



2016

**Book Reviewed by Yvonne Y. Kwan: Katharya, Um. (2015). From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora. New York and London, NY: NYU Press. 329 pp. \$28.00 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-1-4798-0473-3.**

Yvonne Y. Kwan  
Dartmouth College, yvonnekwan@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea>



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Kwan, Yvonne Y. (2016) "Book Reviewed by Yvonne Y. Kwan: Katharya, Um. (2015). From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora. New York and London, NY: NYU Press. 329 pp. \$28.00 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-1-4798-0473-3.," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1147

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea/vol11/iss1/5>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).



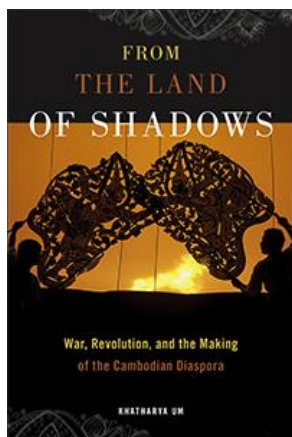
## Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Volume 11 (2016)

[www.JSAAEA.org](http://www.JSAAEA.org)

Katharya, Um. (2015). *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*. New York and London, NY: NYU Press. 329 pp. \$28.00 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-1-4798-0473-3.

*Reviewed by*  
**Yvonne Y. Kwan**  
*Dartmouth University*



In this long-awaited book, Katharya Um offers a comprehensive archive of the postcolonial and genocidal periods of Cambodia's recent past. Part I and II of the book offer vivid accounts of the periods during and before the rise of the Khmer Rouge (KR), while Part III examines the legacies of historical trauma for survivors, their families, and the larger communities in Cambodia and in its diaspora. Overall, this book situates and contextualizes KR history and its legacies—something that extant scholarship on the topic has often failed to address—by threading together French colonialism, postcolonial politics, American intervention in Southeast Asia, exile and diaspora, and the legacies of trauma and suffering.

Given the nature of this kind of work around trauma, genocide, and memory, there may be many challenges and pitfalls related to the fragmentary nature of traumatic recall and the “conspiracy of silence” that is prevalent among trauma survivors (Danieli, 1998). While survivors are more likely to speak to non-Cambodians about their experiences, Um suggests that the information that is shared may be more superficial because of a lack of mutual cultural understanding and because of the intricate nature of cultural translation. Given this, Um's personal experience as a Cambodian person both gives her insight into the complexities about feelings of loss and survival and offers her a unique ability to empathize with and understand her interviewees and interlocutors.

In the introductory chapter, Um argues that the magnitude of human suffering that ensued in Democratic Kampuchea (DK) signals not only to massive destabilization of Cambodian culture and politics but most importantly, to the “irreparable tear” that has been left upon the Khmer nation and its people (p. 2). (Auto)Genocide has the ability to tear asunder the social fabric of the nation—especially given complications of painful remembrance, total destabilization, and liminal exile.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For further discussions on genocide versus auto-genocide and the legal implications of these designations, see Kwan (2015).



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and the **Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement**, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or **JSAAEA**.

*Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement*, Vol. 11 (2016) ISSN: 2153-8999

Rather than describe refugees as subjects of western benevolence who have little to no agency given their social, political, and economic positions, Um's text embodies Yen Espiritu's (2014) call for Critical Refugee Studies, which locates the refugee not as an object of investigation but a central figure of knowledge production. Um extends this notion, given her transnational lens of investigation—both to Cambodia and its diaspora (particularly in the United States and France).

In order to capture the inherently fraught nature of memory recall and remembrance, especially amongst a backdrop of silences, historical trauma, and continued marginalization in the present, Um interweaves ethnographic research and over 250 interviews with survivors and their children. It is notable how she seamlessly integrates these interview narratives into her arguments, which are grounded by comparative and complementary studies of revolutions, totalitarianism, diaspora, transnationalism, and memory works within and beyond the Cambodian context.

