

# Life After/Ward:

  

## Recovering Life After Social Death in Post-Genocide Cambodia

Khatharya Um

*That which wounds me has no name- Rithy Panh<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Rithy Panh and Christophe Bataille, *The Elimination* (New York: Other Press, 2013), 4

## Introduction

When asked if he ever dreams of his tortured victims, Kaing Guek Eav, better known by his *nom de guerre* “Duch,” who oversaw the Tuol Sleng S-21 extermination center where at least 12,000 people were tortured and killed, said unequivocally: “No. Never.”<sup>2</sup> The survivors of the genocidal regime of which he was a leading figure, however, are not afforded that luxury. Over four decades in the aftermath, in Cambodia and in the diaspora, genocidal haunting continues to torment not only the survivors but also the postgenocide generations. In commemoration of the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Khmer Rouge genocide during which almost a quarter of the country’s population perished in less than four years, this paper reflects on the afterlife of genocide. It illuminates the ways in which genocidal haunting continues to unfold in the postgenocide everyday, and the struggles of Cambodians to make meaning of, and work through, this historical trauma. Attentive to the gaps and tensions between state rhetoric and survivors’ agency, it interrogates the possibilities and limits of international tribunals in delivering justice, reconciliation and, above all, healing in the genocide aftermath, and reflects on acts of repair, big and small, public and private, that individuals and communities have undertaken to transcend, if not heal, this collective wounding.

At another level, the questions raised in this paper are also meant to invite contemplation about the wider implications of the Cambodian tragedy that, despite its extremism, displays features not uncommon in our time. Wars, mass atrocities, degradation, and acts of dehumanization prevail in all corners of the world. While slavery purportedly has been abolished, today there are 40 million estimated modern-day slaves worldwide,<sup>3</sup> with 600,000-800,000 individuals trafficked annually, many in and from conflict areas. Whether it is about the Khmer Rouge forced labor camps, or enslaved workers on fishing vessels, what threads through these instances is the question of the human and, correspondingly, the structures of power that render some peoples and groups less human or even nonhuman, hence less deserving of life—even bare life— and disposable. The multi-scalar dislocations of war, mass atrocity, ecological destruction, and dehumanizing conditions call for a nuanced and deeper understanding not only of the forces and factors that create these conditions but of the consequences, the life beneath the rubbles, and the ways in which individuals and communities excavate futurity from historical ruination. Though saturated with statistics and information, we still have little insight, and even less understanding, of what it means “to lose one’s world,”<sup>4</sup> as Veena Das puts it, to rebuild life and sociality after social death. How then do we mine the debris for insights into these experiences that can help us fill in, however inadequately, the lacunae of official historical accounts? What floats to the surface and what remains buried under the sediments of other traumas? How do we break through the barriers that genocidal encounters have created in the muted silence as well as in speech that stifles the silence beneath? How do we hear silence? What indeed is the role of speech and silence, of stories and secrets, in our postgenocide afterlives? How do we not forget, yet heal, and what does healing look like in a world unmade?

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<sup>2</sup> Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> International Labor Office, “Global Estimate of Modern Slavery,” Geneva 2017

<sup>4</sup> Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

## The Wound: Genocidal Ruination

During the Khmer Rouge trials, International Deputy Co-Prosecutor William Smith stated “the CPK leaders established the first slave state of the modern era...(that) operated as an ongoing and continuous criminal system of persecution, enslavement, forced transfer, forced labor, inhumane treatment, and murder.”<sup>5</sup> Since the fall in 1979 of Democratic Kampuchea as the country was renamed, much has been written about the extremism of the Khmer Rouge regime, in terms of both the stated policies and their yet to be acknowledged consequences. In less than four years, over one million of the country’s seven million population perished from state manufactured starvation, executions, and deprivation-related illnesses. Virtually an entire generation was decimated, leaving the country in the immediate aftermath of genocide with a very young population and a marked gender imbalance, as more men had perished, particularly through execution. For a culture that is based largely on oral tradition, deaths and disappearances of almost one quarter of the population created a rupture in memory and traditions. It took decades for the small handful of the nation’s surviving artists and artisans to reassemble and suture cultural memories and revive the country’s traditional arts and crafts. If a nation’s future is contingent upon its ability to tap into its cultural repository, what does it mean to grow up without elders, with no vessels in which historical and cultural memories are contained, preserved, and bequeathed? What does it mean to grow up without memories other than that of the killing fields?

The catastrophic loss of human lives is underscored by the systematic dehumanization that the regime utilized as instrument of governmentality, subjecting the populace to a state of being where “every instant is cruel.”<sup>6</sup> From summary executions, to torture, to being disappeared for the slightest transgressions such as picking up a half-eaten fruit or breaking a farm implement, and subjection to the institutionalized rape of Khmer Rouge forced marriage and other forms of violence, state terror was wielded with impunity against those the regime deemed to be without rights (*khhmean sit*). In this state of manufactured deprave deprivation that epitomized the Agambean *bare life*, “nothing’s more real than nothing.”<sup>7</sup> As with other forms of “new slavery” in which “slaveholders get all they can out of their slaves, and then throw them away,”<sup>8</sup> the enslaved populace of the Khmer Rouge terror state was even less valued than human chattel. In the construction of an ideologically pure society, some people or class of people were regarded as disposable nonhumans whose permitted existence was contingent solely on their usefulness to *Angkar* (the Organization); the regime was unequivocal about those it deemed useless: “to keep you is no gain, to destroy you is no loss.” In this “zone of nonbeing,”<sup>9</sup> victims, as former S-21 guards would describe them, are like “pieces of wood,” “half human and half corpse,” whom their torturers were not afraid to hurt. Considered “soulless, like animals,” there was little thought given to actual or moral repercussions to harming them. In death as in living, the victimized populace was stripped of their dignity as human beings. The Khmer term “*samlab*

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<sup>5</sup> ECCC, E1/231.1, Public Transcripts of Trial Proceedings, 21 October 2013: 63, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/document/court>

<sup>6</sup> Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Dominique Eugene and Ani Kalayjian, *Mass Trauma and Emotional Healing Around the World*, (Denver: Praeger, 2010), 272.

<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 2.

