

# Trotter Review

---

Volume 19  
Issue 1 *Where is Home? Immigrants of Color in  
Massachusetts*

---

Article 4

January 2010

## Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: Negotiate and Create Places and Identities in Their Refugee Migration and Deportation Experiences

Shirley S. Tang  
*University of Massachusetts Boston*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter\\_review](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review)



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Immigration Law Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Tang, Shirley S. (2010) "Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: Negotiate and Create Places and Identities in Their Refugee Migration and Deportation Experiences," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter\\_review/vol19/iss1/4](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol19/iss1/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the William Monroe Trotter Institute at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Trotter Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).

# Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: How Cambodians Negotiate and Create Places and Identities in Their Refugee Migration and Deportation Experiences

---

Shirley S. Tang



## Holy Grain

*Cambodian women ready rice offerings at Sanghikaram Wat Khmer, the Buddhist temple in the Boston suburb of Lynn, Massachusetts. The temple, founded in 1985, is in a former Baptist church near the heart of the city's Cambodian community. © 1988 by John Suiter. All rights reserved.*

In 2002, the oldest Khmer (Cambodian) American<sup>1</sup> community organization in Massachusetts, the Cambodian Community of Massachusetts (CCM), closed its doors to constituents in the state's North Shore metro region, where the adjacent gateway cities of Lynn and Revere were home to the country's fifth-largest concentration of Cambodian Americans, according to the 2000 Census. Founded by Cambodian refugees and their supporters in 1981 as one of the first-generation mutual assistance associations encouraged by the federal Office for Refugee Resettlement, CCM had operated as an ethnic-based, multiservice agency that helped survivors of war and trauma in Cambodia to adjust to U.S. society by providing counseling, job and housing referrals, ESL instruction and translation, and other human services. Few program planners, policy makers, or funders, however, recognized the full spectrum of challenges faced by Khmer refugees during their initial resettlement twenty-plus years ago, and the ways that issues of forced migration, displacement, and contested citizenship status would continue for this vulnerable population more than a generation later.

Today, despite Lynn's status as one of the five largest Khmer American concentrations in the nation and Revere's historic significance as one of the first major residential and commercial hubs for Cambodians in the United States, the local Khmer community remains overstressed, under-resourced, and relatively powerless politically. Various efforts to establish formal, institutional spaces in the community have been fragmented and unsustainable, with the exception of local temples that have not depended on mainstream institutional support or recognition. The story of CCM's closing, for example, though far beyond the scope of this study, reveals how the contexts of funders (and others with power or influence, including researchers) who invest both monetarily and ideologically in models of immigrant incorporation often lack insights based on people's non-institutional, day-to-day experiences. Indeed, the decision by well-intentioned, mainstream funders to "pull the plug" on CCM's operating budget in the early 2000s may be viewed as an example of how the Khmer American community has largely been excluded, in both social and physical terms, from dominant decision-makers' conceptions of the urban landscape of Massachusetts's North Shore.

In briefly recalling the regrettable demise of CCM, I wish to suggest that an alternative way to understand the role of community organizations in the incorporation of immigrants—a thread that runs through all the research studies described in this issue of the *Trotter Review*—is to examine the underresearched sites and strategies of community mobilization and organizing on the ground. I argue that the nonformal, non-institutional spaces are crucial terrains for understanding the everyday, at times unexpected, experiences of immigrants and refugees in metropolitan contexts. In doing so, I still clearly recognize the importance of community organizations that enable immigrants to become incorporated within demographically challenging neighborhoods across the country. But the downsizing and closing of many community organizations—especially at a time of economic recession and budget cuts—highlights the question of how resource-poor people struggle and survive without direct links to the kinds of organizations that typically occupy the center of academic/policy analysis and philanthropic investment. As African American studies scholar and historian Robin Kelly writes of the black working class, “The so-called margins of struggle, whether it is the unorganized, often spontaneous battles with authority or social movements thought to be unauthentic or unrepresentative of the ‘community’s interests,’ are really a fundamental part of the larger story waiting to be told.”<sup>2</sup>

