork in terms of what could I offer to my community and how I could give back to everyone who was willing to let me share space with them. What does doing participant-observation mean for me? How do I convey that in writing? Scholarship tends to move slowly. As a

scholar and novice practitioner, I am forever behind my friends and interlocutors and continue to follow how they transform the world.

***

An ethnographic research project continuously changes in response to the field. This project was no different. I began with plans to conduct research in Cambodia's first gay dance company, Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA. While I spent much of my time in the company working and volunteering with the dancers at the company, I shifted my focus over time towards the broader scene of contemporary performance and what it encompassed in Cambodia. In some ways, this was always the goal of the dissertation, even if I did not know when starting my fieldwork. I was curious about all forms of creative work and cultural production in Cambodia and entered different arts spaces to gain a wider purview of what people were doing. These included inspirational work in the film community and the visual art spaces where there is a vibrant scene of creative dialogue that fell beyond the scope of the dissertation. I studied the *khloy* (bamboo flute), *sralai* (quadruple reed instrument), and *samphour* (double-headed barrel drum) at Friends Music School. I attended the Cultural Seasons Festival in Cambodia during February 2023. I trained under the supervision of master artist and dancer *Nak Kru* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro. I learned about the different lives of Cambodians from the diaspora who now reside in Cambodia for different reasons. I helped organize Amogkhabas - The Next Generation, a performance event featuring new works by friends and peers. Over time, I found that I wanted to reflect on a range of creative projects that I found myself in

relation with through my networks of musicians and dancers. I was inspired by them and remain committed to sharing their work.

I attempt to answer the following questions: (1) What is contemporary performance in Cambodia? (2) How are creatives negotiating codified tradition with contemporary cultural production? (3) How are artists and creatives reimagining Cambodian identity and engaging in worldmaking through contemporary Cambodian performance? (4) What forms of critique emerge through these works? In the sections that follow, I frame my approach to contemporary performance in Cambodia with an extended discussion of methodology and then broader themes and issues that permeate the rest of the dissertation.

Writing, Researching, and Experiencing Cambodia

Ethnographic fieldwork all too often is framed as a transformative experience where scholars experience the joys of musicking and dancing with their interlocutors. Jeff Todd Titon explains this as a "musical being-in the world" rooted in friendship where relationships in the field are defined through collaborative music-making and mutual gain (Titon 2008, 38). Timothy Rice describes that these transformative experiences deconstruct insider-outsider binaries and reframes them as dialogic relationships built on cultural appreciation (Rice 2008, 53). During my fieldwork, friendship and dialogic relationships were a core component to my ethnography. Each chapter of this dissertation reflects an important friendship and connection and shaped my scholarly frameworks. While relationship building and music-making are transformative aspects of fieldwork,

its foundations inherently rely on privilege, and these ethnographies are often written from dominant perspectives (Lawrence 2023, 7). Power and privilege shaped my fieldwork in ways that engaged the slippage of being and insider and outsider during my interactions with artists, performers, and broader community. These took place during participant-observation, studying music and dance, and walking around various areas in Cambodia; the reception of difference shaped my fieldwork experience. On one level, I carry the privilege of being a US-born researcher with a major dissertation research fellowship entering into spaces that are not where I have been enmeshed within. At the same time, I am ethnically Cambodian Chinese and can be perceived as a cultural insider. These impacted my ethnographic entanglements and evoked questions for my interlocutors.

Conducting ethnographic research is complicated and fraught. It leads to messy situations, discomfort, and uncomfortable conversations. One incessant and recurring conversation involves my positionality. I experience life as a gay Cambodian Chinese American. During my fieldwork, I navigated situating my background to interlocutors in different ways. Stating that I was Cambodian Chinese born in the United States outright was always met with confusion. I am easily seen as Chinese while out and about, and my last name certainly lends itself to that interpretation. At the same time, because ethnicity and nationality are easily linked together, this led to people understanding me as a Chinese person from China. Then, I would explain that my parents and grandparents were from Cambodia. From there, it would lead into questions about my pronunciation in Khmer which is heard as “not clear” because people wondered why I am not fluent if I

was Sino-Khmer. I would explain that my dad left Cambodia as a refugee, and my mom married him and emigrated to the United States in the 1990s. More times than I care to count, this prompts the question of whether or not my parents spoke any Khmer in the household. Almost begrudgingly, I would explain where I grew up in Portland, Oregon and life in the United States so that people would recognize that English was my main language of communication in the spaces that I inhabit. I was a lot of things that needed to be explained, and many of these I did take for granted from being in academic or American spaces. Sometimes, I had these conversations when I first met someone at an event or showcase. Other times, these conversations would take place towards the end of an interview when I would open space for my interlocutors to ask me questions.

After a while, it was easier to lead off by telling people to think of me as a "foreign" researcher, not necessarily as a form of deception but to slowly walk them through my background. Afterwards, they would prompt me for more information. Once they knew more about me, and this usually involved an overview of my family ancestry, my multiple selves began to make sense. Negotiating moments where asserting questions and my status and privilege as a scholar, I found myself an unruly presence or interloper marked by difference (Srinivasan 2011, 9), and it was something I navigated continually while conducting ethnographic research. I was always in a position where I must disclose my positionality and purpose in the space. It was a challenge and also an opportunity to build deeper relationships.

This is a project about artists and creatives based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Because I am the scholar-practitioner writing about them, it is also about my reactions to

their incredible work. These are contained by and constrained within my limited purview as an ethnographer and my varying roles when documenting each performance. Thus, I have also chosen to write about my ethnographic fieldwork through the lenses of thin description where I am less invested in the intensity of social interactions in context. Instead, I provide a contextual entry point that situates myself, the performers, choreographers, and audience members with the understanding that my perspective on the scene is incredibly limited. It is deeply autoethnographic. Thin description recognizes the expansiveness of the ethnographic moment and does not pretend to see every last detail (Jackson Jr. 2013, 13-14). Following John Jackson Jr.'s discussion of how interlocutors produce their own readings or forms of critique, I write slices of experience that depict how I engage with my interlocutors in the moment. I do not attempt to collapse their perspectives into ethnographic writing but add a filter by being transparent about my thoughts through narrative writing. I also echo discussions about patchwork ethnography where "ethnographic practice is always already founded on a negotiation between intersecting responsibilities" (Günel and Watanabe 2024, 136); these responsibilities are personal, professional, and political. There is also an unevenness or patchiness to my ethnography that directly results from my commitments to friends, interlocutors, and scholarship.

Working through these commitments, I consider where the messiness of fieldwork, as it has marked me, detracts from the critical richness of each artist's interventions. Closely and critically documenting those moments in hindsight presents a narrative that is unrepresentative of the broader scene and the important issues at play. I

depict different scenes as I encounter them and make a concerted effort to center the performance and the artist. At times, I pull back and let the creative work of my interlocutors take center stage, knowing that the caveats of my presence and perspective are always there. Thus, I provide a critical discussion of performance as it happens on the ground through my varying levels of involvement to bring into focus a snapshot of the scene. To accomplish this, I share my readings of these works through vulnerable and performative writing. Anthropologist Ruth Behar explores creative writing as a way to be vulnerable and resist the authoritative ethnographic eye/I (Behar 1996, 21). She writes about how searching to "become a bridge between the island and the diaspora" reveals a power disparity of being an institutionalized scholar and the privilege of U.S. nationality in relation to her community (Behar 1996, 24). Similarly, I am challenged by having to write as a scholar from the diaspora and its unique privileges to speak for, though I aspire to speak alongside, my interlocutors and friends. Recognizing the mobility of my subject position and relationship to the scene, I engage in performative ethnographic writing and activate experiences using different registers and voices, shifting between formal prose and reactions from in the moment.

Rendering some of my experiences felt impossible through standard academic prose. As shown with the opening monologue above where I am deeply reflective, I use different forms and styles of writing to render events, moments, and performances as I experienced them. I am always entangled with the ethnographic moment and take up the trope of the unreliable narrator when I find myself especially implicated in the moment. I reconstruct and narrate brief moments and conversations with my interlocutors while

attempting to reproduce my thoughts at the time. Writing as the unreliable narrator rhetorically asserts the limits of my perspective while addressing the specific details that I am attending to. For instance, as I examine scenes in performance, they are informed by my relationships with my interlocutors and what they have shared with me, and I always write from the perspective of how I see, understand, and interpret the moment and work as it unfolds. The centrality of my perspective as the researcher is therefore inextricable from my examination of the scene or moment. Additionally, I intersperse personal reflections as forewords or addendums to different chapters. I use a mix of prosaic or poetic writing and play with the space of the page to express my relationship to each chapter or creative artist. These contrasting styles and voices animate the dissertation, hopefully giving it character while identifying moments of tension and articulating interpretations of each performance. In what follows, I situate my ethnographic approach and explain how my thinking developed during my fieldwork. I develop two methods that shaped my navigation of the contemporary performance scene in Cambodia: following and doing ethnography from the booth.

Following as Method, Scholarship as Process

It's mid-March of 2023 and I've been formally studying Khmer classical dance since I started my fieldwork in August 2022 at NATYARASA. I'm in the back of the line at dance practice. This dance is completely new to me. I've never seen it before, but it seems like the other dancers already know it. My eyes flit up, down, left, right rapidly. My gaze quickly tracking as many of the movements in front of me. I attempt to mimic

each gesture, my right arm rising into position maybe about half a second behind the person in front of me. Oh, wow, we're going straight to the floor now. I feel my brain working overtime while I focus on everything: the person's movements in front me, my movements, the melody that I'm supposed to be singing but I'm hearing for the first time, everyone else's singing. I simply can't keep up. I'm utterly overwhelmed. My hands, fingers, legs flail around. I fail to step forward. My legs are in the wrong position. I make a quick switcheroo. In that time, I can no longer see what hand gestures they are making in front of me. My hands are supposed to be in front of me doing something.

"Just keep following," I thought to myself, trying to maintain composure.

I share this brief moment of panic while learning Khmer classical dance to put forward *following* as one way to work across disciplines and relationally. It's common in the study of Cambodian music and dance, as well as several music and dance practices, to "follow" the lead of someone else while learning music and dance. Despite how often music and dance are performed together, there are few and far cross-disciplinary engagements. Working as an ethnographer along the intersections of music and dance, I'm interested in how to critically engage with music and dance by developing following as a framework and technique. I use following as a way to theorize my ethnographic research, unpacking my methods, describing relationships in the field, and framing public-facing work.

Ethnomusicology and dance studies remain oddly distant from one another. To borrow Bruno Nettl's words, "ethnomusicologists have been ambivalent" about the study of music and dance, which is unfortunate given the interdisciplinarity of our research

(Nettl 2015, 453). However, this is not to say that there are not cross-disciplinary conversations going on. A rich array of scholarship straddles disciplinary boundaries. For instance, I am inspired by the writings of Barbara Browning (1995), Katherine Hagedorn (2001), Tomie Hahn (2008), Henry Spiller (2010), Matthew Rahaim (2012), Christina Sunardi (2015), Ama Oforiwaa Aduonum (2022), Hettie Malcomson (2023), Rumya Sree Putcha (2023), and Shayna Silverstein (2024) in their discussions of music/dance transmission, examinations of gendered difference, and engagement with the intertwined corporeal and sensorial experience of music and dance. In 2023, The International Council for Traditions of Music added "and Dance" to its name. Several scholars pushed for more work in choreomusicology-and the consideration of sound-movement as inseparable bodily phenomenon (Stepputat and Seye 2020, 17). In centering the body, there are ways to engage with the ontological turn in the humanities, an area in which ethnomusicology can make strong contributions. For instance, we may hear and move in different ways. These differences show the *different ways* people interface with the world. Taking up the question of difference, I am reminded of William Cheng's provocative question: "what is the purpose of sounding good?" (Cheng 2016, 8). He argues that the values inherent in "sounding good" are inextricable from our subjectivity and embodied reality. It is important to ask: how is sounding and looking good socially and culturally determined? The answer is relative to the particular beliefs, values, aesthetic preferences, and ideologies associated with a particular sonic-movement practice. For instance, as Made Hood explains, Balinese music and dance is intertwined with local philosophy, spirituality, cosmology, creativity, and the natural environment

(Hood 2020, 112). Thus, music and dance are inseparable from local ontologies, and its aesthetic constitution further embodies that knowledge.

At the same time, no single performance practice or genre is entirely uniform or standardized. In the case of Khmer classical music and dance, and no doubt other genres, each teacher has their own styles of playing or dancing, often referred to as *phlov* or path, that are often dependent on how their teachers played or danced. Within the metaphor of *phlov* as representative of style, I understand that it is more reflective of a history of knowing music and dance in the body. In the context of learning Khmer classical music and dance and following teachers and peers, I find it a way of coming to know at least one lineage or perspective of the practice. In training, I acquire one way of how to play a particular piece or one way of performing a gesture. I found myself thinking, "so this is how they conceptualize that phrase or sequence of movements and gestures." The process of following, thus, offers the follower the perspective of the person or thing being followed. In turn, these perspectives present different ways of interacting with the world and our bodily capacity.

Following is also a methodology. When I began my fieldwork in Phnom Penh, I briefly remember my mentors and friends telling me to allow the field to guide my research. In this sense, following the field is about openness to experience and understanding that not only our proposed projects will change but our worldviews will change as well. When thinking about how I changed during fieldwork, I am reminded of Kay Kaufman Shelemay's words: "Ethnographers also experience a process of becoming" (2020, 4). I was shaped by training to become a dancer, learning new

instruments, and experiencing race, gender, sexuality, and nationality in Cambodia. For example, following my experiences formed the foundations for and contextualize questions around performance and diasporic subjectivity. In fieldwork, I began to explicitly reflect on this process of becoming when I was once asked:

"Is your plan to become a dancer?" My friend Khuon Chay asked during a practice break early in my fieldwork.

Figure 3. Photo of author following another dancer's movements during rehearsal on June 19th, 2023. Photo by Panhara Chakrapong.

I was a complete and total beginner at Khmer classical dance. I had attended workshops and observed some dance practices in the United States prior to fieldwork in Cambodia but nothing prepared me for a career as a dancer, especially as someone who spent the better part of ten plus years as a classically trained violinist and only in college began to study more music and dance practices.

"I don't know. I'll certainly try my best to learn but I don't think I'll be any good." I replied, feeling dissatisfied with my ability to learn and memorize choreography.

"I think if you want to be, you can," he said in support of my efforts.

I began to wonder whether I wanted to become a dancer. Was that my goal as a researcher?

I was, and I think continue to be, immersed in that process of becoming (a dancer). My research is informed through this process of coming to know through actively following the sounds, movements, and people around me. The way that I follow what is around me and the ways those sound and move are a part of that process of becoming (a scholar-practitioner). I try to move like a dancer. I try to understand things like a dancer. Yet, following does not mean knowing or being the same as the person followed. There is an element of unknowability where it is impossible to totally comprehend another person who is inherently different. It is impossible to become other people through following them. However, following can help make sense of difference and how that shapes personal experiences in the world.

Following also offers a framework that centers local thought, discourse, and needs by coming to know and prioritize issues relevant to the community. It calls for deep and

active listening *to*, *with*, and *alongside* people. I place an emphasis on understanding their ideas, values, beliefs, and agendas. In following, I find that it situates power with the entity being followed. Following is a deeply intimate process. Crystal Song (2023) describes in ballroom dance the exchanges back and forth between leader and follower, agency and pleasure, and possibilities for empowerment that Asian American women can find in the face of totalizing heteronormative whiteness. She ultimately points towards how exchanges between the follower and leader are inherently collaborative in the pursuit of pleasure, joy, and liberation. Attending to following and leading activates what I discuss in the next section as ethnography from the booth where research cannot be divorced from the projects of my interlocutors. It is a back-and-forth exchange where I am as much a participant in their work as they are a participant in my scholarship. Thus, following is deeply relational. It relies on careful communication and trust while navigating and negotiating the ebbs and flows of movement and exchange. Likewise, it recognizes the power of institutions and entities. The ethnographer follows in support of the interests of the community. While following the field can indeed be powerful and lead to growth, trust, and relationships, Catherine Appert and Sidra Lawrence (2020, 9) carefully note that "fieldwork, like all experience, is always marked by and marks raced, sexed, and gendered bodies." Following may come with its own risks and necessitates caution and criticality.

"It goes against your own technique," *Nak Kru* Chanthou said to me in Khmer while driving her student and I to a more remote area outside of the city. This statement remains with me for a few reasons. I had a much easier time learning a melody by ear and

capturing most of the twists and turns of the melody than I did learning classical dance choreography. I could also more readily sing following the voice of someone else, in other words sing along with someone else. It highlighted the fact that my struggles from studying dance stemmed from issues in my dance technique and experience. I had no problem knowing where the beat fell but plenty of issues finding the correct movement path and trajectory to arrive on the beat.

Following is not only a framework but also a technique. In my fieldwork, I spent much of my time thinking about technique in both music and dance. This difference showed how my bodily reality was shaped by the range of my technical skills in music and dance. Ben Spatz (2015, 26, emphasis retained) wrote that our knowledge of the world is a result of how we "encounter and *come to know* reality through technique." He explains that technique comes from the development of embodied knowledge. To extend this further, this embodied knowledge comes from passively learning from the world and surrounding environment. In conceptualizing following as a technique, I echo what Diana Taylor describes as the repertoire and how embodied practice is "an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge" (Taylor 2003, 26). Following as a technique considers how the granular details where specific modes of embodiment, knowledge, and ideas are transmitted between master and pupil. In Khmer classical music, *phlov*, while literally meaning path or road, is considered a technique. As an important metaphorical concept, *phlov* engages lineage, temporality, action, and transformation. Through *phlov*, a musician activates a history of sonic stylings and invokes it often alongside other

musicians, bringing to life a heterophonic texture rife with varying histories and embodied knowledge that go on to shape future interpretations of the melody.

While dancers do not refer to *phlov*, they gesture towards it. I returned to the United States from my fieldwork in September 2023 and joined Modern Apsara Company, a Cambodian classical dance group based in Long Beach. They were teaching us the choreography to *robam phuong neari* and I had added a gesture that was not a part of the original choreography which glided the flower gesture onto my earlobe before releasing the gesture and proceeding further.

"That's kbach bong Prum's," one of the instructors at Modern Apsara Company said during rehearsal in March 2024.

I had studied at NATYARASA, Prum's dance company, during my fieldwork and picked up that movement as a part of this dance's choreography from his studio. I knew he made his own modifications to the choreography, and I was aware that this movement was one of his inventions. In the context of Cambodian classical dance, it was small gestures such as this that sparked conversation about changes in choreography and gestures. In one sense, making changes to classical choreography challenges the existing set choreography passed down from previous masters. At the same time, these changes reflect the personal philosophy and training of the instructor and choreographer. In Long Beach, the instructors were not opposed to this movement as much as they wanted consistency and uniformity across the performers when it came time to perform the dance later for Khmer New Year.

Coming from my experiences learning music and dance in Cambodia, I propose that following is a technique of music and dance and tool that works across both disciplines that engages with epistemic and ontological difference. My concept of following is shaped broadly by feminist thought, queer theory, American and ethnic studies, and affect theory. Following is inherently a queer practice through how it explores relational alignment. Sara Ahmed writes about following in terms of alignment and how bodies are oriented towards particular movements, spaces, actions, and choices that reveal forms of social commitment and investment (Ahmed 2006, 14-17). While writing, I think about the following questions: What am I oriented towards? When viewing a performance, what does the performer want me to follow with my eyes? Where is the follow spot on stage? During rehearsals and practices, what are the specific techniques and technical details—including but not limited to gestures, bodily positioning, and staging—should I be attending to? These questions about orientation force me to examine how my relationships and experiences shape my reading of the scene as well as my personal attachments and perspective. What I turn towards or focus my attention on reveals my commitments to an idea, agenda, perspective, and interest informed by my interlocutors and what they choose to disclose with me. It is a commitment to frame and discuss my interlocutor's performances generatively and meaningfully by working towards relational alignment.

In my work, I accompany my interlocutors, following their journey and becoming emotionally invested in the work. Engaging Leisy J. Abrego's framing of accompaniment and the affective and emotional nature of doing ethnographic work, Leisy J. Abrego

explains that accompaniment "requires humility [and] carries immense responsibility" in terms of engaging with and responding to the deep emotions of the community and producing "more honest and ethical research" rooted in the power of interpersonal connection (Abrego 2024, 39-40). Following takes up accompaniment and values humility in outlining the process of knowledge production in ways that not only disrupts expectations of scholarly objectivity but activates the meaning and significance of interpersonal relationships in ethnographic fieldwork. Accompaniment means that I show up and I step up to assist in ways that my interlocutors need from me; this is at the core of what I discuss next about doing ethnography from the booth. I follow the emotional and personal narratives of my interlocutors because their narratives as it intersects with my experiences with them accompany my analysis and reading of their work. It also means expressing how the emotional and personal shape production and the creative process and how these generate instances of alignment and misalignment that must be addressed and reconciled to complete the work.

Following and the role of accompaniment also invites attention to queer and non-normative modes of relationality and the role of misalignment. In this sense, I identify connection and disconnection as it relates to interpersonal dynamics. Found family and the fostering of non-normative relationships is a core component of my thinking and how it produces new forms of lineage and dis/connections. I think alongside the performances, my interlocutors, and also the people around me. This includes reflecting on dialogues with my landlady and friend, *Aum* Yoo, who helped me process and think about the contemporary (see chapter one). A politics of queer following also informs how I

understand the lineage of the contemporary performance as an interlinked web of connections shaped significantly by the work of *Nak Kru* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and Prumsodun Ok who trained some of the choreographers and performers (see chapters three and four), as well as trained me in Khmer classical dance. In turn, I recognize and realize how following lineage involves intentional disjuncture and dis/connect and includes natural deviations and disruptions that reimagine and remediate lineages of performance, technique, culture, and identity.

Following, queerness, and lineage engage how worlding and transnational connections shape knowledge production and embodied self-making. For instance, writing and researching as a queer scholar from diaspora inherently comes with an orientation towards queerness and difference. I follow the contours of queerness that question and unsettle normative approaches in Cambodian performance and frame it in terms of Cambodian-ness, elaborated later in the dissertation. Recalling Sara Ahmed's thinking about queer slants as the interlinked realities of straight and queer worlds (Ahmed 2006, 106), using queerness as a lens allows me to disrupt the centrality of ethno-nationalism while recognizing how it cannot be divorced from the context of my work. Furthermore, queerness activates an orientation towards the ambivalence, ambiguity, and, what I refer to later as, muddiness that informs the contradicting registers of Cambodian subjectivity. Looking for and engaging with slants identifies the slippages and diversions within lineages of performance, the cultivation of technique and style, projects of self-making, as well as diasporic and cosmopolitan formations that all shape the many ways to follow a person and their work.

In learning to follow someone's voice, body, and movements, our relationships and responsibilities to each other change. We move into greater proximity, greater intimacy. We become aware of the range in our abilities as well as the range in the abilities of the people we follow. It reveals points of alignment and misalignment by forcing us to confront difference firsthand through how we process, think, move, and experience the world around us. Following is a way of perceiving situated knowledges, a methodological framework, and a move towards collaboration. Specifically, I follow the performance, artist and their works, the community, different technical elements, aesthetic concepts, and the overall production; these guide my scholarly commitments and how I frame each chapter. Thus, it informs how I engage with scholarship and what types of interventions I make throughout this project. For instance, I ask: What does following a performance entail? How does the artist convey their argument through following their approach? What can it mean to follow an artist over time?

Ethnography from the Booth

While conducting my ethnographic research, I assisted with the production of two performance showcases with works from these events forming the basis for chapters three and four. This section engages my experience as a part of the production team to consider another participatory mode for ethnographies of performance beyond the classic dimensions of ethnographer as audience or autoethnographies of the performing ethnographer. I present the idea that an ethnographer can exist on the production team. Who better than the constantly present ethnographer attuned to interpersonal interactions,

planning, scheduling, and performers? From this vantage point, I will write from the booth as a methodological framework for ethnographies of performance that extend beyond audience-performer binaries towards other modes of participatory work. In doing so, I invite additional considerations about what an ethnographer's commitments are to their interlocutors, what are the shared goals and desired outcomes when putting together a performance work, and how these collaborations shift ethical approaches to ethnographies of performance.

One of my roles during fieldwork was to manage the lights and sounds for the black box theater. To be transparent, I have neither studied audio engineering nor extensively used a digital audio workstation, let alone managed lights for a production. Yet, I found myself in GarageBand with a handful of audio files and a little too much freedom. I volunteered to help mix audio for Chakra, one of the choreographers and dancers for the project Amogkhabas – The Next Generation discussed later in the dissertation. Chakra was choreographing a solo piece for the showcase using music from Khmer artists, including a Khmer jazz group's performance of the piece "Take Five" among other various tracks that were unlabeled. He gave me the audio files and showed me the specific sections where he wanted the audio to transition between tracks, leaving me to decide how the whole work would come together and shape the trajectory of the choreography (see Figure 4). Beyond those instructions, I repeatedly presented the audio to Chakra, having him listen to it for feedback and noting places needed remastering. Once completely settled, I sent the final version to Chakra for him to finalize his choreography in the weeks leading up to the showcase. In my interview with him

afterwards, he expressed that he thought my overall track was really weird but "that it grew on him."

I share this anecdote to begin a discussion about how being involved with the production impacted my relationship to the choreographers, artists, creatives, and their respective works. I am invested in what I term "ethnography from the booth," a way of understanding research from the black box, from the production team, breaking down the boundaries of theory and method as well as performance and production. In this sense, I extend my methodological approach of following to consider how technical production informs the relational elements of following. In particular, I consider ethnography from the booth as a dialogic process where leading and following continually exchange between myself in the booth and the choreographer and performers on stage. My discussion of Chakra's work among others here are deeply informed by my experiences with their projects or communities, ranging from shallower to deeper immersion.

My involvement as a lighting and sound technician, amateur audio engineer, and assistant event organizer, reveals how my relationship to artistic production is inextricable from my scholarship and tied to scholarship rooted in decolonial approaches. Scholars have discussed at length about how decolonial research methods should be deeply relational and collaborative, especially in relation to the ethnographic method and its history of extractive research. Drawing on performance studies scholarship, D. Soyini Madison has written about critical ethnography through positioning the ethnographer as audience or performer, drawing attention to the ethnographer's power and positionality relative to their interlocutors to articulate how ethnographers observe and view these

network of relations (she writes specifically about personal experience, cultural politics, social power, and resistance) through their subjectivity (Madison 2005, 174). Yet, much of these relationships are defined within the audience-performer binary, assuming the researcher does not occupy another role.

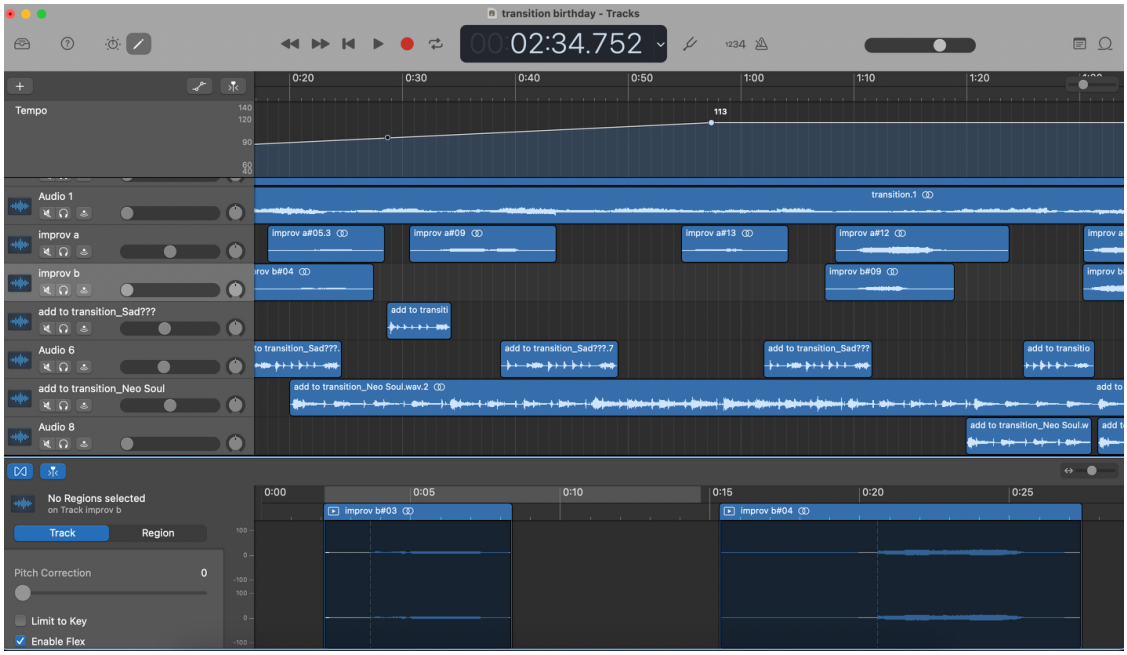

Figure 4. GarageBand screen capture of the audio files for Sokhomsan's Birthday *(2023).*

Collaboration is key for organizing performances and highlights differences between people, their identities and subjectivity, interpersonal modes of communication, and creative approaches. Luke Lassiter describes collaborative projects as sharing "not only power and control but also a vision of citizenship and action that […] is at the heart of both collaborative ethnography and public anthropology" (Lassiter 2005, 102). I take this to mean that the collaborative elements of performance and research are intertwined

through their shared goals and outcomes. Dwight Conquergood suggests that performance ethnography foregrounds practice-based research, emphasizing the primacy of the embodied knowledge that comes from engaging in cultural production for the writing and representation of people in scholarship (Conquergood 1991, 190). Ethnography from the booth is a practice-based approach that requires studying and understanding embodied practices to adequately apply and use the techniques of production. I am informed by both studying music and dance as well as production elements I learned during fieldwork. Engaging her commitments as a scholar and taiko player/community member, Deborah Wong uses the framework of performative ethnography to convey how performance can reimagine identities and subjectivities through a reflexive approach focused on how performance moves performers, audience members, and the ethnographer (Wong 2008, 78-79). In my reflexive writing, narration and development of ideas, I consider how I relate to the work through reflective interludes and ethnographic vignettes. In particular, I speak to how my overall disposition, and the process of collaboration were shaped by working in the booth.

My involvements in production require that I am transparent about behind the scenes labor. Working from the perspective of playwrights, Dorinne Kondo frames her creative ethnographic work through the lens of racialized artistic labor, putting backstage interactions and the work of the artist as the core of her discussions (Kondo 2018, 4-5). Specific to chapters three and four, I overview labor and preparatory work that impacts the performance and its overall production that speak to careful negotiations and tensions behind the scenes and indicate moments where I was shaping the performance. These

embodied experiences extend to people both on- and offstage, recognizing that stage craft and technical production workers are performers themselves and thus part of a larger community of actors or agents. These practices of collaboration and embodiment that can get written out of scholarship in favor of complex theoretical paradigms and representations of the exotic other. By attending to production, I bring into focus the importance of the process and that process is dialogic, drawing on Linda Tuhiwai-Smith's discussion of supporting Indigenous research agendas, emphasizing the importance of process for respectful research that facilitates and moves towards self-determination (Tuhiwai-Smith 2012, 130). In the context of my discussion, writing from the booth highlights the communal elements of process, discussion, and negotiation in creating performance works.

I propose that writing or working from the booth offers a model by which ethnographers of performance may find alternative kinds of participatory action and research. My understanding of these contemporary works and their narratives are shaped by how I have turned the lights on or off and where I have clicked play on my laptop. These seemingly simple tasks have high stakes, e.g., the consequences of failing to play the audio or missing a lighting cue. These forced me to attend to the performance in different ways. Not 'just' an audience member and performance analyst, I had to understand the perspective of the choreographer and creative, and I had to watch intentionally for crucial transitional moments and note down all the cues. It involved multiple and lengthy rehearsals where I procedurally learned elements of theatrical production. In this extended process of working from the booth, my goals shifted. It was

no longer about research and rigorous documentation. For me, it was about working collaboratively to support their goals and a greater collective effort. Working from the booth requires a transformative critical ethics. Following and ethnography from the booth involves what Xóchitl Chávez articulates as sincere collaborative intention. In her work about bringing Oaxacan brass bands to the University of California, Riverside, she provides extensive transparency about the process of event organizing, how it promoted cultural exchange, and created a decolonial contact zone that radically transformed the space of the university. Echoing the values of process in decolonial research methods, I take seriously what sincere collaborative intention means for expressing the challenges and difficulties of producing events and working in the booth. I write with the intention of revealing my ethical commitments and stakes as well as laying out the tensions and emotions underlying the entire process.

Performance is a collaborative process, relying on a network of bodies from rehearsals, pre-production, production, post-production, etc. If the goal is to put on a successful show, then it requires deep collaboration and everyone playing a role. My role was not simply just a researcher but an involved collaborator, working together with all the performers to successfully present their works for the public. If decolonial work requires collaboration and consideration of our collective relationality, then for ethnographies of performance, writing from the booth offers a model for conducting ethnographic research in the realms of music, dance, and performance studies where the ethnographer is closely involved with and invested in the production process despite not being an active performer in the scene. Rather than focusing on the ethnographer as

performer or ethnographer as observer, doing ethnography from the booth promotes a perspective that engages performance analysis from the lens of production, considering the interplay and dimensions of performance and production while inverting researcher-community power dynamics through an unsettling of the audience-performer binary. In turn, involvement with the technical production resituates power with the artists and community, serving the broader goals of creating and curating performance.

Towards Contemporary Ontologies of Performance in Cambodia

I re-route scholarship about Cambodian performance towards the contemporary by opening conversations about ontology and performance in Cambodia. This section includes an overview of conversations about the Cambodian performing arts in order to situate the plural aspects of Cambodian subject formation and Cambodian-ness embedded within contemporary Cambodian performance. The vast majority of Cambodian scholarship is enmeshed in discussions around preserving Cambodian traditional practices due to the devastating impact of the Khmer Rouge genocide that eliminated 80-90% of scholars and artists. These scholarly conversations have shifted from a previously preservationist and descriptive approach towards issues of cultural sustainability, memory and trauma. Recently, scholars have taken steps to address the impact of U.S. Cold War politics in Cambodia in generating the conditions for the civil war and genocide during the 1970s. Scholars focused on documenting Cambodian music and dance was instrumental for doing important restorative work post-genocide (Cravath 1986, 2008; Keo 2005; Khean, Dorivan, Lina, and Lenna 2003; Phim and Thompson 1999; Sam

1988; 2002). Yet, this has led to uneven investments into the Cambodian performing arts where court centric practices remain the focus of the conversation because of a salvage oriented and archival impulse.

Following the turn of the century and the enshrinement of Cambodian classical dance as UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage, Cambodian dance scholarship investigated issues about intergenerational trauma and cultural memory. For instance, Judith Hamura indicates how the performance of Khmer classical dance responds to memories and trauma from the Khmer Rouge genocide and the utopian imagining of Angkor (Hamera 2002). Suppya Nut (2014, 2015) traces the genealogy of Cambodian classical dance through how women across mythology, history, and performance asserted their own agency through classical art forms. Cultural tourism, as another issue, raises questions between the commodification of Cambodian classical dance and its dancers for touristic consumption and its sacred roots (Tuchman-Rosta 2014, 2019). Burridge and Frumberg (2010), in their anthology, feature the voices of Cambodian women who simultaneously uphold preserving court practices but also articulate how an emphasis on court traditions constrains their creative agency in producing new works. For instance, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro (2010) discusses how her dance drama *Samritechak* was perceived as being against Cambodian national identity despite how she has transformed the Cambodian performing arts scene. Furthermore, Toni Shapiro-Phim (2020) examines Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's work *The Lives of Giants* to show how the arts are a way of subversively critiquing the political climate of Cambodia to imagine alternative futures.

Meanwhile, scholarship about Cambodian music has drawn attention to questions of adaptation and transformation in the 21st century. For instance, Stephanie Khoury explores spiritual potency and the stage to reveal how ritual configurations of space are "challenged by the redefinition of court-related dance and theatre in Cambodia as ritual and non-religious performances co-exist" (Khoury 2017, 459). Additionally, Francesca Billeri discusses changes in dance and theatre in her analysis of the televised broadcasting of Cambodian theatre. She observes how "in contemporary Cambodia, the situation of traditional music is a paradox" between the maintenance of tradition and how these mediated performances reveal transformations in Cambodian theatrical stories, music, and length of production (Billeri 2020, 98). These broader transformations reveal a generational tension between how elders are concerned with the contamination of the tradition and how technocultural flows have shaped cultural production in Cambodia. These trends can also be observed in Cambodian popular music. Cambodian American scholar LinDa Saphan writes about how Cambodian alternative music has been defined by the social elites and integrates stylistic elements from rock and roll, hip hop, Korean popular music, and French popular music are reflective of tourism, Western musical influences, and the monarchy (Saphan 2012, 2017). Sophea Seng shows that these songs take on new meaning in diaspora. Through their re-performances or covers, these songs produce moments of joy by remembering life pre-genocide and reimagining Cambodian diasporic subjectivity (Seng 2025).

The transformative potential of music and dance remain crucial for Cambodian peoples across the world. Yet, the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide and the

continuous fallout of 20th century Cold War politics remain present in all these scholarly conversations. With this hyper-fixation on cultural preservation, memory, genocide, and trauma in Cambodian Studies, there has been limited attention on ongoing cultural production that falls beyond the scope of traditional practices. In the late Y-Dang Troeung's book *Refugee Lifeworlds* (2022), she reroutes Cambodian scholarship from issues of memory and trauma towards questions around cripistemology, aphasia, and debility. I am deeply inspired by Lina Chhun's work where she articulates the limits of memory work in engaging the psychosomatic and deeply embodied aspects of being to address questions of relationality, affect, and Cambodian cosmology (Chhun 2019, 36). She argues that an emphasis on memory perpetuates a historicization of Cambodia that trauma should inherently shatter. Instead of working through fragmentation, she articulates an approach rooted in palimpsestic time which "reveals the cyclical and recursive relationship of silence and disclosure, whereby the circulation and recycling of stories produces different forms of knowledge and knowing—each iteration of experience containing something old and something new, informed by the context in which retelling takes place" (Chhun 2019, 47). I refract her discussion of palimpsestic time through the term *sahasamay*, the contemporary, as another way to engage the idea and reimagine knowledge production about Cambodia and redirect and reorient scholarly attention around memory, trauma, and catastrophe.

In Khmer, artists and creatives can express the genre of contemporary performance using the word *sahasamay*. While I discuss this further in chapter one, *sahasamay* is formed through two words with Pali/Sanskrit roots: *sa-ha* meaning united

or one and *samay* meaning time or era—suggesting a togetherness in time or co-temporaneous-ness that contrasts with other temporal words in Khmer for modern, recent, new, now, and present day. Understanding ideas of the contemporary requires explaining the relationship between Cambodia and modernity. If nation-building is at the core of modernity in Cambodia, then I contend that Cambodia has multiple, palimpsestic modernities. These include Angkor as the imperial (and imagined national) power in mainland Southeast Asia during antiquity until the late 15th century and residual centers of power after the collapse of Angkor. Under French colonization, Cambodia became reconstituted as a French protectorate as a part of French Indochina. Meanwhile, nationalist and resistance movements in the early 20th century pushed against French colonial control. For example, Buddhist resistance movements helped Cambodia to retain its script rather than transitioning to Latin script. Following World War II and global decolonization movements, Cambodia proclaimed independence in 1945 and, after years of political instability with France and internal separatist movements, formally became independent from France in 1953.

During the 1950s and 60s, as a core component of augmenting and strengthening Cambodian national identity, cultural expression engaged the legacy of Angkor through reclaiming aesthetics from the bas-reliefs and structures, leading to works such as the apsara dance as well as architectural innovations as seen through the work of Vann Molyvann. Starting in 1970, Cambodia became embroiled in a civil war, genocide, and extended period of reconstruction until the 1990s when the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) left in 1993 and Cambodia joined the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations in 1999 following further political instability. In briefly outlining these several political shifts, I write to suggest how modernity for Cambodia includes and exceeds colonial contact, especially regarding retention and reclamation movements from French colonization onwards. Furthermore, returning to the term *sahasamay* and the contemporary, I view *sahasamay* and its melding of temporalities as a palimpsestic element within contemporary Cambodian performance that reaches into and extends beyond the centrality of war, genocide, and violence to interweave and thread fragmented worlds together.

After the first generation of students from the Royal University of Fine Arts in the 1990s, contemporary performance in Cambodia began to crystalize in the 2000s shaped by global tours and performances of Cambodian cultural heritage as well as a growth of non-governmental organizations focused on the arts and foreign interests and investments. Contemporary performance in Cambodia often consists of the avant-garde, hybrid, and intercultural works that fall outside of constructed categories of tradition, classical, and folk. These are critical works that aim to reimagine of the world through a coalescing of space and time. Furthermore, contemporary performance can also be the rearticulations of traditional, classical, and folk genres; these are also contemporary as they are set to new locations and contexts, cast on to different bodies, etc. I take performance as the site where identity is continually redefined through the contemporary. I situate these works within ideas of the contemporary, diasporic ontologies of dis/connect, and how the contemporary facilitates worldmaking in Cambodia. I claim a

different genealogy for the contemporary, touched by but not dependent on Global North fetishizations of the contemporary avant-garde.

Sahasamay and the contemporary exist in relation to ideologies of tradition, authenticity, and heritage. Tradition and heritage are based on linear narratives of history and mediated through cultural nationalism. Walter Benjamin critiques historicism for its investments into a universal and authentic truth (Benjamin 1968, 255). As folklorists and ethnomusicologists have shown, ontologies of truth or authenticity can also be expressed in how tradition and heritage are historically situated and justified through social, national, and cultural value (Hobsbawm 1983; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995). In turn, these filter into and inform how social identities are constructed and imagined and depend on identitarian forms of history. As situated within cultural nationalism, notions of tradition and heritage can be tied to critiques of liberal humanism also. Sylvia Wynter (2003) uses the analytics of Man1 and Man2/bios and mythos to show how these constructs have naturalized constructions of self and Other/human and non-human. She describes this partially as the "principle of nonhomogeneity" where Otherness is produced through abjection from colonial narratives (Wynter 2003, 322). Contemporary Cambodian performance, as an avant-garde practice, acts as an Other or alternate approach to the Cambodian performing arts that does not inherently prioritize traditionalism as it has been nationally instituted and upheld. Rather, it is a genre of cultural production that pushes boundaries of acceptability and is less invested in these teleological narratives of tradition and authenticity or conforming to cultural nationalism. *Sahasamay* and the contemporary intimates that Cambodian cultural production as pluralistic in scope,

suggesting that what constitutes Cambodian likewise contains multitudes and inherently heterogenous. Thus, the relationship between identity and cultural production becomes increasingly malleable, especially when considering the palimpsestic ruptures shaping modern Cambodia. By deconstructing temporalities of tradition, I suggest that contemporary performance navigates the plural concepts of past, present, and imagined future and pluriversal formations where alternate constructions of identity and cultural production lie.

Arturo Escobar (2020, 26) argues for a pluriverse where there are multiple, interdependent worlds engaged in liberatory praxis aimed towards new possibilities for being in and for the world. Escobar's pluriverse understands that lifeworlds are rhizomatically linked and unsettles universalism and homogeneity. The palimpsests of Cambodia activate the multiplicities of the pluriverse to realize expressions of Cambodian-ness and the reformation of Cambodian subjectivity. María Regina Firmino-Castillo (2016, 60) discusses how Indigenous performance enacts relationality as an ontological activity, activating human and more than human relations to express plural modes of Indigenous being. Firmino-Castillo (2016, 69-70) indicates how Indigenous cultural production is infused with emic cosmologies that signify trans-ontological possibility. Informed by the traditional and ancestral as well as transnational, cosmopolitan, and diasporic flows, contemporary Cambodian performance engages the plural constructions of Cambodian identity, emic knowledge, and ontologies, envisioning otherwise and relational possibilities for being in the world through cross-temporal and cross-spatial imaginaries.

If ontology is how people live and think about the world, them this is always informed by identity and personal experience. Therefore, performance is the space where ontology can manifest, crystalize, and be mediated alongside identity. Ontologies about performance are often framed in terms of its ephemeral, intangible, elusive, transient qualities and its role in bringing about social change (Camp 2023). Moreover, through the instability of performance as a cultural object, Peggy Phelan writes that "performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies" (Phelan 1993, 148), which I understand as always socially marked and relationally constructed by the performer and the audiences. These generate multiple interpretations and meanings. I take as a given that the performance works that I examine are living breathing experiences that generate critical discourse. Also, I view these works as representative of and informed by the ideologies and ontologies and worldviews of their creators and interpreters. A choreographer's, composer's, performer's, and viewer's identity are inextricable from the work and therefore performance is entangled through its interdependent and relational ontologies (Escobar 2020; Wilson 2005). In this sense, I write under the assumption that performance lives as an extension of the artists and the consumers of performance and with the understanding that these are filtered through my perspective. I work towards contemporary ontologies of performance where situated perspectives are implicated in performance and coincide with identitarian experiences including race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and articulations of the self and Other.

I formulate contemporary Cambodian ontologies of performance by analyzing how Cambodian subject formation is situated and reimagined in contemporary

Cambodian performance primarily from the perspective of rising, younger artists. For many of the artists that I worked with, the echoes and traces of the Khmer Rouge permeate their lifeworlds, shaping their experiences in Cambodia and the diaspora. However, engaging how Karen Shimakawa (2002, 3) explains that abjection "does not result in the formation of an Asian American subject or even an Asian American object," I argue that Cambodian subjectivity, as it is both externally shaped and individually determined, expands beyond war, genocide, displacement, and trauma in the contemporary moment.

This is not to say that genocide and trauma do not play a role in Cambodian subjectivity and performance. As a crucial parallel, Davorn Sisavath (2021) explains that repurposed war metal from bombs create new "modes of existence that make sense of a failed war [through] creative and critical expression" where "traces of imperial violence" reveal a search for alternative futures that recognize a radical interdependence with the world. In fact, conflict remains as one of *many* aspects shaping Cambodian subjectivity and contemporary performance. If Cambodian subjectivity demands being legible through the framework of cultural nationalism and the centrality of trauma, it inherently relies on the Cambodian performing arts occupying the status as a victim, participating in humanitarian desires for a rescuable subject as Emily Hue (2025) argues about Burmese diasporic performers. Instead, I contend that Cambodian subject formation is not solely formed through trauma but a confluence of intersecting and overlapping worlds influenced by technocultural flows, empire, migration, displacement, and identity formation. Furthermore, contemporary Cambodian performance engages the pluriverse

and offers a critical reframing of Cambodian subjectivity. Through reshaping the contours of Cambodian subjectivity, I challenge the central frameworks undergirding scholarship about Cambodia for its darker positioning of Cambodia and its peoples.

I recast Cambodian subject formation in terms of futurity, hope, and connection. Contemporary Cambodian performance, in its deviation from cultural nationalism and missives of cultural preservation, operates as a genre marked by queerness. In fact, queerness has always been a part of Cambodian performing arts from antiquity to the present and contemporary performance has always been shaped by queer subjects, including directors and organizers of non-governmental organizations from the early 2000s and the more recent work of Prumsodun Ok. My thinking here is deeply informed by José Esteban Muñoz's framing of queerness and its performative indeterminacy. He proposes queer utopian memory and utopian longing as cross-temporal ways of generatively engaging the specters and traces of violence to envision otherwise possibilities (Muñoz 2019 [2009], 35, 46-48). Shaped by how queerness remains temporally unfixed in the horizon, contemporary Cambodian performance intimates and desires a world that encapsulates the indefinite, multiple, and amorphous qualities of Cambodian subjectivity or Cambodian-ness. This world activates queer lineages and dis/continuities and remasters the narrativization of Cambodia in terms of radical interdependence and relationality.

I examine contemporary performance works that sit at the intersections of the past, present, and future and the nexus of spatialized experiences marked by globalization, migration, and diaspora. Returning to the idea of *sahasamay*, it evokes a

connotation of plurality and relationality guided by different subject positions. *Sahasamay* also reveals the slippage between tradition and contemporary and the local, global, and the glocal. As shown throughout this dissertation, contemporary Cambodian performance activates Global North discussions of postmodern temporality in ways that lends itself towards the possibilities of worlding. Worlding is a critical process of generating multiplicities and pluralities that are attuned spatial and temporal relations and actively transform the world (Gillman, Greusz, and Wilson 2004, 262, 265). When thinking about world genres, it raises questions around difference, the exotic Other, and Western and non-Western binaries. It speaks to the uneven worlding and globalization of cultural practices, concepts, aesthetics, and ideas all marked by difference. Rene Lysloff (2016, 503) explains that worlding reveals how artists participate in global arts discourse that engages questions of difference and ideas of the exotic Other. As I examine throughout, worlding contemporary Cambodian performance articulates what it means to be contemporary, addressing conceptions about the exotic Other and engaging cross-temporal and cross-spatial imaginaries.

