

Fragmented Histories: Transgenerational Memories of Democratic Kampuchea

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*An audio version of the author reading her paper is available at:
<https://soundcloud.com/oralhistoryaustralia/journal-article-naomi-frost>*

In the aftermath of Democratic Kampuchea, as Cambodia was named under Khmer Rouge rule, over half a million Cambodians sought refuge through immigration abroad. This paper addresses how Cambodian Australian families have remembered, forgotten, or transmitted narratives of their family histories to the second generation following displacement, starvation, suffering, and loss under the Khmer Rouge. Through a series of interviews with second generation Cambodian Australians in Melbourne, I consider the sources of memory production and transmission that inform the next generation's understanding of Cambodian history within the family home. This paper considers how post-genocide memory production and transmission plays out within the Cambodian diaspora in Melbourne, and how these memories are further nuanced by temporal, spatial, or personal distance from family histories. An examination of the generational transmission of these family histories within the context of the Cambodian Australian diaspora illuminates the role of intersecting cultural identities, and the implications of personal, cultural, temporal and spatial proximity to historical events in the transmission of memory and family narratives.

INTRODUCTION

On a cold Sunday morning my friend, Veronica, welcomed me into her home. She gave me a tour of the abundant family photographs that adorned the walls of her family's Oakleigh home in Melbourne, Victoria. The first photograph she showed me captures her mother and father standing side by side in the Thai refugee camp where they met. Veronica also paused at her favourite photograph: her mother's father, who died during the Khmer Rouge period. She expressed regret that she never had the chance to know him. As I sat in the same chair in which her father first shared his story with her, I came to understand, in part, why these photographs adorn the walls of her home and how profoundly they speak to Veronica's own journey toward understanding her family's past. Veronica's journey, however, involved more than just listening to her parents' stories. She described the frustration of not knowing why her grandparents were not around, and confusion when her home grew tense as she completed a family tree for school.¹ These experiences drove Veronica slowly to piece together the fractured history of her family, and to understand the place of the past within her own life.²

Between coming to power on 17 April 1975 and its fall in 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime caused the deaths of approximately two million people through execution, disease, forced labour and starvation.³ During this period of Cambodian history, millions were displaced, forcibly separated from their families and stripped of their identities, as the Khmer Rouge demanded complete, unwavering loyalty to the Communist Party of Kampuchea, concealed from the public behind the word *Ângkar*.⁴ The strategic destruction of familial, religious and social institutions under the Khmer Rouge regime constituted a profound rupture in the fabric of Cambodian lives and communities

3 James Tyner, Savina Sirik and Samuel Henkin, 'Violence and the Dialectics of Landscape: Memorialization in Cambodia', *Geographical Review* 104, no. 3 (2014): 227.

4 *Ângkar* was the term used during the period of Democratic Kampuchea to refer to 'the organisation', or 'the party', meaning the Communist Party of Kampuchea. See Alexander Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 237, 127 for definition of *Ângkar*.

which continues to resonate far beyond the demise of Democratic Kampuchea (as the country was named under Khmer Rouge rule).⁵

The ways that the memory of the Khmer Rouge period resonate in the everyday lives of survivors and their descendants, and the transaction of these memories between generations, become particularly complex in the case of post-conflict refugee histories. As political scientist Khatharya Um eloquently notes, ‘memories, like the refugee bodies that they inhabit, are fractured, dispersed, multiple, and diverse, foregrounded and invisible’.⁶ In the case of second generation Cambodian Australians, I argue that these memories are further fragmented by temporal, spatial, or personal distance from their family histories.

The largest migration of Cambodians into Australia occurred between 1979 and 1990, with many migrants spending a number of years in refugee camps before being processed and arriving in Australia.⁷ By 1991, the area of Springvale in Melbourne’s south-eastern suburbs constituted the second largest concentration of Cambodian-born people in Australia (second only to Fairfield in Sydney). Through a series of interviews I conducted with second-generation Cambodian Australians in Melbourne, in this article I explore how second-generation Cambodian Australians learn about the Khmer Rouge past within the home.

I argue that the process through which survivors’ descendants learn about their family histories is multifaceted, and often results in fragmented and dislocated narratives of the past. The manifestations of trauma in the daily lives of the second generation, as well as perceived ‘walls of silence’ that shroud family pasts, constitute distinct forms

5 For further historical background on the period of Khmer Rouge Rule (1975–1979) see: David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution Since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Craig Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984); Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996); Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

6 Khatharya Um, ‘Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Diaspora’, *Positions* 20, no. 3 (2012): 835.

7 Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne), Multicultural Equity and Access Program, *Cambodian Cultural Profile* (Melbourne, 2010), 1.

of indirect non-verbal communication about the past which can actively develop the historical consciousness of the second generation. Silence, in this regard, must be understood as an active means of communication about the past. Interviewees' encounters with the trauma of their family members, and with silences surrounding the Khmer Rouge past, also shape their interpretation of the fragments of the past they encounter in the home, and of the stories family members share with them.

INTERVIEWING SECOND GENERATION CAMBODIAN AUSTRALIANS IN MELBOURNE

Four interviewees (Leda, Sophea, Bo and Jun Giang) were found through snowball sample selection methods via the social and family networks of existing interviewees (namely Veronica Lee and Moni Chhun) whom I knew prior to beginning this project. Closely reflecting the demographics of the Cambodian Australian population, my sample of six interviewees consists of people from Khmer and Chinese-Khmer ethnic and Buddhist faith backgrounds (although one interviewee was raised Catholic). My recruitment methods inadvertently favoured well-educated participants.