*chaol*” (killed and discarded) references not just the act of killing but also of objectification and dismissal, a state of abandonment that is eloquently eulogized in the commemorative work of two survivor-artists:

In the silence of the forest,  
With none to trust you’ll be alone,  
With wild beasts who grunt and groan,  
There you’ll be thrown away, too <sup>10</sup>

Violence has its own temporality, for as Galtung notes “a violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind and the spirit.”<sup>11</sup> Under the Khmer Rouge terror regime intent on destroying all that it deemed subversive, the nation was torn asunder not just structurally but culturally, spiritually, and metaphysically. Beyond the physical loss, the systematic destruction of key pillars of Khmer identity and social cohesion – family, village community, religion – left a tear in the social fabric of the nation. Death, separation, forced removal, surveillance, and denunciations erode trust and relational bonds, leaving a sense of alienation that continues to mark the genocide afterlife. Centering social death in the discourse of genocide, as such, forces our gaze away from the spectacular towards the loss of all things that make for social coherence and cohesion.<sup>12</sup> Even less legible are the enduring psychosocial effects of terror, deprivation, and dehumanization on identity, self-esteem, and psyche that persist long after the violent encounter. The wounded soul– *bak sbat* (broken spirit)– is the afterpain that remains long after the body has healed. In his autobiography, Rithy Panh, an Oscar-nominated filmmaker and survivor, reflected on his dislike for the “overused word “trauma,” noting that “what wounds me has no name.”<sup>13</sup>

### Living with the Wound

More than the destruction of lives, homes, and institutions, genocide is world shattering, a voiding of meaning and relevance in one’s relationship with the world that leaves in its wake an ontological crisis. As Veena Das puts it

unlike a sketch that may be executed on a different scale from the final picture one draws, or that may lack all the details of the picture but still contain the imagination of the whole, the fragment marks the impossibility of such an imagination. Instead, fragments allude to a particular way of inhabiting the world, say, in a gesture of mourning.<sup>14</sup>

Of living with trauma, Panh notes: “When you have gone through a history like mine, you cannot really be assuaged. There is something broken in us forever.”<sup>15</sup> For Panh, orphaned by the

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<sup>10</sup> Sophy Him, *Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia* (musical score), 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Johan Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990), 294.

<sup>12</sup> Claudia Carr “Genocide and Social Death” *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 18, no.1 (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Das, *Life and Words*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Marcos Uzal, “Rithy Panh: Je Travaille Comme Un Archeologue,” *Liberation*, 20 June, 2019.

genocide at 13 years old, as it is for many survivors, the afterlife is unhyphenated, with the past and the present cohabiting a temporality that has been warped by the violent encounter. As he puts it “if I close my eyes, still today, everything comes back to me,” “this extreme violence is in us, we suffered it...we had already died once, but we keep this death in us”<sup>16</sup> resonating with Charlotte Delbo’s writing of “dying again, the death of those who died.”<sup>17</sup> The death references here is not just the physical losses but also the moral and social deaths from which survivors struggle to return. Bonna, a survivor-refugee, echoed the sentiment: “it has been more than 30 years, almost 40 years, but I still dream that I am in the Pol Pot regime.”<sup>18</sup>

While for some survivors, what torments them are the sacrifices and moral compromises they were forced to make in exchange for survival, for others, it is the shame and guilt over the sacrifices that others—parents, siblings, spouses— have had to make for them, the debt that can never be repaid— that haunt them in the genocide afterlife. Disappearances and mass graves further impair mourning by denying survivors of a sense of finality and the ability to fulfill their tradition-sanctioned obligations. A woman whose husband was buried alive by the Khmer Rouge said: “For 27 years, I did not return to that site. It was so brutal. It was only when my son said “Mom, let’s go get Father.’ People showed us the grave, but there were 30 people in there. How can you find anyone?”<sup>19</sup> In a culture where the performance of requisite funereal rites is essential for the transmigration of the soul, the inability of surviving kin to carry out the duties of assisting their loved ones on their final journey left them with an festering sense of guilt. For many survivors, it is these unfulfilled obligations, both in life and in death, that perpetuate the suffering, keeping not only the dead but also the living in liminality, both unable to make the final passage to their respective afterlives.

Genocidal haunting thus “attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary.”<sup>20</sup> In Cambodia, the wound is pricked by daily confrontation with the historical injury that has fundamentally altered the country’s social and physical landscape and survivors’ relationship to it. The spatial and embodied legacies of violence “hidden in plain sight,”<sup>21</sup> – the rice fields and village ponds that yield life’s bounty as well as mass graves, the perpetrator who continues to live in the village with impunity, the child born of Khmer Rouge forced marriage, the ancestral home now occupied by strangers— all provoke an ontological question of what it means “to pick up the pieces and to live in this very place of devastation.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Therry Cruvellier, “Rithy Panh: Living The Experience Of Genocide In Body And Soul,” November 27, 2018, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.justiceinfo.net/en/39596-rithy-panh-living-the-experience-of-genocide-in-body-and-soul.html>

<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995)

<sup>18</sup> Chenda Hong “Khmer Rouge Survivors Create ‘Bangsokol’ to Offer Hope, Warning,” *VOA*, December 24, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Khatharya Um, personal communication, March 30, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Das, *Life and Words*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> James Tyner, Gabriela Alvarez and Alex Colucci, “Memory and the everyday landscape of violence in post-genocide Cambodia,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 13, no 8 (2012), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Das, *Life and Words*, 6.

Looking at genocidal violence not as an event but as a historicized and continuously unfolding process<sup>23</sup> allows us not only to trace the shock waves of trauma but also other manifestations of violence that mark the “before” and the “after” lives. The temporality of trauma, as such, is not only inflected by proximate distance from the historical encounter but also by the ways in which trauma moves, evolves, and is compounded by other encounters. The layering of traumatic experiences that is often overlooked in conflict discourse is poignantly captured in the reflections of this survivor: “my life has always been about suffering since I was born.” For many Cambodians, the Khmer Rouge period—vernacularly referred to as *samay a Pot* (Pol Pot’s time)—was a phase, albeit one of unprecedented extremism, in a longer continuum of historical violence, extending from colonial conquest, foreign occupation, royal absolutism, an unacknowledged American war that eventually acquired a fratricidal feature, and the afterwar brutalization at home, in the refugee camps, and in unsettlement in blighted inner cities of the West.