Worlding invites new approaches for understanding subject formation, and I read performances in this dissertation for worlding informed by the diaspora and queerness. Việt Lê further explains that worlding and reworlding as a process of "reconstituting and relocating oneself again and again" where contemporary art becomes "tactical negotiations of sites as continual process of becoming, morphing." Lê indicates how local and diasporic artists, as they are liminal in both space and time, demonstrate how these identities are continually in flux (Lê 2021, 107-113). Extending Lê's ideas, I consider

how worlding plays out in the genre of *sahasamay* through its uniting of different times and eras. In this dissertation, I am drawn to how contemporary ontologies of performance in Cambodia reflects the coalescing and worlding of time, space, and identity in a purportedly post-genocide and post-colonial world. I examine how contemporary Cambodian artists negotiate sonic, movement, and aesthetic practices and to convey contemporary Cambodian performance ontologies, its global entanglements, and possibilities for worldbuilding. Through enactments of worlding, I propose Cambodian-ness as a way of reimagining Cambodian subjectivity towards futurity. Building on queerness and its rhetoric of ambiguity, Cambodian-ness recognizes palimpsestic social formations that both shape contemporary Cambodia as well as speaks to the cross-temporal and cross-spatial relational imaginaries brought about through worlding styles, techniques, and movements.

Cambodian-ness: Performing Technique and the Technical

Cambodian-ness recognizes how Cambodian subjectivity is amorphous and indeterminate in scope and how it constantly remolds, reshapes, and refashions itself. Therefore, it is deeply tied to the concept of *sahasamay* and how contemporary Cambodian performance involves processes of creating and making within palimpsestic space and time. Cambodian-ness engages contemporary ontologies of performance and crystallizes of the praxis of being through the realm of technique and the technical. Extending Butler's discussion of performativity where gender is defined through a series of repetitive acts over time (Butler 1990, 33), I consider contemporary Cambodian

performance as a continual project of reiterating, or a shifting expression of Cambodian-ness. Ananya Chatterjea argues that this cohering of identity is "limitless and aspirational" in contemporary performance (Chatterjea 2020, 92-93). In this dissertation, I *follow* and examine how Cambodian artists draw on their personal experiences and worldviews to both reimagine and rewrite Cambodia's narrative.

Envisioning Cambodian-ness is critical imaginative work that coincides with how Jacqueline Shea Murphy's positions Indigenous contemporary performance and creative practice as "locating ways of knowing." She explains that Indigenous contemporary performers "activate and generate a vibrant, temporally layered, Indigenous present futurity" where they "dance Indigenous worlds" (Shea Murphy 2022, 63). Victoria Levine argues against the "traditional/contemporary binary" to demonstrate that "Indigenous musicians have always been modern" and "privilege Indigenous theory and method" (Levine 2019, 11). Performing contemporary Cambodian-ness and framing it as ontology recognizes the overlapping temporal and spatial dimensions of the Cambodian performing arts and how Cambodian music and dance are informed through transnational and diasporic relations as well as reimagined Cambodian lifeworlds. In this sense, classical, folk, and traditional genres, as they are performed and reimagined, are part of the contemporary alongside experimental approaches to contemporary performance. As a genre of music and dance, *sahasamay* indicates how contemporary performance enacts and resituates Cambodia against the centrality of genocide, trauma, violence, and displacement, reflecting alternate ideas of Cambodian modernity beyond the centrality of the nation. Furthermore, it reveals the multivalent qualities of being Cambodian or

Cambodian-ness. Shaped by diasporic and intercultural entanglements, contemporary performance in Cambodia enacts processes of identity in transformation and worldmaking to intimate a constellation with multiple iterations of Cambodian-ness as it is expressed and embodied.

As I discussed earlier, technique marks, molds, and transforms the body and mind through both active and passive acquisition by passing down specific beliefs and practices. Technique is also related to the word technical. In Khmer, these are generally the same word: *bachchekates*. Considering the slippage between both words, I engage both technique and the technical as entangled in my discussion about contemporary ontologies of performance. Training for contemporary performance requires gaining an extensive set of skills. Ameera Nimjee explains that Indian contemporary dance comes from the combining of Indian classical techniques with avant-garde and abstract movements. Indian contemporary dancers undergo intensive training where the body is trained to attain higher levels of flexibility and sensitivity beyond Indian classical idioms (Nimjee 2019, 80, 110). Similarly, contemporary performance in Cambodia necessitates musicians and dancers to develop and draw on an expansive set of techniques and skills beyond classical and folk practices. These may involve studying and applying different isolation movements, gestural vocabularies, and movement practices. This can be seen as counterproductive to the missions of preserving tradition. Yet, it is tied to the transnational, and inherently Euro-American centered, ideas of contemporary performance where deterritorialized practices rooted in the Western canon define the contemporary as a genre (Kwan 2017). For contemporary performance in Cambodia,

performers practice this notion of the contemporary but do not necessarily privilege Euro-American approaches in their work. Instead, some artists privilege Cambodian sound and movement in their practice while others retain core concepts and ideas. These constitute the techniques and the technical aspects of contemporary performance in Cambodia. Even as they engage with and take up new artistic and cultural practices, contemporary Cambodian artists and performers are informed by their technical or epistemological foundations. For most of my interlocutors, they are initially trained in Khmer classical music and dance. This shapes their artistic and creative interventions by requiring them to navigate multiple technical practices during the process of acquisition.

During my classical dance training, I learned that one of the many aspects of being a well-trained Cambodian classical dancer is to maintain the arch of your foot while balancing on one foot, moving across the stage, and remaining in different positions. At the same time, the toes must always be extended into dorsiflexion and not curled into a point like ballet dancers. This generates an element of oppositional force where toe dorsiflexion facilitates balance by grounding the dancer and yet requires directing strength into the toes to point them upwards. When some Cambodian dancers cross-train for different practices to build up their skills as a contemporary performer, some might retain this type of bodily tension from their background as a Cambodian classical dancer. This happens knowingly or unknowingly for some performers. For instance, while not the focus of chapters one and four, dancers in both chapters demonstrate this in varying degrees.

Toe flexion and oppositional tension are important elements in Cambodian classical dance that shape contemporary Cambodian performance. On the granular level, toe flexion in such a technical manner displays a Cambodian-ness through re-expressions of traditional praxis. Conceptually, engaging the oppositional forces of up-down and its resistive qualities also articulates a Cambodian-ness. Cambodian-ness does not cast aside the technical or conceptual realities of folk, classical, and traditional practices but integrates them with contemporary styles and approaches. Ben Spatz writes that learning technique involves an element of newness that "emerges from the confluence of social and material factors" (Spatz 2015, 61). In thinking about technique and the technical capaciously, gaining a new technique is always relative to the person, their embodied knowledge, and individual conditions. Thus, artists and creatives interpret and apply new techniques and ideas based on their subject position and interests, shaping their works based on their positionality. I frame contemporary Cambodian performance as a form of newness, and view technique and the technical as personally embodied and express Cambodian-ness as simultaneously and contradictorily individualized and pluralistic. Performing contemporary Cambodian-ness and reading its values and aesthetics through the technical unsettles binaries including traditional-contemporary and home-diasporic.

When Cambodian artists and creatives engage with globalized practices, ideas, and aesthetics, Cambodian-ness does not disappear. It becomes newly articulated and contextualized. It could be a visible or audible trace of Khmer music and dance. It can be overt, subtle, or possibly an obscured component of the performance. For instance, I consider the drum as a conceptual homage in chapter one. Alternatively, it could also

manifest as how modern dance is blended with Khmer classical gestures as discussed in chapter three. This embodied and emic knowledge shows where contemporary performance can coalesce, activate, and reveal new possibilities through how it interacts with various practices, genres, technical concepts, or techniques. As it is studied and performed, it enacts a process of transforming what it means to be Cambodian that refuses fixed notions of identity in favor of flexion and plurality. It always reflects and refracts transnational, cosmopolitan flows and vernacular expression, integrating the local and the global to express mutability. Cambodian-ness as an element of performance alludes to the complicated layers of embodied knowledge embedded in contemporary Cambodian performance and a praxis of being Cambodian that remains in constant flux.

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Being Cambodian is tied to the Khmer Rouge genocide and U.S. Cold War politics and centers a narrative of trauma and violence. Under the demands of this epistemological framework, I could read for how the continued flexing of the toes signals a refusal to forget longer legacies of cultural techniques and practices threatened by multiple ruptures: mass violence, genocide, displacement, and globalization. It is a promising argument. It would also perpetuate the broader narrative about Cambodia and its peoples as continually resisting annihilation. Instead, I am invested in a paradigmatic shift for scholarship towards alternate constructions about Cambodia and its peoples and unmooring the ways in which Cambodian scholarship centralizes the traumatized and

maimed Cambodian subject to render it as human and rescuable. Sylvia Wynter explains how humanist and enlightenment thought, and its construction of the universal man denies humanness to its conceptions of the unassimilable and abjected Other (Wynter 2003, 281-282). Wynter's critique of Western modernity and liberal humanism is also critique of knowledge production and how it participates within colonial regimes that reinscribe specific narratives of humanness. Knowledge formations about Cambodia have rooted its peoples within imperial matrices, including historicized relations to Angkor civilization, Siam and the Ayutthaya Kingdom, French Indochina, U.S. militarization in Southeast Asia, and post-genocide international occupation. Thus, being Cambodian meant being conditionally human in service of narratives of empire, survival, resistance, and resuscitation where Cambodians are humanized and made circumstantially legible and relevant to power. In turn, Cambodian subjectivity will never be human under the current episteme and alternative narratives about being Cambodian cannot be foreground.

I can never fully depart from how Cambodian subjectivity is tied to rupture because it continues to inform the lives of Cambodian people globally, including my own as the second child of genocide survivors. However, I choose to write with the aim of showing how contemporary ontologies of performance in Cambodia participates in processes of reinventing humanness. Cambodian-ness intimates a praxis of being Cambodian, if not human, that is situated within a series of global networks and entanglements. Mayra Rivera examines the counterpoetics of Sylvia Wynter's essay "Black Metamorphosis" and argues that scholars must play a role in "bringing about new ways of being" by "challenging the prevalent order of knowing" through imaginative and

creative work (Rivera 2021, 79-80). Katherine McKittrick expresses how "black cultural production writes scientific and disciplinary knowledge anew, as necessarily a human project" where new forms of cultural production remediate histories of violence and rethink humanness (McKittrick 2015, 160). Throughout my work on contemporary Cambodian performance, I challenge the ever-important scholarly episteme about Cambodia and its entrenchment with genocide and imperial conflict. Narrating and reading the incredible and visionary works of my interlocutors, I write about contemporary ontologies of performance in Cambodia because of how my interlocutors resituate Cambodia from being contentiously human to being more. They activate imagined ancestral and future interdependent networks of connection in ways that create new worlds and recognize Cambodian subjectivity as expansive. Examining Cambodian-ness understands Cambodian subjectivity within trauma and violence while envisioning futures rooted in optimistic possibility cast in the horizons through the contemporary.

Following ideas of contemporary cultural production, I attempt to unsettle dominant scholarly approaches to Cambodia with a focus on creative praxis. Contemporary ontologies of performance in Cambodia and expressions of Cambodian-ness work to displace narratives of empire and reimagine Cambodia. I centralize my interlocutor's projects to identify how they express the complexities of being Cambodian in the present moment. Their ways of being Cambodian appear as I read for technique and the technical and, as a manifestation of knowledge, signify ontological thought and creative approach distinct from narrative solely focused on war, genocide, and displacement. Attending to technique and the technical activates the machinations of

performance in multiple registers: as performer, choreographer, producer, technical team, and scholar. I keep these registers in mind and heart while writing about each person in my dissertation. At the core of my discussion of contemporary ontologies of performance, I attend to how they create in relation with their world and render the palimpsest of systems undergirding their lives to express Cambodian-ness on their terms.

Chapter Overview and Reflections

"Following the Way: Worlding Connections in Contemporary Cambodian Performance" takes its name from the methodological framework discussed earlier in my introduction and the performance work titled *Phlov* (2023). *Phlov*, translated by choreographer and dancer Khuon Chay to mean The Way, usually refers to roads, streets, and paths. It is also a term in Khmer classical music and dance that refers to techniques, styles, ornamentation patterns, and forms passed down from teacher to student. It's about lineage, temporality, action, and transformation. *Phlov* involves the transformation of a given melody from its more decidedly straightforward version towards a series of melodic ornaments coalescing into a rich heterophonic texture of sound. It is also indicative of the distinct movements and gestural patterns that each dancer internalizes in order to animate, embody, and become their character on stage. Inspired by this practice and technique, my dissertation follows the way of each performer and artist. In the following discussions, I contextualize each work to convey different narrativizations of Cambodian-ness. Using these case studies, I consider how artists and creatives in Cambodia are thoroughly integrated into the global artistic landscape and convey it

through contemporary performance. These creative endeavors reveal contemporary ontologies of performance that aimed at unsettling hegemonic constructions of Cambodia and worlding new creative relationships imagined and otherwise.

I must state that this dissertation is not an exhaustive survey of contemporary performance, performers, or performance spaces in Cambodia. Rather, it is a reflection of the different paths that intersected with my time in Cambodia and therefore limited to certain perspectives. Cambodian women shaped my thinking about contemporary performance, and I write about two of them in the conclusion of the dissertation, including the work of Sophiline Cheam Shapiro. However, there are many contemporary performance spaces led by women that I am not prepared to write about in a meaningful and substantive manner. I want to conduct further ethnographic research in closer community with them and strengthen my connections with groups such as SilverBelle and Ny and Khun who are all also at the forefront of the contemporary Cambodian performance scene.

In part shaped by my positionality and the spaces I mainly inhabited, I write mostly about men, and in most cases gay/queer men. Much of my thinking and theorizing is informed by queer studies and my queerness. At the same time, my attention to queerness is uneven throughout the dissertation. In chapters two and four, I address queerness as a facet of the individual artists' works whereas I do not in chapter three. In chapter one, the artist does not identify as queer, so I am reluctant to invoke queer theory to examine his work. While ideas of queerness are present in these works, it is one part of what I am interweaving within plural understandings of Cambodian-ness. In the cases of

chapters two, three and four, these works are all queer-led projects and engage queerness at different registers in their pieces. For Phou and Khuon, the artists at the center of chapters two and four respectively, queer experiences and being gay men shape aspects of the narrative in their work. In contrast, queerness is not overtly the central idea of Sokhomsan's work. I engage with these artists because they reveal the role and significance of queer artists, many of whom I believe are up and coming, in shaping the future of contemporary Cambodian performance. Collectively, these artists and choreographers advance decolonial approaches rooted beyond the centrality of identity. Instead, I hear their demand to reach beyond identity to re/establish connection and recognize the interdependence of the world. This informs my framing of Cambodian-ness as an expansive formation that decentralizes the nation-state while acknowledging how it informs subjectivity. In sum, I share a carefully written snapshot of experiences as an attempt to express contemporary ontologies of performance via *sahasamay* and the multivalent experiences of Cambodian-ness.

I focus on the personal narratives expressed through each work to complicate expressions of being human in a post-genocide, post-colonial world. I read for how each creative engages the postmodern, cosmopolitan, diasporic, and intercultural in their work. I integrate ethnographic writing with essays about performance to situate and contextualize each artist's work from my perspective. These also include personal interludes that express my connections and commitments to each chapter. In chapter one, I discuss Ros Sokunthea's experimental music-dance piece titled *Voice* (2023) and unpack its intricate sonic layers and mixed choreography to show how the postmodern

and intercultural integration of sounds and movement vocabularies reflects processes of glocalization and a Cambodian creolism indicative of the voices of a rising generation of creatives. Creative experimentation, as I show, serves as a call and the impetus for generative change amid a broader preservationist and archival impulse. As it is performed and staged in *Voice* (2023), I describe how Cambodian-ness is deeply entangled within and in conversation with global cultural production in ways that push against ideologies of tradition and authenticity. These themes foreground the following chapters where artists assert their presence within global conversations about the stakes of contemporary cultural production and its relationship to human subjectivity.

I thread together French Cambodian Jean-Baptiste Phou's multimedia film *My Mother's Tongue* (2021), the film's post-screening performance, and memoir *Coming Out of My Skin* (2023) in chapter two to conceptualize diasporic dis/connect. As an analytic, diasporic dis/connect expresses the tensions with negotiating identity, belonging, and language in relation to Cambodian-ness. Phou's works indicate a fraught relationship to the homeland signified through a poetics of difference where radical deconstruction and reparative re/connection can begin. Emerging from one of the performance events I helped organize, chapter three looks at the choreography and spoken word poetry from the contemporary dance piece titled *Birthday* (2023) created by Cambodian American Chakra Sokhomsan. I extend ideas of diasporic dis/connect to develop muddiness as an analytic for understanding the uneasy, liminal aspects of being inhabiting a diasporic subjectivity. I connect his bilingual Khmer-English poem projected over the speakers during his performance into dialogue with the mixed choreography and

sampled sounds. These convey the tenuous construction of Cambodian-ness by Cambodian diasporic subjects as it is mediated, distorted, and received. These chapters reflect on diasporic creativity as it is practiced across different text, recording, multimedia context, and performance. Together Phou and Sokhomsan express the plural experiences of Cambodian-ness and messiness of diaspora.

In chapter four, I write about Khuon Chay's work *Phlov* (2023), translated to "The Way," a choreographed performance that reimagines Khmer classical dance idioms as well as builds on other contemporary projects. Khuon creates various scenes that retell the origin myth of Cambodia and queer the Khmer wedding while also expressing experiences with migration and capitalist labor. I analyze his choreography to reveal how fragmentation and performance citations allows us to recognize the non-linear and overlapping temporalities that shape our world view and understanding of the self. I return to themes across the three previous chapters about globalization, identity, postmodernism, and migration to understand how the praxis of being is implicated in performance. Lastly, I conclude my dissertation reflecting on Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's performance at The Met in March 2023, Phung Huynh's artistic response presented at Luis de Jesus in Los Angeles, and Modern Apsara Company's performance at Huynh's opening. While these performances of a Cambodian prayer dance critique museums as colonial institutions, I examine how these prayers for these stolen and beheaded statues raise questions about the life and death of Cambodian-ness. Contemporary ontologies of performance reveal the continuity of life and its plural entanglements and coalesce through *phlov* and lineage to repatriate Cambodian-ness embodied spirituality.

Interspersed throughout the dissertation are four reflections written in a mixture of narrative prose and poetics. In this sense, I meander around these chapters and share a snapshot of my experiences to frame the surrounding chapters. Following the introduction, I describe brief moments studying *sralai* and explain my understanding of *phlov*, how Khmer musicians and dancers follow a lineage of masters. After my discussion of Jean-Baptiste Phou's film, memoir, and post-screening performance, I describe a walk down the street near the National Museum of Cambodia to consider how people read and interpret my everyday comportment as a Chinese Cambodian American. I situate this interlude alongside Phou's work because it expresses my personal challenges and emotional conflict as a diasporic subject in Cambodia. Preceding chapter three, I narrate the work of producing a weekend showcase of new Khmer classical and contemporary dances that leads into the events of chapter three. Lastly, I describe a scarf dyed by Khuon Chay and how it echoes his three-month trip to Thailand and meeting refugees displaced due to the military coup in Myanmar on February 1st, 2023. This poetic essay identifies an interconnected series of relationships between people and the environment as it overlaps with militarized violence and displacement. I compartmentalize these moments as reflections to share how my personal experiences shaped my thinking about contemporary Cambodian performance.

The genre of scholarly writing involves a detached style of writing, even after the postmodern turn in anthropology and rise in creative approaches to ethnographic writing. These reflections serve as my intervention for rethinking the interlude as a space for creativity rather than a place for additional contextual information. As an alternative way

to represent ethnographic experience, Sean Williams explains that poetry can deepen and reframe the ethnographic moment in ways that could not happen in standard, linear ethnographic prose (Williams 2022). Similarly, my creative reflections take up the possibilities of poetic writing to signal how my experience inform and relate to major themes and issues examined in the dissertation. I explore the utility of prose derived from fictional writing and poetics in rendering different moments while I was conducting my fieldwork. In the reflections, I play with space and text alignment on the page with the goal of writing in different voices and expressing both my authorial voice and personal reactions to the events going on. By narrating these moments, I share why the works I discuss matter to me and what informs my ideas and writing. In doing so, I construct a bridge between different chapters or extend ideas in ways that I cannot fit in the main body of the chapters where I have chosen to center a specific performance and avoid shifting the emphasis away from the artist and their work. Through these short creative reflections, I situate myself as the ethnographer and person conducting fieldwork and convey my relationship to each performance.

Reflection One: Learning Khmer Music

I was learning cheut chhueng in May. While I *still* couldn't do circular breathing, and it was a necessary skill since sralai players are expected to play continuously without rest, we had covered a lot of ground between my first lesson over the past few months. None of music was notated, though my khloy lessons had notation. However, I never really thought I would be learning all my sralai music via solfège.

"re--ti-la-fa…?" I guessed, staring at my sralai and moving my fingers over the holes to mime the correct pitches.

I looked at Louk Kru Chanthy, my sralai teacher with
a look that I hoped said
please help me.

My eyebrows furrowed in concentration as I stared at the holes of the sralai as though it would somehow tell which pitch was next.

It didn't.

"re--ti-la-sol," he stated.

After several, *several* attempts,

I made it through to the end of the first section.

"re--ti-la-sol re-sol re--mi--la--mi--re--mire--redoti--do--remire-sol--la-re-ti-la-sol--," I recited after multiple attempts to use the correct solfège.

Usually, people sing on the vocable noi for music that does not have words or when they forgot what the words are. Dancers accurately sing using noi during rehearsals without focusing on naming the specific intervallic relationships. In my lessons, I would drop the solfège and switch to singing noi so I could *at least* show that I knew the melody.

In addition to using solfège, I transcribed music when I needed to visualize what I was doing. The more music I would learn, bits and fragments of melodies, what in Khmer was conveyed to me as words and sentences, would start to loop back onto themselves.

This was especially challenging when Louk Kru Chanthy started teaching cheut chhueng and baa thum where the fragments would be so similar. It got even worse once we started going over sathukar which seemed to circle back to several other melodies.

My brain was melting.

I could start in one piece and then

find myself playing a completely different piece.

But Louk Kru Chanthy confirmed that when you play the melody *straight*, there are fragments or perhaps melodic sequences that sound similar. When you add *phlov* to it, the melody blossoms and becomes piruoh or pleasing to the ear.

***

One day in May when my samphour teacher had spare time, he stayed for my sralai lesson. Louk Kru Chanthy decided it would be a good opportunity for me to chol vong, literally to enter circle, or play in a small ensemble: him on roneat ek, my samphour teacher on samphour, and me on sralai. He remarked that I wouldn't really have opportunities beyond when both teachers were available.

I was excited to try it.

But I couldn't *do* circular breathing.

Apparently, people pick it up after a while…

I'm convinced that I need divine intervention.

I can make about thirty seconds before needing to take a desperate gulp of air.

We had covered almost two full sections of cheut chhueng with both sections being forty-five seconds to a minute each. While the roneat ek player would usually lead off, they let

me start the piece since I was still learning. Both teachers joined in quickly, filling in the ensemble.

Okay. I have bad news.

I was running

out

of

air.

Not only that

I forgot one of the fragments or second-guessed what it was.

I cannot tell you exactly what I did in that moment.

Something about the lack of airflow and panic set in.

I held out a note for a moment.

I was desperate to just keep playing.

Some other notes squawked out from my instrument.

Whatever it was, it wasn't what he taught me.

I stopped playing to catch my breath and made an attempt to rejoin the group.
I make it back at the end of the first section and successfully start the second part. We make it to the end of the second section.

I got through it,

somehow.

Once we finished the second section of the piece, Louk Kru Chanthy asked me in Khmer, "Did you improvise just now?"

"Yes, I think so," I replied,
very out of breath
and not entirely sure of what I did.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked.

"No," he said plainly. We continued with our lesson.

I was expecting a correction to the section where I momentarily forgot the melody. I did ask for clarification in that spot of the music so I could reconfirm that I knew the melody for cheut chhueng. I also asked with the thought that he would talk a little bit more about

what I did when we were practicing in a group. I followed up the next week, and he didn't recall it.

I've heard recordings where the sralai player deviates from the melody by holding out a pitch and adding flourishes and ornaments. What I think I did would fall into that, though it was different than what Louk Kru Chanthy taught me. I don't think it was *phlov* in the technical sense, but it did make me think about what can be done to a melody.

***

I asked both my *samphour* and *sralai* teachers about *phlov*, what I understand as the semi-improvisational and interpretative approach to playing Khmer classical melodies. It encapsulates the ornaments that create Khmer classical music's heterophony. It also indicates the style and lineage of the teacher and their students. Specifically, I would ask them about different ways of "releasing the melody" or different ways of "inserting techniques" that contrasted from our lessons.

Both teachers would constantly direct the question towards the term *piruoh*, when translated literally it means melodious. It indicates a sonic aesthetic of pleasurability and a realization of expressiveness. Individually, it deals with how musicians use their instrument's timbral quality and how they apply musical ornaments to imbue the music with life. In a group, *piruoh* suggests a sense of unified sound where all the musicians are playing in synchronicity. This was especially the case between musicians. However, I heard dancers describe the music as not melodious. When I asked them why, they would remark that it didn't have the same sound as another group in some other recording. At times, the idea of something being *piruoh* reflected individual preferences and sometimes these were communally agreed upon.

Chapter One: Sounding the Now Through Contemporary Cambodian Music

"What are they doing?" I thought to myself, watching the performers in the evening drench a cymbal in an unknown liquid from a plastic water bottle. I was at the French Institute of Cambodia, an important hub and supporter of artistic programming in Phnom Penh, attending a dress rehearsal for *Voice* (2023) by Ros Sokunthea and facilitated by Cambodian Living Arts for their Cultural Seasons festival in 2023. I was with colleague Celia Tuchman-Rosta, who was in Cambodia conducting her research and reconnecting with interlocutors. She and I were about ten rows back, observing the rehearsal from where the middle of the audience would be located. One of the performers began trying to light the cymbal on fire. Now realizing that the cymbal was covered in oil, I watched in confusion and amazement as the cymbal was lit on fire as Ros Sokunthea struck it with his bare hand. Flames splashed out from the cymbal as we watched him rehearse the closing section of the work.

I share my surprise to express the pinnacle of Ros Sokunthea's work and, as he would later remark to me, the first time he lit the cymbal on fire (see Figure 5). He told me that it was his way of conveying his emotions as a musician and composer in Cambodia. As I reflect on the work, I find that the flames reveal a fiery passion for his creative praxis on the outside and simultaneously the flames of critique, self and otherwise, that consume him from the inside. These together signify a daringness to his work to innovate what constitutes performance in Cambodia. When the flames flashed

out from the cymbals and dance in the evening, Ros Sokunthea uses it to voice, to sound out a contemporary Cambodian artistic praxis and show what is and has become possible in Cambodia.

This chapter explores the networked connections of Ros Sokunthea's *Voice* (2023). Attending to interculturalism, technocultural, and cosmopolitan flows, I examine Ros' experimental practice as it is activated on stage through his varied instrumentation, cross-disciplinary engagement with dancers and musicians, and engagement with media. In the preceding reflection, I introduced two of my music teachers who indirectly would talk about Ros and his work. While I do not make note of those conversations, in part because the reference was always in passing and oblique enough that I almost missed it, it inspires me to write about *Voice* (2023). In this chapter, I attend to following as a way to respond to my multiple personal teacher-student relationships and, as a theoretical approach, begins to trace out global dis/connections that make contemporary Cambodian performance, indeed, Cambodian. Taking his work as a starting point, I ask: (1) how is the contemporary leveraged as a genre and vector of analysis in the Cambodian performing arts? (2) how might the contemporary be redefined and reconceptualized through performance? I deconstruct the contemporary and frame it in the context of Cambodia and its potential for artists of the Global South, positioning it as co-temporaneous creative activities. In conceptualizing *sahasamay* and the contemporary, I claim that all forms of cultural production are inherently contemporary works in their sociocultural and temporal contexts.

Figure 5. Ros Sokunthea striking the cymbal during rehearsal on February 15th, 2023. Photo by author.

In music studies, contemporary music is largely discussed within the confines of Western European and American art music and composers composing elite art music and esoteric avant-garde sound installations that transform the boundaries of Western classical music. Yet, as Steven Feld (2000) writes, world music has come to categorize musics of the third world or commercialized world music, signifying global studio interactions and changes in listener interests. In turn, world music has come to be the category of the Other, connotating musical traditions as well as intercultural and transnationally situated popular musics. Within dance studies, contemporary dance is a fraught concept, especially when considering its relationship to modern dance and world dance. As SanSan Kwan (2017) writes, choreographers and dancers strongly engaging with non-Western conventional styles are all too often relegated to world dance,

excluding their movement modalities from the genre of contemporary dance. These include creatives in folk, traditional, and classical genres of performance and conditionally, contemporary dance may integrate world styles, worlding the Other into the contemporary. Focusing on the genres of world music and world dance, these categories often conjure ideas of new age sounds as well as traditional and folk styles of performance. Thus, newer creative works that adhere strongly to techniques and aesthetics from traditional practices while integrating glocal interpretations of different genres and styles are undervalued. In sum, genre conventions surrounding what is contemporary are often narrowly defined within Western-Eurocentric discourses, often allowing the contemporary as a genre category to subsume global styles.

Throughout the 20th century in Cambodia, composers and especially choreographers have been creating new works, including the classically codified works *Robam Apsara* and *Robam Chun Por* as well as more experimental composition such as the work of the composer Chinary Ung. During the Cold War, U.S. militarization in Southeast Asia destabilized the Cambodian government, leading to the installment of the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979 and the elimination of over 80% of artists and scholars in Cambodia and broader persecution of high art and culture associated with the royal courts and its patronage. Beginning in 1979 and especially from the 1990s during United Nations occupation and the rapid growth of NGOs in Cambodia, the Cambodian arts has largely been situated within discourses of cultural preservation, maintenance, and sustainability. This centered the court-classical genres as endangered national cultural heritage in need of protection (Sam 1988, 2008; Grant 2014, 2017). As a result of

intentional efforts to politicize classical dance among other genres of performance, and the enshrinement and international recognition of Cambodian classical dance into UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage is an important part of this, folk and Indigenous styles received less attention until recently (Grant and Chhuon 2018). With all these efforts, there has been an extended emphasis on cultural preservation, extending from an impulse to archive and document in response to genocide, mass violence, and displacement. However, it is the turn of the century where creatives define the emergence of contemporary performance.

One evening, I was having a conversation with my landlady, *Aum* Yoo. I was staying at her sister's house thanks to one of my friends, *Aum* Yoo's nephew, who helped me when I was getting settled in Phnom Penh. She and I were at the dinner table at her sister's house in Toul Tompong. As a retired educator, *Aum* Yoo always had an interest in my research and wanted to know what I learned at music or dance practice and at my Khmer language lessons. She and I regularly chatted in the evenings and occasionally went on walks to the market to both exercise and buy fruits to snack on. In many ways, she became found family to me while I was doing my fieldwork. She asked me about the music and dance I researched, and I told her I was interested in *sahasamay*, the word for contemporary in Khmer. Unless she was simply testing my language capacity, and she often would, she was confused about what I meant by *sahasamay*. Unexpectedly, she explained that it was not a common word. Its etymology was clear, but its use in practical conversation beyond the context of contemporary performance was less apparent to her.

In Cambodia, artists either say *sahasamay* or use the loanword "contemporary" when discussing new creative works that fall outside of known, conventional genres. While artists and creatives use both terms, they often used contemporary when speaking to me, the (Cambodian) American scholar, until I used the term and then they alternated between both. *Sahasamay* is formed through two words: *saha* meaning united/together and *samay* meaning time/moment/era—a togetherness in time or with this time. Taken together to mean co-temporaneous and existing in simultaneity, *sahasamay* coincides with other Khmer language temporal markers. For example, as a descriptor, *tumneub* encapsulates ideas of the modern time, including modernity or modernist aesthetics in some instances and not wholly divorced from other temporal markers. *Bachchbapann* typically refers to the present day, often meaning nowadays in everyday dialogue. As another descriptor, *thmei* usually defines the quality of being new. Roger Nelson (2017, 75) discusses these terms along similar lines, explaining that the terms for modern and contemporary cannot be regarded as "discrete and distinct eras" in Khmer language but are coexisting terms with coextensive relationships to time. In Nelson's work, art expresses multiple temporalities in its given space. I extend Nelson's definition of *sahasamay.* It is a term or genre largely used among artists and creatives that connotates an artistic plurality and relationality and indicates a slippage between these temporal markers while sublimating spatiality in its creative consumption of globalized practices and aesthetics.

Sahasamay and Cambodian conceptions of the contemporary reflect scholarly trends in the global postmodern and cosmopolitan as it relates to glocalization and the

transculturation of cultural practices (Turino 2003; 2008). Hal Foster (1983, xii) has written about the postmodern as an artistic practice of resistance and reaction. In articulating an artistic practice of the present or contemporary, *sahasamay* involves artistic rupture or what Frederic Jameson (1983; 1984, 61) discusses as "schizophrenic" breaks with reality and deconstruction of aesthetic expression. For creative works in Cambodia to fall under *sahasamay* or the contemporary, artists and creatives must negotiate the slippage between what is local and traditional relative to what is global and contemporary, often navigating these boundaries through what Susan Gillman, Kirsten Silva Greusz, and Rob Wilson have referred to as worlding, the uneven spatial-temporal relations of the world under global capitalism. Reflecting unequal glocalization, worlding has the potential to promote a transnationally informed consciousness (Gillman, Greusz, and Wilson 2004, 262, 265), producing cosmopolitan subjects and artistic production. Cosmopolitan subjects are often described as elite "citizens of the world," evoking a worldliness and openness to their philosophical outlook on life and inhabiting the possibilities within transnational cultural encounters. In the term of artistic production, cosmopolitan subjects engage in processes of aesthetic universalism by drawing aesthetic qualities from across the globe into their avant-garde works (Appiah 2006). In turn, I am saying that creatives in Cambodia, and potentially elsewhere in the global South, activate discourses of the postmodern and cosmopolitan on their terms through negotiations with cultural nationalism and the global stage.

As acts of worlding, world music and dance, as well as contemporary performance conflate and blur conventional genres. Thus, artists from the margins can

generate cultural critique using the contemporary and artistic experimentalism. These experimental practices rely on the fluidity of cultural flows as they are emplaced in their local contexts, involving processes of deterritorialization, translocalization, transculturation, and the sublimation of genre and instrumentation (Stepputat and Djebbari 2020, 7). For Cambodian creatives, this is often discussed in terms of the word *chnai*. Master dancer and choreographer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro categorized experimental choreography involving Khmer classical dance as "*robam boran chh'nai*" or modified classical dance (Cheam Shapiro 2010, 118). In addition to *chnai* meaning to modify, the word *chnai* is related to the verb to design or word for designer. Taken together, I offer another translation of *chnai* where *chnai* is to craft, design, innovate, transform, and experiment. I argue that contemporary artists and creatives in Cambodia *chnai* to position their work within a politics of experimentation and innovation that constitute an aesthetic practice of *sahasamay* and the contemporary. Creatives engaged in contemporary cultural production take up innovation and experimentation as a generative approach to composing, choreographing, producing, and performing new works that transform what is possible in Cambodian performing arts. As a part of worlding, they *chnai* and collapse boundaries through a practice of cosmopolitan styling in the genre of *sahasamay* and contemporary performance.

Framing the contemporary as a genre requires discussing how meaning is produced through aesthetic practices and styles. Nikolas Coupland takes up styling to consider "the activation of stylistic meaning" or ways of creating and producing stylistic meaning (Coupland 2007, 2). Building on Coupland's work, Ed Wolf (2019, 4-11)

conceptualizes the idea of styling, or the dialogic interactions when negotiating the politics of genre and racialized difference in Afro-diasporic music-dance in Chile. Wolf's thinking about style indicates how social identities and difference are negotiated through styles and cultural production. Focusing on African-diasporic fashion, Shane White and Graham White investigate stylin', discussing the zoot suit as a symbolic performance of excess and resistance while presenting the Afro-diasporic subject as inherently cosmopolitan (White and White 1998, 252). They describe how the zoot suit demonstrates how class and mobility is articulated through style. Addressing diaspora and migration, Kareem Khubchandani (2020, 6-9) uses the framework of accented styles or accents to discuss the performative aesthetics of cultural production shaped by transnational movement and mobility, drawing attention to the nuanced encounters with global and cosmopolitan difference. Building on these scholars and alert to accents, I use styling to engage how the contemporary as a genre critically responds to and relies on accumulating excess in contemporary Cambodian performance and its innovations. Thinking about style through excess indicates a process of moving towards disintegration or dissolution of cultural difference for creative reintegration (Chin 1989, 167-168), generating intercultural creative practices that, in the case of Cambodia, expose the cosmopolitan forces and transnational networks mobilized and involved with experimentation.

For the Cambodian arts, much of the contemporary creative production largely exists outside of institutional spaces where classical and folk styles dominate. New works are being created in those spaces, but those works are produced within the parameters of

the national institution and its support, reinforcing cultural nationalism. At the Royal University of Fine Arts, as a capstone project, students may produce their own work. However, these works are strictly in the style of folk and classical performance and few students do contemporary projects. Shane White and Graham White (1998) discuss how slave and plantation owners held neutral or ambivalence stances on how African Americans modified clothing and attire in order to maintain their status in power, demonstrating a social and institutional indifference while manipulating and exerting their control during slavery and Jim Crow. Similarly, in Cambodia, the government enacts its control in the arts through cultural nationalism and the promotion of traditional, classical, and folk expressive cultures, reproducing Cambodian identity using classic symbols of nationhood. Thus, aspects of strictly contemporary cultural production do not adhere or conform to cultural nationalism and its endeavors to reproduce nation-state ideologies and empire. In doing so, the state indirectly suppresses it by not allocating resources for contemporary works and not exceeding what NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have been able to facilitate. In the case of Cambodia, contemporary music and dance pose a challenge to cultural nationalism for not conforming to its iconography. For instance, Rachmi Diyah Larasati (2014, 115) and Suppya Nut (2014) reveal how the female dancing body in Indonesia and Cambodia is positioned in international politics as pure feminine representations of the nation. Contemporary works are marginalized for their unintelligibility, divisiveness, and deviation from pure representations of the nation. By choosing to engage in transculturation and translocalization, contemporary cultural

production unravels the definitive nation-state and its art forms through its aesthetic renderings of globalized performance genres.

I consider *how* artists – especially namely composers and choreographers – in Cambodia stylize, envision, and create a contemporary Cambodia by experimenting with different genres and styles in contemporary performance. I show that contemporary performance is a space for reimagining the Cambodian performing arts and conveying emerging interests among a rising generation of Cambodian creatives. This chapter unpacks the intricate layers of sounds and movement in Ros Sokunthea's work *Voice* (2023), translated from the Khmer word *samleng,* meaning voice or sound, engaging both the choreosonics of his work and the crossings of Cambodian classical and global styles. Ashon Crawley (2016, 93) writes about choreosonics as the interstices of sound and movement in relation to Black ontological being and aesthetic and performative practice of otherwise possibility, producing alterities for Black life. Ros activates a Cambodian choreosonics that takes the slippage of voice and sound to consider the corporeal elements of performance where sounding and voicing are deeply embodied modes of expression. Crossing the boundaries of music and dance allows him to produce postmodern, intercultural performance vocabularies that reflect processes of glocalization or transculturation in Cambodia. He recontextualizes techniques and styles from across the world into the Cambodian performing arts scene to materialize the interconnectedness of contemporary Cambodia with the world. Envisioning new approaches to creative praxis, these contemporary projects *chnai* what is possible in Cambodia and for Cambodian creatives.

Ros Sokunthea is a rising artist affiliated with the non-governmental organization Cambodian Living Arts. Coming from a family of artists, he grew up dancing *lkhaon khaol* dance-dramas while learning many Cambodian traditional instruments. Upon mastering the *roneat* (xylophones), *kong* (horizontal knobbed gongs), and *skor* (drums) while at the Secondary School of Fine Arts and Royal University of Fine Arts, he began to study instruments from across the world, attending workshops about foreign music and watching YouTube videos. As I learned from Ros Sokunthea, composers and choreographers at the Royal University of Fine Arts must attain a certain level of mastery in Cambodian performing arts prior to studying contemporary styles. At the Royal University of Fine Arts, students are required to choreograph their own works for examinations and he worked with faculty member Belle Sodhachivy Chumvan, Director of the contemporary dance company SilverBelle, studying with her and the NGO (non-governmental organization) Amrita Arts which started in 2003 and closed in 2019. It was these engagements that led him to create the experimental work *Voice* (2023) for Cambodian Living Arts' Cultural Seasons festival. The word *samleng* translates to the nouns for sound and voice in Khmer. In the program notes provided by Cambodian Living Arts, they translated it to mean 'voice' to consider the questions: "Whose voice?" "Where does that voice come from?" and "What does that voice want to convey?" I consider the ontological divide between voice and sound as a slippage in translation that invites multivalent and symbolic representations of different cultural practices intermixed in contemporary Cambodian performance. Throughout *Voice* (2023), Ros asks questions about creativity in the present, articulating the importance of experimentation in

presenting contemporary Cambodia and the undercurrent of global voices impacting its manifestation in the arts scene.

Intercultural Connections: Experimenting with Taiko

"They're drumming almost like taiko players," I thought to myself in confusion about 10 minutes into the performance. Ros Sokunthea, with a drum in front of him, strikes his mallets together, cuing the tempo before directing his mallets to the drum in front. In response, the dancers, drumsticks in hand, dramatically raised their arms up, swiftly dropped their arms downwards, and struck the snare drums on stage in front of them in unison (see Figure 6). Across the stage, the dancers started swaying left and right in position as they struck their drums. At other moments, they leapt around their drums, striking their mallets in time with Ros. Most of the drums were not taiko drums but disassembled drum sets on which the dancers mapped taiko-style movements. Other performers carried a hand drum on their bodies and one person held a tambourine, moving about the stage, adding their hand strikes as textural contrast. Meanwhile, Ros walked to the back of the stage as the dancers—now drummers—continued moving in choreographed unison. While dancers on stage brought out musical instruments several times in the show, it was an eye-catching moment for me to see two things: the dancers themselves playing instruments and the blending of taiko and experimental Khmer music-dance on stage.

Ros told me that he studied dance throughout his education, learning the monkey role in Khmer classical dance. Similarly, some Khmer musicians study both music and

dance in their professional lives, such as my *sralai* teacher Moeurn Chanthy, allowing them to follow and recall the classical choreography more prudently. During my *sralai* and *samphour* lessons, we would discuss or mime out the set movements from the classical dance repertoire for the pieces that I was learning, connecting my practical understanding of the music to the dance and allowing me to put it into context. In other words, by cross-training or working across disciplines, these musicians develop a sensitivity to the dancers, orienting themselves to their movements. However, from my experience, the converse is less true; dancers do not cross-train as extensively in presumably in comparison to the musicians who I know.

Figure 6. During the first performance night on February 16th, 2023, the performers raised their arms to strike the drums. Photo by author.

Ros Sokunthea wanted the dancers to understand the music on a more advanced level. As part of his goal while creating this work, this drum scene challenged the dancers in the work to both make music and dance. Ros Sokunthea and dancers used snare drums, among other drums, to emulate taiko drumming. In Phnom Penh, a small taiko drumming community is led by Keiko Kitamura, a Japanese musician. Taking her teachings and work into consideration, Ros Sokunthea and the dancers integrated the choreographic elements of taiko drumming into the work, deriving their own movement patterns and stylings while learning to embody sound from the vantage point of the musician. In doing so, they dissolve the separation between musician and dancer during these four minutes, entering into a choreographed jam session together before a final unison strike of their drums as the lights filter into purple and the group disperses for the next segment of the work. Across different forms of Cambodian dance, dancers attend closely to the beat of the drum and in this work, the dancers on stage now are responsible for creating the beat of the drum, extending their embodied understanding of music through the corporeal production of sound.

Ros' attention to the drum and the beat recalls his original title, *Chongvak* or beat. After consulting with Soy Chanborey, faculty at both the Secondary School and Royal University of Fine Arts, Ros renamed the work to *Voice* (2023) for the Cultural Seasons festival. However, while *chongvak* is emphasized in Khmer classical dance training, it is perceived sonically and internalized by dancers rather than embodied. In practices or rehearsals without music, a beat pattern is recited and clapped out by the dance students

and teachers. Interestingly, these onomatopoetic syllables differ from the syllables used when I was studying the *samphour*. Dancers will refer to the same beat pattern using certain vocables that are reminiscent of the sounds of the *samphour* while in my lessons, we used sounds that were most like what the *samphour* produced. I highlight these differences to point towards parallel, yet differing, relationships to the beat between Khmer musicians and dancers. At a fundamental level, both groups understand the metric and beat structure, yet they engage with these structures differently, indicating two ontological and embodied relationships to sound and movement. These relationships are further complicated by the intercultural encounter with and collaborative work involved with inclusion of taiko in the work. By performing as drummers/dancers, Ros has the performers deconstruct these divides between musician-dancer and cultural difference.

The cross-engagement between trained Cambodian dancers and performers and styling of taiko invokes a politics of interculturalism. Within the context of contemporary Cambodian performance, postmodernism, and the cosmopolitan, I turn towards interculturalism to discuss the impact of global contact and exchange. I frame my discussion of interculturalism through Marta Savigliano's discussion in the edited volume *Worlding Dance* (2009) and what Priya Srinivasan (2019) explains as neighboring, a metaphor for thinking about respect, relationality, and collaboration as well as addressing the role of proximity and the global encounter in shaping cultural production. Richard Schechner writes that intercultural exchange requires translation. "The translator of culture is not a mere agent, as a translator of words might be, but an actual culture-bearer" involved in doing culture (Schechner 1989, 158). Schechner draws attention to

the issue of translation and incommensurability when cultures and people come into contact. SanSan Kwan writes that intercultural work should be understood as a "process of discovery that is as much interpersonal as intercultural" (Kwan 2021, 13), suggesting that the encounter and its developments are crucial for understanding collaboration and incommensurability. These ideas shape my thinking about interculturalism in Ros' *Voice* (2023). I focus on the overlapping relationships and encounters that inform Cambodian cultural expression that take place between the individual performers and across a global artistic conversation. I am interested in the disconnect or moments that become reinterpreted and then require trust to reconcile. Interpersonally within the work, taking the divide of music-dance, Ros and the dancers articulate new relations along the lines of musicians-dancers, bridging and attempting to reconcile this ontological and disciplinary divide by re-staging and re-styling taiko.

Interculturalism is about the respectful encounters, translations, and engagements between cosmopolitan subjects and cultural practices across the world. In the case of *Voice* (2023), translation takes place in multiple parts, from technologically mediated experience to composer, composer to the instruments and digital audio workstation, composer to the performers, and then the stage to the audience. While information may be lost in translation, at the same time, these acts of doing and transference lead to the development of new embodied knowledge shaped by contact, negotiation, and encounter. Daryl Chin writes that interculturalism brings "previously suppressed material into the artistic arena, by admitting into a general discourse, other cultures, cultures which had previously been ignored or suppressed or unknown" without deforming or making these

cultures conform to the dominant culture (Chin 1989, 175). Chin's consideration of how difference and power can be redrawn into alignment through interculturalism, on the scale of styles and aesthetics, allows me to see how Ros engages a network of connections across the Global South, between the North and South, as well as East and West divides. In Cambodia, contemporary works range from a strong adherence to classical convention and exclusion from a global contemporary category to works predominantly in Western modern dance. These are often read and classified as Western works or disingenuous despite being performed by Khmer performers. However, *Voice* (2023) engages the politics of interculturalism to enact a change in contemporary Cambodian works. By integrating taiko and modern dance into a contemporary Cambodian work, Ros and the dancers enact a worlding of Cambodia into the global conversation surrounding the arts, showing that Cambodia participates on the global scale beyond the realms of world music and dance.

Ros Sokunthea's *Voice* (2023) is a complicated work that mediates global cultural flows in Cambodia, enacting *chnai* and experimenting with the boundaries of music-dance and intercultural connections as they exist in Cambodia. As a work categorized as *sahasamay*, Ros Sokunthea is worlding contemporary music in Cambodia, integrating stylistic elements from taiko into the stage choreography for the dancers and bringing in an array of instruments from across the world. I return to his provocation "whose voice?" because his question implies that there are multiple voices but that these voices have yet to be heard in the Cambodian performing arts scene. Ros calls for more voices and sounds in the sense of having more creatives and also the infusion of more aesthetics

across cultural boundaries, using intercultural experimentation as the grounds for change in Cambodia and pushing for the realization and recognition of more contemporary works. The stage itself becomes the contact zone for exploration and experimentation where contemporary projects where ideas are stylized/restylized and, in the case of *Voice* (2023), used to envision what contemporary Cambodia looks and sounds like in the context of technological, cultural, and generational change.

Intercultural Disjuncture and Instrumental Experiments

It's hard to say when the performance started on opening night at the French Institute of Cambodia. Celia Tuchman-Rosta and I were seated towards the front of the audience, two or three rows back from the front. I was unexpectedly seated behind my *sralai* teacher *Louk Kru* Chanthy, my *khloy* teacher *Louk Kru* Mien Penghak, and *Louk Kru* Borey a teacher at the Secondary School and Royal University of Fine Arts and we all started talking before the performance. I did not know that the *sralai* player *Louk Kru* Mien Penghak periodically mentioned in our lessons was actually *Louk Kru* Chanthy. Somehow, it also never occurred to me that *Louk Kru* Chanthy and *Louk Kru* Borey knew each other but in our conversation, I learned from *Louk Kru* Borey that *Louk Kru* Chanthy had a great reputation in the community. Chanthy and Borey had been acquainted with each other for a while but were actively working together for the Lakhon Khaol Youth of Cambodia along with Ros Sokunthea. What a small world.

