

Modern Missionaries in Cambodia: When Does Activism Become the New Imperialism?



Joshua Russell '06

*If the western world was less obsessed with property
and the need to keep it safe with threats of war
then the third world wouldn't need a war economy
that we're supplying at a cost they can't afford
So we buy up all their crops and grain
and sell it back again
when there ain't no rain
and have a big campaign
using famous names
and as that penny drops
into the Oxfam box
take off the V.A.T.
Then call it charity
They call it charity
- Citizen Fish*

On one of my last nights in Cambodia I listened to Ces play my favorite song on her guitar. It was an old Italian antifascist anthem called *Bella Ciao*. I have never heard an English version true to the original lyrics, but the words roughly translate to *This morning I awakened / Good-bye, beautiful / This morning I awakened / And I found the invader...And if I die as a partisan / Then you must bury me / Bury me up in the mountain / Under the shade of a beautiful flower / And all those who shall pass / Will tell you what a beautiful flower it is / And this flower of the partisan / Is the flower of liberty*. Her version was the most beautiful I had ever heard; Ces sung in Tagalog. She used to play it when she was a protest singer, fighting the American occupation and Marcos dictatorship. I met Ces because she was in cahoots with the notorious Rosanna Barbareo, director of Womyn's Agenda for Change, one of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) where I had worked that summer. Rosanna (Ro) had been there earlier that evening for dinner. We mostly talked about social justice and sex.

Ces and Ro are more than dynamic leaders. They each possess a magnetism that draws people. I've never seen anything quite like it. Their very presence creates social space that is unique in that they act as a grounding force for those around them. Their influence on others is organic, not domineering; it just happens. To that end, I continued to live in such space even as I was geographically in different parts of Phnom Penh. The community they created, whether physical or not, maintained an active presence in my consciousness.

I worked for two different NGOs. I attended a massage school daily. I spent time in ancient temples and gyms, in museums and marketplaces. In that sense, my time there might seem fractured. It wasn't though. As I struggled to frame these experiences I came to realize that many of my stories came directly from the physical and social space around Rosanna Barbareo and Ces Millado. Their organizations, homes, extracurricular activities, and the space around them all seemed to flow together in a vibrant—as sociologists say—*gemeinschaft*. I began to understand this as a kind of community. And during my brief time there, it was *my* community.

I had come to Cambodia with a host of ideas about privilege, power, wealth, domination, and exploitation. These ideas simultaneously held excitement and inspiration, with self-consciousness and ambivalence about my role in Cambodia. I was wildly skeptical of activists from rich countries traveling around the world and messing with people's communities in the name of what they thought was "right." I constantly struggled with questions of identity, intent, and purpose. I suppose part of me felt like it wasn't my place, as some ignorant white kid, to be engaging in radical activism in a country I knew little about. But with the help of Ces and Rosanna, I was doing it anyway.

One. (disaster)

“What was that?” “I don’t know, it sounded like a machine gun.” “No way, a gun is much louder than that.” “Hmm. It was probably a motorbike engine or something, I guess.”

Then the noise happened again, a bit louder.

Leah and I had been sitting alone outside a restaurant eating Pad Thai. A large woman burst out of the restaurant door, eyes darting frantically. Shortly after, her son followed suit. His toned muscles were tense, his eyebrows slanted. Alert. He looked similar to the statues of chiseled “strong men” in communist artwork, like the one in the center of Phnom Penh. Her two daughters stepped outside and stood cautiously next to their mother, who kept flexing her hands back and forth. I imagined her throwing our table at someone.

Gun shots rang out again, progressively getting louder, closer. The family grabbed us and we all ran inside their restaurant. Leah and I huddled behind the counter with the mother and daughters while the 30-year-old son slammed metal gates down around every opening. Shots reached our street. The only thing separating them from us was a concrete wall. The mother and I embraced. Tightly. I could feel her heartbeat pounding through her palm onto mine. Her lips arched upward in a forced, nervous smile—the kind that is apprehensive, but not too tense to block the words “It’s okay, don’t worry about it...it’s okay” from slipping out.

Thai-Khmer relations are tense in Cambodia, to say the least. Racially-motivated violence is not uncommon. A few months prior, a few hundred teenage Cambodian boys rioted and burned the Thai embassy to the ground over an unsubstantiated rumor in a newspaper. They then proceeded to spread throughout Phnom Penh, destroying every Thai-owned business in sight. Everyone knows which businesses in Phnom Penh are Thai-owned.

We were huddled behind the counter of a Thai-owned restaurant, listening to gun shots outside the door.

The mother tried to reassure us. “Our family looks Khmer, so most people don’t know we’re Thai...There have been other shootings here recently but we haven’t had problems...I wasn’t at the restaurant during those, though...” Her body weighed over me, almost as if she were trying to shield me from stray bullets. Her large hands clasped mine. “It’s okay. This is no problem, really.” Her voice wavered to the point of inaudibility.

Whatever was happening was happening right outside. Every time we heard a shot, we ducked lower, hugged tighter.

Our grips slowly loosened during the subsequent ten minutes of silence. It seemed over. We stood up and uneasily smiled at each other. Huge trucks crammed with grimacing police trudged past our window. Twenty more minutes passed. Leah and I decided that it probably wasn’t going to get any safer; we might as well leave. The mother insisted on calling a motorbike for us so we wouldn’t have to walk home. I hugged her, shook the hand of the strongman son, and then hopped on the *moto* behind Leah.

Two blocks down were several hundred people standing next to their motorbikes. They were shaped in a horseshoe, like an amphitheater or something. Center stage laid a man, bloodied on the ground. I thought he was dead, but Leah swore she saw his arm twitch. Police were just standing over him, staring. Everyone was staring. They didn’t seem shocked or horrified like bystanders would be in the States. They just were. It had been over 20 minutes since we had heard the last shot, but nobody had even tried to take him to a hospital yet. Our driver maneuvered through the fractured dirt roads clogged with people. When we finally made it back to our apartment, Leah and I stayed up and talked on the porch all night.

Dan came home and showered. He was the other intern from Brandeis (Leah had just graduated from NYU). The water stopped working while he was all soapy, so as I (unsuccessfully) tried to get the water to work, I mentioned the shooting to him. He had had no idea that it happened. After drying off, he came on to the porch and asked us to tell him the story. His eyes lit up and he listened in fascination, his face almost seemed jealous, as if he wished he could have been there to have a story to tell his friends or something. As if such a story would demonstrate the danger of the place that he was living in and validate the work he was doing there as a result. As illegitimate a reaction as that seems, I can’t say I wouldn’t have felt the same way. In retrospect, maybe I did, when he told the story of seeing a girl dragged and thrown from a truck. Most Americans seem to exoticize violence and disaster.

I suppose part of me felt like it wasn’t my place, as some ignorant white kid, to be engaging in radical activism in a country I knew little about.

Maybe that's why they exoticize Cambodia.

The shooting that I experienced didn't give me any epiphanies or revelations. Except for a few minutes, it wasn't even that scary; it was more surreal than anything else. I was comforted in my privilege—if someone *did* come to that restaurant to engage in racial violence, I would be spared; I'm white. When those kids burned down the Thai embassy they were ready to kill a man who was inside. They quickly discovered that he was Japanese, not Thai. Upon this realization, they apologized, bowed, and escorted him to safety. Then they ran back inside to see if there were any Thai people left to beat up. I wasn't in much actual danger. The mother in that restaurant, despite being in far more danger than me, felt it was her *responsibility* to comfort me and be the strong one.

That family didn't need to pull Leah and me inside at all. They could have shut their doors and taken cover. But they didn't.

During the course of disasters we re-realize our humanity and commonality with others. Disasters are essentially defined by their break with 'business as usual.' Normality ceases to exist. During this disaster, a woman and I embraced. Who she was was unimportant; we were both human, looking for comfort in that fact. I could have been anyone, and so could she. People see themselves in each other during the course of a disaster. What if I were a Khmer boy who hated Thai people? Would that embrace have radically changed my orientation to race? Or would everything have returned to "normal" afterwards? Does this emotional commonality that we find in times of crisis have a reconciliatory potential? Usually the opposite happens. Either way, a disaster—when life and death are suddenly up in the air—*renders reality negotiable*.

There are times when this happens on a societal scale as well. During moments of revolution, things happen that defy the logic of the old social order. It can be inspiring. In Cambodia, it was barbaric. When the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975, Pol Pot's dream of instantly transforming Cambodia into an agrarian Maoist society defied such logic. More than two million people were murdered in the span of three years. In no other event in world history have so many been murdered in such a short amount of time...and most of the world turned a blind eye. In Pol Pot's Cambodia, *everyone* was seen as a potential enemy. Children would turn in their parents for a bag of rice. There was a complete breakdown of trust.

That disaster has yet to end. Though the Vietnamese Communists drove out the Khmer Rouge in 1979, the past is alive in Cambodia. Phnom Penh is an institutionalized disaster. Their break with reality became normal. Amidst rampant political corruption and a crumbling civil society, day to day survival is now the only reality. The only priority is putting food on the table; most Cambodians do not have the luxury of thinking beyond that. Indeed, there is little concept of a "future" in Cambodian consciousness. Heartlessness and deceit are still some of the only salient survival traits; "trust" is still a foreign concept in Phnom Penh. The ruthlessness of many Cambodians

is matched only by their political subordination. Those who have lived through the Khmer Rouge want stability at all costs. They are willing to accept "peace" at the expense of justice. They have been conditioned not to cause political trouble, and they don't. In contrast, young Cambodians riot and burn down buildings as an expression of their frustration with their life situation. It's not quite nihilism; it's life in permanent survival mode.

Two. (always a dance party)

"If I cannot dance, I want no part in your revolution."

—Emma Goldman

Phnom Penh is a place where Buddhist monks gang rape women. Saffron robes left in the pagodas, they dress in street clothes to seem inconspicuous. But everybody knows. Their bald heads might tip you off, but their shaved eyebrows are a dead giveaway. Most young Cambodian men find this to be a morally justifiable act; some even believe they are doing these women a favor. "It's their job" they say. The gang rape of sex workers, or *bauk* as it is called in Khmer, is regarded as a bonding experience among friends.

Amidst the cries of prostitutes being beaten by police batons for being unable to afford the proper bribe, floats a 350 foot houseboat on the Ton Le Sap River. The river heaves and grows during the rainy season to the point where the water weighs down so heavy on the system that the river actually flows backwards for a few months.

It is the only in the river in the world that completely reverses its current.

The boat used to be home to a dance club. She has since had a revolution and is now inhabited by roughly 20 activists who collectively comprise Womyn's Agenda for Change (WAC). It might no longer be a club, but the dancing hasn't stopped. The week before my arrival they had had a dance party with upwards of 500 transgendered Khmers in attendance. Apparently, it was pretty crazy.

Old Khmer language makes use of three gendered terms: female, male, and transgender (not neuter). There were no politics to being a trannie; trannies just *were*. Upon the arrival of Western missionaries this began to change. The concept of gender binaries was gradually normalized, and transgendered Khmers were gradually marginalized. We would later encounter the Phnom Penh trannies during their Saturday morning Apsara dance lessons at the WAC boat. They say that that place feels like home.

I didn't actually go to WAC until my second week in Cambodia. That same week I was sitting in an internet café along a strip of road that runs parallel to the river. It was a couple blocks down from the Thai restaurant I had been at earlier. It turns out that there were *two* men murdered there that night. Despite my initial assumptions, it had nothing to do with their ethnicity. They attempted to steal two motorbikes, and the police shot them dead on sight. I ate and checked my email on that street almost every day.