It is in this context that the notion of *post* in the term “postgenocide” that I deploy in this paper refers temporally to the period after the genocide but one that is still marked by that injurious encounter, hence connoting not an *after* but a *through and beyond* the immediacy of genocide.<sup>24</sup> It is an “afterward” in a temporal plane where the before and the after are at once demarcated and non-traversable, yet bleed into each other in unresolved tension. Survivors have described their existence as having “one body, two lives,”<sup>25</sup> at once ruptured and bound by spectral haunting. The ‘after/ward, as such, is fractured, mediated and inflected, with the past watermarked onto the present, simultaneously imprinted, filtered yet legible. Unlike the “passing landscape from a moving train” analogy that Freud applies to recall, genocidal violence freezes time. Mrs. Ung Bun Hor laments: “My life stopped the day my husband was handed over.”<sup>26</sup> Of his own inability to move beyond this history, Rithy Panh reflected “I felt my whole life was already behind me, that it belonged to those years of struggle for survival.”<sup>27</sup> For Panh, the fragments that remain manifest themselves as “an unending desolation; as ineradicable images, gesture no longer possible, silences that pursue”<sup>28</sup> – the hauntings of unfulfilled obligations, unuttered last words, and absence that torment survivors, and through them, the generations after. Joy and fulfillment are always mediated by memories of the past, often by the absence of kin with whom they could be shared. The silence of abject loss, of aloneness, is deafening in a land where virtually no one emerged unscathed from the genocide.

Elie Wiesel once noted that “there are zones of silence; there are shades of silence. Silence has its own archeology, its own memory, its own colors; it’s dark and gray and long and

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<sup>23</sup> Cecilia Menjivar, “Violence and Women’s Lives In Eastern Guatemala: A Conceptual Framework,” *Latin American Research Review* 43, no 3, (2008).

<sup>24</sup> Tyner, Alvarez and Colucci, *Memory*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Um, *From the Land of Shadows*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 188.

<sup>26</sup> Jon Henley, “Thirty years on, the nightmare of Pol Pot’s terror haunts a widow in a Paris suburb,” *External Players*, January 26, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Rithy Panh, “Cambodia: A Wound That Will Not Heal”, *UNESCO Courier*, December 1999, 38

<sup>28</sup> Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 3.

short and harsh and soft. Silence is the universe itself.”<sup>29</sup> The silence that hovers in many Cambodian homes is both externally imposed and internally induced, both equally damaging. Often, both parents and children seek to shield each other from the pain of remembering with a veil of silence. As it is with guilt and shame that are not to be taken as pathological but rather as natural protective responses to historical trauma,<sup>30</sup> silence, like speech, is laden with meaning—at times, reflecting suppression and subjugation, and others, resistance and willful acts of self-determination. The inability to speak about the traumatic experiences is paired with the unwillingness to speak. We often talk about silence and speech, and rarely about secrets. Some stories, however, are not meant to be told. What do we do with them?

Both violence and its consequences manifest a gendered feature that is often obscured by the flattening of conflict and postconflict discourse. The enduring effects of gender-related violence, including the inability to function in everyday life, are well documented.<sup>31</sup> Among Cambodian Americans, trauma-induced hysterical blindness affected mostly women. The intimate violence of Khmer Rouge forced marriage has left thousands of women with decade-long anguish of remembering those experiences, of mourning the irretrievable loss of maidenhood and a chance at a real wedding “with elders, traditional music, and *pka sla*” (the areca flowers used in wedding rituals) and of the self to the sacrifices for survival.<sup>32</sup> The violated being, now radiated with “poisonous knowledge”<sup>33</sup> they were forced to ingest, is muted in the process of holding on to a secret past that could destroy any chance at a future. Silence becomes a culturally prescribed strategy for safeguarding dignity, for even with this world-shattering experience, society hangs steadfastly to its prejudices; “women are like spun cotton, once stained, can never again be pristine.” Both speech and silence, as such, are not only experientially but also culturally inscribed in their weight and meaning. In recognizing the potency of silence, it is thus necessary to acknowledge that silence, like the knowledge that it holds, is both a poison and a cure. In the re-assemblage of the afterlife, paradoxes, contradictions and misalignment co-exist in resigned tension.

### The Precarious Afterlife

Discourse on historical trauma often focuses on what had transpired in the past as if it is containable to the past, with insufficient attention to the malignant aftereffects that inform the ways in which survivors think about the past, and the prospect of repair. In a country that currently ranks in the bottom 127 of 128 countries in terms of the rule of law, where former Khmer Rouge are found from the village level to the zenith of government, the genocidal past is in the present. Fear of local authorities and former perpetrators, and concerns about security were the top reasons given for victims’ reluctance to testify at the Extraordinary Chambers in the

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<sup>29</sup> Heidi Anne Walker, “How and Why I write: An Interview with Elie Wiesel,” *The Journal of Education*, 162, no. 2 (1980), 60.

<sup>30</sup> See Eugene and Kalayjian. *Mass Trauma*.

<sup>31</sup> See Helen Leslie, “Healing the psychological wounds of gender-related violence in Latin America: A model for gender-sensitive work in post-conflict contexts” in Caroline Sweetman, *Gender, Development and Humanitarian Work*, Oxfam, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Bophana Center, *Transmissions 2018* (Oral History Project), accessed March 12, 2021, <http://bophana.org/events/transmissions-2018/>

<sup>33</sup> Das, *Life and Words*, 2006.

Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).<sup>34</sup> The culture of impunity is shored up by new transgressions. Illegal concessions, forced evictions carried out by powerful elites, militarized dispossession of the poor and vulnerable, and extrajudicial killings engender new forms of precarity in post-genocide Cambodia. For Sophany Bay, a civil party to the Khmer Rouge trials, the one compelling lesson of the past is for the “leaders of Cambodia to stop using the law of the jungle...not to copy the leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime,” otherwise “the people of Cambodia...cannot find peace in mind.”<sup>35</sup>

Violence is also experienced in the quotidian struggle of surviving families. The different encounters with violence are integrally linked and mutually constitutive as micro level violence is tied to and aggravated by the more overarching structures of unequal relations that implicate new formations of power and dominance, and the neo-coloniality linked to global capital. At the establishment of the tribunal, some 40% of Cambodia’s rural population, and as high as 64% in some provinces, were mired in poverty. An estimated 28% of the population are landless, and 47% own less than the minimum needed for subsistence.<sup>36</sup> This percentage is much higher among women and female-headed household as nearly 50% of all war widows do not have access to any land.<sup>37</sup> Land disputes continue to be the country’s leading affliction, and forced evictions continue to plague many rural communities as only about 20 percent of land owners in Cambodia hold secure land titles.<sup>38</sup> Other indices of precarity such as limited access to education, clean water and basic sanitation are also registered.<sup>39</sup> Genocide orphans, widows, and those physically and mentally destroyed by state terror, are left especially vulnerable socially and economically in the aftermath of genocide. Crushing poverty resulting from the fracturing of families is a recurrent theme raised by the civil parties at the Khmer Rouge trials. Sophea, the child of a survivor, spoke to the transgenerational impact of genocide: ‘It has been 30 years and I cannot lift myself out of poverty because I do not have a father.’<sup>40</sup> Mrs. P.T. whose husband was killed at Tuol Sleng spoke of the social vulnerability of widowhood in Cambodia: “It is not easy to be a widow...Khmer men are terrible...They said all sorts of things. But I am not afraid of them.”<sup>41</sup>

In the diaspora as in Cambodia, the precarity of the genocide afterlife deters healing. For Cambodian refugees, the exiled life perpetuates the historical trauma as refugees see the loss of home, country and self-determination as the direct consequence of war and genocide. Genocidal fractures are compounded by the dislocations of flight, precarious settlement, and what I have referred to as *refugitude*<sup>42</sup> - the conditions, feeling, and consciousness of being a

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<sup>34</sup> Michaela Raab and Julian Poluda, “Justice for the Survivors and for Future Generations,” ADHOC’s ECCC/ICC Justice Report, European Commission and Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> UCA News, “Voiceless of Asia: Portrait of a Khmer Rouge Survivor, January 31, 2019, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://www.ucanews.com/video/portrait-of-a-khmer-rouge-survivor/84393>.

<sup>36</sup> Open Development Cambodia, *Social Land Concessions*, August 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Transparency International, *Landlessness and Land Conflicts in Cambodia*, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> The World Bank, *Cambodia Rural Sector Strategy Note: Towards a strategy for rural growth and poverty reduction*, June 2005, 32, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview>

<sup>39</sup> UNDP, “2018 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index,” accessed March 2021, <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/turkey/CBYE/MPI%202018%20FlyerEN.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Sovann Mam, *Beyond the Khmer Rouge Tribunal*, Cambodia Working Paper Series, Swisspeace, July 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Khatharya Um, personal conversation, Phnom-Penh, March 10, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Um, *From the Land*, 213.

refugee. Among Cambodian female refugees admitted into the US over a quarter were genocide widows. An equal proportion of the refugee population lived in single female headed households where socio-economic vulnerability was most concentrated. With over 19%, and as high as 41% in the urban areas of Cambodian Americans continuing to live at or below poverty line,<sup>43</sup> the struggle to patchwork life, family, and community, and survive in a foreign land, with little resources, often without kin support, further denied many refugees the luxury of mourning. The cacophony of the postgenocide everyday muffles resurgent memory. Grippled by the spectral past, and marginalized by the inhospitable present, many survivors remain mired in liminality. Decades in the aftermath, a survivor and civil party in the Khmer Rouge trials reflects “I never dream about my life in United States. All I dream about are stories in the...Pol Pot regime. Sometimes I have nightmare. I scream at night.”<sup>44</sup> With grief buried under the imperative of survival, commemorative moments such as the performance of *Bangsokol, A Requiem for Cambodia*, the first major symphonic work to commemorate the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians, provide a needed and rare reprieve, a time to just “sit still for one moment.”<sup>45</sup> It is these lived realities and the heroism of the quotidian that compel a re-envisioning of agency, not as a demonstration of an extra-ordinary act, a rising above the ordinary, but rather as simply choosing to re-enter and reclaim ordinariness.

### The Politics of Remembering

Discourse of justice, reconciliation, and healing must take into account the prevailing realities that undermine the process. In a country where the current leadership is entangled with its tragic past, genuine discourse outside of state sanctioned narratives is further stifled by state appropriation of the space of remembering. Rather than a time for reconciliation, the national day of commemoration was long proclaimed as the Day of Anger. While denial of Khmer Rouge atrocities, or anything interpreted by the current regime as such, is considered a crime, Prime Minister Hun Sen, himself a ranked former Khmer Rouge, pushed the country to “dig a hole and bury the past”<sup>46</sup> while a textbook on this period was not issued until 2009, three decades after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, produced not by the government but by an NGO. Strategic forgetting is also imposed over Vietnam’s decade-long occupation of Cambodia following the genocide that remains today an unwritten and largely unspoken history, one that is tied to the genesis of the current regime in Phnom Penh. In effect, Cambodia’s tragic history has been politicized by all the major forces implicated in it. None—neither the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders nor other parties to the tragedies— had ever acknowledged their responsibilities.

Imperfect and fraught with perilous connotations, the term “autogenocide,” as such, is deployed here not to divest external players’ responsibilities for Cambodia’s tragedies; the roles of the US, France, China, Vietnam, and Western scholars who supported the Khmer Rouge are well documented in other studies. It is used here to underscore the particularity of the Cambodian genocidal experience that, I argue, bears implications for remembering,

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<sup>43</sup> PEW Research Center, “US Cambodian population living in poverty, 2015,” September 8, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Agustina Calatayud, Vener Macaspac, Rosa Maria Matinez, et al, *In Search of Justice*, (Berkeley: Rotary Center for International Studies, July 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Joshua Barone, “Genocide Survivors Compose a Requiem for Cambodia.” *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Kay Johnson and Kimsan Chantara, “No Trial for Defectors,” *The Cambodia Daily*, December 29, 1998.

reconciliation, and healing. Unlike the Holocaust and many other instances of 20<sup>th</sup> century mass atrocities, both the perpetrators and the majority of the victims were Khmer. That the crimes were committed in most instances by co-ethnic adds an additional layer of complexity to the Cambodian experience and contributes to the unmaking of the ordered world and of meaning that makes repair even more difficult. As evidenced by their testimonies, many survivors simply want to understand why “Khmers killed Khmers.” In effect, the attempted “othering” of the perpetrators, particularly the denial of their Khmer identity, reflects this inability to accept the reality of the intimacy of violence. As Youk Chhang, Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia and a genocide survivor puts it, “genocide is us. If we don’t embrace it, we will never be whole.”<sup>47</sup>