But there we all were, lost in conversation as the performance almost began without us. At some point during our conversation about how we all knew each other, a

small group of dancers covered by a black cloth started moving slowly on stage like an amorphous blob (see Figure 7). Almost imperceptibly at first, sound began to play from the speakers and the lights dimmed, cuing us that the performance started. Ros was manipulating the sounds from his laptop on stage. The dancers moved slowly from backstage to the front and the cloth swelled and rippled as each dancer stepped forward or stretched out their arms, making odd points and spikes as the shape continuously changed. Meanwhile, an undulating sound reverberated out from the speakers with intermittent plucking ringing out a mixture of single notes and dissonant pitches. In their slow procession across the stage, the amorphous shape stepped off the stage, entering into the space between the stage and audience. Their movements began to slow as Ros fades out the sound.

I appreciated how Ros integrated modern dance and experimental music. He conveyed a sense of uncertainty and unrest in this opening scene by beginning his work with an electroacoustic performance as the dancers move around the stage using a shapeless cloth. He uses approximately ten instruments, some local but many of which were imported from across the world, layering them over each other with his laptop and creating an aleatoric sound with intermittent plucking and reverb. In doing so, Ros unsettles the audience's sense of place through integrating familiar and unfamiliar sonic practices and movement patterns. During the Cultural Seasons festival, many of the works fell under conventional Khmer genres including dance-dramas and theatrical works. However, *Voice* (2023), marketed as an experimental music piece with contemporary dance, separated itself from established classical and folk genres and

potential audience expectations. Ros and the dancers are taking a risk with this project. I learned later in an interview with *Louk Kru* Borey that Ros had composed much of *Voice* (2023) a year before the premiere but was hesitant to produce the work, in part, because it was an experimental work.

Figure 7. During the first performance night on February 16th, 2023, the dancers move while covered under a black cloth while Ros Sokunthea manipulates the audio on stage. Photo by author.

During to the Khmer Rouge genocide from 1975-1979, the regime intentionally persecuted artists and scholars, eliminating and sending into hiding many masters and experts. Following the reopening of the Royal University of Fine Arts after the genocide, there has been a strong adherence to preserving, protecting, and sustaining the

Cambodian arts amongst practitioners and this discourse has extended to scholars writing about the Cambodian arts (Grant 2014, 2017), generating narratives about endangerment in the face of globalization and a decline of young artists. On the ground, any attempts for significant change or innovation have been subject to substantial critique, sometimes regarded as akin to the destruction of Cambodian culture and the nation. Such anxieties and statements come from critical master artists, government officials, rising practitioners, and the general public. As community members hinted to me at times during my fieldwork, it is these voices that want to dictate, bully, pressure, and control how Cambodian arts should change. However, in creating *Voice* (2023) and using a plethora of instruments throughout the work including the handpan, ocarina, hand drum as well as hand gongs from Indigenous tribes in upland Cambodia (see Figure 8), Ros Sokunthea pushes for extensive change and innovation in the arts. He invites a new generation to assert their voices/sounds while introducing sounds from across the world to Cambodians while putting himself into the spotlight for critique. *Voice* (2023) begins an unsettling of established discourse on the meaning of preservation and the imposition of a specific narrative voice defining the Cambodian performing arts.

In watching him on stage with all these instruments, I was interested in how Ros came upon these instruments in his studies. He told me that spent much of his time investigating and looking into different musical cultures across the world via the internet. Namely, he frames YouTube as *kru* or teacher where video media and the website's algorithm operates as a mediator for uneven global contact and translation. Because one critique that can be leveraged against him is the issue of cultural appropriation, I posed

the thought in Khmer (a translation of my roughly phrased Khmer): “from my experience, some cultures and musics are believed to be sacred or need to be taught directly from teacher to student, so some people may think that what you’re doing isn’t good or respectful.” I asked him about the ethics of using these instruments since he studied how to play many of the instruments from YouTube rather than through formal instruction. He responded to my prompt positively. He said that he understood that there are possible issues about learning many instruments without formal instruction. At the same time, he wanted to show instruments beyond traditional and classical instruments as well as popular music, introducing the general Cambodian audience to sounds from across the world and what musicians across the world were doing. It was clear to me that this was important work for him.

Figure 8. At the dress rehearsal on February 15th, 2023, Ros Sokunthea plays the handpan. Photo by author.

Because my landlady *Aum* Yoo was an experienced teacher, I had told her that I was a graduate teaching assistant, and we had several conversations about the Cambodian education system. One evening, she brought over several school textbooks that middle school and high school students studied from. Cambodian students purchased their own copies from what I could tell so it had to be a mixture between her and her family's books. She tasked me with reading the Year 7 textbook. It had to be a history/social studies textbook, but she thumbed through the book, handed it to me, and, to test my reading skills (a regular activity that we did in the evenings), asked me to read it aloud. Immediately, I was very relieved that it was not another classic literature lesson (though I learned at least two or three words per sentence during those lessons). Thumbing through a few of the pages and seeing several musical instruments, I recognized that it was a lesson that introduced Cambodian folk and classical instruments.

From our conversation, I learned that within the general Cambodian education system, secondary school students (approximately middle school/junior high age) are taught about Cambodian music and dance. As a part of the curriculum, they read about a subset of instruments and a general history of Cambodian classical dance but do not gain an extensive purview of music and dance practices across the world beyond what they may encounter via social media and popular music. Ros Sokunthea's sonic borrowing proposes contemporary performances as an educational device aimed at inviting globalized sound into Cambodia through performance. Specifically, his thinking of YouTube as *kru* or teacher in Khmer opens a conversation in Cambodia about

contemporary creative work and its broader purpose for intercultural engagements and educating about difference.

Voice (2023) does not aim to appropriate in its application of a plethora of instruments, though it may be subject to this critique. As discussed earlier, *chnai* involves experimenting and, in *Voice* (2023), Ros experiments using different instruments. In his discussion of Zhang Yimou's rendering of the opera *Turandot*, Sean Metzger proposes the idea of intercultural fantasy island to describe the "paradoxical process of cooption by and resistance to an American-led, hegemonic expansion of capitalistic interests in creating and sustaining a blockbuster model of artistic practice," catering to "the Western orientalist vision of China as a space of exotic excesses" (Metzger 2003, 214). While *Voice* (2023) engages in processes of coopting global cultural production through weaving together different instruments, Ros and the dancers do not perpetuate orientalist ideas or symbolic representations of the foreign but instead produce a complex nexus of sounds and movements aimed at integrating Cambodian sound into the world. He creates a global collaged wall of sound that builds on local Cambodian readings of globalizing sounds and movement practices, working beyond what was possible within Cambodian classical or folk practices. Thus, Ros' *Voice* (2023) renders a cacophonous world within which an experimental, contemporary Cambodia can situate itself.

Buried in this collage of sounds and movement styles, *Voice* (2023) asks the questions: "Whose voice?" "Where does that sound/voice come from?" and "What does that voice/sound want to convey?" I take these questions as signifiers for the tensions related to experimental composition in Cambodia, implying a critique of

incommensurability and inaccessibility as well as a challenge to preservation centric work in the Cambodian arts. For instance, in tracing the early trajectory of the European free jazz movement and Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians emerging in South Side Chicago, George Lewis (2004) points to the incommensurability between both artistic movements due to their differing goals, the former seeking to liberate jazz from its categorization as African American sound and the latter aiming articulate African American musical experimentalism within the 20th century art music scene. These irreconcilable differences led to the bifurcation of American and European jazz movements in the mid-20th century while perpetuating racial stereotypes. Yet, both these movements indicate that experimentalism and innovation through *chnai* involves rupture and an attempt to break from established stereotypes and conventions that are incompatible with each movement. Here, I read the question "whose voice/sound?" as an invitation for rupture and a question about who gets to dominate or control the paths of contemporary Cambodian performance. The direction of the Cambodian performing arts remains in control of the master teachers or *Kru Thum* and their students maintaining a deep reverence for their them. Therefore, to *chnai* and innovate revolves around the question of whose voice can guide and direct the scene.

Ros' experiments with sound and movement in *Voice* (2023) indicates a new source of knowledge and information: YouTube. His search for various musical practices indicates a unilateral interaction of collecting information that may not reflect interculturalism's central tenet of respectful contact and interaction. Yet, by thinking of YouTube as *kru*, he reveals how his creative process is entangled within networked

cultural circulation where other experts post and share their cultural practices, allowing him to build a new connection beyond Cambodia. Adam Kielman writes that musical creativity involves worlding or world making through cosmopolitanism where composers engage their spatial relationships: how they connect to their physical location, their relationship with the world, and the world as it relates to them. I like how Adam Kielman (2022, 10) emphasizes vicarious mobilities, or the way "people [imagine] being elsewhere through sensory practices, economic participation, or affective political connection." For Ros, his engagement with different performance styles is shaped by being a cosmopolitan consumer of globalized media as it is vicariously, unequally, and unevenly distributed. As composers and choreographers are informed via social media, the algorithms shaping their personalized content and search outcomes reflect its creators, developers in the Global North. Therefore, there is a strong likelihood that social media content, while mediated in the Cambodian national frame, still maintains a bias towards content from the Global North, including China, Japan, South Korea, as well as France and the United States. By way of careful experimentation, Ros Sokunthea's *Voice* (2023) signals that the path ahead is deeply rooted in what is possible through cosmopolitanism and complicated processes of translocalization.

Inventing the Contemporary: The Vernacular Drum

The drum is a major throughline in *Voice* (2023). Conveyed partially in his experimentation with taiko-style performance, the drum is the main instrument in Ros' piece. About twenty minutes into the work, one of the performers set a hand drum at the

corner of the stage with a lit candle inside of a chalice placed on the drumhead. Ros walks over to it, kneeling onto one knee before it and placing his head on the rim (see Figure 9). In this section, I highlight some of the experimental elements involving global contact and exchange. Here, Ros reminds the audience about the importance of the drum in Khmer music and dance as different drums and styles of playing the drum are taken up in *Voice* (2023). The drum is central to the piece and highly revered in Khmer classical music. At *sampeah kru* or *thvay kru* ceremonies, a smaller set of offerings are made to the *samphour*, including fruit, incense, and candles separate from the main offering to the teacher spirit, indicating its spiritual importance. Ros Sokunthea's use of the hand drum stands in for the *samphour*, inserting into the work a performative practice of honoring the drum and recognizing its significance to the composition and within Khmer culture. By turning to the drum, I draw attention to the vernacular and vernacularization of cultural borrowing present in *Voice* (2023) for building intercultural connections across traditions.

In *Voice* (2023), the drum as a moniker for tradition and heritage articulates new connections in a contemporary work. Echoing how Eric Hobsbawm (1983) and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995) describe the invented historicization of tradition and heritage, the drum functions as a metaphor for the multiple registers of Cambodian-ness in that it activates temporalities of tradition as well as enacts the intercultural value of respect and translation using the drum's spiritual potency. I argue that the contemporary relies on concurrent trends of the present and is directly tied to movements of change and resistance. While traditions fundamentally rely on ethnocentric or nationalist ideologies,

the contemporary can be defined on how it diverges from the nation by intentionally drawing together of the world on stage. Ros bowing before the drum serves as a homage to all the music and dance practices integrated into *Voice* (2023), serving as a spiritual symbol of intercultural respect that sidesteps cultural nationalism. Ros' gesture of respect reflects how notions of the contemporary, while involved with postcolonial nation building, are tied to globally informed, cosmopolitan subjects and their locally bound lifeworlds. Extending the framework of the contemporary to its different iterations indicates how all cultural production can be read as contemporary through how creatives re/produce and re/create works. Thus, it means that festival performances and ritual performances can be contemporary works as a result of their staging or restaging.

Figure 9. Ros Sokunthea bowing to and holding the drum on February 16th, 2023. Photo by author.

Ros Sokunthea and the performers' mobility are largely confined within ASEAN. In most cases, Cambodian performers travel within Southeast Asia for various diplomatic programs, cultural exchange, and festivals, and very few travel to East and South Asia for invitational events. Marc Gidal write about how Latin American composers situate themselves as cosmopolitans, speaking "to the commonalities of their varied situations and attitudes with regards to their diverse affinities, transnational mobility, and participation in an elite occupational culture (Gidal 2010, 49). While a typical cosmopolitan is hypermobile and marked by their participation in high society, Marc Gidal highlights an issue of privilege and constrained mobility that is relevant for Cambodians who, by nature of their citizenship, have limited international mobility. Yet, I contend that they are cosmopolitans through their activities in the global arts scene.

Ros Sokunthea and his contemporaries take up modern dance stylings and different musical instruments while honoring their own practices, engaging in and producing a local or vernacular cosmopolitan work. Hon-Lun Yang describes how local Cantonese cover songs activate a vernacular cosmopolitan imaginary where pop melodies were "repackaged to fit the local context, rewritten into local narratives and conveyed in the local language..." in order to "…embrace certain 'cosmopolitan' values and lifestyle traits (Yang 2021, 161). Christine Yano further explains that vernacular cosmopolitan "takes the mobility of cosmopolitanism and places it squarely upon the shoulders of people in situ, within the particularities of their histories and aesthetics" (Yano 2021, 255). Both Yang and Yano imply an uneven vernacularizing or localizing of Global

North styles; for similar reasons, many contemporary Cambodian performance works take liberties with genres such as belly dancing, breaking, modern, Bharatanatyam, among other genres prominent on the global dance scene. All these styles become techniques of expression that reflect how Cambodian artists seek to situate themselves as participants in the global circulation of culture. In the context of *Voice* (2023) and the interplay of multiple instruments and stylings, Ros Sokunthea's insertion of the moments such as the homage to the hand drum, an instrument with many different variations across the world, invokes how Cambodian musicians value and respect the drum through ritual and ceremony and translates this to the different musical worlds brought onto the stage. By honoring the drum, Ros and the performers pay their respects to all the teachers and styles that inform their work. Thus, as it is leveraged in Cambodia, the contemporary is about respectfully forging new connections on stage, even as it is entangled with global hegemony and challenges local established conventions.

Contemporary Experimentation as Intervention

Ros Sokunthea's *Voice* (2023) is one artistic intervention into Cambodia's performing arts scene. His work is supported by Cambodian Living Arts and his personal networks, including peers and colleagues at the Royal University of Fine Arts. *Voice* (2023) reflects a broader trend with contemporary performance where creative and experimental projects situate themselves outside government institutions. By doing so, artists and creatives are then able to produce work without adhering strictly to cultural nationalism, which is not to say that composers and choreographers who do observe

traditional styles closely are not also producing contemporary works (Burridge and Frumberg eds. 2010; Kwan 2017). In fact, contemporary works should and do encompass all ongoing creative activities of the present, including reproductions of folk and classical works. Restaging works and performances of the classical repertory are new works because they involve new contexts, settings, and performers. These elements of newness highlight the ephemeral nature of performance and the impossibility of an exact replica. It is these iterations of the folk and classical along with the contemporary that unravel cultural nationalism, highlighting the ever-changing contexts of cultural production and its global connections. By *following* Ros' creative approach and framing it through the concept of *sahasamay*, I can envision imminent lineages and genealogies responding to Ros' *Voice* (2023) and the global, technocultural flows underpinning his performative innovations. Indeed, he is not alone in producing experimental works; there are more groups shaped by cosmopolitan formations and transnational movement.

Global encounters are not new for Cambodians. Cambodians have been cosmopolitan for more than a century. Throughout the 19th and 20th century, Cambodian musicians and dancers have traveled the globe, serving as cultural ambassadors by performing at festivals and political events and, in doing so, encountering works from outside Cambodia. Paul Cravath (2014) has described the history of Khmer classical dancers traveling to France and the United States, serving the mission of cultural nationalism in the 1970s during Cambodia's political unrest. Clare Croft writes about how the US State Department sponsored dance company tours to produce intercultural sympathies; she argues that cultural diplomacy through embodied connection is a kind of

soft power (Croft 2015, 12). I was at Java Creative Café having a coffee with *Nak Kru* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro in August 2023. We talked about her incredible corpus of works. She explained that Cambodians have been a part of several intercultural programs and collaborations pre-genocide and post-genocide. Over the past thirty years especially, artists and creatives have traveled to Cambodia for collaborations and residencies within NGOs such as Cambodian Living Arts and the closed Amrita Arts, influencing the local artistic community and introducing new ideas for performance. Furthermore, diasporic artists have shaped the trajectory of contemporary performing arts in Cambodia. As Ros Sokunthea shows with his plethora of instruments and usage of the internet, different modes and genres of performance are readily accessible at everyone's fingertips.

I went to Ros Sokunthea's family home in August 2023, and we sat down for an interview in which we discussed composition in Cambodia. I especially wanted to know his perspective about composing music that integrates instruments from across the world. One of the most striking things he said was, "khnyum hean [I dare to make [music]," suggesting that his intervention was to appropriate and meaningfully engage musical cultures and to draw them into the Cambodian soundscape. By saying *hean* rather than *tveu* or *bangkaeut*, meaning to do/make and to create respectively, Ros Sokunthea gave me the impression that he wanted to challenge the community and be provocative. My reading of his choice to be daring was that he invited controversy and wanted to incite other musicians to create new works using their own means. As I have observed at other events and performances, *Voice* (2023) is not the only work that draws on other styles and genres. Other companies such as SilverBelle take a similar integrationist approach,

engaging in cultural borrowing drawn from workshops by visiting artists in Cambodia. Yet, Ros Sokunthea's creative intervention is striking due to how his experimentation is guided by indirect and disjunct modes of study mediated by the internet.

In framing *Voice* (2023) as indicative of global artistic dialogue, I say that contemporary performance in Cambodia reveals how technologically mediated access to cultural production facilitates intercultural encounters. These confrontations with the world provoke a new artistic consciousness, one that other artists such as Khuon Chay, discussed in chapter four, activate to connect with the world. Fanon conceptualized Black Antillean subjectivity as they traveled between the Caribbean and French metropole became "demigod[s]" informed by transnational experiences (2008 [1952], 3). While Fanon's discussion focuses on racial binaries caused by a psychological schism, I redirect his ideas about Black ontology to consider the formation of the cosmopolitan subject. Fanon identifies a creole subject who navigates their changed relationship to the Antilles, revealing a glocal, racially marginalized Black consciousness informed by global travel and colonial contact. Fanon's ideas allow me to see the Cambodian cosmopolitan artist communing with the world via technology and vicarious mobilities (Kielman 2022, 10), creating art and performance as a part of a global community.

Following Fanon, Stuart Hall viewed creoleism as part of globalization. He writes that creoleism and creolization are unfixed terms that define a "complex, troubled, unfinished relation to history…and the unrequited trauma of violent expropriation and separation" (2024 [2003], 136) in Caribbean cultures, driven by cultural loss and resistance in translation (137). I align the histories of French colonialism between the

Caribbean and Cambodia to identify parallels between creolization and intercultural contact. Postcolonial experimentation in Cambodia pushes beyond its narratives of colonial and authoritarian violence through creole cosmopolitanism, "a framework for imagining oneself in the world" (Vergès 2001, 180). For Cambodia, this articulates a postmodern and postcolonial Cambodian-ness that extends beyond cultural nationalism, addressing global formations of difference and pulling new perspectives into relation. Western influence flooded into Cambodia during the French colonial period, but it is equally important to see how the creole cosmopolitan offered crucial influence, shaping Cambodian subjects in response to colonial labor, migration, and transculturation. I suggest there has been a layered response to French colonialism and independence on the one hand *and* the Khmer Rouge, Vietnamese occupation, and United Nations control on the another. One evoked postcolonial nationalism and the second provoked a radical relationality and alignment with the world. Cosmopolitan subjects in Cambodia challenge established national, governmental, and foreign narratives about the arts. Ros Sokunthea's *Voice* (2023) represents this technologically mediated contact with the cosmos, inviting and integrating sonic and movement practices from across the globe on a cosmopolitan stage that produces a world of the "interconnected whole in which it participates" (Rae 2006, 15). By *daring* to make *Voice* (2023), Ros Sokunthea audaciously remixes contemporary Cambodian performance, infixing Cambodia's presence in the world.

Voice (2023) reveals the interconnectedness of contemporary Cambodia. Rather than focusing on the ruptures of the genocide, Ros Sokunthea contributes to a growing

corpus of contemporary Cambodian performance rooted in a politics of *chnai*, or innovation and experimentation as discussed earlier in this chapter. I place *Voice* (2023) into the conversation of the cosmopolitan because Ros Sokunthea and other Cambodian creatives draw attention to how their work doesn't necessitate global nomadism or a complete disconnect from the nation-state. *Voice* (2023), among other works, reflect cosmopolitan formations of Cambodian-ness where networked interrelations are cast across their chosen identities, as a dancer, musician, artist, Cambodian, Khmer, American, queer, gay, and more. While scholars have discussed the cosmopolitan subject as detached from identity, cosmopolitans have multiple, inseparable subjectivities. Those subjectivities are both agentive and ascribed by external forces. *Voice* (2023) represents Ros Sokunthea's ambitions as a musician and composer in Cambodia asserting a new voice/sound in contemporary Cambodian performance, advocating for a contemporary repertory of Cambodian performance that *dares* to reinvent and reimagine the arts. New, experimental works simultaneously challenge and contribute to long-standing conversations about cultural preservation and sustainability. They refuse stagnation and build new paths for the arts that extend into global circulations of contemporary performance.

Responding to a rising generation of artists, I interrogate *sahasamay* --- the contemporary in Cambodia to think beyond genocide centric and cold war epistemologies. This chapter lays the groundwork for how artists and creatives produce and rewrite narratives about Cambodia. I view contemporary Cambodian performers within their own cosmopolitan formation of Cambodian-ness, always in conversation

with diasporic subjects and their global networks of relationality. I am drawn to a global Cambodia tethered to and yet unbound from the nation-state. New creative works in Cambodia reimagine the artistic environment through a nexus of choreosonics and citation that reimagine tradition as contemporary. Ros Sokunthea's experimental work *Voice* (2023) asks whose voices matter when traditions begin to change. Ros recontextualizes and reimagines Cambodian artistic practice in his work, drawing on contemporary art music and dance as well as identitarian politics to produce his own intervention. By way of *chnai*, contemporary cultural production invites an active reimagining of the performing arts and Cambodian society, defining a new narrative direction of the arts outside of cultural nationalism.

Contemporary works in Cambodia are always scrutinized for how they purportedly fail to contribute to the mission of cultural preservation. As a result, contemporary artists choose to do their work outside of government institutions. In turn, contemporary artists in Cambodia refuse a politics of cultural nationalism that reifies the nation-state while working towards the global. David Chaney (2002) writes that cosmopolitan subjects and their art challenge notions of cultural citizenship by distilling high art and culture. By styling a contemporary genre, contemporary Cambodian creatives recognize themselves within and remove themselves from the nation-state through experimental practice, activating and engaging a wider range of global dis/connectivities. The contemporary is unbounded in ways that facilitate a greater sharedness or collectivity beyond national identifiers through collapsing space and time. In turn, the contemporary produces new ontologies of performance as a genre category.

Philip Bohlman argues that ontologies of "our music" define music in relation to ethnonational and political identity, but that it relies on more than shared group identity to define it and therefore becomes impossible to encapsulate (Bohlman 1999, 21-22). The contemporary as a genre functions similarly as an ontological category that is incredibly capacious. It contains multiple approaches to re/defining performance. Contemporary Cambodian performers invite friction with their work. Anna Tsing (2005, 4) describes friction as "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" that cause motion and change. Friction is generative and the performing arts reveal how cosmopolitan artists use the global encounter to interject and voice new narratives while challenging established practices and traditionalism. Building on conversations on Global Asias (cf. Chen 2021, 1002; Chen and Eubanks eds. 2024), Ros Sokunthea and his contemporaries cultivate what I envision as Cambodian-ness. Cambodian-ness understands that transnational and diasporic networks are central to Cambodian identity and cultural production in the present, leading to plural identity and cultural formations and an expansiveness to what constitutes Cambodia and its peoples. Who is *following* whom? What new genealogies are made visible once we ask that question? Reflected through the genre of *sahasamay*, these connections are made up of a series of dis/connections and slippages, activating plural conceptions of Cambodia and its cosmopolitan subjects. I turn to them in the following chapters, revealing overlapping experiences with diaspora, migration, identity, and creative experimentation in contemporary Cambodia.

Chapter Two: Diasporic Dis/Connect in Jean-Baptiste Phou's Creative Works

After the final screening of *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) and post-screening talk concluded in Java Creative Café's black box theatre on November 27th, 2022, the audience and I exited the theatre and seated ourselves in the outdoors seating area. The gray concrete floor and benches contrasting with the wire boat suspended over a sandbox (see Figure 10). Throughout the month, people coming to the café as patrons or viewing the film could voluntarily write a personal message on Chinese offering paper and tie it to the hanging boat using the red yarn available. The instructions were to simply write a message to someone who was important in your life and that these messages would become a part of tonight's performance. Despite coming to the café a handful of times throughout the month of November, I had only attached my message to the boat earlier that evening.

Before the screening, a relatively young Cambodian man sat next to me. During the question-and-answer session, he asked Phou about the Cambodian education system, noting the decline of Khmer language in favor of English, Mandarin, Korean, and other languages deemed necessary for professional work. After Phou shared his sympathy and acknowledgement of this ongoing trend, he and I began a side conversation in English. I shared my observations about language. Throughout my studies of Khmer language, I heard my teachers talk about how fewer Cambodian youth had strong reading and writing skills in Khmer compared to their English or Mandarin proficiency. It was unsurprising,

though incredibly disheartening. We continued our conversation outside. He was interested in my experience learning Khmer as an American while he shared about his friends and family's varying degrees of English competency. It was interesting to think alongside a friendly stranger about how people from the diaspora seek to learn Khmer and how Cambodian youth appeared to prefer learning foreign languages.

Figure 10. Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao holding candles and lighting the messages suspended from a hanging wire frame boat in Java Creative Café Toul Tompong. Photo by author.

As we sat outside, a ball of red yarn was making its way around the attendees. There were about 25 of us or so still here after the talk, and we were each asked to hold

the yarn. Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao, the artist whose drawings were featured throughout the film, then walked out dressed in all white. They slowly lit each of the hanging messages on fire. One by one, each message started to burn. Some of the offering papers were immediately consumed in flame. Other slips of paper drifted into the sand pit slowly turning into ash. As smoke filled the space, we observed the burning in relative silence. I could hear indistinguishable murmurs. At some moment during the burning, one-by-one, we were asked to relinquish the yarn we held collectively. Phou and Sao's assistants brought the yarn into the center. They set it on fire. As all the hanging messages vanished, Phou and Sao set the remaining fallen messages aflame. Eventually, after what felt like an hour, but was maybe only twenty minutes, all the slips of paper and yarn burnt into ash and smoke. All the messages and our shared connection were released into the world. Afterwards, people left the venue or walked over to Phou to offer their appreciation of his work before dispersing.

I attended the last showing of a month-long screening of French Cambodian Jean-Baptiste Phou's 32-minute film *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in November 2022. It was accompanied by a brief question and answer session and short performance that same night as well as workshop discussions through 2023. I begin and I will end this chapter with this performance to reiterate themes of interconnectivity from the previous chapter. In this photo, I aimed to capture the yarn linking all the onlookers together at the foreground as it connects itself to the hanging wire frame boat to consider the shared experience of this short performance and earlier viewing of Phou's film. The burning of yarn highlights the tenuous nature of interpersonal relationships through the

consumption of our messages and our connections to each other. This chapter explores these loose and fraught connections through how Phou frames the experiences of people who call Cambodia home and the homeland.

In *My Mother's Tongue* (2021), Phou recounts his relationship with his late mother through his struggles with language. Phou is a polyglot who speaks six different languages, but Khmer is the language that presented the most difficulties for him. He takes his struggles with learning Khmer as a starting point for processing and understanding his mother. This experimental animated film has beautiful rotoscoped artwork, with palimpsestic sonic and visual collages. Phou provides a voiceover narration in a mixture of French, Khmer, and Teochew with subtitles in Khmer and English. It is a genre-breaking work. Phou's projects almost always invite conversations about diasporic cultural production as embedded within local cultural forms and global cultural flows. Paul Gilroy explains the multidirectional interactions in Afro-diasporic cultural production as "a story of hybridisation and intermixture that inevitably disappoints the desire for cultural and therefore racial purity" (Gilroy 1993, 199). This is Phou's sustained style. By eliding genre conventions and traditional modes of cultural production, Phou's multimedia work *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) narrates an exploration of diasporic ontology and participates in a postmodern rearticulation of Cambodian-ness. Diasporic cultural production renders visible what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) refers to as the contact zone or a space allowing for the cohabitation of heterogenous practices and perspectives. Phou's multimedia work further reflects what Black feminist scholar Mecca Jamilah Sullivan describes as a poetics of difference. These include the "multiplicities of

form and genre [responding] to global discourses of antiracism, decolonization, feminism, and anti-heterosexism" and intervene in "how social difference and identity are imagined" to propose new expressions of Blackness that interrogate the complexities of being human (Sullivan 2021, 13-16). Pratt's and Sullivan's ideas help me to see Phou's work as a crowded space that activates powerful vectors of the contemporary. Thinking through the lens of diaspora and expressions of cultural identity as inherently multiple and pluralistic in scope, I sit with Phou's poetics of difference through his writing, media, and performance.

Triangulating Phou's film *My Mother's Tongue* (2021), his memoir *Coming Out of My Skin* (2023), and this short performance narrated above, I thread together different layers of Phou's life narrative as a gay Cambodian diasporic subject to develop diasporic dis/connect as a heuristic for conceptualizing the experiential contradictions that foreground diasporic return. I focus on Phou's connecting of place, language, and memory from his personal experience to understand these as linguistic, sonic, and visual layers that reflect an uneasy relationship between the diasporic subject and the homeland. This composite exploration of Phou's works understands the film and memoir as a performance in tandem with the outdoor, symbolic burning of Chinese offering papers.

Inspired by the burning yarn and paper, I argue that the Cambodian diasporic subject is spatially and temporally entangled within processes of diasporic dis/connect. I am expressly interested in the complicated modes in which diasporic subjects construct and define their relationship to the homeland. I engage following as a mode of analysis to consider how diasporic subjectivity complicates and advances the core values of

following. In particular, I *follow* the various threads of Phou's narrative across three of his works and identify where dis/connect emerges in his artistic lifeworlds. I use the backslash to indicate the slippage of how the diasporic subject negotiates their relationship to the homeland with and against situated, and predominantly nationally defined, loyalties. Rhacel Parreñas and Lok Siu write that situated loyalties frame how the connections to the diasporic home and the imaginary home are "always in flux and changing, and it can represent more than one place" (Parreñas and Siu 2007, 15). Diasporic Cambodians have situated loyalties attached to experiences with genocide and political turmoil, intergenerational memory, and the ancestral legacy of Angkor. Many Cambodians in the diaspora also have familial ties to parts of China. Therefore, in addition to the home in resettlement, the imagined homeland for diasporic Cambodians is exceedingly multiple and shaped by these fraught dis/connections. In this and the following chapter, I explore the valences of return, where the diasporic subject travels to Cambodia and produces their own artistic intervention in negotiation with tensions of identity and belonging as it is co-constituted by the self and broader society.

Khatharya Um complicates diasporic notions of return by showing how the Cambodian diaspora is situated within "two simultaneous contexts of exile – exile *from* the ancestral home and the memory source, and exile *within* the new place of refuge" (Um 2015, 233). The broader notion of return is complicated by the unstable and oppressive place of refuge marked by racialized exclusion and contrast of the traumatic but beautiful and romanticized homeland. These juxtapositions undergird the experience of return. I extend this framing of exile and return towards questions surrounding

identitarian belonging. In this sense, the Cambodian diasporic identity is not only contingent on an imaginary return and invocations of memories and images of the homeland. Instead, the experience of diasporic return is entangled within the possession of cultural knowledge, practices, and values as well as apt linguistic performance.

In this chapter, I develop the concept of diasporic dis/connect to explore the tensions between return, exclusion, and subject formation. Diasporic dis/connect includes the complicated ways that diasporic subjects articulate their multiple relationships to place, ethnicity, and nationality as increasingly mobile cosmopolitan subjects. I am expressly interested in how diasporic subjects activate cross-cultural, international relationships that inform cultural production and their situated self-identification. For instance, Cambodians in Cambodia and across the diaspora continue projects of memory through programming such as Seasons of Cambodia and its 2025 rendition Acts of Memory. By featuring art, media, and performances addressing the importance of heritage and preservation, these programs contribute to the ongoing dialogue of rememory. Cathy Schlund-Vials explains rememory as multivalent processes of remembering aimed towards reparative articulations of selfhood in relation to trauma and mass violence (Schlund-Vials 2012, 194). Diasporic dis/connect resituates these conversations about genocide and trauma and focuses on issues of subject ontology and reparative work. In particular, Cambodian-ness and its mobility and mutability express ways of articulating and complicating essentialist constructions of Cambodian identity, refusing the centrality of trauma while simultaneously reconciling with it.

Informed by the dynamic mobility of creoleism and the cosmopolitan subject, I examine how Phou's work articulates a global and decidedly plural subjectivity through experimental, contemporary creative praxis mutually informed by transnationally mediated experience. These activate a "diasporas of difference" and troubles sublimated understandings of diasporic identity and experience by attending to multiple encounters centered on difference (Sullivan 2021, 21). Phou's work helps me articulate how artistic and creative experimentation are mechanisms for establishing a reparative connection or re/connection, revealing the already existing connection, identity, and sense of belonging hidden or obscured by displacement and abjection. Dorinne Kondo writes about the reparative potential of performance as the "brutal confrontation of the real" and the artistic endeavor to redress violence and injustice as a core component of worldbuilding (Kondo 2018, 33). Phou's film and memoir similarly and viscerally render the tenuous racial, sexual, and linguistic slippages that engender abjection and discrimination.

Taking these issues as my anchor point, I argue that diasporic dis/connect points towards a relational ontology rooted in the self-deconstruction at the center of *My Mother's Tongue* (2021), *Coming Out of My Skin* (2023), and this brief performance. I identify a pluriverse by tying together Phou's different works to identify a Cambodian diasporic subject formation rooted in shifting connections and vulnerabilities. Framed through the slippage and contradictions of dis/connect, I navigate the layered co-constructions of Cambodian identity as it situates itself across ethno-national, familial, and linguistic dis/connections that are a result of imperial development and modernity. Through a discussion of these experiences, rendered through Phou's work, I work

through ideas of radical interdependence and relational ontology, specifically communing with the self, multiple selves, and its social and interpersonal connections. Drawing from Buddhist thought, Arturo Escobar explains that interdependence involves an understanding that "everything is mutually constituted" (Escobar 2020, 19-27, emphasis removed), pointing to the dissolution of self and other in favor of interlinked worlds and lives. Furthermore, building on Sylvia Wynter's (1984; 2003) configurations of the human, Katherine McKittrick frames diasporic creative work as the means for "rethinking how humanness might be imagined" beyond colonial definitions of man and towards how people practice living (McKittrick 2015, 156). Diasporic dis/connect attends to how being human as a person from and in diaspora revolves around the need to be in communion precisely because ruptures deny connection, and how being plays out in the co-construction of identity. Phou's creative and personal work reveal a process of queer worlding that explores how the social and interpersonal tensions surround desire along identitarian lines and the complicated ways diasporic subjects re/dis/connect. Queer worlding envisions new relational connections and possibilities that express Cambodian-ness and its reparative possibilities.

My aim is to weave together Phou's personal narrative and vulnerabilities surrounding his gay and Cambodian identities, which are separately conveyed in his works. I hope to thread together the themes of abjection and reparation that Phou articulates for his audiences. I intentionally emphasize weaving and threading. During an interview, Phou told me that one of the major themes in *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) is textiles and threads (Phou 2023, personal communication). In our follow up exchange

after this chapter was written, he clarified that this theme was prompted by the curator of the exhibition who first commissioned the sound work of *My Mother's Tongue* (2023) (Phou 2025, personal communication). Phou said that "languages are like threads" when referring to the live drawings and redrawings done by Sao Sreymao in the film, conveying the complex textiles, tapestries, connections, and relationships that can be forged through languages. Phou also told me that audiences sought to psychoanalyze his relationship to his mother using his work, treating him as an object of analysis rather than addressing the broader contributions of his work threads (Phou 2023, personal communication). Furthermore, in his memoir *Coming Out of My Skin* (2023), he critiques the sexual fetishization of Asians for its fantastical objectification of Asian bodies. His work is deeply personal, and he has set a boundary that I will uphold. I try to make a pointed effort to situate Phou as the person within a broader context to avoid transforming him into an object in my written interpretation of his artistic work. My caution here also aims to rectify colonial modes of knowledge production and analysis that strip away the autonomy of the artist. In doing so, I uphold what he told me: he wants his work to speak to other people and their feelings as diasporic subjects. This chapter reflects our conversations where Phou graciously shared clarifying details that supplement my analysis of his work.

Liminal and Linguistic Dis/Connections

French Cambodian creative Jean-Baptiste Phou is a cosmopolitan diasporic subject. He was born in Paris in 1981, and his parents were Chinese Cambodian. His

subjectivity conveys and troubles relationships to the homeland. I focus on how his experiences as a polyglot and gay Cambodian (Asian) man are shaped by the violences of desire, transience, liminality, and dis/connect. I reflect on how Phou addresses ethnic and racial, national, diasporic, and sexual abjection to unsettle Cambodian diasporic identity and Cambodian-ness. Both *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) and *Coming Out of My Skin* (2023) highlight how these dis/connections are experienced and expressed through language.

The opening scene of the film starts in complete darkness with the sounds of a pop song playing in the background. A photo of a baby boy, Phou, lying on the seat of a chair slowly fades in. In the background, there is a spider plant, television, and a stack of machines making up a stereo system. Initially in color, the photo fades into black and white when the narration begins. Phou does the voiceover narration in a mixture of French, Khmer, and Teochew with subtitles in Khmer and English. He begins his story showing how he was exposed to Mandarin, Cantonese, Teochew, Khmer, and French while growing up in France. "Our home was a real tower of Babel," Phou remarks. He lists each language: Mandarin, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese, and Khmer. As Phou pauses between each word, the audio transitions from the initial song, recognizably sung Mandarin now, to different conversations in Cantonese, Teochew, and Khmer after he speaks. As the narration starts, a sketch of a woman with medium long hair in a collared shirt appears. Sao Sreymao, Phou's collaborator and visual artist, draws solid lines in real time over the sketch while Phou talks, delineating and imposing the woman's presence on the photo. Her arms hold a bowl that is being set on a drawn-in table (see Figure 11). Sao

draws a speech bubble. Changing layers, Sao removes the initial sketch, leaving the solid lines and shapes of the woman as a scarf is draped across her shoulders and tossed out behind her. Sao continues to draw in details, adding a plaid pattern is on the scarf. While the scarf is not unique to Cambodia, this plaid scarf is a krama, a popular symbol of Cambodia and indicative of Cambodian heritage. Once the scarf is filled out, Sao sketches a symbol in the speech bubble. It is the first letter in Khmer *ka* that appears as Phou says "et cambodgien."

Noting how his parents seamlessly switched between languages at home, Phou states that the only language was passed down to him, his mother tongue, was the Southern Chinese dialect Teochew passed down from his mother. Sao adds more and more details onto the woman, including a red floral pattern on her shirt and light and shadow across her face and arms. In response to fellow schoolmates complimenting him on knowing Chinese, Phou says that he "envied children who spoke just one language / that of their parents." As a diasporic subject in France, Phou reveals that French was his primary mode of communication outside of the household, leading to strained communication at home as well as gaps in cultural and familial knowledge. Meanwhile, Sao superimposes a sketch of a young boy over the baby in the photo. While Sao creates light and shadow to provide a sense of dimension, Phou explains that his unsatisfactory knowledge of Teochew and Khmer limit his ability to ask his mother about her family history as Cambodian rock music filters in and out of the narration. Out of frustration with himself and his mother, he asks "how come you never taught me Khmer?"

The first four minutes and forty-five seconds of the film captivated me. I appreciated the recognition of how multiple languages from the Chinese diaspora in Cambodia were mixed with other languages in the home. It recalled my own Teochew-speaking family members and how my parents would blend Khmer and Teochew seamlessly to the point where I didn't know the difference between either language when I was a child. This pseudo pidgin language speaks to what is pejoratively referred to as a broken language. On the one hand, brokenness intimates the disconnect between Phou and his mother, revealing the limited capacity to engage with each other and their strained communication. However, brokenness also gestures towards the condition of the diasporic subject. I do not mean to say that diasporic subjects are broken and fragmented and thus reproduce narratives of the traumatized Cambodian subject. Instead, I thread together brokenness and liminality. Victor Turner describes classic liminality as the "betwixt and between" and "ambiguous and indeterminate," generating communitas and anti-structure (Turner 1969, 95). Scholars generally focus on communitas and its engendering of shared collective experiences through the deconstruction and sublimation of custom and convention. However, anti-structure draws attention to the violence surrounding liminality. Victor Turner explains that "all sustained manifestations of communitas must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions" (Turner 1969, 109). Brokenness is dangerous. There are jagged edges, sharp points, splinters, shards, cracks, tears, etc. Brokenness evokes a desire for resolution, repair, restitution, and reconnection. Drawing from Gayatri Gopinath's framing of queer diaspora as diametrically opposed to heterosexuality and the

nation (Gopinath 2018, 11), the diasporic subject formation reflects and refracts Turner's concept of anti-structure, implicating the forces that dismantle structure, convention, and reality. Diasporic subjects, in their indeterminate liminal position, reveal that brokenness is a symptom of the desire for connection.

Figure 11. Sao Sreymao's drawing superimposed over Phou's photo of his living room. Image courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao.

Phou's initial scene draws attention to how the violence of linguistic disconnection reveals the differences between himself and his mother as well as with his French peers. He highlights these differences through his contradicting desires to find a sense of belonging through being in a family where only one language is spoken and his

longing to communicate with his mother. These liminal desires point towards alienation and abjection through a sense of isolation. Julia Kristeva (1982) frames abjection as the opposition and suppression of dominant subjectivities and difference in preservation of established conventions, ideologies, morals, ethics. Extending Kristeva's framework into Asian American performance, Karen Shimakawa discusses abjection as the "movement between foreignness and domestication/assimilation, visibility and invisibility; it is that movement between enacted by and on Asian Americans" (Shimakawa 2002, 3), highlighting the liminal position of Asian Americans and diasporic subjects more broadly. Grappling with his abject position, Phou conveys the struggle for connection on an individual level through his inability to receive answers directly from his mother about family members or why she never taught him Khmer.

Across this scene, Phou speaks over a kaleidoscope of songs and nearly unintelligible dialogue that signify the collage of languages permeating his early years. I return to this opening scene with a focus on the audio. At the start of the film, I hear plucked electronic strings with bowed strings and drums enhanced with reverb and echo. They fade in slowly from faraway. While the music crescendos and creates a sense of closer proximity, I catch voices faintly laughing. About fifteen seconds in, the music diminishes in volume and the laughter fades. The music continued in what I experience as a vacuum as Phou's photo transitions from color to greyscale. When Phou begins speaking, the accompanying soundtrack fades into the background, and I can no longer hear the music in detail. When nearly imperceptible, he introduces each of the languages present in his childhood.

"Mandarin," he begins. I recognize the same song from earlier and I catch a fragment of lyrics, identifying that the song is in Mandarin, though I am unable to make out any specific lyrics. Then, the song gently fades out and Phou says "Cantonese." I hear women laughing and conversing briefly in what I ascertain to be Cantonese. "Teochew," Phou intercedes. Immediately afterwards, a child's voice interjects into the foreground and draws my attention and a man's voice respond affirmatively while the women disappear into the background. "Hainanese," Phou says, and the sounds of sizzling oil take over my ears, and the boy is no longer audible. I hear the scraping of a spatula on a pan as a woman speaks, presumably in Hainanese. "And Cambodian," concluding his list. This time I can understand what I'm hearing this time. I make out the sounds of a market with a seller saying that he sold enough rice with pork to profit for the day to his friends who cheer in support as the sounds of motorcycles and children playing fill in the background. These transitions between songs and recorded audio interlaced with Phou's narration encapsulate the first minute of the film and enact the ease by which Phou's parents would switch across languages.

A flurry of gongs and drums cuts into Phou's commentary with a drum roll that crescendos into a recitative sung by a Teochew opera singer that takes over with string accompaniment. The music fades into the background and Phou returns to explain that Teochew is his mother tongue, implying that the audio is excerpted from Teochew opera. Once I make this realization, a school bell rings out with the sounds of children chattering and conveying their jealousy to Phou before another school bell rings and the sounds of idle conversation fade into nothing. Phou's narration continues in relative silence in envy

of his monolingual peers. Distantly, I begin to hear someone speak in French; I imagine that it's someone on the television or radio speaking as Phou comments on the communication difficulties in his home. He talks to his mother in French. As he does, I infer that dishes clatter in the background, creating the sense of being in the kitchen. She does not respond and the clatter fades into sounds of bubbling. While Phou shares his thoughts about not learning Khmer growing, the rumbling chorus of the song "Dance A Go Go," a Cambodian 1960s psychedelic rock song, permeates the background with its quick dance tempo, electric guitar and bass, and bright soprano vocals. "I will probably never have the answers," Phou says as the song fades away, leaving the remainder of his narration about the gap between him and his mother in relative silence.

Throughout this wonderfully crafted sonic medley, Phou introduces his linguistic and familial background. The confluence of Mandarin, Cantonese, Hainanese, Teochew, Khmer, and French highlight a constellation of connections within Phou's home. By interlinking these different songs and sound clips, Phou positions himself as a person with Chinese Cambodian heritage in France. He draws attention to a history of Chinese peoples in Cambodia, the largest ethnic minority community in Cambodia, while highlighting the more prominent Chinese dialects and communities in Cambodia. The Chinese presence in Cambodia can be traced back to as early as the 13th century through the records of Zhou Daguan. Generally, Chinese immigrants integrated themselves into Khmer society but were organized into their dialect groups as a form of tax collection during the French colonial period. These divisions facilitated specific economic niches based on dialect. Chinese communities in Cambodia were mostly located in rural areas,

except for those who incorporated themselves into Khmer society and acquired Cambodian citizenship. However, the overall Chinese community grew in Cambodia from the colonial era into postcolonial Cambodia with increased migration and trade. With the US-supported military coup ousting Sihanouk in 1970 and the right-wing militia in the countryside, ethnic Chinese people fled into urban areas. Shortly afterwards, they were pushed out and targeted by the Khmer Rouge starting in 1975. These linguistic connections, as they are rendered visually and sonically, foreground the suppression of ethnic Chinese people in Cambodia as they assimilate into Khmer society and face discrimination as a result of French colonialism.

In consultation with the imaginative work of his sound designer, Phou portrays a shared understanding of competing identities—Chinese in multiple iterations, Khmer, and French—by alluding to the histories of conflict that inform his family's emigration to France and the multiple languages used in his household. These social and historical factors inform the broader framing of *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) and Phou sets up a linguistic habitus by continuously slipping between languages and sound worlds. Pierre Bourdieu describes the habitus as systems and structures that inform an individual's or community's disposition or attitude to the world (Bourdieu 2013 [1972], 72). Expanding Bourdieu's discussion of habitus and practice theory, Thomas Turino explains that embedded ways of knowing and worldviews are in constant negotiation with the habitus (Turino 1990, 409). While any habitus relies on structures and systems, Phou strategically constructs his early linguistic world to convey an indeterminacy within a multilingual anti-structure. These slippages convey the disconnect from normative

monolingual homes referenced in his conversation with his primary school classmates. This intricate linguistic soundworld also speaks to a broader diasporic subject and cosmopolitan subjectivity that deals with anti-structure and disruption of normative convention, particularly in the monolingual home. Frantz Fanon (2008) examined how the Black creole subject is marked by their shifting relations and movements between the imperial center and colonized home. However, as Phou shows in these opening minutes, these shifts and negotiations are further complicated for second generation diasporic subjects, where the connection to the homeland is refracted through the home in diaspora. Phou's multilingual home life of six languages connects these disjunctions to portray a diasporic ontology constructed within and reliant on constantly negotiating competing social and linguistic structures.