A young boy walked inside and tried to sell me a guidebook to Laos. Five minutes later I had taught him how to give a high-five—the kind where you slap hands in the air, and then swoop down in an arcing motion and slap hands again when they meet at the bottom. After another 10 minutes of listening to a German punk rock band called Inner Conflict, he gave me my headphones back, smiled and said goodbye. In our subsequent daily interactions, I never did figure out what to call him. Each time I asked he quickly blurted what seemed to be a different one-syllable name. I soon gave up trying to learn it.

A few days later we started talking in the street on my way to the WAC boat. I sped past the cafes and men with *krumath* wrapped around their necks on my bicycle. His face lit up from the curb; he nearly jumped directly in front of my tire. I ended up giving him daily rides on the back of my bike down the river on my way to work. Each time we passed anyone he knew, he would shriek as if to say “Look at me! I am riding with a *fabrant!*” Maybe somewhere deep inside, I wanted the tourists we passed to see *me* with a Khmer boy too, to declare “Look! I’m not some asshole tourist like *you*, I’m *different!*”, though it’s embarrassing now, and I would never have admitted that at the time. We would ride to a particular corner that was good for business and he’d hop off. Then I would continue my journey to WAC by myself.

They began to tear up the road several blocks after my friend’s drop off point. During the entire months of July and August, *some* major section of road along the river was under construction. I ducked under makeshift caution tape and rode my bike on the sidewalk and grass next to it. I usually managed to evade the cops as I rode through the perpetual cloud of dust with a bandana over my face. Squinting my eyes as tightly as possible, I survived the airborne dirt. On the off chance I was caught by a cop, I was forced to ride the detour route with the motorbikes. The detour was comprised of more potholes than road. I suppose my green one speed bike wasn’t in such good shape either. The tumultuous thrashing of my tires would sometimes jar the seat right off it. People on motorbikes and rickshaws would speed past, usually looking over their shoulders at me. Most white people didn’t stay in Cambodia long enough to acquire their own transportation. Those that did had cars. I often rode barefoot.

A few blocks after the end of the construction area was a spot where two men would spread out blankets on the grass. On top would be an assortment of trinkets, mostly carved elephants and Buddhas, but also plastic guns and beads. The police regularly staked out a spot a few feet further down from them, where they would arbitrarily pull over motorbike drivers for bribes. I rode past with ease. I never did figure out if it was because of my white privilege or my bike privilege (who pulls over a bicycle?). Just like the rest of Phnom Penh, the latent smell of burnt garbage hung in the air – not the putrid kind, more like the pleasant smell of charred wood in a fireplace, yet tinged with the smell of burnt hair follicles...or something like that. In this area the smell was mixed with the scent of heavy machinery – donated Caterpillars from Japan. By the time the smell of construction had dissipated, I had arrived at my destination.

You could barely read the sign from the road. You didn’t need to; everyone knew what the WAC boat was. Everyone who mattered at least: every sex worker, transsexual, AIDS patient, and peace activist. Every day I would pass women in the small space of land between the parking lot in front of the WAC boat and the dust cloud called the road. Fruit hung in yellow netting from the roofs of their wooden stands. The women’s wares consisted mostly of monkey bananas, jackfruit, rambutans, pomellos, mangos, and mangosteens, but occasionally they had a durian or two as well. Their often-naked children played soccer in the parking lot and cheerfully climbed all over me and my bicycle whenever I entered. Adjacent to the lot on the right hand side was a shanty town, where the fruitwomen and their families lived in tents made from salvaged tarps and makeshift huts. Over the course of the month of August, one such hut was built on the grass hill leading up from the river to the parking lot. I watched a family of six slowly construct it from scattered pieces of drywall, styrofoam, cloth, and wood. It was about six feet long on each side; it was smaller and less sturdy than some of the forts I built as a child.

At the end of the rainy season the river completely floods the area up to the parking lot. Their house is likely underwater as I write this.

Directly behind the house was a concrete wall that holds up the ground over what would otherwise be a landslide into the Ton Le Sap. The parking lot sat perpendicular to the wall, and on its edge rested an old guard tower. “Tower” seems to confer magnitude and height – something that certainly does *not* characterize this structure. It was a booth. It was also about six feet on each side. The booth was squatted by a family of five. Found Pepsi advertisement canvasses were stretched out from the roof to use as rain flaps, covering the shoddy sleeping bench in front. There was not enough room to sleep inside.

To the left of the booth stood a wooden bridge extending from the lot to the edge of the river. At the end lay the base of another bridge which transforms into a staircase when the river rises.

Shafts of sunlight sifted through the clouds down to earth, until they landed and reflected off of the sheet metal roofing on the top of the WAC boat. I feel compelled to describe it as a “beacon of light,” but really, it was too rusty for that. The faded sign proclaimed “Womyn’s Agenda for Change” in peeling sticker letters. In the background, the name of the old dance club was visible enough to not be able to decipher the meaning, but only to take note of its ghost. The Khmer words were still there, written in the dirt that collected on the sticky remainder of what used to be decal letters.

Entering the boat for the first time was nostalgic and new at the same time. I didn’t know anyone there and didn’t know what to expect. Then I began to look around and thought, “Hey! I have that poster! And *that* poster! And *that* poster! And is that an *anarchy symbol?*” A woman smiled and waved. She stood about as high as my nose. Her name was Phoung. After introducing herself she explained that she was a Senior Program Officer, in

charge of WAC's sex worker empowerment project. Dan, Leah, and I sat down on pillows in the middle of the floor under a disco ball and stage lights. On the wall behind a stage, a projector played several PowerPoints illustrating the plight of Cambodian women. After four emotionally draining presentations, she waved us over to the adjacent couches surrounding a table. Vases with beautiful paintings of Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse Tung served as paperweights, holding down *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan* (RAWA) pamphlets, and the most recent issues of the *New Internationalist* and *Green Left Weekly*. Phoung gave us tea and asked if we had any questions.

I had many.

We were soon joined by a Vuthy, another Senior Program Officer, who directed the research on debt and neoliberalism. He wore an anti-IMF shirt he got at a demonstration in Washington DC a few years earlier. I had been at the same protest, and had marched with the group that silkscreened that shirt. Tien, the third Senior Program Officer and director of the Garment Worker project, wasn't there that day. On the other side of the room sat Socheata, Sokunthy, Pagna, and Kadeai, all typing at computers. They were all roughly my age, and seemed intensely focused on their work when they weren't cracking jokes. A tall woman with long dark hair and high cheekbones stopped sweeping the floor to laugh with the kids. It took me about two weeks to figure out that her job was a cleaner. I had always assumed Sopheap was a head program officer who just enjoyed sweeping up. She was treated no differently than anyone else at WAC; her profile and job description sat right next to Rosanna's on their directory (which I didn't read until my last week there). Matt's desk was in a small room next to the stage. He was a twentysomething ethnically-ambiguous Australian expat. Matt's sarcasm was both compelling and off-putting. I had met him a few days earlier at Rosanna's river house, and watched him chain smoke cigarettes while explaining WAC's work. That same day I met Anna and Sara, two interns from some law school in Michigan. They were only there for a couple months during the summer, unlike Sanushka. Sanushka was an Indian-Australian intern sent to WAC by Oxfam-Australia on a youth program. She spent half her time at another office, and half her time at a table adjacent to Rosanna's door. Rosanna wasn't in that day. I'm not sure where she was. During the month of July she was rarely on the boat; she usually gave presentations to Parliament. I saw her almost as often at her house as I did at WAC.

Three. (alive)

"If I cannot have a Revolution, what is there to dance about?"

— Albert Meltzer

A *tuk tuk* is kind of like the confused marriage of a golf cart and a motorbike. It's a bit slower and more awkward to maneuver, but can also seat four people (or in the case of Cambodians, about ten if they can stuff themselves in properly). Ingrid had

arranged for one to take Dan and me to Rosanna's river house our first weekend there. Ingrid directed the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, another NGO I worked at that summer. I lived in her apartment, across the street from the National Museum. The *tuk tuk* was waiting there for us.

We sputtered down the road in front of the museum, and took a right until we swooped around the temple Wat Phnom. Monkeys ran along the telephone wires that stretched around the island of grass housing the pagoda. We trudged onward and upward, over the Japanese Friendship Bridge. A colleague at Reyum would later tell me that heartbroken men regularly throw themselves off the bridge, adding to the bodies lying at the bottom of the Ton Le Sap. Our *tuk tuk* gasped for breath as we covered our eyes from the dust kicked up by motorbikes zooming by us on the pedestrian curb; I had forgotten to mask up. Once we reached the other side, the city noises stopped.

I guess it was technically still Phnom Penh, but we were in the countryside. The roads lost all pretense of paving. Stilted wooden houses dangled over the wet rice fields to the left. Many looked as if they were on the brink of collapse. Dusty shops and banana trees lined the right. We first passed a sign graphically depicting a crying black bear getting its bloody hands chopped off. Then one for the new American-style suburb development, complete with a map of grid like streets.

When we pulled onto a small muddy path, everywhere we could look was green. The chickens ducked for cover, the dogs barked, and the children shrieked "*Hello!*" They would scream 'hello' at any white person in sight. Rosanna had once tried to teach them to yell "*SMASH CAPITALISM!*" instead, but it never really caught on. We pulled into the gate of her river house. It was the first of what would be many visits.

Rosanna said that once a reporter asked if he could interview her on the "hardships and struggles of living as an aid worker in Cambodia." She refused. "Life isn't a struggle for me in the slightest. Why in the world would they want to focus on me, instead of the women here who are suffering every day?" Ro didn't have the white guilt that plagued many liberals from the States. She lived her life on her own completely unapologetic terms. Her home, at first, struck me as crass hypocrisy. It was gorgeous. The river house was stilted, like those of her neighbors. Yet unlike the neighbors' homes, hers was made from sturdy, shellacked Teak wood. The architecture was mostly Thai. It was maintained by live-in groundskeepers. I scratched my head and thought "Socialists don't have servants! What kind of place is this?!" I was skeptical... but subsequent sleepovers would soften me up.

One morning I woke to watch the sun rise. Lying on a red Vietnamese hammock, I watched magenta rays poke through mangrove and palm branches to penetrate the bright blue morning Mekong water. The silhouette of a fishing canoe floated by. A man with a large net stood at the bow while his toddler sat at the back. Birds sang, insects chirped, roosters crowed, the occasional dog howled, and the water swirled and glistened with the current. Ro's house wasn't the decadent display of wealth that I had first imagined. It was more like a simple jungle hideaway.

It's not actually *her* river house. It's a collective, and four other people live there as well. *War, Racism, and Economic Injustice* by Fidel Castro lay on the bookshelf next to an Apsara carving. It had the same cover art as the debut EP of a hardcore punk band from back home called Diallo. Most of Rosanna's possessions seemed to be books. Fruit and flower bearing trees surrounded the home. Chickens from neighboring houses often wandered into the yard, pecking at the ground for worms, or whatever chickens eat. Ro's collective also encompassed a small, simple guesthouse that they loaned out to resident artists or people writing novels. Hammocks were strung between flood posts, and walls consisted mostly of opened screened windows. There was no air conditioning, but the river brought cool air every night. Large multicolored geckos lived in the rafters and occasionally came down to greet us. When confronted with the "servant question" Rosanna explained that she believes in equitable distribution of labor. She would rather dedicate her time to fighting imperialism than to rainproofing the deck. So instead, she hires people and pays them very well, with representation and full benefits. They are probably the only people in Cambodia who do housework and get full health insurance. Their relationship to Ro is one of respect and dignity.

She can be intimidating, if not downright scary to most people. Upon learning that I was a "Brandeis Ethics and Coexistence Student Fellow," Rosanna looked me in the eye and flatly stated, "Fuck coexistence." She doesn't put up with any bullshit.