Interviewees' ages range from 23 to 28 years. All come from families who migrated from Cambodia to Australia between 1979 and 2000, and all were predominately raised in Australia. The aim was to gain meaningful qualitative data through in-depth interviews, with each interviewee having their own unique experience of growing up within the Cambodian community in Melbourne. The sample size of six interviewees allows us to understand both the common and distinct experiences of a relatively small group, revealing what Alessandro Portelli has referred to as a 'horizon of possibilities, the meanings and implications of a few significant narratives'.⁸ With a small sample size, however, it is important not to over-generalise about the upbringings or experiences of second generation Cambodian Australians, a large and diverse group whose demographics are not completely represented within the scope of this research.

8 Alessandro Portelli, 'The Apple and the Olive Tree: Exiles, Sojourners, and Tourists in the University', in Alessandro Portelli (ed.), *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 276.

What constitutes a 'generation', and the use of 'generations' as a concept has been widely debated.⁹ Indeed, as Alistair Thomson points out, historians 'often deploy generation when they mean birth cohort, and ill-defined usage leads to extravagant claims'.¹⁰ It is therefore important here to note that I employ 'second generation' to refer to this group because my interviewees themselves used the term as a point of self-identification. I also employ Charles Price's definition of 'second generation', which acknowledges the crossover between overseas-born and Australian-born that occurs in many cases of migration. He defines the second generation as the Australian-born children of a member of the first generation, or an 'overseas-born person aged less than 12 years at the time of emigration'.¹¹ I am therefore referring to 'second generation' Cambodian Australians as a birth cohort, and also as a group with 'a self-conscious generational identity', based on their parent's migration from Cambodia to Australia following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime.¹²

As the general purpose of the interviews was to discuss family memory, a life stories approach was most appropriate, as the structure and omissions within accounts may be equally as important as the stories they choose to share. This relatively free-form style of delivery by the narrator, however, required minor mediation for the purpose of prompting reflections on their own processes of 'learning' memory. My interviews also posed ethical and personal issues in prompting interviewees to reflect on their family's history of the Khmer Rouge era, and on their own upbringing. Topics covered in the interview process, for example, may prompt interviewees to later approach their parents regarding topics that may cause emotional distress for their parents, or the family more generally. Interviewees may also feel emotionally distressed remembering aspects of their own childhoods or recalling their family narratives. Thus, I considered and implemented methods of interviewing that followed the standard practices and conventions of oral history, aimed at minimising

9 Alistair Thomson, 'Australian Generations? Memory, Oral History and Generational Identity in Postwar Australia', *Australian Historical Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 41–42.

10 Thomson, 'Australian Generations?', 43.

11 Graeme Hugo, 'Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants' (final report prepared for the Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Citizenship (Canberra, 2011), 19–21.

12 Thomson, 'Australian Generations?', 42.

the risk of emotional distress as a result of the interview process. Transparency in the purpose and subject matter of the interviews, careful preparation and pre-interview communication has been crucial. In addition, as Valerie Yow notes in relation to Thomson's reflections on interviewing Australian veterans of the First World War, it has been particularly important to find 'balance between sensitive probing and reading between the lines'.¹³

TRAUMA AND COMMUNICATION

Emerging from the work of Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth points out that Western concepts of 'trauma' are generally considered 'the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but then return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena'.¹⁴ Many fields, and particularly medical disciplines, have debated whether Western concepts of trauma (and post-traumatic stress disorder) are able to encompass the experiences of people in non-Western contexts.¹⁵ In a 2015 round-table discussion on the decolonisation of trauma studies, Stef Craps noted that imposing Western frameworks upon non-Western histories may in fact distort them.¹⁶ The second-generation Australians that I have interviewed, however, have developed hybrid understandings of trauma, memory and Khmer Rouge history. Within the context of this article, interviewees' interpretation of this history and their place within it may be the product of both non-Western (Cambodian) and Western (Australian)

13 Valerie Yow, 'Interviewing Techniques and Strategies', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 170–171.

14 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 91.

15 See: Stef Craps, Bryan Cheyette, Alan Gibbs, Sonya Andermahr and Larissa Allwork, 'Decolonizing Trauma Studies Round-Table Discussion', *Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2015): 905–923; Carol A. Kidron, 'Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism: Comparing Jewish-Israeli Holocaust and Canadian-Cambodian Genocide Legacies', *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 6 (2012): 723–754; Richard J. McNally, 'Is PTSD a Transhistorical Phenomenon?', in Devon E. Hinton and Byron J. Good (eds), *Culture and PTSD: Trauma in Global and Historical Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 117–134; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Beatriz Pérez Zapata, 'Decolonizing Trauma: A Story of Multidirectional Memory in Sadie Smith's "The Embassy of Cambodia"', *Humanities* 4, no. 3 (2015): 369–392.

16 Craps, Cheyette, Gibbs, Andermahr and Allwork, 'Decolonizing Trauma Studies Round-Table Discussion', 907.

conceptions of history, trauma and identity. In this sense, the interviewees serve as a bridge between Western and non-Western understandings of the impacts of the Khmer Rouge era.

Researchers in psychology and medicine have identified a range of Khmer ‘idioms of distress’, meaning phrases or metaphors used in the Khmer language to describe effects or symptoms that are best understood as related to the English concept of trauma.¹⁷ Australian trained Cambodian psychiatrist, Dr. Sotheara Chhim, claims the symptoms understood in Western medicine as those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are most commonly expressed in Khmer through the phrase ‘*baksabat*’, a culture-bound syndrome which translates to ‘broken courage’.¹⁸ Similarly, in a study of Cambodian American refugees in Long Beach, California, Barbara A. Frye and Carolyn D’Avanzo identified ‘*koucharang*’, a culture-bound syndrome which describes ‘thinking too much’.¹⁹ Survivors therefore may associate their feelings with Cambodian idioms of distress, like *baksabat*, as opposed to associating those feelings with symptoms or diagnoses of Western medicine, such as PTSD. None of my interviewees, however, described their parents’ experiences using the language of Khmer ‘idioms of distress’ or ‘culture-bound syndromes’, even in cases where narratives were delivered to them in Khmer.