With this multilingual background, Phou grew up to be a polyglot with fluency in French, English (our primary mode of communication), Spanish, Teochew, and Khmer. He told me (and enacted in the film) that Khmer was the most difficult language for him to learn. In pursuit of his Cambodian heritage, he began traveling to Cambodia when he was twenty-five years old, first in 2006, and he then moved to Singapore for a job in investment banking. In his memoir *Coming Out of My Skin* (2023), Phou writes about being a gay Asian man from his adolescent years to his early forties. Up until he started working at BNP Paribas, he was distant from his family as an unacknowledged gay son, disconnected from Asian diasporic communities in France. However, this pivot in his mid-twenties launched him into being the prodigal son where he was "living the dream: dream job, dream salary, dream lover" (Phou 2023, 59). In becoming the prodigal son,

Phou points to an interesting contradiction between the politics of being a gay Asian son and a successful son with a prestigious career. While Phou is not an Asian American subject, his position reflects conversations about exceptionalism in the Asian American model minority myth. Namely, Phou becomes the productive family member effectively able to contribute to the family through financial means, participating in what Chris Eng refers to as "a logic of contributionism" that values recognition while casting away anything that does not qualify as prestigious or legible to liberal society (Eng 2025, 13). Despite being the gay son and therefore being an abjected other in the family unit, Phou attained conditional acceptance as a cosmopolitan polyglot. Language is entangled within this formation as being a polyglot would indicate exceptionalism within society, raising his value to society and family while reconfiguring his queer subjectivity by situationally shifting his familial and diasporic relationships.

Later, about fourteen minutes into the film, to the backdrop diminuendo of Phou singing the Cambodian popular song "Champa Battambang," Phou remarks about the contrasting reception to his Khmer proficiency. He describes the "painstaking effort" that he puts into speaking Khmer, receiving both mockery and flattery in response to his pronunciation, and the repudiation he faced as a Cambodian subject speaking imperfect Khmer. As he provides this monologue, the film shows an image of his mouth. Sao Sreymao, his collaborator, draws vines and threads that puncture the corners of his lips and protrude outwards with leaves. These vines zigzag across his face and Sao occasionally undoes and redraws the vines and leaves. Then, she draws cracks along his lips, adding thin threads across the upper and lower lips and drawing small leaves on

these thin threads. Sao expands the cracks out and incorporates larger vines and roots that further stitch Phou's mouth shut (see Figure 12). She draws and redraws the vines and leaves, incorporating further dimension by rounding out the larger branches. When Phou remarks "It is a matter of claiming my identity as Cambodian—an identity which is constantly questioned," Sao adds gray stitches across Phou's upper and lower lips, sealing his lips together. As Sao's drawing slows down on screen to modify minute details such as the dimension of the vines and smaller cracks surrounding Phou's lips, Phou's monologue splits into French and Khmer. Starting in French, he speaks short fragments that are echoed in Khmer. "For we now//have a common tongue//to communicate with each other. //I finally possess the words//to ask you the questions and to hear your answers." Returning to only speaking French at the statement, "But still, the words aren't coming." Then, the Cambodian popular song "Champa Battambang" crescendos into the foreground, closing one of my favorite scenes in the film.

Influenced by Phou's love of karaoke, different popular songs from across Asia are prominently featured in the first half of the film, including the beloved Cambodian popular ballad "Champa Battambang." "Champa Battambang," meaning the Frangipani of Battambang, was originally sung by the legendary Cambodian singer-songwriter Sinn Sisamouth in reference to the beautiful scenery of Battambang province and metaphorically the women of Battambang. It remains a major popular song and the inclusion of Phou's riveting cover in the film creates an important sense of nostalgia.

"Champa Battambang" and other songs included in Phou's film recall an imagining of Cambodia's high period during the 1950s and 1960s marked by extensive

musical syncretism and hybridization, including Afro-Cuban rhythms, rock and roll, jazz (Mamula 2008; Saphan 2012), and East Asian cultural flows. As Sophea Seng describes, re-performances or covers of these songs became markers of survival and joy that recall life pre-genocide even as they reimagine Cambodian diasporic subjectivity (Seng 2025). The incorporation of these songs from this period engages Svetlana Boym's ideas of reflective nostalgia, shaped by a sense of longing, and restorative nostalgia, the reconstruction of what was lost respectively (Boym 2007). Phou's collage of songs and leveraging of "Champa Battambang" articulate a diasporic intimacy or precarious affection that underlie these forms of nostalgia (Boym 2001, 252). Boym's concept of diasporic intimacy frames how people from the diaspora define and articulate the contentious ties, memories, and postmemory formations that inform the multiple constructions of home and identity, Cambodia and Cambodian-ness. "Champa Battambang" and other songs are mixed and mastered into the film and imbued with reverb and echo reminiscent of '60s psychedelic rock. These production elements draw out the song's nostalgic qualities and recognizable status as an exemplar of Cambodian popular music. Phou's performance also enacts a form of nostalgic recovery that asserts his identity as a Cambodian. At the same time, these songs allude to the cosmopolitan flows and movements underlying "Champa Battambang" and the music of 1950s and 60s Cambodia to destabilize essentialized understandings of Cambodian popular music.

In his monologue, Phou describes how some Cambodians refuse to accept him. He and Sao portray a silencing of his identity as Cambodian by sewing his mouth shut using thread and vines. Thus, he describes an abject distance from Cambodian-ness

because of how speaking Khmer results in misunderstandings and triggers a self-inhibition or self-consciousness with it. These challenge his desire and ability to establish a connection with Cambodia and Cambodian identity. He enacts what Long Bui (2016) refers to as the refugee repertoire, the ways in which the children of refugees make sense of the aftermaths of violence and war in their artistic practices and stylings. Phou narrates his experience with Khmer language as a second-generation diasporic subject in ways that reveal both a contested connection, in that people challenge it based on phenotypical features, language proficiency, and cultural knowledge, as well as an owned connection, in that there's a self-determined claim to ownership over being Cambodian.

Figure 12. Sao's drawing of roots and branches breaking out of the cracks on a photo of the lower half of Phou's face, sewing his lips shut. Image courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao.

Dis/connection/This connection is an attempt to connect with Cambodian-ness from the diasporic subject position. Language is simultaneously a mode of connection and disconnection through how Cambodians refuse to acknowledge his Cambodian-ness. Phou's circumstantial refusal to speak Khmer, which he told me changed over the years, reveals a disengagement from Cambodia that refuses typical markers of Cambodian-ness, specifically language, without denying the identification outright. In avoiding the social discomfort, he makes self-preservatory moves to avoid unwarranted everyday critique from people who fail would recognize his Cambodian-ness, as someone who possesses a relationship to Cambodia grounded in familial ties and a complex being simultaneously inhabiting and not-inhabiting Cambodia. Thus, Phou speaks to a diasporic repertoire that identifies the dis/connect with the homeland and unsettles ethno-national belonging through abjection, creating a personally and socially created distance from Cambodia and Cambodian-ness.

Diasporic Return and Desire for Connection

Phou traveled to Cambodia for the first time at the age of 25 in 2006, and shortly afterward he started a career as an investment banker in Singapore. Because I was 25 years old at the time and curious to know about Cambodia in the 2000s, I asked him more about his experience in Cambodia during our interview at café near his house. He told me it was "not love at first sight" (Phou 2023, personal communication), challenging ideas of the romanticized homeland. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, his parents had traveled

back and forth between France and Cambodia. They relayed to him a land of "death and war" as he narrates in the film. He establishes his preconceptions of Cambodia as "the root of all suffering." Similarly, during my childhood in the 2000s, I was always told about how dangerous Cambodia was and how unsafe it was compared to the United States. "You'll get robbed." "You'll die." "There's gangs." "It's a very poor country." My Cambodian American friends living in Cambodia also qualified these concerns that the capital city of Phnom Penh was a very different place in terms of its safety and development fifteen to twenty years prior to my year of fieldwork from 2022 to 2023. This isn't to situate Cambodia as a place of danger—I don't think it is any more dangerous than any other place in the world—but to relay an overarching narrative from the diaspora, though I remain critical of this narrative. Throughout his youth and early adulthood, Phou lived in major cosmopolitan cities in Europe. However, his move to Singapore and eventually Phnom Penh resituated him in two cosmopolitan cities in Asia with different racial and social politics from Europe. These experiences in Asia were transformative for Phou. "All my representations had been turned upside down," Phou wrote in his memoir. "…seeing Asians in every job, every trade, from policeman to TV host to garbageman" (Phou 2023, 59). What I find pertinent here is the experience of return from diaspora to Cambodia where Phou is surrounded entirely by Asian bodies.

Stemming from his disdain for the job and his growing interests in Cambodia, Phou told me that he took vacations in Cambodia away from his career in investment banking. During his trips, he started getting to know the artistic scene through different arts organizations. He began to realize how being in the arts community rejuvenated him

(Phou 2023, personal communication). I shared an earlier version of this chapter with him for his review. In one of the comments that he left for me, he specified to me that these included several organizations and spaces including Cambodian Living Arts, Amrita, Reyum, Meta House, the French Institute, and Phare Ponleu Selpak (Phou 2025, personal communication). In 2008, he auditioned and was cast for the musical *When Elephants Weep: A Khmer Rock Opera* (2008), a Cambodian American return narrative with music composed by Him Sophy and libretto written by Catherine Filloux. Once cast, Phou left his "dream job, dream salary, dream lover," sarcastically conveying that these dreams were in fact unfulfilling for him (Phou 2023, 62), for a burgeoning career as an artist and performer. He moved to Cambodia immediately. Afterwards, he was cast for more acting and musical roles, created his own works such as the play *Cambodia, Here I Am* (2011), and continuously traveled in and out of Cambodia for workshops, jobs, and intensive programs from 2008 onwards.

Phou saw Cambodia as a space of possibility for starting a new career and as a gay man. He explains that diasporic Cambodians were seen "as representing the 'best of both worlds:' an Asian phenotype and Western culture" (ibid., 63-64), explaining the fetishistic desires of sexpats. From his experience, Phou narrates how French sexpats navigate the sexual landscape by viewing gay Cambodians as objects, noting how Frenchmen would question Phou's relationships with Cambodians and therefore attempting to generate their own sexual hierarchy. This reveals the erotic habitus of such Frenchmen: C. Winter Han describes the erotic habitus as a racial politics of desire reliant on whiteness where men of color are "desirable only in as so far they are an exotic

distraction from the norm" (Han 2021, 79). As he repudiates how the Frenchmen describe Cambodians, Phou questioned his own desire for Cambodians and his erotic habitus, writing in reference to Cambodian men: "Gorgeous men on every street corner. Those bodies, that skin, those smiles! Was I myself succumbing to the eroticization of local boys?" (Phou 2023, 64). Does Phou's desire, as a French Cambodian, for Cambodians reflect the internalization of a colonial erotic habitus? Or does he restructure the politics of desire away from colonial sexual desires towards a privileging of Cambodian bodies? Does this desire draw attention to a desire for connection to Cambodian people at a more intimate level? Does this represent a desire for the self? These sexual politics reflect critical predicaments in establishing intimate relationships as diasporic subjects that ambiguate the outcomes of diasporic return. In addition to this racial-sexual violence, it is these questions that also undergird the desire for connection as a diasporic subject and the expression of Cambodian-ness.

Phou conveys a contradictory distancing and uniting through his "return" to Cambodia. Erik Olsson and Russell King contrast how diasporic return narratives often emphasize closure and reintegration, while return experiences create fluid "spaces of relations" that blur and destabilize grand narratives of the homeland (Olsson and King 2008, 260). Phou's physical presence and ethno-national heritage suggests that he would experience reintegration and connection based on his roots. However, he encounters distancing based on people perceive him as other and how his mother receives his Khmer especially. About twelve minutes into the film, the screen fades from black into a photo of a metal table with four metal stools surrounding it and a bucket underneath.

Meanwhile, the sounds of chatter and a Khmer popular song play in the background. On top of the table are a kettle for hot tea, utensils, a tissue box, and bottles of sauces. A glossy wall behind the table reflects the shadows of other seated customers. It's an ordinary table setting for noodles. Sao draws Phou and his mother at the table; Phou is seated on the left and his mother on the right with a bowl of noodles (see Figure 13). Phou recalls a trip a noodle shop with his mother where he hopes to make an impression on her with his more developed Khmer language skills. Sao draws Phou turning his head and he addresses the waiter across the restaurant shouting in Khmer, "Oun euy, som keut loy!" "That's not how we say it!" Phou says, voicing his mother's admonishment in French as Sao drawing her head turned towards Phou and her eyes pointedly glancing at him. Sao redraws Phou, dejected with his head facing down to the table and arms crossed as his mother continues eating her noodles. Without receiving any additional input on how to request the bill, Phou continues his narration. "After that, I never spoke Khmer in front of you again." He utters this vow and then the image and drawing fade to black.

For almost all of *My Mother's Tongue* (2021), Phou narrates and voices over the different people. His voice, cast through and over the voices of others, is the sonic focus of the entire film. Following his voice across the work reveals how Phou re-embodies his multiple selves and his mother and engages in temporal acts of translation. Phou constructs and threads together a multivocal narrative rooted in diasporic dis/connect. With one exception being his Khmer teacher in one scene, Phou usually modulates his voice to act out different versions of himself at different ages. In this scene, however, he emulates his mother's harsh tone. While much of the narrative is told chronologically, it

is also told retrospectively through Phou's narration and recollection of events. Phou's backwards oriented narration expresses changing temporalities and disruptions in linear time in that they cannot be disentangled from the viewing of the film. Simultaneously, there are multiple instances where Phou embodies his younger self to articulate different temporal relationships with his mother and other people. These recollections emplace Phou out of time through a slippage of the self and a reidentification with the past. Namely, Phou focuses on how his mother complicates and confounds his Cambodian background through language.

Throughout Phou's narrative of return, he continually conveys this tension of connecting with Cambodia and Cambodian-ness. At the restaurant, though it could be possibly rude depending on the waiter's social positioning relative to Phou, his call to the waiter for the bill is a relatively ordinary request. It is often heard at restaurants and dining stalls on the side of the road. However, his mother's response signifies an inconsistency. Beyond telling Phou that he is speaking inappropriately, she doesn't correct him or direct him to another way to request the bill. This generates a sense of linguistic dysphoria or misalignment where what Phou understands to be correct about Khmer is not congruent with his mother's, the person to whom he most wants to demonstrate mastery and an authority figure arbitrating his connection to Cambodia and the Khmer language. In expressing his desire for connection, Phou develops an insecurity with Cambodian-ness and Khmer language despite his identity as a French Cambodian.

This unsettling of his Cambodian identity reflects what Iván A. Ramos describes as unbelonging, the perceived inauthentic modes of expression that contrast with what

Latinidad and Mexicanidad is supposed to sound like or entail (Ramos 2023, 2-3). Unbelonging complicates essentialist constructions of identity by focusing on dissonant practices. Despite being French Cambodian, Phou indicates a linguistic dysphoria that is induced through how his mother perceives his inauthentic language production. Cambodian-ness, as conveyed through language, mandates specific or correct modes of expression. However, Phou's multiple voices question the need for legibility in articulating connections to Cambodian-ness in that Phou's request for the bill was not phrased incorrectly. Perhaps it was an issue of an accent or some other unknown qualifier, but it was exactly how a Cambodian would request the bill. His dis/connection reveals a disorientation even as it invites a reorientation surrounding diasporic language production. Sara Ahmed (2006, 9-10) explains that orientation can involve feeling at and finding home, and disorientation is congruent being how migrants may express feelings of being "out of place" or "out of line." Extending disorientation to queerness, Gayatri Gopinath (2018, 61) asks what is possible when focusing on queerness and disorientation "as a process of both dwelling in those off-center spaces and of staying lost." *Following* vocal disjuncture and expressions of unbelonging reveal the messy entanglements of a diasporic orientation of Cambodian-ness. The violence of correction and its inauthentic construction of Cambodian-ness points to a diasporic disconnect that expresses the contentions that are part of pursuing and desiring the homeland. At the same time, its intangible difference from a local Cambodian also affords and realizes unique diasporic subjectivities in its perceived unruliness, permitting multiple understandings of Cambodian-ness.

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Cambodian-ness is entangled within ethno-national identity formations while allowing for diasporic reconfigurations of Cambodia. Through cross-referencing Phou's film and memoir and analyzing these as performances of the self, I explored how the politics of desire are embedded in the expression of diasporic Cambodian subjectivity through dysphoria. Diasporic dis/connect draws on the intermeshed pull of desire and the push of distancing to mediate the violence of being a liminal Cambodian subject. Phou's literary, verbal, and graphical weaving together of his experiences convey a continuous process of being made and remade by his surrounding conditions that is reflective of the nebulous and unboundedness of the diasporic subject. It responds to how internal identification and external readings of identity shape how Phou situates himself in- and outside the category of Cambodian-ness through language. He is Cambodian and yet distinct from particular modes of Cambodian-ness. While *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) is classified as a film, it is a multimedia work that transcends conventional genre convention. Similarly, diasporic subjectivity defies conventional classifications or essentialist constructions. It is a continual process that responds to context and a network of relationships all shaped by histories of migration and displacement as well as by ethno-national and familial ties.

Diasporic subjectivity is also actively produced by its subjects, and it continually challenges its own contexts and conditions. To borrow a linguistic term, it infixes itself to

the broader construction of an identity. In Khmer language, abstract nouns can be created through infixation as well as causative or transitive verbs and nominal agents. As an abstract concept, Cambodian-ness is multiply infixed by people of the diaspora through its romanticized ideals as well as its darker hauntings but also by their encounters and reencounters with Cambodia. Thus, these elements of liminal dis/connect can be infixed into Cambodian-ness. Phou's work expresses conflicting expressions of Cambodian identity as he asserts nominally queer and diasporic experiences into Cambodian-ness while upsetting essentialism and interrogating abjection in his life. In turn, these infixations raise their own violences against normative expectations of Cambodians.

Intimate Dis/Connections

Across *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) and *Coming Out of My Skin* (2023), the body is important for understanding spatial and social relationships. Bodily renderings in the film and discussions of the body in the memoir explore diasporic subjectivity and Cambodian-ness. I continue my earlier discussion of racial-sexual violence in Phou's works to further examine how intimacy relates to Cambodian-ness. By considering the role of desire in Phou's work, I consider how the framework of diasporic dis/connect addresses the mutual construction, internal/self and external/Other, of diasporic ontology and its search for communion.

In *My Mother's Tongue* (2021), Phou portrays his arrival to Phnom Penh while Sao draws the first full body rendering of Phou. Almost six minutes into the film, a photo of a marketplace appears on the screen. The photo includes people on motorcycles, a

cyclo, tuk tuks, and monks walking. It's a very full scene. I first notice the sounds of squeaking brakes, engines revving, unintelligible speech, and music playing from a speaker. A wonderful cacophony of street sounds emulates the lively streets of Phnom Penh. As the photo in the background dims, Sao places a sketch of Phou wearing a plain t-shirt and pants in the center looking towards the left (his right). There are lines on his cheeks to suggest that he is flushed from the sweltering heat. He's holding two roller bags that melt into the ground. Sao redraws some of the streaks that trail onto the streets before drawing a scarf on Phou. Phou's scarf is draped around his neck, flowing in the wind as Sao adds a plaid pattern to it. While the hustle and bustle of the marketplace continue in the background, she incorporates more details: sweat dripping off Phou's head, more streaks rolling off the suitcases, and light and shadow to add more depth. The scene cuts to a completely drenched sketch of Phou. Phou's clothes and luggage are completely saturated, water spilling off him onto the streets. Once this visual cut is made, Phou recounts his decision to set foot in Cambodia.

"Everything feels both foreign and familiar. The sounds…the scents…the colours… How could my body remember sensations it never knew. Or was it you who passed them on to me, even without words?" Phou says before pausing.

"I had spent my time running away. And now, I want to understand everything around me." He continued.

"I devour whatever I can lay my hands on, to feel closer to you and to your homeland." As he spoke, the sounds of monks reciting began, growing louder in volume.

Meanwhile, Sao adds a visual layer, revealing a red krama in front of Phou's eyes and flowing in the wind. She sketches in more lines on the krama, completely blinding Phou.

The audio skips, fast-forwarding or reversing, to a lower-register voice speaking in Khmer for a moment. The record scratches again. This time it jumps to a clapping sound and a voice singing the vocable noi. It fast-forwards once more. Now I hear a woman yelling in Khmer, berating someone. The audio skips again to a clip of a woman rapping in Khmer. Now it skips to the sounds of a *pin peat* ensemble with beating drums and a prominent sralai playing the melody while the performers shout. Instead of cutting, the audio subsides into the background for Phou's narration. Phou states that he will complete this quest of being closer to his mother by mastering Khmer in order to understand Cambodia's people and culture.

This scene entangles sound and imagery in ways that speak to me viscerally. Sao's rendering of the intense scorching heat as Phou languishes on the streets of Phnom Penh rolling his luggage sets up the extended importance of the krama, a plaid or checkered scarf. Its sudden appearance as a red scarf draws my immediate attention. Krama serve a variety of functions: protection from the sun, collecting crops, transporting food, carrying babies, and worn as a bandana or belt among other things. During the Khmer Rouge genocide, red and white krama were worn by members of the genocidal regime and used in torture. Because of these factors, Boreth Ly explains that the krama is "a symbol of life and death" (Ly 2020, 83). Nonetheless, it remains an important part of Cambodian culture, enshrined as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2024, representing laborers, reproducing cultural nationalism, and responding to political

regimes (Ly 2020, 102). The krama clearly represents connections to Cambodia and Cambodian-ness while alluding to its functionality (both protecting and destroying life).

Throughout the film, the krama is featured in multiple drawings. It initially adorns Phou's mother's shoulders. Then, Phou wears it on the plane. The krama rests on his shoulders as he sits down, wanders the streets, or prays. In this scene, it covers his eyes. At an immediate glance, the red krama shields Phou from the sun, protecting his eyes like a visor. It also helps Phou wipe away sweat on his forehead as it drips from his pores and drenches his body. However, it materializes as a blindfold, obscuring his vision and therefore placing him in danger at the street intersection out by the market. The blindfold immediately alludes to its use as a technology of torture. A darker interpretation would focus on these issues and recall the genocide, especially for the scarf's red color being emblematic of the Khmer Rouge soldiers. I think it is a more innocent depiction of a young Phou's naivety surrounding his romantic imaginings of Cambodia where he senses and remembers sounds, scents, and colors that he had never encountered before. Similarly, the blindfold reflects Phou's expectations of strengthening his relationship with his mother. Phou sees this quest to learn Khmer as the imperative solution to establishing his connection to Cambodia and family, but he is seemingly one-sided in his ambitions given that she expresses ambivalence about him traveling to Cambodia and learning Khmer in the earlier scenes of the film.

Except the first scene, the scene where he's learning Khmer, and at the restaurant with his mother, Phou wears a krama in all his appearances. Sao draws and redraws it over and over, indicating its significance. While the krama typically is a symbol of

Cambodian identity, it is also indicative of Phou's Cambodian-ness. In this first instance, it indicates an unawareness of the upcoming challenges that he will face while understanding his relationship to Cambodia. When he appears with it a second time, he is drawn walking over a photo of a parking lot in the city immediately following the restaurant scene discussed earlier. Ignoring his mother's critiques, Phou describes making a life for himself in Cambodia and slowly making the country his own. In doing so, he begins to look at Cambodia on his terms. Next, after his mother's metastatic cancer diagnosis, Sao draws Phou seated on the floor with his head on top of his knees. He recounts being his mother's caretaker at the hospital and conversing in Khmer with her. As they prepare to transfer her to France for further medical treatment, Phou tries to speak with her alone before he leaves for France to prepare for her arrival. In this moment, Phou is redrawn without a krama when he hears that she is speaking in platitudes, "say hello to the family for me…send photos…take care of yourself." He comes to the realization that this may be all he can have with her before she passes away.

While there are more scenes afterwards where Phou wears a krama, this moment when the krama is removed is important for highlighting diasporic dis/connect. The krama's disappearance reveals how Phou's Cambodian-ness exists in relation to his self-determined relationship with Cambodia. Because Phou sought a deeper, more expansive connection with his mother, Phou quickly disposes of these statements rather than being with his mother on her terms. He disregards his mother's feelings and simple thoughts of care. While he does this earlier to create his own connection with Cambodia, he disrupts that relationship here with his mother who engendered this connection from the onset of

the film. Phou reveals the slippage of diasporic dis/connect in its articulation of the self and its interdependence on others. Cambodian-ness is co-constituted by both Phou's conception of self and the perspective of his mother. Severing that connection by devaluing these statements of care eliminates their meaningful and intimate connection by generating emotional distance. The krama's bodily absence reveals how it is the material fabric that helps tether diasporic Cambodian subjects and their expressions of Cambodian-ness. With its life-sustaining potential, the krama points towards an intimacy of care necessary for diasporic subjects to maintain a radical interdependence and necessity for communion.

Figure 13. Sao's drawing of Phou and his mother over a photo of a noodle restaurant. Image courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao.

Intimacy is both divisive and integrative. While Phou's desire for closeness and intimacy express connection and relationality, his experiences with the sexual politics of desire highlight a racialized vector within diasporic dis/connect that disentangles racial-sexual abjection and fetishization imposed on the gay Asian (Cambodian) diasporic subject. *Coming Out of My Skin* (2023) is written from the subjectivity of the gay Asian subject position in France, Spain, Singapore, and Cambodia. Cambodian-ness and its diasporic iterations are sublimated into Asian-ness. While collapsing these differences into a unified category erases individual and unique experiences across ethno-national lines, it also reflects a colonial erotic habitus and racial hierarchy of desire inseparable from the sexual lives of gay men of color (Han 2021, 56). After growing public discourse in France about racial politics in 2016 and 2017, Phou spoke with more friends of Asian descent about their experiences with discrimination. In the memoir, he states that "we weren't so much a community bound by ethnicity as a community bound by experience based on the way ethnicity had been perceived" (Phou 2023, 94). Despite its multitudes, Asian-ness is perceived as a monolith. Phou reframes the monolith to articulate dis/connections shared across different Asian racialized intimacies. By centering his narrative as a diasporic subject, he describes the forces of attraction and repulsion driving intimate encounters. These push and pull factors reveal a remapping of desire that deconstructs the colonial erotic habitus.

In the memoir, Phou directly examines his sexual encounters by constantly questioning his libidinal impulses as well as how others perceive him. Specifically, he

shows how the racial fetish and preference, as implicated in racial-sexual hierarchies, redirects discriminatory desire towards the cause of abjection, the rejector. Phou's early trips to the gay bars in Paris's Marais district introduce him to a common refrain "*Sorry, not into Asians*" under the excuse of "personal taste" (Phou 2023, 15). The social metaphor of personal taste uses preference as a discriminatory element in rejecting Phou, and he further explicates that French society claims not to see color. Asian American Studies has long emphasized abjection from the nation and citizenship (Shimakawa 2002; Eng 2025), emphasizing a subjectless critique rooted in the shifting dimensions impacting racialized Asian subjects (Chuh 2003, 10-11). This colorblind rhetoric exists both in the United States and France as part of multiculturalism and the construction of the liberal subject that sublimates difference into a uniform deracialized subject stripped from its context—the diaspora.

At the same time, Phou's articulation of the statement "Sorry, not into Asians" activates the colonial erotic habitus that denies pleasure with and desire for the Asian subject. His repeated characterization of the phrase in his early adulthood reveals how anti-Asian desires impacted different forms of intimacy throughout his life using his authorial voice. Through his directness, Phou expresses that undesirability is not about the Asian body (in diaspora) but a non-deconstructed colonial ontology of desire. Phou further explains how this lack of desire for Asians is socially constructed and maintained. Making note of how these ideologies are internalized and projected both onto him and by him, he writes, "No one is *born* undesirable, they *become* it" (Phou 2023, 19). This rhetoric of personal taste and color-blind sexual preferences abjects, repels, and divides

all while expressing a discriminatory and exclusionary practice that denies pleasure or the possibility for it. Rather than stripping Asian men of sexuality, the sexual abjection of gay Asian men through the inherently colonial erotic habitus reproduces anti-desires that foreclose connections with the racialized Asian body.

"*Sry, no Asians*," Phou hears again (Phou 2023, 69). However, this time it appears in casting rejections. Asian-ness and its imposed undesirability also manifest in the performing arts. Phou explains that theatrical work and acting prioritizes Asians that embody stereotypes and caricatures of Asian-ness, noting the "clichéd, ridiculous, or pathetic roles" that he connects to sexual stereotypes about Asians being "passive, hairless, and submissive" as well as tropes about soft masculinity (Phou 2023, 69, 88). Leslie Bow writes about the objectification of Asian bodies and culture as processes of abstraction rooted in fantasy and fetish (Bow 2022, 188-9). In particular, these inscribed qualities of Asian-ness that Phou describes are tied to a desire for a colonial Asian subject and its legibility to the constraints of the exclusive erotic habitus. Desire for the Asian body is contingent on meeting certain racialized parameters in both the sexual market and the performing arts. However, after attempting to engage with these tropes, it is Phou's refusal to participate in these fetishes that led him to pursue producing his first work *Cambodia, Here I am!* (2012) where he explores his interests and narratives about Cambodia (Phou 2023, 71). The rejection of forced configurations of Asian-ness intimates a slippery dis/connect that begins to reinscribe Asian-ness from the lens of the diasporic subject and their complex worldviews. With Phou's experiences in mind, he is repelled, repulsed, and placed at a distance by others and therefore undesirable by certain

others through the lens of fetish and preference. In turn, this led to his transformation of desires and a rethinking of his intimate relationships, directing him to closely address being gay and Asian in constant abjection.

While Asian-ness collapses the unique situatedness of Cambodian-ness, it reflects a one-dimensional process of racialization and partially reveals the disconnect between Cambodian-ness and its fetishistic abstraction into Asian-ness. These impede opportunities for connection and relationality in both intimate partnerships and professional collaborations. Additionally, in the film, Phou's krama expresses intimacy in relation to Cambodian-ness and his mother by threading together its significance for life and death. These two forms of intimacy express an intimate dis/connection that slips across and between the politics of desire as it relates to Phou's connection to his mother, his sexual relationships, and professional world. I have described these shifts and slippages as push and pull forces that represent the entanglements of the personal or internal and societal or external makeup of diasporic dis/connect. Diasporic subjects must continuously navigate conflicting frameworks of life that preferentially confine and constrain relationality while working to assert their own configurations of life and being. These assertions begin a catharsis and release that engender new possibility.

Cathartic Release and Animating Diasporic Ontology

Diasporic dis/connect deals with the tensions of desire in relation to identity. However contentious, performance is a catalyst for releasing the strained elements of Cambodian-ness and diasporic subjectivity. Expressing the slippages of Cambodian-ness

and the violence of being a subject of diaspora proposes new connections and ways of being in communion. In this section, I examine how Phou addresses the decline and passing of his mother and I return to the post-screening performance. Both detail a slowness and elongation of time that alleviate dis/connect through reflection and engender communion as witnesses to the film and performance.

While Phou voices his mother and his younger selves several times in *My Mother's Tongue* (2021), he does not towards the end of the film. After his mother passes away from metastasized cancer, Phou incorporates different voice recordings including the monk reciting his mother's final rites at the funeral and audio from the 7-week ceremony that marks when the soul departs from the Earth to another realm. In the last three minutes of the film, Phou and his family members attend the ceremony in Cambodia once COVID travel restrictions eased. To the initial backdrop of cymbals and percussion, four people including Phou are drawn seated on a black and white photograph with incense burning in a holder while Phou explains the ceremony. They hold their hands together in prayer, facing the incense holder. During his explanation, the audio transitioned from instrumental ceremonial music to the sounds of people communicating about parking logistics, the brief mention of unmarried children, and the growing sounds of incense burning. Meanwhile, Sao sketches the flowers that were on Phou's mother's shirt in the opening scene onto one of the seated family members.

"We bless and burn representations of all the items that will follow you to your new home: a cardboard house and car, paper money…" Phou narrates. The flames crackle loudly as he trails off.

“As the flames dance, the smoke blows out. May they reach you, wherever you may be right now.” He states. Then the crackling fades away and the scene fades to black.

A small white sketch of Phou appears on the right side of the screen. He wears a krama around his neck that is flowing in the air. Sao draws over the sketch in white, fleshing out the tee-shirt and solidifying his presence on the screen while Phou continues his monologue.

“I continue my journey in your homeland – now my homeland too. Your languages – Khmer amongst them – are now my own. The legacy lives on in me, regardless of how I acquired it.”

Sao colors in the figure with white and adds Phou’s shadow, cast behind him as he looks towards the left side of the screen into the distance.

“Your memory is kept alive. Just as your voice continues to resonate. I could not hear its intonation. But all this time, with your words, your language – our language – you were saying the essential things.”

Beep! A dial tone rings out a second after Phou’s last sentence. The pitch-black background fades away to reveal the long bridge and walkway to Angkor Wat and a framed photo of Phou’s mother sitting on a windowsill at a viewpoint. Voice recordings of Phou’s mother begin to play as the image becomes brighter and clearer. The dial tones separate the voice recordings spoken in a mixture of French and Teochew. The first recording asks if Phou is available for dinner. The second recording says that she’s thinking of him and wondering what he’s doing. The third and final recording wishes

Phou a happy birthday and asks if he has any plans. A final dial tone plays. And then silence until the image fades to black before the credits appear on screen.

Figure 14. Sao's drawing of a young Phou standing before Phou's photo of his mother and the bridge leading to Angkor Wat. Image courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Phou and Sao Sreymao.

Rupture fills these concluding moments. Using the dial tone to separate each recording, these recorded messages are rendered into the context of an answering machine on a home phone. Recorded memos and messages are common forms of informal communication in Cambodia because it is faster than typing messages in Khmer or using the English alphabet to transliterate Khmer words. The interceding dial tones intentionally recall disconnect by indicating the slippages in time between messages and

any follow up communication. While voice messages typically are not accompanied by a dial tone, it is worth considering the ordinariness of these recordings following the funeral and 7-week ceremony. Ordinary affects are the intimate everyday moments that animate life and its encounters and provoke new forms of connection (Stewart 2007, 2-3). After several intense scenes, these seemingly normal instances of listening to a voice message both generate a palpable tension in its sudden ordinariness and intimate a slow moment in collective silence where communion is possible.

These tearful concluding moments of the film facilitate a reconstitution of identity and Cambodian-ness. While in mourning, Phou's relationship with his mom, Khmer language, and Cambodia shifts from his earlier fragmented abject disconnect towards reconciliation and communion. Previous scenes in the film showed Phou's contentious experience with learning and using Khmer language as well as how this impacted his life as a child and young adult. When Phou refers to his mother's intonation, he offers a new interpretation of his mother's words that moves beyond the platitudinal statements that were rearticulated in the voice recordings, or her rebuff narrated in the restaurant. Instead, he acknowledges the affective realms of care and intimate connection that were essential to their relationship. Phou reclaims Cambodian-ness and Khmer language through the repeated reframing of "your homeland" to "our homeland" and "your language" to "our language" that weaves together and reconciles diasporic dis/connect in the film.

At the post-screening performance, these sentiments would be echoed shortly after viewing the film. We sat outside in relative silence as Phou and Sao lit each message and the red yarn aflame. I heard the rustling and clicking of the cameras as

people, including myself, documented the performance. These moments passed slowly and unhurried, elongating the moments between each burning piece of paper as they fell to the ground or the network of acrylic red yarn as it was consumed by the flames. From what I could figure out, the post-screening performance brought together an eclectic audience of local Cambodians, folks from the diaspora, and expats. We were linked together symbolically through the yarn. That same yarn was later burned. What does it mean for this connection to be severed? Are we now disconnected? I don't think the yarn burning ended that connection. Did Phou and Sao burning all the offering papers imply an annihilation of the personal messages tied to the boat? I sure hope not. Similar to the burning of paper money and other effigies in *My Mother's Tongue* (2021), it was a transformation of our collectivity into something new. It, along with the messages we collectively contributed, became a part of the surrounding air. It was ephemeral as smoke and as intangible as our connections to each other. As the smoke filtered into the air and the pieces of paper and yarn burned, all that was left was us, the audience, and the suspended wire boat before the applause and conclusion of the performance.

Earlier, I noted how the post-screening performance elongated time, or, at the very least, distorted my perception of time. Here, I am enthralled by the slow and gentle release of the flame as it animates, consumes, and transforms different attachments and relationships implicated by each audience member (see Figure 15). Phou and Sao's contemplative movements from one message to the next generate what I experience as a time slip. Pryor describes time slips as when "normative conceptions of time fail, or fall away, and the spectator or artist experiences an alternative, or queer, temporality" that

reveal invisibilized temporalities (Pryor 2017, 9). These time slips echo how queerness challenges the "discipline of 'timing,'" which Elizabeth Freeman explains as the naturalized senses of being and belonging. Queerness and time slips disrupts natural time to envision alternative forms of relationality (Freeman 2010, 18-19). I read this performance and its disruption of naturalized relationality as an invitation to reimagine relationships, just like performance, as ephemeral and immaterial. These moments of burning exist in tension with the brokenness of displacement, diaspora, and dis/connect. I read these performative disruptions of standardized time as a reflection of what durational performance artist Raegan Truax conceptualizes as queer refrain where, through disturbing linear time, the body is opened up to sensually understand a polyvalent layering of situations, social relationships, and lifetimes (Truax 2022, 65). As each slip of paper disintegrates, Phou and Sao invite audience members' comments for collective introspection about personal relationships related to the film screening and beyond.

Slowness and silence as parallel concepts mediate these reflective moments of collectivity. Between the methodical recorded drawings in the film and the painstaking burning of each slip of paper, the temporal experience of viewing and witnessing changes. These concluding moments echo similar instances of relative silence such as the 7-week ceremony where paper offerings are burned for Phou's mother. As Khatharya Um shows, silence offers refuge and resistance as it pertains to Cambodians in diaspora remembering how U.S. military imperialism resulted in the Khmer Rouge genocide (Um 2015). In terms of slowness, Kemi Adeyemi explains how slowness, as inhabited by queer Black women, becomes a way of changing relationships to neoliberal demands on

time while also leaving traces and remnants that shape gentrified spaces (Adeyemi 2019). Extending these ideas, silence and slowness operate as forms of agentive resistance and transformation that transform relationships to place and the homeland. In the context of Phou's film and performance, they generate a collective intimacy and engender a new epistemology reliant on the negotiation of diasporic dis/connect by addressing how identity and language interact in a local Cambodian context and how it impacts diasporic belonging and cultural expression.

Phou and Sao's methodical and meditative burning of paper and yarn activate a slow sendoff characterized by the suspended wire boat. The yarn and each individual piece of paper smolders in a catalytic reaction, releasing smoke and ash in its wake and post-combustion. It is the one-by-one-ness in this moment of ritualized suspension is where catharsis takes place. The catalysts are *My Mother's Tongue* (2021) and the post-screening performance, and they activate Phou's narrative in the surrounding shared space, facilitating a reaction or release that prompts a reimagining of Cambodian-ness and expression of diasporic ontology. Themes of diasporic violence, linguistic dysphoria, and desire are rendered intelligible to the audience, inviting new understandings of diasporic dis/connect and Cambodian-ness beyond the homeland. By activating these diasporic experiences, a form of cathartic release emerges where new forms of relationality and communion can materialize based on the situated experiences of the viewer of the film and witness of the performance. Likewise, cathartic release emerges from the memoir through its portrayal of Phou's experience as a gaysian diasporic subject. Knowing Phou's narrative does not necessarily translate to the ontology of all

diasporic subjects, but it begins a new act of translation that complicates singular and fixed constructions of identity and experience. Cathartic release reveals the violence of identity as it is imposed on diasporic subjects while working towards reconstitution.

Figure 15. Offering paper and yarn burning above and in a small sand pit. Photo by author.

Conclusion

Diasporic dis/connect involves a continual process of radical deconstruction and reparative re/connection. Across three of Phou's works in this chapter, Phou deconstructs

his ethno-national relationships through his familial and linguistic narrative and his experience as a gaysian. He detangles experiences with abjection and displacement to negotiate the tensions of diasporic dis/connect as they are contingent on his definitions of the self. I *follow* his metaphor of threads to explore different loops and knots informing his expressions of Cambodian-ness. *Following* his narratives reveals a continued worlding of experience, and in Phou's work, he introduces a queer worlding signified through the continually rewoven and redrawn threads in his life. These entangled web of threads indicate a radical deconstruction where identity and subjectivity are thoroughly examined in relation to the world and its heuristics. Phou narrates a procedural deconstruction in the memoir and film that reflects on his lived experiences, understanding how he fits in the world while expressing his agency and awareness in the world. In doing so, he works towards a reparative re/connection that understands how these facets of diasporic subjecthood and gaysian positionality inform his lifeworld. Reparative re/connection begins with deconstructing the tensions of self-identification and social expectations. By fracturing the performed self, it opens space to find liberation and catharsis from the constraints of identity and subject formation. These slippages begin a reimagining of the self and other that slowly crafts new entanglements and interwoven relationships rooted in intimacy and communion.

Conceptualizing diasporic dis/connect and its possibilities for resituating Cambodian diasporic identity provides a new analytic for understanding the refugee diasporic subject. Refugees are both mobile and immobile subjects and are also cosmopolitan subjects in their liminal status and constant contact with the world.

Scholars in the Critical Refugee Studies Collective write that "efforts to humanize refugees rely on their dehumanization and strip them of the ability to narrate their own lived realities and experiences" (Espiritu et al. 2022, 134). In this chapter, while I do not evade the dehumanization of the diasporic subject, I redirect the conversations within critical refugee studies and the centrality of militarism, war, and conflict to consider the ontological dimension of life in displacement and in diaspora. Similarly, Vinh Nguyen conceptualizes refugeetude to consider how refugees, as a subject position, imagine relational and collective futures by resisting their conditions of forced displacement (Nguyen 2019, 112). Diasporic dis/connect examines the narratives within refugeetude while centering the diaspora in place of the refugee subject to consider how the ethno-national tensions of homeland and diaspora configure the performing arts. Engaging the turn towards Global Asias by Tina Chen and Charlotte Eubanks, examining diasporic dis/connect as it is performed requires an approach that is ageographical and unsettling in its approach and analysis (Chen and Eubanks 2024, 25-28). Cambodian-ness becomes a capacious framework for understanding the multiply situated experiences of being Cambodian as an ethno-national subject formation extending across the homeland and its diasporas, expressing a Global Cambodias that extends beyond configurations of the refugee subject. Envisioning Cambodian-ness suggests a future-oriented approach reflecting the interrelated and sometimes contradictory expressions of identity that informs contemporary cultural production by Cambodian peoples.

In the following chapters, I explore different instantiations of Cambodian-ness. These include my personal reflections through interludes that contextualize my

commitments and relationship to this chapter as well as chapter three and four. As a follow up to Phou's work and its critical invitations, Reflection Two describes how I experience walking the streets of Phnom Penh. Reflection Three addresses my involvements in the performances I describe in the third and, by extension, the fourth chapter. Chapter three continues working through diasporic dis/connect by applying it to contemporary music and dance. Returning to ideas of the contemporary, chapter four integrates Cambodian-ness and ontology together within experimental creative work to engage in layers of cultural critique through performance.

Reflection Two: Walking Down the Street

Somehow, walking down the street is an uncomfortable experience for me in Phnom Penh. As a Cambodian American, it feels like it shouldn't be, but it is for me.

It's not about the lack of sidewalks in some areas, or the piles of trash set out in the late afternoon for evening pick up.

Okay, it's the fact that it's hot and humid, and I'm from the rainy city of Portland, Oregon. It's not like I'm used to this. I feel like I'm one of *those* sweaty foreigners but it's just… hot.

"Tuk Tuk?" A man shouts in my direction.

A man on his kongbey rolls to a stop by me. "Tuk Tuk?" He asks.

I kindly respond. "Ot te Pu [No uncle]."

It's always a Pu.

"Ot te Pu," I grumble at other times, grouchily walking along and wondering why *he* is bothering me.

What did I do that makes me look like a potential client?

I could be walking anywhere and with anyone, and somehow someway Tuk Tuk drivers will call out to me. I could have rolled up to my destination in a Tuk Tuk and within mere seconds of my driver dropping me off, another person could call out "Tuk Tuk."

I guess there are benefits to always being perceived as an outsider. Café baristas always ask me what I want in English and that's great when my brain still needs coffee to function.

***

Chay and I were out on an early morning catch-up session coming back the Riverside walkway bordering the Tonle Sap. There were a fair number of folks out doing their morning exercise before the day got hot. We were walking bong Prum's dog Tosith, making sure he relieved himself before it was hot for him to go outside. On our way back, we passed by some Tuk Tuk drivers.

"Tuk Tuk!"

"Ot te Pu."

"Does this happen often to you?" Chay asked as we continued down the street.

"Yes," I say with resignation in my voice.

Confused, he followed up. "But why?"

"Goooooood question. Do youu have any ideas why?"

I thought to myself. Uggghhhhh, not again. Chay is definitely going to tell the other dancers that the Tuk Tuk drivers wanted our patronage. Yet another way people are going to gossip about me in front me.

***

It's not exactly a negative thing that the Tuk Tuk drivers were soliciting us.

Well, not really us,

just *me*.

People walking the streets is somewhat an unusual sight. The main mode of transportation for pretty much everyone is moto or car. It's how parents take their kids to school or get to and from work.

Tourists predominantly use Tuk Tuks, calling them nowadays using mobile phone apps such as PassApp, a Cambodian owned app, and Grab, an app used throughout Southeast Asia.

***

AmIstaringdownatmyphonetoomuch? I hope not. Everyone always warns me about thieves on a moto coming down the street and snatching my belongings. It's not unlike other parts of the world, including popular tourist destinations elsewhere, but it is a real concern, so I try to be aware of my surroundings when I'm out and about.

I suppose I'm like, 178 cm and tend to tower over most people here. Not to mention I'm, as they say, big boned, so I have a larger stature than most people.

The point is I take up a lot of space. I can be spotted in a crowd with relative ease.

Granted, my height would also imply that I am imposing so I'm not sure if they would really want to rob me?

Cometothinkofit, maybe it's the way I walk and look around?

Walking around outside in 32 degrees Celsius [89.6 Fahrenheit]

as a 178 cm tall guy,

I guess I must be a site to behold…

Maybe I'm being too self-conscious and making it about me. After all, they make a living by transporting people from point A to point B. Why wouldn't they want to solicit customers? Walking is an anomaly in the capital anyways.

Chay and I *were* speaking in English. That was probably the cue, right?

It's also probably my Khmer.

Or as people constantly remind me, "koat niyeay Khmer ot chbas"

[he doesn't speak clearly].

I'm a flawed speaker of Khmer. I accept it, even if it's frustrating.

Besides, it's not like there aren't different accents in Cambodia. And it's not like other foreigners have even worse accents than I do but get lauded and praised to no end for speaking a few basic words in Khmer, if you know, you know.

I'm on the fair side of skin tones here. Different from the distinctly Asian color that would mark me as Asian in the United States. I've been told my facial features give me the appearance of Chinese, not at all Khmer.

Whatever that all means.

I insist to people that my parents

are

in fact

actually from srok Khmer

My mom is from Phnom Penh and my dad is from Battambang. They are also ethnically Chinese, but are still seen as Cambodian from what I can tell.

My dad was a refugee during the Khmer Rouge. My mom was born in 1970 and grew up during the genocide.

Truly, can't get more Cambodian than what they went through,

though I suppose that doesn't necessarily translate to me at face value.

Is my history, my family history, being negated?

Eyes and ears perceive me in many ways as something different.

And also, aren't I supposed to be *from here* inasense.

Reflection Three: Behind the Scenes of Amogkhabas

How did I end up in all of this?

If someone told me before I left for Cambodia for one year to do fieldwork that I would manage lights and sound during my fieldwork, I don't know if I would have believed them. I was the wrong person for the job is *definitely* what I would have told them.

Me? Edit audio? There's no way. Why *me*?

Yet, following the classic advice before fieldwork of saying yes to everything led me to be involved in ways that I didn't expect before going into a yearlong research trip. The following are sampled moments leading up to premiere of Amogkhabas – The Next Generation.

Amogkhabas – The Next Generation started in February of 2023. Bong Prum, the director of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA and first gay dance company in Cambodia, selected his advanced students to choreograph original works. The name Amogkhabas symbolized the threads that connect the past, present, and future. Keeping this in mind, these new dances would represent the future of dancers in the company. Featuring Prum's students, this project was *led* by LGBTQ+ choreographers and each person came with their own independent ideas and approaches. We did not have a central organzing theme. In fact, the projects varied in scope and agenda in wide-reaching and powerfully

imaginative ways. Each artist joined Amogkhabas – The Next Generation and produced their own stories about mourning and remembering loss, Cambodian mythology, conflict and violence, and personal growth. With his students, we had *just* premiered *Phlov*, the subject of chapter four, at the start of January. Frankly, I think we were still recovering from it. Because I was ever-present at the studio and involved with the production of *Phlov*, Prum tasked me and one of his students, Chakrapong (Chakra) Panhara, to co-produce the show.

What on earth was I doing?! I don't even know the first thing about producing!
Sure, I could figure out the basics of stage management.
I worked as a stage manager as an undergrad. But **producing**?!

Brainstorming with Chakra and Bong Prum, we started planning. We *needed* money. We needed a venue. We needed equipment including costumes, instruments, performers, props, and whatever else the choreographers dreamed up for their projects. We needed to fundraise. We needed a budget.

Before anything else, Chakra and I began creating a timeline. Without knowing when the performances were going to take place, we can't begin searching for money, acquiring equipment, or renting a venue. There had to be a plan. We asked each of the choreographers to provide us with a budget. Meanwhile, we worked backwards. Since two of our choreographers, Chakravartin Sokhomsan and Venghour Than, were at

college in the United States, we decided that we needed to have the performances during the summer. Thus, we set our sights for mid to late July knowing that I would conclude my fieldwork and leave for the United States in August.

But *where's* the money for us to do this?

