

Remaining with the Khmer Rouge: Contemporary Cambodian performances addressing genocide in a post-genocide era.

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Abstract

This article examines how the legacies and experiences of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) are expressed by contemporary dancers in Cambodia. It stems from the recognition that such works do not always resort to particular performative formats for their power and effect – specifically those that rely upon testimonial forms that promote the desire for showing, documenting, witnessing and healing. This is not to deny those dynamics in these works, nor the importance of them for artistic expression, but it is to consider how creative praxis can potentially open up additional, and culturally specific, responses to a genocidal era. In particular, the article draws upon Rebecca Schneider's (2011) ideas of performing remains to argue that the multiple temporalities of history are leading some artists to express experiences of the regime through forms of performance that articulate hope for the future.

~To destroy you is no loss, to preserve you is no gain (Khmer Rouge slogan).

~To live is to hope. (Khmer proverb).

May 2014, Khmer Arts Theatre, Takhmao (field diary).

I am sat in the outdoor theatre at Sophiline Shapiro's, a short distance from Phnom Penh. The rainy season is starting; it is 40 degrees and humid. I watch Sophiline's Ensemble rehearse her production of 'A Bend in the River', an adaptation of the Cambodian folk tale Kra Peu Kaley. In the story, a giant crocodile named Moha eats a young girl called Kaley as well as her family, just as she is about to be married. In her anger at being robbed of her future, Kaley vows to avenge her family and asks to be reincarnated as a crocodile so that she can find and kill Moha. As her wish materialises, Kaley unexpectedly falls deeply in love with Moha. A local healer, Vichek Moni, warns Kaley not to take revenge, but she still kills Moha. Kaley is shocked by her actions and swims away to a beach where she sees Lupta, her former fiancé. She transforms into a human, they are reunited and dance together, but then her animal state is revealed, and the villagers act together in vengeance. Kaley must then decide whether to be killed, or to take her own life.

As with much of Sophiline's work, the piece is an allegory for Cambodia and its history. How does a nation rebuild itself in the wake of a genocide? What is the role and price of revenge? What stories of the Khmer Rouge can be told – and how are they narrated?

I sit there observing the dance techniques, the adaptations of the classical Cambodian dance lexicon that is Sophiline's language. I see the undulations of the torsos

and the circling of the hips, both of which traditionally must be fixed into a low gravity, solid, static S-bend, and how this shift is used to metaphorically reflect the rolling turbulence of both the water and Cambodia's history. I watch how the two rattan crocodiles, each composed of 5 pieces that are held and moved by dancers, embody the traditional serpentine S-shape of the mythical naga that underpins so much of classical dance movement; five dancers swiftly move in a line across the raised dais to create the impression of swimming, tracing a wave shape before circling around to fight. Yet I also see how the rattan pieces require choreographic adaptations with lunges, small side hops and jumps as the crocodiles move to fight and snap at each other. The dancers sway from side to side, arch back, producing animalistic movements that bring the crocodiles to life. I then trace moments where movement spaces are asymmetrical, where the traditional figure of 8 pattern that embodies ideals of balance and harmony feels out-of-kilter.

Later, in interview, Sophiline describes how, at the end of the Khmer Rouge, when she was 12 years old, she walked back to Phnom Penh from Battambang. The group she was with encountered some Vietnamese soldiers who had captured Khmer Rouge cadres. They asked the soldiers to turn the cadres over to them, then proceeded to hang them and machete them to death. Sophiline relays that she did not want to see this and that, "I knew then that I did not want to be that kind of person. That was not how I would take my revenge." Instead, inspired by the determination of her teachers to restore Cambodia's classical dance heritage, to bring back what Pol Pot almost destroyed, she says, "I will make the best art that I can. And that is how I will take my revenge."

The Khmer Rouge genocide (1975-1979) was a defining era in Cambodia's history. When Pol Pot's men entered Phnom Penh on 17th April 1975, they began a programme of evacuating Cambodian cities and relocating their populations to the countryside where they became forced labour in an attempt to build an agrarian socialism free from elite capitalist corruption. The torture, famine, illness and violence of the ensuing three years, eight months and twenty days, during which nearly 2 million Cambodians died, has been the subject of extensive academic and popular scrutiny (Chandler 1999; Turnbull 2006; Tyner 2008; Ngor 1987; Ung 2000). Within this, the experience of artistic destruction has been especially highlighted, as dancers were associated with royalty and thus seen as part of an educated elite who were targeted for execution. For dancers, as guardians of Cambodia's cultural heritage, the assault on the physical body was also an assault on the embodied cultural memories, practices and rituals of the past, and, indeed, it is estimated that around 90 percent of all Cambodia's artists died during Pol Pot's attempt to create 'Year Zero.' However, recent research has examined how the Khmer Rouge itself was concerned with artistic practice to promote and fulfil its revolutionary ideals (Tyner 2019), including poetry (Tyner et al 2015), songs (Tyner et al 2016), and portraiture (Ly 2020). Nevertheless, the fact remains that there was an attempt to destroy classical Cambodian dance (*robam boran*), and, in the wake of the Khmer Rouge, a handful of dancers gathered together to reconstruct the repertoire and teach it to a new generation of students. However, many ballets, instrumentations, and songs are still considered lost.

Recently, as Ashley Thompson (2013) has argued, there has been a renewed emphasis on the Khmer Rouge in contemporary Cambodian artistic expression, partly in response to the desire among tourists and the international art world to see works about the trauma and violence of this regime. As a result, the Khmer Rouge has "risked becoming

a mortal trap that reduced Cambodians to their history rather than liberating them from it” (2013, 87). Elsewhere I have explored how the ‘postmemory generation’ (Hirsch 2012) of young artists who did not live through the Khmer Rouge are creating works that move away from this narrative in order to address current issues and concerns in Cambodian society (Rogers 2018, 2020a, 2020b). The debates surrounding these experiments, however, such as the importance of preserving classical dance, whether or not contemporary dance works are ‘Cambodian’ – and in what ways, and whether these works are respectful, are inevitably shaped by the enduring legacies of the Khmer Rouge and the fact that classical Cambodian dance, as a central cultural art form of the nation, was nearly destroyed (Rogers 2018). However, some of these same artists have also created or performed in works that express how the genocide has shaped their lives – it is some of these works that I explore in this paper.