Extending Kelly’s notion of “margins of struggle,” I contend that the situated experiences and knowledge of working people in the North Shore’s Cambodian American communities are similarly a fundamental part of the larger story—in this case the U.S. immigrant story—waiting to be told. The Cambodian American story underscores the importance of recognizing, analyzing, and understanding contemporary immigrant incorporation in relationship with two interconnected concepts—namely, Diaspora and citizenship. By foregrounding these conceptual frameworks, rather than the theories of assimilation and immigrant integration that are more widely referenced in U.S. media, popular culture, and civic discourse, I bring attention to specific experiences of migration that may otherwise be marginalized or overlooked. In the larger research project from which this article is drawn, I am examining the continually changing socioeconomic and geopolitical dynamics experienced by Cambodians in urban Diaspora—and their efforts to engage and negotiate those condi-

tions in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. In this article, though, I focus on ways the constant negotiation and production of places and identity among diasporic Cambodians have both informed and challenged dominant paradigms of citizenship established for them by host-country policies and assumptions. I look specifically at experiences of forced separation, specifically due to refugee migration and deportation, and reflect on how diasporic Cambodians make meaning of their citizenship—a notion traditionally bounded by the parameters of a sovereign state. Contemporary diasporic urban citizenship, however, frequently reflects the “multiplicities and renegotiations of history and space”<sup>3</sup> of the city in the receiving country—and, as I have found in my study, of cities transnationally as well. I shall return to the specific conditions of this transnationalism toward the end of the article.

Many widely discussed concepts of citizenship center on national citizenship and follow T. H. Marshall’s framework of citizenship rights as encompassing political, economic, civil, and social rights.<sup>4</sup> But such notions of citizenship have failed, as both academic theories and municipal practices, to take into account power relations within the matrix of race, class, gender, religion, nationality, language status, sexual orientation, and other categories of difference.<sup>5</sup> Put another way, they have failed to acknowledge the exclusionary policies and practices that operate normatively in multiethnic cities with increasingly large minority and/or immigrant populations—and the subsequent uneven distribution of rights and resources in different geographical areas or neighborhoods. Struggles over space and place are, however, deeply related to the claims to urban citizenship, as “the use of space for one reason or by one group generally violates others’ claim to space.”<sup>6</sup>

Dominant paradigms of formal-legal citizenship also tend to neglect the complexity of lived experiences and relegate the everyday practice of culture and the accumulated memories people carry with them to the private or peripheral. In response, the alternative concept of cultural citizenship developed by scholars and practitioners in Chicano/Latino and Latina Studies—most notably Renato Rosaldo, William V. Flores, and Rina Benmayor<sup>7</sup>—and, more recently, by Asian American studies scholars such as Lok Siu<sup>8</sup> and Sunaina Maira,<sup>9</sup> accentuates the relationship between the “cultural” and the “political,” and addresses critical connections

between material conditions, cultural phenomena, political rights, and civic identities of immigrants. Other scholars draw attention to the continual presence of the nation-state, and emphasize the need to critique the disciplining power of the state (and capital) in defining and shaping its citizen-subjects. In her study of Cambodian refugees in California, for example, anthropologist Aihwa Ong defines cultural citizenship as “a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society.”<sup>10</sup> In my view, cultural citizenship remains an appropriate and useful frame of reference if/when it is tied to an analysis of “self-making” in relation to not only *norms* that are imposed by the state, but also, and perhaps more important, *deviations* (from dominant group standards) that are produced and enacted by a collective of people at what Robin Kelly might call “margins of struggle” of the working class. In the case of younger generations of diasporic Cambodians, recent shifts in U.S. immigration law have also further complicated the ways that they conceive and construct their sense of home and belonging. In the following sections, I highlight three informal, non-institutional sites in which older- and younger-generation Cambodians understand and practice cultural citizenship: local civic space claimed briefly but continually for annual Cambodian New Year celebrations; urban contested space, sometimes known as the streets; and an emerging transnational space, exemplified by a network known as Deported Diaspora.