With the approximate budgets from each choreographer and guidance from Bong Prum, we created a GoFundMe with the goal of raising $5000. It helped advertise Amogkhabas and we received support from different friends and colleagues in our network. $5000 USD would give the four choreographers and the producers $1000 each. And for what we needed in Cambodia, this seemed reasonable enough. But for the producing team, it came down to the venue. We checked out different venues, returning to spaces that the company had performed at. Using our networks, we asked around at the American University of Phnom Penh, some private school out on Diamond Island, and Java Creative Café. We needed to know, first, if the venues would allow us to perform there, and, of course, the costs of the venue.

Could **we** afford it?

In addition to the GoFundMe, we organized a fundraising performance in May and invited people in our network to come to the practice studio and see the dancers perform. The choreographers performed select works from the classical dance repertoire while

Chakra and I introduced the performances and gave brief descriptions of each piece to the audience. After the performance, the dancers and I spoke with audience members, answering their questions, listening to their thoughts about the performances, and of course attempting to solicit donations.

Uhhhh… Well… We didn't *quite* raise $5000. And… well… After calculating the fundraising performance expenses, I uhhhh… didn't want to know what we had left.

Anyways! Time to decide on a venue!

Picking our location was surprisingly simple. Because I helped premiere *Phlov* at Java Creative Café in January, I met Dana Langlois, the owner of the café, when she showed me the technology in the space. The company had worked with her before as well. Given the overall positive relationship between the company and the café, she was willing to let us use the black box theater during the final week of July. Understanding our financial situation, she very graciously allowed us to perform there and only pay for utilities expended during rehearsal and the performance.

I was sweating bullets up to now. Before we met with Dana, I was at my wits end trying to figure out with Chakra how Amogkhabas even would happen.

But we *finally* had a place to perform.

We ended up charging for the tickets. None of us really wanted to but I had to insist. Dana suggested that we ask people to pay to guarantee that they would attend rather than completing an RSVP and not showing up. After taking count of the available seats in the theater, all ticket sales would go towards our expenses. The choreographers rented costumes and equipment from other dancers. We hired a small pin peat ensemble with a samphour player, a multi-instrumentalist to play sralai and other wind instruments, and a roneat ek player. We had to pay everyone who was willing to help us. Not to mention we still needed to pay for utilities.

We designed posters. We ordered specialized poster stands. And we went around to different places: cafes, bars, and anywhere that would let us share the event. We wanted people to show up.

And show up they did.

I spent all my time before opening night sitting in the booth. The choreographers and performers were getting ready and I would be in the way more than anything. They were all getting dressed in the narrow hallway off to the side of the stage, in the restroom stalls, or anywhere else in the café they could go. It was the calm before the storm.

We had a fair number of people book tickets in advance or reserve tickets and tell us that they would pay us at the event. We had a rough idea of what to expect on opening night: About 75% of the seats would be filled with friends, classmates, and the arts community.

I was *very* wrong.

People kept coming. I watched from the booth as more seats filled. The dim lighting made it difficult for me to identify who was in the audience. There were voices that I recognized. Friends of the dancers and choreographers. My friends. Our teachers. Voices that I could attach to a face but no name. Strangers. The seats filled up.

It was 7:00pm and people were still getting seated. Out of available seats, people were sitting on the stairs close to the stage.

Where did all these people come from? How did they find us?

I know we advertised but I didn't think we would get this kind of turn out.

Maybe night two after people saw it, we would?

(We did in fact fill the entire black box theater on the second night with people in the aisles, stairs, and in the vestibule between the theater and the café.)

This was incredible.

I wanted the event to be successful

but I *never* imagined this kind of turn out.

I was happy for all the choreographers and performers.

They had been working hard.

I turned off the house lights to cue the audience that it was time for the performances to start. I slid on the spotlights for our MCs Chakrapong Panhara and Puthik Dy to introduce each piece, the performer, and choreographer.

Chapter Three: Sprouting from Diasporic Mud in *Birthday* (2023)

We took a five-minute intermission after a very intense and emotional piece, a work titled *Umbilical Cord* by Venghour Than, where he depicts feelings of loss and pain after his mother passed away in 2022. Everyone needed time to breathe, process, and reset before moving on.

It was time for *Birthday* (2023) by our one and only Cambodian American choreographer Chakravartin Sokhomsan. After a brief introduction to *Birthday* (2023) from Chakrapong Panhara and Puthik Dy, I dimmed the lights so that the stage was pitch black to signal the start of the next performance. Before pressing play on the music, I remember taking extra time at the start of the piece. I knew I needed to wait until Sokhomsan could take center position on stage. I had no idea where he was or if he was in position, so I waited longer than I needed to before starting his preset audio.

"Hidden beneath the earth." Sokhomsan's voice rang out from the speakers. I turned on the center spotlight to reveal him seated on the ground with his knees and legs front of him and bent to his right. His arms move out in front of him, and his wrists rotate with fingers flexed and extended together.

"Seeds lay dormant waiting for a chance to sprout." Gliding his head towards his left, he gently places his right hand on his thigh and left hand on his kneecap. A looking gesture in Khmer classical dance.

"Eyes grow heavy, laying on the distant ground." He rotates his head to his right, raising his right hand and pointing with his flexed index finger. First, he directs his index

finger upwards. Then he points it away from his body and to his right. And then he sets his hand back down on his thigh.

"pka chouk dos jenh pi tuk puok [lotus flowers bloom fully from muddy water]." Turning his head to his left and looking at his hand, he slowly raised his left hand, rotating it so that his palm is facing up towards the ceiling. Each of his fingers are flexed into points aimed at the ceiling as well. He makes the flower gesture.

"plik min ban tae kmean kreung min dai [can't remember but there's nothing]." While turning to look at the audience, Sokhomsan rotates his left wrist, releasing his left fingers. Now, he forms a circle with his middle finger and thumb, and the remaining fingers are outstretched. Meanwhile, he brings his right hand over and wraps his middle finger and thumb around his left wrist. He returns his left hand to his left kneecap.

"I've always had this dream." As he resets his left hand, Sokhomsan holds out his right hand in front of him and looks out towards the audience. He rotates his wrist and brings his hand closer to his chest to form another gesture. He pinches together his thumb and index finger, and the rest of his fingers are splayed and flexed outwards. His hand looks reminiscent of the birds of paradise flower. This gesture is a self-referential movement.

"kdei soben mouy dai koh pi soben datei [a dream that's not quite like any other]." Making the same gesture with his left hand, he brings it towards his chest. He extends both hands outwards from his body, releasing his fingers into an open hand with his fingers together and stretching out his arms. Leaning forward, he moves them out to his left and right before bringing them to the center. Pulling his legs under him, he sits up

on his heels as he raises and turns both hands towards him. Staring at his hands, he points his index fingers outwards while the other fingers are curled together with his thumbs to form a circle.

"soben nei suon phka thaih chambike neak taih reikhsa [dreaming of lush gardens, needing not to be tended to]." Sokhomsan releases this gesture and holds his hands out in front of his body. Lifting his left knee, he steps forward and angles his head to the left slightly. Placing his knee down, he pinches together his index fingers and thumb in each hand and points them downwards. He slides his right leg behind him and raises both his arms up and splaying his hands out with elbows and wrists at 90-degree angles, turning his head slightly to the right in the process.

"clouds dancing across the skies," He maneuvers his right leg in front of him into a kneeling position as he rotates his right hand into an arc with his fingers pointing towards his face and holds his left arm out in front of his body and pinching his index finger and thumb together. He begins to stand up.

"leaves and lotus blooming from the earth," I turn on lights as he stands up, casting the stage in a vibrant blue. He reverses the gestures of his left and right hands while circling around himself to the left.

"petals-"

Sokhomsan stands center stage, facing slightly off to his right with his right arm forming an arc slightly angled outwards and his left arm hooked out to his side with his palm toward the audience and fingers pointing downwards while he raises his left leg up with flexed toes.

“tuk haur tam phnom towv chngai tuk romloke [water flowing down the mountainside and into the sea].” With his suspended left foot, he steps out with his left foot, turning his body and looking to the left while raising his right leg. At the same time, looking at his left hand, he brings his left arm up and out, flexing his fingers into a curve and bending his wrist so that his palm faces down while he places his right hand on his right knee.

“kchol bok tuv vieng tov mowv [winds moving here and there].” He places his right foot back on the ground and stretches his arms out. He sways both arms up and down while stepping forward with his left foot and then shifting the angle of his feet. He raises up and steps with his right foot.

“i can still feel the chills up and down my spine.” Turning to face the back of the stage, Sokhomsan steps again with his left, raising his right arm up while sending his left back behind him and kicking up his right leg. He balances on his left leg with the bird of paradise gesture held in his left hand and his right elbow and wrists at 90-degree angles. The palm of his hand faces upwards as his fingers flex and curl together. Gradually, turning on his heel, he rotates to his left towards the audience.

“i can feel the earth rumbling and shaking beneath me.” His form slowly deteriorates and he descends to the floor. He sits on the ground; head angled towards the floor and arms outstretched to hold him up in a dejected state.

“im trying to be someone im not.” He slowly rises and sits on the heels of his feet.

“trying to fit this representation of myself authentically.” He raises his hands and rests them on his lap in a cross while continuing to look off to the side.

“authentically living in this battle of being perfect and unique.” He rises, looking towards his left, kneeling on his left leg, and extending his arms out in front of him. He rests his hand briefly, his right on his hip and left on his knee.

“and yet i know there is no one mold.” Sokhomsan stands up on both feet. Stepping back with his left, he raises his left hand up, forming first the bird of paradise flower in front of him before releasing it. Keeping his left hand on his hip, he stands upright and looking to the right, creating an arc with his left arm and fingers.

“im questioning my surroundings and the product of my environment.” Looking to his left, he steps back with his right foot and brings his both hands to his torso to form the bird of paradise flowers. He retracts his left leg momentarily before stepping and leaning forward, stretching out his arms and bringing them together. He holds up his hands in front of his body, palms flat and facing him.

“tae khnhom nov tinea (where am i)[?]” He steps back with his left and lowers his hands and begins turning his wrists.

“my skin is a mask that you cant take off.” Rotating his wrists, he brings his palms together into prayer while stepping forwards with his right foot. He turns around to his left on his heels and faces the audience again.

“rok kheung klounaing batbang (finding myself lost).” Moving his hands out of prayer position and in front of him, Sokhomsan momentarily steps back and forth in place. Then, he stretches out his right arm and moves his right hand behind him while his left arm moves in front of his torso into the bird of paradise flower while he looks slightly to his left.

“breaking grounds, changing shapes, building starts.” Turning his head slightly towards the right and keeping his right arm back, he steps back, rotates his wrists, and curls his fingers, hooking out his arm with his fingers aimed upwards and palm facing the audience. He raises both his left leg and arm and faces his raised hand. He pinches together his thumb and index finger and splays out his other fingers, pointing his thumb and index finger towards his face.

“im on a path with infinite ends and unlimited possibilities.” He turns towards his left and walks in a half circle before returning to center stage. He forms an arc with his left arm and hand, pointing all his fingers towards his face.

“yet my mind cant seem to fixate on my failures and uncertain future.” He lowers his left hand to his waist, drawing his right hand in front of his body, pointing up with his index finger, and stepping forward with his right foot.

“i remember blowing candles when i was dop prambel [17].” Stepping forward with his left foot, he straightens out his right hand and raises his left hand off his hip, holding both out in front of him.

“im mapei [20] now,” placing his right hand on his hip while pinching together his left thumb and index finger and stretching out his remaining fingers to reference himself.

“moving through a world with closed eyes and just wishing they could be open.” Moving both hands in front of him, he steps back. He twirls and rotates his wrists and fingers, raising them in front of his body, kicking his right leg back into the air, and covering his face with his hands. He balances on his left leg as he moves his right leg

forward in front of him and lowers his hands and arms. He holds his arms away from his body, holding them at a slight distance while stepping with his right.

"pel nah khnhom tver truie [when am i going to get it right]." Sokhomsan shifts his weight front and back before stepping back with his right foot.

"i ask myself." Upon stepping back, he raises up his left foot, balancing on his right while stretching his arms out and away from this body while the transitional music begins. I dim out the lights.

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I began this chapter with a description of Chakravartin Sokhomsan's piece *Birthday* (2023) to return to the opening night of Amogkhabas – The Next Generation. Watching these three and half minutes of *Birthday* (2023) drew me into the work and made me want to write about it. At first, I was especially curious to see what he would showcase to the audience as the only Cambodian American choreographer in Amogkhabas – The Next Generation. Now, after watching the performance recording multiple times, I became further committed to write about how he explores self-making as a Cambodian American. Because of my specific involvement in his work, I also find it necessary to reflect on what I did during production for Sokhomsan.

Born to Cambodian refugee parents, Chakravartin Sokhomsan is a second-generation Cambodian American dancer who began his training in dance in Long Beach, CA at the Khmer Arts Academy. He studied Khmer classical dance under Prumsodun

Ok, Charya Burt, and Mea Lath. I first met Sokhomsan when he was in his senior year of high school in Long Beach while conducting ethnographic research at Khmer Arts Academy in 2019 for my MA thesis. After finishing high school in 2020, he completed Bachelor of Arts in Dance at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and graduated in 2024. He has been involved with Valley Traction, Dance Theater Group, Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, and American Dance Festival. In 2025, Sokhomsan completed the Young Artists Internship at Bernstow in Mt. Vernon, Maine. Currently based in the Los Angeles area, he is a Teaching Artist at Modern Apsara Company in Long Beach and performing with master artist Charya Burt in her work *Rebirth of Apsara: Beyond Genocide* which is, at time of writing, being performed across the United States including the San Francisco Bay Area, Lowell, and Chicago. During his third year at Dickinson College, under the direction of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA, I contacted him to see if he had plans to be in Cambodia that summer and would be interested in participating in the Amogkhabas – The Next Generation project. After a few Facebook messenger exchanges to clarify details, he told us that he was available and excited to be a part of the project and choreograph a new piece. Having been around Sokhomsan's orbit since 2019, this chapter *follows* his journey through his work. and I am invested in his diasporic sensibilities as a choreographer and performer for Amogkhabas – The Next Generation.

Sokhomsan originally choreographed *Birthday* (2023) while studying abroad in Europe for his undergraduate coursework and re-choreographed it with new music as a solo piece for Amogkhabas – The Next Generation for the final week of July in 2023.

Out of the four choreographers premiering works at this showcase, Sokhomsan was the sole Cambodian American choreographer and dancer. *Birthday* (2023) is an eleven-minute semi-improvised work that grapples with themes of youth, identity, and growth as an early career artist. He frames the choreography in two parts. First, he establishes questions surrounding his identity through combining spoken word with modern and Khmer classical dance, placing an emphasis on gestures from nature. In the second section, he interrelates more modern and contemporary styles of movement by drawing on Khmer classical dance, body/mind/centering techniques, and somatics. For Sokhomsan, these gestural vocabularies evoke a dialogue about the bifocal quality of being both Cambodian and American.

Continuing discussions of Cambodian-ness and diasporic dis/connect from the previous chapter, this chapter examines Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023) by moving sequentially through both sections of the piece before returning to my specific involvement. I provided my reading of the initial three and a half minutes of Sokhomsan's choreography in tandem with his spoken word to describe the continuous flow of gestures and vocalized sound. His movements are contextually related to each other, and I find it valuable to include a broader description before close analysis. In turn, this allows me to foreground the important issues in part one of the performance. I made specific choices and non-choices to represent the movements while also including Sokhomsan's spoken word as he originally wrote and recorded it. Barring a few typographical inconsistencies from the spoken word text document shared with me, I retained how he chose to transliterate and translate Khmer words and phrases into

English. In the second section, I focus on the interplay between sound, movement, and lighting to consider themes of dynamics and obfuscation. I think alongside Sokhomsan's project and what it suggests for Cambodian American expressions of Cambodian-ness. How does Sokhomsan express his relationship to Cambodia and Cambodian identity using different expressive styles and practices? What do these convey about the Cambodian diasporic subject and Cambodian-ness? How is diasporic dis/connect negotiated, embodied, and performed?

In this chapter, I discuss the importance of music technology and technical production using scholarship from critical remix studies to contextualize the process of setting up *Birthday* (2023) while reflexively addressing my involvement. Engaging with remix studies helps me reflect on the techniques of production and interrogate how I practice ethnography from the booth. I write as the implicated ethnographer because my influence on the performance is unavoidable as technician and co-producer. For me to theorize from the booth means that my presence is never neutral, nor should it be. I am always implicated by and in relation to the overall production. What I did and do in the moment is in service of the production more than any scholarly outcome, despite there being an ever-present academic agenda. My ethics of following demands this level of transparency and requires that I take ownership of my role in the scene. The practice of following is mutual between me and Sokhomsan in terms of the exchange of cues and musical production. I take the approach of an accompanist and take seriously my responsibilities in the production for bringing the performance to life. I attempt to carefully negotiate ethical issues of representation by discussing my reading of

Sokhomsan's choreography in relation to how I shaped the work without overextending my involvement. By emphasizing the issues embroiled in *Birthday* (2023), I center Sokhomsan and his work while being transparent about what I did in order to convey conflicts and tensions during the production process that impacted the performance.

Embedded within the dynamic choreography and interplay of sounds of *Birthday* (2023), Sokhomsan conveys what I call the analytic of muddiness where he teases out the contradictions of identity formation and explores living as a diasporic subject. Mud obscures the bottom of rivers and reduces visibility. It gets stuck on things and creates a general mess. Muddiness as a component of sound similarly detracts from crisp and clear articulations in audio production. Yet, mud itself is also critical for the lives of plants, fish, and insects. Muddied sound, sometimes interpreted as noise, indicates more waveforms that are a part of the everyday and implicates life beyond ideals of high fidelity. Mud makes it more challenging to *follow* a path, sound, leader, or dancer, shaping my engagements with the production of Sokhomsan's work. Thinking about muddiness means considering the continual forms of interference or complications ever present in diasporic life. These include how diasporic subjects reimagine and transform styles, practices, and approaches in ways that become translocal, glocal, transnational, and ageographical. Muddiness helps Cambodian-ness extend beyond ethno-national formations. In Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023), muddiness revels in the messiness of diasporic dis/connect as it takes up the global postmodern and cosmopolitan aspects that underpin Cambodian-ness. Responding to these themes, Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023)

performs self-making as a process in tension with the world by articulating questions of belonging, self-identification, and embodied practice.

Part One: Muddy Poetics and Natural Movement

In this section, I examine Sokhomsan's poetics and the vocalization of his spoken word in relation to audience desires for clarity which come from expectations for linguistic pronunciation and high fidelity. Extending his nature metaphors, I push against clarity through considering the significance of muddiness for Sokhomsan's project in denying intelligibility. Muddiness addresses the textural elements of vocal production and expresses the messiness of diasporic struggle as he negotiates being Cambodian American. Then, I read how he gesturally paints the spoken word recording alongside the hybrid movement vocabulary to express a sense of disorientation in the world as a young adult. Sokhomsan's emulates the fragments of his narrative to articulate mounting feelings of abjection from the diaspora and homeland. I argue that Cambodian-ness does not coalesce or concretize but reflects processes of negotiating the self and its relations.

Listening to Sokhomsan's Spoken Word

I always think about his spoken word recording as one of the most thought-provoking parts of *Birthday* (2023). As far as I am aware, it was the first instance where a choreographer in Cambodia composed a blended narration in both Khmer and English. There are dubbed translations or multilingual program notes, but all performance works that I saw were monolingual. When I listened to the initial audio, I noticed very minor

issues with the recording but nothing that couldn't be fixed with some adjustments in GarageBand. His voice was very resonant in the microphone and while I would have preferred a drier sound so it would be easier to edit, I figured out how to clean it up. While other people might find issues with the content of his spoken word, I didn't have any critiques of his spoken word poetry. I simply trusted and understanding that he made specific choices when composing it. I made the note to myself that once the performance was over, he and I would discuss his spoken word piece further.

In the week leading up to the weekend of performances, we gained access to the black box theatre at Java Creative Café. In preparation, I asked everyone to rehearse their projects with me throughout the week so I could make note of all the lighting and sound transitions. Thankfully, Sokhomsan's piece only required that I manage the lighting. He and I compiled the audio in advance and were in the process of finalizing last details. These sessions were also moments for the choreographer and their performer(s) to present their works to each other. Using a draft version of the fully compiled performance audio to *Birthday* (2023), Sokhomsan shared the work with everyone.

The other choreographers and dancers participating in Amogkhabas – The Next Generation had some concerns. I was not with everyone for the feedback session because I was in the booth updating my notes for the performance. Also, having listened to the audio play through the speakers of the theater and hearing odd spikes of loudness in places where they were not supposed to be, I needed to rebalance the mix.

Here is what I managed to overhear and learn about in later conversations. First, they thought that Sokhomsan's voice in the recording was not clear and said that he

should re-record the whole thing with another, better quality device. Second, they also had issues following the spoken word. The other dancers and choreographers said that it could be due to the overall recording quality, his unclear pronunciation in Khmer, and his confusing word choice. Admittedly, I am used to hearing a range of accented Khmer because I am in spaces with Cambodian American heritage speakers and other Khmer language learners. However, what I understand as an accent is considered unclear by fluent Khmer speakers (cf. Khubchandani 2020). At the same time, I know Sokhomsan has a distinct way of speaking. If I had to describe it, I think he has a softer diction which meant to everyone else that he was under-enunciating his words. Because it involved production, I debriefed the conversation with him later.

That evening, we had made plans to get dinner with our mutual friend Sela. Rather than Sokhomsan going home and coming back, we figured it would be easier to leave together from my place to meet her.

"Did you want to talk about the vocabulary in your spoken word poem?" I asked.

"I met with a few of the others, and we talked about it. I changed some words, but I sent those changes already." He replied.

I recalled that earlier that month, he shared the spoken word with some of the other dancers and choreographers. They had already given him feedback about the wording and grammar.

"Oh good. I didn't have any issues with what you sent me, but I also was reading it as I was listening to it."

"People weren't sure what I meant when I said '*sobun*.'"

"What does '*sobun'* mean again?" I asked having an embarrassing lapse in memory.

"I understand it as dream or heavenly dream."

"I thought it was clearly pronounced, but what do I know. And it's supposed to be poetic so it's not like it needs to follow any prescribed grammar."

"Right!"

"What did you record the spoken word with?" I asked out of curiosity.

"I just used my iPhone to record it." He replied. "Is that not a good recording device?"

"I think it's good enough. iPhone's nowadays have fairly solid microphones and can do a lot if used correctly. I have a separate zoom microphone that we could use also. Where did you record it? The location of the recording can impact its quality."

"I just recorded it in my room."

I thought to myself that there wasn't any feedback, echo, or additional noise detracting from the recording. We could re-record it, but I do not know anyone who has a recording studio available for us to use. Nor did I think that re-recording it in a fancy studio would really amount to much.

"They also suggested that I have someone else record it," he said.

"I can understand why they would want that, especially if they want a clearer pronunciation of Khmer. But what do you want to do?" I asked him. "I have things to adjust in the recording so it wouldn't be an issue for me to replace the recording with a

new one. But to be honest, I think it's fine the way it is. It's your voice. It's just what you sound like. There's nothing inherently wrong about that."

I wanted to make clear that I would support whatever he wanted to do. At the same time, I was flabbergasted. Why should an artist's spoken word piece not be read by them? It just didn't make sense to me. After our discussion, Sokhomsan did not have me change anything related to his spoken word audio after our conversation. I didn't even make changes to clean it up like I had planned to earlier.

After the opening night, I asked one of my friends in the audience—Tia, a Cambodian American living in Cambodia, publicist and social media manager who attends and writes about the performing arts scene in Cambodia—if all the production elements were okay, with specific attention to Sokhomsan's poem. She said that it was perfectly fine to her. Given her confirmation that nothing was wrong, it was clear to me that the audio quality did not detract from the performance. At the same time, this experience inspired me to think about what might drive the desire for clarity and fidelity as it relates to diasporic subjects.

While pre-recorded, Sokhomsan's spoken word is a performance and it serves a range of audiences, especially bilingual listeners who speak English and Khmer. It generated two major questions: (1) Why was I invested in hearing his voice rather than someone else's? (2) What does the desire for clarity and high fidelity accomplish and for who? I could start answering my first question by saying that I was interested in having him be his authentic self and that he is the artist and performer so why not keep his voice? Let us listen to his voice read the piece as he intended it to be heard. However, my

pursuit of authenticity could be contradicted by how I question the need for clarity and fidelity. Clearer diction and fidelity also imply authenticity.

Authentic representations and reproductions rely on a sense of purity. Walter Benjamin discusses authenticity in terms of its aura, or the essential quality that defies but defines a work's unique materiality (Benjamin 1968, 221). Benjamin explains that an authentic reproduction relies on its ability to reproduce an aura that retains its pure original self. Because authentic cultural reproductions rely on an essence, Regina Bendix shows that essentialist constructions of authenticity require a referent Other constructed in relation to ethno-national difference (Bendix 1997, 17). Complicating essentialist approaches to authenticity, Sokhomsan defines his authenticity in terms of identity and praxis of being. Leading up to the performance, his authentic self was under question. Sokhomsan's voice is a recorded and material representation of his identity, experience, and narrative as a gay Cambodian American as well as his artistic praxis. Expecting clarity in terms of the recording and his enunciation would ultimately deny aspects of himself by modifying the original spoken word content beyond what he wanted and changing the speaker. Instead, retaining Sokhomsan's perceived muddiness, rather than obfuscating meaning, generates space for a fuller representation of his voice as it sonically materializes and is embodied on stage. While muddier sounds are usually attributed to extra noise or frequencies in the recording that detract from ideal vocalization, Sokhomsan's softer and more resonant articulation facilitates a plural construction of the self understood in relation to others.

Defining the authentic self or identity involves a deconstruction of difference from being a singularity towards its plural. Sokhomsan's spoken word begins to reveal how his authenticity necessitates multiplicity. By confounding essentialist underpinnings of identity, he conveys the contentious and complex ways of being Cambodian that do not prescribe to hegemonic definitions of a pure identity. In a sense, re-recording and having Sokhomsan articulate each word would prescribe to an authentic reproduction of Sokhomsan's narrative by prioritizing its reproducibility as a recorded work. At the same time, Sokhomsan also made the choice to read the spoken word and retain his softer enunciation and accent, and this reproduces an aura of difference or illegibility with a perceivably muddier sound. Muddiness, as I read it in Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023), makes audible the complex ways identities and difference are expressed on stage and behind the scenes. Thinking about the racialization of noise, Amber Jamilla Musser writes that attending to noise as a multisensory phenomenon "allows us to sense how questions of recognition, legibility, and comfort underlie reception" as well as racial representation (Musser 2024, 5). The extra "noise" of Sokhomsan's voice complicates rather than detracts from the performance by highlighting his difference as both an accent and individualized vocalization. Sokhomsan's choice to leave the recording alone to express his artistic identity maintains an authenticity that defies and challenges pure notions of authenticity while emphasizing his self-determination.

Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023) nuances the relationship between language and diasporic identity in his access to and connection with Cambodia. In his spoken word, Sokhomsan complicates metaphors for innocence, beauty, and youth through self-doubt

and insecurity. In addition to *Birthday* (2023) marking his artistic birth and journey, his spoken word is a coming-of-age performance or an act of becoming what he already always was: Cambodian American. Despite being challenged about the clarity of his pronunciation and fluency as a Khmer speaker, he chose to keep the spoken word portion of his performance with his voiced reading. In turn, he asserts an intentional unbelonging that answers his own questions about "trying to fit [a] representation of [himself] authentically" by refusing expectations of flawless fidelity for local Khmer people. He enacts how unbelonging is an dissonance that rejects adhering to authentic definitions of identity in favor of disidentifying with and remaining "in the complexities of identity" (Muñoz 1999; Ramos 2023, 21). By rejecting externally informed expectations of Cambodian subjectivity in *Birthday* (2023), I argue that Sokhomsan demonstrates a diasporic muddiness that engages how recording technologies and recorded materials can destabilize static and pure notions of identity in favor of self-determined constructions of identity that are inherently plural. Furthermore, Sokhomsan complicates his non-belonging through the vocabulary of Khmer classical dance to emphasize his relationship to Cambodia. Muddiness remains important in the following section where Sokhomsan explores the conjunct and disjunct modes of relation using mixed movement practices to express a capacious Cambodian-ness with his diasporic experience.

Natural Movements: Tensions Between Khmer Classical and Somatics

A major part of Sokhomsan's choreography is the Khmer classical dance gestural vocabulary. The basic gestures are usually described as a cycle of life. The first gesture is

the **seed** which is where the fingers are curled into a fist, but the thumb remains pointed out. It is similar to a thumbs up, but the thumb is hyperextended as much as possible. Next, the seed sprouts and creates a **stem**. This is represented by the hyperextension of the index finger, and the tips of the middle, ring, and pinky finger are held against the thumb and forms a tense circle. Then, the plant grows leaves. This gesture, the **leaf**, is conveyed through the flexed, hyperextended fingers that curl back with the bending of the wrist. The thumb is bent slightly and pokes out from the leaf. After the plant grows leaves, it begins to flower. There are two notable **flower** gestures: the bird of paradise and the lotus. In workshop demonstrations, the bird of paradise flower is usually demonstrated. The bird of paradise gestures involves flexing thumb and index finger together at the middle joint so that they converge and diverge at that point. The remaining fingers are flexed and splayed outwards to suggest the flower's bird-like plumage. The lotus flower involves flexing the fingers and pointing them upwards as if they are individual petals. With the flowers, the plant grows **fruit**. The thumb holds the middle finger in tension, forming a circle. The remaining fingers are flexed outwards and away (alternatively, imagine that you are going to flick someone with your middle finger as hard as possible). This fruit falls from the tree or bush and its seeds grow into new life. These fundamental gestures are representations of nature and can be interpreted loosely in a variety of manners, usually idiomatic to the practice but not always. Often, choreographers and the works in the classical repertoire do not explain every detail through movement. Instead, performers present statements and fragments, and these are very clear for narrative purposes or left to audience interpretation.

I learned from Prumsodun Ok and Sophiline Cheam Shapiro that Khmer classical dance gestures can be considered stylized movements taken from the everyday. When gestures are performed or combined, they are meant to mimic and ornament natural, everyday movements in ways that are both recognizable and enhanced. Individual Khmer classical dance gestures, *kbach*, are augmented and metaphorized natural movements. The word *kbach* when translated into English means style or ornamentation. These include how architecture and drawings are adorned with different patterns to denote sacred or important spaces as well as the individually danced movements and gestures of Cambodian dancers. In visual media and architecture, for example, certain patterns and ornamental adornments may symbolize the fire that adorns a temple or palace or the bountiful natural environment. Generally, the word *kbach* can be applied to conversations about detail, ornamentation, and style outside of specific Cambodian settings. In chapter one, I discussed style as aesthetic renderings and performances of difference and cosmopolitan excess (Khubchandani 2020; White and White 1998). Taking up how it transforms everyday movements into aesthetics, *kbach* also signifies an element of excess in Khmer classical dance. This repertoire of movement also draws from the natural environment while transforming the body from human to the divine.

In the Khmer classical repertoire, dancers embody the divine, becoming mythic gods, demons, monsters, spirits, and royal figures. I intentionally write becoming because Cambodian classical dancers do not simply perform the role but are trained to go beyond acting and must inhabit their assigned role as a performer. Judith Butler explains that performance and performativity involve repetitive, discursive acts that coalesce into

identity and ontology (Butler 1990), and Cambodian classical dancers actively rehearse their roles during training, molding their bodies into hyperextension to accomplish extensive bodily curvature. While hyperextension may seem unnatural and contradict ideas of natural movement, it is a necessary component to extend the limits of the body into excess and transmute into the divine. Drag performance provides a similar model for thinking about bodily transformation, excess, and embodiment. Amelia Jones writes that drag paradoxically makes and destroys reality by channeling queerness and queer figures so that the body is a conduit for change (Jones 2021, 17-22). Drag's reality bending principles echo the spiritual embodiment of Cambodian classical dancers and their channeling of specific roles and figures. Furthermore, Tamara Loos (2020, 936) explains that gender performativity in a Southeast Asian context must also encapsulate spirituality and ontologies of third gender identities, accounting for the dualistic framing of gender and cultural performance. Thinking about performativity further, I also include non-dualistic framings of sex, gender, and sexuality and multi-gender possibilities given the pantheon of Khmer Hindu-Buddhist deities. Instead of confounding gender and the body, Khmer classical dance mandates mentally and spiritually becoming the role in ways that transcend the visual spectacle of performance and move into the metaphysical and supernatural.

Sokhomsan's movement vocabulary in this part of *Birthday* (2023) draws heavily from Khmer classical dance, but he is also informed by somatic movements. Doran George argues that the underlying assumption in somatic dance training of a natural body and natural way of movement relies on universalist understandings of the body and

romanticized ideas of other cultures and their movement practices (George 2020, 57). Drawing from George's critique of how difference is collapsed in somatic movement, I put forward that relativistic concepts of the natural derive from ontology. Thus, *Birthday* (2023) engages two genealogies of natural movement: one guided by Khmer mythos and another by Western humanism. Together, Sokhomsan expresses the inner tension from navigating dual ideologies and his identity as a Cambodian American. Mediating this duality, he moves towards embodying and becoming environmental phenomenon, redirecting the idea of the natural towards nature as another universal source for movement while upholding Khmer classical dance conventions. I am particularly drawn to his choreography when Sokhomsan dances to the following words:

> tuk haur tam phnom towv chngai (water flowing down the mountainside and into the sea) / tuk romloke kchol bok tuv vieng tov mowv (winds moving here and there) / i can still feel the chills up and down my spine / i can feel the earth rumbling and shaking beneath me

Sokhomsan sways to the right and then left casting water down with his left hand raised above his head. Then, he sways again, moving as wind using his outstretched arms. He turns around to face the back of the stage. While raising his right hand up into the air, he lifts up his right foot behind him and pulls his left arm behind him to rest his hand on the ball of his foot. In a way, he takes flight but remains tethered to the ground with his left leg. He trembles while turning on the ball of his left foot. As he feels the (wind?) chills and earth shake, he falls to the ground.

With the spoken word poem as a guide, the fluidity of his movements encapsulates a collapse of the self into the natural world where, in my opinion, Sokhomsan effectively becomes the qualities of natural phenomenon. Sokhomsan becomes the water, wind, and earth and he becomes in relation with nature through movement while contained in a human body. As he makes these movements, his body works in opposition with itself. Sokhomsan grounds himself into earth, the stage, and simultaneously ascends into the sky reaching higher and higher with his arms. In turn, these activate the idea of oppositional force within Khmer classical dance and highlight the duality of earth and sky or human and non-human to convey a radical interdependence between aesthetic ideas, corporeality, and nature. Arturo Escobar discusses how radical interdependence involves derealization or processes of "recommunalizing, reconnecting, relocalizing, deindividualizing" that recognize the interexistence of all living beings in the natural world (Escobar 2020, 20-21). Sokhomsan uses the gestural vocabulary of Khmer classical dance and activates it, and I am riveted by how he accomplishes his derealization and becoming nature through movement. Sokhomsan enacts a slippage into nature where Khmer classical dance became a mode for integrating himself into the world.

However, when Sokhomsan falls from his tenuous position of balancing on one leg, the tone of the work shifts. It is at this moment when *Birthday* (2023) expresses its central question: Who am I? While he transduces the energy of his movements to match the natural environment, Sokhomsan physically cannot achieve flight. His attempt to fly and subsequent fall to the earth represents the entanglement of mortality and his inability

to transcend the limitations of the human body. I am drawn to when he trembles while balancing on one leg and this moment of instability, insecurity, and subsequent rupture where Sokhomsan's bodily integration into nature fails. Flailing in the swampy mud, he turns, rotates, reaches outwards to redress his separation from the more-than-human back to human. Breaking from the natural world, Sokhomsan's efforts towards self-making are challenged by questions of authenticity, as discussed earlier, and mediated through ontologies of performance. Now, Sokhomsan moves with uncertainty and questions his place as a young adult. He sits with the mud and contestations of his identity and his experiences as a rising Cambodian American artist.

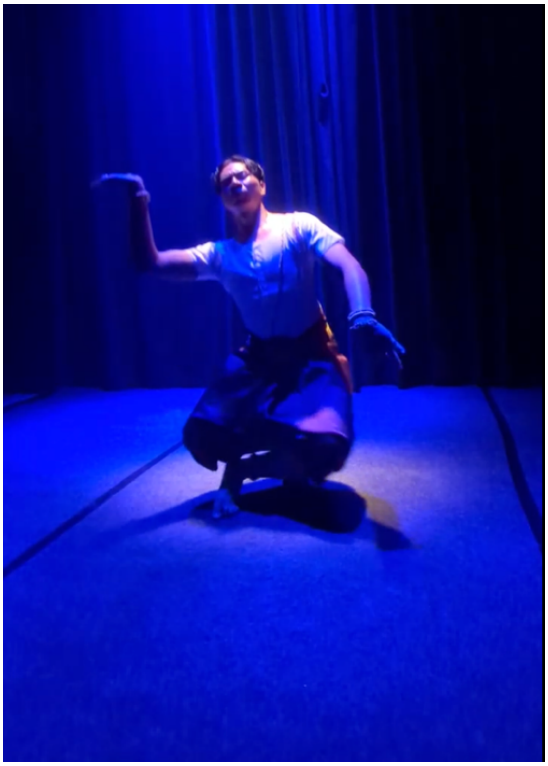

Figure 16. Video still of Sokhomsan falling to the ground. Original video courtesy of Sotheavy (Tia) Nou.

In this opening segment of *Birthday* (2023), Sokhomsan draws into relation the human and non-human using concepts of the natural within different performance ontologies. However, he concludes this part of the work with the concern "pel nah khnhom tver truie [when am i going to get it right] / i ask myself" while leaving himself open and vulnerable. In doing so, the first part of the work remains inconclusive and articulates how self-making in performance continues as a process rather than achieving a conclusive definition of the self. This indecisiveness or openness presents alternative possibilities that center aspirational processes of self-identification with the world rather than in it. Sokhomsan's spoken word poetics offer a multivalent rendering of diasporic identity that, when combined with his exploration of the natural, unsettles or muddies authentic ideas of Cambodian-ness while setting up the second section of the work.

Part Two: Distorted Sounds and Samples

Sokhomsan leaves the audience in a moment of uncertainty as darkness envelops the theater, and new sounds play out from the speaker. This is a two minute and thirty second transitional sequence featuring electronic music and sampled sounds of *roneat*. One by one, he removes some of his jewelry, white shirt, and purple cloth folded into pants to reveal a purple leotard. After he removes parts of his costume, he folds his shirt. Then he folds the purple cloth. Stacking everything together and now dressed in only a leotard, he exits the stage to set his clothes aside.

From a distance, Sokhomsan's body and form is clearly visible and suggests the appearance of nudity in moodier lighting. In turn, he performs a sense of vulnerability where he leaves himself and his body exposed to the world. Shedding his jewelry and clothes suggests a leaving behind of Cambodian-ness. However, stripping also indicates how Cambodian-ness is inscribed on to his body as both essentialized and embodied. While he still wears his Khmer classical dance bracelets and anklets, Sokhomsan's overall bare vulnerability reveals that he is more than just Cambodian and that he navigates a constellation of identities.

Embedded within Sokhomsan's transitional moment is the question of belonging and becoming his fully realized self. I conceptualize his exploration of this question through a series of distortions. Distortion in terms of sound production includes the processing, compressing, and transforming of a waveform in ways that cause clipping or changes in the overtone series that amplify or dampen the tone quality. For dance, I see distortion as analogous to the altering and manipulating of the body in space and time relative to the body's capacity for movement or the transformation of a specific movement practice. Sokhomsan asked me to combine studio recordings of Khmer musicians playing various pieces including "Take Five," rearrangements of folk melodies, and improvised home recordings to form his sonic landscape. In collaboration with Sokhomsan, I arranged the audio files in accordance with when and how he wanted each recording to filter into the work. I also added other changes, recording on top of the work, modifying the tempi, and emphasizing different pitch registers (more thoroughly explored in the next section). In this sense, Sokhomsan structured the work and I made

additional creative decisions that augmented and distorted the audio. With various changes in tempo, pitch, and additional fills and flourishes, these remixes animate the second section of *Birthday* (2023). I am invested in how Sokhomsan engages with the samples and soundbites in the remix to produce his muddy distortions emblematic of his diasporic experience. The speed of Sokhomsan's movements along with semi-rapid lighting transitions create a visual muddiness through distorting time and space. Previously, his precomposed movements were contained and closer to the body. Breaking from his earlier gestural vocabulary, Sokhomsan plays with distortion by incorporating sharp and gradual movements to convey how he reconciles diasporic dis/connect and muddiness.

Once he sets his clothes off stage in the dark, new music plays out from the speakers. I turn on the red lights and Sokhomsan rushes out on stage wearing classical dance bracelets and anklets and of course his purple leotard. Sokhomsan fills the stage by improvising and using his whole body. Head in hands, he crosses to stage left, doubling over before stepping backwards to the center stage. He twists and rotates his body around while the droning and fluctuating pitches play out from the speakers. He lurches right and left, as though pulled by an unseen force before slowing down his movements. As his movements gradually slow and the music begins to calm down, he steps towards the center. He brings his left hand over to his torso, raising it over head and making the bird of paradise flower gesture in Khmer classical dance. He steps with his left foot and crosses to the right side of his body while lowering his left hand on his left side, showing his whole body before leaning forward and pulling his arms to his side.

In this segment of the performance, Sokhomsan dramatically shifts the speed and dynamic shape of his movements in relation to audio spikes and pitch fluctuations. He runs out on stage and throws his body against the anguished quality of the music. He contorts and rolls his body inwards, reckoning with the question of who he is. Sokhomsan begins to slow down when there are fewer dramatic shifts in the audio. He takes slightly more time to move across the stage before eventually arriving at center stage. His choice for red lighting further amplifies the tension, indicating frustration and rage as he works to assert himself. Until the very end of these thirty seconds, Sokhomsan eschews Khmer classical dance conventional movement, navigating modern as his primary dance vocabulary before quickly releasing one Khmer gesture. He seemingly expresses the question: can these two dance practices overtly interact? At the same time, he begins to articulate how modern and Khmer dance can be collectively embodied and performed on stage; neither negate the other in their performed interaction.

The tempo of Sokhomsan's movements leading up to this gesture also evoke slowness. Prior to making gesture *dai cheip* (see Figure 17), Sokhomsan's movements start broader and quicker, maximizing both space and time before making a gradual shift, in response to the music, towards lengthened movements that drag out across space and time. Slowness and the importance of bodily control in generating it creates a shift in dynamic register (see Figure 18). Sokhomsan engages with how Khmer classical dance regularly involves slower, meticulous and minute movement and how it contrasts with the preceding open and larger movements. By moving slower, he implies that Cambodian-ness was implicit in his movements, even after stripping most of the

emblematic clothing that would symbolize his Cambodian identity. Periodically here, Sokhomsan would make different gestures using his hands, place his hands at his waist, and take different stances that all reference Khmer classical dance. By juxtaposing it against the fast-sweeping movements that he borrows from modern and free improvisation, Sokhomsan demonstrates how Khmer classical dance is a dynamic movement practice and can be remediated for a range of expressive purposes.

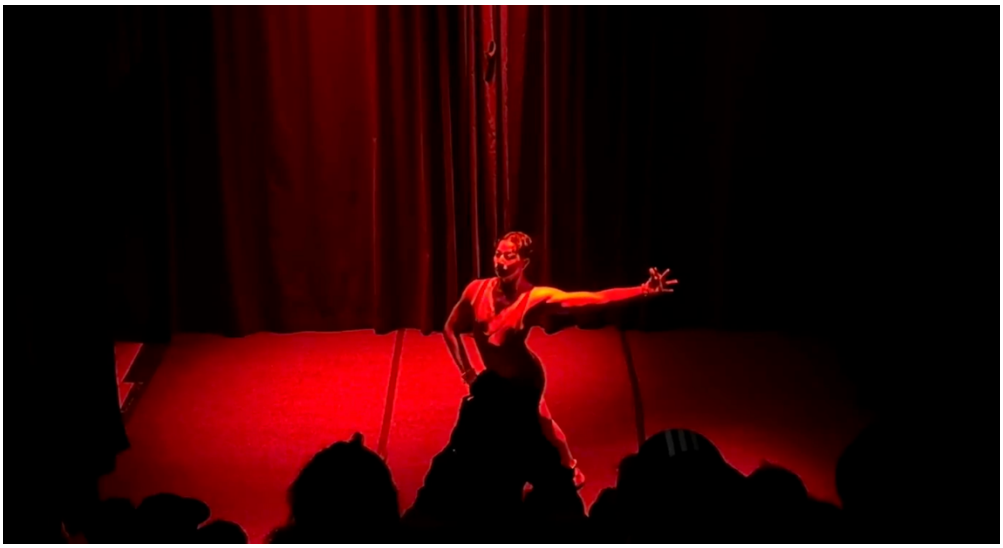

Figure 17. Video still of Sokhomsan making a Khmer classical dance gesture with his left hand.

Dynamics and dynamism are important to Sokhomsan's narrative in *Birthday* (2023) where he uses volume, tempo, and the spatiality of movement to express his journey. His shifts in velocity in relation to the volume and tempo of the music indicate an intentional listening to the preset audio. Sokhomsan contorts his body and makes quick directional changes to emulate the distortions in the audio. Juxtaposed to minutes

earlier in the work, Sokhomsan breaks form and leaves behind ideas of the natural body. Rather than using somatic movement or drawing from Khmer dance, he deforms the body using modern dance with postmodern improvisation. He matches the distorted sounds of the audio through bodily contortion by bending out of naturalized shape and posture, even when he expresses himself with the birds of paradise shaped gesture.

Figure 18. Video still of Sokhomsan as he slows down in response to the music.

Sokhomsan's semi-improvisatory movements convey dynamics through his relative use of space and also his mediation of dance genres. Katherine In-Young Lee explains that 'dynamic' is a multivalent term that includes "motion, change, action, energy, and volume in sound" (Lee 2018, 32-33). For Lee, dynamism animates how samul nori has circulated or globalized as a rhythmic form for its modularity. While

generating his own dynamics of movement by interacting with the audio, Sokhomsan also presents Khmer classical dance as a modular movement practice. By leaving this gesture at the end, he easily draws it into relation with globalized genres that animate his performance to instill a Cambodian element into a section that was otherwise disconnected from Khmer movement conventions. Specifically, he worlds Khmer classical dance, showcasing its modularity alongside the mutable aspects of modern and somatic movement.

After he momentarily floats the Khmer gesture of a flower and then leans to his right, the music fades into a rendition of the jazz standard "Take Five." At first, I did not know what to make of Sokhomsan's citation and application of "Take Five." I actually did not recognize the piece until about five or six months after I returned from fieldwork while in a friend's car. Originally composed by Paul Desmond and originally released in 1959 on the album *Time Out* by the Dave Brubeck Quartet, "Take Five" became a jazz standard for being, at the time, in the relatively unconventional meter of 5/4. It generates an asymmetrical rhythmic pulse (3+2 or 2+3) that Sokhomsan described as groovy compared to a strict, square 4/4 meter. Sokhomsan's choice to use "Take Five" was about the featuring of Khmer musicians from the group Khmer Fusion Project. However, Desmond took inspiration from African polyrhythm and Eastern European mixed meter styles. Desmond's "Take Five" reflects how world popular music appropriated the global South and marginalized expressive cultures in its pursuit for the natural or primitive (Feld 2000, 166) and participates in globalism and the universalizing of cultural production without regard for its origins (Turino 2003, 75). Because of the lack of program notes or

additional contextualization for the audience, “Take Five” primarily symbolizes the Black American genre jazz and Sokhomsan choreographs it to establish his American upbringing. While I was initially unaware that this was an excerpt from the Khmer Jazz Fusion’s cover of “Take Five,” my subsequent modifications then complicate its origins as a genre rooted in Black/Afro-diasporic sonic ingenuity, its popularization by white musicians, and its recent reimagining by Khmer musicians.

Instead of taking up the asymmetrical pulse, Sokhomsan begins by collapsing the metric structure into one beat divided by five rather than the 3+2 or 2+3 pattern. When “Take Five” starts, he lurches, steps, bounces, and moves his arms at the top of each measure. In turn, he imposes an even pulse over the uneven meter. After establishing his tempo, Sokhomsan adds smaller movements that activate the 3+2 pattern before making fuller body spins, leg lifts, and partial turns that displaces the emphasis of the one. Dancing in polyrhythm, he plays with meter and the manipulated audio to distort the pattern of his movements while improvising under a unified one.

