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Transgressing Tradition?:
Unstitching Costuming in Diasporic Cambodian Classical Dance

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
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in

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by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the upcoming second and third generations of Khmericans who will shape and direct re-construction, revival, and experimental dance projects in the near future. I look forward to seeing what's to come, knowing that the future is open to many possibilities of love, light, and prosperity in your careful and capable hands.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Transgressing Tradition?:
Unstitching Costuming in Diasporic Cambodian Classical Dance

by

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Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies
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The process of re-construction of Cambodian classical dance in Cambodia and in the global Khmer diaspora is heatedly contested by both scholars and dance practitioners. Khmer diasporic choreographers' attempts at deploying costuming and choreography make visible ongoing tensions in all attempts for diasporic Khmer artists to negotiate contemporary Cambodian cultural nationalism. Analysis of three diasporic choreographers' costuming tactics reveal the struggle diasporic artists face with Cambodian national policy that cautions against experimental classical dance practices and costuming that are not born out of royal patronage. Who decides what bends the repertoire "too far?" When is this bending considered transgressive against the tradition and why? This thesis begins with a feminist reading of the historiography of classical dance to highlight the greater implications of costuming in Cambodian cultural nationalism. Following this, I analyze three case studies of new costuming tactics by independent classical dance choreographer Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro of Sophiline's Arts

Ensemble (formerly known as Khmer Arts Ensemble), independent classical dance choreographer Prumsodun Ok, and classical dance organizer Ravynn Karet-Coxen of The Sacred Dancers of Angkor.

Karet-Coxen seeks to revive dance as it was practiced in the age of Angkor (802-1431)—as a sacred ritual and sanctifying practice for holy places. She uses white, flowing costumes to mark the purity of her dancers that enables them to transmit blessing in Sacred Dance. This costume, though new to the repertoire, consents to the fixed national narrative which depicts female Cambodian dancers as pure conduits of the Apsara of Angkor. The struggle for negotiating Cambodian cultural nationalism manifests through the costuming design, inspired by Roman Vestal virgins and problematically draped on impoverished, virginal Cambodian dancers. Conversely, Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro and Prumsodun Ok's experimental costuming tactics in the Cambodian classical dance diaspora arguably empower a break-away from the dance repertoire's historical supplicancy to royal and national political projects. Karet-Coxen, Ok, and Cheam-Shapiro "bend" costuming tactics in classical dance in order to revive dance either in line with or against Cambodian cultural nationalism.

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INTRODUCTION: Costuming Interventions in Cambodian Cultural Nationalism

The Sacred Dancers of Angkor came to the attention of the Long Beach Khmer dance community in April 2013 at the Cambodian New Year Celebration, a day-long festival of everything Khmer, from dance to food, art, clothing, education, and play in Long Beach, California, the largest Cambodian diaspora.[1] It was a hot, breezy, Southern California day. Long Beach Cambodian classical dancers flooded onto and off the center stage in the middle of El Dorado Park.[2] Their graceful bodies sparkled in the bright, beautiful costumes that define the global Cambodian classical dance repertoire. They moved gracefully in colorful, bold silks, gold-painted brass belts, and shining crowns (*mokot*) underneath the red and white striped tent. Their bodies lithely swayed to the recorded sound of the *pin peat*, their arms flowing through the air, their fingers bending

[1] Susan Needham and Karen Quintiliani, "Why Long Beach?" *Cambodian Community History and Archive Project,* May 2011, http://camchap.org/en/why-long-beach; in this thesis, "diaspora" acts as both a geo-political site and cultural identity marker.

[2] According to "Brief History," *Cambodian Coordinating Council,* accessed May 5 2015, http://www.cam-cc.org/drupal/brief_history, the Cambodian Coordinating Council (Cam CC) has hosted Khmer New Year since 2000. In 1999, Long Beach denied access to El Dorado Park for the Khmer New Year Celebration. Cam CC took over the celebration and planned to move it elsewhere. Many Cambodian Americans—a self-describing term for people who live in America of Cambodian descent use—did not want the celebration to move elsewhere. Cam CC organized several demonstrations. After months of organizing demonstrations, Long Beach approved the celebration at El Dorado Park with heavy restrictions and a large police presence. Thousands of Cambodian Americans travel from across the U.S. to participate in the festival. Tickets are sold by the carload. It is assumed that you are not coming by yourself; it is a family event. Most families pack food and picnic on the perimeter of the festivities. Some non-Khmer come to the event, but the majority who participate are Khmer.

backwards, and the balls of their feet gently tapping the platform of the stage.[3] The dancers were embodying dances of Cambodia's past. Some dances they performed resembled versions of dances that may have been created over a thousand years ago.[4]

In addition to performances at the center stage, locally run educational booths and vendors rimmed the edge of the park. One particular booth was raising money for their Banteay-Srei Cambodian-based troupe The Sacred Dancers of Angkor. They were attempting to raise the necessary funds to bring their dancers and musicians to re-sanctify Buddhist temples and public spaces in the United States.[5] The dancers pictured in the photos were from Cambodia, but they did not look like current "traditional" classical dancers.[6] In these photos they were not wearing the colorful silks, sparkling crowns, and

[3]*Pin peat* is a musical ensemble that performs classical dance and other associated arts for the royal courts, temples, or educational purposes. Similar to the court dancer, there are multiple bas-reliefs of *pin peat* instruments at the temple complex Angkor Wat, dating both court/classical dance and *pin peat* to over one-thousand years old. There are nine to twelve wind or percussion instruments per ensemble which use a seven-tone pentatonic scale. "There is no harmonization in the Western sense, but instruments played together create a complex piece and the player is free to add ornamentation within the framework of the melody." "Pin Peat," *Khmer Cultural Development Institute,* accessed May 5 2015, http://www.kcdi-cambodia.com/khmertraditionalarts/pin-peat/

[4] Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower: The Divine Mystery of the Cambodian Dance Drama* (Holmes Beach, FL: DatASIA Press, 2014), xxv.

[5] Karet-Coxen asks, "what is more fitting than for children, all born in this sacred land, to perform Sacred Dance Rituals to 're-sanctify' our temples?" when describing why she started a sacred dance troupe in Banteay-Srei. Ravynn Karet-Coxen, "My Vision for NKFC" in *Sacred Dancers of Banteay Srei*, ed. Lucretia Stewart (Cambodia: DatAsia Press, 2013), 45.

[6] According to Kent Davis in the opening "Prelude" in *Sacred Dancers of Banteay Srei,* ed. Lucretia Stewart (Cambodia: DatAsia Press, 2013), 12, the Sacred Dancers of

face make-up that define the repertoire – they shrouded their bodies in white, flowing fabric, posed in crowns made of dried palm leaves that were handmade by the students, and their youthful faces were devoid of make-up.[7] This costuming choice was new.[8] It was not only new to the Long Beach Cambodian and greater Khmerican community, it was also new to current Cambodian dancers in Cambodia and to the long history of Cambodian classical dance.[9]

These particular dancers pictured were purposefully dressed to look different than any other dancer currently practicing classical dance. The Sacred Dancers of Angkor's creator and organizer Ravynn Karet-Coxen strives to empower her students by teaching them the dance practice's sacred intention, rather than teaching them to dress in costume

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Angkor's costuming "are quite unlike the glittering outfits associated with any other Cambodian dancers in modern times."

[7] Additionally, Ravynn Karet-Coxen asserts that her dancers are "all pure in body, mind and soul." The dancers must maintain their virginity if they want to perform Sacred Dance rituals. Ibid., 45.

[8] Most classical dancers, regardless of their geopolitical position in Cambodia or the diaspora, wear "Chaktomuk" style costumes. "Chaktomuk" references two things – both the first era of the Kingdom of Cambodia from 1431-1525 as well as a classical dance costuming style. The costuming style has "dominated classical dance since the 1960s." Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, "Gods and Angels," *Java Arts*, accessed December 9 2014, http://javaarts.org/exhibitions/detail/?id=184.

[9] Terms such as "Khmerican" are used tactically by Cambodian Americans to, in Josephine Lee's words, "negotiate not just the search for visibility, but also the power of these "hyphenated" identities as they become more visible." "Cambodian" indicates a resident of Cambodia. "Khmer" or "Khmerness" is a culturally identifying marker, regardless of where the person lives. I employ the term "Cambodian American" to Cambodians living in the U.S. Josephine Lee, "Between Immigration and Hyphenation: The Problems of Theorizing Asian American Theater." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 13, no. 1 (Fall 1998), 67.

and dance solely for entertainment.[10] Karet-Coxen's aim is to reconstruct "what must have been done in the time of Angkor, when the Apsaras performed their sacred roles to link the powerful spiritual energy of heaven to earth."[11] Karet-Coxen created these new costumes to reflect her dancers' purity—both in body and in spirit—which must be maintained in order to perform sacred rituals and to move away from performing sacred dance rituals as entertainment.[12] Despite the productive aspects of the work, one effect of Karet-Coxen's costuming is that it subtly, even if unintentionally, reasserts the dominant national narratives of the past that treat dancers as "pure" vessels and objects of the King's power.[13]

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[10] Ravynn Karet-Coxen writes that her intention with the Sacred Dancers of Angkor is to "revive what must have been done in the time of Angkor, when the Apsaras performed their sacred roles to link the powerful spiritual energy of heaven and earth." Ravynn Karet-Coxen, "My Vision for NKFC" in *Sacred Dancers of Banteay Srei,* 45.

[11] Kent Davis writes that "this troupe and their mission are unique in the world. And while Cambodia has many dancers to entertain tourists, these children alone are empowered by Royal Patronage, honing their finest skills to perform for gods and King" in "Prelude" in *The Sacred Dancers of Banteay Srei,* 11. Karet-Coxen identifies costuming and the re-introduction of the sacred to Classical Dance as the troupe's specific identifying trait in "My Vision for NKFC" in *Sacred Dancers of Banteay Srei,* 45.

[12] Kent Davis discusses Karet-Coxen's mandate that performers of Sacred Dance be virgins in "Prelude" *The Sacred Dancers of Banteay-Srei,* 13. In an interview with Karet-Coxen, Davis writes that "to enter and remain in the school, children must be 'spiritually and physically pure,' she says. To participate in sacred rites they must maintain their virginity. "They are free to do as they wish, but to perform the rituals they must answer to a higher authority."

[13] I use the term "vessels" here to allude to the dancers' bodies being used as rhetorical containers and transmitters of the King's power both in dance and as concubines up until the reign of King Monivong. Along the same vein, Toni Shapiro in *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia,* 3, writes the "in all these guises [the dancers] have remained vehicles for the maintenance, passing on, and re-creation of tradition, and the creation of a new

Conversely, independent classical dance artists Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro and Prumsodun Ok create new costumes to revive and expand the classical dance repertoire. They both, in addition to reconstructing and reviving classical dance, arguably empower a break-away from the dance repertoire's historical supplicancy to royal and national political projects with their transformative choreographic work and costuming tactics. Instead of seeking a return to Angkor, Cheam-Shapiro and Ok provocatively experiment with Angkorian imagery outside of the nation-state's policy of "preservation, re-construction and revitalization."[14] Their innovative work reaches a wide audience and moves classical dance practice into conversation with identity politics and issues regarding nation-state cultural policing of classical dance.

These Khmer diasporic choreographers' attempts at deploying costuming and choreography make visible ongoing tensions in all attempts for diasporic Khmer artists to negotiate contemporary Cambodian cultural nationalism. Analysis of these three case studies reveals diasporic choreographers' struggle grappling with Cambodian national policy that cautions against experimental classical dance practices and costuming that are not born out of royal patronage. My work makes a unique contribution to Southeast Asian Studies and Khmer dance studies by lending a feminist reading to the historiography of classical dance in order to highlight the greater implications of

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order." Vessel connects the dancer's body to their role as the literal regeneration of the nation.

[14] Her Royal Highness Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, "Royal Dances of Cambodia – Revival and Preservation," 2, interchanges revitalization with revival.

costuming in the larger frame of Cambodian cultural nationalism. My thesis secondly fleshes out the struggle that results when artists attempt to abide by or steer away from Cambodian cultural policy through an analysis of three case studies of new costuming tactics by independent classical dance choreographer Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro of Sophiline's Arts Ensemble (formerly known as Khmer Arts Ensemble), independent classical dance choreographer Prumsodun Ok, and classical dance organizer Ravynn Karet-Coxen of The Sacred Dancers of Angkor.

Method

In this thesis, I employ a textual analysis of bodies in print and bodies in performance. I draw from and compare Khmerican, Cambodian, and American newspaper performance reviews, performance programs, online news journals, artists' public social media websites, crowdfunding project webpages, museum websites, and artists' websites to map the public discourse surrounding costuming and performance in Cambodian classical dance. I highlight the media's poly-vocal responses to Cheam-Shapiro, Ok, and Karet-Coxen's works through public print and internet sources, with the intent to reveal costuming tactics in the center of debates on re-constructing diasporic Cambodian classical dance.

I delve into written scholarship on Cambodian classical dance to draw attention to the strengths and fissures in this small, but growing archive. Through a feminist reading of the canonical texts by James R. Brandon and Paul Cravath on Cambodian classical dance I bring to light the missing individual agency and forgotten labor of the classical

dancer in archive. Such a feminist inquiry, in the footsteps of Annuska Derks, Priya Srinivasan, and Rachmi Diyah Larasati, provides an alternative, yet fragmented narrative of costuming politics and its effects on the dancer's changing social mobility. I also employ scholarship from HRH Buppha Devi, Paul Cravath, Kent Davis, Toni Shapiro and Celia Tuchman-Rosta to contextualize the royal discourse on classical dance and to set up and identify contrasting narratives. Auto-biographical articles from Cheam-Shapiro, Ok, and Ravynn-Karet-Coxen offers the reader with the artists' authorial intent and their self-described costuming tactics in their works. I frame the artists' written intent in their costuming choices, the media's discourse on the artists' costuming tactics, and the scholarship on costuming in classical dance to demonstrate the multiple yet inconsistent tolerance or intolerance of new costuming in classical dance costuming to further reveal the effects of Cambodian cultural nationalism on diasporic classical dance-making.

I analyze dancers' costumed materiality and corporeality by attending performances in the US diaspora given by Cheam-Shapiro, Ok, and Karet-Coxen. I flesh out the individual slippages and fissures in the dancers' costuming that demonstrate inconsistencies between the choreographer's intent and the produced, performed reality.[15] I connect their live, costumed bodies to the costumed bodies in the archive, revealing how costuming posits at the center of the complex yet intertwined political narratives of the preserved yet living female, dressed, dancing body.

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[15] Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2011), 9.

Interrogating the "Unbroken" Trajectory from an Ancient Past to a New Home

Like many "traditional" dances, Cambodian classical dance has a long and contested history steeped in the politics of preservation and regeneration. [16] By lending a feminist reading to Cambodian classical dance's canonical works, I highlight the classical dancer and her costume's primary role in the making of Cambodian cultural nationalism. I argue that though scholarship perceives the archive's dressed, dancing, female bodies as vehicles for a nostalgic, Angkorian vessel for cultural nationalism and diplomacy, changes in costuming policies reveal the jagged and broken tradition and dismantle the "unbroken" rhetoric. A feminist reading dispels the discourse's monolithic treatment of the dancer as vessel of royal power and simultaneously dismisses the rhetorical notion of contemporary dancer as a collapsed re-construction of the Apsaras of Angkor.

