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Book Reviewed by John Marston: Yamada, T. S. (2016). Modern Literature of Cambodia: Transnational Voices of Transformation. Seattle, WA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. 150 pp. ISBN: 1517435463

John Marston
El Colegio de México, jmars@colmex.mx

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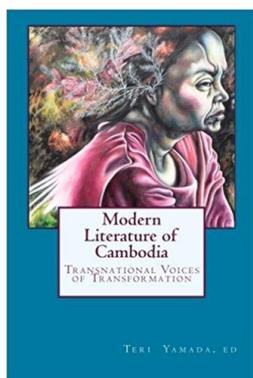
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Reviewed by

John Marston

El Colegio de México



One of the most important writers' groups in Cambodia, the Nou Hach Literary Association, was founded in 2002 by Teri Yamada, an American professor at California State University, Long Beach. Yamada, in supporting the group over the years, has made a major contribution to Cambodian letters, providing organizational support for annual writing seminars and, most significantly, playing a major role in generating the publications of the association, in particular the *Nou Hach Journal*, published largely in Khmer language. Her second anthology of Khmer literature in English translation, *Modern Literature of Cambodia: Transnational Voices of Transformation*, continues in this vein. The book should be seen, first of all, in the light of the larger effort of the Nou Hach

Literary Association to promote Khmer literature. As such it builds on a growing body of literature.

The book is organized into four sections, two with work by writers from Cambodia proper ("Short Fiction," and "Poetry and Essays") and two with work by Cambodian American writers ("Poetry and Essays" and "A Play"). Yamada uses the phrases "writing from the margins" as the title of her introduction, and the volume is perhaps best approached somewhat sociologically as a window onto Cambodian society and that of Cambodian Americans. One can imagine the book being used in a course for Asian Americans such as the students Yamada works with in California, focusing at first on the social dilemmas of modern-day Cambodia, as exemplified by the short stories and poetry by writers based there and then going on to discuss the identity issues faced by students such as those she is teaching. It succeeds as a teaching tool and, I think, as a way of glimpsing some key issues of the social realities of, on the one hand, contemporary Cambodian issues and, on the other, the Cambodian-American experience.

At the same time, I would point out that, while most Nou Hach publications are in Khmer and clearly oriented toward Cambodians in the country itself, Nou Hach's normal audience, even with sophisticated English skills, might be puzzled by cultural references and the overall perspective of the work by some of the Cambodian-Americans here, whose sense of their heritage is sometimes very broad or even misinformed.



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In purely literary terms the material in the book is, in my opinion, of variable quality, as is typical in volumes of this kind. An underlying dynamic of contemporary Cambodian literature is the ways it deals with painful social realities we associate with Cambodia, starting with the memory of the 1975-9 Pol Pot period. What is it that, in some literature, enables an author to transform painful reality into the highest form of art, whereas in many other cases, the painful reality as presented cannot seem to escape the levels of melodrama or self-indulgence? A good portion of the contributions to this book remain in this second category.

Four or five contributors to the volume stood out for me and left me curious to read more of their work. Among them I have to include Yin Luoth, who is—full disclosure—a personal friend, some of whose work I have translated. The essay included here, “As a Poet: An Essay,” and five poems, provide glimpses of the symbolic ambiguity and sense of irony which makes his work so interesting. (An example: In his essay, he recalls his mother reciting a poem to him as a child in which, with poetic resonance, the thunder advised the trees to grow deeper roots and crabs and snails to dig deeper holes. “My young mind had an active imagination believing that the thunder could speak to crabs, snails and trees, and that those creatures could understand it.”) Nevertheless, this is not his best or most representative work.

PraCh Ly is a Long Beach, California-based Cambodian American hip-hop artist whose name I have been familiar with for some time. However, despite having listened casually to his music a few times, I never gave him systematic attention or looked at his lyrics as poetry. Reading the two poems in this volume, I was impressed with their impact and had a new curiosity about him and his work. Perhaps it is because of their vigor, PraCh Ly’s gift for dramatic detail, or his ingenuity in adopting to hip hop conventions that, from my perspective, these poems succeed in turning the painful into something transformative.

We take, wait.
in past tense we took.
Valuable belongings
wrapped up with sheets.
A pair of pot and pans
so we can cook food to eat.
Take what weight we can carry
and leave the rest behind.