In considering the social and political work that artistic practice can do in response to war and genocide, there has been an overwhelming emphasis on interrogating spaces of violence and trauma (Anderson and Menon 2009), on questioning the representation and remembrance of conflict (Riding and Wake-Walker 2017), and in bearing witness to often horrific events (Bennett 2005; Levine 2006), particularly through testimonial forms that document truth-telling (Paget 2009; Reinelt 2009). Research has critically analysed the complexities raised by such practices and the extent to which they provide a capacity for healing (Salverson 2001; Thompson 2009). Here, however, I want to slightly shift the frame of analysis in relation to contemporary Cambodian performances that take the Khmer Rouge as a starting point for creativity. I want to suggest that contemporary dance and modern theatre works that are ostensibly ‘about’ the Khmer Rouge can sometimes thwart the spectatorial desire for testimonies about the genocide. That is to say, they do not always

attempt to represent the past or evoke the response of witnessing; instead, they can open up new ways of relating to history and thinking through its connection to the present moment. There is a danger, particularly in a context where extreme violence has been almost fetishized, to consider all expression within this frame - to demand the evocation of experience or, conversely, to suggest that it is inexpressible to render. To instead examine the obliqueness of representation as I do here is not to deny the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, nor to suggest that these performances do not address difficult issues of violence, trauma and memory; they do. In the Cambodian context there is a widespread narrative that survivors of the regime do not talk about their experiences, and that there is a nationally repressed trauma (Ly 2000). However, Thompson (2013, 88) also argues that local responses to commemoration and expression do not necessarily fit expectations around the desire for representation, such that western and touristic eyes can be “critiqued for misreading the signs of absence.” In attending to this argument, here I want to consider *how* performances narrate the genocide by examining questions of form – of dance aesthetics, of narrative allegory, and of staging, paying greater attention to more subtle modes of address, including those that are culturally and geographically specific (Thompson 2013; Ly 2020).

To do this, I want to work from a different starting point by considering the relationship between performance and history (rather than, for instance, the depiction of violence, memory, or trauma). The Khmer Rouge ended over 40 years ago, yet its reverberations remain, even for Cambodia’s predominantly young population who did not live through the regime. Geographical research on performance has yet to fully address such multiple and enduring temporalities, their effects, and the aesthetics through which they are formed. Instead, human geography has tended towards a consideration of performance

as an ephemeral art form, a legacy of early non-representational work that drew upon Auslander's (1999) theorisation of liveness and Phelan's (1998) ideas of disappearance to consider performance as the "art of the now" (Thrift 2000, 237). These qualities remain integral to many discussions of performance within geography, where the ephemeral performing body is seen to hold a political potential that allows it to subvert dominant structures to articulate alternative voices and visions (e.g. Houston and Pulido 2002; Johnston and Bajrange 2014; Pratt and Johnston 2017; Raynor 2019). Research has highlighted the limits of these possibilities, particularly because performance exceeds textual representation and thus comes up against bureaucratic structures that seek to order and contain its knowledges (Pratt and Johnston 2007). However, some historical geographers have recuperated the performative playfulness and gestures of the body from archives, implicitly challenging the idea that performance simply disappears, and pointing towards the enduring nature of the moving body (Gagen et al 2007; Griffin and Evans 2008). This paper develops these ideas using work in performance studies that has troubled the 'nowness' of performance to emphasise, as Rebecca Schneider (2011) describes, "what remains" when history is re-enacted. In so doing, it suggests that geographers pay greater attention to how performance is both a process and product of history. Classical Cambodian dance is an apt site in which to investigate these ideas as it is seen as having persisted since at least the 9th Century, despite attempts at eradicating it by the Khmer Rouge. The form of classical dance itself thus embodies multiple histories that no dancer can escape.

In what follows I discuss literatures on the persistence of performance and its ability to represent violent events before analysing three works by Cambodian dancers: *My Mothers and I* by Chey Chankethya; *A Bend in the River* by Sophiline Shapiro; and *The Edge* by Nam Narim. Each of these addresses, is inspired by, or narrates, an experience of the

Khmer Rouge, using a contemporary dance vocabulary. In Cambodia, the definition of contemporary dance is contested, and its enactment is highly varied, but as I have outlined elsewhere (Rogers 2018), there are two broad types of praxis. The first uses the classical dance vocabulary and adapts its movements and meanings to tell new stories or to tell existing stories in a new way. The second combines classical movements with those from other dance styles, particularly from the west, but also from other contemporary dance settings in Asia, to create a stylistically varied field that can include movements from modern dance, hip hop and ballet (among others). I combine my analysis of dance movement during rehearsals and performances with interviews conducted in person, or from secondary sources such as newspaper articles. I recently researched audience responses to contemporary dance works (see Rogers et al 2021), but this is a challenge in a context where there is a lack of popular arts criticism. Indeed, Yean (2020) argues that the Cambodian term for criticism (*gareekun*) can imply that the artist is 'wrong' or has made a mistake, rather than considering the deeper, more nuanced reflection that art can enable on society. As such, the vocabulary and practice of arts criticism in Cambodia is in its relative infancy, but it is also stymied by the country's political context. In the conclusion, I highlight how by embodying and enduring with the past, some of these dances point towards hope for the future, opening up the possibility to rework expected narratives about the Khmer Rouge and starting to free artists from this overdetermined framing of their work.