Part I consists of two chapters that focus on state power and the necropolitics of Democratic Kampuchea. Um centralizes survivor accounts of death and suffering amongst a backdrop of larger discussions and critiques of the KR's use of disciplinary techniques. In Chapter 1, Um describes the internal strife and conflict among the KR through her accounts of the unevenness of suffering brought upon by both draconian and inconsistent policies of persecution. Beyond simple violence, the KR instilled terror among the Cambodian people, both urbanites and the base peasants (farmers). She goes on to describe the specificities that occurred in particular geographic regions; these include a description of the disparate level of terror, food instability, political strife, and so on. Because of the escalation of disappearances, torture, and starvation in the work camps and prisons, most people had no choice but to do whatever they could to survive. Given this, Um implores us to not focus on the moral compass of the survivors but instead consider the resilience and ingenuity of those who survived.

In Chapter 2, Um focuses on the impacts of the genocidal period on what she calls the "children of Angkar." These children include both those who were recruited (often times forcibly) into the KR ranks and those in the work camps. Given that everyone was supposed to renounce their familial ties, children were punished for both receiving and showing affection towards their parents. Rather than just the hard labor, it was the harsh draconian policies and abject conditions of fear and terror that crushed the children's inner hopes and spirits. Many survived by obeying orders—whether it was to work or to torture and kill others. Even though Um witnessed how the children of Angkar seemed to adapt well to their new environments in the diaspora, she argues that the scars of terror have left a "stain" on their social fabric, even after so many years.

After providing such vivid accounts of survival and resilience in Part I, Um contextualizes and historicizes the ideological impetus behind the rise of the KR in Part II (Chapter 3, 4, and 5). In Chapter 3, Um argues that Cambodian people are not inherently savage or depraved—it is not something unique to the Cambodian culture. Instead, KR extremism is rooted in Cambodia's postcolonial history: French colonization and its neglect of Cambodia, encroachment of the Vietnam War, and extreme Khmer nationalism, as influenced by the war and colonization. Despite the KR's adherence to ideologies about peasant uprisings, the Cambodian peasantry was a relatively passive element in the decades prior to the rise of the Khmer Republic and ousting of King Sihanouk. In the next two chapters, Um explains how the Cambodian peasantry was both forcibly and ideologically recruited to join the ranks of the KR during the period of the Khmer Republic.

In Chapter 4, Um describes how military intervention coupled with communist ideology produced the conditions that transformed Cambodian peasants into revolutionaries. Ultimately, the KR gained power not solely because of its political ideologies but because of the historical moment

in which the KR was able to join forces with the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA), especially after the US withdrew troops and left the South Vietnamese to “protect” the Cambodian people. Those South Vietnamese troops, however, often did not fight the communists but instead terrorized the peasants. Coupled with the coup against Sihanouk, which left many feeling lost and not grounded, the KR/VC/NVA coalition was able to gain power and popularity by appearing to be united as royalists. Meanwhile, the US-backed Khmer Republic could not reassert control, especially in the jungles, because of weak infrastructure and because of its role in perpetuating existing inequalities and social injustice. Given the rising power and brutal nature of the KR, many peasants had no choice but to join the KR in order to stay alive.

If anything, Um’s study of DK demonstrates how it is impossible to examine a regime by just highlighting ideology without considering structural factors that make that transition possible. In Chapter 5, Um shows that because recruits and leaders lacked a common political consciousness, internal strife and infighting within the factions between both the cadre and leaders proliferated. Terror against the prisoners and the troops became the most effective way to neutralize dissent and impose social control. While ethno-racial explanations about terror and violence are necessary, they cannot fully account for the reasons why so many ethnic Khmer were targeted. Instead, Um offers an inquiry based on socio-political context. The cities (predominantly inhabited by the Vietnamese because of colonial vestiges of French rule) represented cultural imperialism while the villages functioned as the locust of an idealized past. And, since no one was truly safe from the terror of the KR, the only option was to express excessive fervor for Angkar—even if it required one to do the unimaginable.