All interviewees used the language of ‘trauma’ in reference to the effect of the Khmer Rouge period upon their parents. The distinction between Western and non-Western

17 See: Sotheara Chhim, ‘Baksbat (Broken Courage): The Development and Validation of the Inventory to Measure Baksbat, a Cambodian Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome of Distress’, *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 36, no. 4 (December 2012): 640–59; Barbara A. Frye and Carolyn D’Avanzo, ‘Themes in Managing Culturally Defined Illness in the Cambodian Refugee Family’, *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 11, no. 2 (2011): 89–98; Devon E. Hinton, Vuth Pich, Luana Marques, Angela Nickerson and Mark H. Pollack, ‘Khyâl Attacks: A Key Idiom of Distress Among Traumatized Cambodia Refugees’, *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 34, no. 2 (June 2010): 244–78; Havi Karel and Rachel Cooper, ‘Introduction: Culture-bound Syndromes’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Studies* 41 (2010): 307–308; Carol A. Kidron and Laurence J. Kirmayer, ‘Global Mental Health and Idioms of Distress: The Paradox of Culture Sensitive Pathologization of Distress in Cambodia’, *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 43 (2019): 211–235; Christine A. Stevens, ‘Perspectives on the Meanings of Symptoms Among Cambodian Refugees’, *Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2001): 81–98.

18 Sotheara Chhim, ‘Baksbat (Broken Courage): A Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome in Cambodia’, *Medical Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2013): 161.

19 Barbara A. Frye and Carolyn D’Avanzo, ‘Themes in Managing Culturally Defined Illness in the Cambodian Refugee Family’, *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 11, no. 2 (2011): 89.

understandings of trauma complicates my interpretation of the use of the word 'trauma' by my English-speaking interviewees in relation to their parents. The differences between Western and non-Western concepts of trauma also bring into question how these interviewees may be able to articulate their parents' emotions, and their understandings of the impact of perceived 'trauma' upon their own lives. Moni Chhun discussed his understanding of trauma as a part of his everyday life. He said, 'growing up Dad would sometimes get really angry or upset and now that I've grown older, I see it as post-traumatic stress disorder'.²⁰ Moni's interpretation of his father's 'trauma' also suggests that he understands aspects of his own childhood experiences as a product of the Khmer Rouge past. When Moni talked about taking on the responsibility of raising his brothers, for example, he said:

I don't know, is it because of Dad having gone through that trauma? I feel like these duties are what dads are meant to do, right? Instead I'm doing it, and I wonder if that's because of trauma or that's because of something else, I can't really distinguish that. Yeah... I was also thinking in today's society in terms of us growing up we are, I feel like we are missing out on a lot of things because of the Khmer Rouge.²¹

Here, Moni emphasised a direct relationship between his parents' traumatic past and his experiences in the present, evoking the Khmer Rouge past as a means of articulating his own autobiographical narrative. Some interviewees referenced the concept of trauma as a measurement and a means of articulating their parents' emotional wellbeing, or 'their post-traumatic growth'.²² In this regard, trauma emerged as a key concept through which the second generation interpret their family histories, and the effect of history on their own lives in the present.

20 Moni Chhun, interviewed by author, 21 January 2019. Tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Chhun and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

21 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

22 Sophea (first name changed, and surname omitted at request of interviewee), interviewed by author, 28 February 2019. Tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Sophea and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

Interviewees' perceptions of their parents as having 'trauma' or having 'been through trauma' may be based on their own Western understandings of the concept, whilst their parents may not use this vernacular to describe their own experiences or emotions. This linguistic difference between generations impacts descendants' interpretation of their family histories. For example, native level proficiency in Khmer may facilitate communication about complex emotions and expressions, such as those associated with genocide and trauma. Someone without proficiency in Khmer, however, may understand the non-verbal signs of trauma, but may not understand verbal expressions of emotion as deeply or effectively. Language, in this sense, is a cornerstone of how traumatic experiences can be communicated between generations. Thus, the second generation's connection to, or awareness of, their family history cannot be understood in isolation from language and linguistic comprehension.

Bloch and Hirsch note that many interviewees find their heritage language to be more emotionally or intellectually expressive than English. One of Bloch and Hirsch's Tamil speaking interviewees, for example, claimed Tamil to be 'so emotional, every word means so much more'.²³ Similarly, Moni Chhun explained,

I think for me when they tell us the story, telling us in Khmer definitely evokes a different kind of emotion. Because Dad is an interpreter and he's more than capable of telling us the stories in English, you know, but it doesn't have the same impact or meaning.²⁴

Here, Moni reflects on the emotional and conceptual meaning of language in storytelling, and on the impact of this expressive disparity for the listener. Mary Besemeres, in reference to bilingual autobiographies such as Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, addresses the capabilities of languages in reflecting emotional experiences in different ways.²⁵ To demonstrate, she draws on a comparison made by Polish writer Stanisław Barańczak about the meanings of both the Polish and English words for 'happy' (*szczęś-*

23 Alice Bloch and Shirin Hirsch, "'Second Generation" Refugees and Multilingualism: Identity, Race and Language Transmission', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 14 (2017): 2450.

24 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

25 Mary Besemeres, 'Different Languages, Different Emotions? Perspectives from Autobiographical Literature', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25, no. 2-3 (2004): 140.

liwy in Polish). Whilst in English the word is used frequently in a variety of everyday contexts, the Polish is 'reserved for rare states of profound bliss, or total satisfaction with serious things such as love, family, the meaning of life'.²⁶ Barańczak notes that 'the question one hears at . . . parties 'Is everybody happy?' if translated literally into Polish, would seem to come from a metaphysical treatise or a political utopia rather than from social chitchat'.²⁷ If, as Besemeres argues, different languages are able to express different emotions differently, language plays a central role in shaping how the meanings and emotions of the past are communicated between generations.