Remains of Performance, History and Memory

Discussion of performances about the Khmer Rouge must, out of necessity, consider the historicity of the performing body. In performance, the body moves through space and

time to not only make “the past *visible* in the present [but] *making* the past in the present” (Dean et al 2015: 6). Such a perspective exposes how the present is thus inevitably about the past, but also how the past is shaped through the present, creating multidirectional reverberations. In her analysis of American Civil War battle re-enactments, the performance studies theorist Rebecca Schneider (2011) examines the unpredictable and persistent temporalities that enable an exploration of “how performance remains” (p.104). She argues that to remain involves endurance, the constant intermingling of the past with the present, but that it also means to be ahead of and before. As a result, the performing body simultaneously articulates and transforms multiple temporal registers, with memory not limited to the past, nor ever finished. The past always appears to us in fragments because those memories, experiences, archives, and, in this instance, performances, that constitute history are ‘haunted’ (Carlson 2003) by those who created them, leaving us with partial impressions and imperfect knowledge. Remaining is thus always “incomplete, fractured” (Schneider 2011, 37) but, nevertheless, performance embodies the *refusal* to disappear (ibid, 39).

Such a perspective challenges the ephemerality associated with performance and concomitant expectations of disappearance and erasure. Indeed, embodied acts of repetition that constitute the mnemonic transmission of knowledge and experience have historically been undervalued, and even expunged by, archival approaches that focus on textuality and documentation (Taylor 2003). Refocusing on and valuing embodied practices is central to any understanding of Cambodian classical dance because the dancers themselves constitute the repertoire of knowledge and experience, handed down from teacher to student in a relationship that is life-long, even today (Shapiro-Phim 2008). Although contemporary Cambodian dance can shift the meaning and constitution of

gestures and poses (*kbach*) from the classical dance vocabulary (which dancers train in from childhood), classical dance itself has been re-worked throughout history, emphasising that traditional art forms are rarely static. This is particularly since independence in 1953 when Queen Sisowath Kossamak undertook a modernisation programme of classical dance, adapting it for new audiences (particularly foreigners) and creating new works. Yet in performing dances, poses and gestures, there is always a sense in Cambodia that it is possible “to literally touch time” – not least because dancers trace their lineage, their dance genealogy, and their mode of embodiment, through their teachers (Schneider 2011, 2). Indeed, Cambodia’s most famous and iconic dance, the *Apsara*, is reported to be partly inspired by carvings at Angkor Wat, with the dance’s creation officially attributed to Queen Sisowath Kossamak (Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts 2008). The *Apsara* dance evolved during the late 1950s/early 1960s but became internationally famous when HRH Princess Buppha Devi performed it at the Paris Opéra in 1964 during Cambodia’s state visit to France (Falser 2014). As such, performing this dance connects the body to multiple periods in Cambodia’s history. Contemporary dance in Cambodia can, therefore, be seen as part of a much longer history of creative expression through the moving body – one that nevertheless was disrupted, indeed nearly eradicated, by the Khmer Rouge.

In exploring how performance might be a living archive of and about the past, the relationship to Cambodia’s genocidal era is shown to be multiple and fluid (Rogers et al 2021). As Riding (2020, 241) argues, “the body and the bodily act of commemoration is a counterpoint to the tendency in post-conflict regions to collectivise the individual voice.” In his work on transitional justice and the politics of memory in Cambodia, Peter Manning has highlighted that Cambodians “actively renegotiate a [...] varied set of relationships to memories of atrocity” that do not indicate a passive or uniform relationship to historical

violence (2017, 2). This is reinforced by Mak and Tang (2020) who emphasise the varied emotional responses of the 'post-memory' generation towards the Khmer Rouge.

Mechanisms for redress in Cambodia, notably the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia or ECCC), have largely, and problematically, focused on the key architects and orchestrators of the Khmer Rouge, and not those middle or lower ranking officials who implemented the regime's everyday violence throughout the country (see Hughes and Elander 2016 for an overview). However, there has been large scale participation of victims in the ECCC as witnesses and through collective reparations projects – indeed, another of Shapiro's works, *Phka Sla*, is one such project based on testimonies (collected by academic Theresa de Langis) of those who experienced forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge (see Shapiro-Phim 2020). What this means is that, in Cambodia, questions of redress and justice are not individually addressed as in other post-conflict settings, but through the reparations projects, victims have been consulted about appropriate forms of remembrance (ibid).

Research on the remembrance of wars, genocides and conflicts also examines how embodied actions “activate a space” (Riding 2020: 240) that opens up ethical questions around what and how to remember. Such spaces potentially enact their own forms of violence and erasure in response (Anderson and Menon 2009; Veal 2020) and memories about the genocide and modes of remembrance practice do not always have a disruptive edge because they can be incorporated into pre-existing cultural frameworks and political relations (see Guillion 2012, Thompson 2013).ⁱ In performance terms, questions around the performative representation and re-enactment of memory always raises questions around how to represent violence or the qualities of violence (Fitzpatrick 2011; Nevitt 2013). Such debates concentrate on the double-sided coin of testimony and witnessing, particularly

regarding traumatic experience. Testimonial forms of performance are often seen as “testifying not simply to empirical historical facts but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination”, positioning those who experienced violence as agents rather than victims (Laub 1992: 62). Theatre can give a voice to those who are silenced (Skloot 2007) but equally, as Scarry argues regarding the body in pain, there is a right to silence and “an acknowledgement that parts of experience must necessarily be forever in silence” (1985: 6). Performance studies has extensively questioned if and how audiences can be witnesses to such testimonies, such that they do not simply passively consume stories but are instead actively engaged in them, becoming part of, and potentially even co-owning, traumatic experiences (Willis 2014, see also Laub 1992).

Such discussions circle around questions of absence and presence, on the need to tell, to evidence, to presence the violent past, with the impossibility of so doing. In these narratives even absences can ‘speak’ and work as an ethical form of response (Willis 2014; Larasati 2017; Riding 2020). However, the performances I discuss here consistently emphasise *presence* and *persistence* as a mode of the past remaining (both of the experience of the Khmer Rouge and of dance itself) but in ways that do not necessarily resort to the testimony-witnessing dialectic, rather “they contain something of the thing itself, but which are not the thing itself” (Reason 2006: 232 in Willis 2014: 137). As indicated earlier, these performances contain such dynamics, but to focus on them can obscure other insights creative responses can provide into culturally specific modes of remembering a violent past – and into how some of these works might seek to no longer be confined by this history. Performance is often conceptualised as a mode of cultural survival, a way to address unstable histories and politics (McDonald 2009). But in thinking more concretely about *how*

performance remains, I want to analyse the aesthetic forms that performances create and deploy in narrating a violent past.