James R. Brandon was one of the first scholars to document "traditional" Southeast Asian performance. He directed and helped build Asian theatre studies at the University of Hawai'i before there was much Western scholarship on Southeast Asian theatre. He completed his dissertation work in Southeast Asia in 1967 where he documented many types of performances throughout the mainland and islands. Through his research, Brandon found that contrary to popular belief, there is no way to concretely

[16] Eric Hobsbawm writes that "tradition" denotes a type of invented tradition—a "set of practices…which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by petition, which automatically implies continuity with the past." "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" in *The Invention of Tradition* Eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 10.

know that dancers performed dance dramas pre-dating the time of Angkor. Though there are multiple depictions in bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat of Apsaras in flight, Brandon argues that there is still no concrete evidence besides these representations of dancers that dancers ever existed outside of mythology, let alone practiced in the royal court.[17] Many in Cambodia and in the diaspora, however, claim that the dance practice is over one-thousand years old.[18]

Dancers, teachers, and dance organizers gesture to these bas-reliefs of Apsaras and devatas at Angkor Wat to prove the *current* dance practice's direct relationship to an ancient past.[19] Brandon calls this a collapsing of time, labor, bodies and overall

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[17] James R. Brandon, *Theatre in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 59.

[18] Many in the Khmer classical dance community assert that the dance practice derives from the Hindu adopted Khmer origin myth the *Churning of the Sea of Milk* as depicted through bas-reliefs on the walls of Angkor Wat. At the beginning of time, the gods and demons began a long battle for an elixir of immortality, which was lost in the sea of milk. They employed a large *naga* serpent to churn the sea. The demons pulled the *naga* on one side and the gods pulled the *naga* on the other side, creating a whirlpool of otherworldly foam. Apsaras emerged out of this great churning foam; the dancing women of Angkor who represented her were "key to maintaining a harmonious Khmer society, its economy and maintaining the balance of the universe itself." Many utilize this origin story to reconstruct classical dance today, focusing on the Apsara to honor the arguable original intention of classical dance. "Women's History," Devata: Angkor Wat Apsara and Devata: Khmer Women in Divine Context, 2015, http://www.Devata.org/category/womans-history/#.VU7p4O8g_ug.

[19] Toni Shapiro argues that "in Cambodia, that knowledge, that culture, has an intensely essentialist feel to it, and is perceived to be threatened with extinction." Additionally, Shapiro argues that "Khmer dance, with its rituals of re-membering, its power of mediation with the spirits of the land, the ancestors, the deities, and the royalty, and with it sheer beauty, speaks to need to create or forge a grounding. Yet it's a 'grounding' in a community and space unfettered by boundaries of geography, and even time." Toni Shapiro, *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia*, 438-439. Additionally, Paul Cravath writes that Apsaras and "the Devata of Angkor Wat are today popularly, if inaccurately,

"romantic nonsense." In Brandon's words, "a world of difference separates the elaborately costumed, chaste, and refined Cambodian dancers of today from the bare-breasted, hip-swinging beauties of Angkor."[20] Brandon's narrative orientalizes Khmers, ignores Khmer oral accounts of court dance, and privileges concrete evidence that is difficult to find when studying an ephemeral artform such as dance.[21] Dance's ephemeral nature cannot, though Brandon may wish it, effectively be documented—notations and artistic representations, such as the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat, are at best visible traces or shadows of classical dance practice. Brandon's attempt to fully document hard evidence

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considered to represent dances." He further claims that "Angkorian dancers may indeed have the appearance of these Devata, as modern re-creations have suggested, but it must be stress that none of the Devata—who, being at least twice the height of Apsaras and thus clearly distinguishable—can be seen in a dance pose." Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower,* 65.

[20] James R. Brandon, *Theatre in Southeast Asia*, 59.

[21] Performance and Dance studies scholars have argued that performance and dance are what they are because they can only be seen and experienced once. Peggy Phelan writes in *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge Press, 1993), 146, that "performance cannot be saved, recorded, or documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance." Live-ness, the very fact that performances disappear after the actors or dancers walk off the stage, or exit the room, reinforces Phelan's claims that performance is ephemeral and that it cannot be performed again in the same way. Phelan argues on page 148 that these notions indicate "the possibility of revaluing that emptiness; this potential revaluation gives performance art its distinctive oppositional edge." Andre Lepecki in "Inscribing Dance" in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory* eds. Andre Lepecki (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 127, argues that performance "resists and escapes those boundaries of codification and inscription as temporal arrest try to impose." Thus, narration or photographs of Cambodian classical dance will succumb to the "elusive presence" of dance, "dance as the fleeting trace of an always irretrievable, never fully translatable motion: neither into notation, nor into writing."

of dance is a ubiquitously Western approach to dance and is emblematic of the pitfalls of 1960s anthropology.

However, Brandon does accurately point to the very obvious fissures in the royal court's continued narrative of classical dance being relatively unchanged since the time of Angkor. "Dance tradition," in dance scholar Rachmi Diyah Larasati's words, "is the construction of national identity, is based on an imaginary past, the concept of its preserved value, and the acknowledgment of the brilliant bodies of the 'virtuous' citizens who mask the technique and who transmit and reproduce it through the limited, legitimized channels of ethnic groups, nation, and government."[22] Many organizers and *krus*—dance teachers, today strive to represent their costumed classical dancers as the direct conduits of Angkor and labor to reconstruct this nationalist narrative onto current Khmer dancing bodies in many different ways.[23]

Since its 1983 publication, Paul Cravath's dissertation turned book, *Earth in Flower,* has served as the seminal reference for the history of Cambodian court dance, informing succeeding literature for both artists and scholars in the small but growing

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[22] Rachmi Diyah Larasati, *The Dance That Makes You Vanish: Cultural Re-construction in Post-Genocide Indonesia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 11

[23];Princess Buppha Devi points to a direct connection between the current Cambodian Royal Ballet and dance in the 12th century. She writes, "during the period of Angkor, dancers of the Royal Ballet were believed to be 'diving messengers' and a conduit between the king and the gods." Her Royal Highness Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, "Royal Dances of Cambodia – Revival and Preservation" eds. Stephanie Burridge and Fred Frumberg, *Beyond the* Apsara*: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), 5

discipline.[24] For the better part of one hundred and fifty years of French colonial rule before Cravath's work, many Western scholars, including Brandon, perceived Cambodian court dance as a watered-down version of Indian classical dance. Some also claimed (and still claim) that Cambodians stole, exchanged, or were heavily influenced by Thai court dance.[25] Cravath labored to reveal a subaltern history of court dance. He brought pre-Angkorian dance history to light and dispelled the notion that Khmer court dance was a direct descendant of Indian classical dance. Cravath used archival and archeological evidence and traced classical dance back to Khmer indigenous cultural practices of the sixth century CE through pottery remnants which depict dancers attending funeral rites. This new historical analysis shifted the discourse's perception of court dance as inherently made for the royal court and highlighted indigenous dance practice.

Despite all of the productive contributions Cravath's work has made, a feminist reading highlights several important areas for further interrogation and analysis. Though he labors to highlight the indigenous dance practices of Khmer dance, the overall focus in his work is on dance for the King and the royal court.[26] He writes that indigenous dance

[24] Cravath's work is also the first of its kind written in English.

[25] Sasagawa Hideo, "Post/colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance," *Southeast Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (March 2005).

[26] Sappho Marchal, the daughter of a conservator at Angkor, and a French enthusiast herself, documented and illustrated the bas-reliefs of Devata goddesses at Angkor Wat in 1923. She argues that in the Angkorian era the cloth "must have been stiffened with some sort of starch" and in other bas-reliefs concludes that in "some cases the cloth was very light or even transparent." Sappho Marchal, *Khmer Costumes and Ornaments of the*

practice in later years were adopted by the royal Angkorian court (802-1431 CE) in the dancers' ritual dance performances and participation, as who as concubines in the King's harem "regenerated" and maintained the health of the King and Kingdom.[27] Cravath asserts that the larger the harem, the more indicative of the health and wealth of the King and Kingdom. Cravath weaves a narrative that positions the dancer as powerful, yet her power hinders on her role as part of a collective whole. Only within her role as dancer and concubine for the King and the Kingdom, as one number among many, does the dancer hold any power. Cravath paints Angkorian dancers as only supportive infrastructure of the King's power. The dancers' social mobility and their individual power in the court are not addressed nor are they made important in Cravath's narrative.

Though Angkor declined in the fifteenth century due to an array of different factors, including the growing force of the Thai city Ayutthaya, Cravath argues that the court dance persevered and continued unbroken. He also finds little indication of court dance being practiced in Cambodia in the fifteenth century.[28] Yet, he does discover evidence within "the oral tradition, [that indicates] court dancers were taken to Ayutthaya in conjunction with the fifteenth century demise of Angkor."[29] Though little proof points to the presence of court dancers in Cambodia after the fall of Angkor, Cravath stresses

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Devatas of Angkor Wat (Bangkok, Thailand: 2005, first English edition, original publishing date 1927), xi, 5.

[27] Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower*, xxix.

[28] Ibid., 99.

[29] Ibid., 100.

that the presence of reworked dramas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries makes evident and confirms current Khmer oral recounts that "the dance tradition in Cambodia remained unbroken from the pre-Angkorian period to the present."[30] Though Cravath's work dispelled the notion that Cambodian court dance was a watered down version of Indian court dance, Cravath, unlike Brandon, reasserts the notion of classical dance being "unbroken," problematically collapsing history, bodies, and labor into a singular narrative that avoids fleshing out the dancer's agency amidst growing tensions in negotiating cultural policy.

Figure 1
Photo of Devatas at Angkor Wat by author in June 2013.[31]

[30] Ibid., 100.

[31] Sappho Marchal writes in *Khmer Costumes and Ornaments,* 3 "these Devatas, or at least all those found in the sanctuary, must have been gilded or perhaps painted (gold or

Figure 2

Photo of Apsaras flying up out of the Churning Sea of Milk at Angkor Wat by author in June 2013

If the dance practice was not found to be "unbroken" after several hundred years of transformation, war, and new policies as the result of new Kings, then I argue that the court dance's jagged, historical trajectory was undoubtedly "bent," disturbing the currently accepted cultural narrative on classical dance.[32] Costuming highlights the uneven landscape of Cambodian classical dance history and the fissures that result in engaging Cambodian cultural nationalism. For example, Cambodian King Ang Duong (1841-1859) separated male and female court dancers and established a radically new costuming design for court dancers during his reign. He personally prescribed his new

traces of red still remain in grooves on some of them); this must have given them a very different appearance from the way they look now."

[32] Referencing Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro who writes, "if my experimental choreography bends the traditional aesthetic, it never breaks it." Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, "Dancing Off Centre," eds. Stephanie Burridge and Fred Frumberg, *Beyond the* Apsara*: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), 118.

costumes to the dancers, vying away from the bare-breasted, loose fitting *sampot* of the Angkorian era. Cravath writes that the Angkorian style remained unbroken from the time of Angkor until King Ang Duong's manipulation of the dancers' costumes, yet, what do we make of the fissures, the new paths, and new costuming and choreographic tactics of King Ang Duong's reign? Dance scholar Tania Hammidi argues that scholars should not easily dismiss costuming's role in continuously redefining national and gender politics. Hammidi's "dressed, dancing body" is a new notion in dance studies that moves the ornamentation—the dressing down or dressing up of the dancer or performer's body—into the forefront of dance studies. Hammidi writes:

> The dancing body is a complicated critical entity, more than flesh, muscles and bones; more than energy, chemicals, and neurons...the dancing body is a costumed body, what I call 'a dressed, dancing body,' whether naked or garbed. To acknowledge this viewpoint as a critical scholar in dance means to let go of the humanist view of the body and adopt an expanded notion of what creates, maintains, and projects 'the body' into language and therefore into history, both discursively and materially.[33]

Costuming acts as a performative site of political representation in classical dance as illustrated in King Ang Duong's revision of court dancers' costumes. Ang Duong's "revised version insisted on heavy clothing [that] restricted movement" with "heavy brocade skirts with bodices so tight they had to be sewn in for each performance" which irrevocably altered the appearance of court dancers, limited their movement, and thus altered the choreography and movement gestures that defined the repertoire. [34]

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[33] Tania Hammidi, "Dance, Dress, Desire: Drag Kings, Prison Wear, and the Dressed, Dancing Body" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 2010), 6.

[34] Ibid., 110-111.

Why move to break tradition and cover the dancers' bodies with heavy restricting fabric? Larasati in her seminal text on Indonesian court dance argues that though national tradition appears to be an "un-edited whole," in reality, this narrative "is riddled with gaps through which millions of actual bodies have both physically vanished and been mythologically expelled."[35] She writes that "simulacra" replaces or "replicates" the live bodies, as new dancers are tasked to recreate a tradition that never existed.[36] We can only speculate as to why King Ang Duong covered his dancers in modest, restricting fabric, erasing and replacing a long tradition of costuming and choreography. This covering of the dancers' bodies arguably reflects King Ang Duong's vested interest and creation of a new version of the *Chbap Srey* (women's code) which he composed and modeled in the midst of his reign. The *Chbap Srey* "specifies women's place in and responsibility for maintain social order and peace within the family and broader society."[37] It teaches Cambodians how women should act in all things as pure, obedient, and virtuous. Cravath alludes to changing gender norms in Cambodia during what Annuska Derks would argue were the early "symbolic images of the woman and of proper female behavior, thus not only function to preserve culture but the Khmer social order and people in general."[38] The covering up of the dancer's body with heavy,

[35] Rachmi Diyah Larasati, *The Dance That Makes You Vanish,* xvi.

[36] Ibid., xvi.

[37] Annuska Derks, *Khmer Women on the Move,* 43

[38] Ibid., 12.

restricting silk reflects Ang Duong's investment in the *Chbap Srey* as cultural narrative and marks a steep break in the traditional costuming of classical dance.

This new "invented tradition" of both costuming and dance style dominated King Ang Duong's reign, continued to dominate court dance style well into the 1970s, and arguably well into today's costuming of classical dancers.[39] Cravath, though, argues that court dance remains relatively "unbroken" through these several eras and hundreds of years, yet also posits that court dance under Ang Duong as seeming to "have reversed a fundamental balance of elements" in the repertoire.[40] How can a tradition remain unbroken but undergo a complete reversal of fundamental elements? Why is it important to Cambodian national rhetoric and to Cravath to posit court dance as unbroken? Eric Hobsbawm argues that inventing tradition "is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition."[41] Ang Duong thus partly invented classical dance under his reign. Invented tradition in this case follows "a rapid transformation of society," bending court dance's aesthetics both in costuming and in choreography. Cravath's claim that classical dance has continuously functioned unbroken is in itself an invented tradition which continues to reverberate in the rhetoric and scholarship on Khmer dance.[42]

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[39] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," 4.

[40] Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower,* 113.

[41] Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," 4.

[42] Ibid., 4.

Cravath's narrative turns to Ang Duong's son and successor, Norodom, who was as equally personally invested as Ang Duong was in his dancers, especially in his later years of rule (1860-1904). Cravath writes that Norodom's behavior towards the dancers bordered on paranoia—he "was relentless in maintaining the seclusion of the palace women" as "a dancer might ask for permission only one day each year to leave."[43] Additionally, Norodom observed rehearsals on a daily basis. Cravath writes that his daily attendances "bespeaks his personal affection for the dancers as well as their art."[44] Cravath's narrative is driven by the need to glorify and highlight the King without providing any possible counter-narratives from the dancers. This narrative does not flesh out the monarch's policing and controlling behavior towards the dancers especially as their bodies were subject to his male gaze both in dance and in bed.[45] This narrative also reinforces the rhetoric that, in Mariam Lam's words, the female body is a "vessel or bearer of […] nationalist attributes."[46] In sum, though women's bodies in Cravath's narrative were the most powerful sign of the royal kingdom, they are represented in discourse as vessels of royal power without agentive characterization.

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[43] Ibid., 116.

[44] Ibid., 116.

[45] Cravath writes that "regardless of the contacts which the dancers must have made with outsiders, Norodom was relentless in maintaining the seclusion of the palace women." Ibid., 116.