Western concepts of trauma form part of the framework by which the second generation understands the lived effect of the Khmer Rouge past. Often learned outside the family home and applied to encounters within the home, such concepts may not accurately or effectively describe the emotions felt by their parents. In cases where communication *about* trauma is absent, the second generation is often acutely aware of the manifestations of trauma not only in their conversational interactions with family, but also in silence.

SILENCE AS AN ACTIVE PROCESS OF REMEMBERING

Many scholars have contended that silence is as much a part of communicating the past as verbal communication, such as storytelling.²⁸ My interviews with the descendants of survivors of the Cambodian genocide support this contention, and highlight the role of silence as an active process of remembering, and in communicating the weight of traumatic histories to the second generation.

The act of silence can serve many purposes and be employed in a multitude of ways. Silence can be used by survivors as an active mechanism to preserve and to guard memory. Khatharya Um contends that 'straddling the interstice between the need to speak and the inability to express, silence is, for many refugees, a self-imposed externally compelled strategy of survival'.²⁹ Silence may be a means of emotion-

26 Besemeres, 'Different Languages, Different Emotions?', 142.

27 Besemeres, 'Different Languages, Different Emotions?', 142.

28 Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 9.

29 Um, 'Exiled Memory', 842.

ally protecting loved ones, or can provide survivors with a degree of agency and control in regard to their painful past experiences.³⁰ It can also simply be a means of protecting oneself from the emotional distress that comes with remembering traumatic events.³¹ Harboring painful experiences within the self is not only an *act* of memory, but can also be an approach toward healing.

None of my interviewees, however, associated silence with forgetting. Rather they emphasised the intentionality of their parents' silence. Veronica Lee, for example, reflected on her mother's avoidance in talking about her past experiences:

She's not very open to this day about speaking about her experiences either. It's very hard for me to get a really honest answer from her, she's very fleeting in her details. She'll tell things, but very superficially and I know that she might say something, but there's an underlying tone or message, or she just refuses to answer me, or she'll answer me with a little bit of sarcasm or something. It's not truthful, I think I'm an adult now, I can tell when she's telling the truth or not, or when she just wants to shut something down, or she's saying something to me just so I won't poke any further.³²

Although Veronica clearly expressed frustration toward her mother's silences, she also acknowledged her mother's intentional use of silence as a means of communicating boundaries. Veronica explained that to respect her mother's maintenance of silence, she would turn to her father who was more open about discussing his experiences of the past.³³

Silence can also be adopted by the children of survivors.³⁴ This can be in an attempt to avoid emotional topics for their own emotional comfort, or it may be due to a desire to protect their parents from the negative emotions that come with discussions about

30 Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009), 39.

31 Nancy J. Lin and Karen L. Suyemoto, 'So You, My Children, Can Have A Better Life: A Cambodian American Perspective on the Phenomenology of Intergenerational Communication about Trauma', *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* 25, no. 4 (2016): 403.

32 Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

33 Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

34 Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 47.

the past. Jun Giang admitted speaking to other relatives instead of his mother or father because of the emotional distress the Khmer Rouge past causes them. My interviewees also referenced instances in which they detected the emotional distress of their parents in everyday situations. Veronica, for example, recalled noticing her mother's emotional distress when grandparents were mentioned in conversation, even if it was not in the context of her own family. These unvoiced interactions can signal to the second generation that the topic is best avoided for the comfort of both themselves and their parents.

Though they respected silences and approached sensitive topics with care, interviewees emphasised the value of communication about the Khmer Rouge past. My research in Melbourne, however, somewhat conflicts with the findings of Carol Kidron in the Canadian diaspora. Researching second-generation Cambodian Canadians in Montreal, Kidron reported that interviews with the descendants of survivors 'repeatedly highlighted the personal and collective benefits of forgetting'.³⁵ Kidron noted an absence of traces of the genocide in everyday family lives and homes in the Cambodian community in Montreal.³⁶ While my interviewees explained reasons for respecting and maintaining silence, they consistently stressed the importance of remembering and communicating about the past. A number of interviewees also expressed a deep sense of 'responsibility, where it's up to me to remember'.³⁷ In this sense, the second generation engage in a balancing act between respecting others' silences, maintaining it themselves, and seeking answers that will allow them to piece together the fragments of their family histories.

FRAGMENTS

Members of the second generation may also learn about their family past through what I refer to as 'fragments'. Particularly in cases where storytelling is not direct or explicit, descendants of survivors may learn about family histories less directly, through non-narrative fragments of the past that they encounter through objects, photographs, behaviours, or conversations in their everyday lives. In some cases,

35 Carol A. Kidron, 'Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism: Comparing Jewish-Israeli Holocaust and Canadian-Cambodian Genocide Legacies', *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 6 (2012): 723.

36 Kidron, 'Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism', 724.

37 Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

encounters with these kinds of fragments may precede storytelling, or prompt conversations within the home. In this section I turn my attention to voiced and visible fragments, and specifically photographs, objects, and family interactions.

Our understanding of the past and our own place within it, is constructed within the processes of everyday life. Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwartz and David Sutton have noted that if we are to consider everyday conversations and interactions, or encounters with the past through ‘intimate cultural forms’ such as letters or photographs, as history, ‘it is history under extreme pressures and privation’.³⁸ They argue that, ‘usually this history is held to the level of private remembrance. It is not only unrecorded, but actually silenced. It is not offered the occasion to speak’.³⁹ Oral history offers these sources of narrative construction the opportunity to speak, and to be understood. I argue that in order to explore how a sense of the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian past is constructed by members of the second generation, who are temporally and spatially distanced from this history, it is of paramount importance to treat these ‘intimate cultural forms’, or fragments, as historically significant.