Questions of form implicitly and explicitly surface in research that considers creative approaches to the representation and remembrance of conflict. For instance, Larasati (2017) details how her choreography and dance operate as a form of aesthetic resistance to remember those experiences and individuals that are erased by state-based narratives of commemoration. Similarly, through their creation of the documentary film poem *Bridges <Bosnia 20>*, Riding and Wake-Walker (2017) use poetry as a critical tool of remembrance, knitting it together with images of trauma and conflict through the use of a computer screen to create an anonymous mode of viewing that “questions and deconstructs the usual packaging and representation of a war” (p.63). Such aesthetic experiments can also hold an ambiguous, not simply critical, potential as Veal (2020) outlines in her consideration of the aesthetic of the grotesque and the role of mimetic representation in testimonial dance theatre in South Africa. This focus on form is often oriented ethically towards a desire to produce a positive change in post-conflict settings, or to recast places as not simply associated with violence and trauma (see Riding 2017 on creative place writing in Sarajevo). It is this latter dynamic that the three works I discuss here tap into in different ways, either by finding culturally specific depictions of the Khmer Rouge and its legacies, or in trying to move on from its shackles. Ideas of remaining articulated by Schneider (2018, 300) point towards its futurist dimensions, for if the past continues to reverberate in the present, if it keeps re-appearing, then “how might ‘we’ respond differently to its perpetual recall? If the past reappears in the wake of trauma and violence then the key may be to address it differently at the site of its reappearance.” Thinking about how the past remains allows it to

be changed, but here, I suggest the form of the works discussed below is what begins to move that past to one side so that other futures might be realised.

My Mothers and I

The first example I discuss, Chey Chankethya's (2013) solo performance *My Mothers and I*, is notable for how the aesthetic form of contemporary dance is used to express the continued reverberations of the Khmer Rouge. The piece addresses Chey's relationship with her mother and her dance master, and how such interpersonal connections have been shaped by a legacy of violence against the self and the dancing body in particular. The piece combines classical and contemporary movement with a spoken narrative and a percussive soundtrack, with Chey transforming seamlessly between being herself, her mother, and her master (the latter particularly indicated by being bent double, with shaking hands). This often occurs in the space of a few movements, shuttling between different temporalities and personal histories.

The first notable point about this piece is the way it links the aesthetics and practice of classical Cambodian dance with the Khmer Rouge, such that classical dance itself embodies a violent history, one passed down to, and literally folded into, a new generation of moving bodies. For instance, at times, the gestures, poses and movements of classical dance training and rehearsal merge into the expression of being assaulted during the Khmer Rouge as indicated in my performance analysis:

Kethya speaks in English as she dances: My Master's name is... I never call her by name.... no never. (Choreography: Shaking head. Doing a series of flying poses as she moves across the

stage on her knees). But what I remember about her most is the warmth of her touch (stands seamlessly from her classical movements, looking at her hand as she holds it in front of her, brings it to her chest lovingly), the touch on my back (slowly moves it down her body and around to the small of her back, then hands on hips, bends her knees), on my shoulder (arm traces across the front to her shoulder) and (push – breaks the reverie by suddenly pushing down hard, speaking loudly in Khmer) pushing her shoulder down, then pulling her head in the opposite direction, like she is being grabbed by the ear, pulling her head over) and she will never stop (breaks away, snaps back). [...] She used her hands to mould my body. (Holds her arm and brings her hand in towards her softly in a flower kbach, twirls it around and pushes it away from her, in and away, then sharp snap back). She doesn't talk much (holding her hand as she bends and circles backwards, then bends over as if a very old woman. Claps. Claps. Claps). Kethya calls the movements out loud, doing each slowly, shaking, then slowly stands upright, morphs into herself doing the basic female role gestures for lotus, branches, fruit, fruit drop, seed, love, shy, sad, cry. She performs each movement carefully, then as she finishes the crying movement down her face with her fingers, her other hand slaps them away – a punctuation of discipline that, as she falls sideways to the floor, is also a bodily slap to the face.

In this early sequence, basic classical dance poses are interspersed with violence, such that the serene and calm aesthetic often associated with classical dance is constantly unsettled, creating the sense that her dancing is about to be punctuated with violence at any moment. Later in the piece, the clapping traditionally used in rehearsal to signal the need to change to the next position also sounds as a gunshot. The dancing body itself thus embodies the violent history of the Khmer Rouge, not least because of how dance is transmitted between generations, with the imprint of her master's hands, cultural knowledge and life experiences

literally being folded into and reproduced in Chey's own performing body. The piece thus suggests that to dance is to embody and express this violent history.

However, in thinking further about the aesthetic form of *My Mothers and I*, the piece does not directly depict personal experiences of the regime for witnessing, but rather is suggestive of the distortions of its lingering effects. As such, it thwarts the spectatorial desire for violence to instead produce a more disorienting experience of partial information and knowledge. This is evident in the fact that we do not know or find out her master's name, and although we know the name of Chey's mother and that she could speak French, we – like Chey herself – do not know how, or why she came to learn it. Rather, we are left with impressions of individuals, of the past, and of how these threads connect to the present. Individual histories are obliquely rendered, even as the effect of those histories is expressed physically and tied to the intimate geopolitics of violence towards the female body (Pain and Staeheli 2014). Although there are sometimes direct expressions of physical harm (such as recoiling from being punched), there are also more subtle indications of, for example, rape: *"My mother, my master, they know the soldiers very well"* especially in the sequence when Chey depicts her excited return to Cambodia from the U.S., and her mother's reaction is to establish distance, with the piece moving into a sequence about "no touching" and the need to protect yourself as a woman: *"Don't let them touch you. You need to protect yourself all the time. Put more clothes on [...] Hot is better than being destroyed."* Chey's response, her confusion around how to behave, and the inability to connect with her mother physically, the impossibility of motioning to give a hug or a kiss to the cheek, expresses intergenerational difference and the difficulty of navigating those moments when the force of history influences expectations of behaviour without warning or a clear explanation. The performing body can therefore be said to simultaneously

embody individual, familial, social, and collective histories across multiple times and spaces in ways that are suggestive of Thompson's (2013) observation that, for many Cambodians, it is not that they never talk about the Khmer Rouge, but that indications of experience are, in fact, always present under the surface.

