

## Reflective Praxis and Program-Building for Khmer American Women's Leadership

Shirley S. Tang<sup>1</sup>, Ph.D, Kim Soun Ty<sup>2</sup>, M.S & Linda Thiem<sup>3</sup>, M.Ed.

### Abstract

---

In this article, we offer a grounded, interdisciplinary profile of Khmer American women and girls within diasporic, historical, intergenerational, family and community contexts. Our synthesis begins with a critical historical framing and demographic analysis. Through brief case studies of two local Khmer women-centered commitments during the past two decades—one focused on street-based girls' development and one dedicated to documentation of grandmother knowledge—we then foreground the importance of recognizing transnational, traumatic legacies and the power of intergenerational storytelling over time. We conclude with reflections based on our collaborative efforts to develop and document Khmer diasporic women-centered leadership within the structure, culture, and long-term educational praxis of an Asian American Studies academic program at one urban, public, minority-serving university in the United States.

---

**Keywords:** Khmer, Cambodian, Diaspora, Storytelling, Genocide, Inter-generational

*I want Cambodian women to empower themselves and believe in themselves. . .*

Ely Phlek, the first Khmer refugee woman to graduate from UMass Boston with a background in Asian American Studies in 1990, quoted after opening her restaurant, *Teptbida Khmer*, in Lowell, MA in 2007

### Introduction

Despite claiming over four decades of diasporic history, little research or writing from U.S. women-centered Cambodian or Khmer (we use these terms interchangeably) perspectives has influenced women's studies, Asian American Studies or public discourse, with the exception of a handful of personal memoirs (Schlund-Vials, 2012; Chan, 2003, Ung, 2000). Concentrated Khmer refugee communities in small U.S. cities such as Long Beach, California and Lowell/Revere/Lynn in Massachusetts have asserted Khmer cultural profiles and needs since the 1980s and 1990s, but with little recognition of the critical roles of Khmer refugee women or gendered realities in Khmer communities specifically, other than some examples from public health research and youth development (Sangalang, Ngouy & Lau, 2015; Wetzel, Huong & Heng, 1995, 2008). Today, more than one generation later, Khmer American women and their families within diasporic contexts continue to survive and adapt to legacies of both homeland genocide and U.S.-based racialized poverty, though largely still on their own. In this article, we seek fresh recognition, while reaching beyond basic demands for disaggregated data and intersectional analysis. Through sharing brief examples of program-building from our own work with local Khmer American women and girls within diasporic, historical, intergenerational, family and community contexts in metro Boston for the past two decades, our approach foregrounds the importance of recognizing transnational,

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA USA, Associate Professor, Asian American Studies Program, School for Global Inclusion and Social Development, University of Massachusetts Boston. email: [shirley.tang@umb.edu](mailto:shirley.tang@umb.edu); phone: 617-287-5658.

<sup>2</sup> University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA USA

<sup>3</sup> Middlesex Community College, Lowell, MA USA

Traumatic legacies and the power of intergenerational storytelling in validating the lived personal experiences of Khmer American women/girls over many years of time within stable, structured environments of educational support and knowledge co-production (Tang, 2017).

### **Local Cambodian American Contexts**

The state of Massachusetts is home to the second largest concentration of Khmer Americans in the U.S. and has been an important site of Cambodian American history-making for four decades (Tang, 2004). Although Khmer diasporic communities did not exist in the U.S. before 1975, a small number of Cambodians had come as students to attend American colleges in the 1960s but could not return due to civil war, including Daniel Lam who later served as Coordinator of the Office for Refugees and Immigrants in Massachusetts and taught as an Asian American Studies instructor at UMass Boston, the urban public university where we also work.

After an initial wave of 5,000 Cambodians fled to the U.S. following the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975, a much larger flow of 130,000 refugees arrived in the wake of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime's demise in 1979 (Chan, 2016; 2004). Refugee-run community organizations in Massachusetts such as the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Lowell and the Sanghikaram WatBuddhist temple in Lynn were among the earliest Khmer cultural and spiritual institutions established in the U.S. during the 1980s and still operate today. Through the 1990s, refugee realities continued to define the daily experiences of Cambodian Americans in all aspects of life, but the process of community building took deeper root through ethnic small business development and emerging bilingual/bicultural leadership from the 1.5 generation. Gaps in language, culture, and experience within family and community contexts also grew, however, particularly as the younger generation independently confronted issues of poverty, racism, changing gender roles, urban violence, domestic violence, substance abuse, gang involvement, and forced assimilation to Black/White, English-only standards of American culture (Ong, 2003). Community institutions committed to Khmer-centered care such as the Metta Health Center in Lowell (Griggs-Saito, Toof, et al, 2010) developed to address both the complex, continuing needs of the rapidly aging refugee generation and the cultural needs of a growing U.S.-born second generation. Cambodian American civic engagement also advanced through notable local electoral victories by Rithy Uong and Rady Momin Lowell—the first Cambodian American elected officials in the U.S. at city and state levels, respectively (Kiang & Tang, 2009).