### **Cambodian New Year Celebrations**

The historic resettlement of Cambodian refugees in urban cities in the United States may be understood as a process of status-shifting from “a stateless people” to an “urban minority group” marked by state-sanctioned claims to citizenship. Since their relocation to the United States, Cambodians have been subjected to deteriorating conditions caused by deindustrialization, concentrated poverty, police repression, land redevelopment, and the limitations of domestic civil rights agendas.<sup>11</sup> Racial skirmishes as well as intense conflicts between Cambodians and “authorities” have erupted in an array of white-dominated public domains, ranging from schools to workplaces to government agencies to city streets. In response to such segregated contexts, Cambodians have constructed

dynamic social spaces where they can find collectivity rooted in a shared history and cultural identity. Temporary but consistent sociocultural sites, such as annual Khmer New Year celebrations, provide relevant community space that complements the presence or absence of mutual-assistance associations and other institutional sites. For older-generation Cambodian refugees who are survivors of war traumas and cultural genocide, their memories of tradition are fractured: Local New Year celebrations create places for them to reconnect with their cultural roots and to reconstruct memories with others who have shared histories. Within these sociocultural spaces, individual and collective experiences from both the past and present are referenced and reflected upon. It is also in these spaces and times that older-generation Cambodians have authentic opportunities to reconnect Khmer cultural meanings for themselves and younger generations.

Furthermore, Cambodians have purposefully brought temple rituals to the site of urban New Year celebrations. A Khmer New Year event on the Massachusetts North Shore typically begins in the early morning with a Buddhist monk blessing ceremony. Monks who are invited from temples in Lynn and Revere act as conduits for merit making. Cambodians offer food to the monks, show their respect, and donate money to help maintain the temples. For the Khmer, these are all acts of karma or merit making. By making and accumulating karma or merit (*tvoe bon*) in this life, Cambodians hope to increase their chances for a better rebirth or secure a place in heaven after death.<sup>12</sup> To many older-generation Cambodians who have experienced severe losses from the war and genocide, along with overwhelming pressures of poverty and displacement in the United States, karmic meaning and merit represent real power with which to make sense of human suffering and to address the conditions in this life. These collective annual gatherings of people who share an identification with life and death as a continual spiritual journey appear to have real significance and value for many who attend. Such a communal spiritual identity differs from the kind of civic or political identity that mainstream agencies typically engage in their advocacy, service, or organizing work.

But the Cambodian New Year celebration is more than a space for cultural reinvention; it is a flexibly sited venue designed to reach varied

audiences with multiple purposes. The Khmer New Year events are organized mostly by Cambodian American volunteers and sponsored by a consortium of Cambodian-serving agencies and institutions, including MAP for Health, Lynn Community Health Center, Roca, North Shore Community College, small-business owners, and other individuals. Sponsoring organizations not only provide financial contributions and other resources to support the all-day event, but also set up tables or booths in different areas of the venue to interact directly with their constituents. Organizational staff members distribute flyers for events, health information packets, and educational materials; some conduct oral histories or surveys, while others actively recruit local Cambodian Americans to social groups, church congregations, and college access programs. Urban Khmer New Year celebrations, therefore, serve as important sites where formal institutions can conduct community outreach, research, and assessment; at the same time, they represent essential nonformal, non-institutional places for community members to access institutional services and programs that may otherwise be inaccessible to them. Moreover, non-Cambodians from within and outside the community also participate in the celebration as friends, neighbors, coworkers, teammates, allies, and, in growing numbers, as family members. The New Year brings different people and institutions together in a common venue, reconstructing a sense of home place and simultaneously enabling connections to mainstream resources and services.

In addition to being a place where cultural-spiritual practices and organizational activities flourish, the Khmer New Year events are also much-needed spaces for celebration. Old and young generations interact and party together on this important day in ways that are not possible during the rest of the year. They dance to live music played by commercial bands from other parts of the Diaspora, such as Long Beach, California, and even Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Teenagers and children compete in break-dancing contests and play traditional games that are not part of mainstream U.S. pop culture, while extended family and friends engage in conversations and catch up on their daily lives. Despite the fact that different generations of Cambodians can take pride in their own traditions and cultural practices during the New Year, ongoing contestations over what space to utilize for the annual event suggest that the local Khmer



community has yet to forge a public identity comparable to what other racial and ethnic groups have seemingly claimed. Because of conflicting visions and interests between event organizers and local authorities, North Shore Khmer New Year celebrations have had to move from year to year to different venues in Lynn and Revere—ranging from the gym of a well-known public community college to the private gallery space of a small community arts center to the outdoor parking area next to one of the local Cambodian Buddhist temples to the open street in a local neighborhood where the Cambodian community is highly concentrated. Interestingly, in every case, regardless of physical location, the annual Khmer New Year celebrations have taken place under the watchful eyes of the police.