Rosanna Barbareo is an Australian expat who has lived in Cambodia for over a decade. She was an active member of the Aussie Communist party at the age of 14. After organizing factory workers, she grew to embrace the Australian Social Democrats, through which she adopted Cambodia as one of their "outreach" countries. As time went on, she became more and more involved in Cambodian social change, eventually setting up permanent residence in Phnom Penh. She has been the director of WAC ever since. Ro has sustained a healthy polyamorous relationship over the course of 15 years with her sarcastic husband Pete. The sleeveless dresses she wears proudly display her brown armpit hair. She is a strict vegetarian. And she introduced me to Ces.

Ces Millado is a Filipino AIDS activist living in Phnom Penh. I met her at the river house. She had just come back from doing workshops all over China. After introducing herself, her smile moved her cheek muscles so high up her face that her glasses almost slipped off. Ces hugged me and offered some Burmese tea she got on her travels. It tasted a little like hot chocolate. After an hour of joking around with her, curled up on the couch with Burmese tea, she felt like an old friend.

Her humor is intoxicating—she thinks *everything* is funny, which makes it *actually* funny. Her laughter is jovial while simultaneously earnest and sincere. When you speak to Ces, you know she is really listening. She cares about what you have to say. She is a large woman. I don't mean to use the word

"large" as a euphemism for "fat"—she isn't. But her size carries a vibrancy that was unmistakable; Ces is *alive*.

Rosanna by contrast, is thin to the point of frailty. While Ces's vitality is encapsulated in her physically, Rosanna's passionate vivacity seems to contradict her small frame. One doesn't anticipate the profanity that lies behind her wry smile. Her words always ring with direction, intention, and focus. She also likes to laugh. Both Ro and Ces dance silly, and they give fantastic hugs. They started WAC together, back when it was a project of Oxfam Hong Kong. Ces eventually left to do her own freelancing as an AIDS educator, organizer, and workshop facilitator. She is in very high demand. Rosanna is now the main WAC coordinator.



I never did figure out his name.

Four. (impostor costume)

"They break our legs, and we say 'thank you' when they offer us crutches."

- Chumbawamba

The first time I saw Rosanna for more than five minutes was at Ingrid's river house. The sun had already set. Gigi was wearing her deceptive smile—the kind that makes you think she is a friendly dog that wants a pat on the head. She does not. That night she was particularly anxious for some reason. As Gigi darted around our legs, barking and growling and barking, the mosquitoes had already begun to dart around our heads. Like with Gigi, you expected them to bite, but curiously, they never really did. Ingrid and Rosanna were talking about the neighbor's baby water buffalo, but I wasn't really paying attention. Mesmerized by the moon's reflection on the black Mekong water, I gazed off the edge of the porch until a particular conversation jolted me back to attention. The volume of Ingrid's voice dropped. It sharpened with seriousness.

"People might be nice to you. *But you can't trust anyone here.* Don't fool yourself into thinking relationships are genuine. People might like you and be friends with you, but they always have ulterior motives on top of it. It's just how things are; it's just the situation being a Westerner in Cambodia. *Everyone* is trying to get something out of you. They will sell you out in a second if it can get them a dollar."

It was our fourth day there, but both Dan and I were already familiar with Ingrid's cynicism. Half of me took her



ready to rock...

I felt my face flush with embarrassment from imagining an American pop cultural reference to illuminate a political interpretation of what Ingrid said. Nobody noticed. It was dark out.

Meeting people in Phnom Penh was often refreshingly straightforward. Back in the United States, people play strange social games. Nobody wants to be too enthusiastic off the bat. Showing too much interest? That's weird. Indifference is hip. Cambodians never learned how to be hip. Many look you straight in the eye and say "I want to make a friend with you, is that okay?" at the end of a first conversation. If you answer "yes" it often prompts them to declare, "We are best friends!" as often as possible. I took it to be an endearing cultural difference. I didn't realize what I was getting myself into.

It quickly became apparent that many Cambodians sought my friendship *because* I was a Westerner. "That's okay" I thought. It doesn't mean they don't want to be friends with me for *me*. Had I seen a crust punk walking down the streets of Phnom Penh, I most certainly would have approached her/him by virtue of their punkness. That doesn't cheapen the interaction. I would later use the same logic to rationalize my own enthusiasm for my friendship with a monk by virtue of his monkhood.

Ces, "I got another email from him." "Who?" "That guy Hak Srun I told you about." About a month and a half after that conversation with Ingrid at her river house, I was in Siem Reap. That's a northern Cambodian province, and home of the ancient Angkor Wat temples. I was staying at the Angkor Century Hotel with my visiting parents. We arrived at dusk – around 9:00 p.m. I was up late, frantically writing an email to my then-partner Claire, to the backdrop of the International Noise Conspiracy song "Impostor Costume." A tall man with high cheekbones and a maroon uniform sauntered over and awkwardly stood over me. Pulled from the haze of my emotional key-pounding, I looked up and smiled. Upon receiving my smile, he returned one twice as wide. I couldn't let him out-do me. I saw his smile and raised him two dimples. He saw my dimples and raised me his lips, displaying his slightly out-of-line mother of pearl teeth.

advice to heart. The other half dismissed it out of hand. All of me looked down on it. The first thing that came to mind was a scene from *Spider Man*.

I thought of the vivid image of Harry Osbourne's father—the archetype of the white, distant, evil, ruling-class billionaire—dressed in a bourgeois black business suit. His contorted face snarled "*They're all beautiful, until they start sniffing around your trust fund like a pack of ravening wolves!*"

We had surely broken out of our poker faces. I offered him my earphones. He looked at me in disbelief. Hak Srun would later tell me, "Nobody ever talk to me unless it is for hotel things." I was the first Westerner who interacted with him on social terms, beyond his role as a service agent.

Wearing my earphones, he started rocking out, and I turned my attention back to my impassioned email. When the CD ended, he asked, "May I make a friend with you?" "Of course!" His eyes widened. "I think I am very lucky to have a special friend like you. I have never had a friend like you before." Smiling, I replied "I have never had a friend like you before, either." He quickly began tripping over his words. "I...I want I...You...I..." Inhale. Deep breath. "Do you like dancing?" "Sure!" "I would like to take you dancing...and your mother too...night...tomorrow." I told him that I would love to, but was unsure if we could. We were to wake at 5:00 a.m. and hike around jungle and temples all day. In all likelihood, we would be worn out by the time we got back. He immediately started backpedaling as if he believed he had overstepped his bounds. "I am sorry. Do not worry you do not need to come it okay if you cannot, but if you can it good but if you cannot it okay!" I reassured him that I appreciated his invitation—that I'd *love* to go if I were able. Before we said goodnight, he proclaimed me his "best friend." The next night my mother and I were too tired to accompany him.

"You got **another** email from him?" Ces frowned.

"What happened again? He was kind of stalking you, right?" "Well, that first day my parents and I trudged back into the hotel, exhausted. I didn't even see him at the counter, but I guess he saw me walk in...or he asked his coworkers to keep a lookout for me or something, I don't know. But the **very second** I opened the door, the phone rang. It was Hak Srun. He wasn't even really saying anything, it just seemed like he was struggling for contact. In every conversation we had he repeated 'I do not want you to forget me, Josh. Do not forget me.'"

"You know what that means, right Josh?"

I didn't respond to her. I was ranting at this point. "Ces, do you know what he told me?!"

During my second night in Siem Reap, Hak Srun had told me that he had called his father in Can Tho Province. Phone calls in Cambodia are expensive, especially if you can hardly afford to eat. "I called my father and tell him I made a American friend. And you are my *best* friend. He told me, 'Congratulations.' You make me very happy Josh. I do not want you to say you like me, but then later, with other people, do not like me. I want you to remember me. You are my best friend. You make me very happy." I nervously smiled. He was oblivious to my discomfort. Hak Srun went on to explain that he had a cousin that lived in Phnom Penh. Instinctively, impulsively, perfunctorily, I replied, "If you come to town, we should get lunch." Somehow that offer turned into a tentative plan for him to come down and stay with me in Phnom Penh. We would then both travel to his home province of Can Tho, and I would meet his family.

Ces skeptically raised her eyebrows. "Why did you give him the idea that you would take a trip?" I shrugged. "It seemed like it would be fun. I liked the idea, and wanted to do it. But I also didn't really take it too seriously. I dunno if I really thought it would **actually** happen." "So you liked the idea before he got intense." "Yeah, before he started pouncing on me every time I set foot within 500 meters..." "You can't lead Cambodians on that way Josh." The way she spoke seemed offensive, but I knew it was true. Hak Srun became more and more zealously attached. "He kept going on and on about how he wanted to give me a gift to demonstrate his love for me. He has no money, Ces! On my third [and last] day there, I gave him gifts of various items, like mouthwash, slippers, and toothpaste. He forgot his present for me. He said it was a small elephant carving." She nodded and moved her hand in a circular motion, as if to say 'Yeah yeah, get on with the story!' I continued, "When he realized that he had forgotten his present, he started flailing around the room like we were in a bomb raid. He really freaked out. He assumed I would think he had been lying the whole time about the present. I told him I didn't need it, but he wouldn't accept that. I said that if he wanted to, he could mail it to me. I asked if he had a mailbox. He said 'Yes!...I...I mean, no. I will buy one!'" Ces threw up her arms in frustration. "This guy couldn't afford rent in his broken down shack, and he was going to buy a mailbox?! That's ludicrous." "That's what I told him! Then I said that if we saw each other again, he could give it to me then. That was my way out. I always qualified all my statements about that—if I have time, you can come, **if** Ingrid doesn't mind, you can stay, **if** I'm not busy I'd like to go with you..."

Ces looked disappointed in me. "Show me his picture again." I pulled out the 1x2 inch photograph he gave me so that 'I wouldn't forget' him. "Josh, you need to break contact with him." "Why?" I was still talking to him over the internet about the possibility of him visiting. "Josh, he doesn't care about you. He cares about what you **represent**." She sighed, and her tone wavered as if she were speaking to a child. Not in a condescending manner, but in an imploring one. "He is not asking you to be his friend. He is asking you to be his **patron**. You represent travel opportunities, money, upward mobility. He has a vision of what this friendship means, and he is not going to let go of it, unless you let him go." I didn't want to. I knew it would hurt him; it felt like it was going to be a rough breakup. I knew Ces was right. She always is. She elaborated, "You have to understand your social position as a Westerner, as an outsider. With the exception of the people who have had it socialized out of them—like the kids at WAC, for example—everyone sees you as a potential source of income." Wow. Those were the exact words Ingrid had used a few days earlier, reiterating that point she made so early in my internship. "You are a potential source of income. When you decide to walk along the street,

and you turn down a motorbike driver, he sees your walking as robbing him of his salary...You can't trust anyone here."

Until I spoke to Ces, I had been emailing Hak Srun to tell him I was too busy with work to spend time with him. A week later Hak Srun emailed my father. The only way he could have done that is if he went and looked in the hotel records for the email address used to reserve the room. He was one resourceful kid.

Dear mr scott

How are you sir? How is your wife? please bring my regard to tell her know also thank you very much for your time mail to to me back i am very happy that i receive you mail yes really that my friend he very busy with his job i mail to hime very day but some time he reply to me one day some time three day but for me it noproblem i already understand he cam in cambodia sort time for him so he very busy like this.even he promiss with me he want to see my province but now he deon't have the time to go my province but maybe the end of this month when he finish his duty maybe he have the time with me to go somewhere and i take the picture and send to you with josh my best friend.and i give you some present to you i like your family so much. you know sometime i want to speak with josh on phone but when i call he finish his duty so next year you cam and visite cambodia again,and you cam with your family and josh also when you cam i will go to pick you up at the airport don't worry i will do so next year which month that you cam,i am very happy that I get good information from you looking forward to welcom you in next year with take care good luck to you

from Hak Srun

A week after that my dad sent me this reply:

Hey Josh,

I finally sent Hak Srun a reply this morning, and I got another reply within 2 hours! He sure is persistent. Distance is a good thing.

