

# The Art of Coexistence

# 64 Students Countries

# 1000 Questions



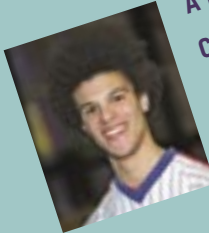
New Voices in Johannesburg:  
Melody and/or Cacophony?  
Darnisa Amante '06



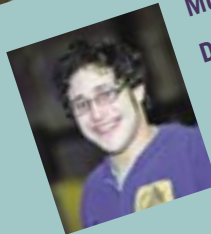
Ice Breakers in Sri Lanka: How Do  
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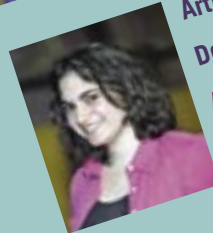
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Artist Proof in South Africa: When  
Does Optimism Silence Memory?  
Amy Schiller '06

The International Center  
for Ethics, Justice and Public Life

Brandeis University



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# The Art of Coexistence

2004 Ethics and Coexistence Student Fellows  
The International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life  
Brandeis University

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# Introduction

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**Daniel Terris, Director  
International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life**

Over the past seven years, more than 40 Brandeis University undergraduates have served as Ethics and Coexistence Student Fellows. Chosen during the fall of their sophomore or junior year in a competitive process, Fellows participate in a three-part program. In the spring term, they enroll in PAX 186a, “Introduction to Coexistence,” in which they study the theory and practice of work to improve relations between people in divided societies. In the summer, students work for 8-10 weeks in a non-governmental organization (NGO), where they have the opportunity to learn “in the field” about how practitioners address coexistence issues. Students have undertaken internships in Sri Lanka, Serbia, Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Tanzania, Israel, South Africa, Ecuador, and Cambodia, among other countries. In the fall, students return to campus and take a readings course, where they have the opportunity to integrate their academic and practical learning in the coexistence field.

This publication, *The Art of Coexistence*, is the work of the 2004 Ethics and Coexistence Student Fellows. This year’s fellowship program focused especially on the ways that the arts can play a prominent role in the work of coexistence, and most of the students’ internships reflected this emphasis. In this endeavor, they were ably led by Cynthia Cohen, the instructor of PAX 186a, who is leading a multi-year international exploration of art and reconciliation. Students had the benefit of meeting and in some cases working directly with practitioners from five countries who were brought to Brandeis under the auspices of another fellowship program, the Brandeis International Fellows.

In the fall 2004 seminar, which I led, the student fellows studied and practiced the art of documentary writing. Beginning with Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (the text used for the 2004 Brecher New Student Forum at Brandeis), the fellows considered the challenges that any outsider has in bringing a community to life through writing. *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis, provided an empathetic but rigorous model, which students adapted and discarded according to their preferences and circumstances. Most of all, the fellows wrote and re-wrote, commenting on each other’s writing and searching for the delicate balance between clear-headed observation and personal reflection.

The portraits published here bring to life organizations in Cambodia, Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Sri Lanka that, in very different ways, address the difficult issues of coexistence, justice, and social change. They also highlight the complex dimensions of idealism, when it comes into contact with surprising realities. Each narrative shows how experience has transformed a college student’s worldview. Sometimes they have had to curb unwarranted optimism, but at other times they have generated new sources of action and hope through the inspiring example of seasoned practitioners.

Special thanks to Marci McPhee, assistant director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life. Without Marci’s patient, careful work as a liaison to the internship sites, a mentor to the students, and a steady hand at our home base, the Ethics and Coexistence Student Fellowship program would never get off the ground.

# New Voices in Johannesburg: Melody and/or Cacophony?



Darnisa Amante '06

## Prologue: Welcome

From the side of the petite windows placed over the wings, the landscape of the country lying below was not only visible, but also quite exquisite: completely flat brown land with spurts of green and dust. Then, from the horizon, the city came into view and skyscrapers began to emerge. It is a city built upon the backs of miners and revolutionized over the past 10 years by a democratic fervor—and extreme desire for change from its former regime towards betterment. In a sense, it is a city that represents the gradual creation of a place where the slogan “proud to be South African,” does not seem both preposterous and hypocritical; rather it looks towards the prospect of progress and opportunity. A voice from the intercom above announced in English, Afrikaans, and Sestho: “Welcome, Welkom, Lebogega to Johannesburg.”

Looking at my reflection in the airplane window, I could not help but think about what lay before me. There I was, a black woman, 20 years old, from Brooklyn traveling to South Africa—a place that my ancestors are “said to hail from”—to work in a local organization aimed at black empowerment for nine weeks. I was going to Artist Proof Studio (APS) to work with not only well-known South African artist, Kim Berman, but also with Stompie Selibe, another artist and coexistence practitioner. But the stakes were high.

There were no protective walls of Brandeis University, and no reassuring talks from friends and professors. I was landing in Africa, truly alone and independent for the first time, with a clean/anonymous slate. No one knew of my past and my involvement in the Brandeis Black Student Organization, Student Union, or even the Ethics Center. There were no crowning achievements bearing my name. I could only be identified by the images that I portrayed, by the color of my skin, and by my relationships with others—*just* as Darnisa Amante.

Stepping off the plane in Johannesburg, the entire airport was abuzz with travelers milling about. Black hands could be

seen with different colored passports of red, green, and yellow, but none of those black hands held a blue passport embossed with gold eagles, none but mine. It suddenly seemed as if all the milling had stopped, people who had previously been dragging along suitcases and children, were looking in my direction, wondering why I, a black woman, had a U.S. passport. A passport of a country of opportunity, a country that they believed held all of the answers, answers that a South African passport could not provide. Needless to say, it made me uncomfortable. I didn't know how to respond. Unable to meet their questioning eyes, I simply picked up my own luggage and headed towards customs and the outer doors of the Johannesburg International Airport.

## I: Johannesburg: I Live on the Other Side of Injustice

*“You know, Darnisa, life is about a journey. And sometimes you never know where that journey is going to take you and why some roads take people one way and you another. But you always have to question it...”*

*- Stompie Selibe*

“Gandhi Square! Next Stop Gandhi Square” could be heard from the man sitting in the driver's seat. He wore no uniform, the distinction between him and the other passengers was made only by his tight grip on the lever of the door. It's a firm grasp that clearly states that he's a cut above the rest. He makes the choices and no one can take that right from him. He can choose when and when not to announce the stops, and when to open the door that continually creaks and sometimes has to be closed manually by standing on the concave bottom step. It's a double-decker, plastered with adverts on the side proclaiming that you're only half human if you rape a woman, as well as selling Yebo Gogo cell phones, and Grandpa medicines for headaches. But those factors go unnoticed by many. This is a mandatory ride to and

from work, not one of observations. The bus whips to the right, everyone leans and I stumble into my seat.

It's a windy scenic tour, from the large houses, green landscapes and BMWs of Parktown North, [a suburb of Jo'burg], to the tall cement buildings and mini-taxis of downtown Gauteng [the former name of Jo'burg]. My vehicle of choice is a bus, and at times it almost seems as if the ride is just as tumultuous as the swirling dust clouds that surround the township of Soweto on the outer rim of the city. I am swept up by a bus that descends upon the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> in Parktown, where I am staying, like dust settling on children's faces while at play. The bus swerves to the left and comes to an abrupt halt. "*This is the last stop,*" the driver says. The loud creak signifies that the doors are open. Stepping down, I'm immediately bum rushed by a score of people with briefcases, linens, baskets, and Colgate toothpaste. *Johannesburg*. The doors close quickly behind me and the bus pulls off, a phantom that disappears as quickly as dissipating dust.

The space left by the bus is quickly filled by dozens of black faces that give me customary glances, but nothing more. For the moment, I am just one of them: a black woman in Jo'burg trying to avoid the wintry gusts of wind, nothing more and nothing less. I tie my scarf tighter across my face, while more people glance in my direction. They do not question me, because the confused look on my face and the feelings of being uprooted are felt by scores of people walking amongst me. I'm lost and don't know in which direction to begin this quest, where to walk, and to whom to speak; my feelings are similar to their own. They've all gone through periods where they've felt displaced and alone with nowhere to turn. Maybe the bus and the dust clouds were partners in crime, both disappearing quickly and offering no help. One was just well camouflaged in a dirty cracked exterior, only five Rand for the ride of a lifetime.

*"Well I was born in this place called Rooitgamtiesfontein but I didn't grow up there. Now I live in Soweto. We were forcefully removed from that place to a new place in the northwest province because that place was fertile and we had to make place for the Afrikaner farmers. I remember soldiers carrying big guns and I still remember the house we had. It was a big house and after we were displaced, we moved to a shack house. Can you imagine going from a 16-room house to a shack? I'm from a big family and we are 10 at home: six brothers and four sisters. Even now I sometimes don't have enough to pay five Rand for the bus. I take the*

*mini-taxis. I know that they are really crowded and a lot of times the drivers don't have licenses but I don't have a choice. You squeeze yourself through the doors because you have to. I've never even left from Gandhi Square, it doesn't go in my direction."*

—Paul Molete

Mini-taxis whiz by again, as I begin walking through the circular-shaped square, the once-white color of the taxis now unrecognizable. Legs and hands are pressed up against the window but their owners cannot be seen. However, the taxi is heading in the direction that I need to walk: three blocks down Pritchard and seven up President Street. Glancing up, first at the sign for Pritchard Street, the walk seems inviting enough. Along the way I pass numerous music stores playing Kwato music, an interesting mix of traditional music and rap in Zulu, Sestho and English. Heads are bobbing in the street and children in their school clothes—blue, red, and green plaids—are running behind mini taxi's and waving two fingers in the air; in a way making an absurd-looking peace gesture. The buses are never an option, only the taxi rank.

However, the gesture has absolutely nothing to do with peace signs or the hippie movement of the 1960's. It instead simply denotes the direction of travel. One finger for Soweto and two for the city. My fingers are lying at my side; not only do I not know the signs, but I, myself, am not going anywhere. A funeral parlor to the right halts my movement. There's a kneeling stone figure in the window lying against cold marble. The words above the headstone exclaim that this particular store has the cheapest rates in the neighborhood. In fact, it proves to be one of many parlors along the route. The heads around me are still bobbing, as if 48 years under apartheid has left people unfazed.

The walk always seems to be quick, even though it takes 25 minutes. The order of objects on the street is compelling. The

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Jo'burg public library across the street from Standard Autobank, human excrement alongside the building and then an immense glistening figure in the horizon. Suddenly, I see that there is glass everywhere but my feet keep moving like nothing has changed, mimicking the movement of others around me. The panes are reflecting everything within the nearest one block radius, including the newly finished Nelson Mandela Bridge. It's the Stock Exchange, the crowning achievement of progress, a wave of the future for the new South Africa. There's excrement alongside this building as well. I continue walking.

However, the landscape has changed yet again. Here there are cultural factories: dance, theatre, and in the distance, the bus factory owned by Beautiful Things, the home of APS This is the studio where I've been assigned. I take a moment to whisper to myself about the image upon me: a large parking lot with overhanging shutters of aluminum and greenery. An inner utopia of local art works with huge APS signs next to an advert proclaiming Beautiful Things; a true declaration of the achievement. The studio is located in the back of the Bus Factory, contributing to the existing arty ambience created by Beautiful Things—the showcase crafts from all over South Africa.

Walking into the studio, I am overcome by the absurdity of the colors that somehow seem to be in sync and work with each other: reds, oranges, and grays. Such a warm surrounding to encompass the true meaning of a place that not only houses black youth in order to ensure them equal opportunities, but was also built out of the ashes of the post apartheid regime. It is a space that houses more than 100 artists, a place that is as welcoming as it is beautiful.

The heads around me begin to turn. My voice wasn't low enough. When I open my mouth, though I am a black woman in a predominantly black area, all of the heads turn. People become perplexed. I looked like them, yet my voice was different. The eyes of those around me, like those in the airport, are questioning and wondering what exactly I'm doing in their part of town and why I'm not on the same route as many of the other "tourists." How could I explain that I was a student from Brandeis University doing coexistence work on an internship? Why did I of all people have the choice to determine a different path for myself? On one hand, I was an outsider. Yet, they still accepted me with open arms. According to them, a black woman always had a place in their open arms, an idea that I will explore later. They did not care about what university I went to but rather chose to view me as an insider, giving me access to cultural practices otherwise denied to "tourists." I was at APS and regardless of being an outsider, I was made privy to its surrounding, its beautiful interior and its orange colored walls.

The studio occupants turn around on their stools with their aprons slightly lagging by a few seconds. I had entered the studio during lunch. They continue eating fat cakes with liver. Siphso, a second-year student, offers me some of his,

*"Take the fat cake like this, fold it like a bun and place the liver in the middle"* he says.

I am welcomed. Some, like Thembekka a 20-year-old student, were even smiling at my American accent. As the rest turned away from me to finish their food, I hear people behind me saying "Swabona": Hello and Welcome. They are Thulani, Nelson, and Siphso [who had offered food earlier], all young black artists who were only two or three years older than my 20 years. They told me how they'd come to the studio and integrated me into the world that is APS.

*"I was tired of staying at home. I went to town and I did some job interviews and when I got there, the queue was too long, and then I started walking around town and looking around. And then I found this place, APS, and I asked them what they did and they told me about it and I was so excited. They told me when to come back for my interviews and then later I got accepted and now I'm here. I was accepted for my art."*

*"To me art is a form of expression, not only can you express yourself but you can heal yourself as well. A lot of us need some healing. By healing yourself you're also healing the next person that sees your artwork. I see art as a powerful way of expression and as a way that can change man's perception and man's belief and things like that. It can still serve that purpose even now. I see art as being a little bit closer to being God. You're becoming a creator, and art to me is that you're given the responsibility to be a creator and a limited God."*

*-Thulani*

I was not alone anymore...

## II. Artist Proof Studio In-Depth: Breaking Away from Apartheid

*"Things are not always the way they seem, there is something always under the surface. It was kind of like that during apartheid. People would be so afraid to ask questions because they knew that asking questions would bring harm upon them. The people in the generation before me couldn't talk about what was really bothering them because if they did they might not make it to the next day. You could be arrested in the middle of the night. To them worrying about such nonsense would only lead to trouble. And by nonsense I mean asking questions and wanting legit answers. Many of us have stopped questioning, but it doesn't mean that we aren't searching for answers..."*

*– Stompie Selibe*

The greatest impacts on a community are often those that spawn from history. Sometimes, it is hard to discern what aspects will have the most effect on a community. At times it is the backlash to oppression, and other times it is the sheer desire for change that acts as a catalyst for the greatest stirrings within a group of individuals. APS exists as a conglomeration of both of these ideals.



Founded in 1991 by Kim Berman and Nhlanhla Xaba, APS is a community based printmaking studio that is located in the Newtown Cultural Precinct of Johannesburg. APS offers an intensive training program in printmaking, and organizes meetings and exchanges between its artists and international printmakers. It is also involved in art-related poverty relief and AIDS awareness projects throughout South Africa's nine provinces. However, while APS strives to empower its artists through printmaking, it also provides an opportunity for artists to take control of their own careers. APS coordinates various job creation programs for young artists involving professional internships, or contract commissions for silkscreen cards, hand-made paper, graphic design and other products.

It is this devotion to job creation and black empowerment that has resulted in APS emerging as a community institution built upon anti-apartheid sentiments. Founded three years before the end of apartheid, both Berman and Xaba felt that it was important for a place to exist where race was not a factor, but rather where artistic talent surpassed all ideas of racism. As many explained to me throughout the internship, art has no race.

*"When you talk about empowerment, I realize that for a human to be empowered they need to be supported, APS provides that. Growing up I had support as a child but I felt like I didn't have enough support for the really important things in my life. The art that you can create brings peace to your inner soul. Art brings questions about how to deal with issues like racism. Some of us didn't know why things happened like discrimination but it wasn't something that I aimed to entertain. It was something that was often evoked in the space because it is something that is never discussed. It opens up the possibilities of who you are and where you're coming from. We could question our families and our past through art at APS."*

- Stompie Selibe

With the help of workshops run by Stompie Selibe and the continual creation of art by students, the studio over the past 12 years has combated the ideology of an oppressive regime. It is absurd not to consider that Apartheid, which remained in place for over three decades, has not only succeeded in tarnishing the history of race relations in the country, but has also succeeded in stigmatizing its black peoples. The Apartheid era was focused on locking black South Africans into societal "norms," silencing them, and fostering the idea that black progress was not true progress.

In a sense, Apartheid embedded the idea that white was right and anything black needed to be segregated for the greater protection of the white minority. It's ultimately this idea that APS challenges on a continual basis by running Paper Prayer campaigns for AIDS awareness, engaging in community art projects, and selling students' works within the studio's Nhlanhla Xaba gallery in the studio. All of this is done to embody the image of the new South African - a person that is not focused on racism and discrimination but rather tries to overcome discrimination by looking toward the future and democracy.

Students are given the opportunity and responsibility to take part in all phases of their exhibitions, including design, installation, and pricing.

APS also builds upon the positive movement towards social change that developed among activists under apartheid. The use of visual arts presents a forum for members of the studio to work side by side with former enemies [some groups from their own townships] in exercising their creativity and talents.<sup>1</sup> Rather than constantly focusing on the negative, artists come to the studio and engage in a variety of art techniques. APS offers opportunities and tuition for a range of printmaking techniques including etching, silkscreen, relief printing, photographic processes, papermaking, and lithography. These various tools provide ways for artists to break out of conventional roles and bring something back to their communities. This cyclical process of learning and teaching is vital to the APS community. Not only does it allow older artists to influence younger artists, but it also allows artists to take what they've learned about empowerment and racism, and bring it to their communities outside of the studio in the townships to help break down the tensions that still exist.

*"I deal with social issues in my prints and things that we face everyday, like abuse and fatherhood, things that our neighbors are gossiping about and the headline news that you read everyday. It is about that and things that I have experienced and the problems that I am facing everyday. And some of the problems in fact are things I can't solve. I'm not trying to solve everything but I'm just accepting some of the things that we cannot solve. Not to say if I die today I'll be a happy man, because I still have to express more. There are still a lot of colors that I have to put there in my print. Then I can die knowing that I can share with the whole world or my country what I needed to say; it would be something else for the next generation. So I have to try every day to clean up all the mess, and to open new doors for the next upcoming artists, and I know that I'm not going to stray."*

- Nelson Makamo

Every day the young artists, like Nelson, come from around the townships, some as far as two hours, in order to partake in the printmaking process. Nelson, who is a second year student, creates prints that not only depict family scenes but also ultimately evoke his family and ancestors. The images that he creates, as he states, are there to set an example for the next artist that is coming after him. While he does many prints in the studio, he also does many drawings. Each scene is a plea to those young black men that are "succumbing" to temptations that cause HIV and can lead to death. His contribution to the community is simply a plea to remain safe, and for men to be good fathers to their children.

However, the studio represents so much more than lithograms, prints and woodcuttings. As Nelson and others suggest it serves more as a familial unit. It fosters an atmosphere for artists like Siphon, and Thulani to create without the fear of

retaliation from anyone. This is one predominate reason why APS, since its beginning in the early 1990's, has been a symbol of family, support, and most importantly a representative of the new South Africa. Everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve his or her goals. APS simply provides the medium: art.

Through linoleum cuts (linels) which involves cutting an image into linoleum and then inking it, as well as woodcutting, black men and women are in a sense "re-voicing" themselves. Because at some point someone has to talk, someone has to speak about the injustices so that the next generation will not be held under the same tight constraints. Someone has to do a woodcut that can impact the community, and spread the idea that change is possible.

Some of the works that have had the largest impact on the community are the collages that were created after a fire that struck APS in of March 2003. They represent the true reconciliation of a community. Everyone came together in order to reestablish bonds that had been broken by the fire and also rallied together to ensure that APS would stand in the future [which will be discussed more in depth in chapter 3]. Because for these artists, APS is not just a studio, it is a future.

*"The support that I've gotten from friends, family and teachers builds me every day and it teaches me to wake up. So every day to me is a challenge because I don't know what is going to happen. I don't know what I'm going to do but by the end of the day I can tell you what happened in that day but that's as far as it goes. And that is my work now. There will be a time when I'll be battling with a canvas and having to express what I did the whole day in colors, pencils and charcoal until I have to stop. And it is only then that I can go to bed. But today I can see that I am busy polishing my future and it isn't shiny yet but it's about to shine."*

- Siphio

Though many of these issues may seem large and convoluted, it is important to understand them to see the true benefits that Artist Proof represents. Through workshops held with Stompie Selibe, like *Ubuntu*—which is a South African concept of family and humility—men and women are given an

opportunity to speak about what they feel and how things have affected them. They are being given agency through their voices, and it is ultimately the voices of the artist that have built the foundation for the studio.

Their voices permeate throughout APS's orange and red walls and can be found in all of the student's work. Many within the space of the studio are happy to share their stories,

and are eager to move beyond the parameters that have been set by society. APS continues to foster this desire every day, and each day it helps in the struggle of breaking the realm of silence and bringing internal issues to the forefront using the artist's works. For APS, the use of voices in its work is key.

*"Before I started doing this fellowship, I wasn't aware that I was in the process of dealing with reconciling with what you have and the environment that you're staying. Honestly, I never saw myself as someone who could inspire and transform things but I realized that when you have passion, faith and hope you're always working on what you believe. You can be able to learn to believe to have faith and hope that something will work out."*

- Stompie Selibe

However, many problems exist today as residual effects of the apartheid regime that APS has not been able to completely combat. For instance, many communities and peoples continue to live their lives like marionettes with their strings being pulled by outward societal forces. Apartheid has left an undeniable mark on the people, and particularly on its youth and their families. People are afraid to confront their families with relevant and current issues, and there is even a stigma surrounding being a male artist. A perfect example of this can be seen in many of the youth who, like Siphio, are discouraged by their communities from asking questions and voicing their concerns.

*"I think that my family doesn't care what I do, they only care about when I arrive home late or don't come home at all. I'm male artist and they don't even understand what printmaking is. How can I explain inking and printing presses to people who don't really know how to read? They don't question anything else. We've been hurt too much by apartheid. You just begin to ignore things and then it doesn't hurt anymore. I've inherited the same thing from my parents and what my family did. Now, I don't care anymore. I don't feel pain anymore. I just don't talk about it around them."*

- Siphio Mzedkandaba

Instead of outwardly voicing their protests, much of the anger that exists is left to brew just under the surface. While APS has helped in combating this issue, many black youths still feel that they have been silenced and that they do not possess the power to stand up and protest what they feel is unjust as individuals. They instead choose to look toward powerful leaders like Nelson Mandela to vicariously live out their struggles, and to solve their conflicts. This method, unfortunately, has not been as effective as many of the artists would have hoped. Men and women are both encouraged to know their pasts so that they might not repeat the same mistakes and calamity in the future; a concept that is not so far off from U.S. culture.

However, one must also first realize that silence plays a large role in South African culture. The men, when presented

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with difficult situations, must hide their tears: an emotional silencing. When a woman is abused, she must remain silent for fear of being hurt again. In an effort to counter these feelings, APS has set up a comfortable atmosphere that provides a forum for these issues to be discussed not only through art but through workshops such as Men as Partner, which deals with the stigma surrounding being a male artist as well as Paper Prayers, which are workshops that promote HIV prevention. APS strives to reconcile communities and to bring them together, but sometimes the coexistence rhetoric is simply not applicable.

Diane Francis has said that the use of art not only creates positive personal relationships but can also contribute to the constructive handling of conflict<sup>2</sup>. However, while positive relationships have sprung up in the studio, the result has not been an explicit healing among black and white communities but rather an increased sentiment of unity among the black population of the studio. While artists come together every day, there is a striking disproportion of black and white artists. Actually, during my stay at APS, there was only one white artist who was a third- and final-year student. The only other white individuals coming into the studio are those that work there as staff, and people that come into the studio wishing to purchase art from the students.

As a result of this racial distribution, Kim Berman promotes the complete control of artists of their work aside from class assignments. Each artist is in control of how his or her work is displayed, the price range, and the location of their work within the Nhlanhla Xaba gallery. Potential customers enter the studio and are greeted by Cara Walters, the studio manager, or Marjorie Maleka, a third-year student who is also in charge of sales. Once the decision has been made on which picture will be bought, the artist is contacted and will often times have discussions with the patron about the meaning of the work.

While exhibiting many elements of coexistence such as the use of visual arts to bring people within the studio together and providing a means to “break the silence,” APS is one of a few institutions that are being used in the new South Africa to assuage Apartheid sentiments. APS, along with other programs, is located within the new cultural district of downtown Jo’burg-Newtown. Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which promoted the use of voices after the fall of apartheid, institutions have sprung up in order to promote this goal.

In fact, before the creation of APS, Market Theater, and the dance factory [which houses many cultural shows], many white businessmen and patrons were afraid to travel beyond the Standard Bank. There was a fear that to travel beyond that point would increase the risk of being mugged. So in that respect, APS and the other arts programs have been successful in bringing black and white people together. Now, it is not uncommon to see white foreigners and natives walking along President Street

to the Beautiful Thing’s Bus Factory or across the street the South African Museum without constantly questioning the black individuals around them.

While such efforts have been made beyond the studio’s wall, APS is still susceptible to outside elements that cannot be controlled by workshops and art. These elements threaten to destroy its quest for giving voice and empowerment; this is a problem that coexistence practitioners could not fix. APS was threatened by an element that had nothing to do with apartheid and could not be cured through Ubuntu workshops with Stompie Selibe-a fire. The fire had everything do with testing the Artist Proof community’s true strength and unity.