Stripped from its origins in Black expressive culture, this version of “Take Five” includes multiple layers of deterritorialization through its recorded interpretation by Khmer Fusion Project as well as how it was excerpted by Sokhomsan and edited by me. Sokhomsan’s excerpting from “Take Five” implicates and foregrounds an uneven series of racial and ethnic relations between the performer, editor, recorded performers, composers, and conceptual inspiration. Furthermore, these relationships implicate an alignment across racial boundaries that recalls Cambodian American racialization in the United States. Due to refugee resettlement policies, Southeast Asian refugees, especially

Cambodian Americans, were relocated to urban spaces and outside of any enclaves (cf. Ong 2003; Tang 2015). As a result of uneven relocation, refugees developed a Southeast Asian American brownness distinct from the racialized experiences of East Asian Americans. Due to sociocultural contact with other Black and Brown communities in the United States, Southeast Asian brownness was shaped through increasing alignments with Blackness and Brownness while negotiating existing racial configurations marked by Asian Americans of East Asian descent. Yet, Cambodian contact with Afro-diasporic cultural expression can be traced back further to influences in Cambodian popular music during the 1960s (Saphan 2012; 2017). Through Sokhomsan's application of "Take Five" and jazz sound, he implicates a Southeast Asian American refugee politics of brownness that engages its connections with Blackness. Thus, "Take Five" and its asymmetricity achieves more than providing an unequal beat subdivision. In addition to being a stand in for American sound, it also indicates the multiple racial filters of remediation that animate the choreography of *Birthday* (2023).

Sokhomsan explores the groovy and uneven beat subdivision to present his diasporic temporality that circles around and inscribes a unified metric structure over several uneven sequences and exchanges in material and sonic culture. Because Sokhomsan toys with meter, his diasporic temporality revels in its distortion and evokes a choreosonics of possibility. Ashon Crawley discusses choreosonics as the explication of material and sonic Blackness to assert otherwise possibilities for being (Crawley 2016, 134). The dynamism of *Birthday* (2023) asserts choreosonics of possibility through how Sokhomsan enmeshes himself within several racially coded sounds and movements,

including Black, American, and Cambodian practices, to explore how Cambodian-ness is informed by diaspora and difference. Specifically, Sokhomsan's choreosonic practice reflects his lineages of dance training in higher education, Khmer classical dance under the guidance of *Nak Kru* Sophiline, Prum, and Modern Apsara Company, and more recently as a rising professional artist. Cambodian-ness involves processes of worlding that draw disparate practices into relational alignment.

Worlding lineage reveals the importance of cosmopolitan and diasporic formations and how it disrupts ethno-national and essentialist configurations of being. Blending an array of music and dance practices, Sokhomsan dances a constellation of practices into relation including jazz, Khmer classical music and dance, modern, and somatic movement in ways that evoke what Việt Lê refers to the politics of negative return or "a way of being, unnamed, unknown, unhinged from one's axis and *axis mundi*" (Lê 2021, 23). The collective distortion and muddiness obfuscate singular definitions of Cambodian-ness, unmooring identity and being from the nation-state. Furthermore, these remediated samples and musical excerpts and Sokhomsan's improvisational movements articulate the muddled, messy, and continuous process of self-making in *Birthday* (2023) and indicate otherwise possibilities for Cambodian-ness. As a diasporic subject in the homeland, Sokhomsan's work reveals how the experience of displacement evokes a diasporic ontology tied to questions about exploring, understanding, and embodying the authentic self as it relates to what can appear as disparate and discrete aesthetic practices. Extending issues of diasporic dis/connect, he illustrates a diasporic Cambodian-ness that is relationally informed by questions of self and Other as well as generations of

experiences. These are all embodied, performed, and negotiated on stage as different styles, approaches, techniques, and viewpoints that demarcate the relational ways of being from Cambodia.

Going Further Behind the Scenes

Creating the audio for *Birthday* (2023) was inherently collaborative. Sokhomsan located the audio stems and indicated where at what times to transition between different tracks. In addition to the pre-recorded spoken word poetry and aforementioned cover of "Take Five," these tracks included an electronic transitional piece, rearrangements of folk melodies, and home recordings of improvised playing. I don't know where some of these recordings came from. Sokhomsan collected these files from the internet, and we lack the appropriate documentation to trace all these recordings from their excerpts alone (and in case you are wondering, couldn't Shazam find them either). Sokhomsan's set transitions constitute the overall structure of the work. Furthermore, after I made all the manipulations and changes, the audio became the preset structure by which Sokhomsan performed and improvised within. Its structure and modifications reflect the collaborative hand-off between us and the back-and-forth conversations about fitting together the different sections of the original audio and any subsequent changes to the overall recording. I took these collaborative exchanges seriously as a part of my ethnographic praxis to ensure my work in the booth supported Sokhomsan's artistic vision and intention. Dorinne Kondo explains that this artistic labor, as it relates to production, "*makes, unmakes, and remakes race*" and therefore demonstrates the critical work

involved with creativity (Kondo 2018, 4). Working in the booth meant collaboratively shaping how Sokhomsan articulated his identity during the performance of *Birthday* (2023). Furthermore, doing ethnography from the booth also requires being an active *follower* and accompanist whose efforts shape and contribute to the narrative.

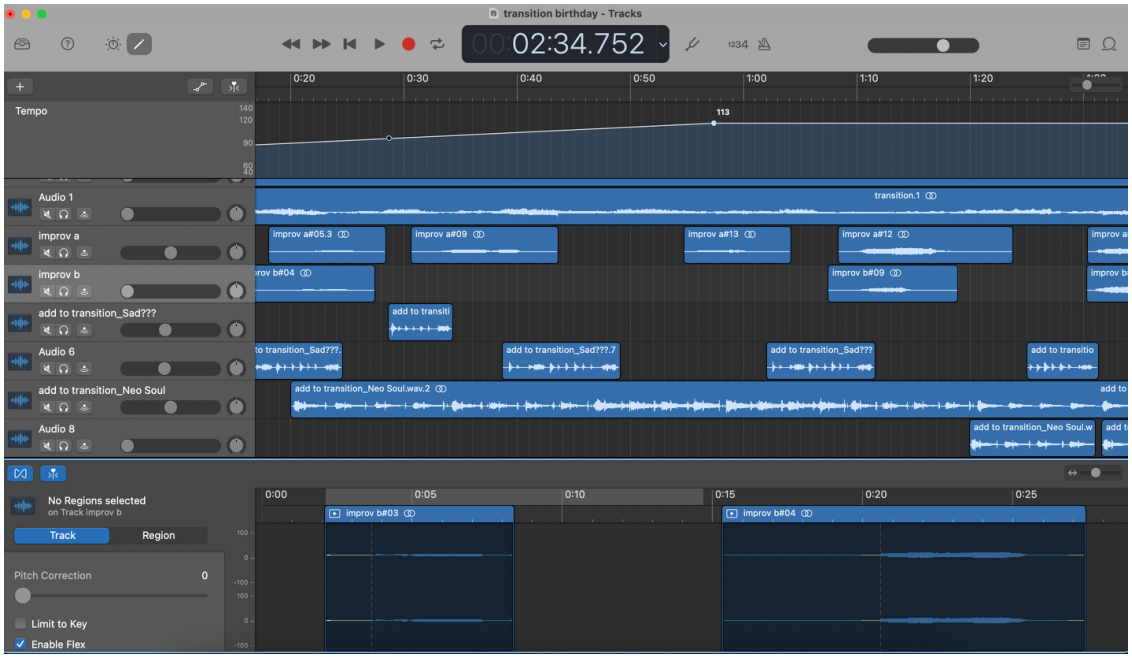

Figure 19. Screen capture of the different tracks as spliced and sampled in Sokhomsan's Birthday *(2023).*

After indicating when to transition between tracks, Sokhomsan largely left me in control of the remainder of the production. I could leave the tracks the way they were and use simple fade ins and outs to switch where indicated. However, we became concerned over copyright and what it would mean if the work exploded beyond our expectations of being performed in this black box theater. Sokhomsan tasked me with finding ways to

avoid any issues with copyright by modifying the tracks. On a practical level, I transformed the audio to avoid any potential issues with copyright claims. With enough changes, all the audio used for *Birthday* (2023) would allow it to be its own original piece. Admittedly, I lack the technical vocabulary to explain the process of remixing and modifying all the spliced audio material. My GarageBand file (see Figure 19) shows how I collapsed the middle frequencies, making attempts to emphasize the highs and lows, which I thought of as the pitch extremes. I added reverb and echo in various spots. I fluctuated the dynamic registers, making sudden changes to the volume and creating sharp contrasts. I played with the pitch, adding vocalized and whistled glissandos over the original recordings to provide additional timbres and colors outside of the samples. In doing so, I contributed to the tracks as both an editor and composer-musician.

I was not the only contributor involved with *Birthday* (2023). Later in the editing process, Sokhomsan asked if I could include a recording of his friend Victoria Ung, Cambodian American dancer and musician, improvising on *roneat*. Without hearing the recording and with no specific instructions on how to incorporate it, I said yes. Rather than include the full recording, I incorporated short samples of Ung's playing, adding them to the transition where Sokhomsan changes out of his costume and over the final audio track that concludes the piece. Because I thought the texture of certain sections was relatively sparse, I included a few clips of my *khloy* playing to fill out the open melodic spaces. Once I made changes, I played the audio for Sokhomsan to get his feedback. I always asked for his thoughts to see what he wanted. I would also always identify something that needed to be adjusted within the remix mashup during these sessions.

Because the opening night was rapidly approaching, and I would delay the final version, he was mostly eager for me to finish remixing it so he could practice with it.

My manipulations of the audio shaped the trajectory of Sokhomsan's semi-improvisatory movements. I interpret his responses as distortions where Sokhomsan was pushed to improvise in ways he did not anticipate when initially sending me the sampled audio. These included dramatic shifts in frequency register when the emphases would switch from the highs to the lows or vice versa. Some of these distortions were shaped by the limitations of my skills and abilities in terms of audio engineering and manipulation in addition to how much control I had over the lighting console and materials available at Java Creative Cafe. All these technical components were not explained to the audience but operated as aesthetic effects that contributed to the overall performance. For instance, samples of Ung's improvisation and my *khloy* playing generate added meaning by asserting Cambodian American sensibilities that reflect our understanding of music as informed by both the diaspora and homeland. Ung studied music at the Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach and with her family and relatives in the United States, whereas I studied briefly at the Khmer Arts Academy and throughout my fieldwork in Cambodia. Before any modifications, the music could be attributed to Cambodian musicians in Cambodia, but the specific inclusion of these improvised samples incorporated relational Cambodian-ness and inter-diasporic connections as well as homeland-diaspora relations.

All these creative changes were made with the goal that it would become an original work, or at least, conform to expectations of originality. However, creative work is never truly original but always intertextual. My collaborative work as an ethnographer

in the booth speaks to the creative process and can be understood in terms of critical remix studies and thinking through the praxis of production as both intertextual and dialogic in scope. Using the history of the remix, Giancarlo Frosio explains that creativity, as situated within the Western canon, draws on reuse, remix, mashup, and appropriation and demonstrates the interconnectedness of creative work as always being in relation to previous work (Frosio 2021). Rather than being original out of copyright concerns, Sokhomsan's work is more of a bricolage that represents the transfiguring of, or building on, the existing cultural zeitgeist (Grba 2021, 375), echoing also the concept of *phlov* ('way') as embodied praxis built out of generations of relationships. Instead of creating an authentic original, Sokhomsan's choreography activates a series of relationships to demonstrate the message of *Birthday* (2023): self-making is a deeply relational process that is endlessly dynamic and resists singular definition through its distortion and muddiness. Our collaborative remix and its array of sonic and movement vocabularies demand a mixed listening practice grounded in both our listening practices and values. For Sokhomsan, it mattered to him that the performers were Cambodian or Cambodian American in addition to the organizational structure of the work. I was driven to modify the material in response to Sokhomsan's needs. Our process of remixing and improvisation evokes Paul Watkins' explanation of DJ methodology where the remix makes previously inaudible material audible, thus approaching the previously unknown (Watkins 2021, 467). Sokhomsan's improvisation transmutes the samples into movement and renders a relationally enmeshed Cambodian-ness visible and audible. His choreosonics coalesced different artistic practices and contested naturalized identity.

Sokhomsan's choices in audio and movements represent a mashup of styles and genres influenced by Cambodian and Cambodian American performers. Christine Boone explains that the mashup reveals both symmetric and asymmetric meaning and therefore crosses boundaries and structures to "provide a potential way out of the shadow of the cultural monoliths that are ever-present" (Boone 2021, 426). The mashed-up audio in Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023) highlights the alignments and displacements between the producers, performers, and recordings. Its distortions refuse a clear definition of the self. The muddiness in the performance indicates a being in the process of self-discovery and self-making. Similar to how lotus flowers grow from muddy and swampy waters, I argue that *Birthday* (2023) revels in the diasporic mud to indicate the beauty and tension of relationality in shaping personal growth and change. This mashup evokes the idea of *sahasamay* and how contemporary performance involves the coalescing of space, time, and identity and shows how articulations of Cambodian-ness are remixes and mashups shaped by the textures and stylings of experience. Sokhomsan signifies his personal transformation in relation to difference, personal experience, migration, and diaspora. These converge in his idiosyncratic register. His work expresses an indeterminate Cambodian-ness metaphorized in this chapter as muddiness and distortion.

The Implicated Ethnographer in the Booth

My fieldwork and overall project are marked by my different commitments and involvements. In this chapter and the next, I am especially implicated for my roles on the production and technical team, or what I consider as ethnography from the booth. As

Angela Ahlgren (2023) considers how production and management work is often invisible labor, especially for women. In writing the reflection preceding this chapter, I shared a brief summary of the events leading up to the opening night of Amogkhabas – The Next Generation where I expressed my surprise, anxieties, and joy surrounding the responsibilities of co-producing the event. Dorinne Kondo argues that this labor constitutes a critical creativity, "a site of theory making and political intervention" (Kondo 2018, 7). My invisible engagements and unpaid work (I also refused any offers of payment) as co-producer and role in technical production was meaningful for all the artists participating in Amogkhabas – The Next Generation, impacting the creative projects in terms of feasibility. The performance became a core part of my research and thus contributed to my academic profile, but my aim was participatory rather than extractive. My methodology also concretizes the stakes of ethnographic research and positions me as deeply enmeshed to the scene in ways that I never imagined. In theorizing my work in the booth, I reveal process and hold myself accountable. My transparency has a dynamic relationship with my invisible labor. At the same time, I was challenged by how to share what I did versus expressing the significance and implications of the artist and their work, leading to how Reflection Three was separated from this chapter.

Volunteering and working in the booth serve as acts of reciprocity and an active practice of decolonial ethnography where I situate myself in service of my interlocutors and their projects. In the moment, it was about helping friends and colleagues and less about any type of exchange for scholarly merit. Katherine In-Young Lee explains that

doing any form of organizing work as a coordinator means negotiating expectations for scholarly rigor and the needs and aims of the artists and performers (Black and Chen 2018; Lee 2018). In my case, I *followed* the choreographer's leadership and artistic direction while I engaged in critical work. I contributed to their projects in the most meaningful ways that I could by fundraising, running lights and sound, and recording practice sessions. Those were my priorities in the moment. Working in a creative team, as Dorinne Kondo explains, "highlights the contingency of the final production" (Kondo 2018, 8). My collaborative activities constituted critical engagements where I was accountable to my interlocutors and implicated in the production and performance, even as I negotiated and pushed for changes in the technical production.

I write unevenly while thinking about production and involvement in *Birthday* (2023) and, in the following chapter, *Phlov* (2023). I was involved for different reasons with both projects. I played a larger role in producing *Birthday* (2023) compared to *Phlov* (2023) but remained involved at the technical level for both. In this chapter and the next, I emphasized the performance and creative process as it related to the work of production so that the spotlight remained on their performances. I made passing references to what I was doing to indicate where I was during the performance while attempting to continually decenter my perspective. However, my perspective is always a part of this ethnography and my roles in *Birthday* (2023) implicate me in the performance. I am not on stage, but I was a performer ephemerally. My presence is felt on stage and there are consequences if I do not cue the music correctly or complete a lighting transition seamlessly.

During the second night of Amogkhabas - The Next Generation, the ceiling lights above the booth were turned off midway through *Birthday* (2023). No one knew why or what happened. I could no longer see the numbers on the lighting console that denoted which switches did what. This took place right before a moment when Sokhomsan asked me to change the lights in random intervals, giving me a chance to improvise for a moment. I cautiously did it the first night and changed colors at different speeds as I saw fit but this time, without being able to see the console and know exactly what lights I was going to mess with, I only could change the current lights to avoid losing track of a later light change that needed those lights specifically. I could only get someone from the audience to turn on my lights on after Sokhomsan finished performing. It led to a slightly longer delay between his piece and the final piece, drawing attention and concerns from audience members closer to the stage and the performers backstage. While inherently collaborative and reliant on community, an ethnography from the booth has real, immediate consequences at the moment as events play out in real time.

It wasn't that I was unfamiliar with the technology, but that I had one week to learn all the lighting for four different pieces for Amogkhabas - The Next Generation. Each choreographer had different requests and varying expectations. I spent that entire week at Java Creative Café in the booth leading up to opening night. I took copious, now nonsensical, notes on lighting and sound transitions. When I worked with each choreographer, I spent time demonstrating what technology was available at the black box theater and what I could accomplish using our limited resources. It led to tensions about what the choreographer wanted versus what I could actually do alone in the booth.

This required explaining why certain lightings or transitions could not materialize either because of the available technology or because I was incapable of doing it. In turn, I had to negotiate choreographers' expectations and demands between the available technology and being the one person up in the booth. It led to questions about trying to get another person to help me. I had refused the additional help, in part because the space was already so tight, and because no one else was available.

Working in the booth requires addressing logistics, organization, and technical production and identifying how to push agendas and ideas. Dorinne Kondo frames her interventions within Asian American theatrical productions as a dramaturgical critique where she aims to push a work further "to enhance the work's already significant aesthetic and political impact" (Kondo 2019b, 267). Kondo's dramaturgical critique raises important questions about how scholars can critically intervene in performance spaces. In my work, I commented on production elements by working on lights and sound to strengthen and augment the directions of *Birthday* (2023) and, in the next chapter *Phlov* (2023). We explored lighting ideas and made note of what was set to an on-off switch versus a slide dimmer. It was through thinking about lighting, and sound as discussed elsewhere, where I could shape the creative process and attend to how everyone developed their projects. I thought specifically about my role and how I could augment the choreographic vision of each artist without overstepping as a novice dancer.

I sought clarification and pushed some of the choreographers to articulate the creative goals and impressions of their project. Dorinne Kondo argues that the creative process, or the work of creativity, relies on collective and collaborative efforts to

disruptive and redress racialized and gendered difference (Kondo 2019a, 188). For Amogkhabas – The Next Generation, our collaborative process similarly meant creating an intervention into the contemporary performance scene shaped by our narratives and interests as young (LGBTQ+) people in Cambodia. *Birthday* (2023) asserted Sokhomsan's diasporic experience and journey to becoming an artist and doing ethnography in the booth as a volunteer was an opportunity to navigate and present the diaspora in Cambodia together. Creative collaborative work in ethnography became an opportunity for following the process and ideas of interlocutors.

At the same time, my roles in *Birthday* (2023) implicates me as an actor involved with the exploration of broader ideas in Sokhomsan's narrative about self-making and self-discovery as it is performed and imagined. In turn, just as I theorize how the work produces ideas about Cambodian-ness, I am equally implicated within the performance as a technical producer. The ideas and concepts emerging here are thus indebted to the artists, choreographers, and performers who welcomed me into their spaces. Sokhomsan's *Birthday* (2023) recognizes everyone that came before in his process of understanding his identity; in some ways, *Birthday* was shaped by generations of creatives and practitioners. Knowledge production through performance is irrefutably co-constructed and entangled with a range of relationships and connections.

Working together for these performances required understanding each other in our different roles, capacities, and approaches, facilitating what Ian McArthur describes as a reflexive de-othering or "the recognition of ourselves in the Other" in service of a shared future (McArthur 2021, 185). It required working across, recognizing, and understanding

difference, even as we were all Cambodian or Cambodian American, to accomplish our shared goal. I do not assert that my influence led to significant changes in choreography or creative work because I respectfully deferred to the artists' decisions throughout my fieldwork. However, I know I had an impact whether I intended to or not. There are ways that I see myself reflected in the work, and my reading of these pieces undoubtedly includes traces of my influence. In this sense, my involvement as an ethnographer in the booth was never neutral, always committed, and always in conversation with the goals of my interlocutors and their creative work. Their shared future was ultimately mine, and it has profoundly shaped the scope of my writing.

Chapter Four: Finding *Phlov* (The Way): Creative Possibility in Contemporary Performance

"Sure, I can run the tech for your show. It can't be that hard. All I have to do is press play and pause at the right times, right?" I said to Khuon one Sunday afternoon after rehearsal.

I vastly underestimated the work that goes on behind the scenes of a performance.

From October 2022 to January 2023, I attended rehearsals for *Phlov* (The Way) (2023) and watched Khuon Chay, my friend and choreographer, create the piece. I was pressing play on various YouTube videos and recordings for sample audio, hitting record on my phone to capture the work-in-progress for review, and sometimes acting as a dance stand-in or placeholder for Khuon so he could observe the other dancers. Despite not being a performer in the piece, I knew *Phlov* (2023) from the inside out despite my linguistic limitations and basic knowledge of Khmer classical dance. I knew enough to identify where to cut the audio. I knew enough to anticipate how long each scene was supposed to be. I knew where the transitions were. I did *not* know I would be responsible for lighting, sound, and the projector for the performance itself.

"Allan!" Khuon would call from the stage.

In the weeks preceding the show, we would shout at each other from across the stage. I would miss a lighting cue. I played the audio too early. He needed to change the lighting. Khuon gestured and pointed to some of the overhead lights. I sighed.

"Which light?" I asked. I moved the sliders on the console. "This one? Or this one?" Once he was satisfied, I updated my growing list of notes and cues. I kept a

running document outlining which tracks to play when as well as which lights to use and to which degree of brightness, not to mention the choreographic action in relation to the lights and sounds. Looking back at the document, it was one of the most nonsensical things I have ever written. I wrote my cues using phrases like “Silent dancing” and “Wait until they sit then turn on 8 10 12 14 (curving around level 5) and P1 (level 4),” referring to the shape of my fingers on the console, and the numbers indicating light sliders and brightness settings. While my notes made sense to me, they would surely mean little to other people, because my notes drew from an embodied practice developed out of hours of rehearsals in the theater. A real lighting and sound technician would certainly have a better method for this.

On another day, there was a mid-scene lighting and audio change where both the lights and audio needed to both change and imperceptibly manifest while the dancers transitioned into the second half of the scene.

“Do you plan to make any changes in the music here?” I asked.

“I don’t think so, why?” He replied.

“I’m going to connect the audio tracks, so they play one after the other.” I said. “That way, I can focus on doing the lights. Give me a few minutes to edit it together and then let’s try it.”

I opened GarageBand on my laptop. I uploaded the audio files and created separate tracks for both files. I lined both tracks up so the instrumental track would fade in while the vocal track concluded. I added a gradual fade in on the instrumental track so that it would subtly enter as the recorded singer held out his last note. I added a little bit

of echo and reverb on the last note of the singer to give it more resonance to mask the entry of the instrumentals. It was ready for testing. We tried it with the dancers and after a few adjustments to better mask the transition, it was ready to go.

I share these moments to situate myself as an ethnographer embedded in *Phlov* (2023). Drawing from earlier discussions of ethnography from the booth, I find all too often that the researcher, and this chapter at times notwithstanding, disappears from the scene in scholarly commentary. While fixating on the work and its actors allows for a critical centering of the performance, it erases the researcher's investments in the analysis. Dorinne Kondo eloquently showcases how the eye/I of the researcher is not untouched by their context and identity but intertwined with the relationalities delineated by subject position and role, indivisible from the world (Kondo 1990, 29, 32). Working as the lighting and sound technician has real stakes. For the show to run smoothly, I must click play at the right time or move the sliders at the appropriate speed to slowly or quickly turn on the lights.

By referencing my role, I position myself as an engaged ethnographer collaborating with the choreographer and dancers in producing a show. For instance, I was never in the front row of the show. I occupy the role of an accompanist where I *follow* the artists on stage. Yet, I am all over the theater as the lights, sound, and media. My subjectivity is dispersed through the theater. I am watching from above in the booth, so many of the reference images from this performance are top-down video stills from my location up in the booth. As I write this chapter, I am watching the performance recordings and viewing scenes in some cases for the first time, uninhibited and

unimpeded by my responsibilities monitoring lights and sound and without the ephemerality and awe of a live show. Ultimately, my positionality in both the identitarian and physical sense deeply informs how I revisit and discuss the performance across the following pages. I am positioned at times as the distanced viewer, describing actions as I perceive them while writing and providing critical post-commentary. At other times, I am reflective, re-experiencing the work as a recording and as I perceived it live. These shape my representations of the choreography, and it grants me retrospective understanding in my broader discussion.

This chapter is a re-viewing of *Phlov* (2023) choreographed by Khuon Chay and premiered in January 2023 at Java Creative Café in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Khuon Chay was a dancer in the Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA dance company which closed in December 2023. He was born in the coastal province of Kampot, Cambodia in 1997 and moved to the capital at the age of 22 to pursue opportunities as a gay man and dancer. He began studying Khmer classical dance in 2019, quickly joining Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA after a year of training under *Nak Kru* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro. Khuon and I met on my first day with the company and he immediately began mentoring me in Khmer classical dance, quickly becoming a close friend. Throughout my fieldwork, we would meet up and chat about our lives, goals, aspirations, and interpersonal dramas. He and I would often meet before practice and take a walk together along the riverside with our coffees in hand, catching up before heading to rehearsal. After about a month of chatting, he invited me to attend rehearsals for *Phlov* (2023) to support my research and to provide him with a dedicated audience member during practice. In turn, because I

learned the ins and outs of his work, I became a technical assistant, recording scenes, pressing play, and standing in for him.

Figure 20. The sound console (upper left), lighting console (center), and my MacBook Pro with my production notes. Photo by author.

Writing from the booth, I return to the performance and reflect on my role as Khuon's production staff to offer my analytical perspectives as an informed viewer and sound and lighting technician. I focus on *Phlov* (2023) for several reasons. This contemporary performance work deploys the language of Khmer classical dance and tells a deeply personal story about the present. Based on how Khuon presents his story, I consider how the work reflects a complex process of self-making and personhood. This process involves fragmentation, or the various pieces, bumps, gaps, and layers that shape human experience. Khuon Chay's retooling of Khmer classical dance offers a way to

understand living with fragments of Cambodian-ness as he worlds classical and contemporary practices to create his narrative of the postmodern condition. I argue that creativity and creative work are the impetus for change, ultimately seeking more than what is in our current reality. I draw attention to creative work's potential for transformation as artists respond to struggles in the world.

Postmodernism resists and reacts, questioning established sociocultural discourses through artistic critique (Foster 1983, xii). Frederic Jameson (1983) writes that postmodernism is characterized by pastiche and schism, involving cross-temporal interactions and "schizophrenic" breaks with present reality. I am especially drawn to Hal Foster's (1995, 304) assertion that the artist is an ethnographer or quasi-anthropologist and, as Michael M. J. Fischer (2023) discusses, I consider their artistic production as modes of cultural critique. Artists involved with contemporary cultural production authoritatively fashion their works within ongoing sociopolitical discourses. Some create performative autoethnographies aiming to deconstruct and break from present conventional practices. This is cathartic, seeking liberation from hierarchical power and commodification. In his discussion of postmodern affect, Frederic Jameson (1984, 61) explains that postmodern works deconstruct aesthetic expression, articulating a cathartic release of desperation. This desperation marks the limits of convention in Cambodian performing arts and pursues alterity through critical and creative reflectivity. Since ideas of difference permeate contemporary Cambodian performance, I am drawn to bell hooks' radical postmodernist practice that incorporates "the voices of the displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed" Other and "shared sensibilities which cross the

boundaries of class, gender, race, etc." (hooks 2015, 25-27). As I will discuss in this chapter, Khuon explores his experiences as a gay working-class Cambodian to present his contemporary Cambodia. Contemporary Cambodian performance takes up experience and subjectivity to express Cambodian-ness along the lines of difference, to imagine Cambodia beyond narratives of rupture.

My focus contemporary works in this dissertation reflects an ongoing schism or break in Cambodian performing arts dating back to the turn of the century if not earlier. In chapter one, I wrote about how preservationist discourses embedded themselves in Cambodian performing arts scene following the Khmer Rouge and subsequent scholarship, and how these discourses impacted contemporary art music in Cambodia. *Phlov* (2023) revisits these concerns in the more avant-garde realm of Cambodian dance where much experimentation has taken place with the support of international artists, artists from the diaspora, and NGOs to create new narratives about Cambodia and its peoples rooted in possibility and plurality.

Contemporary Cambodian performance reframes Global North conversations about postmodern aesthetics towards the possibilities of worlding. Building on Heidegger's concept of de-distancing, Susan Gillman, Kirsten Silva Greusz and Rob Wilson (2004, 262) suggest that worlding is a critical process of generating multiplicities and pluralities that are attuned spatial and temporal relations, discussing processes that actively transform the world. I refract artistic renderings of worlding through the idea of *sahasamay* and its invocation of cross-temporal and cross-spatial relational alignments to reimagine Cambodian performing arts beyond traditional-contemporary binaries. Susan

Leigh Foster (2009, 1-3) questions notions of 'world arts' and cultures, viewing 'world dance' as embroiled within the politics of the Other and comprised of folk and ethnic genres and the works of artists of color. Marta Elena Savigliano (2009, 166) uses worlding as a challenge to the totalizing framework of world dance. World dance can collapse or reify boundaries between Western forms and ethnic and folk genres. I treat worlding is an active process of transformation aimed at expanding what is possible through dance by exposing the limitations of Western 'modern' dance.

Phlov (2023) presents a Khmer perspective on worlding, taking up postmodern ideas of pastiche and fragmentation and presenting a critical intervention from the Global South. Breaking from normative classical conventions, Khuon's work intimates a reframing of Cambodian-ness through his curation of multiple scenes that not only reflect his life but also abstractly gesture towards both the local and cosmopolitan formations underpinning his performance ontology. In his choreographic work, Filipino American Gerald Casel (2023) writes that he subverts racialized expectations of the Asian body in his contemporary dance choreography, using a poetics of abstraction that promotes connectivity through pan-Asian/diasporic movement algorithms. Refusing stereotyped parameters of 'Asian' performance allows Casel and Khuon to create spaces of possibility and transformation. Khuon's process of worlding reimagines the Cambodian-ness and the Cambodian performing arts through critical reflexivity, producing an autoethnographic work that deconstructs his experiences with discrimination.

In *Phlov* (2023), Khuon explores his relationship with Cambodian society, his family, and his romantic love through the language of Khmer classical dance. Khmer

classical dance has a basic gestural vocabulary that choreographers transform to generate new meaning and to tell stories through each movement, through dancing. Across the classical repertory, these movements are fragmented, leaving the viewer enough material to derive meaning and grasp the overarching narrative. It is this fragmentation that partially characterizes Khmer classical dance. Many contemporary Cambodian choreographers including Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and Belle Sodhachivy Chumvan extend the inherent allusions and gestural metaphors within Khmer classical dance to produce new dances and train more artists and dancers. Khuon takes up this convention, retooling it using the postmodern pastiche, including Khmer classical dance gestures, and generally recontextualizing them into the postmodern present.

Following Khuon, I use the term *phlov* and its metaphorical potential to organize this chapter. *Phlov*, translated by Khuon to mean The Way, usually refers to roads, streets, and paths. It is also a term in Khmer classical music and dance that refers to techniques, styles, ornamental patterns, and forms passed down from teacher to student. *Phlov* refers to the importance of instructional lineages and also speaks to the cross-temporal array of experiences that shape artistic and cultural production. It evokes the Buddhist concept of the Middle Path or *phlov kandal* in Khmer. By drawing these together, I discuss *phlov* as a metaphor that is imaginative and creative, materializing through sound, movement, and action. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 139) describe metaphors as tools for understanding how we both structure and understand the world. As Deborah Wong (2004, 24-32) describes, metaphoric constructions can reveal the interrelatedness of music and epistemology. She describes how the Lao terms *lam* and

taeng connect and overlay Lao ideas about musical styles, regional practices, and creativity through conduit metaphors. María Firmino-Castillo, Daniel Fernando Guarcax González, and Tohil Fidel Brito Bernal argue for the utility of metaphor as a decolonial practice that reveals "complex states of being in which things are more than what they seem or what they are called" (Firmino-Castillo, Guarcax González, and Brito Bernal 2019, 34). Engaging the metaphor of *phlov* here presents a multifaceted Khmer conduit metaphor and epistemological approach that activates several of Khuon's core ideas and values. Across each scene, I attend to how he leverages *phlov*, invoking connections to his personal life and worldview, Khmer Hindu-Buddhist spirituality, and instructor lineage. These index his arrangement of Cambodian-ness.

Khuon introduces each character through the maze of daily life. He presents glimpses into his life working in a café and studying Khmer classical dance. He shows us the dynamics of his romantic relationships as a gay man. We watch him get beaten down by friends, family, and society as he pursues his dreams. He shows us his inner turmoil in response to his surrounding environment. We see him hope for a better future as an artist, dancer, and person. There are only two monologues in the performance as a whole and there is limited narration throughout in order to emphasize the choreography Throughout the performance, Khuon invokes and re-stylizes everyday activities including walking, making coffee, and sharing intimate moments while presenting his inner emotional turmoil. *Phlov* (2023) does not a simple, linear narrative but instead showcases a series of moments, reflections, and scenes that illustrate the multifaceted complexity of life, generating an aesthetic experience that allows for multiple interpretations through its

disjunct form (Rancière 2011, 72). These creatively articulated disconnections allow for new possibilities in life. *Phlov* (2023) takes conventional ideas in Khmer performing arts and diverges from them, deconstructing his lifeworld.

Throughout this chapter, I focus on the fragmentary discourses embedded in the sounds, movements, and overall choreography to reveal how Khuon uses contemporary performance to convey his life as an artist and dancer. Khuon engages in a politics of worlding that expands the possibilities of the Cambodian performing arts by exploring his own experiences. Artists engaged with contemporary music and dance in Cambodia work to sustain national heritage while creatively extending what is possible in the Khmer performing arts. The creative expansion of national artforms extends the previous role held by classics stories from Khmer history by now telling stories about everyday life. It extends what Dorinne Kondo (2018, 33-34) refers to as reparative worldmaking. She discusses how creativity addresses the violence of the world through the process of reparation, restoration, life-sustaining, and life-destroying. In *Phlov* (2023), Khuon's creative intervention actively reimagines our social environment by activating a critical awareness of discriminatory abjection, urban development, inner turmoil, and resolution, drawing together these tensions to make sense of his relationship with violence in the world.

This chapter rewatches and remembers scenes from *Phlov* (2023) and comments on how Khuon uses his work to offer his own social critique and to reimagine our world. I write about the performance as it took place on January 6th and 7th, 2023 in Java Creative Café while informed by the weekly rehearsals that I attended starting on October

8th, 2022. I subsequently returned to the work as I reflected on it by writing conference abstract proposals, paper presentations, lectures and talks, and this chapter. Each time I revisit *Phlov*, I find new details and make new realizations that are shaped by my own growth as a Khmer classical dancer. My writing performs a synthesized interpretation of *Phlov* (2023). J. Hillis Miller's (2007, 234) describes text and textual renderings of performance as works generating "a virtual literary reality that can be 'accessed' only by way of the performative efficacy of the words on the page." Thus, my articulations and rearticulations of *Phlov* (2023) are textual representations of the performance that are their own performative utterances, activating Khuon's work through my cross-temporal readings. I have structured this chapter by focusing on one scene at a time. I describe the events on stage while interlacing scholarly commentary throughout. In doing so, I produce side commentaries, akin to whispering to your neighbor during a performance, to share my understanding of Khuon's worldbuilding.

Entering the Stage

The black box theater is pitch black. I locate the lighting console and move the sliders, turning on the stage lights to reveal an empty stage. There are two black wall structures that we built on both sides of the stage, obscuring sections of the stage from the audience.

"*Noi noi, noi-noii noi*," rang out from backstage. The voice belonged to Soeurn Chamreoun. After a few notes, another voice starts to sing. As rehearsed, Path Reaksmey joined him, singing the same melody but staggering his entrance. Shortly afterwards,

Phon Sonya chimes in with the same melody, also staggering his entrance. All three men, dancers from Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA age ranging from 20 years old to 24 years old at the time of performance, sing in a round with each other, creating a cacophony of *nois* that intertwines with each other. Their voices slowly grow in volume, clashing in dissonance and creating harmony as they reach the back of the theater where I sit and monitor the lighting and sound.

Figure 21. Video still of Soeurn Chamreoun (center) preparing to make his exit from the stage while Phon Sonya (left) and Path Reaksmey (right) wander the stage.

Soeurn Chamreoun strides out while singing in the chorus of *nois*. As he circles the stage, Path Reaksmey emerges and begins walking the stage, maintaining the polyphonic texture. Then Phon Sonya comes out on stage, also dressed in all white and singing. Dressed in white t-shirts and cinched white pants with pleats replicating the

traditional *sampot chong kben* worn for dance, the three walk the stage, occasionally pausing in place before continuing to walk. They weave around, narrowly avoiding each other while wandering the stage. Soeurn Chamreoun walks to the center and sings the melodic coda, turns around, and exits (see Figure 21). Now only Path Reaksmey and Phon Sonya meander the stage. Then Path Reaksmey walks to the center, sings the coda, and exits the stage. Phon Sonya continues singing alone before walking towards the center to sing the coda and then exit the stage.

As Phon Sonya makes his exit, I look at the lighting console. I trace my fingers over the console and dim the lights into nothing while he walks off behind the black walls.

In this scene, three dancers sing *khoum vean* as they walk the stage. In Khmer classical dance, *khoum vean* accompanies dancers as they walk out on stage in *robam preah thaong* from *robam buon bat*. Usually, Khmer classical dancers move about the stage in relative unison. Similarly, Khmer musicians would play the melody together in a heterophonic texture. Yet, in this opening scene, the dancers move indiscriminately across the stage, stopping in various moments and singing the melody desynchronized from each other. Khuon creates a fugue-like or polyphonic texture on the stage where each performer enacts a politics of desynchrony. He reconfigures the classic opening melody for his story to convey how each character wanders through life differently. Throughout the performance, these performers come to represent parts of Khuon's world including close friends, family, society, his romantic partner, and the *tevodas* or divine beings.

Across the scenes of *Phlov* (2023), Khuon conveys his inner emotions and turmoil through a choreographed multivocality and polyphony. Katherine Meizel (2020, 17) defines multivocality as the various suppressions and soundings across identity in relation to processes of self-expression and becoming. Multivocality engages with the co-existence of difference as represented through the voice. At the same time, these differences are both voiced and embodied, producing a politics of intervocality, or differences and inequalities embodied and portrayed through the voice (Cahill 2020, 80). In this introductory section, each performer on stage clashes with the next while singing a melody associated with entering the stage. As each performer sings the melody, they overlap and create textural dissonance and disjunctures all while they narrowly avoid running into each other. *Khoum vean*, used at the start *robam preah thaong*, also introduces the characters to the audience. Through the desynchronized voices and movements across the stage, each character is shown to be misaligned, conflicted, and in disagreement with each other. These tensions are further magnified through the bodies of the performers themselves. Despite dressing in the same white uniforms, each performer has a distinct subjectivity, as expressed through vocal timbre, enunciation, and walking gait, reflecting their individual differences as characters and actors within society. In effect, Khuon choreographs polyphony on the stage, producing a series of differences between the three uniformly dressed performers, setting up later conflicts and tensions in the performance between himself and the other performers. Asserting difference on stage, Khuon immediately introduces multiple, contrasting experiences of Cambodian-ness.

In the Shadow of a Tree

"Hey! You watch out now!" I heard a voice exclaim in the darkness. I recognize that it's Khuon shouting in Khmer, his voice filling the theater.

"Those people are always like that." Khuon continued. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, a cloaked figure emerges from the back of the stage: Khuon, wearing a hood and covered by a long trailing cape that looks black on the pitch-black stage.

"But if it were me, I wouldn't always be so careful. When it gets dangerous, they flee back to the countryside again. I've been here since long before you walked down this path. And those people, most of the time, they don't know what they're saying at all."

I slowly turn on the front spotlight on stage left, rendering Khuon more easily visible onstage. The long cape trails behind him as he circles the stage.

Figure 22. Video still of Khuon Chay stands in the spotlight wearing a cloak, giving his monologue.

"And they're lost, nowhere to be found. And no longer visible in this water, truthfully." He continued, walking towards the spotlight (see Figure 22). "Those people, probably artists, musicians, dancers, and others like them too. But if you go with them, you've gone too far. Do this song, that song. Dance so that you become a *nead* [dancer]. Listen inadequately too." He faces the audience.

"But now, I don't see you in this water, truthfully at all." He slowly turns around to face the back of the stage. He continues, "Hmmm. And also, you don't know your purpose in the world at all." I fade out the spotlight. Khuon, all alone, steps towards the center of the stage.

"And you, also," he says. As he does, I cue up an image on the projector, displaying a monochrome tree on the back wall of the theater. The tree is barren, stripped of its leaves. I could only make out the bark and branches of it.

"Even if you understand your purpose here, it would have ruined you already. But you're here and alive. Please bless them with health and success." Khuon slowly raised his hands, outreached towards the tree and hugged the tree. His index fingers and thumbs of both hands pinching together at the knuckle, flexing outwards all his other fingers to form *dai cheip*, a Khmer dance gesture reminiscent of the birds of paradise flower. Slowly, he lowers his hands to his sides and exits the stage. As he left, I turned the projection off.

While originally in Khmer, I provide an interpretation of Khuon's monologue in English. Khuon rhetorically exclaims "those people" to signify an unidentified and

unmarked other that can only be obliquely discussed in hushed discourse. “Those people” refer to artists and their pejorative status in society. At the same time, “those people” simultaneously insinuate queerness and nonnormative subjectivities. Informed by Khuon’s positionality as a gay man and rising artist, the phrase “those people” implicates negative attitudes towards him. Mary Louise Pratt (1986) suggests through her discussion of speech-act theory that spoken dialogue is framed within socially constituted subjects and their respective contexts. In turn, these are interpreted by the observer and generate change in the world rather than representing life. Khuon’s invocation of these scornful statements voices these criticisms aloud, drawing attention to his perception of how queer bodies and artists are viewed by society; those people are lost, without purpose.

Khuon’s monologue generates discomfort among viewers. As J. Hillis Miller discusses (2007, 234-235), speech-acts are performative utterances summoning the speaker’s perspective into the world. Khuon’s speech reveals parallel attitudes towards artists and queer people and shows how he has internalized these discourses, intertwining artistry and queerness together with discrimination, disparagement, and denigration. Despite performing in an internationally recognized dance company and promoting an exceptional image of Cambodia, Khuon shows how being a skilled gay artist-performer is disavowed within national and capitalist social structures. He reveals how the exceptional national performer remains abjected from the Cambodian nation-state for failing to uphold moral capitalist production.

Khuon initially asked me to project an outline of a tree for this scene. Due to issues with finding a suitable image, we chose to edit out the background of a tree, setting

the tree in a black background and stripping it from its context. While the tree was presented in the darkness of the theater, it recalls the bodhi tree and the Buddha's enlightenment. At the same time, the tree symbolically refers to the fundamental hand gestures in Cambodian classical dance of seed, stem or trunk, leaf, flower, and fruit. These gestures signify the cycle of life within nature, circling through birth, death, and rebirth. As taught to me by *Nak Kru* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and her students, the seed sprouts in the ground and the stem of a plant rises from the earth. From it, leaves grow. Flowers bloom and then become fruit. The fruit falls from the tree and new plants emerge from it. Khuon connects this gestural vocabulary with the Buddha's enlightenment to represent his struggle to derive meaning and purpose from these pejorative statements, setting the stage for the rest of the show where he negotiates societal and interpersonal dynamics. Then, he introduces the characters from the first scene.

In the darkness, I saw three figures walking out on stage in a triangle. I turn on the center spotlight and play the music *smeu* from my laptop. Khuon enters from stage right, starting with the set choreography for *smeu* before getting snagged by Soeurn Chamreoun who interlocks the flower gesture on to one of Khuon's arms. Khuon moves away and deviates from the set choreography for *smeu*, moving into the looking pose as Phon Sonya on stage left turns and using the blocking pose, protects himself from Khuon.

I turn on the blue spotlights. Khuon continues to look around the stage as Path Reaksmey also turns towards Khuon and protects himself by using another blocking pose. As the song transitions to *rout*, the three dancers circle Khuon with arms outstretched, trapping him as he looks desperately around him. I slowly turn the lights

off, fading out the blue lights and dimming the center spotlight. Khuon moves counterclockwise while the surrounding dancers move clockwise. They circle him and then leave the stage. After they leave the stage, Khuon returns to the standard choreography for *rout*, but forming *dai khuong* in both hands. He lowers himself to the ground before sitting on his heels with knees out in front on the ground, forming an upside-down letter V. With both hands together in the shape of *dai khuong*, he raises them to his forehead before returning them to his sternum, completing a *sampeah* as the music concludes. I slowly dim the spotlight as the music quiets down.

The music *smeu* signifies the arrival of new characters. Khuon enters the stage, encountering Soeurn Chamreoun, Path Reaksmey, and Phon Sonya as representations of romantic partners, friends, and society respectively. In his entrance, Khuon is ensnared, warded off, and rejected by the other dancers. Khuon reveals how abjection manifests. Julia Kristeva (1982, 6) describes abjection as a force of denial, repudiation, and negation. Khuon renders it through his ensnarement within dominant and constricting norms. After one dancer attempts to capture him, the others perform acts of defiance and denial that demonstrate non-acceptance and rejection. The dancers turn away, block him from view, and ignore his overtures for connection. These instances of abjection signify how Khuon experiences discrimination as a rising artist, young dancer, and gay man. His identities as an artist and gay man, while distinct from each other, invoke an intersection of non-normativity. At the same time, being an artist also connotates being an outsider, rejecting participation with capitalist production and normative expectations of corporate life in communion with the abject. In Khuon's subject position, queerness extends

beyond sexuality and identitarian politics, evidenced in an expansive choice to associate with "those people," the abjected others referenced by the previously cloaked Khuon. Khuon's artistic aspirations speak to his praxis of being, refusing normativity by accepting abjection.

I turn off the spotlight and turn on the general houselights. Khuon rises, his left leg moving in front of him first before his back leg follows. He stands upright, walking forward with his hands flexed in a curve and resting on his thighs. He stares at the audience; I dim the lights. He looks to his right before walking to his left. Looking to his left, he employs the Khmer classical dance gestures for walking, slowly taking each step, raising and lowering his arms, and forming *dai cheip*, the bird of paradise flower gesture, in each hand with every step. On his fourth step, Khuon makes a sweeping motion with his left hand, stepping lightly and quickly further to stage left. With his left arm outstretched in front of him with fingers curled back towards his face in a classic *dai vong*, he looks towards the audience. He pauses before slowly walking towards stage right. He looks again and then rushes to stage right, stopping with his right-hand landing on top of his right thigh and looking out at stage right. Khuon turns around and rushes over to stage left, looking straight ahead of him once again. Then he moves towards the front of the stage, looking upwards and then inviting the audience to look with him. He points towards the exit on stage right before spinning clockwise into a new pose, facing stage right with his right arm outstretched in front him and his left arm poised in the *dai stuoy* position featuring 90-degree angles at the elbow and wrist. He contracts his right

arm, slowly bending it at the elbow slightly and looking at the audience before exiting stage right as I slowly dim the lights.

In the absence of music, Khuon walks around the stage, looking constantly at his surroundings while engaging the audience. I draw attention to the absence of music as a form of silence. Khuon is silenced. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier (2015, 183-184) writes, silence is intense. Silence allows for contemplation and self-transformation, and it can be sinister and oppressive. By wandering the stage in relative silence, Khuon depicts his experience with social abjection, portraying his discomfort and pain while attempting to comprehend and find constructive meaning in his collective dismissal by the cloaked figure and other dancers. Khuon uses three different looking gestures, implying that he is seeking to understand why the other characters rejected him. He is isolated while trying to make sense of the world around him. Lars Bernaerts (2010, 294-295) writes that speech acts are inextricably bound with physical and mental acts, creating their own meaning and contexts over time. Within this scene, Khuon enacts two powerful narratives about abjection, expressing internalized, deep-seated attitudes towards the arts. These three dancers, later revealed to represent society, friends, and romantic interests, take on a different valence. First, Khuon presents a monologue that discusses public sentiments towards the arts, stating negative opinions about his career as an artist and suggesting that artists are backwards, unsuccessful, controversial, and dangerous even as they promote and preserve national heritage. Khuon's abjection in relation to the figures of society, friends, and romantic interests extends these attitudes into his lived reality. In turn, he performs his ontological world, using silence to intensify and reflect his feelings. At the

same time, by calling these perspectives into the theater, he challenges these critics and responds to his own self-struggle to build a career as a dancer and choreographer by demonstrating his non-normativity.

Café and Intimate Capital

I turn on the center spotlight and start the audio track with sounds of idle chatter. Khuon enters the stage and begins to open the café. He prepares the workstations in advance of the customers and guests by moving from shelf to shelf, cabinet to cabinet, and machine to machine. He welcomes each customer and prepares their order. He dances through the process of making coffee. He is grinding beans, steaming milk, and mixing liquids (see Figure 23). Khuon speeds up. The sounds of background conversation and ambient sounds grow louder; I slide the volume up louder. Khuon's movements become more rushed. He runs from the kitchen to the waiting customer. I raise the volume gradually. The noise continues to grow, filling the space and deafening the room. Khuon spirals. He stops and faces the audience before saying "*arkun churn bong*" meaning "Thank you very much." As he concludes the single line, I cut the audio.