[46] Mariam Beevi Lam, "The Passing of Literary Traditions: The Figure of the Woman from Vietnamese Nationalism to Vietnamese American Transnationalism." *Amerasia Journal* 23, no. 2 (1997): 27-53.

Perhaps the part of Cravath's narrative that gives a feminist reader the most anxiety is his section on dance under the French protectorate (1863-1953). Cambodian court dancers' position shifted from dancing exclusively for the King to dancing for the French and visiting dignitaries under Norodom's reign (1860-1904). Only a small, elite few who associated with the royal family, Cambodian government, or officials of the French protectorate could witness court dance. Cravath claims that during this time dancing became a French political tool and the fundamental meaning of the dance shifted away from its ritual origins.[47] During King Sisowath's reign court dancers gained mobility—they were allowed to leave the court when they wished and were able to get an education (1904-1927). Though women were afforded more access outside of the harem in this period, Sisowath maintained dancers at court in his exclusive harem, which "shielded" the dancers from scholarly inquiry.[48] These women of the palace still maintained their role as the King's "essential power."[49] Cravath, however, argues that the dancers' greater access to education is "clear evidence of the irresistible social change being forced upon the monarchy by European culture"—as if women gaining an education were detrimental to the tradition of court dance. This reading of French

[47] Classical dancers during this era "only performed on five occasions: the king's coronation, his birthdays, royal marriage, the hair-cutting ceremony of a prince or princess, and at the visit to Cambodia of an honored guest." Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower*, 129.

[48] Ibid., 129-131. Cravath writes that Sisowath considered the dancers an "indispensable part of his entourage, and he surrounded himself with dancers every minute of the day."

[49] Ibid., 140.

interception into classical dance only affords for a singular, essentialist story—that of Khmers being imposed upon by a colonial power without any type of deeper analysis of how that power enabled educational and social mobility for the dancers during this time. Social anthropologist Annuska Derks writes that "studies focusing on women in developing countries tend to highlight how they are used to symbolize the state of 'tradition' in their societies or how women are subjected to structures of dominance. The former," which Cravath employs, "points to women as the symbolic bearers of culture, honor, or national identity, and as such carrying the 'burden of representation.'"[50] The suggested passivity of his work removes the dancers as agents.

Some Cambodian classical dancers during this period of transition from court dancer to civil servant began to separate from the royal court and pursue outside projects in the new tourism industry enabled by the French.[51] Cravath takes particular issue with the French exoticizing the dancers and identifying them "with an ancient past and presented as elegant incarnations of Angkorian sculpture," though Cravath takes no issue with the absolute power the monarch had over the dancers.[52] Per French instruction, the

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[50] Annuska Derks, *Khmer Women on the Move: Exploring Work and Life in Urban Cambodia* (Honolulu, HA: University of Hawai'I Press, 2008), 7-8.

[51] For instance, Princess Say Sangvann leant out her troupe of classical dancers to the French to perform at the "Colonial Exhibition." Following their tour abroad, the French government declared her troupe to be the "true" Khmer dancers and allowed for only her troupe to perform at Angkor Wat, rather than the Cambodian royal ballet. Cravath argues that this move was a coup—throwing the Royal Ballet to the margins. Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower,* 142.

[52] Ibid., 144.

dances were made shorter and thus more consumable for tourists and foreign diplomats and the troupe "appears to have fulfilled no ritual function […] nor been identified with the power of the king."[53] Though the French by all means used Sangvann's troupe to overshadow the Royal Ballet, a closer analysis of Sangvann's dancers highlights the greater social mobility women gained in this period in Sangvann's troupe, thus destabilizing the King's all-consuming, policing power over their bodies.[54] Cravath continues to take issue with the French's interception in classical dance practice at the royal court of King Monivong (1928-1941). He writes that the French essentially made the dancers civil servants, who as such gained such personal freedoms as the ability to marry. He argues that these new personal freedoms contributed towards the deterioration of classical dance at a "fundamental level," destabilizing the King's harem as well as Khmer tradition.[55] No longer were the women property of the King; through the French protectorate they had gained greater social mobility. Dance scholar Priya Srinivasan argues that considering dancers as "transnational laborers" highlights dancers' historic transition from the margins to the center of the workforce in industrialization. Through their labor as civil servants of the French protectorate, the dancers were afforded the

[53] Ibid., 145.

[54] Say Sangvann's dancers "were allowed great freedom" in her troupe. Ibid., 142.

[55] Cravath writes that, the dancers "overall function as attendants of the king and performers of ritual dances over which he presided had been replaced by a social role allowing them a personal freedom for which they were ill-prepared…The Khmer dance tradition on a more fundamental level than mere performance was rapidly deteriorating." Ibid., 140.

opportunities of education, marital relationships, and travel. Srinivasan warns scholars to not separate dance from labor, for "in dance, even more than in other disciplines, the labor of the dancing cannot be separated from its means of production, the dancing body."[56]

King Sihanouk's era saw arguably the most "glittering chapter" of Cambodian court dance since the time of Angkor, when dance began to represent the nation (1941-1970).[57] The French attempted to disable the royal dancers by withdrawing funding for new costumes and employing Sangvann's troupe to continue the royal tradition over the Royal Cambodia Ballet.[58] The costumes are a *necessary* component to creating dance rituals – the French, knowing this, withdrew funding. Queen Kossomak sought private sources and was able to costume fourteen dancers and thus continue both the private and public role of the troupe. Under her direction, dances were shortened and streamlined and she brought male dancers back into the repertoire (especially to play the acrobatic role of the monkey). Additionally, certain dances were eliminated from the repertoire and new dances were added.[59] Cravath writes that Queen Kossomak used "staging techniques from the European theatre" to enhance and bring theatricality to the

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[56] Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 11.

[57] Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower*, 153.

[58] Ibid., 154-155.

[59] Ibid., 156.

performances.[60] The dancers were dancing outside the palace more than they ever had before, but their seclusion in previous eras was kept intact – photo-journalists were allowed interviews but never involved "the dancers themselves."[61] Cravath praises Kossomak for perpetuating "an image of the troupe as a precious jewel—highly revered but distant."[62] Though Kossomak used European staging techniques, extended the more modest costuming from King Ang Duong's reign, eliminated and added dances, and streamlined performances to make them more palatable for foreign consumption, she still shielded dancers from the public eye—transforming costumes, choreography, location, and her authorial intent does not "break" the tradition as long as "the purpose of the dancers' performance was, in part, to honor and symbolize royal authority."[63]

The royal family concentrated on reconstructing classical dance in the 1950s and 1960s; which at that time was perceived as a national dance. Under the presidency of Lon Nol, the dancers were no longer known as the Royal Ballet of Cambodia—they were now The Classical Khmer Ballet.[64] As the political climate in Cambodia became increasingly

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[60] Ibid, 156-157.

[61] Ibid, 158.

[62] Ibid., 158.

[63] Ibid., 151.

[64] Cambodian classical dance was previously known as Cambodian court dance; the dancers were only affiliated with the royal court until its public debut in the 1950s. Since the repertoire's shift from royalist projects to national projects, President Lon Nol changed the royal dance troupe's name to Classical Khmer Ballet. Independent artists and troupes currently refer to the practice as "classical" and not "court" dance. Ibid., 169-170.

charged, many dancers with their high official and diplomat husbands left the country thus, leaving the dance troupe depleted.[65] The dance practice abruptly came to a halt two decades later. Pol Pot, also known as Brother Number One, ousted President Lon Nol on April 17th, 1975 after three months of battle. Pol Pot aimed to completely dismantle the royal court and Cambodian government and create a new one: Democratic Kampuchea, or the Khmer Rouge regime. Through this new regime, Pol Pot hoped to rid Cambodia of any and all Western influence by forcing the country to return to an agrarian state. Cambodian American memory scholar Cathy Schlund-Vials writes that Pol pot was "determined to eradicate Western influence by any means necessary."[66] Upon his take-over, those who did not manage to escape were marched out of urban-centers such as the Capitol Phnom Penh to countryside labor camps.[67] A quarter of Cambodians over the four-year reign of terror were killed. Scholars speculate somewhere between one and three million people were murdered; many were buried in mass graves in what were known in the U.S. media as the "killing fields."[68]

The Khmer Rouge regime called for an upending of all the "principal pillars of Cambodian society: centuries-old tradition, prerevolutionary socioeconomic

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[65] Ibid., 170.

[66] Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 1.

[67] Ibid., 1.

[68] See cited works by Ben Kiernan, Cathy Schlund-Vials, Alexander Hinton, and David Chandler.

infrastructures, and Khmer familial affiliation."[69] As such, almost all of the classical dancers during the Khmer Rouge regime were found to be murdered for their affiliation to the royal court. Dance ethnologist Toni Shapiro writes that dancers were especially "not spared the starvation, disease, forced labor, torture, and mass executions."[70] She claims that an estimated ninety percent of professional artists were killed under the KR.[71] Following the war, Shapiro spent over two years completing ethnographic fieldwork on classical dance in Thai refugee camps. Her seminal dissertation *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia* highlights a feminist perspective of classical dance, bringing the dancer and her agency from the margins into the center of classical dance discourse. She argues that classical dance was a way of creating order for Khmer refugees in Thai camps after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime.[72] Shapiro sheds light on the cultural and regenerative impact classical dance has on Khmers, who define themselves both as survivors of war

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[69] Cathy Schlund Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice*, 2.

[70] Toni Shapiro, "Dancing in Cambodia" (Southeast Asia Program, Cornell, Spring 1993), 1, http://seap.einaudi.cornell.edu/sites/seap.einaudi.cornell.edu/files/1993s_1.pdf.

[71] Ibid., 1.

[72] Shapiro was "struck by the fact that among such a small population (about 300 Khmer), and under such conditions, there was a drive to dance, to perform. People who knew only the rudiments of Khmer classical or folk dance movements taught others, and they stage small shows." In 1989, leaders of the troupes at Site 2, a Thai-Cambodian border camp, discussed how to allot their budget –what was the most important aspect of dance to document? Shapiro writes that "the consensus was that 'ancient Khmer dance' (robam boran khmaer), also referred to as classical or court dance, was the most important to document… 'classical dance is the soul (proleung) of the Khmer people." Shapiro argues that classical dance had come to "symbolize a connection to the past and to Cambodia. It provides a rooting in the chaos of war and life on the run." Toni Shapiro, *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia*, 8-10.

and bearers of a precious cultural legacy in classical dance.[73] Khmer dance was the tether to a cultural anchor in the midst of complete and total upheaval.[74] In the years following the Khmer Rouge regime, dance was the first living cultural art to be restored. When the royalty returned in 1992, Prince Sihanouk "hoped to encourage confidence in a promised re-creation of the past, of the era of his previous rule, which he interpreted as a continuation of the model set by Angkorian kings."[75]

Sihanouk's model, though, collapsed the dancer back into her role as a vessel of royal and national bodies. Shapiro highlights dancers' fears of being enmeshed with the palace—"I don't want anyone to think I am a king's property."[76] Shapiro writes that in the first days following Sihanouk's return, through several first performances for the prince and royalty since the Khmer Rouge regime, some older dancers expressed much joy at having the royalty return and some new dancers expressed trepidation—"Do they think that the return of one person brings all of us back to life? What do they think we've been doing for the past twelve or thirteen years?" one dancer asked after being questioned by a journalist if Prince Sihanouk's return signaled the dance's revival.[77] Additionally,

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[73] Shapiro writes that "Khmer have developed a particularly spiritualize and essentialist notion of culture, with specific collective historic memories, behaviors, and rituals used to identify themselves as 'Khmer.'" Ibid., 5.

[74] Shapiro argues that by "referring to the dance as the 'soul' of the Khmer, the troupe leaders were situating themselves in space and time, even though they were physically displaced and living in limbo with only dreams of possibilities for their future." Ibid., 10.

[75] Ibid., 410.

[76] Ibid., 411.

[77] Ibid., 390.

tensions between the need to preserve and the need to create arguably formed the base for classical dance's revival in Cambodia and in the diaspora.

After the war, Long Beach, California became home to the largest population of Cambodians outside of Cambodia. A very small group of Khmer families had made their home in Long Beach before the onset of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1975. Almost all Cambodian immigrants are refugees or children of refugees who survived the Khmer Rouge regime.[78] The small group of families who were fortunate enough to have made their home in the United States before the Khmer Rouge regime formed a solidarity group, and they welcomed and sponsored the refugees in 1975.[79] Refugees first arrived in San Diego County at the marine base, Camp Pendleton. They were running for their lives, and as such, most Khmer escaped with nothing except the clothes on their backs.[80] In the following years, many Khmer, who may have been sponsored in other parts of the country, moved to Long Beach as part of secondary migration for the growing Khmer community and mild weather. Long Beach, in contrast to surrounding cities in Orange and Los Angeles Counties, in 1975 had many entry-level jobs and low-income housing options available. A second wave of Khmer arrived in 1980. They were not as fortunate

[78] Cathy Schlund-Vials writes that "between 1980 and 1985, almost 150,000 Cambodians came to the United States, facilitated by the congressional passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, though others would eventually find asylum in France and Australia (among other countries)." Cathy Schlund-Vials, *War Genocide and Justice,* 3.

[79] Susan Needham and Karen Quintiliani, "Why Long Beach?" *Cambodian Community History and Archive Project,* May 2011, http://camchap.org/en/why-long-beach.

[80] Susan Needham and Karen Quintiliani, *Cambodians in Long Beach,* 21.

as the 1975 refugees. The 1980 refugees, across the board, suffered extreme physical and psychological traumas due to forced-labor in re-education camps with insufferable conditions.[81] Dance, for many of these refugees and their families, allowed for a connection to their homeland that was safe, positive, and community-building.[82]

Several Cambodian classical dance troupes were born from these families. Today, students of all ages, from toddler to retiree, can access free classes. One of the first priorities of Long Beach's newest residents was to establish classical dance practice. Needham and Quintiliani explain:

> recreating dance and the music which accompanies it in Long Beach was a challenge. In the early days only a handful of people had the knowledge and expertise to perform and train others. An equally daunting challenge was costuming, which is an art in itself. Lacking the right materials and only a few experts to guide them, individuals recreated the dress, headdresses, and masks from memory.[83]

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[81] Ibid., 27.

[82] Her Royal Highness Princes Norodom Buppha Devi in "Royal Dances of Cambodia – Revival and Preservation," 2, writes that upon her return after living in exile during the Khmer Rouge regime only forty dancers were left. As such, in the diaspora the situation was especially dire. After kru such as Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro established classes, dancers and their families relied on dance to help create their new communities. Additonally, Paul Cravath writes that, "dance, however, is an oral tradition, and, given the important symbolic value it appeared to hold for the Khmers as demonstrated in this chapter, there can be little doubt that young dancers were trained as soon as possible to replace those lost. Even today in the great diaspora of Khmer dance, this is the case." Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower,* 91.

[83] Susan Needham and Karen Quintiliani, "Dance / *robam*" *Cambodian Community History and Archive Project,* May 2011, http://camchap.org/en/cambodianinlb/arts/dance.

Dance performances occurred in community spaces, at elementary and high schools, temples, and backyards, drawn mostly from the memory of the few artists who survived the Khmer Rouge regime and were able and willing to teach others in the diaspora.

1990 marked a turning point for classical dance in Long Beach. In previous years, the two-week festival was criticized by artists in the L.A. community for privileging artists of only Western European descent. Peter Sellars, the director of the 1990 L.A. Festival, re-centered the focus of the festival on Asia Pacific. Sellars argued that L.A. had become, at the time, a central hub for transnational arts:

> I want people here to be in touch with people in Bangkok, in Santiago, in Tokyo, and to begin to realize that Los Angeles is one of these important capitals on the Pacific. The old, dated cliché of Los Angeles as Hollywood is not operative anymore. Something else is happening in this city. And this festival is about that something else.[84]

That something else was the beginning of a cultural revival for the growing number of Southeast Asian refugees making their home in Los Angeles County. This cultural revival depended on new diasporic choreographers' works that engage the tensions in the intersections between U.S. multiculturalism and Cambodian cultural nationalism.