### III. Out of the Ashes, a Community is Rebuilt: The Healing Begins

*“The studio is a shell. It’s harder on the outside and more fragile on the inside.”*

- Sipho

In the early morning of March 9, 2003, Kim Berman woke up to an alarming telephone call that held double heartache for her and Nhlanhla’s beloved studio. During the night, a fire had struck. Not only had it burned down the studio, but it had also claimed the life of Nhlanhla Xaba, her friend, cohort, and co-founder. But that was not the worst part of the news.

All of the artwork of over 100 artists, which had taken 10 years to make and to display, was gone. Only fragments of what had been were left, burnt linels and printing presses. The artists had to come together. The institution that they had referred to as their home for so long was gone, and the only thing that could be done was to take each fragment and place them together in a collage to commemorate Nhlanhla’s work and life.

Several collages of all of the remaining work had to be made in order to show that their studio was not lost forever. The result was a series of collages within the studio and a mural at the entrance of the studio, and images created from prints by Xaba on the interior doors. Even the security fencing on the staircase and above the walls of the studio is fashioned from collages [each named Conflict, Negotiation, and Peace] of the burnt remains found in the original studio. The process of making art and art therapy was instrumental in the healing of the inner APS community, and of the tensions that existed as a result of the fire amongst groups in the studio, and most importantly in reestablishing the role of APS in the community at large.

*“I never recovered until I made a print. I had to deal with the fire the best way I could and the only way I could was to come up with an art piece that would take away my rage. I had to come to peace about the whole situation and I dedicated the piece to him (Nhlanhla). It was about the journey from the beginning: when I first came here, the journey I took every day, the journey from when I was born to*

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*now, the financial struggles I went through and it was about everything he taught me.”*

*- Trevor*

The creation of the collages signified what an important role APS played and still plays in the community. The collages encouraged students to keep working, and went on public display for the surrounding community to see. People from the larger community were able to see the resilience of the studio, and ultimately see that it would not give up on its goals and aspirations.

*“We made a collage out of burnt prints and it was interesting. It was regeneration and a reproduction of what was burnt into something new. It was like rebuilding the studio and it played a big role in our lives. Then we started working together and it meant there is always someone for you and that we are here for someone, and there is someone there to support me. And that’s how I felt, I would depend on people for security and thoughts and quite a lot of stuff. And that’s when the collaboration occurred, because we were all in one crisis and the only way to rebuild the studio was to work together.”*

*- Trevor*

Not only did the collages bring artists together, but they also produced a long term unexpected effect. The experiences led to increased feelings of a family-like atmosphere and the banding together of artists to protect their “home”. It was this sentiment that I viewed when I entered the walls of APS. It gave me the chance to see the effects of the healing process up close. When you enter the studio, the first things that you notice are the collages that grace the walls. Each one represents a memory, and a piece of art that was created by present day and former members of the studio. Up close, you can see each piece was placed together. Some of the pieces of the collage are black with tar, and others seem unscathed by the flames that overcame the studio.

Walking into the studio was an incredibly moving experience for me every day. Each collage is crafted so well, you can’t help but appreciate it. Each one portrays togetherness and simply reiterates what can happen when coexistence work is effective. Everyone came together for one cause besides the hardships that were happening in the studio in order to reconcile as a group, and I found that incredibly powerful.

Throughout my summer at APS, I was able to witness and observe many instances of the community coming together. After such a devastating event, the solidarity of the community was amazing. However, all of this healing did not just come about from the creation of the collages, but also grew out of many art therapy workshops. The main goal of these workshops is to give the artists an opportunity to express their pain, and their sorrow through artwork. This, however, would not be the first time that I would be able to glimpse into the inner workings of South African history and the studio.

Not only was I working at APS, but I also traveled the countryside visiting Phumani Paper sites. Phumani Paper, also founded by Kim Berman, is a poverty relief program aimed at increasing the economic prosperity of over 150 women in the nine provinces of South Africa. Many of those instances that occurred during my summer happened outside of the studio, in trips to the townships, particularly in Wintervelt.

#### **IV. An Outsider’s Perspective**

Loading ourselves into the van, the doors shut behind us without a sound from the passengers or the usually squeaky doors. This was a moment of awe. A mini-bus, which usually squeezes in 20 people, was a little less than half-full with only nine passengers aboard. The taxi, still maintaining its white factory color, had not yet been caked with the dust that generally accompanies most mini taxis in Jo’burg. It was a clear indication that our object of the day was neither to venture within the inner ring of Jo’burg nor to provide assuring images for people familiar with the turf. Instead, we were going beyond the reaches of the city, in the company of white Americans: a documentary crew whose main objective was to capture the essence of Phumani Paper and the workers at its site in Wintervelt. The taxi had to be perfect in order to symbolize the changes that had occurred in the city since the end of apartheid in 1994. The Stock Exchange’s shiny surface glistened from the right side...strained race relations were “a thing of the past.”

Pulling away from the studio, I glanced to my left at Kgagelo, a woman who worked at APS in an embroidery project called Ikageng. She had been working in the studio for the past 10 years. Her expression was similar to my own, a sense of slight bewilderment with the change of the scenery. At every instant, she couldn’t help but mention to me that every year her “little” town of Gauteng changed,

*“Everything looks different each time I see it,” she said. “Some places look so better much better each time I see them. But the bad places, they just get more bad. I wish you could have seen it five years ago. I can even describe what it was then. Everything was torn down and dirty and it was just so different. I think a lot of these changes come with progress. You know we got the World Cup in 2010!”*

We were leaving the usual noisiness and hectic nature of the bus factory to go to a project in Wintervelt that was specifically designed for women who had either been abused or were HIV positive. It was an all too familiar problem that Kgagelo didn’t fail to mention to me, in a whisper, during our ride from Jo’burg, through Pretoria and Shosunguwe (the town bordering Wintervelt). In this region, only an hour from the city, one could see shanty homes falling over. Sometimes they had neither doors nor roofs. As Kgagelo leaned over me, she mentioned once again in a hushed voice,

*“There is no support for us out here.”*

As we drove by in our shiny white mini-taxi, heads on the street in all three regions turned. Children ran alongside the cars, screaming hello to all the white faces in the van, ignoring the blacks in the back. The white hands, in return, reached out the windows waving hello in return. But behind the children, black adults stood in the background, unwavering in their stance, staring at the new white mini-taxi with six white occupants and three black ones. The kids kept running towards the car. The adults simply turned around, beckoning their children to follow them. We kept moving toward Wintervelt. Kgagelo turned to me again, unable to contain her feelings.

*“You know Darnisa, I love coming to Wintervelt. Since the last time we were here two weeks ago, I have been dreaming of all those beautiful bags that I saw sitting on the table at the Embroidery Project. Do you remember those bags from last time?! I asked my husband for two weeks to save up some money for me to buy that bag. It has taken me so long to finally have money of my own and now I can buy a bag and I’m going to do just that.”*

We’d arrived. Dust swirled everywhere around the Wintervelt school/mission that held both the Phumani Paper and embroidery projects. The school was composed of an old brick church and seven rectangular blocks attached to each other in a zigzag pattern. For the past 10 minutes before arriving at the school/mission, we had not see any paved road, just a vast desert-like region with children walking alongside the patted down dirt with no shoes and colorful plaid school uniforms and lunch pails. Dust was blowing everywhere, and I couldn’t help but be reminded of my first time in Gauteng. The children’s faces were covered with dirt.

We got out of the car and walked to the embroidery project in one of the seven rectangular buildings. As soon, as we opened the door, the first things that could be seen were tables upon tables of embroidered bags, tablecloths, pillowcases and aprons. Kgagelo greeted all of the women in the room with “Dumelas” and began the activities for the day, which included debriefing the women on the presence of the video cameras. After that, the activities simply began. The documentary crew walked into the room during a workshop with their equipment, and all eyes quickly diverted from Kgagelo and myself to an all-white crew. Their walking was followed by more stares. People greeted Kgagelo and myself with Dumelas in Sestho, as is custom when new people walk into the room, and the crew with “Hello.”

As the day wore on, Kgagelo moved closer and closer toward the bags on the table to her left. For the past two weeks, since our last visit to Wintervelt, Kgagelo had been describing to me how badly she wanted an embroidered bag. It was at that point that I decided that I would get a bag for Kgagelo as a late birthday present and as a sign of my extreme gratitude for “showing me the ropes” around Jo’burg. Kgagelo couldn’t contain herself any longer. She began picking up each bag almost as if it held ounces of gold and diamonds, carefully placing one atop the other.

The bag that eventually struck her fancy was black and dotted with pictures of golden giraffes and elephants. It was quite exquisite. When she picked up that bag, she seemed like the happiest person on Earth, as she proclaimed,

*“It’s exactly what I wanted. I have never seen a bag more beautiful than this one.”*

It was one of those moments where it is hard for someone to completely describe what it is that they want but when they finally find it there’s no question, no shadow of a doubt that they’ve found what they were looking for. That was the look that Kgagelo had on her face and it remained there for the rest of the afternoon. Her face was locked in an eternal smile.

While other people were looking at bags, Kgagelo gently placed her bag aside to ensure that it remained within her reach, and to ensure that it wouldn’t get out of her sight and be taken away. She handed the bag over to me, asking me to pay for her, and told me that she would pay me back the next morning, as soon as she saw me. I knew that she was trustworthy and didn’t doubt for a second that my money would be returned. However, I had no intentions of asking for it back, but I hadn’t let her know that as of yet. I paid for the bag, and the film crew continued shooting.

When shooting was finished, one of the crewmembers, whom I will call Martha, walked to the side of the room containing the embroidered bags and expressed that she wanted a bag as well. Kgagelo heard this and walked over to the table. While Kgagelo did not mention that she was nervous about someone taking her bag, the look was written all over her face. She kept glancing between Martha and her bag on the adjacent table.

Martha continued searching until she spotted “the perfect bag.” Her perfect bag was a black handbag dotted with golden giraffes and elephants: Kgagelo’s bag. Martha began walking over to Kgagelo’s bag. I cannot begin to describe the disappointment and anger that was building up inside me. The bag had been purchased already! Martha had been describing all day how her home was filled with items from this particular project. She mentioned how her three-month-old twins slept with Wintervelt embroidered pillows every night and how she carried their embroidered handbags whenever possible. She was insistent upon adding one more to the collection.

The whole scene played out in slow motion, as I watched her walking toward that bag. Coupled simultaneously with that slow motion walking were Kgagelo’s eyes, watching her as well.

Martha reached for the bag and simply help it up with glee and exclaimed

*“Here it is, I’ve found it. Okay, I’m going to take this one now. I cannot believe it was just sitting here like this.”*

Can you hear the scales creaking? I thought race relations were “a thing of the past.” Martha didn’t question to whom the bag belonged, but simply made the assumption that it was hers to acquire. I watched and waited. The hardest part of this encounter was to avoid inserting myself into this situation. By

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throwing myself into that encounter it would have been simply expressing the common American need to become involved and to help others “empower themselves.” It’s a need to take pity upon those whom we’ve deemed less fortunate. In a sense, we must come to their aid like a globalized Robin Hood who has expanded his reach beyond Nottingham Forest. This was Kgagelo’s moment and I wanted to see what would happen.

Here was a woman who grew up under the apartheid era, but was as strong a woman as they come. She turned to Martha and simply said:

*“Well that’s my bag but if you want it you can have it, I didn’t really want it that much so take it.”*

My mouth was absolutely agape. She didn’t want it that much?! Without even questioning that hurt look on Kgagelo’s face, Martha turned around and asked whom she would have to pay.

I couldn’t wait anymore. I had to intervene. If there was not going to be justice, I had to at least make sure she paid me the money for the bag. I couldn’t undo the situation that I had just seen but I was going to make sure that she paid me my money back. For Kgagelo it was no problem because the gesture had been sincere, but for Martha I couldn’t let her pay twice for a bag that was already owned. She had to pay me back, but of course it didn’t change the circumstances. I figured that by telling her that I had paid for the bag, she would realize the mistake that she had made. The bag did have an owner and was not simply dwelling on a corner table as a result of misplacement. She did understand eventually, but that didn’t stop her from adding another cultural piece to her growing collection.

When I turned toward Kgagelo to see what her reaction was to the situation, she had already placed a smile upon her face. She’d done what so many of the artists at the studio do; she’d hid her pain from anyone to see. Though it might have been deceiving to those around us who had not witnessed the interaction, I knew she was upset about letting that bag go. She had masked her discomfort. She was looking down at all the other bags at that table and I asked her if she wanted to get another bag. She just looked up at me and said,

*“No that was the only one I wanted and I don’t see anything else I like. I gave it to her because she really wanted it. You know it’s not polite to be rude to white people like that. And plus she’s a foreigner, and the World Cup is in 2010, how would that look?”*

The scales had completely fallen off their counterbalance.

Reflecting back on that situation, I realized that there were a lot of interesting power dynamics coming into play in that session. I began wonder why I wanted, almost needed to purchase the bag for Kgagelo and why Martha never questioned the ownership of the item. I think at the time we were acting on different parts of the same concept. I do not blame Martha for taking the bag nor do I want to express pity for Kgagelo because that is not my point. My point is to think about the

two different views taken by the Americans in the room. At that time we both had an agenda, whether it was known or not. In fact we both had the same agenda, which was to purchase a bag, she for herself and me for both Kgagelo and myself. But of all the people in the room to get upset it seemed almost arrogant and self-righteous for it to be me. However, it took me two months to realize that. If Kgagelo let Martha have the bag, then it was no place for me to be angry, but still to this day it angers me. I think we have to seriously consider the effects of the years that studying “third-world” countries and developing nations is having on our psyches. While I think that aid is important, and I am not condemning it, I think it is important to consider this idea of making drastic changes to a community or a person that doesn’t necessarily ask for help. Though I must make a distinction between standing up for justice and offering help. In that situation, I believe that I was offering help but it was to no avail. The assumption that someone needs your assistance or help is almost as arrogant as throwing a coin into a man’s cup of coffee, because you’ve made the assumption that he’s a beggar. I’m working on the fact that here, as a black American woman, I am on the other side of injustice.

This was not the only instance where I felt like I was in an awkward situation. Being a black American woman in South Africa was definitely an experience that I can never forget. There were many instances where I became the center of attention not because of the things that I was contributing to conversation, but rather because of the sound of my voice. People were simply intrigued. It was hard for many of them to understand that I was a black woman from the States that had no familial ties to South Africa or a name that “meant nothing”. Many black South Africans possess names that hold significance and are reflections of their ancestry. For instance, Siphos name means “gift of God.” It was not uncommon for me to be questioned on a continual basis,

*“How can you, Darnisa, have a name that is so beautiful that means absolutely nothing? Do you not know where you come from or who your people are?”*

It was a difficult position for me. All of my life, I’ve grown up in a family that stresses the importance of knowing who you are and identifying with the black community, for solidarity and strength. But the roles, in Africa, were different. I had no tribe with which to identify or any culturally significant name. How could I tell them that my name, that was so beautiful, was simply a conglomeration of Darlene and Lisa; something that my grandmother created as a middle name for my mother. It didn’t mean anything except for the significance that I gave it. My name represented everything that I had been through, the trials and tribulations of one individual from Brooklyn, N.Y. and not Brooklyn, Pretoria where many of them assumed I was from.

*“How can you be from Brooklyn, you don’t sound like you’re from P.E. [the abbreviation for Pretoria].”*

I had to tell them.

The result was a renaming process. Mbali, one of the students at the studio, mentioned that my name sounded like the Xhosa name Xoliswe. From that moment on, many people began to call me Xoliswe and everything else returned to normal. No one continued to question my ancestry because they'd in a sense created a history for me by giving me a new South Africa name.

The name Xoliswe meant "forgiveness." I was left speechless. It was a true honor to be renamed, but I still felt that the name Xoliswe did not represent who I am. Only the name Darnisa could do that. I did not go to Africa to discover who I was or my own identity, yet one can't help but question years of slavery and the true status of black Americans in the states. The black community has gone adrift. There is not one factor that can link us together, except for hip-hop music, which is not a true indicator of a people. Hip-Hop is not specific to the black community but is quite far reaching. In South Africa, everyone's name can tell a history. Sipho Mzedkandaba (Xhosa), Nelson Makamo (Sestho), Thulani Mbaso (Sestho); the first and last names alone were indicators of tribes, language, and people. All you had to do was write your name down, and people could begin to tell you years of history. I couldn't do that.

Later, it was soon "discovered" that my own name, Darnisa, was an actual word in one of the 11 official languages of South Africa. It meant Hurry Up. After that was discovered, everyone except for Mbali stopped calling me Xoliswe. Darnisa was now sufficient. My whole name in translation meant Hurry Up Lover [Darnisa Amante]. The beautiful name now held significance. Everyone became convinced that my ancestors might have come from South Africa, and they became even more welcoming.

Every day, I received lessons in Sestho, in order to learn how to properly pronounce words. Often times, white South Africans would come in and try to speak to the artists in Zulu or Sestho. Sometimes, when I thought no one was within hearing range, I would repeat after some of the white natives to learn more words and vocabulary. There was always someone from the studio, who heard me,

*"No Darnisa, you don't say it like that. They are pronouncing it wrong but we aren't going to tell them that. They're white, it just would not be right. But you, you are one of us. You have to learn how to say it correctly because you might offend someone. And you're South African now, and you definitely don't want to insult your elders."*

However, with my "new status" came a dual obligation. On one hand, I was a newly incorporated South African who was accepted by the community within the studio, but on the other hand I was still American. I could never, nor did I want to mask, who I am. My American citizenship is a part of me, regardless of my name meaning "Hurry Up" in Shangan. It was something that couldn't escape me. Every time I walked into a shop and said anything, people would turn around and immediately begin to ask questions.

As an American, people believed that I had the wealth to sustain them and the power to carry their voices and their stories beyond the South African borders and across the Atlantic. While I could not explain that as a student I did not have the income to support them, I have tried to live to the "obligation" of carrying their voices and their stories.

## **V. Contemplatives Thoughts: Looking toward the Future**

Throughout my summer at APS, I came across many instances where I was able to witness coexistence work up close. By spending time in Artist Proof Studio, as well as outside of its orange colored walls in the townships, I was able to see that apartheid has left an undeniable mark on the black communities of South Africa. Artist Proof, under the supervision of Kim Berman, is doing an amazing job at combating the ideas of black inferiority by promoting empowerment and agency. But there is still a long way to go.

Invisible and visible structures exist that separate black and white communities. Regardless of how many art therapy workshops are performed, the fact that so much segregation still exists is going to take years to be rid of. It has been said, "South Africa is still too traumatized to really look at its past- you are still trying to figure out whether you have survived it, and whether you are going to make it." And I believe that this statement is not only valid but highlights one of the obstacles that groups in South Africa have to overcome. They must overcome their violent and segregationist history under apartheid, to look toward the future and to become the country where "proud to be South African" does not seem both preposterous and hypocritical, but rather looks toward the prospect of progress and opportunity.

However, South Africa cannot be a true representation of democracy without the voices of its population playing a large role. Many voices still exist within the society; voices within the studio, within the community at large, and even within this paper. In the studio, individuals try to get their voices across, but that goal is not always successful. In order to achieve this, many blacks have given others, like me, the opportunity to express their voices for them.

While APS has workshops that succeed in bringing voice to the artists, there are still things that cannot be expressed through prints or inks. Instead, artists engage in conversations with others in hopes that their stories will be heard. They hope that their stories and voices will be taken beyond the parameters of the studio and put into text by engaging in oral histories. It is also important to note that the existence of one organization cannot eradicate years of silencing and oppression. A cycle has to exist. Numerous organizations must create individuals that are willing to express how they feel and then be able to bring this idea back to their communities.

This re-voicing process begins with stressing the idea that everyone's opinion is important regardless of color or race. Kim Berman, who is white, has tried for years to stress this importance as well. But she, however, has to walk a fine line.

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Because of her status as white woman, Berman has to be certain that when criticism, like discussing assignments or the layout of a student project, is given, it is done for the advantage of the students. Racism sentiments of black vs. white still run deep, and the voice of a white woman still remains an incredibly influential one.

Throughout the summer, I learned most importantly that my voice also plays a key role. As a black American in South Africa, there are certain obligations that are expected of you, either to provide help for people or to bring ideas overseas. However, you cannot make promises that you can't fulfill. I have tried throughout this work to give voice to individuals who have remained silent for so long. There are simply things, as stated earlier, that cannot be said through prints or woodcuts. They have to be transmitted to another person, to understand their importance and for the healing process to truly begin.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Minow & Chayes. *Imagine Coexistence: Restoring Humanity After Violent Ethnic Conflict*. Massachusetts: Jossey-Bass Publications, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, Diane. *People, Peace and Power: Conflict Transformation in Action*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.





# Ice Breakers in Sri Lanka: How Do Grassroots Workshops Stop a Civil War?

Lisa Kim '06



The morning commute to the AHIMSA office in Nugegoda will wake you up for the day. Why not take the #168 down Stanley Thilakeratne Mawatha? Let loud engines from early-model Japanese cars sing for you. Take in the car exhaust and the cool breeze through the bus windows. Contort your body and try in vain to avoid contact with the 60 other humans packed in with you. Smile and wiggle your head and try to chat with the lady who lives down the road. Admire the women in their carefully pleated saris. See the barefoot Mirihana slum kids on the street, with their clean outfits faded from washing. Make sure your clothes have been ironed properly. Adjust your shirt with your free hand; pay the three rupee fare with the other. Yell out, “Bahinawa!” when you see the small fruit stand. Quickly wiggle your head “thank you” to the fare collector, hop out of the moving bus and jog to a walking pace on the pavement.

You’ll be surprised at how hard it can be to find the AHIMSA office. There’s nothing to set it apart from the stately houses along Pelawatta Mawatha, aside from a small sign that declares its name and location: “AHIMSA- 18A.” Nugegoda is known as a relatively wealthy part of Colombo, and this part of town always houses a government official or two. Don’t be too shocked by the Mercedes Benz or other polished cars parked here and there. Security walls block the beautiful houses from view, but you know from the uniforms on the schoolchildren and the Sri Lankan parents reprimanding them in English that you’ve entered new territory.

It can seem odd that AHIMSA’s official mission is to bring peace education and conflict resolution training to the everyday people of Sri Lanka. You step through the security gate on the first day and feel like you’ve entered a day spa. Soothing music plays from the speakers of computers recently connected to high-speed internet. All the windows are flung open, letting the breeze play with lace curtains. “I’ll take you on a tour,” says Monica, one of the founders and directors. She apologizes for

the plainness of the office, but you can only marvel at the regal architecture of sturdy, clean lines and rich colors.

You see, AHIMSA came about as a brainchild of Monica Alfred, a Tamil female, and Kassapa Diyabedenage and Indika Pushkumara, both Sinhalese males, understanding the need to bridge the gap between university-level peace studies and grassroots peace activity in Sri Lanka. AHIMSA: Centre for Conflict Resolution and Peace places a great emphasis on building relationships with volunteers and peace workers from around the globe and in utilizing fieldwork to promote reconciliation work from the bottom-up.

## A Brief History of the Sri Lankan Conflict

It is important to note that AHIMSA’s aims as a Sri Lankan conflict resolution NGO are not limited to dealing with the historically tense ethno-religious conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. “Conflict” in Sri Lanka is not limited to animosity between the two groups, nor to a power struggle between the majority Sinhalese government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a military group fighting for a separate Tamil homeland. Sri Lanka’s contemporary problems have their roots in colonial rule, socioeconomic disparities, and clashing political ideologies as well as land rights. It is the fusion of the different factors that have allowed violence and fear to affect so many aspects of Sri Lankan life.

Sri Lanka’s long history of Dutch, Portuguese, and British colonial occupation has had an undeniable impact on the societal conflict. It was ultimately through the British method of divide and rule that members of the Tamil minority, highly educated and well qualified, wielded a great amount of political power and were awarded a disproportionate number of government positions. This tactical move was rooted in the assumption that frustration and anger on the part of the disenfranchised majority Sinhalese would rid any possibility of

a Tamil-Sinhalese alliance to oust the exploiting foreign powers. This assumption proved accurate.

Once the British left in 1948, the Sinhalese majority started a highly nationalist campaign to regain proportional power and government representation by marginalizing the Tamil population. In 1956, President SWRD Bandaranaike made Sinhala the sole official language of Sri Lanka, directly against the interest of Tamil-speakers and citizens not fluent in Sinhala. In 1972, the Constitution made Buddhism the official state religion and started to limit Tamil admissions into universities. Parts of the Tamil population mobilized, demanding greater autonomy for Tamil communities concentrated in the north and east. In 1983, an LTTE massacre of a Sri Lanka Army patrol opened the gates to a long and gruesome period of civil war, which included mob violence, looting, and systematic killing on both sides.

Today the mostly Tamil regions in the north and east of the island are still underdeveloped compared to the cities of the Sinhalese-majority populations in the south and west. The power balance favors the Sinhalese, leaving many Tamils frustrated at their social position, and leading some to support the LTTE in fighting for a homeland where Tamils do not have to live as subordinates.