I initially resisted as being too literary the selections by Bun Kong Tuon, a professor of ethnic literature at Union College in Schenectady, New York, but was caught up by them upon re-reading. Who can deny the power of poetry like:

Anyway, these are the images I carry with me:
rib cage thin. Diarrhea. Chicken blindness. Dysentery.
Hands tied behind your back, legs too weak to crawl, eyes bulging,
white with petrification, irises black as night, wings broken,
spirit destroyed, only paranoia and hunger ruled the day
and the night, my mother’s body, difficulty with breathing,
bones sharp as knives, eternal loneliness, eternal sadness
the sour taste of tamarind . . .

Of the poets from Cambodia proper, the one who most caught my attention was Chin Meas, who, according to the short biography that accompanies his poems, completed his education while ordained as a monk. As the notes tell us, “Many of his poems have a Buddhist resonance with cautionary themes about greed and desire.” His ironic take on impermanence reminded me of the poetry of Yin Luoth.

One of his poems is about the mythical figure of Rahula, who, by swallowing the moon, causes eclipses. A stanza:

Rahula is trying to catch the moon late at night,
swallowing it without pity,
without caring about the earth and the sky,
devouring all the light from the world.

In the section on short fiction from contemporary Cambodia, the stories that most interested me were those of Sun Try, a government official who has written fiction for children. As with the other authors in this section, his work has elements of social criticism; however, it is more indirect than in the other stories, taking the form of fables or myths. The story “Becoming Young Again” has something in common with the Oscar Wilde story “The Happy Prince,” but instead of a bejeweled statue sacrificing itself, it is a coconut palm tree: a symbol of nature and, perhaps, parenthood.

As soon as the young man sold everything, he stayed away from the palm tree until it had grown very old. And then the little boy, now a mature man, returned again. As soon as the palm tree saw him, it became very happy and spoke to him as before. But the man said: “No! This time I need help building my house. I need your fronds for my roof and your trunk for the beam.”

The palm tree agreed to let the man, once that little boy, cut it down and do with its remains as he wished.

The section of the book with writing from Cambodia proper largely consists of work which received awards in the Nou Hach competitions. Many of the authors were students when they received the awards, and if the writing feels, in terms of technique, rough around the edges, it is consistent with our sense that this is student writing. The authors categorized as “Cambodian American” have all, in contrast, in one way or another found a niche for themselves as artists.

“Dancing Stories” by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, is put in the section “Poetry and Essays from Cambodia,” but in style and subject matter it fits better into the section of work by Cambodian Americans. Sophiline Cheam Shapiro is an important Cambodian choreographer and the director of one of the most important Cambodian dance companies and her description of the development of her career has undeniable interest for the history of Cambodian dance. However, even though it is a polished piece of writing, it seems more like a program note than a literary essay.

I don’t know whether the editor made a conscious decision to include essays where Cambodians write about their development as artists (as a way of saying to the reader, “You, as a

Cambodian, can take this path, too,") but the essays by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Yin Luoth, and Bunkong Tuon all take this form. I am, however, of a generation that is wary of "selfie" art.

Despite Bunkong Tuon's evident skill as a writer, I found myself slightly irritated by his essay, "On Fathers, Losses, and Other Influences: Essay," which compared his relationship to a father he never knew to his ambiguous relation to his "literary father," Charles Bukowski—all in relation to the saga of his becoming a writer. The comparison seemed a little too forced, literarily, and I could not see why any writer would be embarrassed at liking Bukowski.

One can imagine that the short play "The Unraveling Truth," by Malain Houmoeung, Peter Duong, and Sitavy Thorng, would be effective on stage, and that in itself is a credit to its three Cambodian American authors. It is also praiseworthy simply for giving dramatic voice to the way Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome affects the dynamic of family. The play, about the death of the mother in a Cambodian American family with an abusive father, frames a play-within-a-play enacting what it calls a traditional Khmer folk story—perhaps derived, with many salient cultural elements removed, from the story *Tum Teav*. I found the work melodramatic, however, and, as the work of young Cambodian Americans, it did not resonate with my sense of Cambodian history and culture.

The unevenness of this book may reflect the disjointedness of Cambodian literature itself at the present time, so often realizing itself across cultural divides; the paths to becoming a writer (and a writer self-identified as Khmer) can vary dramatically. The book, nevertheless, is a useful tool for looking at Cambodian and Cambodian-American society, and there is some real literature here—literature which demands our attention.

About the Author



John Marston is a professor at EL Colegio de México. He is the editor, among other publications, of *Anthropology and Community in Cambodia: Reflections of the Work of May Ebiara* (2011) and *Ethnicity, Borders, and the Grassroots Interface with the State: Studies on Southeast Asia in Honor of Charles F. Keyes* (2014).



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