In the fraught landscape of postgenocide Cambodia, mourning is distorted by other politics of remembering. What to remember, who to remember, how to remember are questions that bear both inclusionary and exclusionary features. This was underscored by the controversy over the etching of names on the memorial at Tuol Sleng. While it has come to epitomize Khmer Rouge brutality, the preponderant majority of those tortured and killed at S-21 were themselves Khmer Rouge, including many high-ranking individuals responsible for mass crimes. Should a perpetrator who was later tortured and killed by his colleagues be given the same commemorative place as the 2000-some children whose only crime was to have been born to politically tainted parents? The privileging of S-21 despite its problematic genealogy is also at the center of another, albeit less known hence perhaps more disconcerting, controversy. The government’s unilateral decision to remove Séra Ing’s installation *To Those Who Are No Longer Here* from its intended place at the city center exposes the politics that continue to corrupt the process of acknowledgement and healing. Commissioned as part of the court-ordered reparations in the Khmer Rouge trials, the sculptures were designed to commemorate the forced emptying of the capital city of its two million population, a process that was recognized by the ECCC as a crime against humanity because of the brutality with which it was conducted and the extreme immiseration and loss of thousands of lives that resulted. For the artist who lost his father during that evacuation, the project was also intended to give surviving residents of the city and their families a space for mourning and remembering that is an alternative to Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek where the victims were mostly Khmer Rouge. For Séra, “this fact should not be manipulated to represent the entire genocide.”<sup>48</sup> Speaking of the implications for accountability, Youk Chhang noted “if you can remove or replace part of a legal judgment, what is the impact? It is a major loss in terms of victims’ perceptions of the power of the judgment at the ECCC.”<sup>49</sup> This decision of an already implicated state erased one of the few moments when the desiring subjectivity of Cambodian genocide victims was recognized— i.e. in the demand and forms of reparation. Victims are once again divested of their political agency, evicted from this historic process, and robbed of the voice that they were finally given by the international court.

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<sup>47</sup> Um, personal conversation, Phnom Penh, April 1 2013.

<sup>48</sup> DK Mémosis, “Séra’s memorial ‘To Those Who Are No Longer Here,’” April 1 2018, accessed January 12, 2020, <https://dkmémosis.wordpress.com/2018/04/01/seras-memorial-to-those-who-are-no-longer-here/>

<sup>49</sup> Erin Handley, “Khmer Rouge Reparations Statue Quietly Removed,” *Phnom Penh Post*, January 29, 2018.

Memory work, in essence, is about power, or rather the asymmetry of power that gives form to unequal memories.<sup>50</sup> As Youk Chhang reminded us, “Cambodians had been calling for justice since the beginning. There were over 1 million petitions to bring the Khmer Rouge to trial. Most of the survivors at that time were women and most were not literate. But they were not heard so after a while they lost hope or got disillusioned.”<sup>51</sup> In the diaspora, the space for remembering is even more constricted; with the exception of Buddhist temples, diasporic mourning is essentially relegated to the confine of the homes. It took the Holocaust museum in Washington DC over three decades to host an exhibit on the Cambodian genocide. In France, with her long and painful histories with Cambodia, Sera Ing’s 2007 installation, *Aux Sans-Noms* (“To those who have no name”), in the remote suburb of Bussy-Saint-Georges was, until 2018, the only commemorative site for the French Cambodian community. The 1.75-meter-tall glass Cambodian genocide memorial that was later installed in Paris’ “Chinatown” was part of the court decreed reparations, and not a nationally initiated act of acknowledgement. All these instances of forgetting beg the question of who has the right to have memories, resources to curate, to convene, to exhibit, and transmit? Whose memories society considers important to preserve? In effect, it is this virtual absence of space for collective mourning that inspired the creation of *Bangsokol*, a requiem for remembrance and healing for individual survivors and the Khmer nation that is now bifurcated by forced dispersal.

### Acknowledgement

The obligation to make genocide violence visible thus is “not about knowing but of acknowledging,”<sup>52</sup> Repair, if not actual healing, begins with acknowledgement. Of his interview with Duch, Rithy Panh notes: “I want him to answer me...I want those who perpetrated that evil to call it by its name. I want them to talk.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly for Hong Savath who was also subjected to forced marriage and one of the 776 victims to file a complaint with the ECCC, the trials were also a moment of reckoning: “I want them to acknowledge the truth that these things actually happened during that period.”<sup>54</sup> Accountability, as Mrs. Sophy Bay, another civil party to the trials, noted is also to the dead who are not here to seek justice for themselves: “before I die I need to see justice...for my children, for my parents, for my family - if I did not see justice...I cannot close my eyes properly when I die...the spirit of my children, my parents still ask me, why I don’t try to find justice for them.”<sup>55</sup> As an expression of this multilayered accountability, a Buddhist ceremony was held at the killing grounds of Choeug Ek at the start of the Khmer Rouge trials for “the dead people to know that we are going to seek justice for them.”<sup>56</sup> For others still, knowing is their bequeathal to posterity. As one survivor pointed out: “I buried my Khmer Rouge

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<sup>50</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* (Boston: Harvard Press, 2016) 114.

<sup>51</sup> Um, personal conversation, Phnom Penh, April 1 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Das, *Life and Words*, 6

<sup>53</sup> Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*, 6

<sup>54</sup> Phnom Penh Post, “Marriage Under the Khmer Rouge: The Charge,” February 27, 2016, accessed January 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDFOo1xbr2Q>.

<sup>55</sup> UCA News, *Voiceless of Asia*.