The organizational structure of the once-unified LTTE is starting to be challenged by the formation of the Karuna faction. Based on the eastern part of the island under commander Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, the Karuna faction broke away from the LTTE in March of 2004. They argued that the LTTE was fighting only for the benefit of Jaffna Tamils and Tamils of the north, who are known to be more socioeconomically powerful and better educated than eastern Tamils. The eastern part of the island continues to lag behind the north in development aid and NGO activity. A disproportionate number of LTTE suicide bombers are from the east, while the military leaders are from the north. Violent clashes have been erupting within the LTTE, resulting in a substantial number of deaths on both sides and great uncertainty over the future of the Tamil Eelam movement. The Hill Country Tamils are barely even addressed in this intra-Tamil tension.

There are vast differences between the “Sri Lankan Tamils,” descendants of Sri Lanka’s first Tamil kingdoms of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and the “Hill Country Tamils,” the descendants of Tamils brought to the island in the 1800’s by the British to work the tea plantations. The Sri Lankan Tamils have mostly settled in the northern and eastern parts of the country. Many of the Hill

Country Tamils occupy the central provinces of the island, where they continue working for menial wages on the tea plantations set up by the British. These Tamils are descended from immigrants who trace their roots to lower Indian castes, a social division which sometimes minimizes their involvement in the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, and also minimizes the extent to which the LTTE desires to address the needs of the Hill Country Tamils.

The widely covered Sinhalese-Tamil conflict also fails to address the needs of the substantial Muslim population, comprised of mostly Tamil descendants of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arab traders and more recent immigrants from parts of the Muslim Middle East and South Asia. Furthermore, there are sizeable Christian Sinhalese and Christian Tamil communities, ranging in faith practice from Dutch-influenced Protestantism to the vestiges of Portuguese Catholicism.

Unfortunately, not even the governing power of this diverse country is able to present a united stance on Sri Lanka’s political situation. In 1995, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won by a 51% vote against her opponent, Ranil Wickramasinghe of the United National Front (UNF), who eventually became Prime Minister. After elections in April 2004, the president appointed Mahinda Rajapakse, from her own party, to replace Wickramasinghe as Prime Minister in a systematic move to take power away from the majority UNF government. The ousted Wickramasinghe has been vocal in warning that the UNF will be increasingly resistant to the SLFP’s policy agenda regarding the country’s economic situation, peace process, and general government administration. All the while, newly-appointed Rajapakse has been insistent on forming alliances with the UNF to move ahead in the peace process, while Kumaratunga favors coalitions with the highly nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

**It can seem odd that AHIMSA’s official mission is to bring peace education and conflict resolution training to the everyday people of Sri Lanka. You step through the security gate on the first day and feel like you’ve entered a day spa.**

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Take yet another step back, and one cannot forget the role that India plays in Sri Lankan politics. The Tamil population of Sri Lanka can trace their roots to the Tamil Nadu region of South India (about 20 kilometers from the island), a province that has been involved in its own struggle for increased autonomy. The population of Tamil Nadu is more than the entire population of Sri Lanka. Thus many anti-Tamil/Hindu activists claim that giving more rights and power to the Tamils will inevitably result in Hinduism and Tamil culture overtaking Buddhist Sinhalese culture on the island.

Many Sri Lankans also believe that India has a vested interest in keeping Sri Lanka in conflict. Sri Lanka, as a developing nation with substantial natural resources, has always been an economic threat to India. Furthermore, it is true that any rights won by the Sri Lankan Tamils might encourage resistance movements within Tamil Nadu. In 1987, in the midst of tensions in Tamil Nadu, the Indian and Sri Lankan governments agreed that the Sri Lankan Army would retreat and an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) would work towards negotiating with the LTTE and restoring order in the north and east. The Sinhalese and Muslim populations rose up against the prospect of foreign Indian forces trying to assert authority in a Sri Lankan conflict.

In response to the island's multi-layered tensions, there has been a successful series of peace talks facilitated by representatives from Norway- most recently renewed in January 2002 and stalled in 2003. Yet many fear that a Colombo suicide bombing in July 2004 has the potential to shut down the peace process and nullify the 2002 ceasefire agreement signed by the government and the LTTE. While President Kumaratunga has said that the government is making a "serious and sustained effort" to engage in peace talks with the LTTE, the LTTE is continuing to recruit child soldiers in increasing numbers. There are also increasing incidents of fatal violence in the universities, where politically-charged student groups resort to fists and weapons to settle disputes.

Thus when understanding the complexity of conflict in Sri Lanka, it becomes clear that NGO activity cannot be limited to work done in tense Sinhalese-Tamil border towns. It is dangerous to equate a conflict resolution organization's validity to how much connection they have with the headline-grabbing ethnic violence that has come to define Sri Lanka. The island's long history of colonialism is directly pertinent to socioeconomic disparities and political tensions that exist today. The tensions between government rule and struggles for autonomy and between ethnic solidarity and political rifts all play a role in what Sri Lanka has come to be today.

### **AHIMSA: Center for Conflict Resolution and Peace**

It is in addressing this need for nuanced conflict resolution work that AHIMSA shines. The organization works with the higher-ups of the National Institute for Education, as well as the residents of the Mirihana slums. Workshops address topics from matters of nationalism within hard-line Sinhalese Buddhist

neighborhoods to economic problems impacting the Muslim community.

The ultimate goal of AHIMSA is to set up Barefoot University in order to make peace education certification available for all people. AHIMSA uses workshops to bring the work of educators, peace professionals, international volunteers, and facilitators to the "masses." These workshops aim to promote a culture of non-violence in the personal lives of Sri Lankans in order to promote change in society. It is only through such efforts that one can sustain the peace agreements that are conducted on governmental and international levels.

The Mirihana alternate dispute resolution project is locally-based. It aims to instill positive leadership values in a group of Nugegoda-area slum children and ultimately steer them away from the militant political groups that feed on the frustration of youth entrenched in poverty to sustain societal divisions. The project facilitates programs dealing with self-awareness, problem solving, and leadership development, in addition to educational tours and youth career guidance.

AHIMSA also utilizes an extensive network of national and international contacts to ensure that its grassroots work is wide-reaching. It is collaborating with the National Institute of Education to create a peace projects research system for A-Level students wishing to study peace processes to fulfill the project component of their exams. Schools in Horana (the home of several hard-line Buddhist politicians) and Rakwana (an ethnically diverse town in the southern part of the Hill Country) have already benefited from AHIMSA's peace projects work. The staff has also worked closely with larger American and European NGOs on economic development projects in Mangalagama (a town in a politically volatile region of the east coast) and Kamburupitiya (a Muslim/Sinhalese region of the south), in addition to conducting youth leadership development workshops at schools and in towns around the island.

But of course, just as disparities exist between sociopolitical realities and NGO activity, a similar gap can be present between an organization's mission and its actual capacity to implement change. Despite AHIMSA's great array of work, it sometimes becomes difficult for visitors, and even the staff itself, to make the connection between its grassroots goals and the somewhat elitist comfort that swathes the office lifestyle.

### **18 A Pelawatta Mawatha**

On any given day, the five housecats gently pad across the polished white tile floor. Sri Lankan staff and international volunteers eat lunch together at the dining table. A Sinhalese woman in western clothes here, a German volunteer in a *shalwar kameez* over there. A plate magically appears in front of me and everyone proceeds to give me portions of rice, curries, vegetables, or *kiri bath* from their lunch packets. Welcome, they say, as they smile and laugh and chat. The white volunteers demonstrate how to mix the food together with my fingers and bring small bunches of food to my mouth.

I look around and see newspapers in English and Sinhala piled neatly on a wicker bookshelf. Towards the kitchen is a display case of souvenirs from around the world, brought by the many international visitors who have walked over these polished tiles. Symbols of peace from Israel, China, Cyprus, and Boston. Mugs. Laminated bills. Knickknacks stamped with names of foreign cities, both wealthy and war-torn.

AHIMSA has definitely come a long way from when it was a start-up NGO without a home. “We didn’t even have a plate to eat on,” says Monica, as she warms up a curry over the stove and bustles around the fully-stocked kitchen.

AHIMSA is very well known now and is quite established in Sri Lankan NGO circles. Kassapa is often so busy participating in forums that work can pile up on his desk and remain untouched for several days. He is a man of big visions now. Establishing Barefoot University. Squaring away the plans for a nation-wide Peace Projects curriculum. Making contacts with more NGOs abroad to diversify the pool of AHIMSA’s volunteers.

In fact, it is possible that Kassapa’s connections have been too fruitful. Western volunteers have become somewhat of an everyday accessory for the staff. These volunteers come and go. Although strong relationships are built and knowledge is exchanged, very rarely do these visitors make a long-lasting impact that can be easily seen. Everyone knows that the volunteers are essentially visitors, while the local staff will always be based in Sri Lanka.

At the lunch table, Sinhala conversations take root on one end of the table while the volunteers start to chatter in English on the other end. Everyone scoops rice and curries from neighboring plates and lunch packets. Indika’s wife has packed some delicious jackfruit curry, so we all take a little bit to taste. Yet as light arms and dark arms cross across the table, it is rare that a single conversation includes everyone.

This is not to say that the international volunteers are of no use at AHIMSA. Jacky, the British volunteer from VSO (Volunteer Services Overseas), has implemented a monthly movement chart by the phones so that all staff members know where anyone is at a given time. As the capacity-building administrator, she has made monthly staff meetings a part of the office schedule and regularly meets with all staff members to make sure that everyone’s work is coordinated and progressing smoothly. All of the western volunteers also help out with daily English lessons to help Sinhalese staff members perfect their language skills. We all bring in our varying degrees of experience with conflict resolution work, in addition to our own office skills.

The nationally recognized Resource Centre on the first floor is immaculately catalogued. I should know, as my German flatmates complain to me that they’ve spent hours cutting out labels and figuring out decimal systems, only to have the books locked behind glass-paned doors or collect dust on the shelves. My flatmates explain how they planned the layout of the room to maximize free space, sunlight, and circulation. There’s even a special children’s section on conflict resolution and a plan to

purchase little lift cushions so that kids may read at the table. Unfortunately, the staff seem to be the only people making use of this space. There’s a phone and computer in here, for those who want to take care of errands in privacy, and a TV/VCR in case that some volunteers want to come on the weekend to watch a few flicks. No children though, and not even adults from outside the organization.

Ask the neighbors what work is done at AHIMSA and you probably won’t receive a satisfactory answer. The security wall that blocks away intruders and potential robbers doesn’t entice curious passers-by to come in and learn about peace. Then again, perhaps the staff prefers it this way. It helps to maintain the sanity level once July comes around and everyone is dispersed throughout the island conducting leadership development programs, dialogue groups, and economic development workshops.

### **Workshop Preparation**

Angie and Monica lead the planning sessions for the US AID workshop in Kamburupitiya, on one of these busy days in early July. We all gather around the dining table (which transforms itself into a planning table every so often) and joke about how the two Christian Tamils would be facilitating a dialogue group between Buddhist Sinhalese and Muslim Tamil women. Once the laughter dies down, Monica makes a point to mention that everyone has to be particularly sensitive to the fact that the dialogue group will be facilitated in Sinhala and translated into Tamil. In what way would we be able to work around this inequality presented from the very beginning? The tall fan clicks away as it slowly oscillates a breeze across our faces. “Any suggestions?” Monica prompts.

After a brief silence, the conversation quickly digresses into a semi-rant session on how AHIMSA’s staff is so limited. There are not nearly enough Tamil staff members. Or men for that matter. We have absolutely no presentation of the Muslim community. How can AHIMSA expect to grow as an NGO, and ultimately become “Barefoot University” if we can’t even get a permanent Tamil translator on the staff?

“Well girls,” announces Angie impatiently, “There’s nothing we can do about that right now.” She has taken over the reigns of the planning session, determined to have a successful workshop mapped out without wasting more time. Angie’s manner of preparing is methodical and exact; one can tell that she is not planning her first workshop. She draws out charts and lists on the large sheets of paper taped to the wall. “We will need to have icebreakers.” Everyone around the table calls out names of familiar activities I’ve completed during freshman orientation at Brandeis and on various retreats. This seems to be a pretty standard process. The structure already seems to be laid out. We basically just need to tailor the order of activities to fit the current community in question. I start to wonder how many different communities have been effectively brought together using this skeleton. Angie turns and asks me for suggestions.

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I am surprised. Who knew that the American intern might be able to contribute her two cents? I look at the charts and lists again blindly. Their plan seems foolproof. These are conflict resolution experts we're talking about, after all. I'm just an American undergrad volunteer. But I do see one small area for improvement. "We should wrap up each session with everyone sharing how they can apply the lesson to change their situation. It would be a way to use everything that they have learned thus far." The co-workers approve. Angie smiles. I sigh in relief.

In the kitchen, Wasantha adds heaps of sugar and milk powder to add flavor to the mediocre tea. The best stuff is exported, you see, leaving the natives to make do with the leftover leaves. Even worse, the tea is usually mixed with aggressively marketed, imported milk powder, whose prevalence is damaging the domestic dairy industry. Developing a caffeine addiction is inevitable to anyone who spends an extended period of time at AHIMSA. Wasantha pours the steaming caramel brown beverage into mismatched cups on the tray. They must be brought to the workaholics so they may finish up their proposals in good time before leaving for the workshop in Kamburupitiya later today.

That afternoon, I'm laughing loudly and chatting excitedly in Korean with Suchit, the organization's driver, as everyone brings their bags downstairs. He has been working in Korean textiles for the past few years, and his Korean is as good as my parents' English was by the time I was born in New York. I wonder how he manages to get by. How does he pay the rent? How does he read everything? Can he communicate effectively enough to get through everyday tasks? I veer the conversation away from anything overly emotional and proceed into an informal conversation comparing immigrant life. We discuss racism and prejudice against Sri Lankans in Korea to Koreans in the U.S.

In the end it doesn't really matter what we're discussing. We're too much of a spectacle either way for everyone around us: the girls are peering over the safety rail from the second floor balcony, listening to me babble away in Korean and Suchit following along in Sinhala-accented Korean with some English thrown in. They whisper and giggle and prod us along, but I start to feel a little sick inside. It's because of America's position as a global superpower, in addition to Britain's colonial legacy, that I can get by with communicating in English at AHIMSA. It is because my native country has become powerful enough to exploit immigrants that I can chat away with Suchit in Korean.

But it's now finally time to be off. Suchit has pulled into the driveway. It's the crack of dawn. Frauke and I pile into the van, with Angie and Sureka in their pajama *shalwars*. We pick up Subadra, our Tamil translator, who is staying with a family several minutes away. She greets us by explaining her new hairstyle. Her bangs are the result of her holding a pair scissors to her scalp, threatening to cut everything off while arguing with her mother.

We all settle down again, a little more cramped than before but nonetheless ready for our long journey to Matara. Subadra turns to me and I can feel her eyes staring at me as I try to fall asleep. "It's so nice to meet you, Lisa. I can't stop looking at your skin. You're so lucky to be so fair." Wonderful.

Angie's love song mix CD blasts over the van's sound system. We pass through the empty streets of Colombo, a detached moving entity, a loud bubble of music and chatter navigating past the dogs sleeping under lampposts and the locked-up wooden storefronts of the city.

## **In Kamburupitiya**

Our workshop is held at a beautiful community gathering center in Kamburupitiya, built thanks to the wealth of a man whose pseudo-regal picture is framed and hanging next to the Sri Lankan flag.

AHIMSA has been asked to supervise dialogue groups between Sinhalese and Muslim women, in order to improve communication, build relationships, and ultimately decrease the violent Sinhalese/Muslim clashes in the neighborhood. We are working in conjunction with US AID, a U.S. Department of State agency that aids countries in developing their economic, political, and health sectors. Although U.S. sentiment is not exactly warm due to this summer's Operation: Iraqi Freedom, the women do not seem to have strong objections to participating in a workshop funded by the U.S. government and co-facilitated by an American undergrad. It is perhaps the economic development aspect of this workshop that has the power to smooth over any political objections that may exist.

In Kamburupitiya, Muslim neighborhoods tend to be more densely inhabited, while the Sinhalese have larger land allotments. As various sectors have been developing with the help of outside NGOs, the ethnic tensions found on other parts of the island have become compacted with the socioeconomic issues. Whereas it would be most "useful" to conduct dialogue groups with the men of the village, US AID has decided to use an alternative approach to conflict resolution and development work in the south. The women participants range in age from newlyweds to grandmothers.

Sureka goes over the introductions while Angie jokes on the side. While the women are all getting acquainted, their children draw pictures together on straw mats, trading markers and telling jokes despite the ethnic and language barrier. The atmosphere is quite relaxed as the breeze wafts through the open-air gathering place. We were able to benefit from US AID's generous funding to hire a driver and drive all of the women to the community center. Sureka's calm and motherly nature eases the women into the dialogue group environment, while Angie's affectionate personality lightens up the interactions. Subadra weaves through the group, effortlessly translating between Sinhala and Tamil, sitting next to me during her breaks to translate a bit into English.

I am a little nervous about introducing my icebreakers. I fear that they will seem excessively perky and childish, but it is a relief that they are accepted wholeheartedly by the female participants. We are all in a circle, throwing a ball around to our new acquaintances, shouting their names in advance. Icebreaker number two: for ten seconds everyone has to say hello to as many people as possible. We become a flurry of moving bodies, rushing around to say hello, then to give each other hugs, then greeting each other with a Sinhalese “ayubowan” and afterwards a Muslim bow.

The participants form a wonderful patchwork. The Sinhalese women are mostly wearing button-down shirts with long skirts, their beautiful hair tied back. The Muslim women all have intricate fabric draped over their hair. Some are wearing fashionable *shalwar kameez* sets; others are donning more traditional one-piece dresses. Sureka, Angie, and Subadra all have their saris pleated and in place. Yet as we move through the icebreakers, the women do not seem to care too much about keeping up appearances. Tied hair becomes a little loosened, headwraps slide off without readjustment, saris lose their pleats without much concern.

We start an activity where each person selects pictures from those scattered in the middle of the room and explains the ways in which the imagery resonates with them. One of the mothers chooses a picture of an infant being nursed. She explains the pure nature of a baby’s love, and how this is one of the finest emotions a human can experience. Tears start to slowly well up in her eyes and she struggles to formulate her words. She starts to speak rapidly with passion. The mother explains that halfway through her first pregnancy, her brother passed away. She was unable to give love to her unborn child because of the overwhelming sense of loss. The baby received so much sadness in her womb and took in even more through her milk. Today she is convinced that her son is mentally challenged because of the overwhelming negative emotions he absorbed from her. The participants nod sympathetically and murmur comforting words to her. The Muslim and Sinhalese mothers and mothers-in-training all console and reassure each other without having perfectly compatible language skills. The children off to the side weave in and out of the circle of mothers, bringing newly completed pictures or looking for a lap to sit on. One can start to see the ways in which this group’s all-female dynamic will be an incredible asset.

It is now time for the stereotypes activity. The women split into ethno-religious affinity groups and are asked to give presentations on their religion and culture. This straightforward task inevitably leads to more emotionally volatile conversation. The Muslim group in particular is worried about how straightforward their presentation can be, given the history of conflict in the neighborhood.

The two representatives from the Muslim group stand in front of the room, telling a story of how their temple was almost burned to the ground a few months ago because of one family’s wrath. As a result of personal clashes, an entire

community was put in danger. Although a little apprehensive, these women ask the Sinhalese participants, “Will you allow your husbands to do this again? Your sons and your neighbors?”

Whereas before the women were happy to just interact through cooperative activities and fun icebreakers, the participants are now willing to confront painful events of the past and earnestly look towards fixing them in the future. The group breaks into an intense conversation about the temple-burning incident, discussing the ways in which sometimes they have no control over their husbands’ violent actions, but how the mothers all have the power to determine how the next generation will choose to deal with conflict. The women end the day’s activities with a genuine exchange. “When you see me on the street, will you acknowledge me?” “If I invite you to my house, will you come?”

During our nighttime assessment meetings back at the hotel, Sureka mentions that in our series of US AID workshops for Sinhalese and Muslim women, this group is the most socioeconomically comfortable. Compared to the other participants in our series of US AID workshops, these women have the most power to implement change. They help run some of the town’s successful businesses; they are married to men whose words carry a lot of weight in the town. As a result of their relative wealth, the women know more about the bigger picture and cultural restrictions weigh down on them less heavily. This information makes me wonder in what ways money and culture affect women’s ability to be a part of reconciliation processes across the globe.

The AHIMSA staff workers gather around a beautiful dinner of several curries and rice provided by the hotel. It is a beautiful selection, partly thanks to me. Last week’s workshop facilitators had stayed at a more run-down hotel down the road where the food was not nearly as delicious, and where it was necessary to have run-ins with rowdy, drunken men in order to leave or enter the building. However, as I am an international volunteer, and as it is necessary for AHIMSA to keep up good relations with their foreign NGO partners, it’s nothing but the best when I am with them. It’s an awkward dynamic. But I don’t feel much resentment from my co-workers, who seem to be enjoying this perk. And I am too. As Colombo NGO workers, we’ve all become used to a relative level of comfort and luxury no matter where we go.

**Whereas before the women were happy to just interact through cooperative activities and fun icebreakers, the participants are now willing to confront painful events of the past and earnestly look towards fixing them in the future.**

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## Demuwatha Workshop

The Hill Country is incredibly beautiful. Weather in Demuwatha is exquisite. The cool, clean mountain air makes my lungs want to jump for joy, and I can't get over the incredible landscape. On the van ride to the school we pass bright green expanses of rice paddies, with swaying palm trees in the distance, and behind them are these great mountain-like hills that just soar into the sky, lined with neat rows of tea bushes that just reach into the clouds. On our way up the mountain, one can really see a "mountain range" of sorts. These hills just start and end everywhere, like big green canyons crowded with so many beautiful trees... then one suddenly sees flashes of bright dark earth and black rock and parts of a waterfall. Of course, it really mars the landscape to understand the impact of the quaint white signs indicating how to get to the "[Tea] Plantation Overseer's Bungalow," and seeing the Tamil tea pickers carrying sacks (very colorful and picturesque sacks, of course) filled with tea leaves (for which they get paid almost nothing) over to the big tea processing factory.

My flatmate Frauke and I must be quite a sight there in the principal's office in Demuwatha. Frauke is in full Sri Lankan sari regalia, and I am modeling a bright purple and red *shalwar kameez*. Sureka has emphasized that we'd need to be dressed in a more traditional way in visits to the hill country. No western clothes. The people here tend to be a little more traditional, and even the foreign volunteers cannot escape the clothing rule.

The principal of Demuwatha School serves us cups of Coca-Cola and *seeni sambol* buns- a welcome relief from all the milk tea we had been consuming until now. Sureka and the principal of the Demuwatha school discuss the details of the workshop request. The principal has heard about AHIMSA's workshops through the larger and better-equipped Rakwana School, which Monica attended as a child.

It turns out there have been some flare-ups of violence in the area, particularly between Sinhalese and Tamil youth. The tension takes on a special light in the Rakwana context. As a town located right at the base of the Hill Country, many of the Tamils are descendants of more recent Tamil immigrants to Sri Lanka, a community that is often not as intensely tangled in the Sinhalese-Tamil tension.

The principal wants to instill strong conflict resolution and leadership skills in his students to avoid the conflicts that have been sprouting up in the region. He would like to gather the student leaders of various clubs and key positions within the class body: environmental patrol, prefects, scouts. Little children peer into the principal's homely office as they walk by. It must be quite a sight to see Sureka chatting away with Frauke in her sari, Lisa in her *shalwar kameez*, sipping their Coca-Cola deliciously, nibbling at the *seeni sambol* buns politely. Our backs are immaculately straight and our eyes are alert to the conversation, although the extent to which we understand everything that is going on is questionable. But as always we smile and wiggle our heads at the right time, pretending to know what's going on.

One week later, there we are again, smiling and wiggling our heads. About 30 students from different grade levels have gathered in one of the larger classrooms, the type that is usually divided into three smaller classrooms. The Demuwatha School is basically a large, one-room schoolhouse. The children are still in their uniforms. It's striking how school uniforms, such a loaded topic in the U.S., still fail to mask socioeconomic disparities among the students. The boys who cannot afford new shirts have modified their father's large button-down shirts into t-shirt uniform length. Some of the uniforms are noticeably more faded than others. Although everyone has to wear dress shoes, some are new and polished while others are shyly exposing socks and toes. Some students have defiantly sidestepped the social and physical awkwardness by opting to wear sandals.

I find myself in a circle once again, calling out people's names before throwing a ball in their direction. It is great fun, as everyone keeps on throwing the balls to either me or Frauke, and we laugh together as almost all the names are butchered. During breaks the students keep on flocking to us, eager to practice their English and converse with these new international volunteers. I try to keep the conversations as lively as I can; making exaggerated faces to get some words across, using lots of hand motions, laughing a lot, and jumping excitedly. It seems that the Demuwatha students have really warmed up to the AHIMSA volunteers.

Angie is the clear favorite for the more outgoing students. She goes around pinching, teasing, joking, and poking fun. Angie doesn't care that much about what people think about her and is not too worried that her sari is immaculately in place, which helps to put the other students at ease. Himali is teasing in a more gentle way, while Sureka, as always, appeals to the quieter older students.

Once trust is established, the students break into groups to discuss the meaning of leadership. By highlighting role models with strong leadership qualities in their school, community, and families, the students are able to root the lesson in their real-life experiences. They draw charts of effective leadership strategies and list traits that a leader should have. The drawings are fabulous, with colorful demons looking over lists of traits to avoid, while strong and proud Sri Lankans beam over the laudable qualities. The female students of this school are just as outspoken as the boys. Everyone openly (but constructively) reprimands each other for making silly assumptions and inaccurate statements. The ambitious and determined nature of the students is very clear, in addition to their listening ability. While many of the participants are outspoken, they are not overbearing, and the students are able to build on the balanced dynamics that already exist between them.