Meanwhile, during the past 15 years, dramatic social, economic, and political changes in Cambodia independently re-defined the diasporic relationships of Cambodian Americans as homeland travel, transnational business, family reconnection, and ease of communication via mobile phone and internet expanded. More recent newcomers from Cambodia have arrived as family-sponsored immigrants rather than as refugees—a fundamental shift in status and identity. Indeed, an entire post-genocide, post-refugee generation has grown to young adulthood during this recent period throughout the Cambodian diaspora, carrying the family legacy of war and trauma, but with no direct experience of it themselves.

Ironically, following 2002, and intensifying since 2016, the U.S. government has forcibly deported several hundred Cambodian Americans who carried felony criminal convictions and had failed to gain naturalized U.S. citizenship, even though they had lived here since their childhoods and already served prison-time for their crimes (Tang, 2010). The contemporary Cambodian American profile, therefore, represents refugee elders, second and third-generation diasporic young adults and children, and post-genocide new immigrants—all within social, cultural, and structural contexts of trauma, resilience, and inequality.

### **Gendered Demographic Realities**

Focused intervention with Khmer American populations is an equity imperative among Asian American subgroups. Nearly 40% of Cambodian American families with children under 18 years were poor, compared to 14% for Asian Americans overall and 22% for the total U.S. population, and only 14% had acquired a bachelor's degree, compared with 49% of Asian Americans and 29.6 percent of Americans overall (Center for American Progress, 2015). In this context of inequality, Khmer American women's experiences and perspectives especially matter, not simply via rhetorical questions of representation, but out of empirical necessity, as a gender-based analysis of national 2010 American Community Survey data for Cambodian Americans compiled by the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (2011) reveals. Table 1 shows the female-male proportion of Khmer American women to men in 2010 is not only much higher in every adult age category of 18-34, 35-64, and over 65, but also higher in comparison with the overall Asian American population and the U.S. population as a whole.

The Khmer American population aged 65 years and over, in particular, shows a significantly higher proportion of women (59.1%) compared to men (40.9%). Similarly, 23.2% of Cambodian American households in 2010 were female-headed with no husband present, compared with only 13.1% of households in the US and 9.8% of Asian American households overall. Furthermore, 46.3% of Cambodian American households in 2010 have children under 18 years old, compared to 29.7% of the U.S. population and 37.9% of the overall Asian American population. With so many men killed or lost during the Khmer Rouge era and as a result of subsequent migrations, female-headed families and households are common in Khmer American communities. This is a profound gendered legacy of the genocide that left widowed heads of refugee households as the backbone, hands, and spirit of the diasporic Khmer American community. The higher numbers of Cambodian American households with children also suggest that young people, particularly young women, must take on heavy responsibilities to care for younger children and for the non-English speaking elder generation.

Furthermore, as Table 2 shows, Khmer American adult women are less likely than their male counterparts to have graduated with a high school diploma or higher degree (62% for women and 72.3% for men) or a bachelor's degree or higher (14.4% for women and 18.0% for men). The bachelor's degree attainment for Khmer American women is also far lower than for US women overall (27.9%) and for Asian American women overall (46.8%). The need for gender-specific educational support, intervention, and advocacy with Khmer American girls and women of all ages, therefore, is obvious, just as the historical roots of these gendered, demographic, diasporic realities are multi-dimensional and complex.

**Table 1: Cambodian, Asian, and US Population by Age and Gender, 2010**

Age and Gender	U.S. Overall	Asian Overall	Cambodian
18 years and over	235,184,324	12,804,312	213,777
Male	48.5%	46.8%	45.6%
Female	51.5%	53.2%	54.4%
18 to 34 years	71,867,474	4,650,679	95,399
Male	50.6%	48.5%	47.1%
Female	49.4%	51.5%	52.9%
35 to 64 years	122,883,325	6,655,257	100,813
Male	49.1%	46.5%	45.1%
Female	50.9%	53.5%	54.9%
65 years and over	40,433,525	1,498,376	17,565
Male	43.1%	43.0%	40.9%
Female	56.9%	57.0%	59.1%

Source: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, "Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians adapted from the American Community Survey" (2011).