From a cultural perspective, the aesthetic form of *My Mothers and I* as a dance articulates, but also moves beyond, the experience of *kamtech* – the mechanisms through which the Khmer Rouge systematically destroyed and erased individual identity. This experience often dominates discussions of the regime and is also present in analyses of the Khmer Rouge's contradictory legacy on the arts (see Ly 2020). Artists who survived the regime often describe the eradication of dancers, and by extension, the attempted destruction of dance and Cambodian culture. However, here I want to suggest that the aesthetic of *My Mothers and I* is less one of *kamtech's* destructive oblivion, than it is of disintegration. This suggests, to me, something slightly different, more a loss of cohesion, a fraying around the edges, a looseness of form. At a simple visual level, Chey starts the piece with her hair smooth and clothes neat, her composure calm, but by the final moment, her hair is loose, and she is ruffled in appearance and demeanour. Certain moments in the piece choreographically also suggest disintegration, including when she vocalises the ideology of *kamtech* as she dances. For instance, as she says in a voice over, "*No I cannot write. No, my name is not Pui Mari. My mother told me they had to hide so much. They worked so hard. They had no food. You are not even yourself*" she enacts a classical dance walk, moving up, down and across the stage in a repeated refrain, one arm extended to the side and flexed back, but she gradually speeds up, the movement of small footsteps close together becomes more frenetic, wider and messy as she starts to run, trip as though pushed, circle, twist as she falls, all the time getting up to try and enact the classical movement. Here, the

mode of embodiment is recognisable, but it is interrupted and less precisely rendered. Similarly, a refrain of movement associated with her master (Chey's hands twirling together, her back leg raised with a flexed foot) is developed along different paths, each time the movement becoming bigger, expressed with more physical force, with her leg kicking out in front of her, her arm pulling in sharply to pirouette her around and push her to the ground. This can be interpreted as an expression of pain, of the force and will to push the body to keep dancing and survive but it is also, again, taking the classical dance vocabulary and tearing it open as the Khmer Rouge attempt to destroy it. Importantly, the dance persists, *it remains*, even as it also seems to disintegrate before us.

The aesthetic form of *My Mothers and I* as dance therefore enacts a slow form of violence to the classical dancing body, a violence that is neither complete nor fully known and understood. Even in moments where Chey moves slowly along the floor, seemingly beaten, remnants of classical movement remain: a flexed back foot, a gesture with her hand. In contrast to existing expectations of slow violence as invisible (Nixon 2011), this violence of disintegration produces a spectacle, opening up the experience of cultural destruction for us to encounter as an audience (see also Davis 2019 on challenging extant expectations of slow violence). It does so without always rendering its subject's stories precisely, or wholly, but rather as impressions. As such, we are not called as audiences to witness stories or testimonies, instead we need to witness the more abstract effects of violence over decades and the ability to rebuild from it, here rendered through a dancer and the 'mothers' that gave her life – her birth mother, her master, and perhaps even, the Khmer Rouge era itself.

A Bend in the River

As evidenced above, contemporary dance performances about the Khmer Rouge expose a fragmentary aesthetic that both highlights the difficulty for a young generation of Cambodians to fully know their history whilst also thwarting a spectatorial desire for experiential knowledge. Yet in the fragments that do remain, there is hope to be found. In this next example, Shapiro's (2013) *A Bend in the River*, with which I opened this paper, I want to explore how dwelling with small details can lead from revenge to redemption. Current research in cultural and political geography on trauma, memory and violence, often emphasises how small details, incidents and objects can encapsulate and 'ground' intense pain and trauma to resist the spectacle of violence (Riding 2017). As Riding and Wake-Walker argue (2017, 64), "humans live, and survive, in stories, in fragments of stories, and not the grand narratives of the historic record." Such an emphasis is often used to counteract abstraction and expected frames of reference that render extreme violence knowable and containable as a phenomenon (Carter-White 2012). In his critical analysis of violence and poetry, Philo (2017) interrogates Adorno's (1966) famous claim that 'there can be no more poetry after Auschwitz', instead arguing that, for Adorno, there was a need for poetry that focused on "staying with the suffering, the details" (Philo 2017, 15). For Philo, such an approach can form part of a critical response to violence within the geohumanities to ensure that we retain the caution of 'never again.' This task does not dwell in the positive domains of affective possibility within the world, but instead is a more cautious arrangement of sense and sensibility orientated around wounds that can never close.

However, in another post-genocidal context, details can lead us in a different direction. In relation to Shapiro's *A Bend in the River*, this links to her desire that one way in

which to live with the trauma of the Khmer Rouge, to both express and counteract its horrors, is “to make the best art that I can.” It is to defiantly persist in the face of *kamtech*. Like the dancers who reconstructed and rebuilt Cambodia’s dance heritage in the immediate post-genocide era, this is not necessarily to dwell in that moment of horror, of taking revenge by macheting men, of exploring and keeping the wound open, but to dwell in the moment of counter response without papering over the suffering, to say, “I will not be like this and what does that mean?” It is this moment that then becomes the starting point for expression and transformation in which staying with the details is also important.