The students then all take part in fun outside activities designed to encourage the formation of cooperative skills. They compete in a three-legged race, running towards the chain of facilitators that serves as the finish line. Afterwards, they split into two teams, helping each other make their way through



a web of red yarn that has been spun between some king coconut trees. Natural leaders emerge, shouting out directions and supervising how students should be lifted through the openings without touching the edges. In the midst of the close competition, tensions of course arise, as does some negativity from the losing team. However, the group unity is strong enough such that they are able to work beyond the competition rift.

We settle down to have a conversation about how students can maximize their leadership capabilities within the context of the school. What are some of the challenges that these leaders have faced in fulfilling their responsibilities as prefects, scouts, and members of the environmental patrol? As they go around, one boy in particular is vocal about the stresses that student leaders have to face. He says that it is difficult playing the middle-man, being close friends with many classmates but having to discipline them in the absence of the teacher. He feels that it is unfair for teachers to expect prefects to do all of the reprimanding, and it is unfair that other students blame prefects for everything the teacher does wrong. His eyes start to tear up in frustration while telling us a story about an incident last month. As a prefect, he had been blamed for a fight that broke out in the classroom. The students had been frustrated at the teacher but had taken their anger out on each other. The teacher, although realizing that he was the source of anger, conveniently sidestepped further trouble by punishing the whole class for a mistake made during the prefect's watch, effectively turning all of the classmates against the prefect.

The students start agreeing enthusiastically, sharing stories of everyday challenges that can deter one from wanting to become a student leader. The facilitators carefully guide the discussion, making the students think of situations where the leaders might have to overcome these challenges, especially in the context of conflicts that they would have a responsibility to settle. It is incredibly encouraging to see how the students are able to so effectively make connections between their experiences and the topic at hand, between their frustrations with leadership challenges and the necessity to work proactively against negative confrontations.

By the end of the workshop, the ties which were created have become very strong. The students decide to have a campfire celebration for us on the last day, which also happens to be a Poya Day—the monthly Sri Lankan full-moon holidays which are matched to important events in Buddhist history. With what seems to be less than one day of preparation, the students have prepared a full line up of skits, dances, and musical acts. The boys (scouts in particular) have gathered enough wood to create an expert campfire. The surrounding community has also come to see the show and to evaluate the Colombo NGO workers who are now in their midst. It's beautiful how we can all celebrate this "Buddhist" holiday with all sorts of acts that have nothing to do with religion or ethnicity.

The next morning, it is time for us to set off to Colombo. The students are in tears, asking us all to write down our

addresses and contact information in their address books. The kids come to me with paper asking me to write names and phrases for them in Korean. My written Korean is far from perfect, but I gladly oblige. The kids make me promise to write to them. But I look at the vague street addresses and wonder how reliable the mail service is in this region of Sri Lanka. So I make them promise to write to me first, and that I will definitely reply to them from the United States.

In sadness and frustration, I start to wonder how ultimately constructive AHIMSA's work is, if it never really gets the opportunity to build on the great relationships created through workshops. I'm sure that the students have been able to learn a lot about leadership qualities, and that they have learned how to get along, and that leaders work together to come up with alternate ways of resolving disputes. However, how much has AHIMSA actually done by coming in for a few days, going through a formula of icebreakers which lead up to emotional outpouring, just to leave at the end?

The Demuwatha project, in addition to the Kamburupitiya workshop, is a part of AHIMSA's current initiative of implementing at least one workshop a month to develop and strengthen community-based capacities and initiatives for peace building. The project's purpose is to create awareness, to train, to network with and to provide resources to a wide range of people in communities covering all of the island's ethnic and religious groups. In accomplishing such a task, it is only natural that long-lasting relationships cannot really be cultivated between the participants and the AHIMSA workers. Yet to what extent is this approach more effective than that of a more community-oriented organization that is able to affect people (albeit fewer people) in the long term?

Although this question keeps nagging my mind, there is no time to fully ponder it over as we leave the school. "Lisa, we shall take you to the market to buy some jaggery sweets for your family," Himali announces. The timing is perfect. I give myself a quick reality check. After all, my own internship is reaching its end, and I will be flying off to London in two days.

## **AHIMSA in Sri Lanka**

As I sit here in the winter chill that is Waltham, feeling worlds away from the hot, bustling energy of Colombo and the striking beauty of Kamburupitiya and Demuwatha, it is hard not to wonder whether my life-altering experience at AHIMSA also changed the lives of anyone still on the island. What exactly is AHIMSA's current role in the context of Sri Lankan conflict resolution? How does AHIMSA's work fit into what I have learned about coexistence and reconciliation?

A draft of AHIMSA's brochure states, "AHIMSA is a non-political, non-religious and non-profit making organization committed to help people develop their insights, attitudes, values and skills in living peacefully and creatively. We work to develop a peaceful society in which people are able to attain

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their highest potential, both individually and collectively.” AHIMSA’s work currently aims to achieve these goals through widespread, short-term work. Workshops and dialogue groups emphasize the importance of the individual and what each person can contribute to a community’s non-violence movement. It is the hope that these individuals who have been impacted by the workshops and dialogue groups will become a nation-wide foundation of people committed to cultivating a nonviolent way of life on the island.

Part of the driving force of AHIMSA’s mission is the belief that a connection needs to be established between the work going on in the classroom and in the field: “We believe that academic peace education often fails to interact with grassroots practice and vice versa. There is a lack of interaction and learning between the two parties. We aim to fill that gap.” AHIMSA has had so many international volunteers because in addition to adding a degree of prestige, they become important liaisons between AHIMSA and various peace/nonviolence/conflict resolution organizations and universities across the globe. The contributions of these volunteers ultimately add to AHIMSA’s resource pool of workshop methods. The books the volunteers bring, the insights they’ve gained from lessons and deliberations in the university, their own interpretations of conflict resolution methods—these all ultimately come to be of great use when applied to AHIMSA’s grassroots-oriented work.

Thus it becomes necessary to explore the extent to which AHIMSA’s peace and conflict resolution work fits into the framework of the coexistence and reconciliation theories that I had studied at Brandeis. It is admittedly hard to find the ways in which some theories are applicable, as AHIMSA’s summer workshops were not geared solely towards participants who held deep-rooted pain or anger towards specific ethnic groups. Furthermore, AHIMSA spends a lot of time on preventative measures (working with “slum” children before they join hard-line political groups and high schoolers before they enter the politically volatile college system), while most of the material we studied focused on dealing with intercommunal conflict that already exists.

Nevertheless, the general ideas behind coexistence and reconciliation methodology are very applicable to AHIMSA’s workshop scenarios. In her piece “Creative Approaches to Reconciliation,” Cynthia Cohen defines coexistence as a state of being “where individuals welcome cooperation, understanding and interdependence. Because inter-group relations can cascade backward in the direction of intolerance and violence, sustainable coexistence requires ongoing work to nourish the attitudes, values and capabilities people need to strengthen respect, understanding, and cooperation over time.” Ultimately all of AHIMSA’s icebreakers and activities emphasize the importance of cooperation and the cultivation of effective communication skills. The organization places emphasis on this sort of grassroots work because it is a necessary first step in sustaining government-

level peace work. Regardless of whether the workshop participants are textbook victims of an ethnic conflict, or citizens of a country with a long history of conflict, the cultivation of these valuable cooperation and communication skills is the essential first step towards creating an alternative to a cycle of violence in everyday life.

Cohen defines reconciliation as “former enemies acknowledging each other’s humanity, empathizing with each other’s suffering, addressing and redressing past injustice, and sometimes expressing remorse, granting forgiveness, and offering reparations. Reconciliation represents a shift in attention from blaming the other to taking responsibility for the attitudes and actions of one’s self and one’s own community.” The Kamburupitiya workshop was one AHIMSA-led workshop where members of different ethnic communities were invited to speak on ethnic clashes. By creating a bond of womanhood and encouraging strong cooperative group dynamics, the participants started to put a human face on a different ethnic group that had been defined only by its difference. In this way, AHIMSA’s workshops all emphasize the importance of an individuals’ effort. By understanding the role that the individual plays in a national conflict, and the responsibility one has to those around them, AHIMSA’s workshop participants are able to embody the first steps towards reconciliation.

In Abu-Nimer’s *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence*, African peace worker Hizkias Assefa writes on the power of peace movements rooted in the efforts of everyday people: “By creating a forum for the grassroots where they are able to understand the conflicts, visualize alternatives, and articulate preferences, leadership can begin to emerge from below, which can influence top leaders’ views and behavior. An active civil society begins to take shape that retrains the official leadership’s commitment to perpetuating the conflict” (Assefa 180). By bringing peace education to local people, AHIMSA is able to cultivate a grassroots movement to make a nonviolent way of life a reality for a country ridden by a history of violence. This goal is realized through a variety of its projects, including the leadership development workshop in Demuwatha. By allowing the students to understand the importance of communication and leadership in handling conflicts, they become equipped to cultivate this “leadership from below” for the new generation.

As a Sri Lankan conflict resolution NGO, AHIMSA’s work is essential because it provides an alternative approach to taking apart the structural violence that has become a fact of everyday life on the island. Abu-Nimer states that the field of coexistence can only be effective in the long-term if it reaches beyond the traditional definitions of adversarial relationships: “the coexistence field increasingly acknowledges that to be sustainable, especially in contexts of power asymmetry, coexistence work cannot be limited to helping adversaries appreciate their common humanity; they must also grapple with questions of justice, inequities and historical grievances.” Ultimately it was my summer-long struggle to make AHIMSA’s mission fit in with my

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preconceived idea of international conflict resolution work that taught me the most about coexistence and reconciliation in the real world.

Grassroots activism oftentimes implies the involvement of “common people” and the “masses” to promote change from the bottom-up. However one must also understand how a grassroots model can shape the way student a processes international conflict. It is only by understanding a country’s historical, political, and cultural contexts of conflict that one can start to affect the disagreements and hostilities which headline our newspapers. It is only when we take a more textured approach to studying and resolving conflicts that change can sustain itself in the long term.

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Reyum Arts Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

# Picasso in Phnom Penh: Can Western Arts Help Heal a Nation?



Dan Ludevig '06

*Dedicated to the memory of Ingrid Muan, whose strength and character invaluable influenced and affected my experience in Cambodia.*

## Brown Feet

### Part I

Brown feet and toes, hands and fingers, arms and legs; hairy and smooth, stretching out, folded in. They twitch and jerk, support and trip, tense and relax. Patches of darker gray and smudges of lighter black coat the soles and tips of the toes and fingers as they mold onto the hard, coffee-colored tile floor beneath them. Some feet rest flat on the ground, while others arch in a semi-circle; still others press up against their neighbors or curl up into themselves.

Long slender fingers and short fat ones hold pencils and crayons and glitter, moving along starch-white paper as they depict images from their minds. Voices coo and squeal; some laugh while others remain silent, but the movement of fingers and hands, toes and feet seems independent of the bodies that own them. Some rest in contemplation; others are active so as not to forget their task. Some move lazily, grazing the paper in strides and sprints. Others move intricately, with precision and meticulous care. Everyone thinks the same thoughts: *grosa, grosa, grosa*—family, family, family.

As the heat and humidity rise in competition with one another, small brown feet and hands appreciate the cool sensation of the tiles covering the floor of their school. The otherwise dirt-stained walls are hung with drawings and paintings, glistening with moisture, depicting such images as the countryside—the rice fields, the sparse palm trees, the feeble huts—Khmer traditional dancers, the Royal Palace, and portraits of mothers, fathers and relatives. The 7:00 a.m. air becomes saturated with vapor and energy from the rising sun. The churning of street-side rituals long ago set in motion echo through the small street and tight alleyway that separate the school from the main road.

Through the steel bars of three glassless windows, fresh light penetrates the crooked artwork. The pieces cast a glow in the sunlight that reflects upon the worn and peeling colors of the

high ceilings, the tattered and overused wooden tables, and the beaming blues and reds of the shiny plastic stools.

Sitting with my back against a wall under one of the large windows, I hear the innocent sounds of the younger group's fun and games in the courtyard. Their laughter and screams spiral upwards into the windows of the apartment buildings which surround the Reyum Art School. Looking at the artwork around me and the 60 or so students on the floor executing the task which I assigned—painting what family means to them—I am reminded of a conversation I had had a few days prior with Rith, the youngest of the four teachers here. On the porch of his small, second story apartment in one of the poorest areas of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, he showed me some of his previous paintings and in describing them stated, "Watercolors are for making money to feed the family. Oil paints are for expressing ideas, but no one wants to buy oil paintings because people here like realistic pictures." Glancing away from his paintings I asked him, "Which do you like more?" "Oil painting of course," he responded casually. "Watercolors are for work, oil paints for my own pleasure."

Looking around the rectangular room of the art school and into the three smaller rooms branching off from the main one, one fact remained clear: the paintings here—all produced by the students—were of watercolors.

The countryside, the traditional dancers, the glorious Independence Monument, the majestic War Phnom, the portraits...all exact and realistic replicas. I would soon learn more about the history of Khmer art and the 1000-year old tradition of painting things "as they are, not as we *think* they are." For now though, I would identify these only as "realistic paintings."

A minute's walk down the residential alleyway opens into a small road covered in quivering shadows. Hand-washed laundry sways from the grimacing balconies and wire-fences surrounding

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the cardboard, metal and wooden shacks that range from rooms of three by three feet to apartment buildings of four or five stories. Luxurious and freshly painted villas smile pretentiously at the majority of poverty-stricken Cambodians who are too busy surviving to notice them.

Half a block away lay the main tourist attractions of this capital city. The Royal Palace, the National Museum and the boardwalk along the Tonle Sap River shimmer proudly for the hundreds of tourists who walk by them. Yet, as much as they try, these buildings cannot hide the reality on the streets. Vendors squat in rags and soiled clothing next to steaming pots of cooking food. The smoke and dirt seems to possess an aging effect on their young skin which is often dark and wrinkled. A cover of smog casts a thick blanket over the street-dwellers lining the sidewalks. They sell anything they can—a bowl of soup, meat, cooked noodles, fried dough, vegetables, random trinkets, bread, ice cream, sugarcane juice... Often their families sit alongside them. One does not see *this* reality, however, in the “realistic paintings” of the watercolor artists.

Near intersections, many men dressed in worn-out pants and wrinkled shirts smile as I walk by. Mostly they are countryside farmers who have had a poor crop season or students who need money and have come to the city to try to make an extra buck or two. They ask if I need a lift, yelling, as if calling me by name, the only English word they may know, “MOTORBIKE!” I shake my head and quietly reply, *ate akun*, no thank you.

These two word conversations repeat themselves each day as I make the seven-minute walk from my apartment to the art school. However, most striking remain the silent and grim older women—the tragedies of decades burning dimly in their eyes—who still smile at me when I walk by them in their squatting positions.

Strolling into the art school, I leave behind me the sounds which dominate the streets from 5:00 am each morning: voices of children crying, screaming and squealing; pigs fighting and dogs barking; mothers and women calling out; machines churning, growling and pausing; brooms sweeping and vendors dismantling their carts; cars groaning in the background; birds whistling; and the sharp, harshly-pitched sounds of metal and stone being used, ridden, cut, and molded.

Inside the Reyum Art School, small hands finish drawing their families; feet flatten against the floor and arms raise the body up high to have a look. “Proud, content, disappointed or unsatisfied?” I wonder to myself. Most seem happy and joyfully

back away to admire the larger picture made by the whole class. Many families and images; hands and feet stand and observe or sit and work. Images of families hugging, eating, dressing, laughing, posing, pointing, teaching or caressing. *Grosa, grosa, grosa*. These excited fingers and toes fill the saddened space of the school. Today we do not use watercolors to paint.

## Part II

The history behind the smiling faces of the Reyum Art School students is an unhappy one. Between 1975—a year labeled as “Year Zero”—and 1979, the Khmer Rouge killed nearly two million Cambodians. The regime’s communist dictator, Pol Pot, pursued an ideal in which he attempted to purify the country by ridding it of capitalistic and Western influences in hopes of returning to an agrarian-based society. Under this rule, the Khmer Rouge perceived as a threat anyone “influenced by imperialism,” including intellectuals, skilled workers, and city dwellers, regardless of their individual political ideologies. Pol Pot’s regime evacuated entire cities in the name of cultural cleansing. Phnom Penh was labeled as “the great prostitute of the Mekong.” To reach the highest state of purity, the Khmer Rouge unhesitatingly murdered anyone opposed to their philosophy. According to their ideals, only the simple, uneducated and hard-working peasants would remain in the countryside, and all cities were to be demolished.

Over the course of his dictatorship, Pol Pot masterminded a genocide which massacred almost one-third of the Khmer population and destroyed an enormous amount of Cambodia’s land, cultural treasures and achievements. His soldiers looted and burned towns and cities, bringing the country to a state of utter devastation. By the time the Vietnamese troops took over the country in 1979, every Cambodian in the country had directly felt the impact of the four-year genocide. Yet, even over the next 20 years, during which time the U.N. and the U.S. became

**I would soon learn more about the history of Khmer art and the 1000-year old tradition of painting things “as they are, not as we think they are.”**

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involved in Cambodia's politics and first-time elections, the remaining guerilla forces of the Khmer Rouge continued to use violence to terrorize the Cambodian population. When Pol Pot died in 1998, many Cambodians apathetically followed the news on television, not even knowing whether to believe it or not. After all, many of the former Khmer soldiers and leaders still reside in the countryside and cities today, occupying positions ranging from motorbike drivers to business owners, to government officials.

Perhaps the Khmer Rouge's most shocking aspect lay in what its name already conveyed: the Khmer Rouge was made up of Cambodians. Pol Pot, who was himself a French-educated Cambodian, used Cambodians to kill Cambodians. As Pol Pot increased his strict standards for purification, it became clear that every Cambodian would at some point fall into the traitor category. Trust played a central role throughout the genocide—one learned never to trust anyone. Unfortunately, but predictably, the destructive effects of this mentality still vibrate throughout the Cambodian population today.

With the reign of terror cast over Cambodians beginning to simmer down over the past decade, the country has seen an influx of foreign diplomats, workers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Additionally, Cambodia and its relatively unknown history has begun to interest outsiders who had heard little about one of the worst genocides of the past 50 years. Affected by this increased awareness, Ingrid Muan, at the time a graduate student at Columbia University, began her dissertation in Cambodia on modern art history. "I was interested in what modern art history might look like in a place like Cambodia, which is so often consigned to a glorious architectural past," she says. "No one seemed to think that art was also made in Cambodia during the 20th century." Soon after, she met Ly Daravuth, a French-educated Cambodian who escaped the wrath of the Khmer Rouge by fleeing to France and returned to his native homeland only years later. Together they installed a number of well-received small exhibitions. When offered a grant to continue such displays, the unexpected seeds of the Reyum Art School began to sprout. In 1998, Ingrid and Daravuth officially founded Reyum "in order to provide a forum for research, preservation, and promotion of traditional and contemporary Cambodian arts and culture." Most importantly, Reyum would serve as a free public space which would host a variety of performances, concerts, lectures and discussions within the walls which contained its exhibits. Its mission statement read and still reads,

*"When Reyum was established in late 1998, few spaces existed in Phnom Penh for mounting exhibitions. Those venues which did show work tended either to offer permanent exhibitions of art objects, or to provide repetitive commercial paintings and sculptures for the tourist market. Within this context, Reyum decided to establish a space in which a changing series of exhibitions could address a wide variety of topics, not only in the visual arts, but within broader realms*

*of culture and society. Art exhibitions organized at Reyum aim to foster creativity and critical thinking while providing contemporary artists with the opportunity to explore and create new work."*

In pursuing this mission, Reyum has hosted a variety of exhibits in such varying facets as the theme of communication, painting history, the legacy of absence ("in which Khmer artists were asked to consider the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge"), painted stories of individual lives, an exploration of modern art post-Cambodia's independence, visions of the future, and calling the souls. All of these exhibits function to encourage and support a space for lamentation, questioning, reflection, discussion, and perhaps, reconciliation with the past, present and future.

Initially consisting of an art gallery, Reyum's success has allowed it to expand its research facility and publishing component into separate spaces. The support of an eager sponsor allowed Reyum to open the Art School where I worked, which aims to offer an alternative to children who would otherwise remain unsupervised during the time when they are not attending regular school. An application process guides the selection of some of the poorest but most talented youth, ranging in ages from about seven to 20, that make up the 130 or so students who switch off between morning and afternoon sessions.

By means of a fellowship offered by my university, I obtained the opportunity to work at Reyum as a student intern and found myself particularly drawn to the charming atmosphere of the Arts School. It would not take long to learn that the Art School, the Reyum Gallery and the surrounding community represent in microcosm the very large and significant issues confronting Cambodia today. Through its example, one finds an opportunity to analyze the role of art, inter-cultural work and relationships in Cambodian society and culture.

### **Part III**

It is a joke between Ingrid, the Director of Reyum, and her other Western friends that the most improved part of Phnom Penh has been related to the condition of the dogs. While such remarks often reveal more about the speaker than the subject, it remains true that the changes in the treatment of dogs as pets over the past several years have significantly bettered their standard of living from disastrous to bearable. Humor aside, when compared to any changes within the Cambodian people, Ingrid's comment may contain more truth than most individuals with any knowledge about Cambodia's past might like to admit.

*"The one thing which Cambodians have yet to experience is therapy," she stated one night over dinner at her river house. I sat across from her, listening to the cynical thoughts emitted from the exhausted expression she typically wears on her face. Although harsh, her consistent cynicism and sarcasm always served to crack open my walls of ignorance and naïveté. "Cambodians still have not processed nor come to an understanding of the events in their country from over twenty*

*years ago. Without this help, Cambodians will remain cruel, manipulative, corrupt people who always act for the present and do whatever it takes to make a dollar. Most Cambodians are ruthless, Dan. It will just take you some time to realize it."*

Scanning the small space of the Reyum Art School, one finds it difficult to imagine the manipulative and corrupt sides of the smiling and bubbly students. Sitting around large tables or bundled together on the floor, the children appear more as symbols of fading innocence, rather than heartless manipulators. While they could never be described as entirely naïve—the pain and suffering of their parents' generation remains too close to be ignored—they also still possess a sense of youthful playfulness long lost in the lives of those who have seen enough horror to question even the sanctity of trust between family members.

"This war has made it impossible to trust anyone. When children kill their own parents or husbands sacrifice their families, it is clear that everyone is living to survive," said Fousing Sem, a 23-year-old outspoken Cambodian, one of the few willing to openly comment on his society and culture. "During the time of Pol Pot, parents would risk their lives to steal a bag of rice to feed their children, and the following day their children would turn them in to the soldiers, just so that they could receive another bag of rice. Wives would turn against their husbands; fathers against their kids. I've learned from this that not even bloodline guarantees loyalty and trust. You cannot trust anyone but yourself."

At the Art School today, I have assigned the students the task of identifying their favorite part of Phnom Penh and pictorially representing it in a creative way. Many students choose to draw locations commonly found on tourist postcards, such as the Royal Palace and the riverside. However, after over a month and a half of working with them on ways to include interpretation in their artwork, they paint these common scenes in unusual ways: abstract shapes, designs, and hidden words fill the images; some students even paint with oil paints. Others paint images of their homes, their siblings, and the jobs in which their parents work.

While watching them create personally meaningful scenes, I wonder about the various types of families to which each of these students return at the end of the day. Some travel only 10 minutes while others ride their bicycles an hour and a half to get back home. Some live so far away that they instead remain at the school and sleep on the floor every night, simultaneously acting as guards. My interactions with them at the school revealed little about their home lives.

Yet, from conversations with the students when outside the school, I was able to learn much more about their thoughts and lives. One 20-year old student, Supon, with whom I would often walk along the river, used the space at the Art School not only for learning, but for eating and sleeping as well. His family lived 3 hours away in the provinces, and through night-guarding the school, Reyum gave him a small stipend as well as housing on the Art School floor.

On one Sunday afternoon, Supon and I sat along the boardwalk sketching the barefoot and shirtless children begging for money and otherwise filling the space with their screams, cries and games. Upon seeing Supon and I sitting alongside each other, a group of about 15 children would often surround us on all sides in inquiry of our activities. In Cambodia, one does not often see foreigners sitting with natives. Moreover, people do not use public spaces to engage in such leisurely activities as reading or drawing for pleasure. "The concept of 'taking a walk' is completely foreign to them," Ingrid once told me while we walked along the beach of a small island across the river from her weekend home. "Cambodians walk to the market, or to work, but they do not walk just for fun. When I tell them I'm taking a walk, they always look at me with a confused expression and ask, 'Taking a walk to where?'"

Sitting on the boardwalk wall across from Supon, I attempted to sketch his wavy black hair, his chiseled cheekbones, his eager smile and the small frame of his body. I became so frustrated with my embarrassing drawing skills that upon seeing my sketch, he offered a few pointers to help me improve it. While doing so, a small girl of no more than 4 years old wearing a faded blue short sleeve shirt and a torn red and yellow checkered skirt sat down on the stone wall next to us and propped her naked brother on her knee. Through curious eyes, she silently stared at us. Supon glanced up at her and thought for a moment before remarking to me, "I miss my family very much. They no live in Phnom Penh. When I see little girls, I pretend they my sister, or if I see old girl, I pretend they my mother. I pretend what they look like." The corner of his eyes filled up with moisture as he proceeded to masterfully sketch this little girl and her baby brother. Noticing that she was his model, she sat up proudly holding her brother, and a wide grin spread across her face. I had seen this girl often by the riverside, but this was the first time I had ever seen her still and quiet.

