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Cambodian American Ethics of Identity

JONATHAN H. X. LEE

The past is irretrievable yet I can never be free from it.

—Andrew Lam (2000)

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience . . .

—Susan Sontag (2003)

Since 1975, there has been an influx of Cambodian and ethnic Chinese Cambodian refugees entering the United States. Thirty-five years later, the younger of these refugees, known as the 1.5 generation (refugees having arrived when they were knee-high), are now adults in their thirties and forties. Having grown up in America, they have married, have established families of their own, and their kids are now entering college. A common phenomenon among these Americanized Cambodian Americans is their unfamiliarity with the historical developments in Cambodia that led to their elders’ flight from their homeland. This is partly due to the elder refugees’ reluctance to talk about—and hence relive—the horrors that they faced, and partly a reflection of the quality of historical education in America’s public schools. This essay examines how 1.5-generation and second-generation Cambodian Americans learn about the Killing Fields, and how they reconcile historical awareness while constructing their sense of self. It is a reflection on what I call the “ethics of identity formation,” and an acknowledgment of Cambodia’s history and how it is deeply connected to their contemporary lives as Americans. An ethic of identity formation requires that students wrestle with the Killing Fields and their families’ histories. In the process, healing, both individual and collective, may occur. An ethic of identity formation requires that Cambodian Americans know their history, not just as Americans, but as Cambodians, thus allowing them to negotiate the multiple sources of their identity and begin the process of creating a mosaic from fractals of history and memory.

My father was born in a quiet riverside town of Kampot, to a Chinese father and Cambodian Vietnamese mother. His birth marked the fourth
generation of my paternal family lineage in Cambodia. In 1949, when my mother was nine years old, she immigrated to Phnom Penh with her family from China. I was born in Hue, Vietnam in 1976, when my family was forced to flee from Phnom Penh. Fearing for their lives, my parents gathered my sisters and brother and left. Their extended family stayed behind. None of them survived. In 1981, we came to the United States as refugees. Since then, neither of my parents have mentioned Cambodia, spoken a word of Khmer, nor talked about their families. It was not until the summer of 2002 that I became aware of my family’s history and its connection to Cambodia. I wrestle with my own subjectivity and agency as I begin to self-identity as part Cambodian. Simply saying and ascribing to being part Cambodian American was not enough for me. I proceeded to study and learn about my Cambodian history, but did so consciously and conscientiously, with deference for my parents’ feelings, and for the community that I wanted to be a part of.

History is powerful. History can be enlightening and, at the same time, dark. It can cause fragmentation and destabilize the past and present state of one’s sense of self, thus disrupting one’s present life. Therefore, many survivors, Cambodian refugees, who experience life-changing losses—material, spiritual, psychological, cultural, emotional, and physical—have willfully “forgotten” recent historical events in their lives. There are cases of survivor-refugees who willfully damaged their own eyes, choosing to become blind, so as not to confront the reality of their recent past and present state of ambivalence. Caught in the process of historical forgetting, Cambodian refugees who grew up in America, occupy an in-between space among multiple worlds. Not fully American, yet not fully Asian, their identities are fraught with complications and uncertainties. Living as subjects without historical awareness, or knowledge of their heritage and ancestry, they grow up in America with shallow roots, and an incomplete sense of self. At some point, for some, when they encounter their history, they struggle to make sense of their identity and personhood. How should they react to the historical knowledge that is newly acquired? What responsibility do they have, to history, to their family, and to themselves vis-à-vis their recent historical awareness?

This essay seeks to examine these questions. It argues that with an awareness of history, a self-conscious process of identity reflection takes place and requires ethical responses. This, in turn, informs the process by which 1.5- and second-generation Cambodian Americans transform and construct their identities in light of historical knowledge. The 1.5- and second-generation Cambodian Americans are responsible for internalizing and processing the emotional baggage that their elders have long kept hidden, not just for their own self awareness, but as a means of healing, equally at an individual, familial, and collective level. At the same time, their parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts share in the responsibility because they shape and inform the creation of Cambodian American identity. At this moment, they are forced to
confront history, and question their subjectivity, as Cambodian, as American, and as Cambodian American.

I became aware of my family’s connection to Cambodia in my early twenties, as a result of my mother’s religiosity. Most Cambodians are Buddhist, and believe that people who die and are not properly cared for after death become hungry ghosts who can potentially haunt and harm the living. According to my mother, our Cambodian family members all became hungry ghosts, and lived in America as refugees. They haunted her. They visited her dreams and followed her around.

My mother reconciled her loss and her lot in life on a basic understanding of Buddhist karma. The concept of karma is the belief that one’s actions in previous lives, and the merit that one has accumulated, determines one’s current life situation and destiny. This is also informed by the principle belief in reincarnation, the belief that every individual is at a certain stage of rebirth. Many Cambodian refugees will invoke their understanding of karma to make sense of their realities, and social inequities, injustices, and collective suffering. Poor or unfortunate people, for example, explain their unfortunate life circumstances as a consequence of their misdeeds in their previous lives. Present suffering also results from the spectral presence of hungry ghost relatives, who are awaiting their future rebirth out of hell.