### **Urban Streets**

Although it is tempting to argue that the longevity of the annual Khmer New Year event on the Massachusetts North Shore signifies an achievement of inclusive urban citizenship for local Khmer Americans, the story on the street is far more complicated. Young people, especially Cambodian American adolescent males, have been frequent targets of police surveillance and harassment as well as racial violence. In response, some have exhibited greater resistance in contested public spaces in Lynn and Revere, as well as in other cities like Long Beach, California; Providence, Rhode Island; Seattle, Washington; and in nearby Lowell, Massachusetts. Cambodian American gang activity, for example, emerged in these settings during the 1990s as an adaptive response by youth to claim identity and gain protection in school and on the street. But their increased participation in illegal activities such as the expanding drug economy caused a downward spiraling for many youth and young adults, including the death and incarceration of some. Audacious public displays and representations by young men and women in their full gang colors, of course, also led to heightened surveillance and intensified authority control.<sup>13</sup>

As the stories and voices of Cambodian American young people make clear, those with institutional capacities to support or invest in immigrant and racial minority populations do not always recognize or address those who occupy the margins of struggle. “We are an underserved community,”<sup>14</sup> says one Cambodian adolescent male from Boston.

Another from Revere comments on the lack of educational and cultural activities for Cambodian American youth: “Even in the high school there wasn’t much [happening].”<sup>15</sup> A 15-year-old Cambodian American female from nearby Providence, Rhode Island, shares her view of the root causes of gang violence and low rates of high school graduation in Cambodian American communities: “We have no love. Our families are too busy working for money. Students are getting put down by their teachers. There’s no more belief in our community. Everybody keeps giving up.”<sup>16</sup>

Rather than wait for institutions and agencies to address the problems in their neighborhoods, many young people have taken as their responsibility to confront their profoundly racialized urban landscape on their own terms. As young people attempt to resist oppressive and assimilating forces, however, they may also fall victim to the same conditions that they seek to change. Their unguided attempts to break free of the system may have chained them even more to the system. Anyone with a criminal conviction, for example—ranging from theft and robbery to assault with a deadly weapon and other offenses involving bodily harm—is currently in an extremely vulnerable position, depending on one’s citizenship status, even if the terms of one’s sentence have already been completed.

Their vulnerability results from an amendment to U.S. immigration law passed by Congress in 1996, making noncitizens convicted of a broad range of aggravated felonies and sentenced to as little as one year in prison subject to deportation. The practical applicability of the law depends on whether countries agree to take back their nationals. In the case of Khmer nationals in the United States, the Cambodian government signed a repatriation memorandum of understanding to facilitate the return of removable nationals in March 2002, shortly after 9/11.<sup>17</sup> Since then, diasporic Cambodians’ ongoing struggles for inclusive urban citizenship in the United States have become closely intertwined with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s exercise of arbitrary power to forcibly expel and deport Cambodians and other noncitizens with felony convictions. Established in 2003, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. In Massachusetts, ICE conducted house-to-house raids in August 2008 as part of the agency’s Operation Community Shield—a national

law-enforcement initiative that targets what the agency labels as “violent transnational street gangs.”<sup>18</sup>

People who have been convicted of “aggregated felonies” are the ones most subjected to deportation, with little hope of relief from the current immigration laws. Previously limited to serious crimes such as rape and murder, it now includes minor offenses such as shoplifting, breaking and entering, violation of a restraining order, and drunk driving. In Massachusetts, misdemeanors such as larceny of \$250 or assault and battery could be considered aggravated felonies by ICE or its predecessor, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).<sup>19</sup> A study of Southeast Asians in detention conducted by the Southeast Asian Resource Action Center (SEARAC) shows that the average age of arrival to the United States was nine years and the average length of time that detainees have lived in this country is twenty years. One-third of the detainees said that they had U.S.-born children, and more than half said they were their families’ primary source of income.<sup>20</sup> According to statistics from the INS, close to 1,400 Cambodian American refugees have received orders of removal for deportation since 2002.