I couldn't help but think about the similarities between Supon and this little girl. Both were living on their own, without families, taking care of that which was of most importance to them. The girl had her brother; Supon had his sketchbook and fantasies.

#### **Part IV**

The oil paintings in Rith's small, second floor apartment shine in dazzling contrast to the peeling splinters of wooden planks which make up the walls of the young Reyum Art School teacher's home. To the right of a doorframe leading to the back of the apartment hangs a portrait of a Cambodian man in his forties or fifties. When I asked Rith's wife about this painting, she explained to me that her husband had created it from the only photograph of his father that he has, a photograph taken before the time of the Khmer Rouge. We both glanced at the balcony, where Rith was painting with watercolors, and she lowered her eyes and meekly whispered to me, "Rith's father was killed by the Khmer Rouge." I glanced at the oil painting one more time: the smooth strokes, the three-dimensional texture, the ardor exuding from the canvas. I turned around and

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noticed Rith standing up from his drawing table outside. He walked into the apartment to retrieve another pencil and noticed me standing by his father's portrait. When I looked up at it again, he told me that this painting was his favorite. "My father was taken away by the Khmer Rouge to study and be educated," he said. "That's what the soldiers told us. I know that he is still studying with them now."

When thinking about him later, it became clear to me that Rith's interpretation of his father's fate demonstrated an explanation of his father's death on his own terms. It was no coincidence that Rith had also decided to reproduce his father's photograph in oil paints, not watercolors. The painting had his father gazing off into the distance. Through the abstractions emphasized by the strokes of the oil paints in his father's face, skin, and casual clothing, one could understand that Rith believed his father to retain his capacity to "study," to learn, and to judge, even while under the thumb of oppression. He viewed his father as completely alive, even into the present day. Through doing so, he created an image of his father which was his own to treasure, admire and remember. Rith had taken a standard photograph and infused his own interpretation and commentary on his father's life, consequently producing a portrait and a story that allowed for him to communicate his thoughts and feelings about his father's disappearance to himself and others.

For the same reason that Rith benefited from painting his father in oil paints, one must question what other Cambodian artists might gain from incorporating interpretive creativity into their works. Certainly, Eastern art employs its own form of creativity. The detailed paintings of traditional Absara dancers or the beautiful water festival held in Phnom Penh each year demonstrate a collection of ideas, colors and precision which remain very unique to Cambodian artwork. However, these forms date 1000 years back to the beginning of the Khmer culture and serve the purpose of preserving history and ancient culture. This form of artistic creativity does not serve as a medium through which to document present history in the making and thus differs greatly from the way in which many art forms function in the West. Could the use of a more Western-style of creativity open up doors into the past, present, and future that would otherwise remain closed? Would this type of creativity allow for the society to more openly question its values, norms and way of life? Or, would creativity as defined by Western culture—interpreting issues, events and people in original, expressive and unique ways—have no place in Cambodia's culture? When answering these queries, two all-encompassing questions arise: First, do the benefits of the use of creativity outweigh the costs? Secondly, does Western style creativity even have a place in this society?

In addressing the inquiry about positive and negative features which characterize the inclusion of creativity into artwork, one need not look further than the Western history of art. An explosion of artwork aimed at reaching enlightenment and wisdom marked the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of the Modern world. Following this period—the 1400's—were

a series of movements, all which explored varying venues, methods and styles through which artistic investigation could take place. The period between the 1500's and 1900's included a tremendous outburst of creativity and was home to movements ranging from Romanticism and Modernism, to Realism and Impressionism. Entering into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one finds the movements of Expressionism and Cubism highlighting the abstraction of objective reality, and focusing on the "inner-experience" of spirit, development and growth. The progression of this art corresponded with a shift in the Western world as an interest in individual expression became quite popular. Consequently, creative artwork provided the perfect outlet through which to communicate new ideas to the population as a whole or to specific groups of individuals in society. Naturally, this gave rise to public debates, speculation and questioning of the changing role and possibilities possessed by art. In this way, the addition of creativity into artwork positively served a society which proved ready for a breakaway from the realities of everyday living. Creativity allowed interested Westerners to question all aspects of their lives by providing them with the means to tangibly produce any and all images in their minds for those who expressed interest in seeing them.

However, throughout my time in Cambodia, I found myself wondering whether this same benefit could apply to a society that doesn't condone individual expression and does not encourage change. Thus, the question evolved: can a traumatized society which does not place utility on the effects of personal expression gain anything from attempting to explore art as communication or therapy? For me, the most accessible example became the students and the curriculum of the Reyum Art School. The students, coming from a diversity of income levels and from residential areas ranging in distance from a block away to an entire day's trip to the countryside, make up a representative sample of many of the families of Phnom Penh and the surrounding areas. If one considers the school's students and families as representative of such a population, then it seems fair to say that the effects which creativity could have on the members of the school would be similar to those displayed by many Cambodians.

A typical day at the Art School includes about 125 children (split between a morning and afternoon session) arriving at the school and having assigned a task to them that must be completed within a given time frame, usually by the end of the class session. The days of the week differ on the basis of the type of artwork taught each day. These forms include painting faces and bodies, drawing traditional forms of art, and a free day used to catch up on past assignments or copy images out of picture books, magazines, or photographs. With so much focus on replication, the students at the school flawlessly reproduce every image they see. Considering that the majority of Phnom Penh's art shops and galleries display a wide assortment of replicas of the Royal Palace, Angkor Wat, Traditional Khmer Dancers and the countryside, the skill of reproduction represents one that commercial artists use heavily. Furthermore, in a school where the thoughts of many students often revert back to seeking



their eventual source of income, the students see the traditional forms of replication as well-received by both the tourist and local community, and thus they too want to pursue it. Logically though, this pattern does not act as evidence that the overseas market does not desire creative forms of Cambodian art. Instead, it simply demonstrates the difficulty of separating oneself from the norms of a society that emphasizes conformity on the basis of preexisting patterns. The Western tourist market may jump at the opportunity to buy oil paintings of the palaces, museums, and ancient temples. However, few individuals have the bravery to try out this option. Such conventionality highlights the reality of a culture that has rarely encouraged its individuals to seek out their own paths for success. If a group of Cambodians were willing to test their luck and explore the results of opening up a shop selling creative artwork, perhaps they would quickly meet an eager international market. With such strong internal pressure against this option, schools such as the Reyum Art School must question their interest and motive for pushing forward this consumer-driven focus on artwork.

Yet, what are the benefits of only teaching a technique that models what has already been done in the past? A consideration for other forms of art as well could result in a cultural blending and an interest from foreign customers as well as local consumers that thus far has remained unknown to many of the students. After all, the benefits of creativity as it appears in Western culture could be universal in nature. What if Cambodian children and adults could benefit from the opportunity to communicate their unexpressed thoughts about the recent past history as well as their current lives? Would they have the ability to do so? In fact, through an activity at the Art School which involved using both the Cambodian notion of modeled artwork and the Western concept of creativity, it became quite evident that not only were the students able to produce innovative images, but that the project also excited and stimulated them.

During my second week at the Art School, I assigned a project which included the use of a model but also utilized one's imagination. In this task, the students were partnered up with other students and told to imagine and draw how their partner's face would appear at 80 years of age. This assignment proved much more successful than the prior day's one (which asked students to draw the meaning of family), for it combined an element with which the students already felt comfortable—using a model—but also allowed them to express an original idea—a face that no one had seen before. The students seemed enthused by the prospect of controlling their own representations of their models. Some students even went so far as to create a number of different versions of their “old” partner, which in many cases looked as realistic as their replica-based drawings. This project made it quite clear that the students already possessed full faculty for tapping into their own creative thoughts; it was only a matter of the proper circumstances.

Through a variety of tasks that fused the Western notions of abstract expression with the Eastern idea of concrete realism, the students demonstrated time and time again that they not only

enjoyed the creative assignments placed before them, but also saw it as an opportunity to experiment with the models of art with which they already had familiarity. While it remains difficult to extrapolate these results to the entire Cambodian population, one can suggest that the notion of originality at least allowed the students one more language through which to deliver their thoughts.

Yet, one cannot ignore the reality that through its mission to offer a free arts education to some of Phnom Penh's talented youth, Reyum must also train its students so that they can support themselves in the future. In a devastated economy such as that of Cambodia, artwork inspired by financial reward may ultimately remain the only option. Under such circumstances, can Reyum justify risking the future of its students by teaching them a form of artwork that holds possible consequences of either success or failure? Is there room for the Westernized Cambodian artist in Cambodia? Seemingly, the more likely result would be similar to that experienced by Fousing Sem. “When I returned from France, I wanted to tell my friends about all the great things I learned there. But they would get so mad at me when I would start talking about it. They asked, ‘Do you think you are better than us now that you have gone to France?’ Of course I don't think I'm better; I just wanted to open their eyes. But they refused to listen.” Fousing was rejected by his friends because of the connotations—opportunity, wealth, change—associated with traveling to the West and their ensuing jealousy. In this way, the creativity of one individual could provide the opportunity for others to reject him or her, similar to the rejection of Cambodians who fled the Khmer Rouge and now have tried to return to their native country, only to be greeted by Cambodians who label those that fled during the Khmer Rouge as ex-Cambodians who can no longer consider themselves Khmer. If producing creative artwork threatens the very well-being of the artist—which it could likely do in a society which does not encourage deviation from the norms—then the merit of inserting this concept must be scrutinized. Likewise, even if the community accepted an avant-garde approach to artwork, the symbolic meaning behind Rith's comments on the general lack of interest in oil paints could leave many artists without any pay. Thus, the negative impacts which an increased focus on imagination could have on Cambodian society weigh heavily against the available rewards.

The issue of balance appears crucial when deciding whether creative approaches should have their own place in Cambodian art's future. The example of Vann Nath, a friend of Reyum, offers priceless insight into the possible role that a balanced approach to artwork could play. Born in Battambang, Cambodia in 1946, Vann Nath grew up with a very non-traditional immersion into artwork in which he painted movie posters and portraits. In 1976, the Khmer Rouge imprisoned him in a Phnom Penh prison called Tuol Sleng, where he experienced horrendous torture and was nearly killed. He surely would have died along with the rest of the 20,000 that were murdered in Tuol Sleng had it not been for the guard's discovery of his unusual artistic talents, at which point he was ordered to paint propaganda portraits of Pol

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Pot. He and seven other artists were the only prisoners to survive Tuol Sleng. After the war, the new government commissioned him to paint the atrocities that were committed; often his memory was limited only to the noises which he heard from nearby cells. He painted the graphic scenes and methods of torture in

**The ability to communicate one's real thoughts on paper—whether through artwork, writing, photography, etc.—leads to a greater understanding of oneself and one's surroundings.**

a style uniquely his own—a style in which the images did not look like photographs but still contained a precise sense of accuracy. They hang in the Tuol Sleng museum today as an artifact which allows Cambodia and the rest of the world to understand the atrociousness that occurred under the rule of the Khmer Rouge.

When I met Vann Nath this past summer in the small restaurant that he owns with his wife and three children, I found myself surprised at his calm and peaceful demeanor. Adorning the restaurant walls were dozens and dozens of his

latest paintings, many of which were purchased by both foreign clientele and local customers and which expressed a much more optimistic reality than the one presented in his images of Tuol Sleng. While listening to him narrate the stories behind each one, it occurred to me that there existed a significant difference between the type of realism that Nath presented in his artwork and that pursued by the school. While most Cambodian artists focused on painting realistic paintings—replicas of portraits, buildings, and the countryside—Vann Nath created *paintings of reality*. His images of the horrors of Tuol Sleng conveyed his perspective on the trauma which both he and others experienced and witnessed. Thus, his emotion-driven work opened the eyes of millions of people and allowed for a type of historical awareness that would have been otherwise difficult to achieve.

Vann Nath's incredible artistic and life journey allows one to appreciate the possible role that an element of creativity can play in Cambodian artwork. By not limiting himself to the traditional forms of art and artistic expression, Vann Nath tapped into the emotions in his mind and feelings in his heart and positioned them in his work in a manner executed by few of his colleagues. His example suggests that while Western style creativity in the most extreme sense may not appropriately mix with Cambodian artwork, there still remains a form of creativity using both models and reality which could allow Cambodians to begin thinking more deeply about their recent past, their present lives, and their future ambitions. As demonstrated with the students at the Art School, when given the opportunity to adapt creativity to the forms of artwork with which they already feel comfortable, ideas begin to flow and emerge from the enforced repression of a society not yet confident of the results of allowing observations

to interrelate with sentiments and outlooks. Yet when given the opportunity to individually articulate these notions even within specific paradigms—such as those which dictated Vann Nath to reproduce what he had seen in Tuol Sleng, or those which govern the mindset of the Art School children when thinking about their future occupations, or even those which inspired Rith to produce a portrait of his father—the effects on both the artist and the surrounding community become invaluable. The ability to communicate one's real thoughts on paper—whether through artwork, writing, photography, etc.—leads to a greater understanding of oneself and one's surroundings. The students of the Art School as well as a few local artists have demonstrated an interest in cultivating this understanding. While Cambodia will always maintain its traditional style of exact replication, a new form of creativity in Cambodia's own terms will allow the country to continue developing its artistic culture as well as its concrete and realistic impression of the surrounding world.

## **Part V**

While the merits of creativity may provide a rationale for the inclusion of foreign ideas into Cambodia's present-day politics, economics, and social issues, a visitor from overseas must still observe proper etiquette when trying to introduce his or her ideas. Phnom Penh has become home to hundreds of Western-directed NGOs, most which function in the name of sustainable development and improvement for Cambodia and its people. Yet on numerous occasions, I found myself audience to an explosion of criticism about the actual benefits offered by NGOs. All of these outbursts amounted to one and the same question: What role, if any, should Westerners play in Cambodia's present and future existence?

To some Westerners the answer seems simple. Send over our missionaries, politicians, economists and social workers and let them fix all the problems. Yet to others, the words "send," "fix," and "problems" send chills down their spines. "What else could the connotations and meanings of such words express other than a complete lack of understanding, respect and consideration for Cambodian history and culture?" they ask. Nonetheless, without some education about the dynamics between countries such as the U.S.A. and Cambodia, it remains easy to take the obvious differences between them—political stability, economic strength, social welfare—as a rationale which asserts the Western country's superiority. Although such an attitude ultimately only hurts the receiving end of such a negotiation, I myself recall feeling somehow empowered by the notion that I, as an American, had the opportunity to go to Cambodia and work on "coexistence and reconciliation," as phrased by my Fellowship. In an early journal entry, I described this state of mind through a third-person narration.

*Having prepared for months in advance, the Coexistence Intern Going to Cambodia is an energetic, excited, and "selected" 20-year-old. He has conducted research all about*

*Cambodia and is up-to-date on its history, politics, economic difficulties and social realities. He has read about the work of NGOs and knows about their respective successes and failures. He realizes the degree to which corruption runs through the government and misery through most families. He has collected a mass number of books of stories from personal survivors of the Genocide and can comfortably narrate the factual happenings between 1975-1979, when the Khmer Rouge presided over the entire country with its atrocious whips of terror.*

*The Coexistence Intern Going to Cambodia believes that he can leave a lasting impression on many of those whom he will meet; equal to the impression they will leave on him. He envisions that he will jump over the language barrier in leaps and strides and that through powerful eye contact and a genuine interest in those with whom he's speaking, all communication will flow and be understood. Although he has been told many times not to expect to change Cambodia, deep inside he hopes to make a difference. He expects to return to his University full of completed projects and stories of people he has gotten to know; people with whom he shall mutually share many memories and continuing contact. Most of all, he envisions helping many people talk—maybe even for the first time—about the tragedies of their personal histories and he hopes to assist them in beginning to reconcile with the past so as to move into the future.*

I could not have entered Cambodia with a more naïve perspective on how the country operates. The title of “Coexistence Intern” already established an unequal playing field between me and those whom I was being “sent” to “help.” In reality, no one in Cambodia actually requested or needed my help, and my position as intern on a fellowship from a prestigious university with a coexistence program only acted to increase the distance between me and Cambodia. Yet, many western-based NGOs exist in a similar perpetual state of blindness where they refuse to accept the intrusiveness of their entry into a foreign culture. Even worse, some NGOs simply refuse to consider the disproportionately large input—their expenses—compared to the oftentimes small output—the benefit to the community—which they exchange in trade.

A smaller minority of Westerners have recognized this imbalance and consequently refuse to allow their own organizations to breed this mentality and behavior. Reyum falls into this latter category. From my first day entering the Art Gallery, Ingrid made her low regard for Western aid and student interns quite visible to me. Although still in transition from my first identity as Proud American Savior to a second identity as Lost American in Awe, Reyum's attitude hit me hard. In the same journal entry as before, I described the experience of having my idealistic preconceptions of Cambodia flattened into ones which began to make me aware of the reality of this country.

*When the Coexistence Intern Going to Cambodia finally arrives in Cambodia, he is eager to begin all of his*

*important work. To his dismay, open arms, work itineraries and the many people with whom he will engage in “deep” conversations do not greet him. Quite on the contrary in fact, the locals are too busy working to survive to notice him and the survivors (namely everyone) have little intention of disclosing facts and stories about their past to someone they do not know and who does not speak their language. The women are too shy and oppressed to speak with him and the youth live in fear of discussing publicly any of their thoughts about the government. With those with whom it is possible to converse, the dialogue often exist in paradigms and limitations which remain nearly invisible to the Intern who has no grounding or foundations in a culture entirely not his own. However, he brushes these obstacles off as products of only having been in Cambodia for one day.*

*Yet, he is soon forced to acknowledge that with only two months in Cambodia, his offerings as an American are few and far between. The Coexistence Intern is not necessary in Cambodia. The country and her people will continue marking their path of survival with or without him. The most he can hope to offer is a little bit of cultural insight into what life is like in America and our creative approach to activity vs. the do-what-it-takes-to-make-money approach of this country. Even here though, the Coexistence Intern must understand that life in Cambodia functions on very different terms, and that while in the U.S. it may seem unusual for a child to skip over teenage-hood and go straight into the workforce at the age of 13, in Cambodia, it has become quite the norm. The Coexistence Intern feels guilty because he is doing very little Coexistence work as learned in his theory class prior to the internship.*

The guilt I felt originated from my own expectations and only prolonged how long it would take for me to find a comfortable position in which I could spend the next two months in Cambodia. After some time however, I began to realize that if I intended to immerse myself in the Khmer culture, I would need to drop all of my preconceived notions and accept my role as outsider who would learn most through observation. Only after realizing this point did my experience as an intern begin to manifest itself into an experience of my own. Again, I continued writing in my journal entries about this process of assimilation and transition.

*Over time, the longer the Coexistence Intern stays in Cambodia, the more he begins to discover and appreciate that his influence here can be real but that it must operate on very different principles from past work experiences. Everything must be self-initiated and the results must not be approached in a success/failure or progress/deteriorate type of context. Rather, results must be viewed in terms of the quality of interactions. Every conversation produces thoughts, ideas, and some degree of connection. These exchanges, even when they do not produce a single tangible or material result with which he can write back to his University, remain important*

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*for a greater understanding and ability to communicate with people in general. The Intern must accept his role as a passive observer and that only when lucky, may he occasionally become an active participant. The Coexistence Intern Going to Cambodia must learn to drop all sets of expectations and simply function as a sponge that continuously absorbs everything around him; only occasionally may he be in the position to leak/squeeze/offer a few droplets of anything in return.*

Thus, as with creativity, outsiders interested in working in the country should also begin with a mentality of meeting Cambodia on her own terms and not on those presented by a Western standard of ideals. As soon as one insists on using his or her own cultural norms and education as a basis upon which to decide whether another country needs “help,” “fixing,” or even “development,” one runs the risk of entirely missing the dynamics and factors which make each culture uniquely its own. A quote by David Whyte from his 1997 audiobook *Making a Friend of the Unknown* beautifully summarizes this concept.

*Though I've written poetry since I was small, I actually studied marine zoology and worked as a naturalist in the Galapagos Islands. It's an old joke but when I got to those islands I found that none of the animals had read any of the zoology books that I had read. They all had lives of their own. I couldn't have gotten to the Galapagos Islands without my training, but my training was also the greatest thing which lay between me and that world. My training was like a grid which I would place over the world which I was trying to perceive. Sometimes the lines of that grid were so thick that you could barely see anything at all between them. There was a kind of innocence which I was forced to cultivate. I had to become innocent again after my training in order to see that world on its own terms. That innocence came out of the silence of being there, hour after hour after hour after day after day after month after month, watching the plants and animals and landscapes and changing weather patterns and the sea and becoming a part of that life. I think it's why I went back into poetry after I left Galapagos because I felt that poetry was a more precise way of describing the world than science.*

Until I could remove from my eyes the grid of expectations and knowledge which I brought with me to Cambodia, I would not be allowed to connect with others on any but the most superficial of levels. However, the process of realizing this idea proved to be one of the most crucial turning points of my experience in the country. For this reason, it remains vital for interns and NGOs alike to acknowledge, undergo and accept their own internal changes before working on any substantial external changes. Without this process, any positive outcomes which could arise from inter-cultural communication will remain lost in the fog of cultural misunderstandings, assumptions and disrespect.

## Part VI

“Is it my job to push Cambodians into a direction where they may not even want to go? Why aren't Cambodians doing this? Why aren't the government officials who have loads of money taking an interest in this? Why is it my responsibility? Is it even helping anything at all?!”

I vividly recall the time when while standing in the small kitchen of Ingrid's apartment, she exclaimed these words. At first I found myself shocked and dismayed at her questions. How could Ingrid question the benefit of her work? How could she not see that most Cambodians weren't in the position to do what she had done? The issue seemed obvious to me: Cambodians concerned with putting food on their plates did not have the luxury of time to think about pedagogical issues.

Yet, Ingrid's trepidation about her role in Cambodia echoes that of other NGO directors who also question their position as Westerners working in third-world countries such as Cambodia. Her worries are twofold. Personally, Ingrid has been drained by the reality that the very people with whom she has tried to work often have fought against her to stop her from succeeding. Whether through overt forms of expression—such as the Reyum Art School Director stating that he found it offensive and disrupting that Ingrid would ask the students to question the role of traditional Khmer myths in modern day times—or through more passive types of resistance—the Art School Director begrudgingly complying with Ingrid's requests as if doing her a favor—the end result remains the same. A lack of appreciation and a constant sense of defiance raises questions about the benefits and harms of one's own motives, efforts and work. Ingrid's high self-consciousness and monitoring of her position as a Westerner in Cambodian society remains visible throughout nearly all of her decisions and actions.

Ingrid's second apprehension concerns whether Cambodians would initiate and want to promote an exploration of the recent past and culture if she were not there feeding them her ideas and paying them with her money. “Do you think the workers here would give a damn about any of this if they weren't getting paid?” she would often rhetorically ask me. Ultimately, Ingrid's concerns questioned the role which art could have in a traumatized society.

While both issues concern her right to act as a provoker of change in a society where she encountered resistance from the very people with whom she tried to work, the former point focuses on her own personal experience with service in Cambodia, while the latter issue focuses more on the general question of whether Cambodia wants and/or needs change from its current state.

In conjunction with one another, the responses to these two issues form the rationale which justifies the purpose of such an organization as Reyum in Cambodia.

In terms of her first concern, I felt a compelling need to understand how Ingrid went from a graduate student passionate enough to start-up such an organization as Reyum, to the cynical, skeptical and somewhat depressed woman she

is today. Her high level of self-monitoring began long before I arrived in Phnom Penh, and was directly linked to the many disappointments and frustrations she had encountered during the past several years.

When Ingrid first came to Cambodia over nine years ago, she felt a similar buzz as that which characterized my entire stay there this summer. One's first time in Cambodia is full of fascination, invigoration and awe. The cultural differences serve as adventure for each waking day and act to make each encountered challenge a stimulus for that much more enthusiasm and effort. Casual street-side conversations feel like monumental breakthroughs and the smallest achievement of any sort—whether interpreting directions, or learning to ride a motorbike, or having a conversation in basic Khmer—registers as a milestone in one's personal journey through Cambodia. Hence, the beauty of the naïve, unacquainted traveler.

After some adapting and familiarization with the culture however, the sense of innocent purity can be lost to stronger feelings of specific praise and critique. I recall when I first arrived to Cambodia, my fascination with the disposition of motorbike drivers towards anyone walking by them. Often lazily slouching across their bikes in groups of five or six others, the motorbike drivers would bounce up with interest and simultaneously shout out, "Motorbike!", playfully fighting to see who will be the first to reach this potential passenger. At nearly every corner, motorbike drivers sat cracking jokes at each other and waiting for the next opportunity to make a dollar or two. Yet, this layer of lightheartedness covers the reality burdening the minds of many of these motorbike drivers: lack of shelter, a failed crop season, a starving family back home...