To placate the hungry ghosts of the relatives who haunted my mother, she made them offerings of food, merit, material goods, and paper money. She felt that doing this in our backyard in Los Angeles, California, however, was not enough to save them. In June 2002, my mother decided to go back to Cambodia to perform merit transfer ceremonies (thvoeu bon) to deliver them all out of hell. Her success depended on the willingness of the ghosts to accompany her back to Cambodia.

In deciding to join my mother on her journey, I finally discovered that I was, indeed, part Cambodian and therefore, part Cambodian American. What does it mean to be Cambodian American, or even part Cambodian American? Traditional indicators of ethnicity like language, religion, cultural practices, and foodways that reinforce being Cambodian are foreign to me. Acknowledging and wanting to be part Cambodian American requires that I fulfill duties and responsibilities with that name. Confucians call this process the “rectification of names.” The ethics of my identity formation as part Cambodian American require that I acknowledge and fulfill my duties and obligations as a member of the community. I need to be Cambodian American, actively, not passively.

In Cambodia, I came face-to-face with death. I met survivors of the Killing Fields and heard their stories of torture and suffering. I visited the site where countless souls died, suffered, continued to suffer, and ultimately waited for
their suffering to end. The Killing Fields and its victims were not completely dead, because they continued to haunt the landscape and the lives of the living.

I went on guided tours of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum Security Prison 21 (S-21). I was struck by the ironic contrasts Tuol Sleng exhibited: the peacefulness of the sun-soaked compound with horrific exhibits on display; whitewashed classrooms, with cheery yellow and white tile floors, containing instruments of torture; the beauty of two plumeria placed on an iron bed that was once used for torture; children now playing outside the buildings with a backdrop of mug shots of past children en route to their death.

The children’s eyes in the mounted mug shots seemed to follow me as I walked through the museum. Knowing as I did—and as they perhaps did not—that every one of them was facing death when the photographs were taken, I was unnerved by these photos, these faces. As I walked through and took pictures of mug shots, of faces facing death, I insulated myself from becoming personally connected to their spirits, by viewing them through the lens of my camera. I went from one face to the next, clicking away, trying not to make eye contact with any of them. The sound of my camera clicking, of my film automatically advancing, assured me that I was safe, and that they were just faces on a wall. Why should I want to get to know these faces? Do I want to know why #399 has a friendly smirk? Could #1 be my cousin? Could #396 be my aunt with her baby? Coming face-to-face with the harrowing photographs from S-21 haunted me. I was attempting to recall the possibilities of the historical past, and the events that influenced not only my life, but the lives of my entire family. Yet at the same time, my act of remembering was based on a selective creative reconstruction of my family’s past. Questions abound. What is the ethical limit of my historical reconstruction? What role does historical authenticity play in my historical recovery? Am I projecting too much of myself and my family’s history into these mug shot photographs—these snapshots of death? Further, do I need to address the real and immediate pain of loss: my own and those represented by the photos? But, would pain impede my ability to translate the images and experiences of torture into words?

Repeatedly, I come face-to-face with the repetitive facts and faces of death. When dealing with the culture of S-21, it is tempting to rush to the conclusion that evil takes place elsewhere, that what happened was awful, and that it happened long ago to some other people. I was reluctant to come face-to-face, to become intimate, with the victims of torture. Does intimacy mean taking responsibility for death and misfortune? Does intimacy explain my parents’ survivor’s guilt?

If I now consider myself to be Cambodian and American, what are my responsibilities to history, especially to the group of Americans who identify as Cambodian Americans? By extension, what is my responsibility, not only with respect to the history of the Killing Fields, but to my own family’s
history in Cambodia? Kwame Appiah has suggested that our engagement with history, that is to say, our collective and individual identities, are responses to something outside ourselves, and are not under our control. Is my self-ascribed identification as part Cambodian American outside of my control? Does the social aspect of becoming Cambodian American require that I be a part of the Cambodian American community? Am I born a Cambodian American, or do I become one?

For many Cambodians, the reality of the Killing Fields is not history. My mother did not want to accompany me to the S-21 museum. “It’s haunted!” she said. “Why do you want to go? People died there, that’s all. It’s haunted! I don’t think you should go.” The Killing Fields are alive. It has lived in my mother’s mind, memories, and with her spirit, for 27 years. It suddenly occurred to me that it was the spectral fields and faces of dead relatives that caused her dis-ease and dis-comfort in our California home, an ocean apart, and a world away.

For decades my parents did not have a chance to properly grieve the loss of our relatives, because they were so busy just trying to stay alive—trying to keep my sisters, brother, and me alive. They had no time to grieve. Grieving was something people did when they had the luxury to do it. My parents were not able to grieve the death of my fourth sister, who died before I was born while the family was en route to refugee camps in Thailand and Hong Kong.

My mother finally had a chance to grieve the loss of our family the summer we returned to Cambodia. She experienced joy walking and eating on the streets of Phnom Penh, again, and showing me our old house. These joys were coupled with the joy of finally being able to cry. I realized grieving requires knowledge of personal histories. I never knew about the murder of my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I simply grew up never knowing them, so grieving for them seemed strange. As a Cambodian American who did not experience the Killing Fields firsthand, what do I do? How can I grieve? What are my responsibilities? To whom am I held responsible and for what?