**Table 2: Educational Attainment of People by Gender Aged 25 and Over, 2010**

	U.S. Overall	Asian Overall	Cambodian
204,288,933	10,960,076	172,329	
High school grad or higher	85.6%	85.9%	66.7%
Male	84.8%	87.9%	72.3%
Female	86.3%	84.2%	62.2%
Bachelor's degree or higher	28.2%	48.9%	16.0%
Male	28.5%	51.3%	18.0%
Female	27.9%	46.8%	14.4%

Source: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, "Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians adapted from the American Community Survey" (2011).

Such educational disparities are even sharper in Massachusetts where nearly four of ten Cambodians have less than a high school diploma compared to one of ten for the overall population, and just 3% of Cambodian Americans in MA have attained a graduate or professional degree (Lo, 2014). When one considers that graduate degrees represent minimal qualifications for entry into research, teaching, and policy-making professions or other opportunities for influence such as authoring academic publications, the structural barriers facing Cambodian American women have often seemed insurmountable.

More than a decade ago, Tang (2008a) noted that efforts to collect, interpret, and disseminate Khmer-specific disaggregated data were worthwhile, but needed to be triangulated by community-centered research that documented the voices and perspectives of Khmer American women across generations. Reflecting the historical context of community development and the disproportionate demographic burdens carried by Khmer American women, the following section offers two such examples: 1) a street-based intervention designed by co-author Tang in the late 1990s to support Khmer American young women's visions and practices of leadership; and 2) a university-based curricular intervention extended more recently by Tang with co-authors Ty and Thiem, who are among the three percent of Cambodian Americans in Massachusetts who have completed graduate degrees themselves, and who share deep commitments to the mobilization, leadership, and educational transformation of Khmer American women and girls—locally, nationally, and diasporically.

### **Roca Revere Shirley Girls and Khmer Diaspora Studies from the Street**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, large numbers of Cambodians came to metro Boston directly through refugee resettlement programs and via secondary migration from other geographic areas because of employment opportunities, progressive social welfare policies, and some of the first Cambodian Buddhist temples in the country in Lynn, Lowell, and Revere, Massachusetts. Many found semi-skilled factory jobs in local plants that assembled electronics, computers, and medical supplies. By 1990, Lowell and Revere/Lynn had become the second and fifth largest Khmer communities in the U.S.

Roca Shirley Girls was established in summer 1997 by a group of Cambodian American young women and co-author Tang who was then a street outreach worker in a youth-family-community development organization called Roca Revere. As a social justice-model youth program founded in 1992, Roca Revere's primary focus was street intervention, conflict resolution, and body-mind-spirit development with young people engaged in or "at risk" of gang activity. Named after Shirley Avenue, the main street connecting Revere's Khmer residential/commercial area, Shirley Girls was created as an alternative learning space for a coming-of-age generation of Khmer American young women, many of whom had already dropped out of middle or high school. Its predecessor, the Azi Project (1993-1996) under the leadership of Samnang Chea, was one of the country's first HIV/AIDS health education projects for Khmer American youth. The Azi Project produced HIV/AIDS prevention materials, including a bilingual English/Khmer educational video, a Cambodian AIDS quilt, and a handbook titled, *For Asian Girls Only*. Shirley Girls furthered the Azi Project's groundbreaking work with Khmer American young women by organizing peer-led knowledge-building workshops, house parties, community forums, and field trips. Shirley Girls was unique in enabling young women to experience identities that were distinctly different from those available on the street. Fresh group names stressed "girls' power" such as Millennium Girls, Hip Hop Girls, and Women's Empowerment Group, with rules and policies regarding no colors, no drugs, no alcohol, and no disrespectful language, and with symbols of representation, including T-shirts, logos, and identification cards. Shirley Girls also met with Asian American women national leaders, such as Helen Zia and Cambodian American professor, Khatharya Um, and pioneered their own "street" version of Asian American Studies with classes on Asian American history and culture, youth activism, and resistance movements in communities of color. By centering the perspectives of young women coming from a street-life context, Shirley Girls learned to recognize and reconstruct concentric circles of affiliation—family, neighborhood, city, state, country, and the world—that in turn affected their lives. Such an ecological theory of relationships broadened their choice-making beyond "ghetto" life and enabled them to imagine larger possibilities of growth, change, and interdependence through building resources, drawing on their own strength, and taking responsibility—through an intentional process of imitation and internalization to help each other develop, armed with day-to-day tactics and longer-term strategies in both transmitting and transforming traditions. From 1997 through 2005, some of the Shirley Girls also participated in a collaborative program called Youth-Art-In-Action (YAIA) with the Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth, a pan-Asian youth leadership network affiliated with UMass Boston's Asian American Studies Program, and college students at the School of Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