Nevertheless, my interactions with them were always full of smiles, questions, and awkward attempts at directing them in Khmer. I once mentioned to Ingrid how funny I thought it was that as soon as anyone walked out from any building into the street, one could hear the distant squeals of the motorbike drivers, revving their engines, and driving up to make their friendly greetings: "MOTORBIKE!" After this comment, Ingrid shot me a glance and mumbled, "You just give it a few weeks and then see how much you still like them." Only after eventually understanding the level of desperation affecting these drivers, and the day in, day out personal offense which they took when someone decided to walk instead of paying them for a ride, did I begin to comprehend Ingrid's sharp answer to my comment.

Once, while taking a walk with Ingrid I asked her, "Ingrid, why are you always so critical of everything?" Without looking up, she broke one of her exhausted smiles and replied, "Because Dan, when you've seen all the fucked up things I've seen in this country, time and time again without any improvement, it's impossible to be anything but critical."

Ingrid's once youthful outlook had been corrupted by years of disappointments, lost opportunities and frustrating bureaucracy. Although she had arrived in Cambodia with the fresh perspective of a graduate student working on her dissertation, the years she had spent becoming well versed in the

language, the culture and the politics of today's society, ultimately served to corrupt her optimism and deplete her of strength.

I often found myself wondering about the mission which Ingrid had been attempting to serve. For what purpose or aim was her initial strength directed? To help Cambodians begin a dialogue with the past? To use art as a medium for communication in ways which it is not yet used? Perhaps to create an open space where Cambodia's culture can be presented, discussed, or studied? To me, these seemed like noble goals which she had been successfully tackling. So what could explain her constant frustration?

In fact, while all of these missions have embodied Ingrid's work for the past nine years, the reality of the situation is that she receives minimal feedback from the community about the benefit of her activities. Ingrid's comment questioning the responsibility and merit of her work puts into perspective the real problem confronting NGO work in Cambodia.

Both Cambodians and foreigners show very little support for service work done in Cambodia.

The Cambodian populace puts their time into ensuring that their families are fed—that their basic needs are met; the American world where Ingrid was born takes for granted the fulfillment of its basic needs, even when they are not fulfilled for everyone. In Cambodia, most people are too busy surviving to notice her work; in the U.S., most people are too concerned with the superiority of their own nation to notice any service work done in a third-world country. Due to these circumstances, Ingrid lacks the component of energy and encouragement which prompted her interest and active pursuit of coming to Cambodia in the first place.

The foreign service worker in residence in Cambodia enters perpetual cycles of doubt when they do not have others off of whom they can objectively soundboard their ideas and receive solid feedback. Thus, Ingrid's feelings were a manifestation of the inevitable fate of fighting a battle when one isn't even entirely convinced of one's own convictions.

Indeed however, this is the reality of working in most parts of Cambodia.

"Under the pressures produced by financial instability, fear of government, constant violence, and the need to pick up a dollar at every opportunity, Cambodians do not have the time or energy to engage in peace-building or reconciliatory work. Cambodians would love to be able to think of the future as a brighter possibility, but one cannot be so blind or naively hopeful. The corruption running through the government is so great that some Cambodians even fear a repeat of the Pol Pot regime (only within modern-day parameters). Even the youth are afraid to talk about their thoughts of the government because many who speak out against it are found "coincidentally" dead soon after. Most Cambodians cannot afford to think about the future, because there is barely enough time to think about the "now." Delivering food to the family represents by far the greatest occupation on most people's minds, and few Cambodians are in the position to be able to make longer-term plans that involve

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education or stability. In a country where one cannot trust anything and where corruption and power remain the governing forces behind decisions, it remains difficult to know anything but what one sees on a tangible, day-to-day basis—and even this can often be entirely disillusioning. Cambodia one day may be in a position to think of the future—and will gladly embrace this day when it arrives—but for now, with the current circumstances, this is simply an impossibility.”

In an e-mail correspondence over the summer, I attempted to clarify the situation in Cambodia to an American friend of mine who could not understand why Cambodia could not just pick itself up and begin to deal with the past. He refused to realize however, that by victimizing the victim, Cambodia's needs will never be addressed. In order to really understand what will benefit Cambodia, one must look at the dominating and underlying issues which plague her people.

The largest overlooked problem confronting Cambodia today revolves around the issue of *trust*. Whether through the stories of Fousing Sem, or Ingrid's experiences with parents at the Art School, or in my daily conversations with students such as Supon, it became clear that lack of trust weaves its way through every interaction. Ingrid's first piece of advice to me when I told her that I'd like to work at the art school dealt with this exact issue. “Just remember Dan, if you say you're going to do something with them, you better do it. If you know you're not going to be able to do whatever it is that you're promising, then it's better just to keep your mouth shut. This culture has seen enough broken promises.”

In a society without trust, relationships—between people, between organizations, between the government—remain unreliable. Yet, Reyum has become a space upon which some Cambodians have begun to rely. Contrary to Ingrid's beliefs, the Reyum community—including the workers, the kids, and the Cambodians who have come to appreciate its work—has felt a taste of real trust. Although filled with cracks and gaps left to be filled, the children at the school have grown to rely and trust that the Art School will not disappear one day. The Reyum workers have learned to trust that their jobs will not be snatched from underneath them one morning. In effect, the Reyum community has come to see Reyum as a reliable space.

In this way, Reyum does serve a valuable function in Cambodian society by acting as the first stepping-stones for a society in desperate need of someone or something to trust. Cambodians have yet to begin speaking about their thoughts, memories and fears of the Khmer Rouge. A victim's path to recovery lies in feeling safe enough to begin discussing (in either internal and/or external dialogue) the past. Yet, when everyone in Cambodia has been afflicted with the same illness—the death of over two million of one's own people—which Cambodian will be the strong one to step up and begin the reconciliatory process?

In a manner of speaking, Reyum has been the one to step up. It has the time in its day to devote to thinking about this process; the majority of Cambodians cannot afford this time. Reyum embodies a position that actually grants it access

to a realm nearly unknown by most Cambodians: freedom of thought. As a foreigner, Ingrid's position as director of Reyum allows her to address the issues confronting so many Cambodians, without the fear that prevents Cambodians from addressing these issues themselves.

Reyum can put up an exhibit about Cambodian identity; it can display art about the presence or absence of the soul since the Khmer Rouge; it can present the works of Vann Nath and Tuol Sleng; it can ask Cambodian children to draw their thoughts about the future or to imagine a past which their parents refuse to discuss. Reyum embodies a position which is available to few Cambodians—a neutral moderator of reflection.

In a traumatized society recovering from civil violence and warfare, the power of reflection-based artwork remains unbeatable. Art acts as the medium and moderator for thinking, speaking and listening. Most importantly, artwork, in any way which Cambodians deem appropriate, can begin to truthfully address the past. Realizing this, Reyum has used the notions of creativity and change to encourage artists to utilize their talents not only for commercial purposes, but for therapeutic and meditative ones as well. Specifically, Reyum has utilized the formula for creativity which ensures its utilitarian success: creativity on Cambodia's own terms.

Through the use of reflection-based creativity grounded in the needs and wants of the Cambodian people, Reyum can allow Cambodians to use a new concept in a way which serves them best. *If Cambodians can trust art as a medium for exchanging new ideas, they can begin conversing about the past—sharing stories, memories and events.*

Despite this, many foreign workers worry that even with good intentions, the foreigner in Cambodia will ultimately plant ideas into the society which Cambodians might otherwise not have come up with on their own. Out of frustration Ingrid once asked me, “What if the culture only wants similarity? Commissions repeat themselves and everyone wants what someone else has. In such a context, the new is the strange, the bad, the unusual, the not wanted.”

Yet, my time in Cambodia this summer has led me to believe that Cambodia is not opposed to the new. Rather, most Cambodians have simply not been in a position to trust the new. When the Khmer Rouge took over, Cambodians began by rejoicing and celebrating, only to realize all too soon that this new leadership had a terrible fate in store for them. When the Vietnamese took over in 1979, many Cambodians again thought they were being saved, only to find out that they were now to be controlled and abused once again by another power. This cycle has continued until present day with unmet promises of foreign aid, fair elections and stability. In learning to mistrust any promises for change, Cambodians' hesitations towards delving back into the past for the purpose of reconciliation—a novel concept in Cambodia's history—remain completely logical.

Yet, only when the cycle of mistrust is broken will Cambodians finally begin rising from the bloody dust which still lingers through every part of their lives.

A form of reconciliatory creativity—even if introduced by a Westerner—which allows Cambodians to begin building their own foundations for trust must not be concealed behind doors of cultural self-righteousness. Despite the concern that Cambodia may not be ready for the new, the strange or the unusual, Cambodians have the right to decide for themselves whether these tools are ones which they want to use. One may ultimately find that all that Cambodians are waiting for is the initial spark and leader to fight for this cause.

Through a balanced transfer of ideas—from such organizations as Reyum to the local artists and Khmer people—one realizes that the potential role which foreigners and specific Western ideas can play in Cambodia can significantly and positively affect the lives of natives. Without the necessary trust lacking in present day Cambodia, the country's developments and attempts at standing up again will likely crumble to the ground. However, by using trust as a platform, and art as a microphone through which to begin addressing the real needs of the Khmer people—to enter into dialogue with the burning pain of the last thirty years—Cambodia will find the means by which to begin to remove from its eyes the blindfold of the past and look towards the future with clearer vision.

## Part VII

Brown feet and toes, hands and fingers, arms and legs; hairy and smooth, stretching out, folded in. They twitch and jerk, support and trip, tense and relax. Patches of darker gray and smudges of lighter black coat the soles and tips of the toes and fingers as they mold onto the hard mounds of land beneath them. Some feet rest flat on the ground, while others arch in a semi-circle; still others press up against their neighbors or curl up into themselves.

Under the shade of a great palm tree, the Reyum Art School students and teachers do not feel the pounding and forceful sun which seems to make everything within its gleaming reach move in lazy stride. The warm wind passes by as if on a casual stroll. Cows brush up against brittle leaves, evading the sharp, jagged cacti which emerge from the ground through unforgiving vines and thorns. Rigid weeds penetrate soft patches of dirt, grass, and sand and remain visible throughout the flat land of the Cambodian countryside.

To the background music of clinking cow bells, the younger students run and skip in the bumpy field, playing games with small sacks of sand or plastic toys which they found near an old farm wagon. Some chase each other with dry palm branches, while others roll along the ground until small dust storms cover them and only the sounds of high-pitched laughter escape. The older students sit nearby against trees, sprawled along the grass or aligned with rocks, and draw the expansive farmland: the large trees, the water-filled rice fields, the small wooden shacks sprinkled along the horizon. Rith sits perched on a splintered wooden plow, and VanChan dozes nearby on the seat of his motorbike. I sit nearby writing in my journal and feel both the exhaustion and excitement of our isolation from the city.

The older students quietly munch on their tropical fruits while sketching the preliminary outlines of their drawings and paintings. Some wear long-sleeved shirts and pants while others have already taken off their shirts. Today it is Saturday morning, and almost all of the 130 Reyum students have come along on this field trip to the countryside. They sit with drawing pads and canvases. Some students color their images with crayons, while others lighten and darken their paper with watercolors. Rith elegantly shades his canvas with blue, green and yellow oil tones. At least half a dozen students share the limited supply of oil paints and gracefully create blurry and abstract images of the landscape.

For today, everyone's assignment remains quite flexible: draw anything, with anything that you like, in any form that you wish.

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# A Nerve Centre in Northern Ireland: Can Music Bring Down the Walls of Derry?

Patrick Raymond '05



## Derry

My boss at the Nerve Centre this summer, John Peto, told me upon my arrival in Derry from New York that “many people consider Derry the biggest village in Northern Ireland.” Though Derry is the second largest city in Northern Ireland with a population of 70,000, one almost always has their lives intertwined with someone they see in the local shops, on the street or in the local pubs. Derry very much has an atmosphere of a modern version of a small Irish village. When I landed in Derry, John greeted me at the airport, which was not much of an airport by American standards. Derry’s airport had only one landing strip and one take off strip. There are only about seven flights both arriving and departing from Derry airport everyday. Not many people visit Derry, and not many people leave.

When John picked me up from the airport we immediately drove to the Nerve Centre so that he could give me an early tour of both my place of employment for the summer and Derry in general. As we drove from the airport towards the Nerve Centre, I noticed the stereotypical Irish scenery: grey skies, rolling green hills, old men with wool hats riding bicycles, and sheep resting along the road. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland both seem to be covered with a green backdrop that always reminds you that you are on the Emerald Isle. The ride in John’s Volkswagen from the airport took me through the outskirts of Derry on narrow two-lane highways until we reached the fortified center city.

Derry was built with the intention of segregating Catholics from Protestants. The city’s most notable landmarks are the city walls. Derry’s city walls stand 20 feet tall. They were built in 1619 with the support of the British government to help protect the local Protestants from the majority Catholic population and the attack of King James. Though these walls were built nearly four centuries ago, the spirit of segregation and religious isolation that these walls originally represented is

still prevalent in Derry today. Within the wall’s brick borders lies the city center, the economic epicenter of Derry. The city center contains two malls, several small boutiques, restaurants, small businesses, a police station and the city’s only 4 star hotel.

Derry’s walls don’t hold the same significance today that they once had. During the Seize of Derry in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholic King James of England had sent troops to attack the city walls that protected thousands of Protestant and Presbyterians from his rule. The walls stand today as a testament of time and honor for many within the city, both Catholic, Protestant and tourists.

Walking around the circular 1.2 mile wall you see many similar sites: churches—both Catholic and Protestant—small houses, and local businesses. Though the sites may look the same, the attitudes and people change with nearly every step you take along the wall. You could walk 10 feet and change from a Catholic neighborhood to a Protestant one, and the only way you would be able to tell the difference is by the flags being flown, the murals on houses, or the colors on the curbs. The city’s walls give one the opportunity to gaze at Derry from all directions.

The walls across the street from the Nerve Center, which I ate lunch on nearly every day, looked onto the Bogside. The Bogside has been the most notorious and violent neighborhood of Derry for the past century, mainly because it is home to a disproportionate number of working-class and poor Catholics. From the walls looking onto the Bogside, one can see a Catholic church that stands tall above the thousands of small-connected houses that look like low-level housing projects of the southern United States. On many of these miniscule houses are murals depicting the historical events of this ghetto. The most striking and vivid mural is of a young man, with his face covered by a bandana, hurling a petrol bomb towards



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incoming Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.) officers during the Battle of the Bogside. The Battle of the Bogside was one of Derry's most violent and fierce battles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The conflict placed Bogside residents against the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Northern Ireland's infamously anti-Catholic police force. The Bogside residents were fighting for control of their neighborhoods from the R.U.C., which signified English rule. The intense battle lasted for three days and nights, leaving the R.U.C. completely outnumbered and exhausted. The situation forced the British army to take control of the situation, promising no further violence or English forces in the neighborhood.

During the Battle of the Bogside, petrol bombs and rock were the main forms of resistance residents used against the R.U.C. The mural appeals to many in the area because a large portion of the residents participated in defending their neighborhood. This celebration of guerilla warfare helps to remind Bogside residents of the struggle for segregation and the need for self-determination among Catholics in Northern Ireland.

I found the "petrol-bomber" to be an extremely strong image because I felt as if that mural was what this area wanted to be represented by. The strongest and most apparent image from Derry's walls looking onto the Bogside was this picture of a young man trying to kill or injure another in the defense of his home. This symbolism was something that followed me throughout my work in Derry. A clear and concrete representation of who you are and what you believed in was something that I knew I needed to establish during my time here because I knew people here took themselves, their history, their opinions, and their identities very seriously.

On the other side of the wall, one looks across the Foyle River, which separates the two sides of the city. The waterside is mainly Protestant, and the cityside is mainly Catholic. There isn't much of a difference in landscape or sights. Both are marked by stereotypical images of "urban" Ireland, with steep hills, small houses, narrow streets, and old men riding their bicycles. From the top of the wall looking onto the waterside, you see cannons aiming towards the Foyle River to ward off King James. From this same position at night, you can see hordes of people crowded into the city center and the peripheral area to make their nightly venture into the pubs.

### **The Nerve Centre**

Walking up the hills of Magazine Street, I am surrounded by the city's walls on my right and small businesses on my left. The Nerve Centre is about half way up the hill. It is comprised of two buildings, one of which is a converted hostel. The buildings are home to a café, a concert venue, rehearsal space for local bands, offices, computer clusters, recording studios and a movie theatre. All of these spaces are used to promote creative learning for those within Derry and Northern Ireland. The main building of the Center is home to Café Nervosa, the movie theatre, and a music venue. The lobby seems to be a meeting spot for Derry youths, as well as a place where one can learn what is going on that month in the Centre, and in other arts related events within Derry and Northern Ireland. During my first day at the Centre, John paraded me around the offices and buildings introducing me to nearly everyone who worked in the Nerve Centre and giving me a brief description of their jobs and a few extra tidbits about that person.

After the tour was over, John took me back to our office, the converted hostel, which looks as if it has been abandoned for many years. Our office was across from the two computer clusters that are used to teach computer classes to Derry youths and those searching for technical training. When John and I finally returned to our office, I was overwhelmed by the vast number of different jobs and amount of work done at the Centre. I had just been introduced to music producers, teachers, musicians, cartoonists, project managers, DJs and many people of various other occupations. With this confusion and curiosity, I asked John, "What do you guys do at the Nerve Centre?" John responded by stating, "We do everything." From my first day at work I really felt as if the Nerve Centre truly did everything. They had their grasp on so many different aspects of the culture and life in Derry that I was confused as to how the Centre's work related to the field of coexistence. John continued his description of the with detail and conviction in the work done there. "The Nerve Centre is all about creative learning, and

**Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland both seem to be covered with a green backdrop that always reminds you that you are on the Emerald Isle.**

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giving local youths and the local community the opportunity to express themselves in many various artistic forms. People in Derry are so sick of coexistence and programs that promote the same boring ideas that these kids have been through their entire lives. The Centre gives them the opportunity for them to do what they want with virtually no intrusion in dealing with creative and innovative forms of expression. Coexistence in Northern Ireland has become so taboo because of the conflict here that our job is to try and create an environment in which the community has the opportunity to express themselves.” John said one of the most important things about the Centre is that it is 100% inclusive, and that no matter what religion, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or handicap, it is one of the few places in all of Derry that fosters an environment that is open to all members of society.

Though John gave a brief description of the work done at the Centre, I still didn't really understand what they did until I began going to work everyday and being more involved. But, at this point I did understand that their mission was to promote creative learning and creativity to all members of Derry regardless of religion or race, the great dividers of Irish society. The Nerve Centre went beyond embracing just religious diversity—walking around the Centre, I was introduced to the only people of color I had seen in Northern Ireland up to that point.

And it wasn't just that there were other people of a similar complexion to me that made me feel as if the Centre practiced what they preached. My boss, John Peto, was an Englishman. I wasn't expecting my boss to be an Englishman; I had figured that since I was in a Catholic-majority city, the Catholics would be the only people who would really be concerned with the issues of coexistence and equity because it was in their best interest to create change in that society. Having John as my boss immediately broke down my preconceptions about the English and the Protestants in Northern Ireland. His good nature and humor allowed me to further probe him about the reasons why he decided to come to Northern Ireland. He said that he grew up in a working-class/middle-class neighborhood in a small town in Northern England and said that in his youth the only thing he knew about Derry and Northern Ireland was the conflict. “Growing up in England, I didn't really have any concern over Northern Ireland because I didn't feel as if what happened there affected me.” His interest in Northern Ireland and Derry came during his studies in England where he concentrated in sociology and Irish history. It was through his studies and with a scholarship to a master's program in Peace and Conflict Studies at the University Ulster Magee in Derry that he became immersed in the conflict and how it affects both English and Irish society. This interest led him to the Centre. John enjoyed the laid-back atmosphere that seems to be omnipresent in Derry and after studying and living there for a few years, he received a job from the Centre. He now holds the title of project manager at the Centre, but his duties include much more. He drives to Dublin or Belfast at least once a month to try to acquire donations and contributions from government and private organizations in order to fund many of the projects at the Centre. In between

monthly trips to Ireland's major cities, John is either filming a documentary for himself or the Centre, running presentations on various social issues in Northern Irish society, or just singing and doing paper work in his office. John is like the utility player on a baseball team: he does everything you need. And it's not just John; many people at the Centre perform duties that go beyond their job description. The various tasks, events, presentations, film series, and electronic music festivals are done with a vast amount of teamwork. Everyone seems to pitch in with their expertise or whatever help they can provide.

In the Nerve Centre, people work at their own pace. Workers in the office tend to come into work as they please, and deadlines are not as stressed here as in America. The radio was always on in our office, and it seemed as if a conversation was always taking place. This relaxed environment gave me the opportunity to learn more about my co-workers while getting work accomplished at the same time.

John seemed to enjoy living in Derry, but he always commented negatively when we drove through neighborhoods that he considered “to have identity issues.” These were neighborhoods that were exceedingly nationalist or unionist. These neighborhoods are littered with either the union jack and its colors or the Irish tricolor. In Northern Ireland, 90% of all neighborhoods have a demographic that is 90% either Protestant or Catholic. The divide in these communities is tremendous; to this day, the vast majority of grade school and high school students go to segregated schools. These aspects of life in Derry always seemed to aggravate John. The areas he deemed “to have identity issues” he felt consisted of people who cared more about disliking the opposing group rather than holding to their traditions and loving their own culture. He would continue by saying how “sick people around here are,” people care so much about upholding their identity that they neglect the segregation that this pride causes. The best opportunity most people in Derry have to develop relationships with someone of another religion is in integrated schools, at a blue-collar job, or in the service industry. Segregation in Northern Ireland is real, and the division between both groups runs deep. The histories of segregation and hatred towards one another have left this country in a situation where isolation is accepted and often looked at in a positive light.

John continued telling me of some more negative aspects of Derry, and he warned me of the possible racism that I would encounter in my time here. He told me that, “most people aren't racist, they just have never seen or met a black person in their life.” I found his honesty refreshing because I did notice many people blatantly staring at me during my first few weeks in Derry. When I arrived in Dublin, the only racial minorities I saw worked wage jobs and often faced verbal and physical discrimination. Derry residents seem to be completely fascinated by people with a natural tan because the minority population is so miniscule. John told me that when his cousin, who is half Jamaican and half English, visited him in Derry during one summer, he noticed people staring and making rude comments about her hair and skin color. His candor allowed me to better

understand my surroundings and assured me that people really were staring at me while walking down the street. There are so few non-whites in Derry that to see a person of color on the street is something that would stand out in one's day. Though I was conscious of my ethnicity the entire time I was in Derry, I was never victim to blatant verbal or physical harassment. However, many people of color in Northern Ireland face such harsh treatment every day.

### **Fieldtrip**

After getting accustomed to the laid-back atmosphere, the sharp accent, and cars driving on the opposite side of the street, I ventured out with Gary and Nile, a cartoonist and a music/digital producer from the Centre, to a Protestant elementary school 15 minutes outside of Derry city. Before this fieldtrip, the work I had done in the Centre focused on getting me more acquainted with the conflict and culture of Northern Ireland. We arrived at this segregated Protestant school at around 10 a.m. The school was a one level structure that had a large football pitch adjacent to the school, where we were greeted by students kicking a football around while wearing their green and black school uniforms.

The reason for the trip was to finish up an animation which these kids created, directed, drew and for which they produced the music. This was the first time I really saw and understood what the Centre was all about. It is a place that really promotes creative learning for all children in Northern Ireland; it's the kids who come up with the concepts of the story they want to tell and how they want to tell it. This is what I like most about the work done there, it places a great deal of responsibility on the kids to let their creativity shine, instead of having a bunch of artists telling kids what they should draw and how they should draw it. The animations done by school children in Northern Ireland are mainly sponsored by Peace and Reconciliation grants which the European Union has given to Northern Ireland. The sponsorship of these programs by government officials throughout Europe gives many children the opportunity to express their identity and create their own stories.

At the Protestant elementary school, the guys told me that we had to record the music for an animation, which these students had produced. At first I was shocked because these kids were no more than seven or eight years old, yet they wrote, animated and even produced the music of their very own cartoon. What surprised me even more was that the cartoon had nothing to do with the conflict of Northern Ireland. The animation was done to support the creative learning of these kids. These kids were able to use their imagination in any way they wanted with virtually no intrusion by those from the Centre. In the States, many people would find this money wasteful because it didn't really have a purpose in the school's curriculum. But in Northern Ireland, teachers, students and parents find these sorts of activities to be a positive investment into the community.

I was received extremely warmly by the students, partly because I was a foreigner. I had thought that these kids wouldn't be very accepting of me because of my Nationalist name, Patrick, but in reality the reception I got was phenomenal. The kids wouldn't stay quiet, they kept asking me who I thought would win Euro 2004 or if I'd come back more often. I guess I held more preconceived notions about these kids than they had of me. I am glad that this happened because it showed me that not everyone living in Northern Ireland thought of the other side as their enemy. The warm embrace I got from these schoolchildren opened me up to the idea that the majority of people on both sides don't hate one another and would rather live in a peaceful manner.