Love,
Dad



Sex worker empowerment leader Phoung

Hak Srun and I still write each other emails, but we seem to have departed from the pretense that I am somehow going to “save” him. Oftentimes opportunities are conferred to Cambodians *only* through Western patronage. These opportunities are given through a dynamic of power—indeed often one of *charity*. Hak Srun saw me through that lens. Beggars in Phnom Penh receive more money from other Cambodians than they do tourists. Yet should a tourist hand someone a five dollar bill, it would validate any and all assumptions of wealth and status. Most NGOs in the area function on this model, as opposed to one of self directed empowerment. While a tourist might drop a coin in the hands of a panhandler, aid groups drop something called Microcredit. That Cambodians like Hak Srun attach themselves to Western patrons is a metaphor for the country’s development as a whole.

Realizing the way in which Cambodians grip onto Westerners, many first-world groups and institutions have identified them as a fertile market. In doing so, they further cultivate this unequal balance of power in the interests of profit. Seeing these relationships as “development solutions,” the elite in Cambodia seek Western patronage far more zealously than any hotel clerk does. Cambodia is looking to *outside* investors to develop their economy. They’re even making a bid to join the World Trade Organization. Multinational companies are jumping at this chance, and are fleecing farmers all over the country. According to a statement from WAC’s Debt and Trade Liberalization project,

Liberalization means that local agricultural producers face competition from a massive flow of imports. At the same time, higher production costs requiring the increased use of credit leads to a cycle of debt and landlessness. Trade liberalization-inspired growth also results in environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources, as land and natural resources become privatized. It also results in further entrenching the separation of men and women’s work, with women receiving fewer opportunities in new technology, education, training, and commercial business opportunities.

Women farmers are especially vulnerable to loss of land and hardship, as they face gender discrimination, own smaller farms, and more often need to rely on hiring male laborers. They also must contend with a double load of agricultural work and domestic housework and childcare.

Women feel the effects of privatization policies more harshly. The burden of a loss of social services falls upon women, the traditional caretakers and healers of the family. It is women who are left to look after sick children and relatives and find food for the family. If there is less to be had—less food, healthcare, and education—it is usually women who do without first.

The stress that poverty creates on families and communities is also experienced most powerfully by women through other such factors as domestic violence, or the husband or father’s drunkenness and desertion.

The exploitation of the poor by multilateral lending institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund is being played out on a micro level as well, through loans by microfinance institutions (charging approximately 10% interest per month) and NGOs (charging 4-6% interest per month).

Microcredit, the aid industry’s prescribed solution to poverty, often drags poor families further into debt and it is the women who are left with the impossible task of managing the family’s finances. People often take out loans from NGOs to pay for medical bills, or buy rice in times of drought, flood, or other hardships. Often they cannot meet the interest payments and end up selling their land and are forced to migrate to find work or beg in the city, causing family separation and often family breakdown.

As costs go up and rural communities become more connected to the cash economy, it is becoming more difficult for farmers to survive through agricultural work alone. In such an environment families cannot afford to keep children in school. This is especially true of girl children who are traditionally burdened with the care of the family members.

It is girl children that are most commonly sent to the city to work to support their families in rural villages. Many families now depend heavily on the income sent home by their daughters.

These young women have a heavy weight of responsibility, based on the desperation of their families, and have few options or choices in the work they undertake. Most find themselves in exploitative employment such as in the garment industry, where 21% of Cambodian women aged between 18 and 25 work, or in the sex industry. Older women and women with children who migrate to the city often end up begging.

The Womyn’s Agenda for Change structurally embodies their critique. “Hand outs” are not part of their policy. Their mission, to whatever degree realizable, is to create a dynamic of shared empowerment. They do not deny that a structure of power and privilege allows them to ‘help’ others, but instead work to create environments and situations where people can direct their own development. Sometimes this means just giving women the means to organize themselves – whether they are sex workers, garment workers, or people living with AIDS.

WAC’s work acknowledges and attempts to account for both the societal and structural manifestations of the role of foreigners and the way they directly mirror local relations. Thus whether the context is a neoliberal lending institution, or merely interaction between two people, the dynamic is the same. Friendship across difference is beautiful and should be cherished. All too often, however, the dynamic between Westerners and Cambodians has little to do with genuine “friendship.” Foreigners who form short-term relationships with Cambodians might think there is no harm in it (or even believe their behavior to be acts of benevolence), but they often instead perpetuate a global system of abuse.

I decided to email Hak Srun to tell him that I was sorry. I didn't realize how much work I would have, and I definitely wouldn't be able to see him. Ces always gave me advice that I didn't want to hear. I wanted her to tell me that I was nice for being friendly with Hak Srun, and that he would soon get the idea. Instead, she was honest.

Five. (of a different color)

"I am not a Marxist"
- Karl Marx

Growing up, Ces was at the top of her class, and ended up at a special high school for "scientific geniuses." She didn't enjoy science all that much, but it was a full scholarship to the most prestigious boarding school in the country. She couldn't refuse. The school was to produce the top scientists in the Philippines. During her second year there she joined student activist cells. "That began a series of going to rallies, demonstrations, and underground courses that analyze 'the system'—imperialism, bureaucrat capitalism, all of that." She had been a member of the Communist Party. "This was during the Marcos regime, the dictatorship. We were under martial law, so the protest movement was underground. The organization that was behind it was illegal. That was led by The National Democratic Front. Under that, there were various other organizations, which included the Communist Party of the Philippines. Back then, you chose a side. You were left or right. On the left, there were lots of different sectoral organizations for everyone. There was one for teachers, one for professionals, one for youth—I was in that one, the Nationalist Youth...there was one for the religious community, liberation theology was big..." She spoke of the US military presence there, the one that my Grandfather contributed to during his service in Manila.

"We organized cells and had underground meetings. We took it very seriously. We had secret underground courses, with assigned reading and coursework and everything. We were very committed to understanding our situation. We would discuss issues...it was very organized, and absolutely clandestine." Ces lived a double life, one as a straight A student in a school for the gifted, and one as a covert cell leader. I asked if her parents caught on to her secret life. "Yes. Well, I was jailed when I was 15, so how could they not know?" She got arrested for striking with female garment workers. "We were up against a repressive dictatorship and imperial power. We were on the right side, we felt it. It was a struggle."

In high school Ces wrote and directed plays and was about to become chief editor of the school newspaper. She had gained quite a bit of influence. The administration felt threatened. When they learned of one of her arrests, they kicked her out of school right before she was to enter her final year. Suddenly, the movement didn't give her any support; she was on her own. Disillusioned, she finished her last year at a Catholic school. In college, she decided to give the movement another shot.

She joined the *Center for Nationalist Studies*, as well as a street theater group. She was involved in other acts of subversion too. Everything from "lightning rallies"—illegal revolutionary demonstrations that were coordinated in secret and ended before the police had a chance to respond—to political graffiti. After her first year, she joined a Nationalist singing group called *Pattatag*. They quickly gained wide acclaim, and were the most famous protest band in the Philippines. She dedicated that part of her life to the progressive arts. She was in the cultural movement. No longer 'underground,' her activism was visible and high profile. "I mean I was singing in front of huge demonstrations. You got your picture taken by everyone from journalists to spies." "Were you afraid for your life?" "Always."

"But that was a long time ago. After the 1986 so-called 'People's Power Revolution', Corazon Aquino became the new president, and the left got confused. The left kept with their rigid stance about revolution. But even when the climate was right for an armed revolt, they held back. Because of that, they had been left out of the whole people's power thing, which was mostly led by traditional politicians, just with a different color. Then there was a lot of griping within the left, and then came the purges and splits and all that messy stuff. After the left fell apart the protest movement got messy too. Our singing group started to fade away, we focused on other things...like living our lives. I got married, in a petty bourgeoisie manner. Then I had a kid. Then I got divorced. But I kept working for organizations that were still involved in the cultural side of the struggle. It was still progressive theater and community work, but I was out of the formal underground structure. I found a comfort zone where I was still able to engage in social change in a fulfilling way. In the early 1990's I started getting into my own cause. I initiated a lot of activities around raising awareness around child sexual abuse, which wasn't being discussed by the left at the time. It is a huge huge problem in the Philippines, and huge numbers of women are victims in my country...and everywhere. I did that until I left for Cambodia, and did WAC." Ces had been recruited for the Womyn's Agenda for Change by Oxfam Hong Kong and has lived in Cambodia for a little over 10 years.

Her story resonated strongly with my own background. We both came from upper-middle class bourgeoisie families and both were prepared to give that up for what we saw as right. Both radicalized at a young age, we each became active in high schools where there was little else going on in the way of political action. Yet as much as I felt I could relate, her experience was equally alien to me. Throughout my political consciousness-raising, I identified with libertarian socialism (i.e. anarchism), which rejects authoritarianism in all of its forms. I had thought of Communists as cultish cadres of hierarchical rigidity. Their quest for power has led to some of the most horrific human rights abuses in the world. Listening to Ces talk about the complex internal structure of secret cells and inner circles was like a window into a world I had always thought about, but could never really grasp. It was sort of like bearing witness to a real life spy movie.

My revulsion to conspiratorial authoritarianism did little to hamper my fascination with it. She both humanized Marxist-Leninism and validated my perceptions of its fatal errors. The immediacy of her story was something I secretly longed for. While I believe that the extension of U.S. hegemony is ultimately far worse for the world than the Marcos despotism in the Philippines, the urgency of fighting a dictatorship is certainly a different feeling than struggling against an industrialized liberal democracy. In her struggle, there was a clearly defined enemy. Something inside me wanted the world to seem black and white like that. It's not, though.

Fighting for social justice in the 21st century is confusing, messy business.

Six. (on moving forward)

"...when we finally know we are dying, and all other sentient beings are dying with us, we start to have a burning, almost heartbreaking sense of the fragility and preciousness of each moment and each being, and from this can grow a deep, clear, limitless compassion for all beings."

-Sogyal Rinpoche

"She's dead." I didn't know what Ces was talking about, but she was speaking into a cell phone and I didn't want to interrupt. I found out the next afternoon. The secretariat of WAC's sex worker collective, The Women's Network for Unity, had died of AIDS. An Australian intern named Kate was sobbing. Everyone else oscillated between being somber and being...emotionless. If Kate hadn't been there I wouldn't have known anything was wrong. I didn't have any framework in which to place what I was seeing. I'm a punk rocker from the U.S. whose friend works as an undertaker. I thought I was comfortable with the phenomenon called "death." Nope.

If the WAC employees *had* been emotional, I doubt I would have been able to grasp the gravity of the situation. For the first time I thought about the implications of working with Cambodian sex workers. Many, if not most of them, have AIDS. Sex Worker Empowerment Director, Phoung, has seen most of the people she has been close with die. Death is expected and accepted. Disaster here has been normalized on a level that I am still not quite capable of conceiving of. I looked to Ces for some sort of explanation. "The funeral was Sunday. We paid our respects. What else can we do? We have to keep moving forward." And they did.

Seven. (missionaries)

"I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people."

- Eduardo Galeano

I went to WAC in the afternoons every day. I made myself useful where I could. I did research. I helped with art installations. I helped organize conferences. I conducted oral history interviews. I repainted the peeling sign that adorns the top of the boat. Things like that. When I wasn't useful, I just stood back and learned. I did a lot of that, especially when I spoke to the other kids at WAC. Sim Socheata was just a couple of years older than me, and we constantly discussed the parallels and differences in our experiences as youth activists.