YAIA participants regularly exhibited creative work in Revere, Lynn, and Lowell, as well as in schools, museums, and local galleries—thanks to the visions and efforts of founding director Marge Rack and Khmer national treasure Master Artist Yary Livan who embodied not only the essence of inspirational, humanistic teaching, but also the care of a loving, Khmer-speaking elder/uncle/father who had survived the genocide himself (Tang, 2008b). Though the Shirley Girls and YAIA programs did not continue beyond 2005, their creative work earned a prestigious President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities Coming Up Taller Award in 2005, and the program's long-term impacts on those who participated still have meaning today. The historical significance and continuing impact of community-based project interventions and organizations like Roca Shirley Girls, and counterparts in other settings such as Khmer Girls in Action in Long Beach, California, PrYSMin Providence, Rhode Island, Mekong in the Bronx, New York, and Apsara's Warriors in Oakland, California deserve wider recognition and deeper investment.

During the decade prior to the formation of Roca Shirley Girls in Revere, the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston had already developed its own structure and culture of educational support, leadership development, and community capacity building with local first and 1.5 generation Khmer refugees, particularly among the small numbers of women making their way into the region's urban public university (Kiang, 1996). Informed by a multidimensional conceptual framework developed within our own Asian American Studies Program in the early 1990s that holistically accounted for distinctive cultural and educational strengths and struggles related to multiple and intersecting dimensions of our students' identities as Southeast Asians and Khmers, as refugees, as immigrants, and as racial minorities, the Program's pedagogy and curriculum modeled a range of individual and collective strategies to:

- Facilitate socio-culturally responsive and academically relevant learning communities that support student persistence, mentoring, and connection at our urban, working class, commuter university;
- Document significant issues, needs, and interventions in local Asian American communities and on campus, recognizing that our own students and alumni are themselves members and participants within local neighborhoods, workplaces, and community-based institutions;
- Build research and development capacities in local Asian American communities through connecting ethnic studies perspectives, interdisciplinary methodologies, and analytic frameworks with students' and alumni's diasporic social networks and cultural/linguistic knowledge;
- Produce and preserve original collections of locally-relevant source materials, such as oral histories, digital stories, spoken word performances, directories, maps, and photo/video/print archives.

Asian American Studies curricular and pedagogical interventions at UMass Boston have been well-documented by Tang and colleagues building on themes of trauma/healing, intergenerational communication, and knowledge co-production with under-served populations (Tang & Kiang, 2011). The following examples highlight work led or extended by Ty and Thiem—first as students and more recently as instructors—in sustaining a structured, programmatic environment to support and share fresh products reflecting Khmer diasporic women's experiences, perspectives, and contributions.

### **Valuing Khmer Grandmother Knowledge in Asian American Studies**

As noted in the demographic profile above, Khmer Americans have an extremely high proportion of women to men in the age range of 65 and older. As this generation of Khmer refugee grandmothers passes on, so do their complex stories of war, migration, loss, adaptation and resilience. Typically, Khmer grandmothers do not directly document their own *herstories*, but by involving them as co-producers in Asian American Studies through our regularly taught courses such as Cambodian American Culture and Community, Southeast Asians in the US, and Asian Women in the US, then a process of institutional archiving and a critical programmatic practice of *herstory*-centered culture and language preservation becomes real and sustainable.

For example, Ty created a photo collage book based on her grandmother's life *herstory* in 2013. The book's Khmer title, *Em Kao*, refers to her grandmother as "an intricate, complex, beautiful, courageous, brilliant, kind, strong, and resilient woman." Rich with photos from her family album and quotes from interviews on themes of life and death, Ty's grandmother book ends with her reflections on the second generation's engagement in Khmer American home-making, a perspective she continued to develop and deepen during the next four years, culminating in her master's degree project which was grounded bilingually in local Khmer community history. She concluded:

I see many in my generation, myself included, losing our hold of the Khmer language—the language that ties the future of the Khmer American community to our history. We are only the second generation. What about the third generation and beyond? For those of us who have this opportunity to access many things the generations before us could not, we need to return to our homes, and use our resources and opportunities to build our community.