In this three-minute scene, Khuon reconstructs his work environment as a café barista and service worker. He draws on his work demands to evoke stress, anxiety, and pressure using an everyday environment. First, Khuon intentionally samples background chatter to provide the sonic context of arriving at work. He begins by delicately making coffee but soon becomes increasingly frenzied as the background noise crescendos and indicates the arrival of more customers. It is in this scene where Khuon grounds us in his

material reality, lived conditions, and daily life as we watch him literally spiral and shut down in response to customers, which could be understood as societal demands.

Figure 23. Video still of Khuon Chay using Khmer dance gestures to mix coffee and cream for customers.

"*Arkun churn bong,*" marks the closing of the café. He interjects across the commotion here. While it is a typical response from servers to patrons and patrons to servers, he says it with such veiled constraint against the customers that it comes across as an aggressive assertion built up from mounting tension and pressure conveyed in this scene and the previous scene. He silences the imagined conversations in the room, lulling the space into a hush. Altogether, this scene evokes Kathleen Stewart's (2007) work on ordinary affects or the intimate, intangible, interlocking forces circulating throughout the everyday that involves a shared sense of connection and knowing. Khuon takes the ordinariness of the café and stylizes it using the vocabulary of Khmer classical dance. In

doing so, Khuon also makes the café extraordinary by rendering it in the language of a high-class artistic practice.

The café work environment operates as a symbolic representation of urban capitalist development and Khuon, along with everyone, as an actor within it. While at the time Khuon worked in a humbler café space, operating both as a fitness center and café, it speaks to a type of excess, extravagance, and luxury that is entangled within the café itself. Over my two trips to Cambodia in 2019 and 2022, the number of cafes grew significantly with common chains such as Brown Coffee, Café Amazon, and Tube Coffee appearing on multiple street corners while luxury cafés multiplied, serving as professional work and study spaces while sporting minimalist and polished designs. Café culture in Phnom Penh has responded to inter-Asia flows and urban development where the café symbolizes luxury. The ordinariness of the scene and how it is its stylization articulates a multilayered environment marked by class, labor, and global development. Khuon performs the café as a marker of urbanization—the very construction of the metropolis—implicating the transformation of public space through the recorded sounds of idle chatter. The café exemplifies the commodification of city spaces and Khuon's reaction implies these spaces are a chaotic disruption, situating Phnom Penh and its development alongside globalized nations despite environmental degradation and economic inequality (Douglass and Huang 2007).

Khuon's café scene also speaks to localized or vernacular cosmopolitanism that speaks to place-specific renderings of the global (Yang 2021, 160-161). Presenting the café as a marker of global development, Khuon also leverages the space to position his

aspirations of "wanting to be global" and globally informed. In this sense, he refracts ideas of aspirational cosmopolitanism that draw on romantic notions of the cosmopolitan artist (Barratt-Peacock 2022, 21-22), navigating his personal goals of becoming cosmopolitan by metaphorizing urban development as the backdrop. This scene also enacts worlding by transforming the universalized café space through Khmer classical dance. As Susan Gillman, Kirsten Silva Greusz, and Rob Wilson explain, worlding is a critical and poetic process of bringing the world into relation and attending to the forces impacting lifeworlds and ontological being (Gillman, Greusz, and Wilson 2004, 262). In *Phlov* (2023), worlding in this scene manifests through the idea of *sahasamay*; the uneven nature of global development is mediated through aspirational cosmopolitanism. Worlding through the *sahasamay* also emerges through the co-occurrence of tradition and the contemporary through classical dance and the café respectively, speaking to how Khuon is already a cosmopolitan subject and artist who practices worlding in his work, informed by transnational flows.

This scene isn't done yet. Khuon walks forward slowly, looking left and right warily. He circles the stage and walks over to stage right. As he walks over, I dim the lights, leaving only the right spotlight on. I start the next projection. A naga—the often seven-headed serpent-beings of Khmer mythology—appears behind him. He looks back and forth between the naga and the audience. The naga is drawn in white and placed on a black background. Khuon steps away slightly from the image while looking at it up and down. He faces the audience one last time before walking towards the naga and exiting the stage. While he strides towards the exits, I fade the lights out and stop the projection.

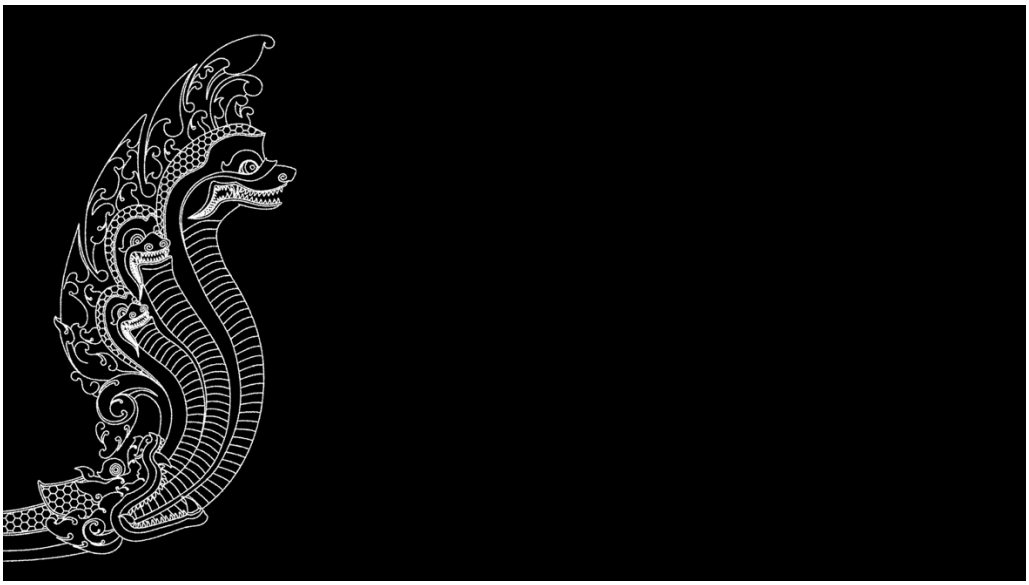

Figure 24. The naga as projected on the wall during the café scene. Image drawn by Morn Sopharoth and provided by Khuon Chay.

In this scene's closing moments, Khuon breaks down the audience-performer distinction. He invites the audience to look with him at the naga projection. The drawing is reminiscent of statues and carvings across the various archeological sites and temples in Cambodia. He uses the naga to symbolically reflect on Cambodia's history, focusing on empires of the past. As Khuon conjures the past, I am also reminded of the Khmer Rouge genocide. The naga projection also recalls the naga king who protected the Buddha while he was meditating after enlightenment, a commonplace image found on amulets and statues. It also refers to the temple bridges and structures at various archeological complexes in Cambodia, indicating a protective force. With these references, Khuon alludes to Hindu-Buddhist mythology and spiritual beliefs embedded

in Khmer religious practices. By fostering reflection through this scene, Khuon situates the present moment, represented by the café, in conversation with both history and spirituality to complicate his earlier portrayal of urban development and capitalist life. Using the naga as it has been represented and portrayed in Cambodia, he reflects on the transformation of the city and the project of modernization and how to mediate and navigate these realities in the face of complex histories of empire and violence and his own personal struggles in the world.

What Does It Mean to Dance?

I turn on the center spotlight, revealing two figures in the darkness. Kneeling on the ground, Khuon, now wearing glasses, is kneading the shoulders of Path Reaksmey, seated in front of him on his heels prepared to dance. Khuon guides him through a shortened version of *kbach bat*, the fundamental gestures of Khmer classical dance that all dancers study. He mimes the gestures with his arms around Path Reaksmey, indicating the flow of the movements. His hands guide and redirect Path Reaksmey into each position, pulling his arm back or pointing outwards in the direction that he's supposed to be looking. With each step, the floorboards creak. As Path Reaksmey stands up part way through the choreography, I turn off the lights briefly, fading out to black momentarily. Shuffling feet can be heard. I slowly turn the center spotlight on and Khuon is seen front and center with arms crossed. Path Reaksmey is circling the stage. Khuon begins pointing and emoting, continuing to direct Path Reaksmey as he briskly glides around the dimly lit stage. Khuon points at him for a second time and then rests his right hand on his chest

while his gaze follows Path Reaksmey. Then, Path Reaksmey raises his right hand out in front of him and above the top of his head with his fingers outstretched and curled and palm facing down, emulating the looking gesture. He begins walking slowly around Khuon, dropping his arms to his side. Once he circles to the front, he steps back with his right foot, raising both his right and left arms. His right hand pinches his thumb and index finger together at the knuckle with his other fingers spread to create the characteristic *dai cheip* while the fingers of his left hand are flexed and curled together. Stepping forward with his left foot, Path Reaksmey raises both hands, positioning his left stretched out with his arm straightened while his right arm, led by his wrist, rises upwards. His right wrist turns, rotating at a 90-degree angle. He releases his *dai cheip*, curling his fingers together and creating two right angles at his elbow and wrist. He marches around and behind Khuon as Khuon points at him. I fade out the center spotlight.

With only the buzzing of the spotlights above, this scene is remarkably silent. Path Reaksmey dances the fundamental gestures of Khmer classical dance, also known as *kbach bat*. In this scene, he takes an excerpt that is usually accompanied by the music *cha banhchoh*. Doing this set choreography without any of its usual accompaniment emulates traditional dance instruction where gestures are taught piecemeal from movement to movement and position to position. The silence is palpable as Khuon directs Path Reaksmey, conveying intentionality and focus. In the Khmer classical dance rehearsals and practices that I have been a part of, teachers are guiding their students through visual, kinesthetic, and verbal instruction, developing their bodily archive through active, hands-on molding techniques, passing knowledge physically into their students. Khuon's use of

silence presents a meditative approach to Khmer classical dance, facilitating the adoption and absorption of embodied knowledge. He intentionally returns to the foundations of Khmer dance to explore his relationship to dance. Khuon's relationship to dance is deeply and inextricably tied to his teachers, *Nak Kru* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and *Bong* Prum. In recreating his training experience, he presents homage to his teachers by expressing appreciation for their efforts. He becomes a teacher and recognizes the labor, effort, time, and commitment involved in the process of instruction. Khmer musicians and dancers regularly organize and participate in a *sampeah kru* or teacher's ceremony and *kbach bat* is often presented during the ceremony as an offering to the master teachers and the teacher spirit *Louk Ta*, the grandfather of the performing arts. Both the ritual and this dance are emblematic of *following* as practice and as ideology. Khuon's scene recalls the reverence for teachers and a lineage of masters as Khuon becomes an artist.

I turn on the center spotlight, revealing Khuon standing alone in the center. First, he steps back with his right leg, arms resting in front of him, before stepping back with his left leg and sitting on his heels and resting his hands on his thighs. He turns to his left as a dancer walks out on stage holding a crown in front of him. He repositions himself, facing stage left and the crown and placing his hands palms together in front of his sternum. He rises with his left leg in front to receive the crown with both hands. Khuon takes the crown and returns to a seated position, facing the audience. As the other dancer steps back, exiting the stage, Khuon raises the crown and gently sets it on his own head, slowly returning his hands in front of him in a *sampeah*. Another dancer walks on from stage right, holding a flower in his hands. Khuon begins to stand up, moving his left leg

in front and then bringing his right leg in line with his left and reaching his full height. He brings his heels together with toes flexed upwards and a flower is placed in his right ear. The other dancer steps backwards, exiting the stage.

After the flower is placed by his right ear, he steps forward with his right foot, moving his hands outwards from the characteristic *sampeah*, forming a downward facing *dai khuong* in his right hand as his left-hand curls outwards. He steps forward with his left foot, raising both his left and right arms. Khuon's left arm is raised up with his *dai khuong* angled towards him as he looks out towards stage left in the direction of his straightened out left arm (see Figure 25). I dim the spotlight and one lone dancer comes out, moving back and forth from standing position to one knee on the ground switching from facing the back of the stage to the front and moving his arms back and forth in front of him to *dai stuoy*. I painstakingly move the sliders slowly to fade out the lights. The floor creaks as he moves to exit and the stage returns to pitch black.

Preparations for a Khmer dance performance are ritualistic. It involves putting on make-up, being sewn into costumes, warming up the body, and reviewing the choreography. In choreographing how dancers receive and put on their costumes, Khuon depicts the process that Khmer classical dancers undergo before transforming themselves into their roles as spirits, kings, warriors, and goddesses, showing that becoming a dancer involves transformation and change. By adorning themselves in performance attire, Khmer classical dancers embody the dancer's spirit and become their respective roles. This scene explores Khuon's gratitude for all the opportunities that have led him to

become a dancer. The lone dancer in the back of the stage continuously forming *dai stuoy* represents his joy, excitement, and happiness in his journey to becoming an artist.

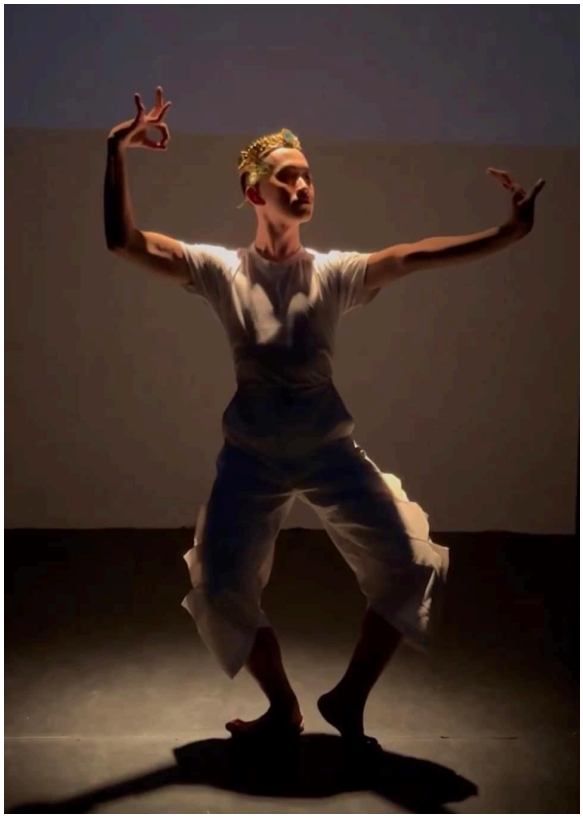

Figure 25. Khuon Chay wearing a crown and flower tucked into his right ear while dimly lit by a spotlight. Photo courtesy of Khuon Chay.

Khuon engages with what Frederic Jameson (1984, 68) would consider the pastiche and nostalgia mode of postmodernism, recontextualizing the ritual as a staged representation imbued with his self-referent past. By replicating these moments of donning the crown and flower, Khuon recreates his personal moment of becoming a dancer, reproducing the spiritual transformation into the dancer's spirit while telling his

narrative. Thus, he reenacts these moments to convey the transformation from disciple to dancer, starting with the first half of the scene about training towards the ritual significance of becoming a dancer in the second half of the scene. These ritual preparations also echo Paul Cravath's (1986, 198-199) discussion of putting on the masks in a *sampeah kru* ceremony. During *sampeah kru* ceremonies where teachers are honored, dancers trained in the monkey role, as a specific example, may don their masks when presenting dances to *Louk Ta*, the grandfather spirit. Equipping the mask involves a ritual transformation on its own, allowing the dancer to become an intermediary between the human and divine. Wearing the crown and flower expresses the preparatory embodiment of the divine preceding performance. Thus, situating the unseen elements of performance on stage, Khuon directly draws Khmer spirituality into relation with his ontological world and personal experience in ways that innovate and re-stylize Khmer performance practices as contemporary.

Queer Love and Citationality

I turn the houselights on. Soeurn Chamreoun walks out from stage right and begins walking counterclockwise around the stage. As he approaches stage left, Khuon enters the stage and begins walking counterclockwise around the stage opposite to the other dancer. They circle the stage without noticing each other. Once Khuon is on stage right and other person is on stage left, they both relax down their pace. Khuon looks left and directly at his duet partner. Khuon eyes him, looking him up and down. He gazes back at Khuon. They slowly circle the stage, reaching their left arms out to each other,

closing the gap between them. Their arms rise up and their palms meet in the center of the stage. The space between them narrows and I fade out the lights, waiting for them to move into position in the darkness for the next part of the scene.

I reach over to the console and locate a new lighting combination, saturating the stage in a deep purple. Shrouded in purple, Khuon and his partner appear on stage right and stage left respectively. I play the next audio track. A melody hums from the speakers and echoes across the space. They raise their hands to their foreheads, palms together and fingers splayed and outstretched in prayer, greeting the audience and spirits. They greet each other, facing each other and rotating their wrists so that the tips of their fingers move from upright to out in front and then back to an upright position. Both dancers gaze longingly at each other. Their movements mirror each other, reflecting each other's gestures as partners and comporting themselves into their gendered dance roles as male and female characters. Throughout the first verse, both Khuon and his partner alternate between left and right, interlacing and looping around each other. During the second verse, they switch between who is in front and behind. Following each other across stage, they profess their love for each other or provide each other with reassurance. At the end of the second verse, the two gracefully fly through the night together, standing on their right leg while the other leg is folded up behind them with toes curled. Their left hands are in front of them, wrists bent back and fingers curling towards their body. Their right hands are pulled straight directly behind them with wrists bent and thumb and index fingers pinched together and pointed towards the sky and remaining fingers angled outwards.

Khuon depicts the ebbs and flows of romantic partnership, from the exchanges of power from who follows and leads, to moments of synchronicity, and the intimacy between two lovers. This scene is a marriage between the couple in that they follow each other while circling the stage, which is very reminiscent of Khmer wedding ceremonies where the bride, representing a naga/serpent princess Neang Neak, is followed by the groom, characterizing a prince or great warrior. Musically, Khuon uses the melody for *preah thaong* from the classical dance *Robam Preah Thaong*. This is known as one of the oldest melodies in Khmer classical music. *Robam Preah Thaong* is a dance that prays for peace, victory, courage, and rain in a traditional ceremony. While this music has lyrics and a specific choreography for the dance, Khuon abstracts the melody, choosing to have the singer record it in a resonant space for the performance to provide a more distant "cave-like" feel that emulates a faraway imaginary.

Khuon's recontextualization of the melody and his evocation of Khmer traditional weddings continues a citational element in his work: he continually reworks classical conventions. While he effectively portrays a romantic relationship between two men, unheard of in Khmer classical dance except in contemporary works, he draws on concepts, ideas, and movements imparted to him from his teachers, specifically *Bong* Prum and *Nak Kru* Sophiline. In turn, he metaphorically enacts *phlov* in his choreography, citing the lineage of Khmer classical dance. Khuon places this gay marriage scene within a longer history of Khmer performing arts using one of the oldest themes in the classical repertoire. He suggests a love that transcends the limits of time while emulating characteristics of balance found in classical dance (often represented

through binaries male-female, left-right, good-evil, etc.). These echo what Michael M. J. Fischer (2023, 70 & 214) refers to as synthetic realism, or how creatives and artists project their struggles and respond to conditions of the present by localizing old and new artistic styles. Rather than offer synthetic realism, I suggest that Khuon offers and presents a real-fantasy through these sonic and gestural references that imagines a future of greater acceptance as symbolized through marriage equality. By drawing on the *phlov* of his two teachers, both shaped by their experiences in the United States and Cambodia, he shows the growing acceptance and marginalization of LGBTQ+ people in this marriage scene while situating it within histories of Khmer classical music and dance.

Khuon uses *phlov* to build a connection between his life, Khmer classical dance, and Buddhism. Because Khuon is a practicing Khmer Buddhist, he told me during interviews and conversations that he incorporated Buddhist elements into his work. *Phlov* obtusely serves as a metaphor for the Middle Path in Buddhism. While there are many interpretations of the Middle Path, based on some of the conversations I had with Khuon, I describe the Middle Path as having and maintaining neutrality, balance, and equilibrium in the negotiation of extreme dualities (like good and bad). The Middle Path focuses on recognizing and accepting human contradictions and expressing compassion in the face of inequality so that the co-existence of difference is possible. In the context of this scene featuring two male partners, it is not asking for condemnation or glorification but a simple acceptance or recognition of love. With earlier scenes, we could understand the Middle Path as involving the recognition and coexistence of complex personhoods and identities as represented in the opening scene. During the café scene, the implied Middle

Path might stem from the expression of gratitude and appreciation to the customer despite feeling overwhelmed and overworked. Across *Phlov* (2023), Khuon performs these values of neutrality, balance, and acceptance while navigating his experiences. *Phlov* (2023) focuses on the process of self-making and belonging in the world.

Figure 26. Khuon Chay (left) looking at Soeurn Chamreoun (right) as he is being led forward. Photo courtesy of Khuon Chay.

As the melody for *preah thaong* decays and flies away into the darkness, a new song, *rev* or *banhchoh*, begins to play, crossfaded into the recording of *preah thaong*. Khuon and his partner move into standing position, placing their hands in front of their torsos. The music gradually rises in volume. I begin to brighten the stage with the

houselights. Their right hands move inwards, forming *dai cheip*, and pull outwards in front of them, unfurling into *dai vong* as their left arm glides back to form another *dai cheip*. Then, both raise their left feet and step forward, kneeling on one knee and then sitting on their heels. Both pray to the audience and spirits before rising again and continuing their duet. They begin mirroring each other's movements and then following each other around the stage. Hand in hand, they take turns leading and following each other (see Figure 26). They walk closely together, circling the stage and celebrating their love.

As the music transitions to *lea* or exit music, they return to mirroring each other's movements. This time, the mirror splits them along front to back, side to side, and diagonally. While *lea* concludes, the couple embraces each other, kneels down onto the ground, and lays to rest together. As they lie down, I dim the house lights slowly, leaving the purple lighting intact. The couple snuggles together in the purple spotlight. Two figures, entering from both stage left and stage right in the back, frolic in the shadows. The flooring below creaks in response to their movements as they leap about in silence. Facing away from the audience, both dancers slowly exit stage right, making the gesture for laughter by forming *dai cheip* in front of their mouths. as they exit, I dim the lights into nothing, leaving the two lovers in the pitch-black darkness.

As the two lovers interact, they circle the stage, push and pull each other, as well as move left and right together. In a public lecture at Varsa Studio in Phnom Penh on January 18th, 2023, Prumsodun Ok (2023) explained that these exchanges across the stage represent shifting power dynamics in Khmer classical dance across dualities. He

emphasized that these interchanges often depict conflict between good and evil. Khuon explores these series of interactions between the lovers, presenting relational dualities such as leader-follower and masculine-feminine dynamics. These moments of direction and redirection reveal the negotiations in interpersonal relationships that seek balance and equilibrium in the midst of LGBTQ+ discrimination in Cambodia. While tolerance of LGBTQ+ is growing in Cambodia, as evidenced by public officials calling for greater acceptance, they are primarily accepted only as long as they conform to social conventions. At the same time, LGBTQ+ people experience stigmatization and pathologization due to conceptions that they are involved in sex work and are carriers of HIV and AIDS. Many still live their non-heteronormative lives in secret, knowing that they rely on conditional tolerance (Hoefinger, Ly, and Srun 2016).

While the two lovers lay together in the night, two other dancers move around the back of the stage, stepping over each other and moving around each other before exiting and making the gesture for laughter. During an interview, Khuon told me that the stage creaking was unintentional. However, it is clear that this is an implied sex scene where Khuon and his romantic partner consummate their love in the moody purple light. As Khuon's love scene considers tolerance through the middle path, he is not asking for condemnation or glorification but a simple acceptance or recognition of love. One of the goals of LGBTQ+ people in Cambodia is marriage equality. While in some Western contexts, the politics of marriage equality are criticized for upholding heteronormativity and the neoliberal subject, in the Cambodian context, it is still considered radical, though other Southeast Asian nations are changing their laws and attitudes towards marriage

equality. I suggest that depicting marriage and queer love in this scene symbolizes possibility through the recontextualization of classical and traditional imagery and style. For Cambodian classical dance, this is a radical and even incendiary act. Beyond reinterpreting classical representations of marriage, (gay) men are dancing in the genre of Royal Ballet. With the exceptions of students under Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA and Sophiline Arts and performers in the diaspora, men are not allowed to perform in the style of Royal Ballet. There are other classical forms, namely *lkhaon khaol*, they can study and perform but it is considered inappropriate because there are plenty of women in Cambodia to dance in the style of the Royal Ballet. Thus, it is the rendering of the marriage between two male bodies, albeit one dancing as a male role and the other dancing as a female role, that asks for tolerance, especially when seeing other countries make strides towards inclusivity and acceptance. Thus, Khuon's work serves as a response to LGBTQ+ movements across the world while articulated through local discourses around men learning and performing in the style of the Royal Ballet.

He shows the embodied connections between past, present, and future, providing an intervention into a continuously changing Cambodia that is in perpetual dialogue and contact through the rest of the world. Across the work, Khuon performs these values of neutrality, balance, and acceptance while navigating his multifaceted experiences. This moment of queerness is one part of his larger narrative. Bridging philosophical ideas, Khmer classical dance, and activist oriented ideologies, Khuon's *Phlov* (2023) builds a world of belonging.

Citing Conflict and Inner Turmoil

I sharply glide the sliders up, filling the stage with red and revealing Khuon standing alone with arms at his side. As I throw on the lights, I hit play on the next audio track. Drums and *sralai* reverberate throughout the theater. Khuon looks around in distress. *Cheut chab*, music commonly used for intense scenes of conflict, plays through the speakers. Phon Sonya comes out and walks to the front of stage right. Khuon attempts to greet him, but Phon Sonya ignores him and turns away, moving to face the back of the stage. Path Reaksmey enters and walks to the front of stage left. Using the looking gesture, Khuon gazes at him and attempts to greet him. Path Reaksmey turns away and stretches out his right arm, putting his hand out in a stop gesture before also turning and walking to the back of the stage. Soeurn Chamreoun slowly walks out to the front of stage right. Khuon looks at him, rushes over, and grabs his hand, pulling him towards the center. They struggle before Soeurn Chamreoun pushes him back. Khuon attempts to grab him but he slips out of Khuon's grasp.

Khuon shows fear, interlacing his hands together, pointing his fingers out, and shaking his hands up and down. He wipes tears off his face while spinning in a circle. He is spiraling. The three circle Khuon. Path Reaksmey, in time with the drum, pushes Khuon down while the other two put their hands out and face away from Khuon. Khuon falls to his hands and knees, looking at the three in horror. He stands back up, returning to a state of panic and fear. This time, Phon Sonya approaches him, casting his arms out to drive Khuon back before kicking him to the ground. Khuon kneels locking his hands with

Phon Sonya's hands and struggling against each other until he gets pushed all the way back to the ground. Phon Sonya saunters away.

Figure 27. Video still of Khuon Chay in fear, wiping tears away as the three dancers begin circling him.

As Phon Sonya and Khuon struggle against each other, he makes a deliberate intertextual reference to Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's work *Seasons of Migrations*. He draws allusions to the choreographed moment between Neang Amari as she fights against her own shadow. Phon Sonya's casting away of Khuon is reminiscent of how the shadows attempt to reconnect with Neang Amari. However, while Neang Amari

successfully rejects her shadow, Khuon unsuccessfully loses the battle against Phon Sonya. Khuon reverses the scene so that he loses, which contrasts with how Neang Amari in Cheam Shapiro's work is triumphant. While he makes this reference, he also borrows a specific gesture from Cheam Shapiro. Khuon kicks up his back leg while kneeling on one of his knees, leaning forward on to his front leg as Phon Sonya pushes him down. Typically, in Khmer classical dance, kicking up the back leg is done while seated or standing upright but Cheam Shapiro devised this gesture for her own works. In the previous scene where Khuon recontextualizes the music from *preah thaong*, he engages with *phlov* to offer a homage to his mentor and teacher Sophiline Cheam Shapiro through reinterpreting her work. He accomplishes this by also excerpting the recorded music she used from *Seasons of Migrations* and *The Glass Box*. Throughout the production, different scenes use sample audio clips from her works, borrowing the specific beat patterns and cues in the drum. Using this imaginative citational practice, Khuon situates himself into her repertoire and speaks to how his creative praxis of being and expressions of Cambodian-ness are interrelated and deeply communal.

Khuon rushes to Soeurn Chamreoun, attempting to embrace him. He latches onto the arms of Soeurn Chamreoun and begin spiraling around the stage. Khuon is pushed to the floor yet again. As he interlaces his fingers together to convey fear, the three dancers position themselves around him. In unison, the three stomp their right foot and sharply move their hand horizontally in front of their sternum, expressing their rage and anger. I turn on the center spotlight. They grab Khuon by the arms and head, turning him away from the audience and pushing him down again. They turn him to the front again. Khuon

attempts to stand up, putting his right foot in front of him for leverage. The three dancers struggle and are eventually pushed away from Khuon who leaps forwards and upright with his arms out. He continues to panic as the three circle him again.

Soeurn Chamreoun breaks from the formation and moves towards the front of the stage. Khuon reaches out to him out of desperation, falling to his knees in the process. Meanwhile, the other two dancers stand at the back of the stage, stomp their feet, and point at Khuon before walking off stage. All the red lights shut off, leaving the center spotlight on. Then Soeurn Chamreoun exits the stage as a new melody takes over. Khuon sits alone on the ground, covering his face with one hand, hiding his tears and breathing heavily. He turns and hunches over with his head drooped, rocking back and forth.

In this scene, Khuon returns to the theme of abjection, echoing sentiments from the earlier monologue under the tree. As representations of society, friends, and romantic partnership, Phon Sonya, Path Reaksmey, and Soeurn Chamreoun attack Khuon, attempting to eliminate him by kicking him down, bearing their weight down, and disregarding his existence. Niko Besnier describes how abjection emerges in response to threats against presumed order (Besnier 2004, 305). Becoming an artist and queer performer upsets normative expectations of success and societal value, and Khuon challenges dominant expectations of the ideal laborer by repudiating capitalist labor and reproduction. Enraged, the manifestations of society, friends, and romantic partnership fight against him to maintain order. Despite Khuon's attempts to reconcile, he is unable to connect with each facet of his world and is overwhelmed by them. In his frenzied rage, he strikes back against all three forces. Susan Stryker (1994) theorizes transgender rage

as a transformative power that emerges in response to inhospitable conditions that threaten subjectivity, allowing survival in the face of abjection. Khuon summons his queer rage and fury, reacting to the threats against his life and being. With his rage, he pushes for tolerance and communion with society, friends, and romantic partnership reflective of Khmer Buddhist thought. All alone, he must cope with how social abjection denied his lifeworld.

The Lotus Flower: Blessings To and From All

As Khuon lays alone on the ground, I begin the next projection, a giant lotus flower. He turns around, kneeling in front of it first and then rising onto his right leg and folding his left leg behind him. Khuon prays, putting his palms together and flexing his fingers outwards. He steps forward with his left leg, kneeling back down with his right, seating himself with his back towards the audience and moving his hands in front of his torso. He inaudibly recites prayers, seeking blessings for health and prosperity. He rises, first kneeling with his left leg in front and hands above his head in prayer before standing with his heels together, feet angled outwards, and toes pointing upwards all while retracting his hands from above his head to the front of his sternum. I stop the projection.

His arms drop to his side. Khuon slowly turns around to face the audience. Speaking in Khmer, he says,

"When people light incense, don't forget the dharma. Because the dharma grants awareness and strength, the ability to understand the truth of life. When meeting good fortune, it isn't right to be prideful. Don't be overly happy. Because whatever comes is

not enlightenment. And when encountering misfortune, don't be discouraged either because life is just like that. I used to tell you that to understand the truth of life, you must continue to struggle in your body throughout the past, present, and future in order to live and be plentiful. The tevodas will protect and take care of you if you can take care of yourself."

I dim the spotlight into nothing.

This second monologue cycles back to Khuon's central theme of the middle path. His statements focus on moderation and struggle as a part of his life. Upon seeing the lotus flower, he reflects and prays, seeking reconciliation and consolation after grappling with his relationships to society, his friends, and love. Read as a speech-act, Khuon's monologue reveals his newfound realizations that the teachings of the Buddha and his journey to enlightenment show him how to negotiate suffering through acceptance. Arnika Fuhrmann (2016, 4-5) theorizes Buddhist melancholia as a queer refusal of detachment that reflects contemporary and glocal discourses surrounding sexuality. The persistence of desire retains a negative affect informed by national belonging and, in this case, Cambodian subject formation. Khuon's articulation of the Middle Path across different scenes situates themes of self-struggle and queerness within a Buddhist melancholia, promoting an external interpretation of neutrality through counterbalanced narratives of suppression and catharsis. His prayer suggests a reorientation towards the possibilities of Cambodian-ness as an expansive identity formation and present new forms of personhood.

In the darkness, three figures emerge, each holding a lit candle set within a lotus flower. They position themselves in a triangle formation around Khuon in the center of the stage. His hands are pressed together with his palms touching and fingers flexed outwards and away while holding an unlit candle. Once Khuon turns and faces the audience, I turn on the center spotlight and play the final audio track for *Sathukar*. All four raise their candles into the air (see Figure 28). Khuon steps forward while the surrounding dancers fold their right legs up behind them, angling their feet and curling their toes. Khuon seats himself onto the ground as the three stand and turn towards him with their candles. They circle him clockwise several times. He remains seated there with his hands together atop his head and candle sticking out. Following a drum cue, they step forward, shifting their weight onto their right legs and folding their left legs back. As they do, they raise their left arms into *dai vong* position while moving their candles together and lighting Khuon's candle. Once the candle is lit, all three dancers spin and face away from the audience, putting out their respective flames. The three dancers circle Khuon, stopping three times periodically to cast lotus flower petals onto him, blessing him. After the third toss, the three dancers exit stage right as Khuon begins to stand up, moving his left leg first and then right leg. While rising, he holds the candle up above him, gazing at it before lowering it in front of him. I dim the spotlight so the only light remaining on stage is from the candle. Khuon slowly steps and turns around, creating shadows of his figure around the room. He exits stage right and the theater is pitch black.

Figure 28. Khuon Chay surrounded by the other dancers all raising their hands in prayer as Sathukar *plays from the speakers. Photo courtesy of Khuon Chay.*

This final scene features the melody *Sathukar* or an invocation of the *tevoda*[s]. As Deborah Wong (2001, 108-110) writes, in Thai classical music, *Saathukaan* is a sacred piece that enacts the performative action of inviting and facilitating the presence of deities and spiritual entities. It does not accompany the sacred but makes the performance sacred. Likewise, for Khmer classical music, *Sathukar* summons the divine, recalling teacher spirits and ancestors into the human world. *Sathukar*, as a part of rituals such as *sampeah kru* and ritual dances such as *buong suong*, serves as a transformative

force that reimagines the world by linking the mortal and divine. Khuon's invocation of *Sathukar* generates a liminal ritual space, drawing out the spiritual potency of the stage at the conclusion rather than at the beginning (Khoury 2017), transforming the other dancers into *tevoda*[s] while invoking the Hindu-Buddhist frameworks of Khmer classical music and dance. In turn, he links the sacred elements of Khmer classical dance with the secular discursive realms of contemporary performance and the personal scenes.

Sathukar is used to begin ceremonies, performances, and events, welcoming the divine and ancestral spirits into the ritual space. However, Khuon situates it at the end of *Phlov* (2023). Paul Cravath (1986, 199) notes that the ritual of Khmer classical dance is deeply tied to funeral rites. In demarcating and concluding *Phlov* (2023) with *Sathukar*, Khuon signifies his death and rebirth. He navigates the politics of life and death, birth and rebirth, present in the Cambodian performing arts. Lighting the candle simultaneously gives life and honors life in its passing. In turn, these activate the Khmer Hindu-Buddhist ideologies embedded in Khuon's work that resonate with the ideas of *phlov* and lineages of instruction as well as Buddhist tolerance, melancholia, and communion. Khuon transforms the three dancers into divine beings, and they cast blessings down onto him and celebrate his awakening and self-revelation into Khmer Hindu-Buddhist cosmologies, tolerance, and growth as a dancer, artist, and human being.

Making *Phlov* (2023)

Preparations for *Phlov* (2023) were incredibly tense and stressful. It was my first time really working in the booth. There were too many audio tracks to switch between

while navigating the lights. It was too difficult for me to make the changes on my own in the booth. It was the week of the show. We were finally rehearsing in Java Creative Cafe, and I had finally gotten used to the technology. In the last few rehearsals, Khuon told me to make sure I wasn't late for either the light or the sound transitions. However, the love duet scene had some of the hardest transitions. I walked down from the back of the theater to the stage to talk to Khuon. He was giving directions to the other dancers while I waited. Eventually, one of the dancers nodded in my direction and Khuon looked at me.

"Will you change the choreography in this part?" I asked, referring to the midpoint of the love duet scene when the stage goes dark when *preah thaong* ends and *rev* starts. I needed my right hand to move three sliders on the lighting console simultaneously as I stop the audio for *preah thaong* and start the next audio track for *revl* at the same time. It was an impossible task for one person and we didn't have another person on hand to help with the transitions. There was also no space in the booth to fit another person. "I want to combine the music. It is too difficult to change the lights and sound at the same time."

"But I think you can do the changes, right?" Khuon replied.

"It's really hard to move the sliders on the light console while changing the audio on my laptop." I said, with a little more bite. "Let me try mixing the audio and you can tell me how long you need."

"Okaayyy. Suuuree," he replied.

With relief, I walked back up to the console and opened GarageBand. I uploaded the files for *preah thaong* and *rev* into GarageBand as separate tracks, leaving silence in

between tracks as we had been practicing. We made multiple attempts at the transition. Each time, I adjusted the amount of time between the tracks until we arrived at a new plan.

"Can you blend the sounds together?" Khuon asked.

"Yeah, is there a way you want me to do that?" I replied.

"We can try it first," he said.

With that vague note, I overlaid both tracks so that *rev* would start as *preah thaong* concluded. At this point, *rev* already had a fade in where it would start almost imperceptibly before getting gradually louder and crescendoing to an even dynamic that wouldn't cause the speakers to crackle. We tried a couple of attempts where I changed the timing of the fade-in while Khuon and Soeurn Chamreoun would adjust how they would move into the second half of the scene. They would slow down or speed up. They adjusted their positions. I moved the track back a few more seconds. I extended the fade in for *rev*. I moved the track a half second ahead. Each party continued to make micro-adjustments.

"That's perfect now, Allan." Khuon exclaimed, Soeurn Chamreoun also giving his approval from the stage.

"Great, I will save this in my notes. Let me know if you want me to change it later." I shouted in response from the booth.

In my introductory anecdote, I described a similar instance where I adapted and linked two audio tracks. My intervention into the love duet was the first time I requested significant changes to the audio. Previously, all audio tracks were separate from each

other, ensuring flexibility with transitions during rehearsal. We had not planned to mix audio for the production at this moment and Khuon seemed relatively unaware of what the process was like until I approached him about this issue, which was impacting my role as a technician and adding to the performers' stress. In the moment, it was about problem-solving. It was about addressing the needs of the performance and the choreographer. In my limited capacity, how could I provide a seamless transition between both the music and lighting? How could I support his needs?

I immensely enjoyed being a part of the production team. I never imagined doing technical work, *especially* while conducting my research. I anticipated moving instruments and equipment but nothing about managing the technical elements of performance. At the same time, this was incredibly invigorating and eye-opening for me as a scholar. It was the kind of participatory work that I believed should be discussed in scholarship and what I now consider ethnography from the booth. I was no longer the observer taking copious notes but the doer and interloper, making changes and modifying the performance. In other ways, I am the ephemeral presence and supporter behind the scenes. My commitments as an ethnographer and friend are embedded in these moments of collaboration and negotiation.

Collaboration is at the core of critical ethnography. Luke Eric Lassiter (2005, 84) writes that ethnographic fieldwork is inherently collaborative and ethnographic conventions should represent collaboration, especially with regard to cultural production. I share this moment to be transparent about how collaboration takes place and the tools ethnomusicologists and scholar can offer. I write as a co-performer in some respects. D.

Madison Soyini (2005, 145) writes that dialogic performance is the basis for critical ethnography, stating that being a researcher involves being "a co-performer rather than participant-observer" and involves demonstrating an embodied commitment to ethical scholarly representation. It is also how the engaged or applied ethnographer participates in what Klisala Harrison calls the epistemic community or "collective of people…who work together towards solving and analyzing a particular problem or issue-area whose terms are epistemologically defined" (Harrison 2012, 506). While applied scholarly discourse focuses on activism and advocacy work, I turn towards a micro-politics of engagement. By attending to the labor of performance and its intricacies, I enact a politics of engaged and applied work that is situated in the realms of my research. My labor combined documentation and advocacy: it put the skills of a music scholar into the middle of the dialogic minutiae that constitute a fantastic performance.

Producing *Phlov* (2023) involved a series of spoken and unspoken negotiations between me and the performers. Decisions were made between the performers. I had choices to make as well. Priya Srinivasan (2011, 16-17) describes the dance ethnographer as an unruly spectator, examining bodily encounters through an interactive, non-passive auto-ethnography that addresses negotiations with sliding power dynamics. Similarly, I worked as the unruly American technician from the booth, making mistakes and misunderstanding directions while interpreting changes in choreography with minimal guidance. Stage production taught me how to be an ethnographer of performance. Dorinne Kondo (2018, 233) explains that participation in a production "demands accountabilities to the creative team and to the audience." I had to learn and develop new

skills so that this chapter and chapter three were conceivable. My interactions with Khuon and the dancers changed our relationships to each other, slipping across colleagues, friends, and acquaintances as the work came together. We were accountable to each other and our collective efforts for the show.

Ethnography from the booth, as an extension of *following*, requires humility and a willingness to step up and help. Doing the work of accompaniment and following the work on stage is at the heart of collaborative work and what it means to be a part of an epistemic community. I write from the booth as a co-performer of *Phlov* (2023), albeit in an atypical sense. I am ephemerally present on stage, through my readings of the work, and in the air as sound waves reverberate across the theater. I follow the movements that are on stage, taking in the follow spot and identifying where the audience's attention will be guided. I document the micro-adjustments in the choreography and jot down production notes in anticipation of the performance. I am guided by the work of my colleagues and am simultaneously an actor in the scene, mindfully and sometimes accidentally changing the performance and subsequently the message of the work. It is these ethnographic engagements that shape my interpretations of *Phlov* (2023) and affect how I *follow* the performances.

Conclusion

Phlov (2023) premiered on January 6th and 7th, 2023 in Java Creative Café to an audience of expats, artists, and locals. In collaboration with Creative Generations, Java Creative Café hosted artists throughout 2022 and 2023 to feature and showcase the works

of local Cambodians. It was advertised online through social media and in Java Creative Café branches across Phnom Penh. Against the recommendation of the café owner to charge admission, Khuon decided that the show should be free, refusing capitalist streams of income and making it accessible for all audiences. While I was primarily up in the booth, audience reception appeared positive with many attendees talking with Khuon afterwards. My landlady *Aum* Yoo and her husband attended the show at my suggestion, taking in the experience of the work. When I returned home that night after clearing the theater, she was waiting for me so we could unpack that night's performance. She told me she did not understand the whole work. She said she understood the spoken word dialogue, the café scene, and the love dance, but had a difficult time understanding the roles of each person on stage. We spent part of the evening discussing the love scene because she wanted to know more about experiences of LGBTQ+ people (a recurring conversation between us), and we also thought through the different roles performed on stage. I think this conversation helped me understand the different characters and roles—a friend, romantic lover, teacher, representation of society—and informed my analysis of the work.

Phlov (2023) is challenging to situate as a work. In many respects, this can be read as a queer work. It was choreographed by Khuon Chay, a gay Khmer dancer, and performed by dancers from Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA, an all-gay male dance troupe. However, I question if the corporeality of all the dancers demarcates *Phlov* (2023) as a queer work. Khuon's narratives about urban development, being a dancer and artist, and inner turmoil in response to abjection suggest that the work is about more than

queerness, though it is queer-led. While he addresses marriage equality in Cambodia through strategically evoking traditional and classical Khmer aesthetics, it is only part of his overarching narrative about his personal transformation and growth. Labelling *Phlov* (2023) as a queer work both gives it the radical edge of queerness while simultaneously reducing Khuon's life narrative to being solely about being a gay dancer. There are strong queer elements, and the work demands an explication of queer experiences if Khuon means to represent his experience through it. Instead of defining it as a queer work, *Phlov* (2023) should be understood through its multifaceted approach to grappling with the complexities of life with queerness as one facet of the overarching narrative.

Khuon Chay contends with his experiences and worldview in *Phlov* (2023). Each scene offers us fragments and glimpses into his praxis of being or Cambodian-ness. These non-linear fragments are performative representations of his multidimensional reality as it is locally and globally informed and transduced for the stage. Khuon's work engages in queer worlding that engages cross-temporal practices, indicative of *sahasamay* and the contemporary, and reveals how these are connected on stage. As *Phlov* (2023) responds to topics such as capitalist development and LGBTQ+ discrimination, Khuon interlaces his commentary with everyday moments, showing the interconnectedness of life and being and embodied ties to the past and fantasias of the future. He generates a self-reflective response to the postmodern and technological developments shaping his life, providing what Anthony Giddens (1990, 45) terms as an aesthetic reflection. Gidden's concept of the aesthetic reflection draws on artistic and cultural responses to capitalism and development in tension with tradition. Khuon ties

together Khmer classical dance with Buddhism while situating both in present day issues with marriage equality, urbanization, and contemporary attitudes towards the arts, revealing how these conflicts impact his worldview. In particular, he forges a work rooted in the genre of *sahasamay* and engages ontologies of contemporary performance that enact the tensions of queer worlding and worldmaking through intimate and glocal entanglements.

These tensions emerge through his duets. Scenes in *Phlov* (2023) revolve around duets that feature micro-interactions between Khuon and another dancer within each scene or for entire scenes. SanSan Kwan (2021, 2) writes that duets are projects of intense vulnerability and incommensurability that explicate the politics of difference. Specifically, she frames the duet as a form of intimate (non-romantic) partnership activating global and local relationalities and showing the fraught nature of collaboration. Duets in *Phlov* (2023) characterize intimate relations between both the global and local and the interpersonal. In the love scene, the duet draws together global discourses around LGBTQ+ discrimination, rights, and movements while narrativizing Khuon's interpersonal relationships, representing the growing push for LGBTQ+ equality in Cambodia. During the penultimate scene, Khuon reaches out to each character, interacting with them while they repudiate and ignore him. These micro-interactions are also duets that render how society, his friends, and his romantic partners are incapable of comprehending him while projecting the inner emotional turmoil arising from abjection and discrimination.

Phlov (2023) is one example of how contemporary creatives in Cambodia construct their reality and respond to the postmodern contemporary world. Khuon's work responds to global conditions rooted in his personal circumstances. These excerpts and scenes represent Khuon's experience, life, and praxis of being. He responds to capitalist production and discrimination by embodying aspects from the ordinary every day, integrating and restyling classical elements to articulate the complexity of his personhood and showing how contemporary conditions shape and constrain his approach to life. Through Khuon's styling and innovating of Khmer classical forms and concepts, reflecting a politics of *chnai* as mentioned in chapter one, he invites a reconsideration of inequality and injustice in our world while pointing out conflicts between friends, family, society, and romantic worlds.

Phlov (2023) is an example of contemporary performance in Cambodia. There are many choreographers, artists, and organizations producing new works and fostering the next generation of artists. These include SilverBelle, Sophiline Arts, and Cambodian Living Arts as well as many more who are all actively engaged in expanding the possibilities of the Khmer performing arts. This chapter supports artistic creativity by recognizing its creative potential for change and transformation on the personal and interpersonal level. Contemporary performance remains siloed in Cambodia due to a post-genocide emphasis on protecting endangered traditional and classical performing arts genres. At the same time, contemporary cultural production, an expression of contemporaneity and the present moment (Kwan 2017), offers a restyling and extending of classicism that exposes the limits of convention in Khmer classical dance. Cambodian

artists world postmodern aesthetics and the social politics of the Global North by recontextualizing them in the Global South. They point to the ideological limits of the Global North. Khuon makes a direct intervention by integrating Khmer Hindu-Buddhist concepts, and by producing a cultural critique informed by postmodernist and poststructuralist thought from the Global North. Khuon levels multiple critiques, making meaning and generating discourse by laying bare societal attitudes towards artists and LGBTQ+ people.

Among other artists and performers, Khuon uses his work as a vehicle for change and transformation. Throughout *Phlov* (2023), Khuon explores his passion and desire as he competes with and is challenged by the world to generate change for himself and others. He advocates for tolerance using the middle path from Buddhist philosophy, seeking acceptance and recognition from society and friends. Contemporary performance is one vessel through which artists and creatives are collectively imagining, searching for, charting, and creating a new path towards the future. In choreographing a hopeful end, Khuon directs energy towards the possibilities of the future, generating a new beginning through the invocation melody *sathukar* and starting a new cycle of life.

Reflection Four: I have this scarf

I have this scarf

I have no idea what the material is

It's a cotton scarf…I think?