As of November 30, 2008, a total of 189 Cambodians had actually been deported.<sup>21</sup> The perceived threats and challenges presented by criminality in immigrant or refugee communities in the post-9/11 era have greatly complicated debates over deportation and other solutions to crime. Critics of deportation draw attention to the fact that many detainees and deportees had escaped atrocities of war and genocide in Cambodia as small children and spent most of their formative years in poverty-stricken neighborhoods in the United States; they cite examples of family separation and urge the public to recognize the limits of a legally bound definition of citizenship and to consider citizenship as both a process and outcome emerging from life experience in this country. Some critics also argue that the practice of deportation goes against U.S. commitments to refugees under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>22</sup> For supporters of deportation the rationale is that to maintain public safety and order, it is by all means necessary to deport noncitizens with criminal convictions back to their countries of origin. National security is understandably a top concern of Americans post-9/11, but the question “Who counts as a threat to national security?” remains, and should remain, highly con-

tested. As June Baeck, an immigration lawyer at Lynn Neighborhood Legal Services, explains, many Cambodian detainees on the Massachusetts North Shore that she represents actually “[have] no outstanding warrants, and [have] only old convictions that were not recent, serious, or open.”<sup>23</sup> Under the current immigration laws, however, these detainees fall right into the category of “removable” or “deportable.”

Noting that political and economic forces have conjoined to frame the contexts of Cambodian refugee resettlement, immigration scholar and lawyer Bill Ong Hing points to the role of U.S. institutions in shaping individuals’ lives and calls for giving the potential deportees and their supporters “a second chance.”<sup>24</sup> Advocating from a community-based rather than legislative perspective, Hing asserts the importance of developing alternative approaches that emphasize “mutual responsibility between the state and the individual.”<sup>25</sup> “Something is terribly wrong with a system that results in the deportation of individuals who entered the country as infants and toddlers, when their criminality is a product of their U.S. environment,”<sup>26</sup> he writes. The impact of the environment on the individual is a reference repeatedly made by many Cambodian deportees featured in a 2007 documentary film titled *Straight Refugees* who are now in their twenties or thirties. One of them reflects on how he survived the streets of urban America and why he turned to crime:

I grew up kind of rough and tough too, had tough love for my dad... I had to deal with the streets. People on the streets, I’m not asking for no sympathy or nothing like that, just understanding. Understand where I’m coming from. Most of the things I could remember right now about my life is [*sic*] to maybe somebody else’s eyes or ears is I’m a bad person, you know. But they’re not looking past the big word. The big word is no. They just looking at the, looking at the caption or you know the heading. That’s all they’re looking at. Some people, not everybody. I just want, want people to like, as far as judging other people read the story, not just the heading, you know... before you judge. My life was crazy. My life...everything that I went through growing up, I basically live an old life. I never really got to become a kid, you know. My thing was, yeah...I

had a little fun here and there, *I never really had space to be free because everything and everyone was around me was violent. So I had to be one with the elements because if not, I probably wouldn't be here.*<sup>27</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Ironically, the life skills that this young man and his deported Khmer American peers developed in order to survive on urban U.S. streets—what could be described as adaptive assimilation—led not only to their loss of freedom and banishment from this country, but also to their forced return back to the very country from which they were forced to leave originally in search of survival and freedom.

### **Deported Diaspora**

While Cambodian American young people have continued to struggle with poverty, violence, and racial profiling, the institutional programs and services designed to address their issues and needs have faced cut-backs and elimination. In Massachusetts, for example, both the Roca Revere and the Roca Lynn youth programs that specifically targeted street-involved Cambodian youth on the North Shore were closed during the early 2000s. The two local Cambodian-run community organizations—CCM and Khmer Association of the North Shore (KANS), a group that briefly succeeded CCM—were also dismantled. Thus, when Khmer American young people in Revere and Lynn, as well as their peers in the surrounding metropolitan region, including Lowell, East Boston, Somerville, Lawrence, and Providence, were detained by the ICE, an initially informal but fresh network of support, known as Deported Diaspora, emerged to assist the detainees and their family members.