Watching the Classical Dance Company perform at the L.A. festival was, for some Khmer in the Long Beach/Los Angeles area, "the first contact with Cambodia since fleeing in the 1970s and 1980s. It was an emotionally charged tour that confirmed the

[84] Peter Sellars quoted in Mervynn Rothestein, "A Festival Embraces the Pacific Cultures," *The New York Times Arts*, last modified August 27 1990, http://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/27/arts/a-festival-embraces-the-pacific-cultures.html.

country and culture had not been destroyed."[85] Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, who was a graduate of the very first class of trained classical dancers from the Royal School of Fine Arts in Cambodia following the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, performed with the Classical Dance Company at the L.A. Festival. She moved to Los Angeles a year after the festival, married an American named John Shapiro, and began teaching classical dance classes in the Long Beach community. Just three years later, in 2002, Cheam-Shapiro opened her studio, Khmer Arts Academy (KAA).[86]

When Cheam-Shapiro moved back to Takhmao, Cambodia in 2007 to start a professional classical dance troupe there, she created an associate artistic director position to allow someone to take her place at KAA in Long Beach, California. The position was given to a professional classical dancer from Cambodia. The idea was that the dancer, presumed to be a female performer, would be flown from Cambodia out to Long Beach and sponsored for one to two years. In 2012, instead of granting the position to a female performer from Cambodia, Cheam-Shapiro decided to pick an artist from the diaspora to be the cultural caretaker of classical dance at KAA. Prumsodun Ok, Long Beach independent artist, queer activist, and male classical dance performer and choreographer, took the position.

There are several current Cambodian classical dance troupes active in Long Beach: The Spirit of Khmer Angkor (SKA) sponsored by the Cambodian Association of

[85] Susan Needham and Karen Quintiliani, *Cambodians in Long Beach*, 54.

[86] Ibid., 55.

America (CAA); Cambodian Fine Art Heritage Relief Foundation (CFAHRF); Khmer Arts Academy (KAA) sponsored by Khmer Arts; and United Cambodian Community (UCC) also sponsors a troupe (not named). These troupes are all sponsored and funded by community organizations, family, and friends. They meet across Long Beach to practice regularly for performances held at community events such as Southeast Asia Day at the Long Beach Aquarium of the Pacific, the Khmer New Year Parade that marches through the heart of Cambodia Town down Anaheim Street, the Khmer New Year Festival at El Dorado Park, and the Cambodian Cultural Festival at Macarthur Park. At KAA, dancers meet every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday for dance lessons. KAA *Neak Kru* and *Lok Kru* uniquely teach all students the starring roles, preparing each student to potentially lead a dance.[87] Learning classical dance at KAA is for many of the students not about becoming a professional classical dancer. Rather, learning classical dance affords students an opportunity to connect to their culture, develop a sense of confidence as part of the greater Khmerican community, spread awareness of Khmer culture in the Long Beach community, and continue to breathe life into the practice of classical dance.[88] As such, the diaspora potentially enables a transformation from royalist-

[87] Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, "A Teacher's Gift," ed. Prumsodun Ok, *Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 22.

[88] Due to this, dancers of non-Khmer heritage potentially disrupt the cultural narrative of Khmer classical dance. Lucy Burns argues that "practices become exotic precisely because they are performed for (and later even by) outsiders, in contexts where they are regarded as alien, strange." Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), 8. In regards to practice at KAA, the majority of dancers are of Khmer descent. Additionally, there are regular dancers of non-Khmer descent such as myself, another White academic, the White boyfriend of a dancer, and a Thai dancer. There is also a constant influx of new

centered to community-engaged projects, destabilizing classical dance's dominant narrative.[89] The dance community however is not of one mind and endeavor to recreate

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dancers of non-Khmer descent. They usually join because they have Cambodian American friends who do it; some stick around and become regular dancers, some move on after a few months. KAA also hosts an Artist in Residence program to connect the Khmer dance community with other dance communities. Currently, New York and Netherlands based performing artist Justin Morrison is working at the studio. He will create a work in collaboration with the dancers and also teach a class to the students after classical dance practice on the weekends. KAA also currently has "Hot Hula" exercise classes after classical dance practice on Saturdays. KAA's manager takes advantage of the studio space to connect Khmer youth with many different dancers from across the world. Serey Tep, *Khmer Arts Students* (Facebook Group), May 7 2015, 10:40 PM, https://www.facebook.com/groups/484540258243206/?fref=ts. As I've previously stated, I am not Khmer nor am I not a professional Khmer dancer. I am aware and critical of my privilege as a white academic entering into and writing about a community that I do not culturally identify with. Kamala Visweswaran in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 8, argues that "if we have learned anything about anthropology's encounter with colonialism, the question is not really whether anthropologists can represent people better, but whether we can be accountable to people's own struggles for self-representation and self-determination."

[89] Asian-American Studies scholar Cathy Schlund-Vials is one of the first to critically engage the highly under-examined field of the politics of resistance in the arts in diaspora. Schlund-Vials argues that the current cultural work of the Khmer diaspora is driven by and built upon "trauma and resistance." Cathy Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice,* 11, 22. Huma Haider, though, claims that we cannot make sweeping judgments on shared values, goals, and political beliefs of a diasporic community—"other identities and experiences" such as class, gender, age, generation, urban or rural background, level of education and occupation, date of departure from the home country, and specific location of origin within the country, can segment diasporas and influence their perspectives. Huma Haider, "Transnational Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: the Participation of conflict-Generated Diaspora in addressing the legacy of Mass Violence," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27, no 2, 207-233, doi: 10.1093/jrs/feu002, April 10 2014. Janet McLellan contends that though many Khmer Canadian community members access Khmerness through an unabridged and authentic path, many of the *second-generation* Khmer youth, those born *within* the diaspora, "do not relate nostalgically to Khmer music and dance, but actively seek new meanings through merging traditional, popular, and modern forms arising within Cambodia and transmitted to transnational contexts." McLellan points to the generational shift between first-generation and second-generation Khmer diasporic community members and how their generational position in diaspora shifts the community's perception of the role of ritual

classical dance with disparate goals: some dance for royal or national projects or, imagine dancing as a culturally-defined shared experience, setting roots for a new home in their Cambodian America. In Long Beach, dance connects diasporic Khmer to the homeland in a tangible, spiritual, communal, and tactical way.[90]

When HRH Buppha Devi returned to Cambodia after the war, she made it her mission to preserve and educate the public about classical dance. Shapiro writes that "with the return of the royalty, the dancers were once again messengers between temporal and heavenly powers."[91] Ten years later, Cambodian Classical dance gained world-wide recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage dance repertoire. The Royal Ballet of Cambodia, under the direction of HRH Buppha Devi, first gained UNESCO recognition on November 7th, 2003. Shortly following the Royal Ballet's recognition, all of Khmer Classical dance was put under the umbrella of World Heritage recognition. The dance

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and dance in Khmer diasporic life. This argument, though subtle in her text, marks a shift in Khmer diaspora studies from theorizing diasporic citizens as refugees responding to the trauma of the Khmer Rouge and subsequent forced migration, to diasporic citizens who access a well of social and political power by identifying with Khmerness in the diaspora. This shift enables classical dancers and choreographers in diaspora to transform the repertoire from royalist and national driven projects to community-engaged, politically nuanced work. Janet McLellan, "Shifts in Diasporic and Buddhist Identities among Second Generation Cambodians in Ontario," *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, no 7 (2011), 92.

[90] Toni Shapiro, *Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia,* 4.

[91] Ibid., 393.

practice had shifted arguably from ritual, to the royal court, to the nation, and then to cultural icon.[92]

Some perceive classical dance as vulnerable and open to becoming misguided and misinterpreted. For example, Her Royal Highness Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, choreographer of the Cambodian Royal Ballet, writes that it is the royal family's task to facilitate in the preservation of classical dance and as such, "I am fearful of the wrong outside influences."[93] For HRH Buppha Devi, Khmer classical dance was no longer only a palace function; she writes that dance is "now secularized; it is the national pride of Cambodia […] we cannot keep the dance just at the palace now—it belongs to the people. It is the property of the nation and not just for the king and the royal family to enjoy."[94] If Cambodian classical dance is now the property of Khmer nationals, where do Khmericans factor in claiming the dance as their own?[95] And if Khmer classical dance is

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[92] Anthropologists Susan Needham and Karen Quintiliani write that after the 1970s, the rhetoric of the dancer transformed from a symbol of the monarch's power into *the* symbol of Cambodia's recovering national strength and resilience, the quintessential "symbol of Cambodian culture" (2008:49).

[93] Ibid., 12.

[94] Ibid., 5.

[95] For example, Many Khmer in the U.S. diaspora choose to maintain a rich, culturally and ethnically identified Khmer life outside of the geopolitical boundaries of Cambodia. U.S. academics and arts organizations, though, mostly affiliate themselves with Cambodian artists born, raised, and working within Cambodia. Khmer diasporic artists are often shuttled aside and marginalized for their homeland counterpart as they disrupt "native authenticity" narratives. For example, the spring 2013 international *Seasons of Cambodia: A Living Arts Festival* in New York City featured Cambodian artists and dancers from the homeland but not the diaspora. The festival reserved one talk, and only one, towards the end of the month-long festival for diasporic artists. The festival imported artists into this diasporic borderzone, to borrow Edward Bruner's term,

property of the nation, who has the right to perform it, who has the right to access it, and who has the right to transform it?

In the Khmer diaspora, with so few classical performers left, classical dance's pedagogy, practice, and performance were under great threat. As the practice and performance of Cambodian classical dance were kept alive and preserved by the *kru* predating the time of Angkor through colonization and the Khmer Rouge genocide, the goals for cultural revival and preservation continue to rest on the shoulders of the *kru*, who aim to carry on the tradition by reproducing past dances with minimal change, reproduce past dances with new goals, and/or produce new work that uses the traditional dance vocabulary to tell new stories.

Independent Artists' Interventions in Choreography and Costuming

Diasporic independent artists Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro and Prumsodun Ok's efforts at transforming costuming and choreography reveal the tensions for diasporic Khmer artists in grappling with contemporary Cambodian cultural nationalism. These two artists struggle to challenge the royal imperative to preserve yet avoid transforming classical dance. They utilize and build upon classical dance gesture and

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kowtowing to a colonial hierarchy which privileges and propitiates homeland over diasporic artists. This preference from festival directors and, at times, academics, to study and interact with homeland artists over diasporic artists marginalizes the diasporic community—not only in the arts, but also in the scholarly archive. "April 2013 Calendar," *Seasons of Cambodia*, New York, 2013, accessed May 4 2015, http://nyc2013.seasonofcambodia.org/soc/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Fold-Out-Calendar.pdf; Edward Bruner, *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), *17*.

movement vocabulary, weave new narratives, and create new costumes—all of which, according to Khmer Arts, "have long been considered inviolate."[96] Both Cheam-Shapiro and Ok stretch the repertoire beyond nationalist preservation projects to current social justice issues. This tactical opening and stretching of the repertoire highlights the dressed, classical dancing body's pivotal, agentive position in negotiating Cambodian cultural nationalism. HRH Buppha Devi, the cultural representative of the Royal Cambodian Ballet, writes that "dance is the national pride of Cambodia and the people need to help us protect the dance—it is our fragile heritage. Our number one priority is to keep, revive, and preserve the dance and bring back dignity to Cambodia and its people."[97] By enlarging and experimenting with costuming and choreography of the repertoire, Cheam-Shapiro and Ok shift classical dance from its historical supplicancy to royal and national political projects, simultaneously avoiding treating the female dancing body as a vessel of royal and national power.[98]

Both artists, having been based in Long Beach and Cambodia at some point in their careers, are deeply invested in building a global Khmer dance community. They are not "bound" to the diaspora—they both travel back and forth to Cambodia and Long Beach with the work they make both in diaspora and in Cambodia. Both artists, who are

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[96] "Khmer Arts." (*Khmer Arts Academy,* 2015), http://khmerarts.org.

[97] Ibid., 5.

[98] Historian Trudy Jacobsen argues that "to change tradition is to meddle in Cambodian cultural identity" in *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History* (Denmark: NIAS Press, 2008), xi.

influenced by and influence other dance artists across borders, trouble geopolitical bifurcations. Through exchange, workshops, social media, and international performances, Cheam-Shapiro and Ok activate and participate in a global network. Though, English scholar Josephine Lee warns the diasporic scholar to be careful—she argues that by analyzing Asian American performance such as Khmer classical dance in Long Beach as "connecting immigrants and their descendants to their 'roots' and transcending geographical and experiential distance" only allows for a singular, two-dimensional reading of a complicated, messy, and politically fraught cultural practice.[99] Additionally, Priya Srinivasan suggests in the context of the Indian-American experience "dancers are dealing with at least two 'master' discourses of citizenship. The first is the cultural nationalism of South Asian communities in the United States; the second is the U.S. multicultural discourse, which seeks to divide minority communities, even as it celebrates their 'national' ethnic forms as the 'other' of mainstream practices."[100] Khmericans deal with these discourses with the additional memory of genocide, trauma, and recovery framing their individual experiences. Analysis of Cheam-Shapiro and Ok's

[99] Josephine Lee helped create the discourse possible on Asian American performance in the late nineties. She writes that "theater is positioned as the demonstration and continued fortification of a coherent, continuous, recognizable culture, and examined only in terms of how it helps a community preserve that culture—its history, language, and bloodlines—against the onslaught of Americanization." Lee contends that these bounded notions of preserving "ethnic" theatre against U.S. assimilation serve no purpose except to "render more profound differences meaningless." She calls for a critical evaluation of both "Asian American" hyphenated identity and Asian American theatre. Josephine Lee, "Between Immigration and Hyphenation: The Problems of Theorizing Asian American Theater." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 13, no. 1 (Fall 1998), 45-56.

[100] Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 142.

costuming tactics highlights the strain and productivity in tackling Cambodian cultural nationalism in a U.S. multicultural discourse.

Cambodian classical dancers who have had the opportunity to practice Cambodian classical dance *outside* of Cambodia are "the first to respond" to the next step in redefining the repertoire. [101] Cheam-Shapiro exemplifies that call to transform the repertoire with her transformative costuming and choreographic tactics. As a survivor of the Khmer Rouge, a partner (both romantically and in business) to an American, and a student of both Cambodia's and the U.S's educational system, Cheam-Shapiro takes the task of stretching the repertoire as a diasporic choreographer onto her shoulders. As a young woman shortly after the KR ended, Cheam-Shapiro danced for the Royal School of Fine Arts (RUFA). She recounts that

> I, like my fellow dancers participated in the patriotic exercise of legitimizing the state by dancing dramas that celebrated hierarchy—dramas in which the lyrics were sometimes changed to replace royal characters with symbols of the current government—or simply by dancing on the government's behalf.[102]

After she graduated from RUFA, Cheam-Shapiro wanted to explore outside of nationalist rhetoric with classical dance. As such, she began choreographing her own works that allowed her to explore her own personal interests such as "inter-racial romance, xenophobia, misogyny, and the responsibility of leadership."[103] She empowers herself by

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[101] Fred Frumberg, "Beyond Revival and Preservation: Contemporary Dance in Cambodia," Compiled by Karen Rose Cann, *Dance/Diversity/Dialogue: Bridging Communities and Cultures*, World Dance Alliance Global Assembly, 2006, 160.