Unlike Part I and II, Part III interrogates the cross-generational effects of terror in two chapters. Akin to the title of this book, the traumas of genocide and relocation cast a shadow upon the Cambodian landscape and community (both in Cambodia and in its diaspora). The material, metaphysical, and cultural loss that resulted from an extirpation of almost a quarter of the population has produced both structural instabilities and a lack of social coherence among the Cambodian people. In Chapter 6, Um argues that the pain and trauma of the past continue to remain in the present: many refugee-survivors cannot free themselves of the hauntings of genocide, relocation, and resettlement. For Um, a proliferation of silences among the older generation is not pathological but instead, it reveals the roles silence in the context of historical trauma. Silence may result because survivors themselves may not know how to process their loss, silence can be inflicted or imposed, and silence can reflect the stigma against airing personal issues in public. In conjunction with this silence, there is also an impetus to retell the stories of survival in order to honor the dead and to shape collective memory and identity of Cambodian people.

In the last full chapter of this text, Um foregrounds the many structural and sociocultural challenges that arose during and after resettlement in host countries. These include but are not limited to unemployment and job insecurity, separation of family, women-men role reversals, parent-child role reversals, and so on. Despite the primacy of everyday trauma that manifests as silences, anger, despair, and distrust, the genocide remains a central part of refugee-survivor and refugee-descendant identity. Lastly, Um ends with a critical discussion about the idyllic hopes of return to the home-land given the traumas of exclusion and exile.

Instead of ending the book with a traditional conclusion, Um offers no clean finish because the Cambodian experience is messy and the conditions of exile may never end. Instead, she offers an Epilogue. It is a brief summary of the proceedings and challenges associated with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, also known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. Given that

the leaders of the KR are dying from old age, the trials symbolize both the hopes and ephemerality of recognition and reconciliation.

As compared to previous works on the Cambodian genocide, Um offers a unique and critical lens that foregrounds the making of the Cambodian diaspora. Often, depictions of war and revolution, however well written and well intentioned, risk objectifying the populations of inquiry. This book shines light upon the complexities of the rise of the KR, both from an ideological standpoint and from a socio-political and historical one that reminds readers of the impact of postcoloniality, military intervention, and local specificity. By striking a balance between using primary and secondary data, Um is able to capture the striking resilience among the Cambodian people, both in Cambodia and in its diaspora. With genocide as a central force in the processes of memory-making and identity construction, it is important to have such work that can acknowledge the universalities of the human condition and the specificities of how Cambodian people have come to live with, interrogate, and thrive in the shadows of trauma, war, and revolution.

This book would be appropriate for academic and lay audiences who are interested in a concise history about the rise of the KR, the functions of terror under totalitarian revolutionary regimes, and the haunting legacies of war and genocide. Unlike traditional history and political science texts, this book beautifully integrates the voices and experiences of the hundreds of people whom Um interviewed. By doing so, she offers texture and complexity to both the tumultuous and mundane lived realities of survivors in Cambodia and in its diaspora. This text is not just about “what happened” but about how people make meaning of their subjection and how they understand and work through and live with those painful memories. Overall, Um captures the extremely complex conditions that the Cambodian people experienced before, during, and after the KR period.

## References

- Danieli, Y. (2007). Assessing trauma across cultures from a multigenerational perspective. In J. P. Wilson & C. S. Tang (Eds.), *Cross-cultural assessment of psychological trauma and PTSD* (pp. 65-89). New York, NY: Springer.
- Espiritu, Y. L. (2014). *Body counts: The Vietnam War and militarized refugees*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Kwan, Y. Y. (2015). Justice delayed: Post-colonial hauntings in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal hybrid court system. In S. Miyazawa, W. Ji, H. Fukurai, K. Chan, & M. Vanhullebusch (Eds.), *East Asia's renewed respect for the rule of law in the 21st century: The future of legal and judicial landscape in East Asia* (pp. 47-67). Leiden: Brill.

## About the Author



**Yvonne Y. Kwan** is a Society of Fellows postdoctoral fellow in the Sociology Department at Dartmouth College. Her work examines the intersection between Critical Refugee Studies, Trauma Studies, and Social Memory Studies. In particular, Kwan's research interrogates transgenerational transmission of trauma and identifies the production of social memory for second generation Cambodian Americans.



# Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

[www.JSAAEA.org](http://www.JSAAEA.org)

## **Editor**

**Dr. Wayne E. Wright**  
*Purdue University*

## **Associate Editors**

**Dr. Chhany Sak-Humphry**  
*University of Hawaii at Manoa*

**Dr. Phitsamay Sychitkokhong Uy**  
*University of Massachusetts, Lowell*

## **Book Review Editor**

**Dr. Vichet Chhuon**  
*University of Minnesota*

## **Creative Works Editor**

**Bryan Thao Worra**  
*Lao Assistance Center*

## **Journal Manager**

**Sung Ae Kim**  
*Purdue University*

## **Editorial Review Board**

**Dr. Steve Arounsack**  
*California State University, Stanislaus*

**Dr. Sovicheth Boun**  
*The State University of New York at  
Fredonia*

**Dr. George Chigas**  
*University of Massachusetts, Lowell*

**Dr. Hien Duc Do**  
*San Jose State University*

**Dr. Sophal Ear**  
*Occidental College*

**Dr. Nancy H. Hornberer**  
*University of Pennsylvania*

**Dr. Zha Blong Xiong**  
*University of Minnesota*

**Dr. Carl L. Bankston III**  
*Tulane University*

**Dr. Phala Chea**  
*Lowell Public Schools*

**Dr. Loan Dao**  
*University of Massachusetts, Boston*

**Dr. Changming Duan**  
*University of Missouri, Kansas City*

**Dr. Sothy Eng**  
*Lehigh University*

**Dr. Vincent K. Her**  
*University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire*

**Dr. Peter Tan Keo**  
*New York University*

**Dr. Peter Nien-Chu Kiang**  
*University of Massachusetts, Boston*

**Dr. Ha Lam**  
*Eastern Mennonite University*

**Dr. Jonathan H. X. Lee**  
*San Francisco State University*

**Dr. Monirith Ly**  
*Royal University of Phnom Penh*

**Dr. Bic Ngo**  
*University of Minnesota*

**Dr. Leakhena Nou**  
*California State University, Long Beach*

**Dr. Mark Pfeifer**  
*SUNY Institute of Technology*

**Dr. Loan T. Phan**  
*University of New Hampshire*

**Dr. Kalyani Rai**  
*University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee*

**Dr. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials**  
*University of Connecticut, Storrs*

**Dr. Nancy J. Smith-Hefner**  
*Boston University*

**Dr. Yer J. Thao**  
*Portland State University*

**Dr. Monica M. Trieu**  
*Purdue University*

**Dr. Silvy Un**  
*Saint Paul Public Schools*

**Dr. Terrence G. Wiley**  
*Center for Applied Linguistics*

**Dr. Kevin K. Kumashiro**  
*University of San Francisco*

**Dr. Ravy Lao**  
*California State University, Los Angeles*

**Dr. Stacey Lee**  
*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

**Dr. Sue Needham**  
*California State University, Dominguez Hills*

**Dr. Max Niedzwiecki**  
*Daylight Consulting Group*

**Dr. Clara Park**  
*California State University, Northridge*

**Dr. Giang Pham**  
*University of Massachusetts*

**Dr. Karen Quintiliani**  
*California State University, Long Beach*

**Dr. Angela Reyes**  
*Hunter College, City University of New York*

**Dr. Fay Shin**  
*California State University, Long Beach*

**Dr. Christine Su**  
*Ohio University*

**Dr. Alisia Tran**  
*Arizona State University*

**Dr. Khatharya Um**  
*University of California, Berkeley*

**Dr. Linda Trinh Vo**  
*University of California, Irvine*

**Dr. Yang Sao Xiong**  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

#### **Doctoral Student Editorial Review Board**

**Virak Chan**  
*University of Texas at San Antonio*  
**Annie BichLoan Duong**  
*San Joaquin County Office of Education*

**Hoa Nha Nguyen**  
*Boston College*  
**Malaphone Phommasa**  
*Marshall University*

**Molly Wiebie**  
*The University of Texas at Austin*

**Anna H. Yang**  
*University of Georgia*

**Keo Chea-Young**  
*University of Pennsylvania*  
**Dung Minh Mao**  
*University of Minnesota*  
**Thien-Huong Ninh**  
*University of Southern California*  
**Krissyvan Truong**  
*Claremont Graduate University*  
**Soua Xiong**  
*San Diego State University &  
Claremont Graduate University*

**Linh Dang**  
*University of Rochester*