Shapiro found the story of *Kra Peu Kaley* (which provided one inspiration for *A Bend in the River* alongside the 1972 Cambodian horror film *Crocodile Man (Kraithong Kra Peu Charavan)*) in a market in Phnom Penh and read it as a teenager. It resonated with her questioning of revenge in the wake of the Khmer Rouge for decades before it became the inspiration for a performance. In part, the production can be viewed as an adaptation of a traditional folk story using a modern approach to storytelling. In interviews with me, Shapiro described her dance practice as ‘modern’ because ‘contemporary’ can carry the connotation of western dance styles. She also undertakes work in different veins, from the re-arrangement of traditional dances, to developing new creations with traditional elements such as the *pin peat* orchestra and traditional costumes, to those involving new choreographies, movements, staging, and ideas. As indicated in the opening performance analysis, *A Bend in the River* falls into the latter category, combining new choreographies, different types of movement, music, props and costumes in ways that can be seen as contemporary whilst also strongly grounded in the vocabulary of Cambodian classical dance (see Figure 1):

“Can I be contemporary without being western? There are people who say if it’s not a European or American sensibility then it is not modernity. No, I’m trying to say that my people have created works that are unique to us and modern! Modern because we are living in this time. Dance can connect to us in this time. And modern is what? – Modern is based on a sense of sophistication, reaching for perfection, and a quality of high culture. But high culture can be created in my way, right?! I’m not narrow minded; it is to share the best with all of Cambodia” (interview, Sophiline Shapiro, 13/01/18).

Shapiro’s approach offers an “alternative modernity” through a culturally specific perspective and aesthetic that “interrogates the present” (Gaokar, 2001: 14). It is possible to analyse the production in terms of this aesthetic sensibility, one also created in collaboration with other Cambodian artists who similarly explore the nexus of Cambodian tradition and modernity: the visual artist Pich Sopheap who created the multi-piece crocodiles using his signature material of rattan; and the composer, Him Sophy, who created an entirely new score using a traditional *pin peat* orchestra. As such, the performance was grounded in Cambodian aesthetics and experiences, but sought to adapt their form to create a new work that evolved from existing repertoires of practice.

< Insert Figure 1. Caption: Figure 1. Sophiline Ensemble rehearsing *A Bend in the River* (2013) at Khmer Arts Theatre, May 2014. Photograph by the author.>

Indeed, the publicity materials for *A Bend in the River* mention the inspirations behind this meditation on revenge, and the piece has to be seen within Shapiro’s *oeuvre* where works are often allegorical (for instance, *Pamina Devi* – an adaptation of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* – is about a young woman finding the ability to forge her own path in life, but it can also be read as a commentary on Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge; *Samritechek*

retells the story of *Othello* but from the perspective of Desdemona and can also be read as being about cross-cultural marriage). However, geographical approaches that focus on the specifics of small things as an ethical mode of response to extremely violent events seem to share a scepticism towards abstraction which can strip violence from its grounded moorings. As such, this is also a scepticism towards allegory as a form. Indeed, allegory is often conceptualised as violent because it abstracts human particularity into the realm of ideas and general schemas (Teskey 1996). Yet, allegory need not be cast negatively, as a transhistorical general property. As Worthen and Worthen (2006, 160) argue in their analysis of the ethics of allegory in Martin McDonagh's play *The Pillowman*, allegory enables art to connect with the world, even as it may emphasise meaning over experience – but it is also critical to art's political potential, “the ability of art to represent more general claims about the temporal ruins in which we live, is essential to any critique of the ethics of art, its implication in the social world of human action.” In this respect, there is an abstraction to Sophiline Shapiro's work, but her allegories are always grounded in her personal experiences and the details of Cambodian culture (here, folklore, films, a moment of life-decision, watching her teachers, religion) – it offers multiple reference points and is multi-layered in its allegorical associations that, for me, strengthen the connection to reality whilst asking bigger questions about how to respond to a violent past. Here, allegory is the form through which cultural persistence operates, even as it is obliquely rendered to a western eye.

In discussing this further, I want to consider the ending of *A Bend in the River* when Kaley must decide whether to face the villagers and their anger, or whether to walk into Lupta's funeral pyre and kill herself. She chooses the latter, although whichever route Kaley takes will lead to her death:

In the performance, the five dancers holding the crocodile pieces encircle the raised dais. The main characters are in the centre, ultimately surrounded by the company who are also playing the villagers. Hands still flexed, everyone undulates their bodies and arms, moving up and down, circling, waving like the flames of the pyre. The dancers make the crocodile pieces toss and turn, as though they are all engulfed by fire. Eventually, Moha and Kaley move down and across the stage, to the sheer plastic column that hangs from the ceiling to the stage floor. They move into it, returned to the river in the final moments.

The piece therefore suggests that the effect of taking revenge is more bloodshed, a spiralling downwards into more violence and a loss of self – which, in an ironic move, means the victory of Khmer Rouge ideology. Yet in examining how the allegorical form of *A Bend in the River* works in multiple dimensions, it is also worth considering the implications of self-immolation in a cultural context dominated by Theravada Buddhism, especially as classical dance is also traditionally a religious practice. Fire is often a symbol of transcendence and enlightenment in Buddhist cultures, and, as Wilson (2003, 33) argues drawing on the Theravada scripture of Samyutta Nikāya, so-called “inner” emotions, desires and attachments, such as ignorance, passion and hatred, are conceived of as fires. As such, the desire to be liberated from suffering, as well as suffering itself, “is often envisioned as a fiery state” (ibid). In this respect, the burning body is both an act of sacrifice and a way to reach enlightenment, and what appears in the moment of destruction “is a negative, if you will, of the flesh and blood person, an outline of what is absent” (ibid., 30). The fire of revenge is not only all-consuming, but one interpretation of this ending could be that Kaley also chooses to extinguish her internal fire as a negative state – something further emphasised by her return to the water. This entails recognition, acceptance, a dispassionate release from forces and feelings of destruction in order to be liberated from suffering. The

challenge the piece poses is a philosophical and ethical one around how to recognise a violent past, and what to do in response to it, but it perhaps also suggests the need to try to accept it and build something new from it, for Buddhist teaching promotes restraint over vengeance, and emphasises that the moment of destruction through fire is also a productive moment of rebirth.