Similarly, Thiem initially created a multimedia video about her grandmother's *herstory* and presented the work to other elders in a community setting, also in 2013. She then produced an original song to record and share her grandmother's life story, titled, "Let's not talk about that," a reference to the heavy silence and lack of communication that often coexists with painful memories of Khmer refugee elders. Reflecting on the songwriting process, she wrote:

There is much to be valued and learned from our grandmothers because of their access to a history that we were not a part of; but we still very much experience the consequences. It has been painful interviewing my grandmother due to language barriers and emotional recalling of memories. I see how oppression and violence have shaped her life, her daughters' lives, and now her grandchildren's lives...my grandmother and her daughters have lived by and practiced a traditional paternal hierarchy... A majority of her grandchildren are female, and so there are roles and expectations that Khmer women must abide by when it comes to interacting and caring for the men in our families. This often creates a suppression of our voices and positions in the family. Violence shaped by war and traditional hierarchies also creates violence in Khmer women's lives. For example, through recalling my grandmother's memories, I can remember how her self-violence in abusing alcohol caused her to be violent with her grandchildren. My song starts off revealing her alcohol abuse as a result of all of her losses: loss of home, loss of family, loss of safety... The second chorus of my song, which is sung in Khmer, describes my grandmother's endearment toward farming with her mother. As my grandmother was accessing these layers of her herstory during the interview, she became very emotional and said in Khmer, "Let's not talk about that."

By connecting several projects over time, Thiem was able to continuously document her grandmother's valuable daily life knowledge of displacement and loss as well as survival and resilience, and to preserve and present it in creative and innovative ways through traditional interviews, food story prompts, and other forms of memory-recalling as practiced in Asian American Studies. Though it may seem culturally inappropriate or traumatically triggering to insist on bringing up the past with elders, second- and third-generation Khmer Americans currently face the unavoidable historical challenge of becoming reliable and committed keepers of their grandmothers' knowledge.

### **Curating Khmer-specific Curricular Commitments**

In 2003, while Roca Revere's Youth Art in Action programming was still active, Tang and colleagues at UMass Boston, Sody Lay and Peter Kiang, established a new Asian American Studies course, *Cambodian American Culture and Community (AsAmSt 270)*, with this rationale:

Development of this course recognizes the emergence of the Cambodian American Studies field and the realities of local Cambodian communities in both Lowell and Lynn, Massachusetts—the second and fifth largest concentrations of Cambodians in the U.S. These communities have been sites of research for faculty and graduate students as well as being home to many of our Cambodian American undergraduates. Until now, however, there has been no course at UMass Boston or anywhere outside of California dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of Cambodian Americans. In addition to being open and accessible to all interested students, this course is also intended to serve as a curricular intervention to attract and engage Cambodian Americans at UMass Boston—in light of the reality that Cambodian Americans have the lowest college-going and college graduation rates of any Asian American population within all higher education institutions in Massachusetts.

Though taught by Tang and others numerous times since 2003, it took 15 years before Ty, as a homegrown instructor who had taken the course as an undergraduate in 2012, was able to offer *AsAmSt 270* herself after completing her graduate degree. Mirroring her own undergraduate experience, Ty found many Khmer American students who assumed some understanding of their own lived experiences, but their knowledge was disconnected from the larger socio-historical contexts of the Khmer diaspora. Through reflective writing, family and community oral history documentation, and creative storytelling projects,<sup>25</sup> Khmer American and non-Khmer American students in Ty's Fall 2017 course closed this gap by being immersed in the social and historical past and present and potential future of Cambodian Americans.

Second-generation Cambodian American women students, in particular, identified issues of intergenerational trauma and misunderstanding within their own family contexts through reflective writing and classroom discussions. One student shared her frustrations with her family's poverty-centered reality:

Eggs on rice or rice porridge were the main dish for my family during our hardships. We would eat this for breakfast, lunch, and dinner on weekdays for weeks because my parent wants to save money to buy a car...I would tell my parents that I'm sick of the food and they would tell me, 'try surviving with a bite of rice each day for years in Khmer'.

Though clear about poverty and food insecurity as a daily reality, she could not locate her family's struggles within a larger Cambodian American community context, adding "I didn't really get what [my parents] meant because I was young and I wasn't familiar with the Cambodian Genocide."