The second generation’s encounters with everyday remnants of the past play a key role in the construction of historical imagination, often prior to storytelling. In the context of Holocaust photography, Marianne Hirsch coined the term ‘postmemory’, describing ‘the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right’.⁴⁰ In both the absence and presence of shared stories, fragments assist the second generation to form connections between imagined and shared narratives of their family histories. In cases where parents have communicated spoken narratives to their children, fragments, such as photographs,

38 Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwartz and David Sutton, *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 210.

39 McLennan, Schwartz and Sutton, *Making Histories*, 210.

40 Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, 9.

also provide descendants with a visual imagination of the setting in which particular narratives took place.

Family photographs often prompted members of the second generation to think about and question their family histories. In family photo collections, they were very unlikely to uncover photographs of the Khmer Rouge period, as private ownership in all forms, and particularly products of art or technology, were symbols of disloyalty to the regime and its ideology, and were thus destroyed or never created in the first place. Thus, a visual imagination of the Khmer Rouge period was usually ascertained by the second generation when they came across photographs taken by the regime, found online or in books. Some families did, however, manage to keep photographs from before April 1975 or from Thai-refugee camps, and many took photos during their early settlement in Australia.

Photographs from the Khmer Rouge period are almost always absent from family photo albums, but the period is evoked by other images. In some cases, photographs of relatives killed by the regime adorn the walls of family homes. These photographs may have been descendants' first encounters with the Khmer Rouge past, as they learnt who that person was and what happened to them. These photographs are often revered by the descendants of survivors. Veronica Lee showed me her favourite photograph – the one of her grandfather who died during the Khmer Rouge, which I described in the introduction of this paper. For Veronica, this photograph represents not only the emotional weight of *his* story, but also the loss of *all* of her grandparents during the Khmer Rouge period. In her interview Veronica explained that she's never seen photographs of her other grandparents, and to this day does not know what they looked like.

Most interviewees made reference to photographs in their interviews, most often in the context of how they learned particular parts of their family history. Photographs not only help shape the second generation's imagination of their family's past, but also help them create their own place within their family narratives. Leda Ly, for example, described a collage that she made which occupies a prominent place above her desk. It featured various photographs and a couple of newspaper clippings. She pointed to



Ly Family in Villawood Detention Centre (date unknown). Photographer unknown, personal possession of Leda Ly.

her favourite: a candid picture of her family sitting on the grass in Villawood Detention Centre eating dinner (above). This photograph, she claimed was her favourite, ‘because you can see the fencing, and then it’s just us huddled over what probably is a really shit dinner [laughter]... It’s just a good picture of like, us not having our freedom. It really shows what we went through. Like, it’s just one fence, but it means so much’.⁴¹ To Leda, the photograph not only represents the Khmer Rouge past that brought her family to Australia, but is a visual representation of where she fits in relation to her family past – it places the Khmer Rouge past within the development of her own autobiographical narrative. Indeed, in Leda’s articulation of her own life story, she returned regularly to the fact that she was born in Villawood Immigration Detention Centre, emphasising the impact of the Khmer Rouge past not only in the lives of her parents, but also the lives of herself and her sister.

Many Cambodian refugee families have no photographs of their family or their lives prior to the Khmer Rouge taking power. Indeed, as for Veronica Lee, not having photographs of those who were killed during Democratic Kampuchea intensifies feelings of loss and absence. Some families spent years searching for images or traces

⁴¹ Leda Ly, interviewed by author, 4 January 2019, tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Ly and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

of those they lost. Sophea's mother miraculously came across an image of her father in footage featured on what Sophea believes was a news program:

So, she used this video to kind of, she found an artist to help paint my grandpa because she obviously really wanted something in memory of him or to have a piece of him. So, I remember when I was little that she would pause the video and that's how she showed that artist what he looked like and who he was ... So that's how my mum got this image of her dad. And this is the only picture that we have of our Grandpa.⁴²

Holding the painting, Sophea proudly explained how the painting came to be, and described in detail the uniform her grandfather wore as a soldier before the Khmer Rouge took power. This painting embodied his story, and her mother's determination to remember and honour him.

Fragments of survivors' experiences were also communicated to their children through anecdotes and fleeting references to the past in everyday conversation, often without historical context or elaboration.⁴³ For many interviewees, references to the Khmer Rouge or to 'Pol Pot time' occurred in everyday conversations as a time reference. Bo said, 'for example, they [her family] could be talking about a relative. And they would say, "oh yeah, he was alive during Pol Pot". You know? And it's not even like talking about the situation, but it's just more like it's a time reference'.⁴⁴ Similarly, Veronica reflected, 'I don't know about the general public, but if you're Khmer and you say "Pol Pot time", you know exactly that they're referring to the Khmer Rouge time. They don't even have to use the words Khmer Rouge. And to shorten it they say, "P.P. time", they don't even speak his name'.⁴⁵

42 Sophea interview, 1 May 2019.

43 Carol A. Kidron, 'Universalizing Trauma Descendant Legacies: A Comparative Study of Jewish-Israeli and Cambodian Genocide Descendant Legacies', in Vigdis Broch-Due and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen (eds), *Violent Reverberations: Global Modalities of Trauma* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 71.