In this reading, not only does *A Bend in the River* caution against revenge, but its allegorical dimensions suggest a release in order to carry on and *persist*. Indeed, Shapiro described how initially she thought that Kaley should withdraw, return to the river and essentially walk away. So, although Kaley had lost everything and was alone in the world, she still had hope:

“Why did I choose that? Because I value life. I think that as long as you live there is always hope. And even though she will be by herself, she will live her life to the last breath. [...] I thought of that because after we got married, we went to Singapore on our honeymoon and when we left [in 1991] we drove past Angkor Wat, and I raised my hand to say goodbye to Angkor Wat. At that moment I was so sad, I felt like I was a leaf that was separated from the tree, I felt that I would probably never come back to Cambodia, and I will just die in the US. And I thought, as long as I live a good life, that would be fine! [...] But then going back to *A Bend in the River*, I think we [Sophiline’s husband John Shapiro wrote the spoken narrative for the production] decided that it was not so dramatic! [*Laughs*] So we had her crawl into the fire!” (interview, Sophiline Shapiro, 13/01/18).

The effect of the message remains the same, and again is grounded in Cambodian experiences and cultural mores (notably the proverb in the epigraph) that focus on acceptance and the possibility, the hope, that can emerge from leading a good (Buddhist)

life. In *A Bend in the River*, fire works performatively as both a dramatic and allegorical tool to allow the same meaning to be conveyed in multiple cultural contexts. The production itself also exists as a performative statement in Austinian (1955) terms, it speaks as “the best art I can [make].” The performance, each time it is enacted and watched, performatively brings into being a defiant stance against cultural erasure. I have argued here that allegory is the form, the mode, through which this message is conveyed, for the violence of the Khmer Rouge is not shown, but its effect, the desire for vengeance, is what remains – however, the piece suggests that this feeling needs to be extinguished for Cambodia to find hope from the ashes.

The Edge

The final piece I want to discuss is the twenty-minute contemporary dance piece *The Edge* (2015) by Nam Narim. Nam is the granddaughter of the dance and song master Em Theay, who started learning classical dance at the Royal Palace in the 1930s. Nam, like her grandmother, and mother, performs the giant (*yak*) role which has been passed down through three generations of this family. Em Theay was the subject of several documentaries (e.g. *The Tenth Dancer*, (1993) dir.: Sally Ingleton) and performances (e.g. *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields*, (2001) dir.: Ong Keng Sen), and was a UNESCO living treasure. *The Edge* explores Em Theay’s life, dealing with the passing of “time and internal expression” (Amrita Performing Arts, 2015), particularly in relation to the Khmer Rouge, when, in one instance, she was identified as a dancer but kept alive in order to perform for soldiers. She also practised in the fields in secret, and famously, hid and managed to retain her dance and song books from the Royal Palace. These were some of

the few performance documents to survive the Khmer Rouge before they were lost during a fire that burned down the family home.

The Edge, therefore, is a biographical piece about the Khmer Rouge and its effects on one woman, but it is not simply testimonial as its arc expresses, among other things, the gradual move towards the freedom of self-expression. The solo piece takes place inside metal poles that trace the edges of a cube that symbolises the repression of this era, reflecting how “I was told that people lived as if in a prison without walls” (Nam in Naren and Vachon 2015: n.p.). The cage is therefore a spatial device that represents the experience of the Khmer Rouge, and the positioning of the body within, and eventually outside, the cage, signifies the extent to which one remains caught within the tendrils of this history. Nam’s movement begins crouched down low, stuttering, jolting, spasmodic, conveying the difficulty of physical expression, and the positioning of the body away from the audience at times also suggests how movements were hidden from soldiers. Throughout the piece, she gradually explores the space inside the cube, slowly performs at an increased height, allowing her movements to physically reach out and take up more space as indicated in my performance analysis:

She is sat on the floor doing classical movements but there is a sense that she is always pushing against something – an oppressive, invisible force. Slowly moves like she might stand, but crouching, her upper body sharply undulating. Her back is to us, her torso pushing and pulsing as she fights back trying to emerge. Slowly uncurling, moves around to face the audience, trying to stand, her back arches, but then she is low and bent over double, pulsing with each move, her hands coming together to do posed positions, but she is constantly struck back. Confined by the cube structure, she looks out beyond its confines and

moves backwards, like hit in the stomach, then reaches out beyond it, but pulls her arms back in and looks scared. [...] Eventually she stands. There is a moment of relaxation, of relief, breathing, doing some full poses, a moment of pleasure in looking at her hands, then back low, her hands are shaking. Again, the movement is repeated, she is struggling to do it, it is hard.

Nam constantly fights against an invisible oppressor, the fear that shapes her movements (reminiscent of the slogan that Angkar is ‘a pineapple with many eyes’), but she persists in it, braves the physical expressive enactment, that in her grandmother’s life could have led to death (see Figure 2). She eventually becomes able to reach out inside the cube and haltingly explores it vertically, slowly climbing one of the upright poles. She eventually performs giant *kbach* on one of the top poles outside the cube (a feat of incredible balance and strength) before sitting on one of the top corners to enact a sequence of giant fighting poses. Her hands still shudder and shake, but less so, conveying a sense of increased freedom, strength, and determined confidence in self-expression gained from being *outside* but *in touch with* history.