We often talked about America. "You know, everyone talks about the United States being this wonderful place to live, but I don't think that's true." I asked why. "I have never been there, but I know many people who have. They go there for money, opportunities. Most people here would die for the chance to get to go over there. But they go there expecting to be rich, like on the TV. They don't realize that they get paid more money but also life there is so much more expensive too. So they get a bad job and try to make money to send home to their family. They barely can afford to. It's like a punishment almost; they have to go there to send money to their family. Then they come back. You know, for many Khmer people, the U.S. is like prison."

"What does your family think about your activism?"

Socheata's eyebrows arched. I shrugged and replied, "They're supportive, but I don't think they really understand the implications of what I'm doing." "Well, mine don't understand what I'm doing at all." "How so?" I asked. She elaborated, "I try to talk about the Iraq war or women's rights and my father gets very upset. He practically doesn't let me out of the house without an escort. He wouldn't even let me stay at my friend's birthday party the other night because I would come home after dark." I asked, "Does he know that you'd go out at night when you were on that program in Geneva?" "No, my parents don't care what I do if I'm not in their house." "It works the same way in the U.S. Most kids go to college and their parents don't check up on them like they do when they go back home," I said. She replied that her situation was 'different.' I assured her that it wasn't really all that different. I was well accustomed to talking to various young activists about challenging the orthodox beliefs of their families. *No, this is different.* she insisted. I heard her, but I wasn't listening.

It *was* different. Parents in the United States have been conditioned by three waves of feminist thought. "Conservative" meant something quite different for families in Phnom Penh, Cambodia than it did in Wilton, Connecticut. Socheata had said, "They support what I am doing because I have a salary here. I have a future. But they don't understand, and I stopped making them try to understand." I realized the significance of her words later the next day. It was 1:00 p.m. Going to the gym in the Mi Casa Hotel had already become a part of my daily routine. Sweat towel in my left hand and Discman in my right, I pushed the door open with my shoulder, just in time to avoid falling flat on my face. As I had leaned in, someone on the other side pulled open the door, throwing me off balance. I looked up to meet the gaze of Joan, a woman I had met several weeks ago at a Civil Society Convention

at the Buddhist Institute. We exchanged cursory “hellos” and I headed for the elliptical machine, thinking about my experience at that conference with her. One of the lectures I had attended there brought Socheata’s comments into full relief.

A Sri Lankan woman named Hema Gonatilake was speaking about the need for radical progressive change in Southeast Asia in general and Cambodia in particular. She emphasized skepticism of Western NGOs and a need to root transformational feminist politics in indigenous institutions. She pointed toward Sangha as an example of such an institution. *Sangha* is a Buddhist term that often refers to a community of monks and nuns. Gonatilake was referring to Cambodian communities dating back to roughly 1,000 BC. According to Gonatilake, such societies embody the principles of justice “we” (radicals, progressives, feminists etc.) strive for. It caught my attention because her description used just about every piece of anarchist terminology and rhetoric that I am familiar with. Sangha civil life revolved around the pagoda, which functioned as a body to regulate “consensus decision making”, “participatory democracy”, “direct democracy”, and “mutual aid”. This social structure even boasted full gender equality, until the gradual disappearance of women’s institutions (like female monkhood etc.). I would later discover that the economics of Sangha are profoundly anticapitalist – they function on an economy of gifts. Sangha gift economies, I’m sure, were the inspiration for Western discourse like Michael Alpert’s *Parecon*. Even Gonatilake’s rhetoric of autonomy was in the anarchist tradition: “People must save themselves by their own effort.”

Gonatilake’s lecture didn’t just capture my fascination because she was describing an ancient Cambodian anarchist society. It was intriguing specifically because it was this type of social structure that somehow evolved into what we see as Cambodian orthodoxy today. Cambodia is now rigidly hierarchical, to the point where several different levels of hierarchy are written into the language itself. Khmer doesn’t just use “formal” words to speak to elders. One uses entirely different language when speaking to a prince, or a monk, or an elder, or a child. Socheata was trying to tell me that it is one thing to challenge authoritarianism and male rule in a liberal democracy like the United States, but quite another to do so in an crumbling oligarchy such as exists in contemporary Cambodia. Not only do hierarchy and patriarchy manifest themselves in vastly different ways in each context, but misogyny in Cambodia is necessarily bound up with issues of control and domination left from a legacy of colonialism and genocide.

Cambodian history is the narrative of ‘the outsider’ coming in, exploiting resources, and imposing cultural norms. The most apparent example of this dynamic of domination is in their history of French colonialism. To this day, some Westerners still refer to the region as “French Indochina.” The dynamic is also present in a long history of imperialism on the part of missionaries. It manifests itself both historical *and* contemporary relations with the Vietnamese and Thais. Whether it be outright military invasion (or liberation!), cultural tension, or economic domination, the

dynamic is the same. Even the Khmer Rouge was inspired by an imported distortion of Lenin-Mao-Marx-Whatever-Ism that Pol Pot absorbed while studying in Europe. In contemporary Cambodia, the local Khmer culture is rarely cultivated, nourished or even acknowledged; rarely have there been conditions in which the Khmer society has had the opportunity to develop according to its *own* processes and imperatives.

It is against the backdrop of an understanding of the extensive legacy of domination by outsiders that I questioned the approach of many western NGOs in Cambodia, and WAC in particular...and of course, my own role in the mix. I pedaled faster on the elliptical machine.

I guess one good thing about globalization is that it creates the need to deal with identity politics. I looked around at all the other white faces in the gym. Everyone who went there was either an aid worker or some grimy neoliberal investor. What was I *doing* in Cambodia? Well, I had a vision of a just society, and I wanted to act on it. This vision came from a Western ideology called “feminism”—*radical* feminism at that. This ideology challenges social institutions that could be seen as fundamental aspects of contemporary Cambodian society, hierarchy and patriarchy included. I had struggled with these questions before accepting the fellowship, but actually living them in practice complicated things more than I could have imagined.

I was going around the world messing with other people’s cultures in accordance with my definition of “justice.” An Ethiopian peacebuilder named Hizkias Assefa would later tell me “You know what other Western travelers went around the world uprooting cultures in the name of what they believed was right? *Missionaries*.” Just who exactly did I think I was? What was WAC’s real role in Cambodian society? Could they be doing more harm than good? Sweat was sliding down my face, slowly. I didn’t wipe it off; I let it gradually ride the contours of my cheeks down to my chin, dripping off onto the floor. What, then, can distinguish Western activists from missionaries? I thought for a minute and decided that the most apparent answer was in how activists construct their work, and how they are received by the communities they are active in. If the outsider is welcomed into the community as an agent of social change, then one could hardly construct it as an imposition. I looked up at the clock and thought, ‘Yeah...the Native Americans *welcomed* European explorers at first, too.’ It was getting late.

I reasoned further. Culture is not stagnant. To locate certain aspects of culture (like hierarchy, patriarchy etc.) as unchangeable constants is to misunderstand the way human societies develop

The question, as I had framed it in my head, was as follows: was it appropriate for Western activists to go to other countries and subvert what are often the institutional building blocks of their culture?

and chang—indeed it is to misunderstand what cultures *are*. Cultures are interactive. They are forged through both *intercultural* and *intracultural* struggle (Song 2). If movements for social change occur *within* a given society, one would be hard pressed to argue that the result is not “authentic” culture. Therefore, if my activism, as a Westerner, is not acting *for* people, but in *solidarity* with them, the work is legitimate. Right? It was 2:00 p.m. Time to take a shower and eat some Salor Ko Sap soup before going to WAC.

That evening, Rosanna and I were sitting on the couch on the boat. “Ro, do you think being committed to feminism and being committed to multiculturalism are two mutually exclusive positions?” “What do you mean?” “Well, don’t you feel like imposing Western ideas of justice on Cambodia in the interests of subverting traditional culture is like cultural imperialism?” I wanted to know why we thought it was okay to fight neoliberal economic globalization, but not ideological globalization. “I’ve heard that critique a lot, and I think it’s ridiculous,” she shot back. “The notion that certain ideas can only belong to certain people is *racist*. Just because some ideas were developed in the West doesn’t mean that they can’t be adopted by other people. How fucking condescending.”

I nodded. The idea that the West necessarily has a monopoly on feminism is in and of itself ethnocentric. It ignores the vast history of women’s struggles throughout the global south, especially in Latin America and Asia. *Some* feminisms were developed in the West, some were not. After further consideration, I collapsed my concerns into a single problem.

The question, as I had framed it in my head, was as follows: was it appropriate for Western activists to go to other countries and subvert what are often the institutional building blocks of their culture? Specifically, do NGOs with feminist agendas have a legitimate claim to their goals of abolishing hierarchy and patriarchy, both of which seem fundamentally ingrained in Khmer culture?

Not surprisingly, I was unable to find any answers during my time in Cambodia. The question in of itself was so thickly laden with unexamined assumptions that it perhaps in of itself embodied the Western paternalism I wished to examine. Working through an analysis of why my framework was itself bankrupt, I found, pushed me toward some of the answers I sought.

I had assumed a construction of the “West” as embodying progressive feminist values, and the “East” as dominated by thousand year old patriarchal traditions. Accepting this notion at face value, I then questioned whether or not it was “cultural imperialism” to transplant these values from the West to the East. But to essentialize Cambodian values as “patriarchal” and Western values as somehow more egalitarian is to grossly mischaracterize the two cultures. Khmer used to have transsexuality written into its language, until Western missionaries came, remember? We cannot ignore the way that Cambodia has *already* been shaped by the West.

Since the imposition of neoliberal policies on Cambodia, once-subsistence farm work now leaves families destitute.

Despite the myriad of different circumstances that bring sex workers to cities, almost all can be traced back, in one way or another, to this financial desperation. In highlighting ways in which economic models from the outside cultivate the sex trade, I do not intend to reinforce stereotypes of sex workers as victims. Indeed, one of the reasons WAC is so successful is that they recognize that sex work is *work*, and these working women should be treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. There is nothing “immoral” or inherently wrong with their profession. This, however, does not obscure the abusive and oppressive conditions these women work in. The Cambodian sex industry can surely be understood as a devastating manifestation of patriarchy in Khmer society. This abuse cannot be thought of in a vacuum. The dynamics that allow it to exist are largely shaped by outside forces; the sex trade in Cambodia is in many ways a direct response to Western economics.

More than merely bringing young girls to the city out of desperation, outsiders have a hand in creating the very patterns of abuse as well. I would later read up on this notion. It is explained by Chinese feminist Ming-yan Lai that “the loss of national control over the means and ends of production, [is displaced] onto a cultural-moral realm of patriarchal control over the conduct of women” (Lai 216). She posits that male domination of women *in general*, in many developing countries, is the direct expression of a desire to reestablish the control lost in other realms of society. Thus practices “we” (westerners) see as culturally indigenous, may indeed flow directly in response to an imposition of the institutions of global capitalism. This can include anything from exploitative sex work, to domestic violence, to *bauk*. Lai continues, “[Those who control a society] imagine that, once the traditional patriarchal order is restored and men resume their rightful place as benevolent fathers, powerful husbands and filial sons, the nation will also regain control if its own destiny and put up resistance against neocolonial domination from foreign capitalist powers” (Lai 216). To construct a cultural relationship as “enlightened progressive Western gender equality vs. Eastern regressive patriarchy” is simply ignorant. But if I reject the mindset that feminism is *inherently* a Western imposition on other cultures, I must find some other way to distinguish particular feminisms (and *feminists*) that act as ‘imperialistic’ forces from those that do not.