In my early twenties, I had come to identify as being part Cambodian, and hence, part Cambodian American. How do I live as a Cambodian American? Living as a Cambodian American is a blueprint for “identity.” Therefore, to speak of living-as is to speak of identity. Nancy Smith-Hefner has argued that to be “Khmer is to be Buddhist.” Thus, to be Khmer American is to live life in America guided by Buddhist doctrines, morals, and ethics. Ethically living as a Buddhist, informs what it means to be Khmer American. But, this is not as simple as it may seem, because Khmer Buddhist morals and ethics of selflessness, compassion, and community clash with American values of individualism and materialism. Smith-Hefner points out that the collective,
The social body is key to the construction of self, identity, and ethics; this, too, is fragile in the Khmer-American community because there is a scarcity of religious institutions and monks who transmit and reinforce the moral and ethical order of Khmer sociality and society.

The “self” constructs the frame of authenticity for this life as a Cambodian American, even if it is just partial and not a fully self-ascribed identification. The (re)discovery of history thus fragments and (re)creates the authentic experience of living-as a Cambodian American. Echoing Smith-Hefner, Appiah argues, “The idea of identity has built into it a recognition of the complex interdependence of self-creation and sociability.” More importantly, Appiah also notes the role of creativity in the process of constructing one’s self-identity, saying, “... self-construction, creating one’s self-identity is a creative response to our capacities and our circumstances...” This creative response may be exemplified in Smith-Hefner’s documentation of Cambodian elders who use Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Little Buddha* to transmit Buddhist beliefs and teachings to Khmer-American children. This creativity is exemplified by Cambodian American writers, artists, and musicians who create identity through recording history in memoirs, hip-hop, and visual arts. Teri Shaffer Yamada documents how Cambodian American writers employ memoirs as a way to not only record history and tell their stories, but to transform trauma from pain and terror to socially engaged efforts to demand justice for survivors of the Killing Fields. Similarly, Cathy Schlund-Vials writes about praCh Ly, a Cambodian American hip-hop artist who employs Khmer musical styles and techniques, movies about the Killing Fields, and family narratives, to construct not only an identity as Cambodian American, but a transnational subjectivity that situates the self in a vexing position between two worlds: America and Cambodia. 1.5- and second-generation Cambodian Americans will creatively employ the works of Cambodian American writers, artists, and musicians, coupled with their own family narratives, to (re)create, (re)discover their history, and construct a self that is simultaneously consciously, and conscientiously, Cambodian and American.

The process of historical recovery for 1.5- and second-generation Cambodian Americans is marked with responsibility. Identity is defined only through things that matter: history, material condition, and social relationships. For Cambodian Americans, identity includes the history of the Killing Fields, family relationships, and emerging Cambodian American communities. The idea of finding one’s self—of discovering and recovering one’s history by means of reflection, memory work, and creative construction of self-identity—requires a careful attention to the world and one’s history. Becoming a Cambodian American necessitates confronting dark history and memories. Forgetting, or willful amnesia of history, is not an option—at least
not for 1.5- and second-generation Cambodian Americans. Perhaps active denial of painful historical events has been the only salve of the first-generation refugees, a salve that is quickly fading now that the 1.5- and second-generation Cambodian Americans are coming of age. Perhaps the new generation will be able to better lead the way to inter-generational recovery, since they did not directly face the horrors of the Khmer Rouge like their parents did, and can therefore more easily confront the past and move through it.

Since arriving in America in 1981, my father has not spoken a word of Khmer. Is his memory loss a matter of neglect, a display of non-filial behavior, or a means of a carefully crafted way to care for the self? My relationship to my father has been shaped by his relationship to history. As a teenager in Cambodia, my father was in a band, he was an artist—a photographer—carefree and creative. In America, he quietly struggled. He negotiated survivor’s guilt, destabilization and fragmentation of self, tremendous grief, and the need to care for himself and his family—quietly. To what degree, in what ways, can I comfortably and without guilt, echoing Susan Sontag, regard the pain of my father? What are the responsibilities that come with regarding that pain?

By identifying with my refugee status, and my Cambodian heritage, I am responsible for bringing to public attention the unspeakable events that occurred during the Democratic Kampuchea era. I accomplish this in the classroom, with my students. For Cambodian American students, this process is transformative: allowing history to potentially change from a source of haunting, to a source of healing, transformation, and subject-making. For my non-Cambodian students, they gain knowledge about Cambodian history and the Cambodian American experience. They cultivate empathy for individuals and communities who are trying to settle their roots on America’s soil. Once Cambodian American college students figure out the process of establishing stability and balance in their identity, they are then able to engage their parents and elders in oral history, and begin their historical recovery. In this way, old wounds are made public and, by being recognized, given a chance to mourn and hopefully heal. This allows the silent suffering to come to an end, and the acknowledgment of pain to begin. The children of this generation will discover, in turn, where they come from and thereby gain a vision of where to go in the future.

RECOMMENDED READINGS


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