[102] Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, "Dancing Off Centre," 110.

[103] Ibid., 110.

naming herself a choreographer—departing from the classical dance popular notion of divine authorship.[104]

As dance scholar Anthea Kraut would argue, this naming "as a strategy of remembrance" addresses and gives privilege and power to marginalized artists.[105] "Choreographer" does not reference a homogenous structure that privileges the written word over the moving body.[106] Rather, the title "choreographer" recognizes Cheam-Shapiro's individual labor and agency that were previously rendered invisible by Cambodian cultural nationalism that dictates classical dance as divinely authored. Cheam-Shapiro's choreographic work set the stage for stretching the repertoire beyond state-sponsored projects. What follows is a textual analysis of one of Cheam-Shapiro's first choreographed works and one of her newest. I analyze the news media and academy's reception *Samritechak* (*Dark Prince*), specifically focusing on how her use of slightly altered traditional costuming marked the beginning and opened the door for other artists to stretch the repertoire. Her newest work, *A Bend in the River*, received a much different reception than *Samritechak* and also stretched the costuming and movement

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[104] Both in the diaspora and in Cambodia Cheam-Shapiro is recognized as a choreographer in addition to being *Neak Kru* (teacher).

[105] Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 1; Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, "Dancing Off Centre," eds. Stephanie Burridge and Fred Frumberg, *Beyond the* Apsara*: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), 114.

[106] Kraut argues "calling someone a 'choreographer' assigns credit to that individual" and "serves as an assertion of authorship." This acknowledgment of authorship as choreographer "acknowledges a history of labor" and the "calculated, labor-intensive orchestration of moving bodies." Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk,* 76, 77, 85.

gestures far beyond "traditional" dances of the repertoire. Examining Cheam-Shapiro's costuming tactics enables a reimagining of Khmerica and Khmerican choreographic work from a timeless Angkorian present to a politically current, possibly transgressive against Cambodian state policy, yet internationally renowned work. The legitimacy of classical dance in Cheam-Shapiro's work does not rely on the traditional, time-collapsing, costuming of the Apsara carved into the walls of Angkor Wat or King Ang Duong's restrictive brocade silks—rather, her new costuming tactics recognize classical dance as a tradition that can thrive, albeit with some fissures, without the markedness of the costume of the stone deities with new cross-culturally infused dimensions.

Cheam-Shapiro set the stage for shifting classical dance costuming and movement aesthetic away from Angkorian myth and towards social justice projects. She adapted Shakespeare's *Othello* onto the dancers of the Royal Cambodian Ballet. She used Othello's destructive character to "cast a critical eye on the responsibility of leadership" during the KR.[107] In Huma Haider's words, she sought to "challenge conventional politics and divisive attitudes in the homeland, and to set new agendas and solutions."[108] As she was living in the United States at a time when Shakespeare adaptations flooded the arts, the notion to adapt *Othello* into a Khmer classical dance work did not seem out

[107] Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, "Dancing Off Centre," 113.

[108] Huma Haider, "Transnational Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: the Participation of conflict-Generated Diaspora in addressing the legacy of Mass Violence," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27, no 2 (2012), 212.

of reach to her.[109] She writes, "when I arrived in Cambodia […] some people inside and outside the dance world were offended by my choice to adapt a foreign story rather than a Cambodian one." *Samritechak,* however Cambodians in Cambodia perceived of it, became widely popular outside of Cambodia. In a recent article, Theatre Arts professor Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. argues that though *Samritechak*'s international popularity made Cambodian classical dance accessible to a global audience, he misguidedly asserts that with its popularity came "the result of obscuring more authentic indigenous narratives."[110] To begin, naming a practice "more authentic" over another seeks a fictitious and harming narrative of a "cultural other"; where Western influence damages and irrevocably alters the "indigenous" other.

Further, anthropologist Edward M. Bruner argues that a deconstruction between a fictive authentic past and the fleshly live performer is needed in scholarship on traditional performances.[111] He argues that traditional dance is inherently constructed—whether it is a touristic, professional or a community based performance group. To posit one dance as more authentic over another completely obscures the fact that "change is inherent in all

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[109] She started touring with *Othello* in 2000. Brian Calvert, "Khmer Classical Dance Explores Shakespearean Themes" (The Cambodian Daily, March 29, 2000) https://www.cambodiadaily.com/archives/khmer-classical-dance-explores-shakespearean-themes-15977/.

[110] "Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. "Samritechak and Intercultural Shakespeare in Cambodia" in *Shakesepeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace* eds. Alexander Chang-Yuan Huang and Charles Stanley Ross (Purdue University Press, 2011), 171.

[111] Edward Bruner, *Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 1.

cultures." There is no "authentic" performer or performance—"authenticity is a red herring, to be examined only when the tourists, the locals, or the producers themselves use the term."[112] Wetmore Jr.'s nationalist, Original-Khmer embedded narrative parallels what many in Cambodia felt about Cheam-Shapiro's work. Cheam-Shapiro wondered if Cambodians were sensitive to her adaptation because it was a story that originated from the West. However, she writes that "the fact that many classical dance dramas, including the Reamker, tell imported stories failed to pacify such complaints."[113] She was "accused of damaging Cambodian national identity, threatened with lawsuits, and investigated by the police" because *Samritechak* was *not* a dance celebrating Cambodian nationalism and did *not* treat the female dancer as a vessel of royal and national power.[114]

Wetmore Jr. writes that even though Cheam-Shapiro's work marginalizes "indigenous" and "authentic" Cambodian classical dance, he could name *Samritechak* a "success" as long as her "objectives have been of a preservation of a classical Cambodian dance form" and a building of a bridge between Cambodian and Western theatre.[115] Cheam-Shapiro confronts her critics—"new dances," she writes, "have come into being as the result of commissions from those with official authority" and not independent artists. Cheam-Shapiro choreographed on her own behalf to critique leadership in the KR

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[112] Ibid., 3, 5.

[113] Ibid., 110.

[114] Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, "Dancing Off Centre," 113.

[115] Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. "Samritechak and Intercultural Shakespeare in Cambodia," 171.

regime and the years following as a "commoner with no position of leadership in government" and so the concepts driving *Samritechak* were not deemed permissible in the Khmer arts community as the dance and the country are still very much entrenched in the notion of central authority—a perspective of which Wetmore Jr. writes from.

Cheam-Shapiro began to stretch Chaktomuk costuming with the male lead's costume in *Samritechak.* She writes that the "protagonist exemplifies the 'macho' persona, yet the costume is beautifully embroidered, sparkly and perhaps a bit feminine."[116] By bringing the feminine to a male character's costume, Cheam-Shapiro stretches codified notions of the masculine and the feminine as constructed for the dancer in King Ang Duong's reign.[117] This marks an important shift in classical dance costuming. In *Samritechak* it was not the King, Queen, nor Princess designing costumes for dancers. A diasporic choreographer created these costumes with the specific intent to honor the thousand-year old tradition yet move beyond the narrative that defines the repertoire as a constantly seeking return to Angkor. Cheam-Shapiro draws attention to the KR by choreographing and costuming a new story that confronts the nation and the people's struggle for democracy.[118]

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[116] Cheam-Shapiro recalls Peter Sellars saying that she had "transformed" Othello, "including the choice of costuming." Adolfo Perez-Gascon, "Gods and Angels: The Dressing of Deities" ("Latest" *Advisor* Dec 2 2014) http://theadvisorcambodia.com/2014/12/gods-angels-dressing-deities/.

[117] Khmer Arts Records. MS-SEA043. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California. Accessed June 3, 2015.

[118] Stephen Heder, research associate in Politics and International Studies at the University of London, argues that Cambodia's current Prime Minister Hun Sen has not allowed for "a properly functioning liberal democracy" for more than twenty-five years.

Classical dance affords Cheam-Shapiro increased social and economic mobility in both Cambodia and the U.S., akin to how Bharata Natyam "maintains links to Indian culture, especially for women, and has become a vital pedagogical tool in immigrant communities."[119] Diasporic classical dancers generally fulfill Cambodian cultural nationalism due to in Srinivasan words the "immigrant anxieties about cultural miscegenation and the loss of 'pure' culture" that are emblematic in diasporic communities and "can be laid to rest when the community's women, who symbolize the Indian nation, perform and stage immigrant 'nostalgia' on their own bodies."[120] In seeking to embody pure culture, it becomes as Penny Edwards describes, "a curious process of copying and replication, of imitation, and ultimately, of anticipation; the

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The 1991 Paris Peace Accords officially ended the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and allowed for the United Nations to take over as the government of the state. Two years following, Hun Sen was re-elected as the youngest Prime Minister in the world. The UN's mission was to "prepare the country for a new Constitution and for free and fair elections" (United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights). Caroline Hughes writes that though a constitutional state was set up, by the end of the 1990s only a shell of liberal democracy remained. "The rule of law," she contends, "existed, but it was inhabited, usurped, and undermined by a shadow state organized around personal hierarchical connections and the manipulation of commodified patronage and violence." Caroline Hughes, *Cambodia in the shadow of genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 120. Hun Sen's political dictatorship transforms a political leader into royalty. In recent years, Hun Sen has reinvented himself as a "magical God-King." His title, Samdech Akka Moha Sena Pedei Techo or "exalted supreme great commander of gloriously victorious troops," reflects his desire and assumption of his status as kingly, or even "more astute than Cambodia's past kings" Stephen Heder, *Propaganda, politics, and violence in Cambodia: democratic transition under United Nations peace-keeping* (Armonk, NY: M.E Sharpe, 1996), 102-103.

[119] Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris,* 40.

[120] Ibid., 40.

credentials of the ‘Original Khmer‘ were simultaneously invented and validated in textual, material, and visual fields.”[121] Cheam-Shapiro, however, with her own individual choreographic work and through the creation of Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach, California, veers away from this self-orientalizing narrative that adheres to Cambodian cultural nationalism. She avoids representing her dance practice as an “uninterrupted” thousand-year-old tradition “that has absolutely no link to U.S. culture” and instead confronts both homeland and hyphenated identity politics in her work.[122] Cheam-Shapiro writes that she is “a product of both environments, [the U.S. and Cambodia]. While my aesthetic foundations is set in classical dance tradition, my cosmopolitan understanding of the arts comes from the educational and artistic opportunities that I took advantage of and the financial support I’ve received in the USA.”[123] As such, she does not deny or shut out non-Khmer influence—she uses both to transform and stretch the repertoire.

These transformations of the repertoire are evident in her newest work, *A Bend in the River*. Cheam-Shapiro’s new dance drama adapts a folktale about a crocodile to once again confront social justice issues concerning Khmers’ resentment of leadership during the KR. Cheam-Shapiro collaborated with costume designer San Vannary to bring loose, yet form fitting costumes to life, veering away from the sewn-in, restricting Chaktomuk

[121] Penny Edwards 163.

[122] Ibid., 40.

[123] Sophiline Cheam-Shapiro, “Dancing Off Centre,” 119.

design. Most noticeably new in contemporary classical dance design is artist Sopheap Pich's addition of two large, multi-piece rattan crocodiles. Each crocodile is made of five parts—a head, three mid-sections, and a tail that whips back and forth at the hands of a dancer. Each part is carried by a classical dancer who manipulates the rattan piece with both hands and at times struggles to corroborate the lower half of their body in classical dance style. At one memorable moment in the performance, five dancers carrying five parts of the crocodile over their faces kicked their feet laterally out, flicking their heels to the side then crossing back over the other foot. They crossed left then right as they approached the front of the stage. They pause, their feet crossed and planted on the stage, their hands occupied above their heads bearing the weight of the rattan crocodile piece, then swiftly circled their hips, undulating and simultaneously attempting to maintain a deep arch in their back as they rise up to the balance on the balls' of their feet. This movement arrangement was complicated—both to perform and to watch as a spectator. In observing classical dance the spectator learns to seek the slow, smooth and deep curves and swift yet subtle movement flow that define the repertoire.

In this rapid set of movement gestures, the spectator is caught between watching the rattan shift around the dancer's head, appreciating the deep curve to the dancer's spine, noting the swift and strong kicks as she approaches the audience, and startling at a hip undulation that jars the seemingly seamless arrangement of movement gestures. Cheam-Shapiro's attempt at deploying new costuming and choreography in *A Bend in the River* make visible ongoing tensions and attempted reconciliations for diasporic Khmer artists to both claim yet move beyond contemporary Cambodian cultural nationalism.

The evident tension in the dancers as they bear the weight of the rattan and keep classical dance posture while circling their hips and rising to pointe clearly illustrates the struggle for diasporic artists to stretch both the costume and movement repertoire outside of traditional costuming and movement gestures. *The New York Times's* columnist Andrea Mohin writes that Cheam-Shapiro is "liberating the movement from heavy costuming — and shows the potential of its undulating flow" yet no matter how "luminous" the dancers are they are laden down with the "sometimes awkward task of carrying pieces of the crocodile while etching the refined positions of Cambodian dance."[124] I argue that though the dancers' classical training shines through most of this performance, there are moments when the rattan crocodile potentially distracts from the quality of the dancer's classical training—explicitly rendering visible the cumbersome task the diasporic choreographer undertakes working within Cambodian cultural nationalism in a U.S. multicultural discourse.

Prumsodun Ok, Cheam-Shapiro's protégée, similarly bends classical dance choreography and costuming to transform the repertoire and allow a space for classical dance to enable a critique of social justice issues. In his works, Ok frequently embodies the traditionally female danced role of the Apsara character. By dancing the Apsara, Ok accesses an Angkorian femininity as represented in the powerful, dressed-down bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat. Ok troubles the rhetoric of the dancer's body as vessel of

[124] Andrea Mohin, "Calculating the cost of revenge: the cost is always high." *The New York Times*, April 10, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/arts/dance/khmer-arts-ensemble-at-the-joyce-theater.html?_r=0.

Cambodian cultural nationalism by performing the role of the Apsara, queering the repertoire. Ok trained underneath Cheam-Shapiro at KAA. He also studied Experimental Filmmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute, hosts a salon series highlighting Khmer arts in Long Beach, serves on the Board of Directors for the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, performed at REDCAT—an interdisciplinary contemporary arts center in Los Angeles—and trained for two years in Cambodia at Sophiline's Arts Ensemble (formerly known as Khmer Arts Ensemble). As associate artistic director at KAA, *Lok Kru* to students at KAA, and independent artist, Ok "works to engage diverse communities in his practice" through "Rene Daumal's idea of the 'avant-garde in antiquity,' reinterpreting the gestural vocabulary and ritual function of Cambodian classical dance as a tool to question, explore, and inspire transformation within our world."[125]

Ok draws on Angkorian mythology to challenge political social and gender norms in and out of the diaspora. Chapman writes in the *Phnom Penh Post*, "Ok seized on something missing from the world of ancient myth and legend that traditionally inspires Cambodian dance: gay men."[126] Ok enables a dismantling of heteronormative roles in current Khmer Classical dance practice and performance by using Angkorian mythology

[125] Tom Reilly, "Meet TED Fellow Prumsodun Ok, Interdisciplinary Artist" (Huffington Post Arts and Culture, February 22 2011), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-rielly/meet-ted-fellow-prumsodun_b_826870.html.

[126] Chelsea Chapman, "Ancient dance, styled by the new generation." *The Phnom Penh Post,* September 6 2014, http://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/ancient-dance-styled-new-generation.

as his primary referent. For example, Ok posted via Facebook a three-minute clip to the beginning of his newly choreographed work *Beloved* which sparked a global conversation concerning the stakes of taking classical dance "too far." The video was recorded at Culver Center of the Arts at the keynote performance for the 2013 joint Congress on Research in Dance and Society of Dance History Scholars Conference.