After this somewhat inspiring turn of events and once the music for the animation was recorded, Gary, the animator, and I ventured off to an integrated school. Integrated schools are a fairly new concept in Northern Ireland, with this school in existence for only 10 years. Integrated schools means that both Catholics and Protestants attend the school, but at the same time I noticed many more racial minority students as well. Here our job was to engage an arts class to begin thinking of an animation they would like to create that is associated with the school's 10-year anniversary. The students in the class were around 15 or 16 years old and were all extremely talented animators. They all wanted to do something humorous to insult teachers, Protestants, and Catholics, showing how ignorant all sides were during the conflict and in the present. In brainstorming for ideas, the students began to tell me why they chose to come to an integrated school. They all had similar answers, that in order for society to progress they felt that these sorts of institutions were necessary to help break down stereotypes and to really begin to coexist. They were all very glad to go to integrated schools because they feel as if now they have more friends than those who go to segregated schools and this was something that they were very proud of. The knowledge of these kids was incredible; they all knew and felt that they were part of history and progress, but at the same time they felt as if integrated schools were the right thing to do. The optimism expressed by these skater punk teenagers was impressive. Their vision of an integrated society was something which they hoped they would see in their lifetime, but in reality felt would never come to fruition.

### **The Arts and Coexistence**

On the cab ride back from the integrated school, Gary and I began talking about why he works as an animator with the Centre. Gary, a Catholic, said "I like working with kids because they are much more honest than adults. The candor of kids I feel allows the issues of peace and integration to be expressed without any fear of being politically correct in order to appease someone. I like working on animation projects because we give people the opportunity to use their creative juices in order to express themselves however they choose to do so. Next week I'll be traveling to Ramallah, Palestine for a few weeks to aid in animation projects with young Palestinian artists. The arts,

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even in areas of conflict, provide people with a creative outlet in which they are able to express themselves and their ideas instead of taking up arms. And sometimes when art reaches its greatest potential, it is able to act as a form of resistance without resorting to violence.” Gary’s initiative in promoting the arts as

a form of resistance and a way to prevent further violence in areas of conflict demonstrated the strength of many people’s conviction in the arts. He discussed the arts as a tool of healing and expression that has a power that often exceeds that of political bureaucracies. His belief in the arts led him to one of the most dangerous areas in the entire world, Palestine, where the loss of human life is often overlooked by the West. Gary’s departure to Palestine provided me with further hope in the arts and in coexistence. I had finally been witness to and friends with someone who continually risked his life by traveling to extremely dangerous parts of the globe to teach animation and encourage artistic expression within many of the world’s most oppressed and subordinated people.

The arts provide a space for people to examine and question the society that one lives in. In Derry, the Nerve Center is a physical space that promotes the use of the arts in both the Protestant and Catholic communities. The Centre is a mediator in the artistic expression of Derry.

*Artists can serve as mediators. In divided communities where violence has impaired people’s capacities to listen, artists can use the qualities of receptivity to facilitate expression, healing, and reciprocal understanding. The qualities of listening associated with aesthetic attention—alert but calm, emotional but cognitively aware, engaged but detached—are precisely the kinds of presence that can help people put their experiences into words. Also, artists’ listening to those who have been traumatized by violence can begin to restore a victim’s capacity and willingness to hear the stories and experiences of the other (Cohen 272).*

The Centre acts as a mediator similar to that of an artist because it is an institution that encourages creativity and healing through the arts by its initiative of creative learning to integrate Derry’s community

After spending several days traveling to schools throughout Derry County, aiding students in the production of their animations, I returned back to the Center to continue learning more about the history and conflict in Northern Ireland, particularly in Derry. The history of segregation in Derry is something that has come to shape and define the city’s identity. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Protestants locked themselves within the city’s walls to protect themselves from the Catholic King James, to the great segregation in Derry’s communities today, namely the Bogside and Fountain, segregation has always been and continues to be a prevalent part of the social fabric.

In all of Derry, religious and ethnic segregation are the way of life, and many people view living in hegemony as the only way to live peacefully. Nearly every area of Derry is marked to indicate which religious group has the stronghold of the area. In Catholic sections you would see graffiti saying, “FUCK THE QUEEN” or “Brits Out,” or you would see curbs painted with the orange, white and green of the Irish flag. In Protestant areas, one would find Union Jacks waving off of flagpoles and graffiti celebrating the history of Protestants in Northern Ireland. It seemed as if Derry was almost completely closed off to the ideas of integration. The only place it seemed that people of different religions and ethnicities interact and work with one another, outside of integrated schools and wage labor jobs, was in the Centre.

Back at the Centre I became very interested in the issues and ideas around segregation in Derry. I wanted a perspective outside that of local Derry people to understand the conflict and segregation. I felt as if I was hearing the same story from both sides. Members of both communities would tell me that “we can’t trust these people; they have historically participated in terrorism against my people and my family.” The heat and intensity of those I spoke to on the issue of segregation within Derry reminded me of the fear many whites had of integration in schools and other public facilities in the 1950s and 1960s within the US. This parallel interested me in gaining the perspective of someone who is non-white and lives in this culture and society. So once again I was drawn back to the Nerve Centre, the home of integration within Derry. I found a black Englishman named Kwame, one of the local DJ’s and musical technicians who works at the Nerve Centre. Kwame and I had a strong relationship because we were the only two black guys who worked in the Centre and at times it felt as if we were the only two black people in all of Derry.

Kwame was around 6’2” with thin long dreadlocks. He was known as the best DJ in town and also as one of the most popular people in town. He was in his late twenties and a self-proclaimed nomad. He wasn’t really sure why I had asked him to meet over a pint of Guinness. My intentions were to ask him a few questions about Northern Ireland. We met at Sandinos, my home away from home, where we sat alongside “Free Palestine” flags and murals of Ché Guevara in the poorly lit upstairs corner of the bar. He ordered and paid for both of our pints and as he approached our table with the beers he said to me with a warm smile, “what’s the crack, brother?,” in a strong English accent. I simply asked him, “why are you here?” He responded by stating, “I am here because I love music. I think that music is a tool in healing people and if I could help spread healing and love in this area of the world I feel as if it’s a good thing.” I was surprised by his answer because I thought he would have a much deeper and meaningful response, but like my question he kept it simple. He continued by discussing why he chose Northern Ireland. “I’ve been spinning records since I was a wee lad, and Derry has been so warm to me my entire time here. I’ve witnessed the troubles in the ’90s and I have seen the impact music can make on people. Though people live very segregated, music is one of those few

platforms in which people from all communities come together in a casual manner and just have a good time. Music is the only way integration takes shape here, it's at the Centre or here in Sandinos where people come get drunk and dance to music without taking into consideration religion, race or ethnicity. That's why I'm here, I'm trying to better off society by a little." His words struck a chord with me. Though he wasn't doing the most intellectual work, he was providing a vital service to the community by facilitating events that cater towards integration in an otherwise segregated society. At first, it seemed to me as if his work was just a superficial attempt towards bringing people together without much intellectual justification to support his claims. Though music has the ability to bring rival factions into the same building for a few hours, it doesn't solve any of the political or social ills of the community. The conversation that I had with Kwame made me question his intentions and motivations for working in Derry. Though his mind and heart were in the right place, I wasn't convinced in the power of music. As a hard-headed individual, I don't fully believe in something until I witness it and the account Kwame gave me of music's relation to coexistence was something I looked at cynically and as a superficial form of integration.

### **Not being white in Derry**

In my conversations with Kwame and other people who weren't of European descent, I discovered that I wasn't alone in my feelings of latent racism within the Northern Ireland society. John, though a white Englishman, had always mentioned how he had continually been witness to racism within Irish society, especially after his cousin's visit. He also told me of how Catholics and Protestants refer to the Police Service of Northern Ireland as the Black Bastards. I found this phrase to be very offensive because it is in so many words calling the police niggers, and this was a term used widely by many in Derry and throughout Northern Ireland. My flatmate this summer, Toshi, was a Japanese student who was working for his PhD in Peace and Coexistence Studies at the University of Ulster. He was often the victim of verbal discrimination because of his Japanese accent and physical characteristics. Though he took it in stride, I always had the urge to attack the fool who opened his mouth.

In Derry, every black person I saw either gave me a signal of acknowledgement or came up to me and started talking to me. The first time I really noticed the importance of acknowledging one another in such a small community was when I was walking down Foyle Street, the main street in town. I saw a black woman with her two children, one boy and one girl, in their school uniforms. Her son turned to look in my direction and saw my large Afro, and when he saw me he started to smile and proceeded to tap his sister on the shoulder, pointing out to her that there were other black people in town. After he grabbed his sister's attention, he threw up a fist in the air for black power, so I threw a fist right back at him. I found this to be a nice interaction between a couple of complete strangers and me. Our

race had bonded us in an area where we are so few. That moment helped me to realize that all over the globe, many black people still have a certain appreciation and acknowledgement of a similar struggle endured by others despite location.

Even though I am Irish and I take pride in my Irish heritage, I don't look Irish and in Derry, people didn't perceive me to be Irish. This in many ways has taken away from my pride in being Irish. Being both Irish and black in Ireland has shown me that the Irish have many racist stereotypes and fears of blacks. The racist tendencies I encountered in Northern Ireland made me reject many aspects of my Irish identity.

The racial discrimination that exists promotes stereotypes that I as a black man was raised to reject. I still know and believe that many Irish people aren't racist, and it's through these people that I take pride in my Irish heritage.

### **Music: Derry's Greatest Integrator**

The week following my conversation with Kwame, the Centre began its annual Celtronic festival in which electronic, rock, jazz, hip-hop, punk, metal bands, and many other music groups come to perform from all over Europe. This event helped me to better understand what Kwame was talking about because until this point, the greatest levels of integration I found anywhere in Derry were at the integrated schools I visited. During one of the first nights of the festival a friend of mine, Nile, a hip-hop DJ, and his crew, the Silent Assassins, took to the stage. This was an unusual crew for Derry not only because it was a hip-hop group in an area dominated by guitar rock, but also because they were as religiously diverse as you can get in Ireland, being a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Muslim. They stepped on stage looking a little nervous in front of a crowd of 300. The hot and sticky club on the top floor of the Centre was packed with Derry locals in both Celtic and Rangers jerseys, which seemed stunning to me. The last time I was in a bar with adults wearing opposing team jerseys there was a fight that led to the police escorting half of the bar to a local prison. It was striking that Fountain and Bogside locals were there with no reason to antagonize one another, but the most stunning thing was that the majority of people in the club were under the age of 18. The youth were more active than their elders in participating in integrated events. Why does a group of 20 or so Irish kids have greater power than the local authorities to create an environment where Protestants and Catholics can hang out peacefully? Even after my trip, I am not sure if I am able to answer this question. But regardless of the fact that this integration may be superficial because it is driven by intoxication and loud bass, it is important to recognize music's strength in enabling people of both communities to come together under the same roof. Before the Centre, there were virtually no concerts or musical events in Derry because if the event was held in a certain neighborhood, people from the other group would feel intimidated and unwelcome. The Centre's neutral location within the walls of

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Derry and policy of non-discrimination caters to members of both communities. In this instance music may not have been as great of a force in creating an environment of integration as the policies, location and mission of the Centre.

### **West Belfast**

Though I recognize that there is a vast amount of segregation within Northern Ireland, I don't think that it is comparable to the apartheid and coercive segregation that many blacks faced in South Africa and other African nations. In Northern Ireland it is much harder to tell who your enemy is than in South Africa. Both Catholics and Protestants are white and have the privilege of invisibility, being unable to physically distinguish between who is of what religion. The best way to determine someone's identity is by which football jersey they wear or what neighborhood they are from. Neighborhoods throughout Northern Ireland are small ghettos of people of the same identity who litter their streets, curbs, walls and buildings with decorations that represent their identity. In my travels in Ireland, I found no better example of segregation and frustration than in West Belfast. On one of John's many trips into Belfast for the Nerve Centre he gave me a tour of the home of the IRA and UVF during the troubles. Every block is lined with identity markers. The Protestant side was filled with red, white and blue flags hanging over the streets in preparation for the 12th of July, the day of the Orange Order Parades. The Catholic areas have many murals depicting various events and people who are of importance to that community, such as the Christ-like depiction of the hunger striker, Bobby Sands. I really got an odd feeling when I was walking through both areas because I know of the great history of violence that occurred on the streets in the area. On nearly ever corner, there was a plaque in dedication to someone who was killed on that street. Violence there, at least the history of violence there, is inescapable. It truly was everywhere because in addition to the plaques on every corner, there were murals depicting local paramilitary figures as icons that should be worshipped and adorned by the entire community.

I first walked around Sandy Row, the Protestant stronghold in West Belfast. The mural that welcomes you to Sandy Row shows a paramilitary soldier standing with a gun claiming that the UVF will always defend Ulster's Protestants. This mural was stronger than the ones that I had seen in Derry, and a true advocate of violence. Many murals in this area were of local paramilitary members with gun in hand. Through these murals I distinguished that the people there have had a lot to deal with during the troubles and that this was a place where much of the troubles occurred. Another interesting aspect of culture in West Belfast that I noticed in Sandy Row was an Israeli flag hanging from a bar, which I did not see in Catholic communities. In Sandy Row and in other Protestant communities within Northern Ireland, people believed that Israel was a legitimate state and sided with Israel on the issue of the Middle East.

In the Republican stronghold of West Belfast, however, I saw graffiti that read "Free Palestine, Boycott Israeli Goods." The Catholic communities in Northern Ireland believe that Israel is an occupier of Palestine and feel a certain level of sympathy with the Palestinians because they feel that the Catholics and Palestinians are in the same boat. Catholics feel their situation is parallel to that of Palestinians because they feel as if they had their land stolen from them and are an oppressed minority within their society. Though I can see how both sides take their positions, I feel that many people from both communities believe in some of their beliefs as part of their identity without considering the facts of the situation.

At one point in West Belfast, in a Republican area, John pointed to a bar and said, "during the conflict, in order to have gone you had to have served a political sentence in jail". That is how crazy the situation was in West Belfast. Local institutions widely accepted and supported people doing violent acts towards the opposing communities and in many ways praised people for these acts. The bar was one of the nicest bars in that part of West Belfast, though it was secured to the teeth, with huge fences and security guards with baldheads, who were so muscular it appeared that they didn't have necks, standing outside guarding the bar. The bar must have been the place that many youths aspired to get into. In order to go to the "cool" bar you have to kill or do something really bad, while in the States in order to get into the "cool" bar you have to dress well and have pretty girls with you. Being in the heart of hostility and conflict in Northern Ireland made me question if integration is ever going to succeed in this deeply divided society.

This fear was supported by the events of the very next day, July 12<sup>th</sup> the beginning of the marching season in Northern Ireland. The marching season is often a time marked with violence and community tensions. On this day, Protestants celebrate King William defeating the Catholic King James in Ulster. The conflict on this day happens because Protestants often march through Catholic areas to signal that all of Ulster is Protestant. This is what my Irish Catholic friend Chris described as a big "fuck-you-we-still-run-this-place" type of thing to do. And yet, this day is also a day of picnics and family celebrations for many others. At the same time, many Catholics feel that some of the messages of the parade echo a sentiment of cultural superiority among Protestants.

This year in West Belfast, I witnessed Catholics riot against the police after a march in Protestant West Belfast. The Orange Order wasn't allowed to march down the main streets in the Catholic areas of West Belfast. Though the march itself didn't progress through West Belfast, the police did allow for the parade's supporters to march down the streets of the Republican stronghold while drunk. What irritated the Catholics was that these people were forbidden to walk down these streets during that day, but were afterwards protected by a police and army escort. At this point in the day both sides were drunk and when emotions are high and mixed with alcohol, violence is almost

inevitable. Many Catholic youths found the police escort to be an insult by the police and Parade Commission of Northern Ireland. With these feelings of resentment, many Catholics took to violence to defend their territory. It started off with rocks, then escalated into a mob of teens and adults finding any means possible to prevent any further intrusion by their enemies. People ran up to cops and beat them with bottles, the police's own batons, and with whatever shank they could find. The riot continued with people flipping over cop cars, and eventually, as is typical in Northern Ireland society, a number of petrol bombs were hurled at the police vehicles in the hopes of pushing the police out of the neighborhoods.

That night I took my questions about the day's events to Sandinos in order to try to come to terms with what I saw and felt. As soon as I met up with my friends Chris, a Derry local, and Paul, who had just returned from Liberia as an Irish peacekeeper, they immediately started discussing the events of the day. Paul began by saying that he thought that segregation was a feasible and non-violent way to create coexistence. His comments shocked me after a semester of listening to how integration and getting to know one another is the best way to create relationships which foster integration and change in my coexistence class. Paul was someone whose word I took seriously because he had been out there in the field working and fighting for peace in Africa. His belief that integration is more harmful than good shocked me. I found it hard to believe that peace situations such as Liberia and Rwanda were only created through the use of force and in some cases violence by international peacekeepers.

After Paul told me about his work in Liberia, we began to further discuss coexistence. He told me some of his ideas, which were contradictory to what I felt. We were talking about the issue of coexistence and what I thought would best help create coexistence in Northern Ireland. Almost instantly, I began talking about integration and creating greater intercommunity relationships. I told him that people must better understand one another to live peacefully and must be involved in one another's community in order to create a certain degree of coexistence. It was funny because though he thought what I said was interesting, he countered by stating that he thought segregation is the best way to keep and maintain coexistence. This way each group was able to sustain their identities and not be bombarded with the other group. He gave me the example of Russia and the U.S. during the Cold War. One of the greatest feuds between nations ever, but, since they were at such a distance from one another, nothing of significance ever happened. I found it extremely interesting to hear what he had to say about segregation as a positive method towards coexistence because he had worked on the grounds of a civil war to try to create peace in Liberia. He made me question why I believe in integration, and at the same time opened me up to another way of thought. Can a divided country in conflict be cured of its ills by separating enemy groups from one another?

I learned in my time in Derry and Northern Ireland that isolation and segregation only perpetuate stereotypes, tensions and a lack of understanding among communities. In a society where inter-religious marriage is looked down upon, any efforts for integration should be encouraged and alternative forms of coexistence related activities should be further sponsored. The work I witnessed by the Centre in trying to promote new outlets of coexistence and integration should be looked at as a model throughout the nation in providing communities with opportunities to promote integration. Otherwise, Northern Ireland will continue to be a society stricken with the continual fear of violence and a society that is psychologically and physically divided.

### **Telling the Facts**

During my last few weeks at the Centre, John and a group of Centre filmmakers had a documentary of theirs air on BBC2, *The Battle of the Bogside*, which John bragged about weeks in advance to its showing. The film portrayed the events of the conflict through interviews with key players in the battle and through footage of the events from those days. This film gave first-hand insight from both Protestants and Catholics. The film portrayed the conflict as objectively as possible while highlighting the issues and reasons for the battle.

The documentary was extremely vivid, placing the audience in the heart of the fight. This film represented the Nerve Centre's mission of providing an artistic production and creative description of key events of the area to allow for all to attempt to better understand themselves and their "enemies". The documentary was a collaborative effort of Catholics and Protestants who made a conscious effort to give both perspectives and realities during the conflict. Though many hardcore Loyalists felt as if the documentary was too critical of the R.U.C. and British government, more felt as if the movie gave an accurate depiction of the events.

The Nerve Centre's approach towards coexistence is to educate through creativity. The non-intrusive approach of coexistence at the Centre allows for people who are sick of force-fed old-fashioned coexistence practices. The Centre creates an extremely casual atmosphere that doesn't pressure people to change their opinions or perspectives. Derry is a place of strong conviction, and the Centre allows people to express themselves creatively while simultaneously creating an integrated community through the arts. Everyone I met in Derry, whether Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Asian, Black, or White, all looked at the Center as a positive investment in their communities. Everyone in Derry appreciated the educational value and importance of the Nerve Centre. In a place where segregation is a way of life, the Nerve Centre provides an outlet where integration, coexistence and creativity are accomplished, even if they are accomplished on a small scale.

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# 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.

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## 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.**

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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 *kromath* 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 *fabran!*” 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 canvases 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...

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!"*

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.

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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup>, 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 WACtivist, 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 splashes 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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Artist Proof Studio, Johannesburg, South Africa

# Artist Proof in South Africa: When Does Optimism Silence Memory?

Amy Schiller '06



## Our Hearts Were Touched by Fire

A skittering scooter bumping over the brick path breaks my early morning reverie, my all too brief mental retreat from the metropolitan sensory onslaught. Downtown Johannesburg is teeming with minivan “taxis,” each transporting double their allowable number of passengers, crammed 10-deep with workers making their hour-long commute to work from the township to the city. Alongside the taxis are shiny double-decker grey and blue buses. Their whooshing brakes muffle the chaotic rumbling of vans rushing by with doors unsuccessfully held closed with pieces of string. This particular square is itself a bit of an oasis, perhaps the only spot en route to work where daydreaming is possible. A tranquil plot of grass set amid the brick trail leads to the entrance of the imposing tan stone structure of the Johannesburg public library. The cloudy midwinter sky brings the buildings into sharp relief, their rigid structures posing a stiff contrast to the vibrancy and instability of the street traffic.

Several of those buildings display murals or photos of art projects, such as performance artist Robin Rhode posing on the ground with motion lines drawn to make it appear as if he is flying through the air to make a slam dunk, or jumping over a ledge on a skateboard. These images bear the trademark of “Johannesburg: ArtCity,” one of several urban renewal projects in this area, designed to highlight and celebrate the creativity and artistic activity flowing in Johannesburg at the moment, ideally for commercial growth (as opposed to purely aesthetic enhancement). Past the library, the sidewalks become increasingly more crowded. Vendors sell everything from underwear in cardboard boxes, to plates with individual bunches of bruised apples or bananas (all of which the flies are exploring with no protest), or gaudily beaded jewelry spread on a worn quilt. The walkways are cracked, buckling and undulating under my feet. These sidewalk entrepreneurs are laid-back in their sales approach, often merely sitting by their wares without so much as a nod to prospective customers. In a particular spot behind a

concrete divider I often see a sleeping man covered in newspaper, so still he could be mistaken for comatose. Today there is a pile of human excrement, apparently of recent disposal, in that spot.

After I cross the street, the next block is bordered on one side by the gleaming glass-and-steel Johannesburg Stock Exchange, rising triumphantly on its own concrete island. The other side is chockablock with storefronts housed in crumbling colonial buildings, their wood pillars painted to look like iron scrollwork, their balconies sagging. Many of them have huge colorful velour blankets-cum-rugs-cum-all-purpose coverings and decorations piled to the ceiling in the box-like quarters. These stores are managed by mostly Muslim proprietors of Indian descent, who more than make up for their black African counterparts’ lack of persistence. “Five rand, five rand!” “Come in, see our stock! Lowest prices!” “Ten rand, ten rand!” Upon entering the Newtown district, the artistic and cultural hub of Jo’burg, the commitment to regeneration and regrowth becomes even more explicit. The fence of a construction site advertises the forthcoming science museum with paintings of bright blue fish and orange phrases extolling its virtues. A wrecking ball suspended from a crane carves out larger holes in an old apartment building, replaced by façades of brand-new condominiums, painted with bright red backgrounds and blue and beige trim. The color scheme invokes the same design on the colonial buildings across the street, now in disrepair. Ironic, perhaps, that the architects are trying to idealize such a bitter and corrupt past that took place under such a beautiful, wealthy façade. On the other hand, the purpose is clearly to attract higher-income homeowners to downtown, a goal not uncommon for American cities as well. In that sense, I find this an optimistic real estate development, given that it is in the heart of downtown Johannesburg, so consciously avoided that some 40-year residents, all white, of the suburban areas have yet to visit.

The Newtown district where Artist Proof Studio (APS) is located contains many institutions that played a historical role



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in using artistic expression to protest political oppression. The Market Theatre, for instance, which is across the street from APS, was founded in Johannesburg in 1976 by the late Barney Simon and Mannie Manim and went on to become internationally renowned as the “Theatre of the Struggle.” It is the theater where the world-famous play *Sarafina* was first performed, telling a powerful story about children fighting against the oppression of their everyday lives. In the 1980’s it was one of the few places where whites and blacks could mix and share on equal terms. The Theatre’s mission statement says that it seeks to “provide a voice to the voiceless” and maintain a high level of artistic excellence and integrity.

Across the street is the deceptively named Bus Factory, the home of APS, along with several other initiatives of the Ministry of Arts and Culture. The Bus Factory’s name recognizes its history and progress as a building, the fact that it too has been refashioned and rebuilt after years as a storage facility for broken-down buses. Certainly its gray corrugated metal walls and high ceilings give it the unmistakable coldness of an industrial building. Yet the craft displays are quite the opposite: meticulous square patches of stone, glass, or sand in flat wood enclosures containing everything from smooth, painstakingly realistic wooden figurines carved with rudimentary tools to wicker baskets and obelisks twice my height. Bamboo racks are draped with colorful embroidered tapestries showing tableaux of animals and nature, squat round white and red candles form a pattern of an AIDS ribbon, and two-foot high wire animals tend to their six-inch tall “children.” The café to the side is stocked with coffee, snacks, and “bunny chow,” a popular delicacy consisting of French fries, hot dogs, cheese and a spicy condiment, sandwiched between two slices of white bread. The entire space is scrubbed clean and guarded by security guards from the Arts and Culture Ministry in neon yellow and green uniforms.

Towards the back of the factory is a false wall that is simply the divider between the various art studios and offices and the craft display area. Past this wall is the entrance to the APS. This is a new space for APS, after a tragic fire last year destroyed the studio, taking the life of one of the founders as well. Across the street, not even 50 feet from the Bus Factory, the old APS still exists as a pile of smoke-darkened rubble, enclosed by a chain-link fence. From the moment you enter the new studio, there is a clear emphasis on remembering the past and rebuilding from that traumatic experience. The front lobby is the Nhlanhla Xaba Gallery, in memory of the “father” of Artist Proof. This space is far larger than

the old studio, thanks to grants and donations. On the first floor of the studio are the computer room, several offices, a boardroom/kitchen, and a workroom for the women’s embroidery group, full of cheerful felt hand-stitched stuffed animals and books. Leading to the second floor are the stair railings hung with pieces of the old studio structure, much like those scraps of metal and cardboard hung on the guardrail on the top of the second-floor balcony. The rusty metal scraps and twisted wire mesh are a stark, though not uncomplimentary, contrast to the furnishings in the administrative offices, including blond wood and steel desks and ergonomic chairs that one would expect to find in a flourishing American NGO.