I reflected on my earlier thoughts. Cultures have always shared ideas and practices with one another. This sharing, however, becomes dominative—what I’m calling “cultural imperialism”—when there is a power imbalance between participants. There is certainly a power imbalance between Western and Cambodian culture.

One of the many ways this construction of power is reflected is through image and representation. Cambodians might not have food, but at least they have MTV and Britney Spears (whose image adorns the front of several hair salons in Phnom Penh). As a white person, I was assumed rich. I represented wealth and opportunity. I was an extension of the United States. Most of the activists I met hated the U.S. Everyone else revered it. Image

and representation are some of the many ways that this disparate construction of power is reflected to, and assimilated into, other cultures.

One night I went out to eat with Dan and his friend Dinh. We sat down, and I soon found myself in a conversation with a young man at another table. We were approached by a beggar, to whom I gave some noodles. The man later said, "It must be wonderful living in a country where there are no beggars." I chuckled and assured him that we do have beggars in the United States. "No you don't. The U.S. is a developed country." "That is true, but poverty still exists. In fact, it is growing more and more every day in my country." He flatly stated, "No, it doesn't." "Look, *I'm from there*. I promise you I see beggars in Boston every day." Refusing to back down, he coldly replied, "You are lying to me." Our conversation was over.

It is difficult to imagine a more image-conscious foreign policy than that of the United States. The American Embassy in Phnom Penh is in the process of being rebuilt. Nothing's wrong with it, they just felt that it would be a good use of money to tear it down and rebuild it again. The new embassy will look just like any other embassy on the outside; it will be friendly and inviting. On the inside, past the facade, will be a bomb-proof militarized compound, big enough to protect all the American Ex-pats in case of terrorism or something (to my knowledge there hasn't been any anti-American terrorism in the area since the KR era). Whether microcosm or metaphor, a friendly-looking outside concealing a militarized, security-obsessed inside sure does feel a lot like home.

Coming back from the river house, Ces pointed to the embassy. Rosanna said, "I talk to people and say, 'Why do you like the Americans? You harbor so much hatred for the Vietnamese and so much adoration for anything from the USA. The Americans bombed your villages and destroyed your infrastructure. The Vietnamese liberated you from Pol Pot... liberated you from *yourselves*.'"

Eight. (holocaust)

"Killas be amongst you and you don't have a clue"
– *Mad Lion*

Pol Pot might be physically dead, but his legacy is everywhere in Cambodia. The remnants of the Khmer Rouge are alive... possibly literally across the street from where I lived. Ingrid once pointed out that "The Khmer Rouge operated through sheer manpower – there were hundreds of thousands of people in its ranks. Where did they go? They didn't disappear. They're *here*. Your motorbike taxi driver could have been an accomplice to mass murder." When most Cambodians talk about Pol Pot, it is in a vague unspecified sense. Cambodian children have almost no knowledge of that era. It's certainly not taught in schools. Some adults, like Vuthy, have been traumatized to the point where the mention of a refugee camp makes his hair stand on end. I asked if we could speak about his experiences. He declined, covered in goosebumps.

Pry Phallay Phoung is one of the rare and exceptional people who feels comfortable speaking about her life openly. I had the privilege of conducting an oral history interview with her one afternoon. We spoke for several hours.

On April 17th, 1975, a teenage Phoung was living in Phnom Penh with her family. The Khmer Rouge captured the city and evacuated it under the pretense of approaching American bombers. Three of her brothers headed to stay with her aunt, and she went with her parents and six other siblings to the rural Kompot Province. "We thought my grandmother and grandfather would be there. But we had to live in Ta Cao Province for three months before we could get to Kompot.

"When we first went to stay in Ta Cao, it was the dry season and there was no work to do. We spent all of our time to find food. We walked 5 kilometer to find water. We would pick grass to eat and bring a basket to try to get one or two small fish. Maybe we could make soup with a small fish and maybe we could find a vegetable. We would keep the shell. Later we would pound rice into a powder, and put the powder in the shell to make it like flesh." Phoung and her family often found innovative ways to make different kinds of food and pretend that it was "real."

"Later they made us work in the fields. I had one small sister and one young brother and they stayed at home. My mother, father, me, and my sister all had to work in the fields. We were in Ta Cao for three months. We requested from the chiefs of the communes many many times to leave. They let us leave after three months. They made us walk from Ta Cao to Kampot province. But when we got to Kampot the soldiers would not let us stay in our old village. They made us go to the forest.

"They wanted to find out who are the rich people. Who are the people from the city? For me they asked me many times. 'You come from the city?' I tell them I come from Phnom Penh. 'What is your father's job?' I tell them that my father is a seller. He sells the bread. But they don't believe me. I say I have five siblings and my father is very poor. He doesn't work in the government." I asked if that was true. "No it was not true, but it is what I had to say. They still didn't believe me. I said 'if I were rich people, my face would not look like this.'" Phoung pointed to the severe burn scarification covering her neck and face. "But they didn't believe me, because my other skin was too soft they said." In post-revolutionary Cambodia, callous-free skin or glasses were the litmus test for affluence. Affluence was grounds for execution. "But I remembered what my mom told me. She said 'Do not tell anybody anything about the family if you are taken away. Say we are poor and sell bread.' And at that time I had the blue uniform for a student. I saved it, so that if people came to stop this regime, I could wear it and prove to them I was not Khmer Rouge. I was different from them.

"We worked in the rice fields at daytime. We planted rice. At nighttime we carried wood and rocks to make a dam. Long, long, many kilometer dam—we had to hike very far. Then they took me and my sister from my family. They made the youth go live in the mountains. We were 'mobile labor.'

“There was a shelter for the girls, and shelter for the men.” Phoung and her peers were divided into groups of 12, each group having its own Khmer Rouge overseer called a Chief. The only possessions she had were the blue uniform and her mother’s ring. “One day they searched everything we had. They found the ring and found the uniform. The Chiefs asked to use them. I said yes. She took my ring. I did not have trouble because she stole it so she was happy.

“We worked all day and night. The food, they did not have much for us. Sometimes we would have morning glory, or water lily. We would take from the pond, chop it up, and put it in the basket to boil. Make a soup. Sometimes there was cow shit in the soup. They did not clean anything. Even if we were starving, if we saw shit in our soup some people didn’t eat. If we didn’t eat, they would say we were spies, or the CIA or something. We always had diarrhea, always sick. There was no hospital, but sometimes we had medicine we made from a root. If we complained of headache, they would take a needle, put it in the vein on the head, and rub it back and forth. They say it will make the headache better. They tried to make me, but I didn’t want to do. It was very painful and it did not make anyone better. I always pretended to not have pain if they were going to do that. But if they offered medicine, I’d take.

“The children of the Khmer Rouge would make our food. I would go up to the girls with a pillow and tell them I knew how to do embroidery. I would take the needle and find string from pieces of clothes, and do embroidery on it, give it to them as a gift. Then they might give me a few tamarind, or some rice—but not the good rice, the rice that is very hard, from the bottom of the pot. But eating it was very good for us, we saved it for a very long time, a little bit every day. I would save for the new people, everybody sharing. I shared with them because I know they were going hungry.

“There were some girls who were experts at climbing the tree, or getting the morning glory from the pond. I would go with them to work and look after them. When the Khmer Rouge were not there, I would take some extra morning glory. I would hide it from the chief of the group. At that time we would only eat the small porridge. So we took morning glory to secretly eat with our rice.

“The sisters that swim would go and get the morning glory. My job was to carry it in big baskets. I carried extra baskets to show the Chief I was a good worker. I would hide the extra morning glory in a small ball under the basket. At 6:00 we would have dinner. The chief of the group would go have dinner somewhere else, and we would quick quick boil our morning glory or water lily. They did not see. Once when they did, we said ‘Oh! Sister! We made you some morning glory!’ and gave it to her. It pleased her. But other people were not lucky like me...”

Bamboo is inedible unless it is boiled for days. After being boiled, it retains a sour taste, and still can only be eaten in very small doses. Like the rice powder in the fish skin, this was another case in which Phoung would scavenge what she could to deceive her body into thinking she was eating actual food. “Sometimes we would secretly eat bamboo. Bamboo is very bitter, so we had

to eat it very small—very little bit in the soup at a time. We have to boil it first or you cannot eat it. The chief found a girl eating a little bamboo in the soup, and got very angry. The chief forced her to eat bamboo and eat the very bitter water until she vomited.” I was reminded of my friend who tried a cigarette when she was 12. When her father discovered her smoking, he forced her to smoke a whole pack at once. She threw up all over the floor and never smoked again. I was about to give Phoung an account of the story, but stopped myself short. Those stories were nothing alike. I couldn’t believe I almost compared the Khmer Rouge to a parent administering cliché ‘tough love.’ Ugh.

“When we cut the morning glory, if we did it wrong, they would say we were spies. If you cut too low, you cut the root, and it cannot grow. It is destroyed. They would say that we are enemies, that we are the Vietnamese, because we try to destroy. Or they say we are capitalists—we do not know how to do farm work.”

She spoke with frankness. I just sat in fascination. “Did you ever get accused of being a spy?” “Yes!” “What happened?” “Many times we would get very very tired. We were very tired. We would get so thirsty because we were tired. I said ‘I’m thirsty’ and went to the pot where they boiled water. But the water did not boil enough. So I delayed drinking so I could rest. I took the shell from the coconut to take out the water. Then I would drink slowly so I could rest. Then I needed to go to the toilet. Of course, they didn’t have a toilet, we had to go in the forest. I went to the forest to go to the toilet, but I took a very good time. I needed to sit, because I was too tired. To relax. They thought I ran away. I came back and they said I was a spy trying to escape.”

The accusations never stuck, but that didn’t stop her from perpetually fearing for her life, based on her background. Her father had worked for the Lon Nol government, issuing property titles. Other people had been ‘disappeared’ for less. “I remember one girl who always said ‘Oh! I miss my family! I miss my father! My father is a doctor!’ She kept wanting to talk to me, and I said no. I remembered what my mother said, she said to never talk about our family, never to talk about the situation in the city. So I didn’t. The girl always talked about coming from the city. Always talked about her family. The Khmer Rouge said, ‘You can go home now.’ They told her that because she missed her family they would send her home. Really they were investigating her because she was a student. She thought she was going home. She was sent to die.”

In 1978, Phoung was too sick to stand. She was sent back to the commune, and stayed in the Kampot hospital for 3 months. The only medicine was serum made from coconut juice and tablets which were made from vegetable roots. “I was very very very very skinny.” Her sister came to take care of her, and she was finally reunited with her family. A few months later, the Vietnamese invaded and overthrew the Khmer Rouge.

Phoung lived in Kampot with her family, who one by one came to Phnom Penh. In Kampot, she wanted to be a doctor. She wasn’t allowed to, but she was allowed to be a teacher. The Vietnamese-controlled transitional government had made it illegal to learn English at the time. Nevertheless, she taught

herself English from a book she found. Eventually finding a teacher, she rode a bike for 10 kilometers and studied by candle light from 6:30 to 7:30 every night. During the day she was a well-respected teacher, training people in hospitality to work in hotels. She worked in the rice fields in the afternoon. At night, she snuck away to improve her English.

The state had employed her as a teacher. In 1995 they finally acceded to her requests to go to Phnom Penh and join the rest of her family. There she found work in a hotel and taught classes on hospitality work. Her jobs financially supported her brother and sister through school. By night she was taking accounting classes. More and more, she wanted her work to be socially relevant. She tried to quit her job, but the hotel did everything in their power to keep her from leaving, including refusing to write recommendations. She was the best employee they had. “They said ‘We will increase your salary.’ I said ‘I want to increase my *experience*. I want to spend my life working for women, to give women power. I want to work for the NGO and make the world a better place.’” She has been at the Womyn’s Agenda for Change ever since.