In the performance, Ok is standing towards the back of center stage. The music begins. Instead of the traditional sounds of the *pin peat*, crickets chirp melodiously over the hum of the sound system. Ok moves sensuously, heel to the ball of his foot, towards the audience. His knees are bent, his hips pushed behind him. His torso curves and his chest rises up, creating a deep, dramatic curve in the spine. With each step he takes, his right arms rises. His thumb and forefinger meet on his right hand making the *baat*, hand gesture, for seed. He picks up the gestural seed, drops it. Picks it up again, and drops it once more. His left hand does not move from its position where it rests just slightly above the only piece of clothing he is wearing, a nude colored thong. For Ok, only the nude thong, gold necklace with circular pendant, white face make-up, and red lipstick adorn his body. The crickets quiet and the only noise we the audience hear is the fuzz of the sound system. He smiles at the audience, making direct eye contact, as he relentlessly continues forward.[127] Towards the end of Ok's performance, his voice narrates as he dances –

[127] Ok describes *Beloved* on his Vimeo webpage as a "layering evocative English, Khmer, and Spanish narration onto a lush soundscape, *Beloved* features male dancers who perform a story of ritual lovemaking. The work strips away the heavy traditional costumes of Khmer classical dance down to a barren minimalism, revealing the charged

> "In the quiet of the night, my love will come to me, and he'll call so soft my name.
> His eyes like Chantra, his skin like Sorya—my beloved in the image of the gods.
> Beneath the stars he'll take my hand, and I'll grow a little weak. He'll sing: songs of his father's fathers, gentle quakings in the glow of candlelight.
> He'll caress my brow. And kiss my neck. And then he'll move inside me.
> The moon will shine; the night stand still. The way he'll move inside me."[128]

Ok attempts to destabilize and re-center Angkorian myth around two male partners.[129] He tactically uses weaves a new narrative onto an Angkorian myth to choreograph and costume queer desire and visibility within "an Angkorian custom recorded in the 13th century—in which the Khmer king made nightly sexual unions with a naga (serpent) to ensure fertility of the land." The choreography, narrative, and costuming "situates the love between men in the ritual-poetic space in which Khmer dance is set, mirroring and shaping, stretching and re-choreographing the image of ultimate social order: heaven."[130]

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eroticism of the ancient art form." Prumsodun Ok, "Beloved." Video, 5:18. February 6, 2015. https://vimeo.com/118895233.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ok's role is up to the interpretation of the audience member. Either embodying the role of the Apsara or naga—both characters of the divine feminine. Colin Geoffrey Pearson writes that the Apsara serves as the "basis for much of the dance vocabulary of today, partly because it is form these images that Khmer concepts of femininity are based and especially because re-constructions of classical dance over the last century have been based partly on the archaeological evidence." Colin Geoffrey Pearson, "Harihara at the Beach: Finding Equilibrium Through Dance in a Cambodian Diaspora Community." PhD dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 2006.

[130] Ibid.

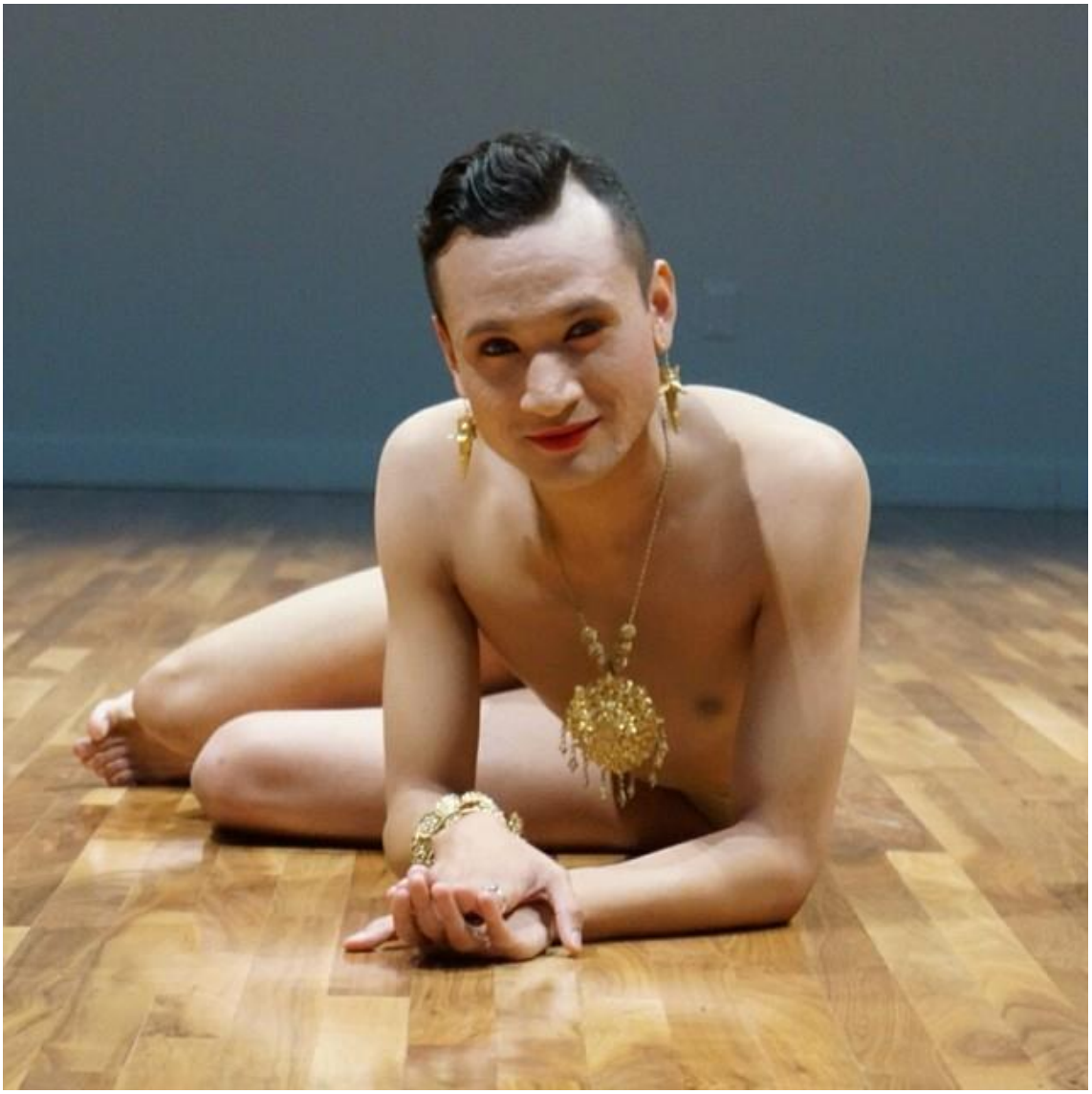

Figure 3

Prumsodun Ok performing in *Beloved* at the Culver Center of the Arts, Riverside, California, 2013. Photo by Katie Nicole Stahl-Kovell.

Several arts officials took issue with Ok embodying a female character and his "dressed-down" devata inspired costume in *Beloved.* Ok responds to the first claim—that men should not dance female roles—by arguing that "any further attempt to say that men

shouldn't perform female roles goes against the history of *robam kbach boran* (Cambodian Classical Dance)" and further "goes against the animism, ancestor worship, Hinduism, and Buddhism that forms contemporary Khmer religious practices today, in which the body is but a vessel or illusion that either holds or hides the spirit of a being, which is his or her true reality."[131] Ok's critics attempt to erase a rich history of spirit-worship by reinforcing strict notions of gender in classical dance (for example, of the Hindu god Ardhanarishvara who is half male, half female). Sarita Echavez See argues that the history of the American empire "is defined by forgetting, its aesthetic is structured by double disavowal" and thus "it seems possible to erase the erasure of the past."[132] Ok dances against this double disavowal, both in Cambodia and in the U.S., rendering visible queer romance for the Khmer diasporic, Los Angeles, and Cambodian arts communities.

Ok responds to the second claim, that he should not dance "naked."[133] He writes:

> "when I stripped away much of the *Robam* Apsara costume, I offered to the dance tradition and to the world a gay dancing body. I confronted the audience with the physical and psychological violence that my community and I have known as well as the beauty, love, and knowledge that ultimately guides me as an individual. I showed that dance is not about being a pretty girl nor is it about a pretty

[131] Prumsodun Ok, "ON ROBAM TEP APSARA: A RESPONSE TO SUP SAKARA," Facebook note, August 19, 2014.

[132] Sarita Echavez See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 66.

[133] Prumsodun Ok, "ON ROBAM TEP APSARA: A RESPONSE TO SUP SAKARA," Facebook note, August 19, 2014.

> costume. Rather, dance is about the integrity of movement and the strength of the spirit—that is all that you need to keep the art form alive."[134]

Ok's queering costuming tactic is more representative of how the devatas are depicted at Angkor Wat than current material manifestations of costuming in classical dance. Even though Ok's dressing down attempts to honor Angkorian tradition, his work is held suspect by some current practitioners, Khmer people and Khmer politicians. It is considered transgressive against the tradition—a tradition which we know was not the "original" tradition but an invented tradition wrapped in the politics of feminine purity and modesty coined by King Ang Duong in the nineteenth century. I find the negative reception to Ok's dressing down of the classical dancer ironic for a couple reasons. The Apsaras and devatas dancing on the walls of Cambodia's most treasured historical site are bare-breasted, with some having the barest amount of silk floating around their legs. Yet, female nudity (as he was dancing the female character) is currently considered taboo in Khmer culture in a community space.[135] In recent weeks, The *Phnom Penh Post* headlines depict the country's deep resentment of the naked dancing body. For example, while photographers captured and published on social media the image of a woman bare-breasted as an Apsara dancer at one of the Angkorian temples, French tourists were deported for photographing each other nude at the Angkorian temples. Additionally, tourists were deported for riding a motorcycle naked. And in the summer of 2015, a

[134] Ibid. This Facebook note addresses a previous performance where Ok bared most of his body while dancing the Apsara character, similarly to his costume choices in *Beloved.*

[135] This is somewhat ironic as many Cambodian men relax outside their houses with nothing but a krama (Cambodian scarf) covering their genitalia.

concert will be cancelled in Cambodia because government officials fear the naked dancers it may bring. The Minister of Tourism Thong Khon has said that "Cambodia does not have a policy to encourage indecent cultures; tourism in the country is [to promote] culture and nature… We do not support the naked dance, because it affects the national culture."[136] The government does not support nudity, apparently in any form other than the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat.

Ok, though, is doing nothing near transgressive if Paul Cravath's interpretation of the role of the Apsara dance is taken into consideration. Cravath writes,

> Angkor Wat…gave form to the Myth of the Churning of the Ocean by placing the king in union with the *naga* earth spirit; from their interaction the waters poured forth on the land and myriads of Apsaras dancers emerged as the embodiment of the highest spiritual energy that can be created through the union of Feminine and Masculine.[137]

If the Apsara is the product of a union between the masculine and the feminine, why would Ok's embodiment of the feminine trouble the mythological origin of the Apsara? Though the Apsara is Cambodia's most treasured mythical creature, present day women and men are not allowed to represent her as she was carved into the walls of Angkor Wat— it's too risky for contemporary Cambodian cultural nationalism.

Ok costumes and choreographs his own body while straddling both Cambodian cultural nationalism and U.S. multicultural discourse. The latter discourse supports and privileges minority stories such as Ok's in an effort to encourage and highlight

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[136] Chhay Channyda and Sean Teehan, "Gov't says 'nyet' to fest," *Phnom Penh Post*, February 3, 2015, http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/govt-says-nyet-fest.

[137] Paul Cravath, *Earth in Flower*, xxvi.

marginalized voices yet, however, also seeks to divide minority groups under the guise of diversity. The minority dancer serves to "iterate and maintain 'difference' to mainstream communities," rendering diasporic performance a commodity to be "traded for dual citizenships."[138] For example, Ok recently received an eighty-two thousand dollars grant from the Surdna Foundation to make *Beloved* a full length work.[139] This Artists Engaging in Social Change grant was awarded to those who "were selected for the quality of the artistic practice and for the dedication to exploring critical themes that arise from, or impact a community; and finally, for the project's capacity to enable social change."[140] As a Khmerican, queer artist and activist, Ok accesses a level of autonomy and "difference" in the contested landscape of classical dance that enables him to receive social justice grants like the Surdna. "My videos have caused quite a stir in the country, sparking much-needed dialogue," Ok asserts.[141] This spark has not only stirred Cambodia, it's also created a platform for discussing Khmerican queer politics. This dialogue though, hinges on the basis of recognizing and profiting off of difference—Ok's queering of the repertoire with his diasporic, male dancing body. Reconciling a classical

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[138] Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris,* 143.

[139] George Soule. "News: Community-based Artists and Culture-Bearers Supported for Quality of Artistic Practice and Promise of Social Change." *Surdna Foundation.* June 10, 2015, http://surdna.org/whats-new/news/830-aesc-text.html.

[140] Ibid.

[141] Prumsodun Ok, "ON ROBAM TEP APSARA: A RESPONSE TO SUP SAKARA," Facebook note, August 19, 2014.

art form to that difference, has encouraged Ok to, in his own words, "make my own stage when one does not already exist."[142]

Ok embodies the Apsara character to access a traditionally codified Khmer femininity upon which the Apsara character is built. Ok troubles and transcends U.S. and Khmer normative notions of gender, sexuality and nudity by accessing this rhetoric of the feminine through Angkorian archaeology and mythology. He works to dance the queer body into the repertoire through Apsara symbolism. Ok enables a conversation about queerness and political heteronormativity that is taboo in Cambodian cultural nationals that troubles the dominant, academic discourse of the pure, woman's dancing body as vessel of the nation.[143]

Cultural Political Interventions in Homeland Politics and the Nation-State

Khmer diasporic organizer Ravynn Karet-Coxen's attempts at transforming costuming to enact a return to Angkor make visible the constant pressures and resultant fissures in efforts for diasporic Khmer artists to negotiate contemporary Cambodian cultural nationalism. She seeks to revive dance as it was practiced in the age of Angkor (802-1431)—as a sacred ritual and sanctifying practice for holy places with holy dancers.

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[142] Ok, Prumsodun, *Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso,* 77.

[143] Ok explains to reporter Chelsea Chapman of the *Phnom Penh Post* that "when you look at Khmer Classical dance, it is really a mirror of heaven. So if there is no image of gay men, or LGBT people there, it means that we don't exist. That means we're invisible, that people can abuse us and discriminate against us the way that people do all over the world." Prumsodun Ok in Chelsea Chapman, "Ancient dance, styled by the new generation."

She seeks this return and revival through Roman Vestal virgin inspired costuming and through the maintenance of her dancers' virginal and spiritual purity. These new costuming tactics represent the resultant continuities and fissures of Khmer diasporic artists' attempts to reconcile and thrive in Cambodian cultural nationalism.

Karet-Coxen's transformation of classical dance costumes occurs under the patronage of the royal state—questionably aligning with HRH Buppha Devi's goal to protect and preserve classical dance without transformation. In this section I call into question how Cambodian cultural nationalism seeks to distance the troupe from the "spectacular" quality of dress of other classical dance practitioners.[144] For instance, while Ok's costuming seeks to highlight the strength and spirit of both the Khmer classical dance community and the global queer community, Karet-Coxen intends to revive classical dance through costuming that reflects and emphasizes the uniquely pure, spiritual dimension of her troupe—both utilize costuming to stake their claim.[145]

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[144] The spectacularity of the jeweled wrists, elbows, waist, and neck are removed from their Sacred Dancer of Angkor's costumes. Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns argues that these spectacular images of the dancer "tend to blind us, serving often to mystify rather than open up historical conditions," Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), 8, 15. Similarly, Prumsodun Ok's bending of the repertoire also seeks to highlight how "dance is not about being a pretty girl nor is it about a pretty costume"—it is much more for both Karet-Coxen and Ok. Prumsodun Ok, "ON ROBAM TEP APSARA: A RESPONSE TO SUP SAKARA," Facebook note, August 19, 2014.