Founded in March 2008, Deported Diaspora is an activist cohort of young organizers, youth workers, and artists from diverse racial backgrounds. Working with a wide range of local and national advocacy networks, Deported Diaspora builds on the foundational work of Family Network—one of the first groups founded in 2002 by rival gang members, people with orders of removal, street workers, and family members in Lowell. Deported Diaspora seeks to unify families and communities to raise awareness and challenge the U.S. deportation system through organizing, education, advocacy, and the arts. Internationally, they support

deported people by connecting them to local (country of origin) resources and by raising the visibility of reintegration programs that provide leadership, education, and self-sustainability opportunities.<sup>28</sup> For Khmer deportees, most of whom had fled their homeland as children, many arrived back in Cambodia without family contacts, access to other resources, or even Khmer-language literacy. Not surprisingly, some have found work using their English-language skills, while others remain unemployed, and still others have fallen (back) into depression and drug use.

Dimple Rana, a woman of Indian descent who grew up in the predominantly Cambodian neighborhood of Revere, Massachusetts, is a co-founder and key organizer of Deported Diaspora. She recounts that many deportees, including those who have roots in Massachusetts, are coping with mental illnesses and/or financial problems while being separated from their families and friends in the United States.<sup>29</sup> In an interview with the *New York Times*, she explains, “I know of a whole bunch of returnees whose mothers were sending money from their Social Security. Now, with the economy in the United States, it is very hard and families are not able to send even \$100 or \$150.”<sup>30</sup>

The recent documentary film *Straight Refugees* has exposed these realities vividly. One of the deportees interviewed in the film describes his drug use and a suicide attempt as follows:

You know like my brain is fucked up with drug. Ah I got a problem every day... But after since I stay in United States immigration for seven years now I got to return back [to Cambodia], I feel like lazy I don't want to do nothing. Like that's why I jump off from the roof [to] commit suicide [and] want to kill myself, but I didn't die, now I got a bad leg I cannot walk.<sup>31</sup>

The lack of adequate medical treatment available to deportees with severe mental illnesses is further revealed in the following story:

Upon arrival, I had one returnee with me. He couldn't handle Cambodia. Once he got here, dude just turned cuckoo, you know. He just flipped. He didn't talk to nobody. Three days later he was running around naked inside detention center. He

was beating up on the police in detention center. But they still wouldn't release him you know. He was mentally ill. He needed help, but then there was *[sic]* no records. The United States government didn't give us no, give the Cambodian government no record. So, they didn't know what was wrong with him. So, he just kept on beating up security guards, breaking windows inside the detention center. You know, and that was what you know happened, you know, because he's stressed out.<sup>32</sup>

On December 6, 2007, a 33-year-old deportee called "Chan" hanged and killed himself in his room in Cambodia. Deported from Long Beach, California, Chan had been depressed and suicidal for a long time. His peers recall what led to his tragic suicide in the following public statement:

We all knew that he needed support. In the States he had major depression with psychotic features and was on medication that basically kept him stable. Since his deportation out here he could never get the proper medications in Cambodia, so he went on a huge decline into a really deep dark place. And then he started smoking yama [a crude form of crystal meth] and that escalated his demise. We got him meds from the clinic, but they didn't work, we got him a counselor but he couldn't keep appointments.<sup>33</sup>

Chan's peers ended their statement with a call for action: "We hope Chan's death helps end the deportation of Cambodians with a diagnosed mental health disorder. This madness and unnecessary death needs to stop."