<sup>56</sup> Inger Agger, “Calming the mind,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 52, no 4, 553.

experiences for so long and I didn't want to talk about them...This can help the young generation accept the truth that this dark regime truly happened in Cambodia."<sup>57</sup>

The quest for accountability, however, was late and unfinished. It took three decades before a Khmer Rouge tribunal was established.<sup>58</sup> While an important step towards providing accountability, the process was undermined by the limited reach of the ECCC. A hybrid court constituted of both national and international jurists, it was the result of a political compromise reached between the Cambodian government that has long resisted the idea of an international tribunal, and the United Nations whose influence it sought to restrict from the onset. As a result, the ECCC was mandated only to consider crimes committed between April 17, 1975 and January 6, 1979, leaving out atrocities that were committed before and since. The US, Vietnam, China, and France have never been held accountable for their roles in Cambodia's tragedies, though one lawsuit has been filed against the French government. Cambodian American Bonna Neang Weinstein who demanded US accountability for its saturated bombing of Cambodia that contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge noted that "The U.S. has not admitted anything and not even apologized to us."<sup>59</sup>

The ECCC was also limited to trying only the "most senior" and "most responsible" Khmer Rouge leaders, though the terms were never defined. Even with its restrictive mandate, the process was glacially slow. Since its formation in 2006, only five surviving Khmer Rouge leaders have been brought to trial, at a cost of nearly \$300 million; only three survived the decade long process to be convicted of crimes against humanity and of genocide, though the latter was only applied to crimes against ethnic Vietnamese and Chams despite the fact that the preponderant majority of those who perished were Khmer. Other known high-ranking Khmer Rouge, including Im Chaem who controlled the Phnom Trayoung prison where an estimated 40,000 died and, together with Yim Tith. is considered responsible for about 560,000 deaths,<sup>60</sup> continue to live their lives openly and with impunity. Though unfounded, Prime Minister Hun Sen has repeatedly evoked the threat of resurgent war in proclaiming an end to the trials, stating that, after these few senior leaders, "no more... I would prefer the court to fail."<sup>61</sup>

For many survivors, the justice delivered through the ECCC is abstract. Behind the faceless, nameless *Angkar*, most never even knew the name or identity of the senior leaders; the only power they encountered was that of local cadres— the guard who tortured and killed, the work team leader who drowned children in the rice field, the *chlop* (informant) whose denunciation sent entire families to their mass graves. It is from them that they wanted accountability. As Theresa de Languis points out, "who really is accountable when they see that their neighbor who was the perpetrator under the KR time is still existing happily."<sup>62</sup> In the same

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<sup>57</sup> Maryna Tkachenko, "Breaking Decades of Silence: Sexual Violence During the Khmer Rouge," Global Justice Center, May 08, 2019, accessed January 5, 2020, <http://globaljusticecenter.net/blog/1127-breaking-decades-of-silence-sexual-violence-during-the-khmer-rouge>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Chenda Hong, *Khmer Rouge*.

<sup>60</sup> Simon Parry, "For former Khmer Rouge officers accused of participating in Cambodian genocide, Christianity offers salvation," *South China Morning Post*, March 7, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> AFP, "Cambodian PM Denies Interfering with KR Court," December 2, 2009

<sup>62</sup> Phnom Penh Post, *Marriage*.

vein, as UN Special Representative Margot Wallstrom had noted, the glaring omission of sexual violence (outside of forced marriage) from the charges levied by the international tribunal left “a pool of victims without recourse to justice—and the accountability and acknowledgement it brings.”<sup>63</sup> With imperfect justice at best that could be achieved given the flawed process, lack of trust in the judicial system in Cambodia, and pressing challenges facing the country’s poor and vulnerable, 83% of Cambodians surveyed in 2010,<sup>64</sup> including survivors, felt that efforts are best directed at addressing current problems rather than past crimes. As Vann Nath, a survivor of S-21, put it “when Cambodians have real healthcare, they will have justice.”<sup>65</sup>

Though fraught with pitfalls and limitations, the belated trials nonetheless provided survivors with an opportunity to confront the once omnipotent *Angkar* who wielded impune power over their life and death with questions that had plagued them—the “why, when where, and how” of their losses—and to insist on their right to a response, hence to accountability. For many, it is a step towards self-liberation from the liminal state of not-knowing that has been the source of their emotional suffering. Even when answers are not forthcoming, as was the case for many survivors, and they are compelled to live with the unknowable, the ability to insist publicly on their right to knowing is reparative, for in asserting their rights, they are also reclaiming their humanity and sense of worth. While acknowledgement, both of the crime and the responsibility, does not necessarily yield forgiveness, it is a way for victims to also recognize the humanity of the perpetrators that is also reparative. For Rithy Panh, Duch’s acknowledgement of his crime would allow him to “take a step on the road to humanity.”<sup>66</sup> Notwithstanding Duch’s apology that commands little credence among Cambodians, acknowledgment, however, was not forthcoming from the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders.

Discourse on transitional justice often approaches justice, reconciliation and healing as if they are interchangeable. In many instances, however, they are shown to be not mutually reinforcing, and may even be conflictual, for the search for justice may interfere with reconciliation, while reconciliation may call for the burying of the traumatic past that, in turn, impedes healing. All this points to the importance of localizing what is often taken to be universal. In Cambodia where justice has been sacrificed for purported peace and stability, this ethical and moral tension converges around the question of genocidal remains. For survivors, the vast majority of whom are Buddhist, keeping the remains on display is culturally and religiously offensive as they impede the transmigration of the spirit, damning them to the perpetual liminality of entrapped souls, with grave repercussions for the living. For the tribunals, however, these are not the remains of loved ones, but “evidence” to be preserved, thus provoking the question of whether it is more important to acquire justice or to achieve healing.

Reconciliation, least of all healing, as such, remains elusive at both the interpersonal and community level in Cambodia. In a 2018 survey, almost 76% of the respondents still felt hatred towards those responsible for the atrocities and over 64% indicated they would feel

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<sup>63</sup> Margot Wallström, “The Forgotten Khmer Rouge Victims,” *Phnom Penh Post*, May 29, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Phuong Pham, Patrick Vinck, Mychelle Balthazard, et al, *So We Will Never Forget: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes about Social Reconstruction and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia* (Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley, January 2009).