44 Bo (first name changed, and surname omitted at request of interviewee), interviewed by the author, 13 April 2019. Tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Bo and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

45 Lee interview, 3 May 2019.

Everyday conversations within the home are a powerful source of indirect memory transmission. In some cases, however, seemingly harmless interactions with parents could become a source of tension for reasons unbeknownst to the second generation. Veronica recalled one of her first glimpses of her mother's sensitivity around the topic of grandparents, when she was invited to the birthday party of a friend's grandparent:

I sort of told them, 'I'm going to so and so's grandmother's birthday', or something. And then Mum was a little bit, kind of standoffish about it, and I didn't really understand. I just thought she didn't want me to go out, and then I remember that evening when I came home, Dad sort of pulled me aside, he didn't really tell me off, but he's like 'don't ask Mum, or don't speak about grandparents around Mum', and I was like, okay, that's a bit odd.⁴⁶

On a separate occasion, Veronica asked her parents for help with a family tree assignment for school. Veronica recalled being confused when they 'brushed it off', and then grew silent and distant. Finally, it was her father who, after a week hesitantly drew a family tree on the back of a piece of paper for her. She submitted this family tree with no photos, names, dates or locations. She said that she couldn't understand why they wouldn't help her or answer her questions:

They brushed me off by saying 'no, you need to do your own homework, we can't help you', and I was like, 'but, I *don't know*, what are our grandparents' names?', 'how many siblings do you have?', and you know 'how many cousins do we have?', and 'where do we *come* from? *Where* in Cambodia?' And these questions, whilst at the time I didn't realise were so invasive, were almost very hurtful for me to ask my parents, because of the trauma that they'd *been* through. And for them, having to remember the reason why I didn't have a grandmother or a grandfather to survive or the reason why we don't have certain cousins, it's *because* of that. And that's the beginning of why I asked all these questions. My mum completely just ignored me for about a week, because I kept asking her questions about this project. And I

⁴⁶ Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

just became very hostile towards her, because I'm like, 'you need to help me, I'm at school, it's an assignment, I'm going to fail'. I never realised the impact of my questions on her... probably not until ten years later.⁴⁷

The topic of grandparents was a frequent source of tension in the Lee household. Unlike many interviewees, Veronica did not know anything about the Khmer Rouge until she was a teenager. In her early teenage years her questions began to break through the silence that had clouded the past for so many years.

These kinds of fragments, whether as part of spoken narratives or as silences, shape the historical imagination of the second generation. Everyday interactions with family members, and discoveries of physical remnants of the past around the family home, can provide the second generation with small clues, fragments and pieces of information that help them to piece together and navigate otherwise disjointed narratives.

STORYTELLING

The stories that survivor parents choose to tell their children, as well as those which they choose to not tell, profoundly shape the historical consciousness of their descendants. While in some cases storytelling delivers the most complete and contextualised narratives of family histories, these voiced narratives can also be fragmented. How members of the second generation interpret these narratives depends not only on the connections they make between a multitude of stories, but also the connections they make between all of the voiced, unvoiced, and visible fragments of the past that they have encountered throughout their lives. How narratives are prompted, shared, delivered, interpreted and retold play an important role in how the descendants of survivors make meaning from these family stories. Moreover, the family narratives that the second generation choose to retell, and how they tell these stories, reveal an important component of how they understand themselves in relation to the past – a crucial mechanism in the construction of identity.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

⁴⁸ Elaine Reese, Robyn Fivush, Natalie Merrill, Qi Wang and Helena McAnally, "Adolescents' Intergenerational Narratives Across Cultures", *Developmental Psychology* 53, no. 6 (2017): 1142.

Based on their research of second-generation Cambodian Americans, Lin and Suyemoto conclude that the narratives shared by their interviewees suggest that the most ‘complete and personally connected learning’ came out of direct conversations about the past with family members, and during which ‘a whole trauma narrative’ was shared.⁴⁹ Some of my interviewees could not recall the first time they learned about the Khmer Rouge, and reasoned that references to ‘Khmer Rouge’, or to the ‘Pol Pot time’, were present from such a young age that they couldn’t pinpoint their first encounter.⁵⁰ Although present from an early age, such stories or references to the Khmer Rouge past may not have become meaningful to the second generation until later in life when they were able to more deeply and contextually understand the history of the Khmer Rouge regime. Sophea, for example, reminisced positively about being ‘surrounded by the stories and experiences’ growing up.⁵¹ She said it was primarily storytelling, both from her family, community members, and accounts she read, that informed her dominant understanding of the Khmer Rouge era.⁵²

While everyday family interactions can help the second generation to connect various family narratives, they can also prompt further questions. Jun Giang Heng, for example, explained how ‘the question of why becomes stronger and stronger’.⁵³ He recalled how he learned that prior to migration, his father had a second family in Cambodia:

I actually found out that story accidentally because my auntie blurted it out when I was 16 years old ... I think it just makes me wonder more about... well like I said before, when my parents are just ‘nobody in our family died, nobody in our family died’, seeing and hearing my dad say that story, that makes me think that gut instinct of, I don’t think my parents aren’t telling the truth, like it’s true something else has happened in our family through

49 Lin and Suyemoto, ‘So You, My Children, Can Have A Better Life’, 411.

50 Bo interview, 13 April 2019.

51 Sophea interview, 28 February 2019.

52 Sophea interview, 28 February 2019.

53 Jun Giang Heng, interviewed by author, 29 April 2019. Tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Heng and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

this war and it just makes you wonder, what else is there? But at the same time, you know, despite it being family, how much can I pry? You know, last thing I want to do is upset my parents.⁵⁴

In instances where details that members of the second generation perceive as significant are not shared, such as unknown relatives in Jun Giang's case, children may begin to doubt aspects of their parents' stories. Perhaps it is because they seem to be, as Veronica said 'far-fetched', or because they feel like that have not been told the entire story by their parents. Interviewees may feel a sense of mistrust, or an uncertainty that the stories they have been told are entirely true.