[145] They both, inspired by the bas-reliefs of Apsaras and Devatas at Angkor Wat, dress down classical dance costuming as instituted by King Ang Duong—Ok opting to not wear any fabric save for a nude thong and Karet-Coxen choosing modest, white, gauzy costumes.

During the Sacred Dancers of Angkor 2013 tour to the United States, the troupe aimed to re-sanctify temples and community spaces and also connect Khmericans to the homeland through Sacred Dance. Karet-Coxen advocated several particular goals for her musicians and dancers during their United States tour:

> 1. Their mission is highly spiritual: to connect Cambodian Americans to the Motherland during the Buddhist Holy Month of Remembrance and to dance, as is the ancient tradition by sacred dancers, for peace and harmonious world. The children will be staying with the same local Cambodian communities that have invited them to perform in the Buddhist Pagodas.
> 2. It will raise awareness of Cambodia's distinctive centuries-old cultural heritage, which was almost wiped out by the Khmer Rouge.
> 3. It is a unique opportunity for the students to learn from the cultural exchange workshops organized with prestigious Ballet institutions, as well as with established Khmer dance troupes to bond and share their common experiences and dreams.
>
> (Indiegogo Crowdfunding Platform 2013)[146]

Their last stop on their tour was Long Beach, California. They participated in a workshop exchange with Khmer Arts Academy, performed traditional classical dances at public performances, and performed Sacred Dances consecrating Buddhist temples in Long Beach. During one of their Sacred Dance rituals in Long Beach, a handful of spectators were allowed to witness their bodies bearing the cultural and spiritual weight of Cambodian cultural nationalism.

On a Sunday afternoon of their tour in Long Beach, The Sacred Dancers of Angkor performed Sacred Dances for Wat Khmer Krom Buddhist temple on Orange

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[146] "2013 Sacred Dancers of Angkor US Tour – September 16 to October 22." *Indiegogo Crowdfunding Platform.* Accessed June 4 2015. https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/2013-sacred-dancers-of-angkor-us-tour-september-16-to-october-22.

Avenue. They had just completed dancing for the public in front of the Mark Twain library in the heart of Cambodia Town. Shortly after, some of the public but mostly Khmericans walked down the street to the temple to celebrate the arrival of The Sacred Dancers. There were many people crammed into the patio space outside of the house converted to a new Buddhist temple. Only a select few were chosen to witness the Sacred Dance. Karet-Coxen made it clear that no cameras were allowed in the room. At first, only a few notable community-members filled the tiny seven-hundred square foot room. A large, beautiful alter stood at one end of the room. To the right, an eleven-piece *pin peat* set with accompanying musicians. The dancers were to perform in the space on the left, leaving enough room for about ten people to witness the Sacred Dances. By the time the Sacred Dancers began their ritual performance, there were close to thirty spectators crammed into the room, some bumping into the musicians and dancers, their iPads held above their heads recording the Sacred Dance. Some did not fit into the room, so they stayed on the steps leading up to the door, standing on their tip-toes to catch a glimpse of the performance as they turned outside to tell everyone what was happening.

The dancers attempted to negotiate an entrance to the room. The spectators, over-filling the room, attempted to make way for them as at some points they climbed over spectators to Karet-Coxen who was kneeling in front of the alter. The dancers had no room to stretch out. When their Sacred Dance began, they skillfully and gracefully manipulated what space they had to make the ritual function in a cramped space with transgressing spectators. A degree of perfection is expected of Vestal Virgins. Arguably, this is also expected of the Sacred Dancers of Angkor. Joshua Roberts explains that

"through the successful performance of these actions and incantations, the Vestals ensured that Rome would continue to prosper" and in the same token, The Sacred Dancers of Angkor performed Sacred Dance rituals to ensure the prosperity of the Long Beach community and of Wat Khmer Krom Buddhist temple.[147]

But what happens to the ritual when the dancer stumbles as she enters the crammed space, teaming with spectators? What happens to the ritual when the unruly spectators record the performance with their iPads? What happens to the ritual when the heat overcomes a dancer, and beads of sweat roll down her face onto her humble, white costume? What happens to the ritual when, on bended knees, the altar and spectators note the dancer's white stocking foot, blackened with soot from walking on the pavement outside.

[147] Joshua Roberts, "Rome's Vestal Virgins," 42.

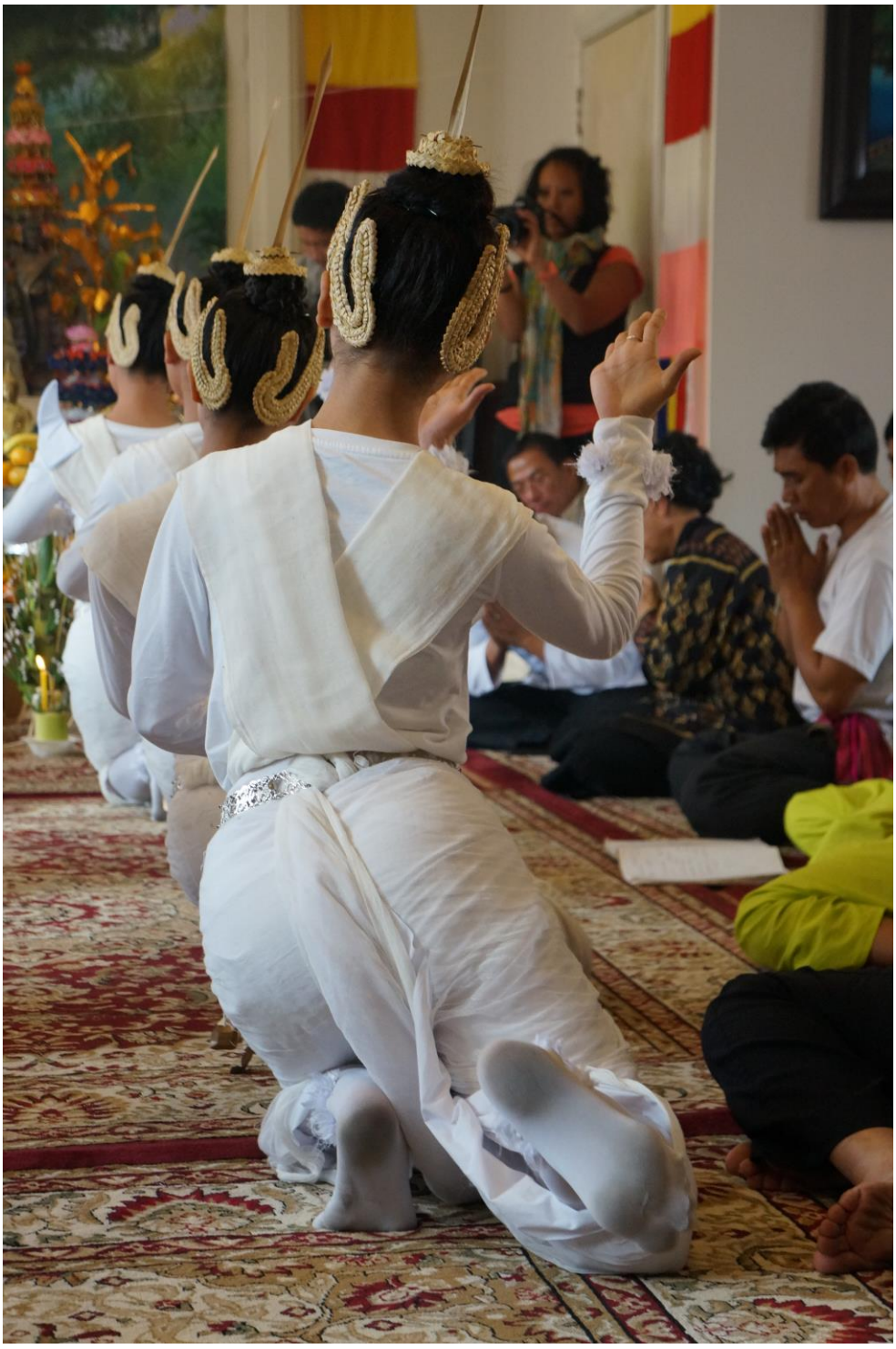

Figure 4
Sacred Dancers of Angkor performing at Wat Khmer Krom Budddhist temple on Orange Avenue in Long Beach, 2013. Photo by Katie Nicole Stahl-Kovell.

These rivulets of sweat and blackened stockings disrupt Karet-Coxen's selected narrative of Angkorian dancer brought to life in these young, impoverished dancers. Though their bodies are employed by Karet-Coxen to act as conduits of Sacredness, the sweat rivulets and blackened stockings bringing attention to the individual, transnational labor of the female dressed, dancing body. The classical dancer's body transports the audience back one-thousand years to Angkor, until she sweats, until she trips, until she accidentally hits a spectator in a closed, cramped space. These bodily fissures muddle the dancer as Angkorian vessel and highlight her live, fleshy, dancing body in a specific current moment rather than a nostalgic "timeless" metaphor of Angkor.[148] These bodily moments do not disrupt the sacredness of The Sacred Dancers of Angkor's Sacred Dance, rather, they expose the "fictive authenticity, in drawing a particular history of the nation into the diaspora."[149] Acknowledging the individual labor of the female classical dancing body enables a disruption in Karet-Coxen's efforts to negotiate current Cambodian cultural nationalism.

Though Karet-Coxen's specific vision of revival does not align with Cambodian cultural policy, the only troupe that has been endorsed by HRH Buppha Devi besides the Royal Cambodian Ballet is Karet-Coxen's Sacred Dancers of Angkor.[150] In an interview with Paul Cravath, Buppha Devi claims "the power of our land and our ancestors flows

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[148] Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris,* 156.

[149] Ibid., 160.

[150] HRH Buppha Devi writes that at present (in 2010) "we do not have the option of going in multiple directions." Further, "trying to remember the old gestures and pass these on to the students" should be only current goal as "this is an urgent task and at present does not leave time to explore new directions." "Royal Dancers of Cambodia," *Beyond the Apsara*, 12.

through" The Sacred Dancers of Angkor. "This," she remarks, "is the only way I can explain their skill."[151] She continues, sharing that "Ravynn's sacred dancers must be seen as entirely different from other classical dancers who perform for entertainment […] to accomplish this, Ravynn has created a distinctive style only worn by her sacred dancers, who perform solely to respect our ancient Khmer spiritual traditions."[152] With royal patronage and support, organizer Ravynn Karet-Coxen transforms classical dance costuming for The Sacred Dancers of Angkor to befit their performing of Sacred Dance rituals.[153]

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[151] HRH Buppha Devi, Interview by Paul Cravath, no date, 96. In *Sacred Dancers of Banteay Srei,* ed. Lucretia Stewart.

[152] Ibid., 97.

[153] In an e-mail correspondence with me Karet-Coxen shared her worry that I would misrepresent her dancers in this thesis project. This worry derived from reading an abstract of mine from a paper titled "'Re-Sanctifying' Diasporic Homelands: The Dressed Dancing Female Body as Ritual Export" I was to give at the Sixth Annual Khmer Studies Forum from March 14-16, 2014 at Ohio University Center for Southeast Asian Studies which is published online. I never got to give the paper, as I was four months pregnant and too ill with Hyperemesis Gravidarum to travel at the time. In my abstract I write "this paper unwraps and ruffles the notion of purity as a 'selling point' for the cultural export of the dancing female body and also calls into question the stakes and possible repercussions of positing a troupe of young women as pure dancers as they travel through diasporic communities." http://www.seas.ohio.edu/pdfs/KSF%202014%20Abstracts%20-%20Revised.pdf. Karet-Coxen initially penned me a note in 2014, but never sent it, until I contacted her in 2015 asking a quick question about the troupe before submitting my thesis. She wrote, "I hope that you will be able to sense their purity, passion and dedication, it is not a selling point at all, in order to survive they need to have a profile, here it is the first ever conservatoire in a rural area and further more in the heart of the Khmer cultural heritage, this is why I decided to give a spiritual dimension to the classical ballet in 'reviving' the sacred dance rituals in the temples as the six-hundred and fifteen dancers recorded in Ta Prom would have surely done like the Roman Vestals, hence their white costumes reflecting the purity and humility." Ravynn Karet-Coxen, e-mail addressed to author,

The royal patronage of The Sacred Dancers of Angkor's signature style of the white, Roman and somewhat French inspired costume needs to be called into question.[154] Karet-Coxen's Roman Vestal Virgin inspired costume problematically carries colonial ramifications—especially when shrouding the virginally pure, impoverished, Cambodian female dancer as a direct conduit of the nation-state.[155] Karet-Coxen writes that "our children always perform in the modest, all white costumes that I designed, inspired by the Roman Vestals."[156] This costume design is well suited to Karet-Coxen's over-arching return to Angkor narrative, for along a similar narrative for more than one-thousand years Roman Vestal Virgins have dedicated their lives to the gods and goddesses, particularly Vesta, who is the guardian of Rome. Additionally, The Sacred Dancers of Angkor and the Vestal Virgins are extremely dedicated to their practice. Historian Joshua Roberts describes the "rigorous process through which a young Roman girl became a Vestal priestess set her apart from society and conferred a status on her that enabled her to be

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April 10, 2014. To be extremely clear, my argumentation in this thesis may not reflect how Karet-Coxen views classical dance or her troupe's specific purpose.

[154] Karet-Coxen extrapolates on her costume design, remarking that "these not only suit our tight budget, but also reflect their humble background and the purity of children born around nature and temples. Their natural beauty is not enhanced by make-up. They make their own adornments and ornaments from dried palm leaves, fresh flowers, leaves and areca nuts. Their hair styles are inspired by temple bas-reliefs and the wonderful drawings of French artist Sappho Marchal, done nearly a century ago." Ravynn Karet-Coxen, "My Vision for NKFC," 47.

[155] Each candidate had to be a virgin and physically perfect to ensure that she could perform her sacred tasks to perfection in order to maintain the *pax deorum* so that Roman society would continue to thrive. 45

[156] Ravynn Karet-Coxen, "My Vision for NKFC," 47.

venerated, modeled and representative of the ideal Roman society."[157] With the Vestal Virgins' dedicated training and virginally pure bodies functioning as vessels of the nation-state through ritual, Karet-Coxen could not have picked a better inspiration to draw from. However, Karet-Coxen's costuming choice reveals the tensions in submitting to Cambodian cultural nationalism. HRH Buppha Devi is greatly fearful of "the wrong outside influences" and especially wary, of in her words, "the influence of globalization on Cambodian dance and culture."[158] If the standards for the dancers are codified through a rhetorical purity that shrouds the dancers' bodies in the Roman's Vestal Virgin inspired costume, then Karet-Coxen transgresses against the current cultural preservation project, highlighting the issues of maintaining "authenticity" while coopting costuming from a Western tradition.

> When I asked her about the role of purity in Sacred Dance, she responded,
>
> "What we are doing is genuine and the purity lay in the Sacred Dance Ritual…The dancers are pure in body, soul and spirit. They were all ordained as nuns and monks for 10 days…The dancers involved in the ritual are virgin and they are not paid nor the musicians it is a true act of devotion."[159]

In order to re-sanctify temples, women's bodies are once again treated as a vessel in classical dance. Annuska Derks argues, though, beneath these seemingly singular dominant narratives lies troubling fissures and gaps. She claims that "women definitely play an important role in these processes, not simply, as we shall see, as pawns in the

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[157] Joshua M. Roberts, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: Public Spectacle and Society* (thesis: Western Washington University, 2012), iv.

[158] HRH Buppha Devi, "Royal Dances of Cambodia," *Beyond the Apsara,* 12.