< Insert Figure 2 here. Caption: Figure 2. Nam Narim performing *The Edge* (2015), produced by Amrita Performing Arts, Phnom Penh. Photograph © Anders Jirås, reproduced courtesy of Anders Jirås >

In the final sequence, Nam jumps back down into the cube as Em Theay, seated in the front row of the audience, starts to sing a *buong suong*. This is a traditional royal offering and prayer ceremony paying respect to the gods, performed as “a general blessing for the nation, as well as to alleviate specific conditions” (Cravath, 2014: 417). The ceremony usually entails asking for rain for rice to grow, something depicted through the

dance of Moni Mekhala and her battle with the giant Ream Eysa. Yet a *buong suong* is also performed to “communicate a request for peace, well-being and fertility of the land” (Shapiro-Phim, 2013: 11). Standing on one leg, her other leg flexed back behind her, Nam does an elaborate dancer’s *sampeah* (a gesture of thanks to the gods, hands slowly turning before coming together in a prayer position at the forehead) to each side of the cube, fluidly, slowly – reflecting how offerings are traditionally raised to the four cardinal points in a *buong suong*. Em Theay becomes the centre of the performance at this point, spotlighted, as she sings and dances into a faded blackout. The ending again suggests hope, the ability to live with the past, for the request for peace and the confidence of fluidly performing from Nam comes from *inside* the cube. Yet it is necessary to move outside that history, to extend above and beyond it in order to reach this position, but Nam is always, literally, in touch with the edges of the cube, with histories – histories that are intimately familial as well as socially connected, and that here are distinctly spatialised. But, at the time of performance, Em Theay’s presence, as well as her legacy and position in the Cambodian dance world, was powerful. Her embodiment, her physical being, as one of the two dozen royal dancers who reconstructed and rebuilt Cambodia’s entire classical dance repertoire, is a literal testament to resilience, the determination to remain and persist, but also of finding a way to live with, and rebuild from, the experiences of this era.ⁱⁱ

Conclusion

This article has examined how the legacies and experiences of the Khmer Rouge are expressed by contemporary dancers in Cambodia. It stems from the recognition that such works do not always resort to particular performative formats for their power and effect,

specifically those that rely upon testimonial forms of theatre that promote the desire for showing, documenting, witnessing and healing. This is not to deny those dynamics in these works, nor the importance of them for expression, but it is to look and see how creative praxis can potentially offer up alternative, and culturally specific, responses to a genocidal era. Rather than simply address the experience of the Khmer Rouge head on, or seek the documentary imperative, these performances all, in their different ways, render the Khmer Rouge an oblique, slightly inchoate period and set of experiences, one that, nevertheless, is shown to have continuing reverberations and effects. It is perhaps this obliqueness that enables the persistence of the Khmer Rouge in contemporary expression whilst also keeping it at one remove to thwart the spectatorial desire to know. This does not mean that the Khmer Rouge is not present or unimportant, indeed, the works above insist upon its persistent articulation, its present remains, but in particular ways and through particular forms. Specifically, I have considered how the three performances above mobilise the personal experiences of this period through different *forms* of storytelling, attending to the aesthetic shape of contemporary dance and its expression of disintegration, the role of detailed allegory, and the importance of the emplaced spatialization of the body on stage. For me, these works all circle around the question of ‘what to do with this history now?’ rather than ‘how to address (or perform) the experience of trauma and memory?’ and, as such, offer a different starting point for considering relationships to this past atrocity.

In this slightly shifted lens, I have turned to the multidirectional temporalities of Schneider’s (2011, 2018) idea of remaining as it chimes with ideas of cultural persistence, reclamation and re-working. But what persists? What remains? What does this lead us towards? Each work answers this question differently, offering up classical dance itself, the desire for vengeance, the overarching abstraction of violence that continues to leave its

embodied mark, the physical body. But what these works also offer is hope, resolution, acceptance, the possibility to keep going on. This is suggestive, paradoxically, of the ability to both hold on to the past, but also to let it go, a situation particularly being navigated by young artists in Cambodia's performing arts sector who did not live through the regime (see Rogers et al 2021). Ideas of remaining embody these layered temporal multiplicities. The works analysed above appear at a threshold, where the past finally, perhaps, *is* loosening its grip, and expression can be about more than seeing individual lives as micro-historical documents of the Killing Fields. In suggesting this, I argue, as others have done, that we are never 'post-genocide' (Riding 2020), for the past is always present, behind and before us, but this selection of works points to a moment where the next generation perhaps takes not another step away, but a step sideways, not to deny history, but to express and create new, parallel histories for the future.

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[improvement/5509629.html?fbclid=IwAR1ikw6axgnT92N3EtMPa26OtpGJsgAQsSoad5wve](https://khmer.voanews.com/a/hello-voa-new-voices-public-criticism-on-arts-community-contributes-to-improvement/5509629.html?fbclid=IwAR1ikw6axgnT92N3EtMPa26OtpGJsgAQsSoad5wve)

[WgLObMcNS6ZAosScNE](https://khmer.voanews.com/a/hello-voa-new-voices-public-criticism-on-arts-community-contributes-to-improvement/5509629.html?fbclid=IwAR1ikw6axgnT92N3EtMPa26OtpGJsgAQsSoad5wve) (in Khmer).

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ⁱ Indeed, in Cambodia, the performative re-enactment of atrocities as a form of commemoration on Remembrance Day (20th May) could be interpreted as an example of the state mobilising the traumatic experience of this era to (as the discourse goes) maintain national peace and stability (see Crothers 2015; Lipes 2020). Although many professional dancers in Cambodia are

employees of the state, working as teachers at the Secondary School of Fine Arts or the Royal University of Fine Arts, or employed in the Department of Performing Arts (part of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts), the works discussed here are all inspired by individual experience and are not tied to any specific political agenda, although they inevitably address a topic that is deeply sensitive in Cambodian society.

ⁱⁱ Em Theyay died in the final stages of revising this paper, aged 88 years old. In considering the impact of this for the paper's argument, what is stated above still stands for the time at which the performance was enacted. Although her passing is deeply significant in the Cambodian dance world because she was the last royal dancer from the Sisowath Norodom era, the legacies of what she – and other dancers of her generation (such as Chea Samy) – achieved still remains in the teaching and knowledge of classical dance in Cambodia. As such, there is still a persistence of their presence in the current moment. I am currently exploring these ideas further in another article that is under review.