Another student described the disconnection from her own family history after watching one of many video documentaries used in the course:

A large chunk of my family history is missing. I know bits and pieces and parts of my family's history that were reflected in the film. However, understanding the true depth, stories, and feelings behind my family's history is still yet to be discovered.

These emergent perspectives from second-generation Khmer American women are slowly filling some of the intergenerational silences prevalent in the Cambodian American community, in part, by recognizing how the elder generation has processed the trauma and violence of their genocide experience.

In addition to class reflections and discussions, students completed local community-centered oral history interviews that they had to adapt as creative documentary storytelling projects to be shared with public audiences. This assignment enabled a male mestizo Latinx and Irish student to interview the matriarch of a Khmer refugee family that his father, a respected Latino community organizer, had worked closely with during the early years of Cambodian refugee resettlement in Boston. The interview was conducted bilingually with the linguistic and cultural support of the course's teaching assistant, the first female international student from Cambodia to receive her Master's degree at our university. In addition to those directly involved in the interview, the matriarch came with her daughter, a professional staff at the university who also provided bilingual clarity, and her two adolescent granddaughters to hear the stories first-hand themselves. These never-before-documented stories covered different periods in her life from growing up prior to Cambodia's civil war and genocide to survival during the Khmer Rouge Communist Regime to persisting in the refugee camps to resettling and adapting to life in Massachusetts, including one incident with the police:

Kids would come gather at my house with my son after school to go play basketball. One day they gathered at my house...The police were angry for some reason... They came to my house and they used their baton to poke the stomach of the kids. So the kids ran. Then the cops called other cops to come catch the kids. I was with my friend and we went to talk to the police. We asked what happened. The cops said the other cops called so they came. If nothing happened, why do you still come to arrest the kids?! If they smashed a car or broke into a window, if you arrested them for that, then I wouldn't say anything. I wouldn't care. I knew the courts wouldn't believe the kids so I had to go as the adult at the scene. I told the judge that the kids come meet at my house to go play basketball. Sometimes they will do homework. They're just doing that... Some kids see the police and become scared. If they're scared, then the kids will run. If the kids run, the police will chase after them. The kids didn't lie, but when they see the police harassing them, of course they will run out of fear... They were all good Khmer kids, and I just wanted to help them out.

This translated excerpt documents the realities of police harassment and racial profiling of Cambodians in ways that parallel and intersect with the experiences of other young men of color in immigrant and refugee communities. Just as importantly, the interview reveals the unsung civic advocacy roles played by Khmer refugee women on behalf of their children in local neighborhoods.

During her interview, amidst poignant pauses and moments of hesitation, the matriarch eventually asked: "Why do you want to hear my stories? They are only going to make you cry." In his reflection after the interview, the Latinx mestizo student replied:

... This simple line was so raw yet so real that it hit me right in the heart. It made me really consider what it is that she is holding onto to believe that it could create nothing but sadness...I hope to get better at conducting oral history interviews, and figure out how to best support people to talk about difficult memories without making them feel that they are burdening anyone else. I feel that it is a place that I can contribute, creating safe spaces for people to feel comfortable sharing their most difficult memories.

The Khmer graduate student teaching assistant similarly reflected:

As a young generation we can learn a lot from our elder's experiences; they have many life experience to teach us; they have many hidden history that we aren't aware of and we need to collect and write about that. She is brave to tell her personal story; she teaches us to live in different societies, she also listened and responded to our question very well...this is how we are learning from storytelling and use to make meaning for our life today. Since, there was her grandchildren listening, too, she might want them to know more what happened to her and they can also learn about their family history and how to be stronger like their grandmother.

Born and raised in Cambodia during the post-genocide reconstruction period, the graduate student's experiences and contexts were profoundly different from Khmer refugees and second generation women in the U.S. Nevertheless, from opposite sides of the diaspora, they shared a basic existential question: how to live with the long-term consequences of war and genocide? Though intergenerational storytelling is not the sole method of healing for the Cambodian diaspora, it is clearly impactful in multiple ways. Moreover, the knowledge of refugee grandmothers, noted here and above, has rich meaning and value, not only for younger generation Khmer American daughters and granddaughters, but also for those in the homeland and for non-Khmer in the U.S. such as the Latinx mestizo student who completed this project for his Cambodian American Studies course.