[159] Ravynn Karet-Coxen, e-mail to author, April 10, 2014.

country's pursuit of national development or as simple cultural images of 'tradition' and 'modernity,' but also as agents in their own right."[160]

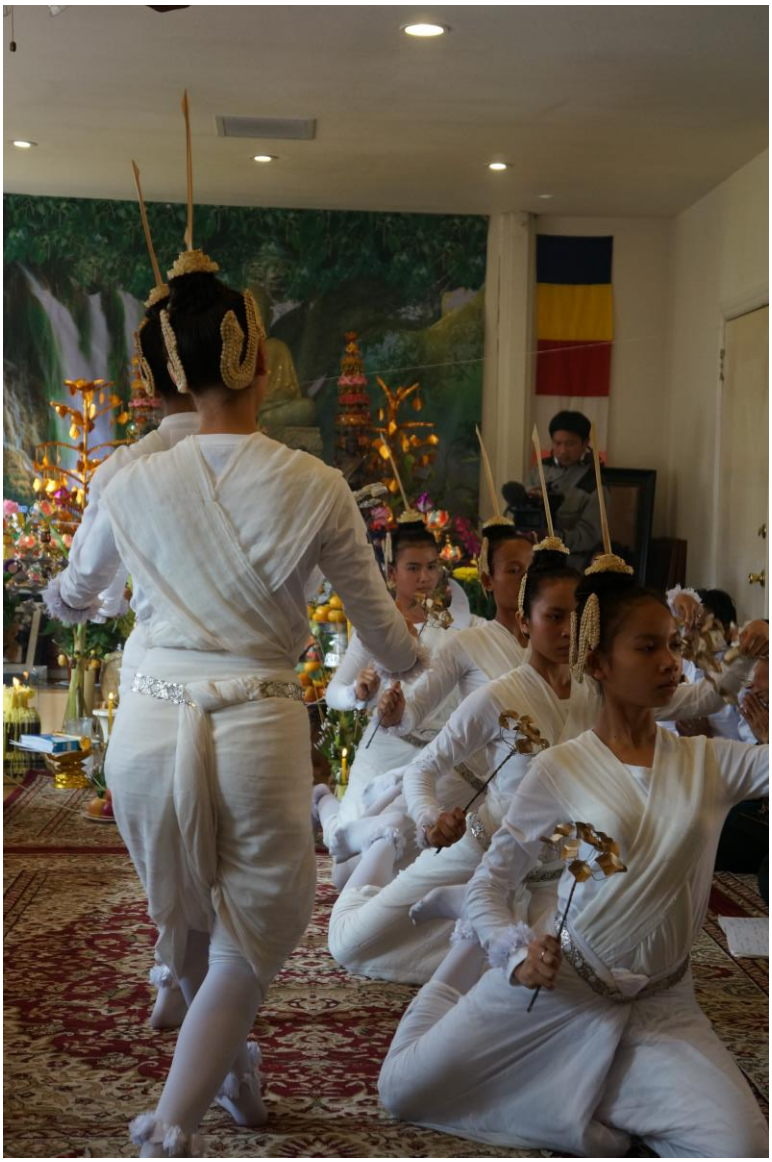

Figure 5

Sacred Dancers of Angkor performing at Wat Khmer Krom Budddhist temple on Orange Avenue in Long Beach, 2013. Photo by Katie Nicole Stahl-Kovell.

[160] Annuska Derks, *Khmer Women on the Move*, 8.

Though their new costumes mark an innovative addition to the repertoire, the dancers in the eyes of royal cultural caretakers in Tejaswini Niranjana's words maintain "cultural authenticity in the midst of social transformation" by accessing Angkorian divinity, seemingly untouched by time.[161] Though Cambodian scholar Lucretia Stewart argues that from the dancers' "purity and simplicity a new spiritual dimension is unfolding," purity and simplicity are not given factors but rather signify a large range of both Khmer and Western cultural projects.[162] This visual marker of humility and purity in the costuming of the dancers aids, in Stewart's words, to "innovate and evolve" by "returning to ideas that have been long forgotten"—but are the Vestal Virgins of Rome forgotten and why do we need them returned at Angkor?[163] The political act of dressing down the Cambodian classical dancer from her silk, brass, and gold embellishments, gestures towards a new cultural narrative being written of the Khmer people—not one of political change, but of political consent to Cambodian cultural nationalism that dictates classical dancers as the spiritual and corporeal conduit of the pure, Khmer woman.

At home in Cambodia, The Sacred Dancers of Angkor seek to breathe life back into the temples of Cambodia through Sacred Dance rituals.[164] Karet-Coxen's vision to revive the Angkorian dancer accesses an unabridged path to Khmerness, or in Penny

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[161] Tejaswini Niranjana, "Indian Nationalism and Female Sexuality: A Trinidadian Tale" in *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* Ed. Faith Smith, 101.

[162] Lucretia Stewart, "The Royal Dance of Cambodia," 69.

[163] Ibid., 69.

[164] "Sacred Dance" is written with both words capitalized in literature on the troupe.

Edwards's words, the "Original Khmer."[165] Karet-Coxen created the Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia (NKFC) in 1994 to commemorate the memory of her father, Nginn Karet, who died in 1965, before the onslaught of the Khmer Rouge regime.[166] Karet-Coxen was unsure where to begin—"Where had people suffered the longest? Whose need was greatest?" she asked. Karet-Coxen decided to focus on the seven poorest villages that had been hit the hard during the KR and the following years of economic instability in the Banteay Srei district of Siem Reap. This district encompassed "32 rural villages with families [who were] living in sub-human conditions trying to survive."[167] Karet-Coxen was humbled and saddened by the conditions of the families. She writes, "it is shocking to say this, but some were living almost like animals." She was shocked by how "children ran wild without supervision, care, education or direction….These families had no hope, no future, no desire, no willpower and no concept of bettering their living conditions or livelihoods."[168] After coming face-to-face with the human conditions that follow genocide and subsequent lack of governmental infrastructure to take care of the impoverished in years to follow, she quickly began to set the building blocks of the Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia (NKFC) on the basis of basic sanitary and educational improvements by "building schools, wells and latrines."[169]

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[165] Ravynn Karet-Coxen, "My Vision for NFKC," 45.

[166] Lucretia Stewart, "Nginn Karet Foundation History," 28.

[167] Ibid., 28.

[168] Ibid., 29.

[169] Ibid., 29.

Karet-Coxen still felt like something was missing. Though she was able to provide basic sanitary and educational needs to this community, she felt the resources she was able to give to the villagers were not "working as well as they should" to help them recover from the trauma of the KR and improve their current social and economic conditions.[170] Karet-Coxen wanted to "protect the families living in the shadow of the World Heritage Site [at Banteay Srei], which is the cradle of Cambodian history, and to help them to reestablish their sense of pride and dignity." Four years later in 2007, she established a vocational training center to give children the opportunity to train in the traditional arts of Cambodia.[171] Thus, the initial concept was born—"An 'Academy of Arts' to empower—culturally and artistically—rural children who, despite living in the shadow of their nation's heritage site, live in poverty."[172] It is from here that The Sacred Dancers of Angkor were trained under the Royal Patronage of HRH Buppha Devi.[173]

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[170] Karet-Coxen also began a vocational center to help parents find work outside of cheap labor in 2003. That, though, did not abate the psychological trauma the people of the district suffered under and after the KR. She writes that "elders approached me to request a dance and music school for their children to help soothe their pains and psychological wounds" from the generational trauma of the Khmer Rouge regime. The students were gifted with classic films from the 1960s that featured "buried memories of idyllic and happy times;" the idea for the dance and music school soon followed in an effort to recreate the idyllic and happy times of the past. Ibid., 30; Ravynn Karet-Coxen, "My Vision for NKFC," 44.

[171] Lucretia Stewart, "Nginn Karet Foundation History," 29.

[172] Ravynn Karet-Coxen, "My Vision for NKFC," 43.

[173] The Academy of Fine Arts is located adjacent to the temple of Banteay Srei. Lucretia Stewart, "The Sacred Dancers of Banteay Srei," 17.

The dancers' training is unlike many other classical dance troupes in Siem Reap.[174] Karet-Coxen writes that of the "twenty-eight troupes existing in Siem Reap we are the only serious troupe giving a training five days a week for four hours a day."[175] Currently, Karet-Coxen is struggling to keep the dancers enrolled, as many of them are needed to work for their families or are lured out of country for cheap labor.[176] "If we lose them," she writes, "as I am not going to compromise to do shows cheapening the divine legacy, no one will ever revive them."[177] When word started to spread that she was planning on taking the dancers to tour the U.S., journalist Claire Byrne of the *Phnom*

[174] Anthropologist Celia Tuchman-Rosta writes in "From Ritual Form to Tourist Attraction: Negotiating the Transformation of Classical Cambodian Dance in a Changing World," *Asian Theatre Journal* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2014), 525, that many classical dancers, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, turned their dance expertise to tourism in order to survive. Classical dancers in Siem Reap, the heart of Angkor, put on dinner-performances for tourists throughout the week. Karet-Coxen argues that "it is sad to see this sacred art form damaged and devalued to only generate money as entertainment for tourists." Yet, for some women, classical dance training is the only skill they can utilize in Cambodia to make wages. Peter Olzeski, "Dance school teaches sacred arts," *Phnom Penh Post* (Thursday May 28, 2009), http://www.phnompenhpost.com/siem-reap-insider/dance-school-teaches-sacred-arts.

[175] Ravynn Karet-Coxen in an e-mail to the author on June 2, 2015, writes that the dancers "focus on their art and are not trained for money but spiritually and when dedicating rituals they are not paid and not expecting it."

[176] Karet-Coxen writes "I am fighting for their survival and cannot afford to give them all a retainer of 100$ a month, at least for a year." Due to some of the dancers leaving for several reasons including their poverty, being "lured by recruiting agents to go and work illegally in Thailand in construction sites for one dollar an hour, ten hours a day," and forced marriages at the ages of sixteen and seventeen." Now, because of the reasons listed above, she maintains eight dancers out of the one-hundred and seventy-six she originally started with. Ibid.

[177] Ibid.

Penh Post wrote that, "even with HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi as patron, her group was never going to compete with the Royal Ballet. She needed a unique selling point. And so began a series of sacred rituals, visiting temple after temple […] with an aim of re-sanctifying the temples."[178] Karet-Coxen's goal for The Sacred Dancers of Angkor, though, is not to have a selling point or win a classical dance popularity contest. Rather, the troupe seeks to re-sanctificy temples with pure, dancing women in a perceived Angkorian tradition.[179] Secondly, Karet-Coxen writes that the troupe has no wish to compete with the "sublime ballet royal," especially as HRH Buppha Devi is "gracing us with Her royal patronage."[180] The costuming choices Karet-Coxen made to create this image of a direct lineage to Angkor are perhaps a point of innovation and concurrent conflict for the repertoire.

In sum, Karet-Coxen chooses parts of the cultural narrative of Angkorian dance to suit her troupe, The Sacred Dancers of Angkor. She seeks a unique version of a revival of Sacred Dance through new white, flowing costumes inspired by Rome's Vestal virgins that mark the purity of her dancers and enable them to transmit blessing. This costume, though new to the repertoire, consents to parts of the fixed national narrative which

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[178] Claire Byrne, "Lady Coxen's Little Dancer's to go Public," *Phnom Penh Post* (June 15 2012), http://www.phnompenhpost.com/siem-reap-insider/lady-coxen%E2%80%99s-little-dancers-go-public.

[179] Ravynn Karet-Coxen. E-mail to author, April 10, 2014. Karet-Coxen writes, there is "no selling points in Sacred Dance Rituals since the dedications are very private between the dancers and their Gods."

[180] Ibid.

depicts female Cambodian dancers as pure conduits of the Apsara of Angkor, yet vehemently avoids the dancers' past as a live, sexual body who through physical interactions with the King was responsible for the health of the kingdom. As a diasporic organizer, Karet-Coxen struggles to corroborate Western costuming aesthetic and a return to Angkor, revealing the large fissures in the making and consenting of Cambodian cultural nationalism.

CONCLUSION: A Fire Burns Bright in the Diaspora

Performing Cambodian classical dance has historically hinged on costuming the live, female dancing body with a re-imagined characterization of Angkor Wat's stone bas-reliefs of celestial dancing women. Though the legitimacy of classical dance has long relied on costuming female dancers in this rhetoric and though HRH Buppha Devi has warned practitioners about allowing for outside Western influence on the re-construction of classical dance, artists' new globally inspired costumes are not treated by public, national, or academic discourses as a break from "tradition" as long as the choreographer's authorial intent and choreographic narrative affirm the dancing female body as a revived Apsara dancer. When diasporic artists stretch choreography and costuming beyond royalist or nationalist preservation projects, their work transgresses against tradition and transgresses against the current cultural policies of the nation-state, mapping the ongoing tensions of the cultivation and re-construction of classical dance practice either as consenting to or grappling with Cambodian cultural nationalism.

In this thesis, these case studies highlighted the greater implications of different cultural policies in Cambodia and in the diaspora which allow for and encourage artists' costume choice in reconstructing classical dance. Performance and costuming in the repertoire are not seen as "against tradition" as long as the choreographers intend for the dancers to submit to royal projects and affirm the dominant national narrative of pure female bodies dancing as vessels of the nation-state's power. When independent artists stretch beyond royalist projects, their work in the eyes of the nation-state becomes transgressive. This thesis highlights how nationally transgressive costuming effectively writes new narratives about women, queer men, the dancing body, the diaspora and the homeland.

This thesis illuminates how costuming, choreography, and issues in negotiating Cambodian cultural nationalism bring to light the changing social mobility, gender politics, and cultural belonging of Cambodians in the diaspora as they intertwine with discourses of nostalgia. I have demonstrated how the state policy's concerning costuming and choreography reiterates a rhetorical longing to return to Angkor through the living, costumed, female dancer. I critique how this cultural and national policy shapes the current classical dance discourse and affects diasporic choreographers' attempts to grapple with Cambodian cultural nationalism. I have presented the notion that due to the firm state policy concerning classical dance, royal cultural caretakers continue to influence and shape dance-making though they cannot fully inhibit transformations, especially from diasporic choreographers. Finally, although I am critical of costuming tactics in classical dance, I endeavor to advocate for costuming's

emergence as a critical discourse that fleshes out the multifaceted attempts to work through or around Cambodian cultural nationalism.

"Regardless that I am a practitioner in the diaspora," Ok writes, "I refuse to let this artform crumble to dirt."[181] As Ok's quote advocates, there is a driving worry circulating and undergirding the Khmer diasporic arts community concerning the possible decline of classical dance. This rhetoric shapes the contestation surrounding the re-construction of classical dance and begs the question—after losing almost all of classical dance practitioners only forty years ago, what is the right path for this dance practice in the hands of the upcoming second and third generation dancers in the diaspora? Though there are many answers to this question, I advocate that critical attention to the liveness of the dancer and the materiality of her costume recognizes the large and multifaceted attempts for diasporic practitioners to keep this artform alive, destabilizing the rhetoric of dancing to replace something that was lost and instead instituting a new rhetoric of dancing to negotiate Cambodian cultural nationalism and the greater challenges of multiculturalism.

In future research, I look to explore and critically unravel the competing paths diasporic practitioners take in re-constructing Cambodian classical dance. Through oral history of the Long Beach dance community, critical dance ethnography of practice at Khmer Arts Academy, and choreographic analyses of diasporic choreographers' contemporary works, I will advocate for a critical evaluation of the Long Beach diasporic

[181] Ibid., 78.

dance community's transformation outside of a celebration of royal or nationalist endeavors by practicing, performing, stretching, and perhaps redefining Cambodian classical dance.

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