Interviewees were often aware of the potential for their questions to provoke a negative emotional response from their parents. Some identified this as a key reason for actively avoiding discussions about the Khmer Rouge period. Interviewees described taking a cautious approach to such conversations in the home, in which, as Lin and Suyemoto explain, they both 'understand and appreciate their elder's story while watching for signs of their emotional pain'.⁵⁵ My interviewees recalled instances where they avoided engagement with particular topics because of their concern for their parents' emotional wellbeing. Jun Giang explained that 'I avoid asking my mum because my mum is very emotional, so I know she'll cry and if she cries then I cry [laughter]'.⁵⁶ Conversations about the past may be avoided both out of concern for a loved one's emotional wellbeing, but also to protect oneself from the emotional effect of witnessing a parent's pain.⁵⁷

During the interview process, the second generation often retold narratives about their parents' survival and the hardship they endured under the Khmer Rouge. These kinds of stories are likely to hold particular significance within shared family narratives. The stories to which Veronica consistently returned in her interview were those of how her grandparents on both sides of her family were killed under the Khmer

54 Heng interview, 29 April 2019.

55 Lin and Suyemoto, 'So You, My Children, Can Have A Better Life', 411.

56 Heng interview, 29 April 2019.

57 Lin and Suyemoto, 'So You, My Children, Can Have A Better Life', 411–412.

Rouge. These stories were the most emotional for her to recall, as they are intertwined with the deep loss that she feels regarding the absence of grandparents in her own life:

So she was heavily pregnant, they forced her into labour and they took her away and killed her ... And for me to realise that the reason why I didn't have grandparents is not because they had passed away long before I was born due to natural causes or whatever, it's because they were forcibly removed from my family. It wasn't this thing where my grandfather died of old age in his bed surrounded by his family, he died because during the labour camp he was starved to death, he was weak and you know, he couldn't hold on anymore. And the reason why I don't have grandparents on my mother's side is because she was taken to be killed because she was pregnant. Like, that's so, that makes me so angry [tears], angry I think, for me, but also for my parents.⁵⁸

The emotional weight of this narrative is deepened by the silence which surrounded it for so many years. Veronica's rearticulation of the narrative not only details the deaths of family members, but is interwoven into a recollection of emotional pain growing up, a longing for answers to the unacknowledged absence of grandparents in her life.

Interviewees most readily recalled those stories which were told to them in a narrative format. During the interview process, they retold these narratives seemingly determined to include all of the finer details that had been shared with them. Interviewees emphasised details pertaining to hardship, or survival in extreme circumstances; starvation, injury, death and the separation of family members featured in almost every interviewee's recollection of their family history. As recipients of their parents' memories and narratives, the second generation may feel a responsibility to retell stories in a particular manner, particularly in cases where stories have been told and retold in great detail. Moni recalled a story told to him by his father:

⁵⁸ Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

One experience that I remember my dad telling, and he's told us many times before and he does get really quite emotional, is the story of how his father, my grandfather, was taken during the Khmer Rouge ... And yeah, that story, every one of us in the family knows very well and has been told, and we can pretty much just imagine it really vividly.⁵⁹

As Moni retold this story, he suddenly stopped part way through and said, 'wait, can I start over?' He restarted the story, this time beginning with an explanation of the specific kind of Cambodian axe that his grandfather sharpened in anticipation of the day that Khmer Rouge soldiers would come to take him away. He also emphasised the exact number of soldiers that his father, then a young boy, remembered coming for his father. Moni was careful and intentional in his delivery, and his determination to tell the story in the way that it was told to him implied both a deep connection with the narrative and a perceived responsibility to retell the story correctly, and to deliver the narrative in a manner that was respectful to the memory of his father and grandfather. This sense of responsibility in the way that Moni relays family narratives is also evident in the way that he told the story of how his family fled from Cambodia to Thailand. He said, 'Dad has told us this story several times, so I should know it back to front'.⁶⁰

Moni told the story of the seven trips across the Thai border that his father made in order to get the entire family to safety in Khao I Dang, and the significance of this story to his entire family:

And even now when we go to Adelaide, like all our relatives and stuff will tell us that story, how my dad heroically brought them all to the refugee camp. And if that didn't happen, none of them would be in Australia and which they are super thankful for, you know. So that basically happened and in that border crossing, there's like, there is like rogue soldiers, ex-soldiers

59 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

60 Chhun interview, 1 May 2019.

and mines and like trip wires, everything like that. It's a story within itself. I recommend you asking him one day. He would love to tell you.⁶¹

The stories of hardship told and retold among families, such as this story told to Moni by his father, become dominant narratives retold by the second generation. Moni's story emphasises hardship, as most stories of the Khmer Rouge period do, but also highlights his father's bravery and the journey of migration. Indeed, as Moni and I wrapped up our final interview, his father emerged and asked us how the interview went. Moni mentioned the story of the border crossing, and indeed, his father's eyes lit up. While Moni and I listened intently, his father then proudly, yet humbly, relayed the story to us. He described how hard it was to cross the border even once, and that it took seven crossings to successfully get the entire family to safety in Thailand.

In some cases, stories about migration were shared by families in lieu of stories about the Khmer Rouge period. Survivors may emphasise stories about migration because they more closely associate the process of migration with their successful survival, as opposed to their experiences of victimhood and suffering under the Khmer Rouge regime. Even in narratives of migration, however, the most frequently recalled stories involve hardship, determination and survival, including in the second generation's retelling of these stories. Leda Ly recalled:

My mum will talk about the boat as the most memorable memory that she has because she was pregnant [laughter], and she was sea sick as well as vomiting from the pregnancy, and they had nothing to eat and they were being hidden by the people shipping them over – so they were stopped often by authorities and they had to hide inside the boat [laughter]. Which is pretty terrifying.... But yeah, it's pretty amazing that they did that.⁶²

Narratives of her parents coming 'by boat' hold particular significance for Leda and emerged frequently in her recollections of her family histories. Leda's emphasis on

61 Chhun interview, 1 May 2019.

62 Ly interview, 4 January 2019.

the journey closely resembled her mother's storytelling, which also focussed closely on the journey to Australia and their lengthy stays in immigration hostels and detention centres.