## Conclusion

Our work suggests that stable programmatic structures and internalized commitments are needed to ensure that the documentation and dissemination of Khmer diasporic women's knowledge is not left to fate or ad-hoc circumstances. Roca Revere's inspiring and innovative street-based Khmer diasporic studies investments with Shirley Girls were unsustainable after 2005 due to losses in year-to-year grant funding streams for the sponsoring agency and political-economic shifts in the local housing market that displaced much of the Khmer community from Revere, Massachusetts to the more affordable neighboring city of Lynn.

Long-term curricular and pedagogical investments through Asian American Studies within the region's urban public university during the past two decades, however, have successfully sustained a programmatic commitment to the empowerment, educational transformation, and leadership of local Khmer American women—thereby enabling the possibility for co-authors Thiem and Ty, not only to gain undergraduate and graduate degrees, but to teach university courses on Cambodian American Culture and Community, Southeast Asians in the US, and Asian Women in the US themselves. Few, if any, Asian American Studies academic units in the U.S. have two Khmer American women instructors regularly teaching. Moreover, 18 of the 87 students (21%) who successfully graduated with either a ten-course major or six-course concentration in Asian American Studies during the past ten years from 2009 to 2018 were Khmer American, and a majority of those (11) were women. Though our numbers are small, we suspect that this may be the highest number and percentage of Khmer Americans and Khmer American women, in particular, graduating from any Asian American Studies department in the United States in the past ten years.

Four decades have passed since Khmer refugees fled from the aftermath of the killing fields to create a Cambodian diaspora in the U.S. and elsewhere worldwide. Yet, Khmer American women, families, and communities continue to confront some of the starkest dimensions of inequality of any diasporic population in the U.S., ranging from educational disparities, poverty, trauma and violence to linguistic, cultural, spiritual, and political disempowerment. Given the growing distance of the professional academic fields in Asian American Studies, ethnic studies, and women's studies from these street-level realities, it is all the more critical to invest in the grass-roots visions and home-making actions of Khmer American women and girls for the future. This means providing structured opportunities for relevant research/scholarship, robust platforms for knowledge co-production, and innovative pedagogies that hone leadership skills and grounded visions. Working collaboratively and closely across generations, we fully recognize that scholarly practices of integrative, intersectional analysis with data disaggregated by ethnicity, race, gender, and other factors are valuable approaches to better understand disparities of health, educational, employment, and other equity indicators for Khmer diasporic women.

However, too often, researchers and advocates focus on data disaggregation and critical intersectional analysis as ends, rather than means, and fail to make any real life impact on transforming oppressive cultural and structural contexts that frame the multiple inequities experienced by Khmer diasporic women. Complementing critique, however, we suggest that Khmer American women and girls need tangible resources to overcome everyday inequality, including financial support, women-of-color mentoring, holistic health care, and access to higher education. In our own praxis, therefore, we have prioritized creating, modeling, and sustaining campus and community environments with long-term ecologies of support and relevant resources that enable Khmer American women and girls, individually and collectively, to make and keep Cambodian American history now and into the future. Fundamentally, our message in this article is to show that such impact is possible programmatically.

Similarly, albeit outside of academia, Nite Yun, owner and head chef of NyumBai Restaurant in Oakland, California recently described her own praxis in an August 2018 video profile for the series, *Cooking in America*, curated by the online platform Eater (2018).

I feel like I do [have a lot of responsibility] because there's not a lot of Cambodian restaurants or a lot of Cambodian chefs, but slowly like we have first generation second generation Cambodians that are reconnecting with their roots again through food... If I could go back in time, I would live during that era [of the 1950s-1960s before the civil war and genocide]. It's like forgotten because it was taken over by something so traumatic. My parents would repress their stories about the genocide. Like my mom's eyes would already get watery every time I bring up the subject, and so a better way for the younger generations to understand their history or to reconnect with their roots, I feel like they need a safe place to express that. Let's say they bring their parents in and they can bring up the topic over a meal, "Mom, did you eat this when you were young?" and hopefully the conversation of healing or reconnecting would happen organically just over food because once you eat certain flavors, it strikes a certain memory, right, so it's like a segue to start healing.

The fresh diasporic grounding, entrepreneurial ambition, and healing mission of platforms like NyumBai led by Chef Nite Yun deserve broad recognition and support. At the same time, we also recognize Ely Phlek who opened her restaurant, *Teptbida Khmer*, in Lowell, Massachusetts in 2007, and was the first Khmer refugee woman to graduate from UMass Boston with a background in Asian American Studies in 1990. Ely had intentionally named her restaurant to represent the strong, courageous women of Cambodia, and boldly wished at its opening, "I want Cambodian women to empower themselves and believe in themselves" (Severin, 2015). Ely's restaurant sadly closed after ten years—a reminder that while the visions, resilience, and contributions of Khmer diasporic women have great meaning, the multiple barriers they face in achieving sustainable success, peace, and long-term wellness are still daunting, daily realities.