<sup>65</sup> Emma Leslie, “Vann Nath Personified Cambodian Reconciliation,” *Transcend Media Service*, September 12, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Panh and Bataille, *The Elimination*.

uncomfortable if one of their children were to marry a former Khmer Rouge.<sup>67</sup> Amidst the many pressing quotidian struggles, reconciliation is not a priority for many Cambodians.<sup>68</sup> The violent present often trumps and dulls the potency of injurious memories: it is difficult to invest in the past when one can ill afford the present. As the last 3 decades have shown, however, absence of reconciliation does not necessarily imply inevitable eruption of conflict. While politics continued to thwart the quest for accountability, Cambodians have had to work through the genocidal debris and reassemble their lives. In the process, avoidance and co-existence have allowed victims and perpetrators, and those who do not fit unqualifyingly in either category, to live if not in peace at least without violent confrontations. In a study done in the early 2000s, 69% of the respondents said that they do not want to take revenge against those who killed their relatives.<sup>69</sup> This restraint is rooted in large part in the desire of Cambodian Buddhists to avoid incurring bad karma, a fear shared even by former Khmer Rouge, one of whom lamented: “How many holes of hell must I go through before I can be reborn a human being again?”<sup>70</sup> In fact, it is the search for redemption that drew many former Khmer Rouge, including Duch and Im Chaem, towards Christianity after the regime’s collapse.

Given that the injury is both to the self and to the society, the process of repair must occur at both the individual and the collective level. In fact, the Khmer term for reconciliation consists of two parts *psas* (to heal a wound) and *psar* (to reattach). Reconciliation thus necessarily involves’ not just the process that victims engage with the perpetrators but also that which they engage with their own extraordinary experience. Youk Chhang spoke of the individualized paths that Cambodians have taken towards personal healing:

Some people look at the past, others look at the present, and other still look at the future. My mother does not want the tribunal. I was angry at first but she told me to let go. She said she had let go a long time ago... My niece who has lost her parents wants nothing of Cambodia, does not even want to come back. She is looking at the present. I want the tribunal. I look at the future. No matter what is the outcome, the victims will win because the process allows them to be equal- they can protest the verdict, they can speak their mind. They are no longer victims.<sup>71</sup>

Thinking of reconciliation as a goal and a process rather than an act allows for recognition of its multifaceted, layered, and evolving nature. It also allows for consideration of the cultural and local frames in which concepts that are often assumed to be universal are necessarily situated. Discourse of forgiveness that gained resonance during the Duch’s trials, for instance, is

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<sup>67</sup> Timothy Williams, Julie Bernath, Boravin Tann et al, *Justice and Reconciliation for the Victims of the Khmer Rouge?* November 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Strasser, Thida Kim, Silke Studzinsky, et al, “A Study about Victims’ Participation at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia and Gender-Based Violence under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” *Transcultural Psychosocial Organization*, Cambodia, September 2015

<sup>69</sup> Mam, *Beyond the Khmer Rouge*, 8

<sup>70</sup> Parry, *Former Khmer Rouge*, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Um, personal conversation, Phnom Penh, April 1 2013.

often devoid of the cultural meaning that should inform understanding of its significance to those who have been wronged. Whereas mercy and forgiveness are often intricately tied in western thought, in other cultural contexts mercy can be extended for other reasons than forgiveness. Youk Chhang reflected: “I could have been vengeful...but it was my mother who taught me about the importance of not incurring bad *karma*.”<sup>72</sup> Much of the understanding of the genocide afterlife, thus, is not found in the moral binary but rather in the interstices where moving forward could occur in the absence of forgiveness and reconciliation, and even of healing.

### Transgenerational Silence, Mourning and Spirituality

Over the last four decades, politics, time, and distance from the trauma source have critically undermined the process of remembering, commemorating and transmitting this painful history, leaving Cambodians to struggle with coming to terms with this historical trauma. For the diaspora-born generations, the relationship with history and memory is even more mediated by linguistic loss and the challenges of integration that continue to overwhelm many refugee families. Historical trauma lives on transgenerationally in the form of the spectral haunting that manifests itself in startles and stutters, unfinished sentences, ellipses, and silence—fragments of history, memory, and narratives that the younger generations are left to patchwork. Speaking of postgenocide mourning, Rithy Panh reflected: “If you can't grieve, the violence continues.”<sup>73</sup> Where memory has been politicized and the spaces of remembering and commemoration appropriated by the state, Cambodians have had to work through and beyond denied spaces to mourn and memorialize privately and collectively, often below the threshold of visibility. In villages throughout the country, the many sites of violence that dotted Cambodia's countryside—a tree, an unused well, an overgrown forest clearing—are often marked by nothing more than burnt incense sticks and dried up offerings from local villagers, the unintentionally exhumed remains respectfully turned over to local monasteries for safekeeping in case of an unexpected return of a surviving kin. On family altars, yellowing photos of loved ones, time frozen reminders of youthful innocence and family bliss, register the unretreating presence of absence. These cultural narrations of mourning and repair are expressions of agency and creativity that are not always legible, and invariably assumed to be nonexistent. They are nonetheless the only ways of coping with unacknowledged grief, undelivered justice, and unattended wounds, and the few uncompromised spaces for mourning that Cambodians have over the last four decades.

For many survivors, there can perhaps be no healing, certainly no closure. At best, there is only “the moving through” and hopefully beyond. With healing, in the implied sense of a return to previous state of wholeness, virtually impossible for genocide survivors, transcendence may be the more hopeful path. Defined here not in terms of lofty spiritual enlightenment but, something more prosaic, mundane, and personal, it connotes a moving through and with the trauma, a process that acknowledges the genocide scarring, traces, and tracing that imprint themselves on the afterlife, with a hoped for arrival not at a point of a fully restored state but one where survivors will cease to be defined singularly by this historical injury.

Reflecting on post-genocide mourning, Rithy Panh noted: “We can't start mourning without knowing how, and part of knowing how is to accept something very painful, something

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<sup>72</sup> Um, personal conversation, Phnom Penh, April 1, 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Panh, *Cambodia: A Wound*, 38.

unexplainable.”<sup>74</sup> Having traversed the other-worldliness of the Khmer Rouge experience, survivors may be left with only a recognition of the absurd, not as passive submission but as active embracing of the futility of the struggle and, in so doing, transcend it. Towards that end, spirituality, and Buddhism in particular, allows them to accept that even the seemingly absurd is logical because of past deeds or unknowable divine intent. The imperative of learning to “live with this pain,”<sup>75</sup> as Panh puts it, is also a core tenet in Buddhism that monks have evoked, along with notion of impermanence, to help survivors cope with their losses. Buddhist merit-making ceremonies such as *kathen* reinforce the idea of transcendence in its investment in a different afterlife, yet another “after” to the afterlife of genocide, a futurity on a different but culturally familiar temporal plane. These village-based activities including the *pchum ben* to honor the ancestors not only provide a tradition-sanctioned and politically uncluttered space for both private and collective mourning and remembering, but also an opportunity to strengthen the sense of community that has been frayed by loss and repeated dislocations, in which survivors may find solace. The reparative potentiality of these communal engagements notwithstanding, it is also important to note that these activities themselves, with their emphasis on collectivity, can also provoke pain for survivors who are without kin, as they heighten the state of aloneness in a culture that emphasizes collectivity and belonging.