There are tassels on the end

tying together the interwoven threads

This scarf is dyed

with the life of three different leaves

Each leaf radiates out hues

hues of reddish-brown, yellow, green

These colors bleed out into the white cotton fabric

Within each leaf are the veins and capillaries spreading across its lamina

reaching out towards the margins,

the boundaries,

the edges

The leaves melt out beyond the confines of their foliage

transgressing and transcending the cotton canvas

escaping out of their superimposed shape

My eyes marvel at the leaves

drawing me closer

I flip the scarf back

seeing the deeply pronounced veins on one end

and forth

looking at the blurred veins on the other

staring at the interconnected networks

visible and to me

I hold the scarf out in front of me

The leaves float out before me

I bleed with the leaves

staining the fabric

leaving a permanent mark on the world

I am together with this scarf

And it is made of more than me

***

This scarf was a gift during my fieldwork. My friend Khuon Chay, whose work I discussed in chapter four, gave this to me after a three-month English language program in Thailand. The leaves were picked up off the ground from the monastery where he was

studying English. We were at a café together one day in late April 2023 after the Khmer New Year and shortly after he returned from Thailand. I think we were at Tube Coffee in Tuol Tumpong on the corner of 163 and 432, a few blocks away from the Tuol Tumpong market and Mao Tse Toung Blvd. While I was writing field notes, he was doing work on his laptop and planning his next choreography to be premiered that July. It was there that Chay gave me this scarf. He apologized when giving it to me, saying that he made mistakes when dyeing the scarf. I had gifted him Anthony Veasna So's *Afterparties* (2021) days prior. This scarf is a personal treasure of mine. It is a symbol of our friendship.

It is also a reminder of the many mornings where Chay and I would walk along the Riverside in Phnom Penh. We would talk about all the unfair, unjust things going on in the world. When he returned from Thailand, he told me about the friends he made there. In particular, he emphatically would talk about two of his classmates from Myanmar. Neither of his classmates could return home. And yet here he was back in his home country. He was upset by their predicament. He asked me about the U.S. As Cambodia geared up for its own election, what did I think of the approaching U.S. presidential election? What was college like? Graduate school? How did I feel about living in Cambodia? He pointed to how trash floats in the river, expressing his frustration with how dirty Cambodia appears and how Cambodia could be doing more to address global climate change.

I return to the scarf as a marker of Chay's experiences in Thailand. A moment where he learned what it was like to live away from your home, in another country,

where the dominant language isn't yours. Where he encountered different forms of struggle and resistance. He was transformed by that experience. That experience is embedded in this scarf and his work. This scarf is a marker of his global encounter as he relayed it to me. It tells the story of Chay's life away from home. Branching out in new directions. Encountering new ideas. Having new experiences. The scarf suggests the degrees of separation between violence and injustice. Ingrained in the scarf are Chay's values towards the environment and his frustrations surrounding global violence and specifically the military coup in Myanmar. What I feel inside this scarf, as I hold it, while marveling at the intricate leaves, are these issues and their interrelations. It reminds me how the military coup in Myanmar and the exploitation of ethnic minorities in Myanmar is tied to issues of environmental devastation. Radical terraforming and extractive mining are all in service of precious metals that constitute our electronic devices. Nature bleeds just as the leaves on the scarf release chlorophyll, staining the fabric, leaving a permanent mark on the world.

Figure 29. Photo of the scarf.

Conclusion: Life, Death, and Performance: Repatriating the Stolen Statues

It's not every day your dance teacher goes viral on the internet. Clips of a video of featuring *Nak Kru* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro at The Met circulated the internet in March 2023. Everyone I knew was talking about her protesting the "blood statues." I didn't even realize that *Nak Kru* Sophiline had left Cambodia last week after teaching her Sunday morning dance class. I only learned about it when I saw that she was all over my Facebook and Instagram feed. Friends, colleagues, and online social media pages were reposting and sharing her performance. I was also receiving messages from friends and colleagues asking me if I planned to write about the performance too. Initially, I wasn't sure how to write about her performance. However, after I returned to the United States, I continued to think about her work. While studying Khmer classical dance in Long Beach, CA, I met and learned about the work Cambodian Vietnamese American artist Phung Huynh. Huynh is an Assistant Professor of Art at California State University, Los Angeles and we studied Khmer classical dance together at Modern Apsara Company in Long Beach, learning from *Nak Kru* Sophiline's Cambodian American students. The company was invited to perform at the opening reception of her art exhibit in 2024 at Luis De Jesus in Los Angeles, CA. She curated a mixed media exhibition with graphite drawings and banners with photographs. It was a critical response to how statues were stolen from Cambodia during French colonialism, United States supported civil war, and the subsequent Khmer Rouge genocide throughout the 1970s.

Inspired by these two artists, I examine both performances and draw together the work of Cambodian classical dance master and choreographer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and Cambodian Vietnamese American Phung Huynh's opening reception with a performance by Modern Apsara Company. Both events resonate with the idea of following as both a way of learning music and dance and an approach to read performance from our situated perspectives. Thus, to read and describe a performance is to follow the trajectory of ideas, movements, sounds, and aesthetics. Furthermore, it reveals how choreosonics, or the entanglements of sound and movement (Crawley 2016, 93), crystalize into contemporary ontologies of performance and what I see as the contemporary or *sahasamay*, the coalescing and worlding of space and time in performance.

By following these performances, I return to ideas of legacy and introduce new directions for thinking about contemporary Cambodian performance in the diaspora and in terms of spirituality and ancestrality. Contemporary Cambodian performance activates cross-temporal and cross-spatial relational alignments of *sahasamay* and worlding new ways of understanding Cambodian-ness. In the diaspora, these performances intimate new forms of resistance and global imaginaries that rejuvenate dis/connections marked by displacement, rupture, and violence. I begin by following Cheam Shapiro's performance with the Blood Statues at The Met and discussing how she recognizes and affirms their spiritual vitality and role in reimagining Cambodian-ness. Then, I reflect on Huynh's exhibit as a continuation of Cheam Shapiro's work and further consider how the statues indicate that repatriation must address more than material return but also the

spiritual and social realms. Cheam Shapiro and Huynh demonstrate how expressions of Cambodian-ness enact postcolonial worldmaking through participating in the project of repatriation as well as realizing the significance of these statues in producing Cambodian lifeworlds. Performing Cambodian-ness accomplishes critical reparative work that critiques imperial structures of violence, reaffirms ancestral legacies, and envisions possibilities for reconciliation.

Performing with the Blood Statues, Affirming Spiritual Presence

After I heard from several people about the performance and saw various clips circulating on social media, I played the YouTube video posted by Brazen titled "Dancing at the Met for Cambodia's "Blood Statues" | Dynamite Doug" on my iPhone.

It began with footage of The Met on an overcast day with precipitation. Then, overlayed on top of the recording are the words: New York City. The video cut to a zoomed in shot from the steps facing upwards. After a moment, the text February 28, 2023, appeared in front of the stairs. It cut to a black background with faded red tones, centered on screen is the statement: The Met has over 30 statues that Cambodia wants back. Next, it showed footage featuring several stone statues in a relatively dimly lit room before switching again to the black and red background. Filling the screen is the sentence: Cambodian dancer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro is here to honor these stolen statues.

Framed from the side, Cheam Shapiro stood with her head inclined forward, eyes closed, and her hands together. Wearing a *sampot*, fitted sleeveless dress shirt, and red

scarf, she prayed. The footage switched to Cheam Shapiro taking her shoes off from behind. She walked across the room. The videographer inserted a point of view clip walking towards a shirtless statue wearing a headpiece and pants. It is missing its forearms and hands. Cheam Shapiro stood before the statue of Harihara balanced on her left toes behind her and right foot in front. Her toes are raised and pointed upwards. She held her hands together above her head while leaning forward and lowers them to her chest while raising her head to look up at the statue and stepping with her left foot. Gliding on the balls of her feet, she turned to her right and began to raise her hands up to her head.

Cutting to the red and black background, there is a new phrase: Many of the Cambodian statues were looted by Douglas Latchford, a British art collector.

The video returned to Cheam Shapiro. Framed from behind, she faced the statue again with her hands together in front of her body. She stepped forward with her right foot and raised her hands to the top of her head, bowing her head slightly at the same time before returning her hands in front of her torso.

There is a cut to show the text: These “blood statues” came out of a war zone in Cambodia in the 1970s.

Next, Cheam Shapiro is shown in the middle of an entryway of another room filled with statues and a rattan sculpture of the Buddha by Pich Sopheap in the center of the room. Facing the center of the room. her arms shifted between one arm straightened out and elongated and the other forming two right angles at the elbow and wrist. Then, Cheam Shapiro stepped back while switching arms. The video cuts to Cheam Shapiro

standing. She is surrounded by statues and to the side of the rattan sculpture. With her eft hand perched on her waist, she positioned her right hand in front of her. Leading with her pointer finger, she swept her hand and arm from right to left, directing my attention to another statue with multiple heads, Brahma.

The footage cuts to a bottom up shot of the statue before another transition to show the statement: For Sophiline, these statues are living gods and should be returned to Cambodia.

Next, the video showed Cheam Shapiro from the front at an angle, appearing to look beyond the rattan sculpture. Her hands are together in front of her body and her fingers very clearly hyperextended. She stood in the frame with her knees together and right leg crossed in front of her. She turned her body, centering it before separating her hands and moving them in front of her. Then, the video was cut to show Cheam Shapiro walking from behind Brahma's statue to a different multi-headed statue, Hevajra. Then, the video showed the onlookers watching Cheam Shapiro's performance.

The video displayed the words: Meanwhile, the Met drags its feet. So today, Sophiline dances.

Returning to Cheam Shapiro, she manipulateed her red scarf, swiftly and gracefully raising it into the air.

The video played footage of a man dressed in a suit and wearing a cloth mask that covers his nose and mouth. As Cheam Shapiro bowed in front of the statue of Avalokiteshvara, he walked up to her and interrupted her. She turned towards him and lowered her hands, clasping them in front of her and nodding to him while he asked her

to stop and put her shoes back on. Then, the video played clips of Cheam Shapiro putting her shoes back on, grabbing her bag from the floor, gazing at the statues, and leaving the museum.

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Dynamite Doug, the podcast series run by Brazen, invited Cambodian classical dance master and choreographer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro to participate in a recorded panel discussion in New York. Brazen, formerly Project Brazen, is a media production company invested in documentary projects and examining complex stories of extraordinary individuals and events in the world. Organized by Brazen, *Dynamite Doug* is hosted by Chinese Cambodian Canadian actress Ellen Wong. Together with Brazen, Wong produces six episodes about Douglas Latchford and his role in looting cultural heritage from Cambodia. For this collaboration, Wong invited Cheam Shapiro to dance before the looted statues at The Met. Cheam Shapiro's collaboration with *Dynamite Doug* critiques how statues were stolen out of Cambodia during the civil war in the 1970s caused by United States militarization during the Cold War and then the resulting Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979. *Dynamite Doug* and Project Brazen demonstrate how museums are complicit with colonialism because they continue to display stolen cultural artifacts. Wong and her collaborators assert the vital need to repatriate all objects looted during militarized conflict and French colonization. The reverberations of Cheam Shapiro's dancing at The Met sparked outrage about how the statues were looted from

Cambodia during political conflict and turmoil. Through these collective efforts, they successfully began the process of repatriating some of the statues to the National Museum of Cambodia starting at the end of 2023. While some statues have not returned, the statue of Avalokiteshvara featured in this performance among others have been safely returned to Cambodia.

At The Met, Cheam Shapiro performed *robam buong suong preahmn.* Similar to the *buong suong* royal ceremony and performances of *robam buon bat* or the dance drama *Moni Mekhala*, *Ream Eyso*, and *Vorachhun*, this dance is usually performed as a part of the *buong suong* ceremony asking for rain, peace, and blessings from the ancestors and gods (cf. Cravath 1986). Within this ritual context, dancers mediate between the human and supernatural realms where the dancer and celestial deities become one. However, while a part of the ceremony, *buong suong preahmn* is a dance excerpted from the classical dance-drama *Roeang Preah Enao Bossaba*.

Rather than being performed in a folkloric, festival, recital, or ceremonial context, Cheam Shapiro performed the dance *robam buong suong preahmn* in a museum for an part of activist project, transplanting the dance out of its traditional dance-drama and ceremonial contexts. However, this does not mean that the dance loses its ritual purposes. She adapts her performance for the museum, changing sections of the choreography where she would typically be sitting or kneeling on the floor to remain standing. Depending on the performance context, usually the dance is performed in a contained space and therefore relatively static in its staging. However, Cheam Shapiro moves around the museum and interfaces with different statues during her performance. These

stylistic choices and modifications amplify the space by drawing further attention to the surrounding objects on display. Her dynamic choreographic re-staging also serves a critical function of paying respect to these representations of the celestial deities. By standing with and alongside the statues, Cheam Shapiro draws herself into relation the statues and expresses ancestral linkages that produce otherwise worlds and togetherness beyond colonial containment in the museum.

In this video, her dance is spliced in several spots, disrupting the continuity of her performance. Interspersed between Cheam Shapiro's performance are slides of text explaining the basic historical context of the statues. What is, presently in full, a twelve-minute prayer dance is ostensibly chopped up into two minutes to function as short form content and quickly garner public attention and awareness. Codifying both the live performance and mediated video as *sahasamay* demonstrates how the traditional is recontextualized and reformatted as contemporary while maintaining its meaning and significance as a prayer dance. This two-minute video easily circulates across the internet and shows footage of Cheam Shapiro with slides of text that makes the goals of her dancing readily apparent: praying to and dancing before the statues signify their spiritual importance to Cambodian peoples and provokes the question of why these statues are still at The Met. Thus, the performance articulates an uneven worlding of power both during exploitation and militarized conflict in the 1970s and in the present through the museum and archive, drawing an alignment between art and colonialism. Ultimately, Cheam Shapiro's captivating performance and the *Dynamite Doug* podcast accomplished the goals of repatriation. While tracing how the statues were lifted out of Cambodia by art

thieves and circulated by wealthy collectors into museums merits further attention to colonial extractions, I focus here on the sensationalist metaphor of "blood statues" and the statement that they are "living gods" that articulate how these statues, rather than being representations of the divine, demonstrate how they are alive.

In an article by *Hyperallergic* after performing at The Met, Cheam Shapiro (2023) narrates purchasing a replica of Shiva's head in the Los Feliz neighborhood Los Angeles, California. While at a store in Los Feliz, she explained how the head of Shiva spoke to her and asked her to take it home. Despite being a replica in a shop, she placed it on her home altar to express its spirituality and essence. These stolen statues, such as the statue of Harihara and Brahma that she dances before at The Met, are more than objects. They are spiritual beings and material manifestations of the divine; they are more-than-human. Her cut and spliced performance of *robam buong suong preahmn* in The Met recognizes the statues of Harihara and other Khmer deities as living representations of divine beings and the legacy of Angkor. Jane Bennett explains how the encounter between different forms of materiality produces affects that can only be understood through an open-ended comportment and refusal of anthropocentric projections of material agency (Bennett 2010, xv-xvi). Though these stone statues are anthropomorphized as speaking, Cheam Shapiro's encounter with Shiva's head in Los Feliz and dance offerings in front of statues at museums across the world reveal the vitality of these statues, communicating their aliveness as spiritual presence. Echoing what Jane Bennett describes using adamantine metal as the relative, relational, and ontological power of things (Bennett 2010, 57-58), the head of Shiva and stolen statues resonate with a vibrant spiritual materiality. Cheam

Shapiro's performance reanimates the statues by dancing with Brahma and Harihara. She embodies the lifeblood of the statues, indicates their aliveness through dance, and asserts how their spiritual affect challenges their configuration as ossified artifacts.

When viewed in a museum, these blood statues and cultural objects are valued as art and aestheticized for the purposes of consumption. Museumgoers marvel at the exhibitions as representations of the pinnacle of an ancient civilization from far across the globe and be captivated by their beauty. It garners further interest in learning about different cultures and peoples across the world. However, removed from their homes and local stewardship, these statues and objects are stripped of their spirituality and rendered dead and inert objects. Their objectification suggests a necropolitics rooted in their captivity. Achille Mbembe explains that necropolitics involves a promise of excess and luxury used to assert or negate political sovereignty and power (Mbembe 2003, 39). The sensationalist moniker of "Blood Statues" asserts a connection to the idea of blood money, or money claimed at the cost of another's life. All the statues, displayed as inanimate museum objects, were stolen during periods of duress with the presumptive guise of liberating sacred cultural objects from immanent war and destruction. In display cases and pedestals, they perform a colonial excess by adorning the spaces of the wealthy and becoming objects of consumption. In the case of many looted statues, they were beheaded and dismembered. Only the determined necessary segments were taken. These primarily included the heads and torsos with other remnants discarded or turn to rubble. Writing about waste, value, and liberal humanism, Neferiti X. M. Tadiar articulates the idea of remaindered life-times. Tadiar describes it as the superfluous elements of life

beyond capital where vitality encompasses "the vibrations of ephemeral existences that compose the substances and durations that we call 'lives,' and yet it is not contained by them" (Tadiar 2022, 71-72). As a result of being removed in pieces, remnants and fragments from their lifeworlds, the statues and cultural objects are rendered powerless and in service of the archive, consumer, and museumgoer. However, it is in the remaindered lives of these statues where power and meaning manifests for people who claim ancestral and cultural lineage with Angkor.

Blood statues reveal relational alignments configured through ancestrality. Doing Khmer classical dance means meditatively dancing into relation and communing with the master teacher spirit *Louk Ta*, past teachers, and the statues. Arturo Escobar explains that cultural perseverance and the aim of radical restitution draw from ancestral memory to assert multiple worlds and futures or the pluriverse (Escobar 2020, 71-76). Instead of only undoing the violence of colonialism through repatriation, the return of these statues affirms Cambodian cultural connection with the legacy of Angkor as a postcolonial assertion of life and refusal of death. In turn, it retains the spiritual connection and significance of the statues in supporting Cambodian lifeworlds and epistemes. Cheam Shapiro's performance at The Met conveys ontologies of performance that unsettles the colonial history of the museum and upholds registers of Cambodian-ness. In this sense, the blood statues as a form of ancestrality *speak* with Cheam Shapiro and reimagine the museum as a contradictorily spiritual and desolate place while the statues live in displacement and disconnect from their homes.

Contained within this performance video, Cheam Shapiro presents a contemporary or *sahasamay* offering of Khmer classical dance that calls lineages of dance and ancestral ties into the present and in the United States. By performing tradition as contemporary, her performances consolidate spatial and temporal disconnections, manifesting them in the present to assert Cambodian-ness as not a fetishized object of the past. Instead, she demonstrates what the relational aesthetics of Khmer classical dance accomplish in terms of anticolonialism and worlding against violence and exploitation. Performing together with the blood statues, she reveals the plural entanglements of life, highlighting the metaphor of *phlov* and temporal continuity through Khmer classical dance. Khmer classical dance draws forward lineages of embodied transmission from one generation to the next. In doing so, she extends how Cambodian choreographers, artists, and creatives cultivate their understandings of Cambodian arts by engaging with the statues, inscriptions, and bas-reliefs at sacred temples and spaces such as Angkor Wat. Cheam Shapiro's performance resonates with these statues to animate their subjugated knowledge and power, leading Cambodian peoples to engage with the repatriated statues upon their resettlement at the National Museum of Cambodia.

Returning Home: A "Re-Performance" in Los Angeles

On June 22nd, 2024, I attended Phung Huynh's opening reception at Luis De Jesus in downtown Los Angeles. I arrived early with my friend, fellow dancer, and UCLA graduate student Rane Prak where we chatted with the Modern Apsara Company performers as they prepared for the opening reception and wandered around the exhibit.

Before the reception, we walked through Huynh's exhibit in the back of the gallery. She produced a mixture of graphite drawings hung in golden frames on the installation walls and semi-transparent photographic banners suspended a few meters away from the drawings. With statues from American museums as a source material, Huynh drew seven floating heads, decontextualized to convey their status as museum and commodified objects. Brilliantly hung in front of the heads are sheer photos of beheaded statues that expressed their dismemberment (see Figures 30 and 31). Huynh illustrates how the statues were desecrated because of United States imperialism and French colonization. She aims to restore the blood statues with her exhibition. Extending her argument about colonial extraction, I contend that her exhibit continues the dialogue of Cheam Shapiro's performance at The Met about the vibrant materiality of the blood statues. Namely, I discuss how repatriation as a mission about materiality and stewardship must also navigate spirituality as a part of Cambodian-ness and the postcolonial condition.

In consultation with Huynh, dancers from Modern Apsara Company performed *robam buong suong preahmn*, the same dance that Cheam Shapiro performed at The Met. Rane Prak was documenting the performance by recording video and taking photos. Putting into practice doing ethnography from the booth or work-centered ethnography, I volunteered to accompany and support Modern Apsara Company and Huynh. Together with *Nak Kru* Mea Lath, the Founder and Artistic Director of Modern Apsara Company, we set up and tested the speaker to ensure it was on and synced with Lath's iPad so it could play the recorded music. Once all the dancers were ready and I was in position by the speaker, I cued *Nak Kru* Mea to start the music.

Figure 30. View from the corner of Phung Huynh's exhibition Return Home*. Photo by author.*

With Huynh's exhibit and Modern Apsara Company's performance (see Figure 32), they presented what I read as a re-performance of Cheam Shapiro's demonstration at The Met. Diana Taylor explains that re-performance transforms a work through the frictions between its new context and framing and previous contexts (Taylor 2016, 160). Rather than attending to its precise re-rendering, the differences between an original performance as it is documented and its re-performance expresses new possibilities, especially in the cases of intangible cultural heritage like Khmer classical dance. Re-

performance in these two works express a remediated connection with the statues in across the different diasporic experiences between the performers and the statues.

Figure 31. Framed head of Buddha from The Met cradled by a sheer image of a small naga Buddha statue from Angkor Wat. Photo by author.

As though I am behind the performers, I *follow* and read for the differences in how *buong suong preahmn* was performed to consider how the choreosonics of both performances speak to the lives of the statues. In the case of Cheam Shapiro at The Met, there is the "live" footage of the event as it is spliced into a video for the *Dynamite Doug* podcast. The video makes a clear critique of the pillaging by art collectors and their

entanglement with the museum and archive. While Huynh's exhibition makes a similar critique, Modern Apsara Company's performance is framed as a ceremonial performance in the exhibition notes and online press release where the "dancers' blessings and interactions will make the bodies spiritually whole" and "activate" the banners. Both Cheam Shapiro and Huynh assert the lifeblood of the statues and recognize their sacred presence and role for Cambodian peoples, disrupting how colonial extraction has robbed both the statues and Cambodians of their cultural autonomy and sovereignty.

Figure 32. Cropped video still Modern Apsara Company dancers performing robam buong suong preahmn *at Luis De Jesus. Original video courtesy of Rane Prak.*

Between these performances of *buong suong preahmn*, there are additional choreosonic distinctions. Because theological, philosophical, and disciplinary figurations

deny the interconnections of race, spirituality, sound, and movement, Ashon Crawley uses the term choreosonics to assert the efficacy of their interrelatedness in imagining otherwise worlds (Crawley 2016, 93-95). Cheam Shapiro's and Modern Apsara Company's performances activate a choreosonics that produce Cambodian lifeworlds in relation with ancestors, spirits, and celestial deities that are mediated through contemporary performance. Effectively, both events simultaneously engage in a cross-temporal worlding to show how the work of *sahasamay*, the interconnections between space and time, assert Cambodian-ness, and a broader critique of colonialism.

Cheam Shapiro performed in relative silence at The Met, accompanied by the ambient sounds of people walking and shuffling along in the museum and the presence of the viewers recording her. Silence dominates how Cheam Shapiro moved in those clips and shots. With the sounds of people around her in the fluorescent lighting of the museum, she breathed and prayed. She gazed pointedly at the statues. The spectacle of her performance is enhanced through the intimacy of silence and augments the broader critiques of colonial extraction. In contrast, at Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, the dancers from Modern Apsara Company performed with recorded music, originally recorded by Cheam Shapiro when she directed the Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach: she shares these recordings with her students. In Long Beach, the dancers are intimately aware of the track and are well-rehearsed. They strongly adhere to what is encapsulated in the recording. While the dancers are bound by the recording as a form of fixed media, practicing with the recording amplifies the musicality of both the dancer and invisible musicians to where idiosyncrasies of the track can be danced during live performance. In

tandem, the music and dance together support Huynh's goal of connecting the dismembered statues with their missing heads and limbs. Because they also dance to music provided by Cheam Shapiro and are her former students, the re-performance gestures towards a familial continuity through a shared dance lineage. Furthermore, Cheam Shapiro's tutelage strongly influences the movements of the Modern Apsara Company dancers while asserting the argument against the captivity of the statues.

Temporal and spatial components of both performances also vary. Because Modern Apsara Company dances to a recording, even with their danced musicality, they are still constrained by the temporality of the music and actively work to fit their movements within the beat and observe a set choreography. Meanwhile, Cheam Shapiro's performance, as it is produced for the podcast, is incredibly fragmented and some of the clips are arranged out of order from the set choreography of *buong suong preahmn*. Because those spliced moments are danced without audible music, it allows the choreography to be malleable and mutable. Cheam Shapiro danced unanchored by a linear temporality of performance and the demands of the beat and deviate from the choreography. At the same time, because of her own embodied understanding of the music and dance, Cheam Shapiro moved across the museum in her own temporal head space that is informed through her imagining and "hearing" the music while communing with the statues. Dancing in embodied sound, her movements exist in her imagined temporality. Though the work was separated into clips, Cheam Shapiro honored the musical structure of the choreography, expressing her own artistry by manipulating the tempo in which she defines and completes each gesture.

Cheam Shapiro beautifully uses the museum space. In the YouTube video footage, she performs in two different rooms and meanders around cultural objects and statues. She interacts with the statues and prays to them. In doing so, she is in relation and communion with the spiritual magnitude of the statues, affirming their shared life. At Luis De Jesus, the three dancers from Modern Apsara Company during the opening reception do not perform among the banners and framed drawings but in an enclosed space surrounded by attendees along the exhibition walls. As a small group, they required additional space that the tighter and restrictive area of Huynh's exhibit cannot allow without collisions with the artwork or audience. However, in this open space, they made different choreographic choices that take advantage of the area. During one of the sections of the dance, all three dancers tossed a folded bundle of red cloth into the air four times while facing each cardinal direction. While many staged performances of *buong suong preahmn* choreograph this section so that the dancers rotate 90 degrees, dancers from Modern Apsara Company swiftly moved around the space, changing who was in the center. Therefore, they shifted the dimensions of the work by creating contrasting shapes and angles with three dancers. Directing their attention to the audience, they highlight a collective relationality rooted in the responsibility to address the injustice done to the statues while delineating a shared spiritual connection with the statues as they are represented in the exhibition space. Together with Modern Apsara Company, Huynh shows that repatriating the statues demands more than any simple "return." She demonstrates how the statues are diasporic and forcibly displaced.

Animated among these performances, the statues, and Huynh's artwork are a constellation of diasporic relationships. José Muñoz writes about how minoritarian subjects and their self-enactments critique the locations of hybridity and asymmetrical instances of power by upsetting colonialist and orientalist readings of minoritarian cultural production (Muñoz 1999, 91-92). While these two performances of *buong suong preahmn* participates in narratives of cultural nationalism and contributes to orientalist readings, its activation of ancestral lineage recognizes how performing Cambodian-ness still is qualified through cultural nationalism. As performances of Cambodian-ness, Cheam Shapiro and Huynh's opening exhibition demonstrate a performed togetherness that challenge how these blood statues are ossified in the museum as objects of consumption. Jade Power-Sotomayor explains togetherness relies on synchronicity and intimacy in performance where sounding, dancing, listening, and connecting are unified together to enact a decolonial way of being (Power-Sotomayor 2020, 52). Crossing space and time, these two performances enact a decolonial synchronicity united by their shared arguments against the colonial archive and restoration of ancestral connections.

As Cheam Shapiro dances to embodied sound and Modern Apsara Company performances activate recorded music, they demonstrate the slippage between the traditional and the contemporary or *sahasamay* through a diasporic rendering of *buong suong preahmn*. Without disavowing cultural nationalism and traditionalism, these performances reveal how the traditional and classical are inherently contemporary, showing their entanglement within postcolonial nation-building, technocultural flows, diasporic re-performances, and Cambodian lifeworlds. Thus, the contemporary or

sahasamay as a genre of performance reconfigures the traditional as more than the nation resonating with the diaspora, displacement, and empire. Working along disjuncture, performing with the blood statues implicate a diasporic re-connect mediated through ancestrality and reimagined relations mediated through technology via the short video or recorded music. In doing so, both events reveal how all forms of cultural production are inherently contemporary in their plural contexts, activating legacies of performance.

I write as a scholar-practitioner from the diaspora trained by Cheam Shapiro, Modern Apsara Company, and Prumsodun Ok. Huynh and I are both students of *Nak Kru* Mea Lath. Cheam Shapiro trained the instructors of Modern Apsara Company—including Prum—when she managed the Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach, California. Cheam Shapiro is from the first cohort of students to graduate from the Royal University of Fine Arts after the Khmer Rouge genocide. She was taught by the late *Nak Kru* Chea Samy in a lineage with other masters from the royal courts. Despite the regime wiping out over 80% of the artists, dancers, and musicians, I *follow* this legacy and recognize its connections to Angkor civilization through bas-reliefs, figures, and statues of musicians and dancers and now continues into the present. Following the contours of these performances, I envision how ancestrality informs choreographic citation and repertoire to reinvigorate the formerly disjunct connections with these statues. As a form of following, choreographic citation worlds and reimagines connections, gesturing towards the possibilities of Cambodian-ness and reforming Cambodian subjectivity.

In connecting Cheam Shapiro's performance at The Met with Phung Huynh's exhibition *Return Home*, I draw attention to how Khmer classical dance mediates

between the codified traditional and contemporary through its re-performances. These performances of *buong suong preahmn* attend to the importance of spirituality and Cambodian-ness. Ma Vang explains that attending to the relationship between Hmong spirituality and narratives of return means "taking care of the spirit" and shepherding its return with the ancestors (Vang 2021, 186-187). By making a statement about the blood statues, Cheam Shapiro and Huynh express their life potential. Dancing with the statues demonstrates acts of care that guide them to Cambodia and activate their spiritual lineage. Coalescing through the metaphor of *phlov* and lineages of performance and ancestry, both performances of *buong suong preahmn* express the connections between Cheam Shapiro and her students, linking present dancers to the statues. Then, Modern Apsara Company extended the offering she provided over a year later. Honoring these relationships, I read these performances with the knowledge I have gained through studying with both Cheam Shapiro and her legacy, practicing performance ethnography in addition to engaging my experience as a scholar-practitioner.

I *follow* the interrelated paths of these two performances of Khmer classical dance that map on to contemporary Cambodian performance. Lineage, as entangled as these connections are and articulated through the metaphor of *phlov*, informs Cambodian ontologies of performance. Across Cheam Shapiro's performance for the *Dynamite Doug* podcast and Huynh's opening exhibition, they activate a Cambodian-ness from the diaspora. While both parties perform the same *buong suong preahmn* from the same lineage of performance, the differences signify the uniquely situated dimensions of their interpretations to assert plural and interrelated constructions of Cambodian-ness. Through

Khmer classical dance and its contemporary manifestations, space, time, and identity come together through the genre of *sahasamay* and crystalize as collective and embodied knowledge to voice how the blood statues are captives under imperialism. The subsequent repatriation of stolen statues, while challenging imperialism and exploitation, also acknowledges the more-than-human Cambodian-ness of the statues. The ontological presence of the blood statues speak, as forms of Cambodian-ness from the homeland, diaspora, and beyond, to the lifeworlds of Cambodia and its peoples.

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This closing chapter honors a series of relationships informed by my continued fieldwork. It is also a reflection of my background as a scholar from the diaspora writing about the "homeland." I wrote about Cambodia in ways that extended beyond the centrality of the genocide or Cold War in Cambodian scholarship. In particular, I sought to reimagine scholarship about Cambodia in the contemporary moment. Reading performances for the contemporary and genre of *sahasamay* brought me into questions about worlding, ontology, and Cambodian-ness. What is Cambodia and its peoples when we decenter violence, trauma, and memory as our entry points? Through this dissertation, I ask about glocalization, cosmopolitanism, cultural hybridity, nationalism, diaspora, worlding, genre, postmodernism, and worldmaking as vectors of Cambodian-ness. In this conclusion, I began a discussion about dance, ritual, activism, materiality, and ancestrality to present more themes relevant what constitutes contemporary Cambodian

performance. I also respond to how the terrain of contemporary Cambodian performance continuously changes as it sparks new dialogue in the postcolonial present about global climate change and the environment, ethno-national conflict, and militarized conflict all informed by colonialism and imperialism. These two contemporary performances of *buong suong preahmn* echo issues discussed throughout this dissertation while indicating directions to explore in terms of how the sacred-spiritual and material realities of contemporary Cambodian performance speak to worlding Cambodian-ness and ontologies of performance. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates the potential of contemporary performance and the arts to enact social change and redress while exploring its implications for Cambodian peoples across the world.

Cheam Shapiro, Huynh, and others mentioned in this dissertation produce innovative works that remap and redefine the confines of institutionalized traditions. Writing in relation with them, I examine how they draw into relation different experiences of Cambodian-ness that come from within Cambodia and across the diaspora. Through their intercultural, hybridized, and reimagined practices, they accomplish post-genocide and postcolonial critique unmoored from centralized narratives of memory and trauma while serving the broader goals of restoration, critique, and worldmaking. My citational practice throughout reflects the work of these artists and their projects where I make pointed efforts to attend to aesthetics, genre, temporalities of tradition, diasporic experience, and embodied practice, writing against the grain of Cambodian scholarship. Undeniably, these stem from my interdisciplinary interests in American Studies, queer studies, ethnomusicology, and dance studies. However, it is also

a reflection of the artists featured in this project. Their work reveals an important shift away from tradition, preservation, postmemory, and trauma towards the interdependence of these paradigms with broader sociopolitical and transnational movements.

Queerness and its relationship to contemporary performance and Cambodian-ness shaped my research project from beginning to end. Reading for queerness in these performances allowed me to interrogate questions about identity, temporality, and relationality and understand Cambodian-ness as a cross-temporal and cross-spatial formation as it coalesces through *sahasamay*. Queerness and its possibilities to imagine new horizons and possibilities informs Cambodian-ness as a capacious way for reframing and reorienting Cambodian subjectivity and scholarship. It was crucial to my thinking about lineage and performance for engaging with slanted forms of dis/connect and how these were remediated through following and Cambodian-ness. Queerness resonates with how genre of contemporary unsettles fixed ideas of tradition and traditional practice as well as how several of the artists and performers are gay men and how it filters into their work in different ways. Contemporary Cambodian performance demonstrates where aligning with tradition neglects and casts into abjection multiplicity and difference and queer studies fruitfully engages these misalignments. It speaks to a series of postcolonial, transnational, and diasporic relationships and modes of critique. It also revealed an undercurrent of voices who actively engage in worldbuilding and *dare* to imagine otherwise.

My colleagues and friends convey the stakes of Cambodian-ness and postcolonial Cambodian lifeworlds as being more than violence and rupture. They convincingly

display the importance of worldmaking and otherwise possibilities in their artistic endeavors. I honor how these performances and projects recognize post-genocide life and forms of Cambodian-ness that are future oriented as much as they are entangled with the past and embedded in transnational, cosmopolitan, diasporic, and increasingly global vectors of Cambodian-ness.

In Gratitude

Several questions echoed as I wrote this dissertation about contemporary Cambodian performance. What are these different performance works telling me? Have I done justice to all the artists and creatives discussed here? Did my written descriptions of their work capture the expressive intensities from a live viewing? These reflect my personal and ethical commitments in my numerous roles as student, collaborator, stagehand, scholar-practitioner, amateur audio engineer, and most importantly friend. My commitments are navigated on the page as I think about my place in relation to the artist and their work. Through the works and teachings of Ros Sokunthea, Jean-Baptiste Phou, Chakra Sokhomsan, Khuon Chay, *Nak Kru* Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, and Phung Huynh, I am animated by the possibilities of performance and its capacity for social transformation. To close, I wish to express that I am indebted to all their kindness and receptiveness to my probing interests. With the hope that I have given each person the appropriate space to share their work, and to everyone involved with this project, I conclude with a thank you and offer my gratitude.

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Glossary

Transliteration	Khmer Script	Definition
Amogkhabas	អមោឃបាស	A term derived from Buddhist tantric philosophy that refers to an unending or continuous faith or connection that guides people towards enlightenment. The term Amogkhabas has been connected to the statues and reliefs from the Srivijaya empire known as Bodhisattva Loukesora with Eight Hands and how it represents light. It is possible that Bodhisattva Loukesora with Eight Hands and Amogkhabas is distinctly Khmer due to its depictions in reliefs dating to the reign of Jayavarman VII (Mang 2022). Metaphorizing the concept, it has been taken to mean unbreakable string and connection between the past, present, and future. Following the UNGEGN system, Amogkhabas would be transliterated as Amoukhabas. This word's pronunciation reads more like Pali and Sanskrit words which do not conform easily to Khmer-English transliteration systems because of its more syllabic articulation. The group transliterated it as Amogkhabas and I follow this usage to be consistent with the group's promotional materials and for searchability.
Aum	អ៊ុំ	A term for an aunt or uncle figure who is or can be perceived as older than one's parents. Gender can be qualified if there are multiple people that a person could be referring to.

		Under the UNGEGN system, it is transliterated as Aum but colloquially is written as Om.
Baa Thum	បាធំ ឬក៏បថម	A musical piece from the classical repertoire that accompanies the role of the monkey.
Bachchekates	បច្ចេកទេស	Refers to both technique and technical. Can also mean specialized.
Bangkaeut	បង្កើត	To create.
Banhchoh	បញ្ចុះ	To drop down or decrease. A musical piece from the classical repertoire that accompanies dancers as they move across the stage or male and female dancers as they interact on stage. Also known as *rev* (see below).
Bong	បង	Older brother or sister. Gender can also be qualified if there are multiple people that a person could be referring to. Colloquially, people say *bong* with the person's name following immediately and therefore inherently qualifying gender based on the person. This is also an age specific term that refers to someone who is older than the speaker but not at the age of their parents, aunts, or uncles. In professional settings, it can also refer to someone who is senior or more experienced in the workspace or polite term for a staff. It is also a term of endearment for the older person, often the male partner, in a relationship. I have chosen to transliterate *bong* in this manner because this is how it is spelled in the day-to-day. Under the UNGEGN system, it would be transliterated as *bang*.
Cheut Chhueng	ជើតឈឹង	A musical work from the classical repertoire that accompanies walking and frolicking.

Cheut Chab	ជើតចាប់	A musical piece from the classical repertoire that accompanies conflict, tension, and battle. It means walking to catch or capture something.
Chol Vong	ចូលវង់	To enter the circle in a literal sense. In Khmer music, it is a colloquial phrase to form an ensemble, acknowledging that the formal organization of a Khmer music ensemble historically is arranged in the shape of a circle or half-circle.
Chongvak	ចង្វាក់	The rhythmic beat or pulse of the music.
Chnai	ច្នៃ	To modify, craft, design, and innovate. There is no direct translation for *chnai* but it evokes a sense of ingenuity and creativity.
Dai Cheip	ដៃជីប	A Khmer classical dance gesture that involves flexing the thumb and index finger together at the middle joint so that they converge and diverge at that point. The remaining fingers are flexed and splayed outwards. This gesture is reminiscent of the bird of paradise flower and its bird-like plumage.
Dai Khuong	ដៃខួង	A Khmer classical dance gesture where the thumb holds the middle finger in tension, forming a circle. The remaining fingers are flexed outwards and away as much as possible.
Dai Stuoy	ដៃស្ទួយ	A Khmer classical dance gesture where the arm(s) is raised in front of the body. The upper arm forms a 90-degree angle relative to the body and bends at the elbow to form another 90-degree angle. The wrist is also bent at a 90-degree angle with the inside of the wrist facing towards the body. The fingers are flexed, hyperextended, and held together in a curl, pointing away from the body.

		The thumb is relaxed and bent at the knuckle pointing upwards.
Dai Vong	ដៃវង់	A Khmer classical dance gesture where the arm(s) is raised out in front of the body. The upper arm starts at a 90-degree angle relative to the body. There is a slight upward bend at the elbow. This should be an obtuse angle ranging from 135-degrees to 150-degrees. At the wrist, the fingers curve back towards the body with the fingertips in line with and pointing to the eye or eyebrow.
Kbach	ក្បាច់	Style or ornamentation. It refers to architectural patterns and designs as well as gestures and movements of Khmer dancers.
Kbach Bat or Kbach Bat Cha Banhchoh	ក្បាច់បាត ឬក៏ ក្បាច់បាតឆាបញ្ចុះ	Kbach Bat or Kbach Bat Cha Banhchoh refers to the foundational gestures and movements of Khmer dance. Performed as an offering during *sampeah kru*, Kbach Bat teaches the fundamental gestures and movements for each role: male, female, monkey, and demon/giant. Kbach Bat Cha Banhchoh derives its name from the music *cha* or *khaki mon pii choan* and *banhchoh* or *rev*. It is a shortened version of Kbach Bat for male and female role that primarily uses those two pieces of music, adding *lea* or exit music to the end.
Khaik mon pii choan	ខែកមន ២ជាន់	Another name for *cha*. See *kbach bat cha banhchoh*.
Khoum Vean	ឃុំវៀន	A musical work from the classical repertoire that is played for Robam Buon Bat and other dance-dramas that accompanies dancers as they enter the stage.
Kong	គង	A generic term for any gong instrument. Colloquially refers to the circle of horizontally suspended

		knobbed gongs on a rattan frame. There are two sets in a Khmer music ensemble: the small set and large set.
Kongbey	កង់បី	A three-wheel rickshaw; kong meaning wheel and bey meaning three. These motorized vehicles are used as a taxi.
Khloy	ខ្លុយ	A vertical, end-blown bamboo flute with seven finger holes on the front and one hole on the back.
Khmer	ខ្មែរ	Khmer refers to the ethnic group located in mainland Southeast Asia and concentrated in Cambodia. It is primary language spoken in Cambodia. This term is often interchangeable with Cambodian, though Cambodian primarily refers to Cambodian nationality.
Krama	ក្រមា	A multipurpose checkered pattern or plaid scarf or long piece of cloth associated with Cambodian/Khmer identity.
Kru Louk Kru Nak Kru [‘nak Kru]	គ្រូ លោកគ្រូ អ្នកគ្រូ	Teacher; linguistically related to the word guru. Louk Kru: refers to a male teacher. Nak Kru: refers to a female teacher.
Kru Thum	គ្រូធំ	Literally translates to Big Teacher and refers to master teacher.
Lea	លា	To exit. In Khmer classical music and dance, it is the music performed when character(s) leave the stage.
Lkhaon Khaol	ល្ខោនខោល	Genre category for the male masked dance-drama featuring performances of the Reamker/Ramayana.
Louk Ta	លោកតា	Grandfather. Also, a term for the highly revered master spirit and creator of the Khmer arts.
NATYARASA	នាដ្យរស	Male dancer. Dramatic. It refers to the importance of conflict between characters to generate meaning, value, and emotions.

		Under the UNGEGN system, it would be transliterated as *neadyrosa*. However, I follow Ok's convention when I refer to his dance company.
Nead Neadakar Neadaka	នាដ នាដករ នាដកា	Dance, dancing, ballet. Dancer (male). Dancer (female), ballerina. Ballet and ballerina refers to Khmer classical dance and dancers and how Khmer classical court dance is translated as the Royal Ballet of Cambodia *robam boran* or *robam preah reach tropy*.
Phlov	ផ្លូវ	Road, street, path, way. In Khmer music, it refers to how the music is ornamented with trills, mordents, turns, or sustains that indicate lineages of instruction. For Khmer dance, it refers to how a gesture and movement is completed or specific choreographic changes and elements that reflect specific lineages of instruction. Highly trained musicians and dancers can identify who studied from who by assessing the stylistic elements of how someone plays music or dances set choreographed works.
Pin peat	ពិណពាទ្យ	The Khmer classical music ensemble performed at ceremonies including *sampeah kru* or *thvay kru*. It features a mixture of wind and percussive instruments including the *samphour*, *sralai*, *kong*, and *roneat*. Under the UNGEGN system and all other systems for transliteration, *pin peat* would be transliterated as *pin peaty*. However, it is most commonly written as *pin peat* by scholars.

		Additionally, the subscript letter that would imply a “y” is archaic and never pronounced.
Piruoh	ពិរោះ	An adjective to describe sounds as melodious and pleasant or pleasing to the ear.
Pu	ពូ	Uncle or an older male who is approximately the same age as their father or around the age when people are seen as fathers.
Rev	រ៉ែវ	See *banhchoh*.
Robam Robam Boran, or Robam Preahreachtropy	របាំ របាំបុរាណ ឬក៏ របាំព្រះរាជទ្រព្យ	Dance. Generally referring to all dance genres and practices but primarily Khmer dance. Khmer classical dance is referred to as *robam boran* or *robam preahreachtropy*. The word *robam* precedes the specific name of each dance.
Robam Apsara Robam Buong Suong Buong Suong Preahmn Robam Buon Bat Robam Chun Por Robam Phuong Neari Robam Preah Thaong	របាំអប្សរា របាំបួងសួង បួងសួងព្រហ្មណ៍ របាំបួនបទ របាំជូនពរ របាំភួងនារី របាំព្រះថោង	*Robam Apsara*, *Robam Buong Suong* (prayer dance), R*obam Buong Suong Preahmn* (a version of *buong suong* excerpted from *Roeang Preah Enao Bossaba)*, *Robam Chun Por* (blessing dance), *Robam Phuong Neari* (bouquet of women dance), *Robam Buon Bat* (dance of four songs), and *Robam Preah Thaong* (the first dance of four in *Robam Buon Bat*). *Robam Buon Bat* includes four of the oldest melodies in Khmer classical music and can be performed as a part of the *buong suong* ceremony.
Roeang	រឿង	Dance-Drama. Refers generally to theatrical works and precedes the title of a work (e.g. *Roeang Preah Enao Bossaba*).
Roneat Ek	រនាតឯក	The lead xylophone in Khmer folk and classical music. In the *pin peat* ensemble, it is one of the leaders of the ensemble, often opening pieces. It has 21 keys suspended over a resonator and a three-octave range.

Rout	រោទ៍	A musical piece from the classical repertoire that typically signifies a change or transition on stage. There are multiple types of rout, including shortened versions or versions of rout that are related to magical power.
Sahasamay	សហសម័យ	Contemporary. It is a term mainly used in the arts as a genre classifier for performance, media, and visual art. The word is derived from *sa-ha* meaning united or one and *samay* meaning time, period, or era. It reflects the combination of prefix "co" meaning together and Latin root "temporalis" meaning time.
Samleng	សម្លេង ឬសំឡេង	Voice and sound.
Sampeah	សំពះ	A traditional gesture of greeting, saying goodbye, and way of demonstrating respect in Cambodia where people place their palms together in front of their body. There are five versions that correspond to hierarchies of age, social class, familial relationships, and religious prayer.
Sampeah kru	សំពះគ្រូ	A ritual ceremony that honors teachers and Louk Ta. It establishes a spiritual continuity between the past, present, and future, drawing attention to lineage and recognizing the importance of Louk Ta. These ceremonies vary in length depending on the repertoire performed. Shortened versions may be called thvay kru.
Sampot Sampot Chong Kben	សំពត់ សំពត់ចងក្បិន	A large rectangular fabric worn as a wraparound skirt. Sampot Chong Kben is a large rectangular fabric that is knotted at the waist, rolled into a tail, passed between the legs, and wrapped around a belt or waistband. It gives the

		appearance of wrapped pants that extend to right below the knees.
Samphour	សម្ពោរ	A double-headed barrel drum made of wood, rattan, and leather hide. The centers of each head are pained with a black paste that gives the drum its pitch and sound. It plays in the *pin peat* ensemble and controls the tempo of the music while accompanying the dancers on stage. Historically, it had a stronger leadership role but often serves as accompaniment in the present. During *sampeah kru* ceremonies, it receives a separate set of offerings that indicate its spiritual significance in Khmer music.
Sathukar	សាធុការ	An important and sacred music work from the classical repertoire that invokes the celestial deities and ancestor spirits as well as honors the teachers. It is an essential part of Khmer rituals such as the sampeah kru and usually opens a performance or ritual event.
Skor	ស្គរ	Drum. Refers to a broad category of drums and usually precedes the name of a specific type of drum in formal settings.
Smeu	ស្មឺ ឬក៏ស្មើរ	A musical piece from the classical repertoire that marks the arrival of an important or major character.
Sralai	ស្រឡៃ	A quadruple-reed oboe with seven holes on the front and one on the back. It has a slight conical shape with a center bulge that has sixteen concentric rings along the circumference. It is played in the *pin peat* ensemble and accompanies Khmer kickboxing.
Tevoda	ទេវតា	Celestial deities and angels. Derived from Sanskrit.
Thmei	ថ្មី	Adjective for new.

Thvay Kru	ថ្វាយគ្រូ	See *sampeah kru*.
Tveu	ធ្វើ	To do or make.
Tumneub	ទំនើប	Adjective for modern or modernity.
Tuk Tuk	តុកតុក	A small trailer pulled nowadays by a motorcyclist. Also referred to as a remorque. See also kongbey.