## References

- Center for American Progress (2015). Who Are Cambodian Americans? Washington, DC. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/AAPI-Cambodian-factsheet.pdf>
- Chan, S. (2016). Cambodians in the United States: Refugees, Immigrants, American Ethnic Minority. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History. Oxford University Press.
- Chan, S. (2004). *Survivors: Cambodian Refugees in the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Chan, S. (2003). Scarred, yet Undefeated: Hmong and Cambodian Women and Girls in the United States. In S. Hune & G.M. Nomura (Eds.), *Asian/Pacific Islander American Women: A Historical Anthology*. NY: New York University Press. 253-267.
- Eater. (2018). One of the Best New Restaurants in America is Chef Nite Yun's NyumBai. *Cooking in America*. [online video]. 9:09. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAqp6CRVrMc>
- Grigg-Saito, D. & R. Toof, et al. (2010). Long-Term Development of a 'Whole Community' Best Practice Model to Address Health Disparities in the Cambodian Refugee and Immigrant Community of Lowell, Massachusetts. *American Journal of Public Health* 100(11), 2026–2029. <http://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.177030>
- Kiang, P.N. (1996). Persistence Stories and Survival Strategies of Cambodian Americans in College. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*. 6(1), 39-64.

- Kiang, P. & S. Tang (2009). Transnational Dimensions of Community Empowerment: The Victories of ChanrithyUong and Sam Yoon.inC. Collet & P. Lien (Eds.),The Transnational Politics of Asian Americans. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 77-91, 193-194.
- Lo, S. (2014). Data for Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Korean Americans in Massachusetts, 2010-2014.Institute for Asian American Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston. [https://www.umb.edu/iaas/census/acs/data\\_for\\_cambodian\\_americans\\_in\\_selected\\_cities\\_in\\_ma](https://www.umb.edu/iaas/census/acs/data_for_cambodian_americans_in_selected_cities_in_ma)
- Ong, A. (2003). Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, The New America. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Sangalang, C.C., Ngouy, S.&A.S. Lau.(2015). Using Community-Based Participatory Research to Identify Health Issues for Cambodian American Youth.Family and Community Health 38(1), 55-65.
- Schlund-Vials, C.J. (2012).War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Severin, D. (2015).Want Real Cambodian Food? Try Tephida Khmer in Lowell.Boston Globe. April 19. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/north/2015/04/18/want-real-cambodian-food-try-tephida-khmer-lowell/mHWLazOysr46EqPVTSUFBO/story.html>
- Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (2011). Southeast Asian Americans at a Glance: Statistics on Southeast Asians adapted from the American Community Survey. <http://www.searac.org/sites/default/files/STATISTICAL%20PROFILE%202010.pdf>
- Tang, S.S. (2017). Digital Stories in Asian American Studies and Co-Producer Knowledge in AANAPISI Contexts.Center for Minority Serving Institutions Research Brief. University of Pennsylvania. <https://cmsi.gse.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/Shirley%20S.%20Tang%20Research%20Brief%20r5.pdf>
- Tang, S.S. (2010). Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: How Cambodians Negotiate and Create Places and Identities in their Refugee Migration and Deportation Experiences.Trotter Review 19(1), 39-58.
- Tang, S.S. (2008a). Challenges of Policy and Practice in Under-Resourced Asian American Communities: Analyzing Public Education, Health, and Youth Development Issues with Cambodian American Women.Asian American Law Journal.15, 153-176.
- Tang, S.S. (2008b). Community Cultural Development and Education with Cambodian American Youth.inL. Zhan (Ed.),Asian American Voices: Engaging, Empowering, and Enabling. NY: National League for Nursing. 147-170.
- Tang, S.S. (2004). An Assessment of Khmer American Community Needs in Lynn, Massachusetts. Khmer Association of the North Shore.
- Tang, S. & P. Kiang (2011). Refugees, Veterans, and Continuing Pedagogies of PTSD in Asian American Studies.New Directions for Teaching and Learning.125, 77-87.
- Ung, L. (2000). First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers. NY: Harper Collins.
- Wetzel, L, Huong, J & J. Heng (1995, 2008). Cambodian Cultural Profile.<https://ethnomed.org/culture/cambodian/cambodian-cultural-profile>.