APS was founded in 1990, when Kim Berman, a young, idealistic printmaker, returned from Boston, where she trained and worked for nine years, to her home in South Africa. Her dream was to contribute to a new democratic South Africa by founding a community printmaking studio that could train talented, disadvantaged youth who otherwise would have no opportunity for training or employment as artists. To realize her vision, Kim sold all of her possessions to purchase a French Tool Press, known to printmakers as the Rolls Royce of presses. In Johannesburg, she found a partner in Nhlanhla Xaba, an artist from Soweto.

Nhlanhla Xaba first studied art at the influential Rorke’s Drift Centre in KwaZulu Natal. The center closed down in 1981, soon after he had joined. In 1986, he attended the African Institute of Art at the Funda Centre in Soweto, where he trained as an art teacher and taught both children and adults. Nhlanhla came to the APS in 1991 as a teacher. He was the winner of the 1998 Standard Bank Young Artists award, and was highly regarded as a valuable mentor to many of the young students of the Studio. He had two young children at the time of his death.

**The rusty metal scraps and twisted wire mesh are a stark, though not uncomplimentary, contrast to the furnishings in the administrative offices, including blond wood and steel desks and ergonomic chairs that one would expect to find in a flourishing American NGO.**

Berman, a native South African, participated in the anti-apartheid movement both in South Africa and in the United States, particularly with her provocative prints. One of her works features pictures of people who participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) together with quotes that demonstrate the brutality and lack of remorse that many white South Africans maintained even while confessing morally reprehensible acts. The piece is titled "Playing Cards of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An Incomplete Deck" (1999). Berman is an example of how art and activism are inextricably fused for many South African artists. Her print series is largely a criticism of the TRC, a crucial part of the new South African identity. Her pieces reveal the callousness of the perpetrators and the cost for the national psyche to hear in detail about horrific crimes committed for 50 years that went unpunished.

The TRC process, which began in 1995, was the most ambitious and public truth commission in history. The commission invited victims to share their stories and to state for public record the atrocities that they suffered, while white officers who perpetuated apartheid could come forward as well and give a full and honest disclosure of their acts in exchange for amnesty. The particularly public style of the TRC—whose hearings were broadcast daily on television and radio and reported on the front page of every newspaper—has been criticized for reducing black suffering to a form of spectacle. Antjie Krog, an award winning South African journalist who covered the TRC for SABC, the most popular South African news radio station, is the most notable example of such social commentators. She speaks to the simultaneous pain and relief of hearing the tragic voices of survivors of attacks and the emotionless repetition of the perpetrators of bombs planted, beatings committed and murders calculated. In her memoir *Country of My Skull*, Krog writes of the psychological stress that she suffered as a journalist while hearing litanies of horrific reports day after day, and asking herself how people from her country, from her ethnic group in particular (she is Afrikaner, i.e. a descendant of Dutch settlers, the most influential group in apartheid government) could possess such cruelty. "The [families of the] victims ask the hardest of ... questions: How is it possible that the person I loved so much lit no spark of humanity in you?"

The TRC is a useful reference point for demonstrating the catharsis of a society bearing witness and reclaiming memory for victims of oppression. Their empowerment emerges when they reclaim their identities, citizenship, and agency by breaking the code of silence, both enforced by the government and imposed by the culture. At the same time, it brings the corresponding questions about whether the display of reconciliation through amnesty, and the optimistic statement such a decision makes about the ideological foundations of the new national character, are in fact just and ethical to the victims of oppression. Did the TRC sacrifice justice for goodwill among South Africans? Does South Africa have to ignore the past's harsh moral failures by emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation to give the image of a Rainbow Nation any credibility and viability? Art and creativity can play

several different roles in affirming or dismantling the way South African businesses, government, and people construct a South African identity, by emphasizing one dimension or the other on the continuum between raw trauma and blithe confidence.

South Africa still suffers severe inequality, particularly with regard to access to education and job skills that would allow more blacks to be upwardly mobile. Yet the level of social criticism veers from one extreme to the other, depending on the issues being discussed, the medium used and the artists' individual perspective. In one advertisement for Woolworths, several multiracial South Africans, including an artist, a choreographer and a deejay, pose with exuberant, optimistic expressions alongside personal quotes that express their enthusiasm for using creative work to reflect South African society. A fashion designer says, "Africa has always been my muse. She is sexy, alluring, sensuous, regal, and exotic. All those qualities combine to make a great fashion statement." A deejay says "It's great to be South African right now... There's a great sense of possibility... Everywhere you turn someone is creating something new. It's invigorating." The significance of this text is two-fold: one, the artists featured can express optimism and pride in their identity as South Africans, something that most people would not have said before 1994. Secondly, a major commercial company can advertise that optimism using faces of different races as a legitimate reflection of South African society and attitudes.

The very existence of APS is proof of the success of Kim and Nhlanhla's efforts. Since 1992, when the APS opened, it has trained hundreds of artists in all aspects of printmaking. By its tenth anniversary, over 50 artists were actively involved with the studio as students, teachers, and outreach program coordinators. Its artists have exhibited and led workshops nationally and internationally. Kim's faith that art could serve to empower the disadvantaged and contribute to social transformation was validated. As she said, "APS was built by joint energy, love and passion." Such progress does not mean, however, that these artists will abdicate their role as activists and social critics. The social reality that South Africans face every day is complex mixture of hopeful progress and painful reality, but artists in South Africa, certainly at APS, try to uncover the complex and sometimes disheartening reality beneath the relentlessly optimistic catch-phrases.

Even as much of the public art in South Africa demonstrates a flourishing of creativity for commercial purposes, or in some cases, personal expression absent of explicit social commentary, artists at APS are continuing the South African tradition of applying artistic creativity to the purpose of social criticism. These artists are not targeted by adverts for expensive clothes placed in magazines that cater primarily to whites. These artists have different stories to tell, informed by their ongoing struggles in the townships, seeing how the reality of apartheid continues to manifest itself in harmful ways on blacks in South Africa.

One print featured in the downstairs gallery shows two pigs wearing human masks watching a human-like form raping a young child. The inclusion of text in the print (the child is five

months old) articulates a shocking truth about the deterioration of human standards, saying that we should not insult swine by comparing ourselves to animals when we rape children. The piece is by Paul Molete, a teacher at the Studio and last year's winner of the prestigious Brett Kibble award for outstanding South African artists. He has also done two other works that portray positively young children who appear to have survived abuse, but these are not displayed in the gallery. The decision to display only the raw brutality of the prevalence of child rape (including infant rape) demonstrates a desire to balance out the relentlessly sunny optimism on display in so many other areas of South African society.

The tension between optimism and burial of trauma is apparent in the students' portrayals of a painful event unique to APS: the fire that destroyed the old studio. Along the walls of the staircase are huge multimedia collages of human figures, created in art therapy workshops after the fire. The collages represent humans rising from the ashes, each in a different pose. Behind Plexiglas coverings, these life-size figures are all of a similar, genderless, rounded human form, like a character on a children's television show, or a traced body outline. One reaches up and out, its arms embracing the imaginary sunlight. Another collage has two figures reaching towards each other in an embrace, viewed from the side. On the bottom of each piece is a layer of dark shading, representing the fire and ashes from which these universal characters emerge with strength, openness, and support for each other.

Upstairs is the studio area. The stone walls and lack of indoor heating make APS cold in the winter, and the architecture does not allow for a lot of natural light. But the students, almost all of them male and black, between 20 and 25 years old, are spirited in their work, mixing inks with great precision and singing songs like "hip-bone connected to the thigh-bone/ thigh-bone connected to the leg-bone" Today they are creating monotypes, a particular type of print using colored ink, which will be used as CD covers for Gito Baloi, a beloved South African musician who was killed during a carjacking. His wife, Erica, was a drawing instructor at the Studio before moving to Botswana after Gito's death. The warmth and emotion in these prints speaks to their now well-practiced ability to create beauty out of suffering.

The structure of APS is based on a large first year class that focuses on technical skills in drawing and basic printmaking, a somewhat culled group of second year students that have regular class but participate in mentorships and learn advanced techniques in etching, monotype and computer skills, and a select group of third year students that focus exclusively on independent projects and internship work at the Studio. One of the most pressing issues is the question of white versus black leadership in the studio. Kim and Cara, the director and manager, both white and female, are eager to develop black managers to serve as role models and authority figures for the students. But often blacks do not have adequate preparation to compete for management jobs, or even apply themselves to entry-level jobs in a way that prepares them for a promotion. This is especially important because the Studio

constantly struggles with students who do not show up to classes on time, do not turn in their work on time, and to an educated white person's eyes lack a crucial work ethic. However, the fact is that for so long blacks have not been given adequate education or access to opportunity where they would feel an incentive to be professional, or even have an understanding of what that would mean.

The success of the second-year class is crucial for both the individual students and for the teachers and administrators, who have to decide which students have proven themselves worthy to continue being supported by APS. This second-year class in particular has been subject to a lot of scrutiny by the teachers and directors. They are the class who had a connection to the old studio and were the most vulnerable when it burned down. The destruction of the old studio destabilized the class, many of whom did not show up to classes that were held in interim spaces, and even vandalized the area around the old studio.

Stompie Selibe is a graduate of the Studio who, in addition to producing his own award-winning artwork, performing as a drummer, and training as an art therapist, also teaches at the Studio. When Stompie saw some of the difficulties that the second year class was going through after the fire, he decided to try to use the loss of the Studio as an opportunity to create a curriculum that would bring the class together as a supportive unit. In fact, the class was very individualistic and competitive in the old studio, but now had a clean slate to bring the class together through group art projects and individual research based on a common theme: ubuntu, or humanity-through-others.

Stompie explained his approach to me in an interview:

*A lot of what we do with ubuntu is about creating a community. There was a lot of tension and struggling after the fire. A lot of anger, students were participating in vandalism, they had lost respect for their class and their work. We needed to find a way to reform APS in how we handle ourselves, and the most important thing is exploring the humanity of the Studio, how we can live that. They had to have a channel for facing the issues they confront as young people, and at the same time form a new vision of APS to fight the racism, the anger, the vandalism.*

*We performed at the opening ceremony. We had a music performance, because music can bring people together, it is both fun and [requires] consciousness of meaning that speaks to the individual within. Three weeks before, I brought in a bag of instruments and asked each person to pick one that they thought related to their identity. Then we just played together, like a jam session, just asked the guys to express themselves.*

*After they were done playing I asked them how we could sound better. We discussed how we have to listen to each other to make more sense musically. Do not try to compete to make yourself the loudest or most interesting or control the flow of the music. We have to complement one another. I explained that music is an example of ubuntu, how we are the best when we listen to each other. It is the same in our class group, everyone has to listen to each other. We had only two weeks*

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*rehearsal, but we gave a great performance. Everybody was very impressed and the guys didn't want to stop playing. We talked afterward more about how we can listen to each other the same way that we listened in that performance. As part of the class we started having a check-in time at the beginning of classes because then tension is always discussed and resolved.*

The first day that I met the class, they were working on the monotypes for the CD covers. I would have been content to silently observe, perhaps introduce myself to individuals, but leave them to complete their work. They had other plans for me. Bekz, a budding rapper and graffiti artist, asked me if I knew what they were doing, and if I knew how to make a monotype. I replied no, but I was fine with simply watching. “No no, it's very easy, here can I show you? You just take a piece of plastic and take a roller, get some paint, and make a smooth background. Then you can make a design with a toothpick or a paintbrush, whatever you want, just make sure to draw it backwards from how you want the print to come out.” I made my first monotype that very morning, an abstract, pseudo-Japanese design of what in my head I imagined to be a daffodil. Many of the more outgoing guys, including Seth in his yellow mesh cap, Elton in his paint-splattered smock, and Nelson with his infectious grin, introduced themselves to me and asked me about my musical tastes, rap and hip-hop being an international language. The most impressive interaction on that first day, though, was when Seth set up the printing press for me and prepared to roll my monotype through. Bekz asked breathlessly what Seth was doing, and when he explained that he was trying to help me, Bekz replied “No, man, I wanted her to learn how to do it for *herself*.” This was clearly a concept that they had been exposed to by their teachers, the benefits of learning a skill and becoming an independent, empowered creator, rather than one dependent on others' help. It was also a great compliment that they felt I could be one of their community, by giving me access to their supplies as well as the skills to use them.

Most of the guys had no problem, however, asking their classmates to help them set up a press or borrow a certain color of ink, or even critique their work. They sang together, besides the “hip-bone connected to the thigh-bone” but also “Tell me when was Jesus born? It was the lasssst month of the yeeear” The covers which they produce have several common images, including a guitar to represent Gito Balo's music, a butterfly to symbolize freedom, and outlines of children resting against their parents. The delicacy of their designs shows a great deal of care and sensitivity to the memory of the artist. As I continued to get to know the class, through their art, the class writings that I typed for them, and my interviews and personal conversations, I found that their research about ubuntu has been rather transformational for them individually and as a class. Several students write about trauma and healing, and the concept of life as a journey (one of Stompie's favorite terms), demonstrating a psychological vocabulary that I would not expect of many

young black South Africans (or many young Americans, for that matter). When I asked Bekz how the class research on ubuntu changed him as a person, he replied, “Now I almost get psyched to be a good person. It changes me a lot. Sometimes I can be very short tempered, but since the project I can control myself.” Elton responded “The project [creating a personal visual diary based around the theme of ubuntu, along with research and writing assignments] gave me more enthusiasm to express myself, understand ubuntu before check in opens everyone's mind to speak out loudly, before it was tense, afraid to speak out.” Frans, one of the quieter students who had a troubled past said “I was very angry, out of control, a thug, but now after performing at the opening, and seeing how we combined in such a short time, I realize anything is possible.”

As encouraging as such statements were for the power of the holistic ubuntu curriculum, the effect of the class's initiatives to bring them together as a community was tested soon after I conducted those interviews. June 13, 2004 brought an enormous blow to the Artist Proof community. Floyd Thungu, one of the students in the second-year class, had committed suicide the day before, and the students learned of his death that Monday. The second years were all called from their upstairs meeting area to the workroom downstairs to hear the news. They sat completely stunned, unable to say anything. Everyone in the Studio that day, student, teacher, or visitor, agreed that Floyd's death felt like a betrayal—of his friends at Artist Proof, his family, his young daughter, and his own talent and gifts as a human being. The teachers at the Studio worried that the students would turn to alcohol or drugs to deal with the pain, perhaps from feeling like they had no other option. But most students returned the next day, a Tuesday no less, the day when they have class with Stompie. Their “check-in” time, designed to help them articulate their emotions and share their emotional struggles with each other, today seemed simultaneously futile and necessary, after losing one person who, it seemed, could not take comfort from their community.

Thankfully, Stompie did not bear the full burden of trying to comfort the entire class in the midst of his own pain. Another visitor came to the class, an art therapist named Haley. In some ways, Stompie's suffering at this moment has been magnified by his questioning of his teaching, his effort over the past year to help these young men face the darkness in their lives with a community of support and a stronger sense of their own power to fight against despair. The class sat around their usual long table on tall stools, their torsos hunched, their arms crossed against the chilled air. He decided to start the session with a prayer. “Can we take hands?,” he asked, and then started praying out loud in Sesotho. My coworker Darnisa and I did not understand the literal translation, but we could certainly feel the sentiment and emotion of the prayer, spoken in the impassioned, rising cadences of entreaties from any faith, in any language. I was relieved that he did not pray in English or repeat the prayer in translation—the students needed strength and encouragement more than us, who were visitors of barely two weeks.

Stompie concluded and introduced Haley, a graceful brunette with a calm presence, so calm, in fact, that she sat at the table unnoticed, at least by me, until then. She proceeded to gently explain that she was just there to talk, and to give them space to discuss how they were affected by the news. She asks if anyone wanted to talk about his thoughts or feelings on the suicide. Her query was met with silence. Silence that lasts nearly five minutes. Everyone sat quietly, trying to be available to whoever tried to talk first, not pressuring or inquiring further. Around the table, heads rested on chests, and everyone sat slumped over, avoiding eye contact. The only sound was that of cars in the street below. I looked to Stompie and to Haley, who were trying to focus on the guys and not give any nonverbal signs of impatience.

This was possibly one of the most uncomfortable situations I had ever been in, not because of the subject matter, but because in my upbringing, I have always been encouraged, successfully, to narrate my feelings. This part of my family legacy comes from having a father, uncle and grandfather who are therapists, though admittedly my father's approach relies on empathy, rather than analysis. Anywhere—in the car, around the table, in a one-on-one conversation over a cup of tea late at night—my family was, and remains, a constant emotional support system. Not to talk about my reactions to a distressing event is anathema. Additionally, as a teacher, my instinct in a dead classroom is to ask more questions, tell a joke, to try anything to provoke discussion and participation.

I wonder if some of the awkwardness came from Haley and I both being white and female and therefore completely different from the guys in terms of race, education, culture, and gender. In addition to my personal background, there was perhaps an expectation on the part of the students that they were either supposed to say something to appease the white person or that they must keep their emotions that much more tightly locked because revealing one's feelings to an outsider could be even more dangerous. Perhaps more relevant than that, even, is the presence of almost all authority figures at the Studio as white females: Kim, the director; Cara, the studio manager; and Ilse and Shannin, two of the main teachers. Especially as black men, it must have felt intimidating to be asked to share emotions by yet another white woman, as well as counterintuitive to open up to an outsider.

Finally, one of the students, Seth, broke the silence, saying how Floyd was a role model for him. "Floyd was such a talented artist, and worked so hard"—he remembered the time when the class visited the zoo to draw animals: "By the end of the day Floyd had drawn four or five beautiful animals where everyone else only had one or two." Seth continued talking about how people often confused him with Floyd, because they had the same light skin and slight build. But then he transitioned into talking more about his emotions, and how difficult it was to talk about his emotions as a man. He said "It's like you stuff clothes into a suitcase and you just keep stuffing and stuffing them in until it bursts- that is what happens with emotion a lot of the time."

At this point several students abruptly left the table, running outside, possibly so no one could see them cry or because they

did not want to talk about this issue further. One of the students was able to express his feelings and feel like he was in a safe community, but others still resisted participating in the group process, constrained by strong social taboos against men crying or showing emotion. This phenomenon became the topic of discussion amongst the group. All of the students noted that crying is not allowed for men in South Africa, though these guys in particular face tragedy almost daily. These combined pressures are enough to break anyone, which is why, one of them noted, "we need to feel like we can open up and it will be okay."

I was torn between my desire to express, to share my thoughts, perhaps offer some advice about how the guys could talk to me, how they could support each other in the group, and my understanding that for that moment, it was more important that I just listen. The most effective use for my voice, ironically, was keeping quiet so as to not intimidate or interfere with the very gradual, countercultural learning process that these men were going through. I was also conscious of the fact that I was perhaps too much like Haley—white, female, educated—to offer an opinion without seeming like another authority figure.

The morning session drifted towards some semblance of a conclusion, necessitated by the fact that Haley needed to leave and it was time for the students' lunch break. She asked the students if they would like her to come back next week. Even this request is an example of the strains caused by cultural and racial differences. For the guys to accept her offer would be admitting that they need more help, making themselves more vulnerable by talking about emotions. Some of the guys said nothing, but it was enough to have a majority of the group agree to take the next step together.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, the second-years held a memorial service for Floyd, inviting family members, friends of the Studio and even a church choir to perform. One group rehearsed several songs, including "Farewell Brother": Farewell Brother, Farewell Brother/G-d be with you/Till we meet again/We meet to part/We part to meet/G-d be with you/Till we meet again. Others composed speeches highlighting Floyd's accomplishments and validating his presence as an inspirational leader for the class. Stompie played a piece on his finger harp and Floyd's grandmother spoke towards the end, shuddering with suppressed tears. Most class members were present, and

**I was torn between my desire to express, to share my thoughts, perhaps offer some advice about how the guys could talk to me, how they could support each other in the group, and my understanding that for that moment, it was more important that I just listen.**

the event was as much a testament to the class's solidarity and support for their community as it was a tribute to Floyd. None of the teachers or administrators organized any piece of the service. The purpose of having the class do all of the organizing was to reinforce their leadership, to show that as students, and as black men, they were trusted to produce something important for their community based on their own talents, instead of their teacher's instructions. It was yet another example of how this class has the tools to create a community of which they can be proud, yet there was an underlying sense of fragility. How strong could their class be if one of their apparently strong members could commit suicide? How much were they sharing with each other and how much was superficial parroting of the jargon they felt obligated to learn?

The appeal of a strong, unified nation, or studio, or class, is so powerful that black South Africans may choose to sublimate or ignore the painful inequality they experience every day. The choices that artists, particularly black artists, make in creating their visual messages are quite telling about the precarious balance between self-expression, social criticism, and a desire to affirm national pride that one sees almost everywhere in South Africa. South Africans are extremely proud of their democratically-elected government, the multiracial casts of soap operas and news broadcasts, and the 2010 World Cup. The TRC hearings were supposed to be a great national healing process, making public the exact horrific details of apartheid, and laying the groundwork for a peaceful transition to civil society. And certainly optimism abounds, whether in the collages of poor art students recovering from their private trauma or in the boardrooms of elite advertising agencies. The sincerity of this optimism is reflected in the statements of ordinary Africans who say, "it is so wonderful to be in this democracy" or "I feel glad to live in South Africa." Yet such blind optimism may lead to deliberate avoidance of some more difficult problems that plague South Africa, even among artists who have a special platform for social criticism.

One example of subjects that artists have for the most part resisted is AIDS, arguably the most destructive element in their society today. The pandemic has affected nearly 25 percent of the population. Billboards abound in Johannesburg exhorting people to use condoms, to "love life," to break the silence. Yet the artists I encountered did not incorporate AIDS at all into their work. Such an absence prevails among almost all prominent South African artists, according to Pamela Allara, a scholar and teacher of South African art. "Male artists in particular," she says "have seemed reluctant to confront this subject in their individual output." One reason for this silence is the fact that to come out as HIV positive is a frightening prospect in South Africa, one that could result in banishment from family, church, and work.

Grace (not her real name) is one such person at the Studio who is HIV positive and refuses to tell her co-workers in the women's embroidery group. "There was another woman a few years ago who had HIV and everyone knew about it, even if she said nothing, so people did not try to be her friend, they were uncomfortable around her. I do not want to go through

the same thing." Declaring one's status as HIV positive is still dangerous even in this supposedly welcoming, empowering community. HIV in particular may have special significance because the illness implies a moral weakness or failing in some South African perspectives—the failure to use protection, to be safe, to be abstinent. Everyone knows someone who has died of AIDS, and the resulting shame comes from this sense of moral failure. Even in a society that has had to admit so many moral failures and resurrect so many painful memories, there is now perhaps an even stronger need to bury personal tragedy if it will reflect poorly on one's moral character, and subsequently, admit something that reflects poorly on South African society, having recently and vocally reclaimed a sense of pride and national unity that to some may seem tenuous.

William Kentridge, an internationally acclaimed South African artist, expresses the ambiguity of living an outwardly peaceful life, in his case as a privileged white person, while the mines, literal and figurative, hold so many buried secrets. He is one of the few artists to confront the issue of AIDS in his charcoal-animation film *Tide Table*. He shows two overlapping stories, one of the wealthy white vacationer at the Cape Town seashore, oblivious to the suffering of the black community, who form the second story. Crowded into small cabanas on the beach, black AIDS patients die while survivors perform religious ceremonies of mourning. Seven cows emerge from the sea, as fat as those in Joseph's dream in Genesis, fat with the promise of new economic and political success. They are subsequently replaced by seven emaciated cows, representing a country now ravaged by illness and persistent inequality. Not only does Kentridge discuss the topical and taboo issue of AIDS, but he does so in a way that illuminates the disjointed nature of South African life for privileged whites versus blacks, as well as the rhetoric of promise versus the reality of perpetual suffering. Most of all, he is a seeker of truth, of resurrecting the truth for South Africa from underneath the layers of secrecy that both apartheid and post-apartheid societies have perpetuated.

His first animated charcoal drawing, *Mine* (1991) shows a white industrialist's coffee plunger transform into a drill that bores into the mine where hundreds of black men extract gold and diamonds, and more metaphorically, where collective and individual memory are buried. This very duality defines the experience of the second-year class at APS, who have grown to an admirable extent in their ability to share emotions with one another and support each other in the spirit of ubuntu. Yet there are untold depths containing a powerful undertow of denial, burial, and shame. Each tragedy is bittersweet for the young men in the second year class at APS, because it provides a new opportunity to accomplish something amazing like a memorial service or huge collective lionel cuts. At the same time, such tragedies serve as a fresh reminder of just how far they, and South Africans in general, have to go before the rhetoric of optimism and those uplifting public murals match the reality of the people walking beneath them every day.



# The International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life

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The mission of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life is to develop effective responses to conflict and injustice by offering innovative approaches to coexistence, strengthening the work of international courts, and encouraging ethical practice in civic and professional life.

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