Others sought healing through imagination and creation. For composer and Khmer Rouge survivor, Him Sophy, art makes possible the re-envisioning of new possibilities: “Art like this helps us to remember the past, but also to look forward and hope for a peaceful future.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, for Him Savy, an artist who lost her father to the genocide, “music can be a medicine to heal all suffering.”<sup>77</sup> Given the decimation of 90% of the country’s artists, art is an offering both to the dead and the living, through which that which has been fractured can be made whole. Though Him Sophy’s requiem ends with the Buddhist rite for the deceased, the act of removing the shroud in *Bangsokol* can be taken as a gesture towards liberation from liminality that imprisons both the wandering souls lost between two worlds, and the living caught between the genocidal universe and the postgenocide present. : “May the pained be free from pain, may the fearful be free from fear, may the sorrowful be free from sorrow...”<sup>78</sup>

### Conclusion: The Duty to Remember

Of the genocide, Rithy Panh notes, “it is not only killing. It is also the destruction of the identity, of your dignity. Where the Khmer Rouge destroyed dignity, we must rebuild dignity... Where the Khmer Rouge destroyed identity, you must bring back identity...”<sup>79</sup> *Bangsokol*, as such, is not simply an act of remembrance but a step towards the restoration of the nation’s dignity and,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Christine Chartier, “Que La Barque Se Brise, Que La Jonque S’Entrouve.” Interview du Realisateur, Arte, October 5, 2001.

<sup>76</sup> Kristi Eaton, “A 'Requiem' for Cambodian Genocide Victims Wants to Help Bring 'Peace to the World', *NBC News*, Oct. 18, 2017

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Refrain from Him Sophy’s *Bangsokol*

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Lee, “Cambodian Americans Find Healing Through Oscar-Nominated Film,” *VOA*, March 7, 2014.

through it, the humanity of her people by reminding the world that Cambodia is not just a tragedy, but a nation that “produces complex, powerful meaningful art, and that Cambodians are in a position to tell their own stories to the world.”<sup>80</sup> For many survivors, that story is a cautionary tale against future transgressions, not just in Cambodia but worldwide. Bou Meng, one of the two oldest S-21 survivors, reflected on what justice, accountability and recuperation mean to him: “I don’t want something just for Cambodians but for the whole world. I want law to become supreme because as long as the law is not supreme, there will be injustice. I want Cambodia to become a “*komrou*” (a model) not a *komroak* (a disease). That’s what I want-not compensation-even \$1 split between the two of us (him and Chhum Mey, another S-21 survivor) would satisfy me. I am 82 years old, but I am still strong.”<sup>81</sup> Speaking of his composition, Him Sophy stated “ I wrote ‘Bangsokol’ to help bring peace to the world, today and in the future...It is important for the requiem to be shown around the world so that everyone can see that tragedy is a shared experience.”<sup>82</sup> At the performance, the audience is invited to don the white shawl symbolizing the funereal shroud that was left on each seat as a gesture of shared grief and in acknowledgement of the universality of the experience. The wider humanistic message of the requiem is noted in the public message: “While the world continues to witness new acts of genocide, war and destruction, *Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia* urges us to remember the scars of the past so that we can learn how to forge a new path in the present. It will stand as a firm and visible memorial for peace honoring all victims of violent conflict and act as a medium for societal dialogue and advocating for peace education.”<sup>83</sup>

Of the genocide memorial in Paris, Mayor Hidalgo tweeted: “What happened in #Cambodia in 1975 concerns all humanity. We must remember because nothing can be built without taking the past into account.”<sup>84</sup> Beyond the historical specificity and the extremism of state terror that was displayed under the Khmer Rouge, the conditions made manifest in Cambodia tragically have become a leitmotif of our time. The forces and structures that breed inequality, that dislocate lives and communities and divest people of their humanity continue to prevail in many parts of the world. If anything, Cambodia reminds us that seeming small “hot spots” on the global landscape can spiral into unimaginable consequences, that they are not unique but tragically widespread, including those that have transpired or are transpiring without commanding global attention, except as a postscript. It is a litmus test of our ability to resist the politics of scale and hierarchy of suffering in calibrating our moral compass, and to look at and for that which we are tempted to disregard. The poetic words of Warsan Shire remind us of the protractility and intractability of shadows that continue to sweep over our global landscape towards which our conscience should be oriented:

later that night  
I held an atlas in my lap  
ran my fingers across the whole world

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<sup>80</sup> Kristi Eaton, *A Requiem*

<sup>81</sup> Um, personal conversation, Phnom Penh, March 30, 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Cambodian Living Arts, “Bangsokol: A requiem for Cambodia”, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://bangsokol.cambodianlivingarts.org/bangsokol/>

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Andrew Nachemson, “Memorial to Khmer Rouge victims erected in Paris,” April 18, 2018.

and whispered  
where does it hurt?  
it answered  
everywhere  
everywhere  
everywhere.<sup>85</sup>

Against this refrain, historical tragedies and acts of repair, large and small, individual and collective, are contrapuntal insistence to let our imagination nurture the possibilities:

Imagine that grief has been overcome thanks to arts, cinema, music. Imagine that life is also possible after the disaster, that poetry is possible, that imagination is still alive. Also imagine the life recovered, as easy as rain, as a rice field, as a landscape without end; imagine the night with stars and each star as a soul who greets you.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Warsan Shire, "What They Did Yesterday Afternoon," Verse, 2015, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://verse.press/poem/what-they-did-yesterday-afternoon-6524900794187889060> .

<sup>86</sup> Cambodian Living Arts, *Bangsokol*

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