While stories of hardship are passed down, parents may not share all of these stories with their children. Leda's mother, for example, told her daughter stories of arriving in Australia by boat whilst pregnant, and even told her children about the difficult decision she had to make about whether or not to put her daughters up for adoption when the Australian government sent them back to Cambodia. Leda only learned about other painful details of her mother's experience in Villawood through newspaper articles that were collected by her aunt. Leda's mother and aunt were interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1996.⁶³ Leda said:

I don't have like, bad memories of it [Villawood]. But yeah, my mum and my auntie did have experiences of people trying to commit suicide there by drinking shampoo and yeah, all this crazy stuff. But actually she's never talked about that personally, but I've just read it in a Herald Sun article.⁶⁴

Leda featured cut-outs of these articles in the collage she created and placed above her desk for inspiration.⁶⁵ Leda's creative process highlights the significance of her family's stories of migration and settlement in her understanding of her family history. Also featuring photographs of her and her family in Villawood together, the collage is a creative visual expression of her own autobiographical narrative, and her place within the past. In a sense, the collage is a visual representation of how Leda has placed herself within her family narrative over time.

Stories of hardship and suffering are often communicated between parents and their children with a moral purpose. Food was a key topic of anecdotal communication

63 Claudia Tazreiter, 'All locked up and nowhere to go – features', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1997, 15.

64 Ly interview, 4 January 2019.

65 For featured newspaper articles see: Cynthia Banham, 'From Cambodian killing fields to law graduate, via Villawood', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April, 2004: 3; Fergus Shiel, 'Epic odyssey from Cambodia's killing fields to rarefied corridors of the Supreme Court', *The Age*, 14 December, 2004: 7; Claudia Tazreiter, 'All locked up and nowhere to go – features', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1997, 15.

about the Khmer Rouge period. Scarcity of food, for example, emerged as a recurring theme in the family stories that the second generation retold in their interviews. Moni, for example, recalled that many of the stories he was told:

Would be like trying to pass on values, like, every now and then still, ever since, he [his father] would always go, you know, ‘back in the Khmer Rouge I’d have this small amount of meat and this much rice if we even got rice’, just trying to pass down values of always finishing your food and appreciating what you have.⁶⁶

Kidron also noted references to the Khmer Rouge era in educating and disciplining children.⁶⁷ She writes that, ‘scarcity of food, hunger and the struggle to skilfully survive are the most common themes of Khmer mythic tales of survival’.⁶⁸ This is also reflected in how the second generation retell these stories. Referring to her parents’ experiences coming by boat to Australia, and their long and complicated journey to be granted permanent residency, Leda said, ‘It’s a survival story, for sure. And my mum always says actually, “we Cambodians, we know how to survive” [laughter]’.⁶⁹

Moreover, it is these moral or purposeful stories, communicated directly by family members to their children, that become the dominant narratives that are passed on and therefore are retold by the second generation. Moni, for example, noticed that most of the stories that his parents had told him about the Khmer Rouge past were about ‘the harshness of it’, and that these stories were often perceived by his brothers and him as ‘lectures’, when their parents wanted to pass down values to them.⁷⁰ While my interviewees retell these stories with a sense of responsibility to the past and to the memory of their family members, they also renegotiate and adapt these narratives in accordance with their own broader encounters with, and understandings of, their family past.

66 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

67 Kidron, ‘Universalizing Trauma Descendant Legacies’, 71.

68 Kidron, ‘Universalizing Trauma Descendant Legacies’, 72.

69 Ly interview, 4 January 2019.

70 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

Negotiation of these narratives also shapes the development of descendants' own autobiographical voice and narrative.⁷¹ A lack of communication about the past may also be a motivating factor driving the second generation to engage in memory work and share family narratives. Kidron notes that, particularly in cases where survivors 'resist testimonial voice', descendants may be motivated to act as surrogates for their parents, 'testifying to their own childhood memories in the shadow of genocidal suffering or to their recollections of fragmentary accounts of genocide suffering'.⁷² This process shapes the second generations' understanding of themselves in relation to the past, which in turn imbues family narratives with further meaning.

CONCLUSION

In the diasporas which formed in the aftermath of Democratic Kampuchea, survivors and their descendants continue to be impacted by the Khmer Rouge past. Second-generation Cambodian Australians in Melbourne continually negotiate and reconcile their own relationships to the past and the meanings that the past holds in their own lives. This process, however, is multifaceted and often results in fragmented and dislocated narratives of the past. When the descendants of survivors retell these narratives, in part they reveal how they have interpreted these silences, fragments and stories, and the meanings they hold. Through these narratives we are able to understand the process through which members of the second generation find their own place within the stories they have been told, and how their family histories have become integrated with their own autobiographical narratives.

Storytelling and the sharing of narratives is, of course, one of the primary means by which the descendants of survivors have learned about the Khmer Rouge past. How the second generation interprets these narratives, however, requires negotiation of all of the voiced, unvoiced, visible and invisible fragments of the family past encountered throughout their lives. Each of these sources of historical imagination play integral roles in the construction of a 'sense of the past' and are consistently interactional and

71 Reese, Fivush, Merrill, Wang and McAnally, 'Adolescents' Intergenerational Narratives Across Cultures', 1143.

72 Kidron, 'Universalizing Trauma Descendant Legacies', 60.

intersecting. Furthermore, the ways that these narratives are evoked, shared, delivered and retold play an important role in how the second generation is able to make meaning of their family histories.

I recall here the words of Steven High, Edward Little and Thi Ry Duong, who write, 'a life story is best understood as a living thing, forever changing'.⁷³ My interviewees will continue to learn and challenge, negotiate and renegotiate, construct and reconstruct the narratives of their family histories. This process will continue as they pass these narratives down to their own children, implicating multiple generations in processes of narrative transaction that both shape and are shaped by family narratives of the history of Democratic Kampuchea.

73 Steven High, Edward Little and Thi Ry Duong (eds), *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media and Performance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 4.