PREFACE

Revisiting, revising, and completing this manuscript was one of the most difficult tasks I have ever faced. I began the project hoping, through the arts, to make sense of the violence, trauma, and ethical and moral conflicts I believe all Khmers in the homeland and in the various diasporas have had to endure and overcome in the post–Khmer Rouge period. But every time I have gone back to Cambodia, I have seen that Phnom Penh—the city where I was born, the city of my ancestral homes, the city where generations of my humble Khmer Chinese family lived and died, and where many of my close relatives were murdered—has been transformed from the abandoned and impoverished metropolis I saw in 1979 to a city filled with skyscrapers. The prewar (i.e., before 1975) ways of life have slowly disappeared. These skyscrapers could also be interpreted as *chedeys,* stupas built to house the ashes of ancestors and found on the grounds of Buddhist monasteries as tombstones memorializing the death of an older city haunted by memories of the past.

Perhaps these changes are inevitable and I must learn to accept that my Phnom Penh exists only in my memory, a place that Salman Rushdie poignantly described as "imaginary homelands."[1] My Laotian-French friend Ratsamy Viphakone-Zafran, an artist who shares a similar history and memory of her homeland, once advised me, "Let it go and let it flow." Of course, she was referring to the Mekong River that cuts across our home countries of Laos and Cambodia.[2] I am also reminded of David Lowenthal's 1985 book, *The Past Is a Foreign Country,*[3] though in my case, the past is a more local and familiar country. Indeed, displaced diasporic subjects like me can only access their pasts through the act of remembering, and time, I would argue, is fragile and unreliable. It needs to be constantly and persistently imagined and reimagined—through the act of remembering.

Further, upon each of my visits to Cambodia I saw corruption, violence, impunity, immorality, and divisiveness among the Khmers in terms of social class, race, and ethnicity. I also witnessed a decline of the Buddhist religion; now some of the monks and novices pay no attention to the *vinaya,* the monastic rules. Rather they are as intoxicated by money and materialism as members of the lay community. In fact, many of my Khmer friends refer to

the current practice of Buddhism in Cambodia as "Dollar *Sasana*" (the teaching of US dollars).[4] Of course, this corruption in the practice of Buddhism happened in the neighboring countries of Laos and Thailand too, but what I saw in Cambodia demoralized me and sent me into a state of doubt and despair; I became incapacitated by a major moral crisis. My Khmer friends from the diasporas of France, Canada, and the United States kept reminding me that "we are guests, and we are lucky they let us return to visit and to live here." But also, the United States is not a welcoming country for a Cambodian American like me. I have experienced racist and homophobic incidents in Santa Cruz, California, where I live and work.

In brief, no matter how broad or inclusive the definition of a nation is, I find that these multiple "otherings," marginalizations, and exclusions in the age of nationalism and authoritarianism on the part of the respective home and host nations have left us without a homeland; we are thus nationless. Discourse focuses on us being "global nomads," "transnational," and "refugees." In all of this, where is "home"?

National- and state-inflicted violence and oppression have engendered great resentment and feelings of ambivalence toward one's own ethnic group. I recall the words of the late Khmer poet and playwright Pich Tum Kravel, a pen name he acquired after the Khmer Rouge genocide, on this issue. His birth name was Chhorn Tort (1943–2015), and he survived the Khmer Rouge genocide.[5] Kravel recalled that he was resentful and secretly harbored great hatred toward his own people for torturing him and depriving him of his freedom. As he recollects, one evening, after having endured a long day of hard labor, he went to bathe in a pond. There at sunset, he saw a flock of birds flying free: "I looked at these birds with envy. At that very moment I hated myself, hated my own people, though I shouldn't say that. A poem that I have left on the surface of the water contained only two lines: 'next life, never born as a Khmer, rather be born as a bird.' "[6] Kravel carried on in the post-genocide period as a patriot who contributed greatly to restoring and preserving Khmer arts and culture. Perhaps a critical patriot (or "matriot") is not an extreme nationalist who blindly supports the nation regardless of how it is governed, but an individual who has a love-hate relationship with his or her ethnic group and nation. In brief, a critical patriot is someone who inhabits a position of ambivalence.