With little official financial or reintegration support for deportees, Deported Diaspora has worked to identify strategies and opportunities for outreach and organizing activities in Cambodia. Although the deportees endure forced separation from homes in the United States and must adjust to life in Cambodia—a process of "immigrant incorporation" turned on its head—most have, nevertheless, continued to negotiate and create places and identities in the new "home" country. Individual deportees have achieved success and notoriety amid struggle, for exam-

ple, by teaching classes attended by visually impaired women and acid-attack victims,<sup>34</sup> or bringing break dancing to street youth in the poorest section of Cambodia's urban ghettos,<sup>35</sup> or outreaching to drug users and sex workers,<sup>36</sup> or assisting more newly arrived deportees to reintegrate into Cambodian society.<sup>37</sup>

Modest but meaningful alliances across multiple boundaries of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, generation, religion, language, educational background, and legal citizenship status have characterized the construction of formal and nonformal spaces and identities forged by the young activists of Deported Diaspora. Their work suggests the importance of reframing the conceptions and contexts of inclusive urban citizenship. At the same time, the transnational connections created by these young activists and the deportees who are now living in Cambodia point to the emergence of a new Khmer citizenship that is, indeed, both diasporic and grounded in the street.

## **Conclusion**

Diasporic Cambodians' journeys underscore the question of what immigrants/refugees' claims to citizenship really mean over the course of a lifetime as they negotiate and create places and identities that are both shaped by and also independent of nation-state regulation of borders and linear modes of immigrant integration—particularly for those who are subjected to forced migration, poverty, and violence across international borders.

For example, through Khmer New Year celebrations, Massachusetts North Shore Cambodian Americans assert their presence and engage in highly localized home-making, while, at the same time, such cultural community-development activities in U.S. cities are exported to Phnom Penh. Similarly, from the vantage point of the street, as Borann Heam, coordinator of the Khmer Freedom Campaign in the Bronx, New York, explains, "Arrests and convictions of immigrants of color in this country occur in the context of racist enforcement and penal policies... To the extent that these refugee youth violated criminal laws, their criminality is a product of the conditions they were placed in. The supposed criminality of refugee youth is not imported from Cambodia."<sup>38</sup>



By focusing on diasporic cultural citizenship as an alternative frame of analysis, I do not mean to suggest that formal citizenship (with legal and political rights) is unimportant. The reality is that even though the wide range of cultural activities discussed in this paper serve to re-create semblances of home and community, for some of those active participants and their peers, their lack of formal citizenship, combined with their involvement in criminal/survival activities in their non-inclusive urban environments, has led to forced deportations and further necessities to resist, construct, and rebuild yet another home place in the very country of war and genocide that they and their families were forced to escape from in the first place.

Despite these most ironic of circumstances, they nevertheless continue to engage in active diasporic citizenship-making—recalling skills and memories drawn from their U.S. and Massachusetts North Shore experiences. From forced refugee migration out of Cambodia facilitated, in part, by U.S. refugee assistance, followed two decades later by forced deportation back to Cambodia in the service of U.S. homeland security, these breathtaking contradictions within and between urban, transnational margins of struggle represent a reality for which policy makers, scholars, service providers, funders, and their respective institutions should take far greater responsibility to address.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup>I use *Khmer* and *Cambodian* interchangeably throughout this article.

<sup>2</sup>Robin D.G. Kelly, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Lisa M. Hanley, Blair A. Ruble, and Allison M. Garland, *Immigration and Integration in Urban Communities: Renegotiating the City* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

<sup>5</sup>Sunaina Maira, *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009); Lisa M. Hanley, Blair A.

Ruble, and Allison M. Garland, *Immigration and Integration in Urban Communities: Renegotiating the City* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup>Lisa M. Hanley et al., p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>See William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, eds., *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>Lok Siu, "Diasporic Cultural Citizenship: Chineseness and Belonging in Central America and Panama," *Social Text* 19:17–28, 2001.

<sup>9</sup>Maira 2009.

<sup>10</sup>Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37 (5): 737–762, 738.

<sup>11</sup>I am currently doing new research and writing about the socioeconomic and geopolitical conditions in Cambodian American communities during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. For an earlier version of my analysis, see: Shirley Suet-ling Tang, "*Enough Is Enough!:* The Struggle for Cambodian American Community Development in Revere, Massachusetts," PhD dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2002.

<sup>12</sup>Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 34–41.