Phoung believes that she needs to tell her story. She needs people to know what happened. Oftentimes, younger people refuse to believe her. Even Sokunthy, one of the most inspired WACTivists, didn’t believe at first. I was dumbfounded. Sokunthy was an educated, active, intelligent person. How could she have been so ignorant of her own country’s history? I thought about my own childhood. I had been inundated with information about the holocaust and what happened to *my people* in Europe. The historical oppression of Jews had been drilled into my head at school, synagogue, and home. From that point forward I couldn’t look at any Cambodian over 30 and not think of the pain that they probably carried inside.

Nine. (storytelling)

“Let your children *name* themselves and *claim* themselves as the new day for today. We are determined to be the channelers of these changing frequencies into songs, paintings, writings, dance, drama, photography, carpentry, crafts, love and *love*. We enlist every instrument: acoustic, electronic. Every so-called race, gender, and sexual preference. Every person as beings of *sound* to acknowledge their responsibility to uplift the consciousness of the entire fucking world.”

– Saul Williams

I thought about Ingrid’s comment, “So many NGOs do work here as if the people don’t have deep seated psychological issues. There has been no healing process here.” How can we even approach any kind of reconciliation, any kind of healing, without a basic knowledge of history?

“It’s all well and good to talk about coexistence from your movement of privilege, but what about the Khmer farmer who has no rice for his kids because he has been fucked over

by the IMF? What about all the people struggling to barely survive? They don’t have the luxury of coexistence. Fuck that peace shit.” Rosanna’s earlier denunciation of coexistence work started to seem a bit obtuse. What meaning can economic empowerment really have for a country that can’t locate its own identity? Until Cambodians begin to understand and accept what happened 30 years ago, it seems that their issues of trust and identity will never be resolved. In that context, “development” will always have to come from the outside, as there is no basis for Cambodians to stand on their own.

Rosanna’s revulsion to coexistence might come, in part, from the semantics around the concept. The let’s-all-get-along-and-throw-aside-our-differences pacifist connotation of coexistence is bankrupt in the context of oppression and injustice. I found that much of the reading on the topic I had done prior to my arrival was useless in Cambodia. There, “conflict” is not organized as two groups engaged in a dispute. It’s not black and white. There are many intersecting lines of power and history that are layered to the point where it is unclear as to who even needs to be brought to the table. Oppression is configured along structural and physical systems of power that require justice before coexistence.

In the same turn, however, Cambodians need to deal with the psychological trauma of their past before that justice can occur. Healing might require, in part, a reconciling with those who committed crimes under the Khmer Rouge. When I asked Phoung about her thoughts on my realization that my motorbike driver might have participated in unspeakable atrocities, she said, “No, I do not blame them. Normal people were the soldiers, they *had* to do it. They were hurt just like us.” Her real fear and anger was directed toward the Khmer Rouge leadership who in many ways still control aspects of Cambodia’s present and future. Reconciliation with other Cambodians is essential to building the kind of civil society required for self-directed empowerment to challenge and confront oppressive systems. It is important to clarify that when I highlight the need for reconciliation with the Khmer Rouge, that doesn’t necessarily include the elites, whom I do not consider part of the Cambodian populace, but rather part of the oppression that must be confronted (adversarially if necessary). The only ones calling for *that kind* of reconciliation are the Khmer Rouge leaders themselves.

By ignoring the need for reconciliation, Rosanna is almost subverting her own aim—self determination and empowerment—as it is impossible for Cambodians to prepare for the future if they cannot make it through the present. Unless they have the social foundation of trust, communication, and healing from issues of death and inhumanity, it seems inconceivable that they will be able to direct their own development. Efforts to cultivate Cambodian autonomy that ignore this are destined to fail.

The Womyn’s Agenda for Change *does* play an important role in reconciliatory work, even if Rosanna would rather not think of it as under that label. Indeed, the kinds of communication that are central to reconciliation inform

much of WAC's logic. WAC is dedicated to creating spaces of empowerment and self-expression. I had helped organize a rape conference that was centered on safe space dialogue and discussion amongst both *bauk* advocates and survivors. This is reconciliation at work. Giving women the opportunity to discuss their own issues surrounding problems like sexual assault and other forms of domination differentiates Womyn's Agenda for Change from other western NGOs in Phnom Penh. WAC is, at least in theory, committed to letting women narrate their own struggle. What if WAC applied these ideas to the deep psychological issues surrounding the Khmer Rouge? There are thousands of people who, like Phoung, carry intense and traumatic memories, unexpressed and unacknowledged.

Healing, on any societal scale, must be collective. It is hard for me to imagine any other way to build a sense of trust among Cambodians. For all the rhetoric about unity and solidarity that is thrown around WAC, there certainly seems to be little attention paid to engendering those issues of trust, of a sense of future and identity. Socheata and Sokunthy would both regularly ask me about what it's like being part of a "social movement." They would often brainstorm ways to cultivate such a political and social formation. Progressive social movements have sprung up in the context of dire poverty all around the world...why not in Cambodia?

Any kind of Cambodian social movement seems inconceivable in the absence of a collective identity. WAC's work with garment workers—facilitating development of trust and awareness of mutual dependency—must happen beyond the walls of the WAC boat and Drop-In Centers outside factories. What will happen when the older generation dies, if the kids aren't taught about what happened to their parents? Phnom Penh needs more people like Phoung. So much Cambodian history is being narrated from outside observers, so much of the story is told by people who haven't experienced it.

And sometimes, I think it's impossible for outsiders to *ever* get the story right.

Ten. (pass the privilege)

"Your actions speak so loud I can't hear a word you're saying."

— Greg Graffin

So there's this American journalist who was writing a book about the Southeast Asian garment industry. I don't remember her name. Her book intends to follow around one piece of fabric through its different stages of development, and the author proposes that she is giving the reader "an objective view of how globalization works." Of course, Rosanna hated her. Ro asked me what I thought of the book idea. I shrugged "I dunno. That framework seems really superficial." "What do you mean?" "Well it totally ignores the underlying structures of domination that lay behind the creation of the conditions that she will be trying to talk about in her book. By focusing on the piece of clothing itself she draws attention away from the issues that really matter."

"Exactly. She came to WAC the other day and asked for my help. I told her what I thought of her idea. She seemed unaccustomed to people not praising her. All she said was, 'Well, I already proposed this as a topic...' she didn't even want to engage with her role and what she was doing. I put her in touch with Tien and Sokunthy. Maybe she'll learn something, I don't know."

Sokunthy and Tien work on WAC's "labor wedge" project and spend a great deal of their time organizing with garment workers. Cambodian garment workers slave away in sweatshop conditions, and almost all of them are female. They organize in spaces called Drop-In Centers on the rural outskirts of Phnom Penh. One morning, Leah and I joined them on their trip to the Drop-In Center. Sokunthy was too nice to say no when the journalist asked to tag along too. We piled into the white Oxfam Hong Kong Jeep and Sokunthy proceeded to explain all about the workers we were going to meet. She spoke quickly, her face animated by her eyes darting all around. She was in her early twenties and one of the most dedicated activists at WAC. Sokunthy was continually interrupted by the journalist, who didn't ask questions, but instead found ways to reference herself and her accolades. We soon were only talking about her feature articles in *Spin* magazine. I gave up trying to shift the conversation back to Cambodian garment workers, and gazed out the window.

Our tires kicked up storms of dirt, and we left a trail of Cambodians yelling "*Hello!*" in our wake. Chickens pecked at the sides of the roads under the banana trees that shaded the small shops selling Juicyfruit gum. The only other visible businesses were fruit stands and motorbike repair shops. My attempts at journal writing were thwarted by the road's refusal to stop bumping us up and down. The rice fields were endless. Clusters of mangroves hung like oases in the murky brown and green. After about 45 minutes, we took a left and drove past a series of textile factories. Various multinational companies outsource their labor here. One factory might serve, for example, Fila, Nike, and Gap. The Drop-In Center was close by.

Blue sheet metal roofing covered a beige building barely big enough to fit the 30 workers. We sat in a circle and they discussed grievances and plans. They spoke in Khmer, and with Sokunthy actively participating and the journalist monopolizing Tien's translating skills, I just sat back and watched. The solidarity was almost tangible. It was the kind of thing we talk about having in activists' groups I belong to in the States, but lack the urgency and immediacy to be able to fully realize. These women were living a reality of abuse. For these women, these meetings were the difference between life and death. They were determined, but also laughing. We broke for lunch, and I proceeded to photograph each woman's profile for a WAC PowerPoint presentation.

The journalist told Tien to "Tell this woman, and this woman, and this woman that I want to interview them at a later date when I have *my* translator." Tien seemed uneasy, but 'told' them. The women were more than willing to talk to the journalist...I wondered if they realized it was apparently

their *obligation* to do so. Sokunthy asked why she couldn't just interview the workers now. "Oh, well, you know. I have my own personal translator. She's a *professional*, not like you guys." I wished Sokunthy would slap the Versace sunglasses off her face. Chuckling at the irony of the 'coexistence intern' having fantasies of violence, I turned back to the workers, who were still passionately speaking.

They were talking about starting a worker-owned collective factory. The idea was that it will appeal to Fair Trade clothing manufacturers, who were finding a growing market niche in Europe and, to a lesser degree, the United States. They could then fully liberate themselves from the sweatshops they currently toil in. WAC was helping them with the resources and logistics. The plan was still in its infancy. The journalist ranted about how reckless and irresponsible it was on the entire way home. I argued.

"So what if this factory fails?" "Well nobody said it wasn't a big risk." "But they can negotiate for higher wages at the factories they're at." "Of course they can't. They'd get fired. You know that." I'm unsure if it was my tone of voice or what, but she took what should have been a completely apparent and uncontroversial statement as a call to arms. "I'm sick of people demonizing the owners of these factories. You can't just say the workers are pure and good and the bosses are evil. It's more complicated than that." "Um, okay. That's not what I was doing, but how is it more complicated than that?" "Because it's not that simple." "I know it's not. But explain to me what you're saying." "Well, the owners of these factories take a big financial risk by investing in these places." "What?" "I'm just saying that there is a risk involved on their part too." I was flabbergasted. Was she really justifying exploitation on the premise that there is financial risk in investment? If these women ask to go to the bathroom at work, they are risking their livelihood. It's a life or death decision. Was she conflating *that* risk with the risk on the part of outside investors? Wow.

Was the notion of a collective factory really outrageous? Rosanna once expounded on her contempt for liberals who chastise her for being 'unrealistic.' "Who exactly is the one who's not being realistic? What are *you* doing? You're trying to show corporations that poverty exists in the hopes of them saying 'oh! I never realized! I'll tell the shareholders that their profits are going to go down a bit so we don't hurt these people!' Give me a break." She continued, switching to condemnation of reconciliation, "These people don't want to 'reconcile' with their exploiters. They want to overthrow and kill their exploiters." The workers aren't exactly the images of guerilla revolutionaries that that statement might evoke, but at that meeting I could certainly see what she meant. I could feel it. These women had been so beaten down and oppressed that their strength came from a vision of a world in which there are no masters—not one in which their masters are nice and generous and give them high wages. But was a collective factory a realizable solution? The journalist was on a rampage.