Where does a diasporic subject like me belong? My predicament is in many ways similar to that of Shirin Neshat, an Iranian artist who came to the United States to attend college in 1975. In Iran a revolution and change of political regime took place in 1979. In Neshat's own words, she has been

living in "self-imposed exile" in the United States ever since. Her art is partly about her experience of and nostalgia for prerevolutionary Iranian culture and identity. *Roja,* a short film she created in 2011, resonates poignantly with her struggle as an exiled and displaced artist. This black-and-white film captures a recurring dream the artist had about her mother. As she relates:

> [It] evolves around my personal, emotional, psychological and political relations, where I feel at once attached yet alienated by both the American culture and my motherland.…[7] After a few years, the amount of nostalgia overwhelms you. In my dreams I always see my mother and I finally came to the conclusion that this mother figure is not really my mother. It is motherland. This was actually my own dream. When I interpreted later, I realized that [it] is my obsession [about] how I am not really welcome in any given cultures and places.[8]

In the film we see the daughter running forward with great anticipation to embrace her mother, only to be pushed away. It was these recurring dreams, memories, and nightmares that forced Neshat to confront and ultimately to accept her situation.

I shared a similar predicament. I was everything and nothing at the same time. It was this complex politics of acceptance and rejection, a subject position and situation that I inevitably needed to confront. Subsequently, I began to have great self-doubt. Why was I writing this book, and for whom? Unbeknownst to me, Soth Polin, a Khmer novelist who is equally displaced and deracinated, provided an explanation for his inability to finish his writings on the Khmer Rouge experience; his words came back to haunt me. I had been living with great anxiety. The moral compass I used in navigating this moral predicament was unreliable, leaving me totally at a loss. Because I had published writings based on my own memories and experiences of living under the Khmer Rouge regime elsewhere,[9] I thought I would be able to write "objectively" about the legacy of art and visual culture of this brutal regime.

Instead, I found that self intersects with history and memory. Clearly, I cannot extricate myself from the history and memory of this brutal regime to assume the supposedly neutral position of a "scholar." Indeed, one of the comments I have received from readers of my published writings on memory and trauma is that what I say is "very moving." This seems to suggest that my writing is "too personal" and inhabits the realm of feelings and emotions rather than that of reason, argumentation, and intellect. I would like to

think that I have structured my writings based on both arguments and emotions. In retrospect, however, embedded in these earlier writings are the traces and residues of my own trauma, pain, loss, and remembrance. Moreover, one of the roles the arts perform in culture and society is their ability to help us contain and transform our painful and emotional experiences of violence and trauma into aesthetics, especially arts that engage with issues of both individual and collective memories of genocide—a much needed emotional articulacy comparable to visual and verbal literacy. To this end, I have been trying to create through my writings, a language of pain, suffering, and healing expressible through the arts.

Due to my moral aporia, I have come to realize that this ambivalence raises many questions and conflicting views; it is contrary to my initial quest to search for answers and resolution to both a personal and a collective subject. I have therefore decided to let you, gentle and critical readers, decide what is owed, and to whom, when you have finished reading this book. I would like to begin the book and close this preface by posing to both you and myself the following questions:

What is the moral obligation of survivors (and perpetrators) to a tragedy of this magnitude?
Are we all destined to relive the trauma of this horrific event for the rest of our lives?
Will the next generation be burdened with this inherited trauma?
Is it possible for survivors to forget and forgive?
What role do the arts play in capturing this experience? Can they help to transcend and thus to heal this personal and collective trauma?
Last, what are the potentials and limitations of the arts in their ability to answer these difficult questions?

This book can only attempt to answer the last three of these questions.

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