"It's ridiculous. I mean it's a wonderful idea and all, but when these women quit their jobs, and try to start a factory and

it tanks, it will be WAC's fault." It wasn't the viability of the factory that I took issue with, it was the assumptions implicit in her language. I was getting fed up. "Don't you think you aren't giving these women enough credit? They aren't children. They can make their own decisions." "Sure, but WAC has to take responsibility for putting this idea into their heads." "But don't you think it's paternalistic for you to treat them like mindless beings without agency? Aren't they capable of choosing whether or not they want to do this?" Responding to the tension, someone turned on the radio. Suddenly all we heard were bass beats and the words "Ludacris got the flow to make your booty go ::clap::" Weird.

Eleven. (consciously false)

"I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to ease his lot by all possible means - except by getting off his back."

-Leo Tolstoy

The next day at the gym I was still seething. This woman and her Western arrogance was everything I promised myself I wouldn't be. I worked my frustration out of me, and slowly my self-reflective side kicked in. What exactly are the implications of Western paternalism? Smirking, I decided that the strongest paternalistic discourse today can probably be found in a mainstream Econ textbook.

Part of the program of the Womyn's Agenda for Change is the analysis and challenging of economic globalization in Cambodia. The contradictions between neoliberal rhetoric and reality it imposed were apparent to all of us. I would later find this concept articulately described in a book called *Feminist Futures*:

Although the concept of democracy is enthusiastically espoused by the champions of globalization, it is never followed in spirit, because, as Gray (1998: 17) says, 'democracy and the free market are rivals, not allies'. Neocolonial institutions such as the World Trade Organization, which see themselves as the epitome of a 'free' market, frame rules for the market which are not open to the scrutiny of any democratic legislature (Gray 1998). These institutions, which idealistically speak of equality for all, actually reinforce what Spivak (1999: 102) calls the 'continuing narrative of shifting imperialist formations', because their norms of functioning adhere to social, cultural and legal frameworks that are predominantly Western... Neocolonial narratives, despite their egalitarian-sounding slogans of a 'free' market and global 'equity', continue to emphasize, overtly or covertly, the managerial authority of elite groups. These groups talk of transcending borders to allow a multinational flow of capital and enterprise, but retain a clearly marked division between Western or West-trained managers and largely non-Western workers. The

dominant managerial core, usually comprising Western 'white males' (Dozier, Grunig and Grunig 1995: 151), formulates policies for the entire workforce, although in numerical terms white male Westerners are only the small minority. In most transnational organizations in the age of globalization, the control of underprivileged groups aligns closely with the control of disempowered employees, who are mostly likely to be immigrants, women and people of colour (Sassen 1998). This dual control is exercised by core groups of organizational leaders who are thus doubly privileged: by virtue of their ethnicity, and because of their positions in organizational hierarchies.” (Kurian and Munshi, 157)

Some of the younger people at WAC had incredibly sophisticated analyses of globalization. Yet when we discussed politics, they would ask me to clarify terms like “right wing” and “left wing.” I mentioned this phenomenon to Rosanna. “That’s because it’s my analysis,” she replied.

At this point, the irony was palpable. How much did the contradiction in neoliberal rhetoric reflect inconsistencies in the mission of a Western NGO in Cambodia? How much does a group’s structure (as opposed to its agenda) determine its impact? Azizah Y. Hibri and I agree, the answer is quite a lot.

At its most abstract level, I define patriarchy as a hierarchical system in which control flows from the top. Thus in a patriarchal system, men oppress other men and not only women. This is why ending such a system is better for all of humanity and not only women. Furthermore, the top of the pyramid in a patriarchal system could be filled with either men or women (witness Margaret Thatcher) without its patriarchal nature being changed. If Western feminists are now vying for control of the lives of immigrant women by justifying coercive state action, then these women have not learned the lessons of history, be it colonialism, imperialism, or even fascism. (Al Hibri in Okin 45)

Rosanna, a radical feminist, occupies the slot at the top of the pyramid that is WAC. If we accept that the basic structure of an NGO—a bureaucratic organization in which outsiders come in to “help” locals—it follows that any organization wishing to subvert this domination must embody their aims structurally as well as ideologically.

In an immediate sense, WAC strives for egalitarianism. I thought of Sopheap, the cleaner’s face next to Rosanna’s on the directory. It surely would be romantic, however, to believe that WAC is free (or has any pretenses of being free) from hierarchy.

As I started the third incline on the elliptical machine I thought about the bankruptcy of my “solidarity not charity” conclusion about feminism and cultural imperialism. Such questions aren’t so clear-cut. What exactly constitutes solidarity? The term at that point seemed meaningless. In the case of the WAC, issues of “control” are difficult to decipher. The staff of WAC is almost entirely Cambodian. The only “westerners” are Rosanna, Matt, and whatever interns happen to be volunteering

at the time. All of the major projects are headed up by Cambodians, and Cambodians do most of the work.

NGO work is practically the only entrance into the middle class in Cambodian society. It would be romantic to ignore this as the motivation for some of the WAC employees. It’s Rosanna’s economic and social analysis that structures the activism there. Indeed one could say that many of the activists there are merely parroting her analysis. But what does that mean? Who is to say that they aren’t adopting her analysis because it is well thought out and completely appropriate for their situation? What if her analysis resonates with them?

Removal of agency from Cambodians is paternalistic.

Many of the women at WAC are passionately dedicated to narrating their own culture—to reclaiming it from imperial power, male domination, and from the NGOs (and foreigners like me) that all too often speak in their name. Real Cambodian women are suffering on a daily basis, and to think that other Cambodians cannot be concerned for their empowerment unless they are coerced by power might in itself be racist. Yet to ignore that dynamic of power—to ignore the systems that structure what choices and options are available—is naïve. Rosanna is an outsider too. An imposing one at that. She—and by extension, WAC—contributes to the underlying tension between Cambodians and foreigners just as much as any other white person.

I pedaled harder, frustrated with myself. The conditions under which people’s choices are structured seem so convoluted that “solidarity” seems to be an impossible notion to really understand. Maybe it’s just a justifying narrative so that activists from the global north can feel good about their work.

I sighed and stepped off the machine. The only appropriate response, it seemed, is moving forward. If consciousness is there, paralysis is the only illegitimate conclusion.

Twelve. (demonstrate)

“[We live in a] world where ‘reconciliation’ means that when one side gets the power and the other side is reconciled to it, then we have reconciliation.”

- Saul Alinsky

There was no longer any farmland. The suburbs below me had an uncanny resemblance to microchips. When the plane landed, the luggage carts cost three dollars instead of being free. I was home.

I had been keeping a journal all summer. I had even written assignments designed to help me process the experience. The totality of it all, however, didn’t hit me until I was back in the States. I had been home for about a week and decided to go to New York City to protest the Republican National Convention. About a half hour into the demonstration, I was lying on a sidewalk in handcuffs. An officer snidely remarked, “You’re being arrested for exercising rights you *thought* you had. But I guess you didn’t have ‘em, didja?” I sat in jail, thinking about how I felt more comfortable in a politically volatile third world nation than

I did in my own country. I still hadn't pieced together my role in Cambodia, which called into question my role here in the U.S.

I live my life in a state of perpetual inspiration. Another world *is* possible, I know it. Yet I somehow have found a way to reconcile idealism alongside acknowledging what is often times a very depressing reality. The dirt on the floor of the jail cell was mingling with splotches of motor oil. We were defeated. If I was going to get arrested, I might as well have been doing something useful. All I did was ride a bicycle down a street for a half hour. I placed my head on the afro of the kid next to me and sighed "what a fucking waste." He nodded and grasped my hand.

Every year the Ton Le Sap reverses its current again. Everything becomes as it was. What I used to see as a metaphor for revolution began to represent reaction and regression. How does one measure success in their activism? Falling short of a complete social revolution that realizes a society grounded in real justice and compassion, *what's our goal?* Whether or not my presence at WAC was 'legitimate' or not, I didn't really change anything by being there. I was content with that, though it took me a while to rid myself of the product-oriented ambition that academia has instilled in me. The Womyn's Agenda for Change *is* changing people's lives. They work to provide people with real choices that weren't there before. WAC is helping domestic abuse victims, rape survivors, sex workers, and people with AIDS give themselves powerful support networks and political representation. They're giving people alternatives. But does WAC really have the capacity to bring about any sort of structural change in Cambodian society? Are they really changing anything institutionally? Politically? Systemically? Cambodia is still a place where you can buy your way out of jail and buy your way into an architecture degree, though most people cannot afford to buy a meal. Union organizers regularly get murdered in the streets. There is essentially no functioning government, though no one dares challenge the state. People are brutalized in jail. Limbless landmine survivors beg on the streets. Human beings are trafficked. With such a lack of civil society, how effective can an NGO with a revolutionary agenda really be? I remember asking Rosanna about what progress she has seen in Cambodia during her time there. Her only reply was, "Well, the health of dogs has improved a lot."

People regularly ask me why I continue my activism in the face of such defeat. The answer, it always seemed, was self-evident: there's nothing else you *can* do. But that day in jail, I found myself asking the same question of the Womyn's Agenda for Change. If it's true that nothing has changed, then what's the point? The point, I think, is that activism *is* changing things.

I'm not about to present a framework for evaluating the efficacy of radical projects. Social progress doesn't happen on a linear model; our agitation ripples and pulsates and affects the world in ways that aren't necessarily quantifiable. The emotional relief of one sexual abuse survivor cannot be measured. The Womyn's Agenda for Change has touched the lives of everyone I have seen them come into contact with.

At the same time, I can't dismiss their role as an outside institution, further perpetuating a system of dependence in Cambodian society. As much as WAC may attempt to account for this power disparity, their very structure as an NGO will ultimately contradict their aims of genuine autonomy. *Rosanna, Ces, and I all contributed to that dynamic.* This does not mean that all well-intentioned Westerners should pack up and go home. Indeed, such a conclusion is cruel. If radicals are serious, however, about helping Cambodia transform itself into a place that realizes principles of justice *as articulated by Cambodians themselves* (most notably, sections of Cambodian society that are usually marginalized—for example, women. It would not suffice to have Cambodia's destiny constructed only by wealthy Khmer men), then we must take seriously a history that makes working in Cambodia different than anywhere else in the world. The lack of civil society in Cambodia—the lack of trust—comes directly from socio-psychological trauma that hasn't yet been dealt with. Confronting and ultimately reconciling with those issues is messy and complicated.

WAC is already helping facilitate this process, whatever you call it. Their encouragement of "consciousness raising" amongst everyone from garment workers to AIDS survivors comes directly out of second wave feminism (just like Rosanna!). That style of dialogue is the central element of reconciliation. With activists like Phoung already interested in sharing their stories, WAC is in a position to become self-consciously aware of the role it already plays as an agent of reconciliation, and apply that role to issues surrounding the Khmer Rouge. One might argue that the role of the Womyn's Agenda for Change is in the grassroots empowerment of Khmer women and that they should focus narrowly on those issues; let another group specialize in reconciliatory healing. Unfortunately, "another group" doesn't exist. And unless *someone* does it, it seems Cambodians will never have the foundation from which to cultivate autonomous development of any kind, let alone social revolution.

Activism is being globalized now, too. Social movements around the world are communicating struggles and sharing ideas. As activists from the north slowly begin to understand their role as "privileged radicals," strong links of trust are being developed that transcend the divisions imposed on us by our histories of conquest and domination. Perhaps this is the real kind of global 'reconciliation' we need.

Once Americans and Europeans drop the pretense of being the saviors of poor oppressed people, we can really work on creating a new world. I don't know where my passion will take me in the future. I do know that change must happen globally. We are embarking on an unprecedented stage in world history. This level of cross-cultural communication among movements has never happened before. We're approaching a new cycle of revolutionary consciousness. I can feel it.

Maybe that's why when the Ton Le Sap reverses, the people in Phnom Penh have a big festival.

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