<sup>13</sup>For a fuller discussion of street-involved Cambodian American youth experiences, see: Shirley Suet-ling Tang, "Challenges of Policy and Practice in Under-Resourced Asian American Communities: Analyzing Public Education, Health, Development Issues with Cambodian American Women," *Asian American Law Journal* 15 (Fall 2008), pp. 153–175; Shirley Suet-ling Tang, "Community Cultural Development and Education with Cambodian American Youth" in *Asian American Voices: Engaging, Empowering, and Enabling*, edited by Lin Zhan (NY: National League for Nursing, 2008), pp. 147–170; and Shirley S. Tang, "Learning to Build a Healthy Community: Youth Development for Street-Involved Cambodian American Young Women" in *Asian Americans: Vulnerable Populations, Model Interventions, and Clarifying Agendas*, edited by Lin Zhan (Sud-

bury, MA: Jones and Bartlett, 2003), pp. 171–195.

<sup>14</sup>Survey on Cambodian American Experiences, distributed at *The Take-over Part One: A Deported Diaspora Fundraising Concert*, University of Massachusetts Boston, March 27, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Cambodian government spokesman Khieu Kanharith stated that Cambodia had been pressured to sign the memorandum of understanding: “We fear that some of those people who have committed very serious crimes or are involved in organized crime might be too sophisticated for our police, but we had a lot of pressure to accept them.” See Eric Unmacht, “A bumpy road ahead for US deportees to Cambodia” in *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 21, 2003, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0121/p08s01-wosc.html> (accessed August 13, 2009). According to another report, Roland Eng, Cambodia’s ambassador to Washington, D.C., at the time when the memorandum was signed, opposed the memorandum. Eng was quoted saying, “I was totally opposed to this. The US told us that there would be no more visas issued, and our kids couldn’t go to school in America. They forced the deal on us.” See: Ron Gluckman, “Sentenced Home,” *The Closer* magazine, March 2008, <http://www.gluckman.com/CambodianRefugeez.html> (accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>18</sup><http://www.ice.gov/pi/nr/0808/080808boston.htm>.

<sup>19</sup>Katheleen Conti, “Cambodians Could Face Deportation” *Khmer Connection*, May 30, 2002, <http://www.khmer.cc/channels/0,11,33,01,5513.html> (accessed August 13, 2009).

<sup>20</sup>“Issue area: Deportation,” [http://www.searac.org/cambrepbak6\\_02.html](http://www.searac.org/cambrepbak6_02.html) (accessed October 15, 2009).

<sup>21</sup>Seth Mydans, “U.S. Deportee Brings Street Dance to Street Boys of Cambodia,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 2008, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Caroline Green, “Strangers in a Strange Land” *Phnom Penh Post*, February 14–27, 2003, p. 14, <http://cambodiatoday.bravepages.com/Stranger.html> (accessed August 13, 2009).

<sup>23</sup>Deported Diaspora, “Deported Diaspora’s E-News,” January 19, 2009,

<http://www.prysm.us/node/470> (accessed August 2, 2009).

<sup>24</sup>Bill Ong Hing, "Deporting Our Souls and Defending Our Immigrants," *Amerasia Journal* 31:3 (2005): xxix.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, xxviii.

<sup>27</sup>*Straight Refugees* (documentary film), dir. Ian White, 2006.

<sup>28</sup>Deported Diaspora, 2009.

<sup>29</sup>Focus group discussion, University of Massachusetts Boston, November 19, 2008.

<sup>30</sup>Mydans, 2008.

<sup>31</sup>*Straight Refugees*, 2006.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>"Statement from Korsang," [http://www.korsangkhmer.org/RIP\\_Chان.html](http://www.korsangkhmer.org/RIP_Chان.html) (accessed August 10, 2009).

<sup>34</sup>Caroline Green, "Strangers in a Strange Land: Khmers who are not yet Cambodians" in *Phnom Penh Post*, February 14–27, 2003, page 14 <http://cambodiatoday.bravepages.com/Stranger.html> (accessed October 15, 2009).

<sup>35</sup>See: Tiny Toones -The First Hip-Hop Center of Cambodia, <http://www.tinytoonescambodia.com/> (accessed October 15, 2009).

<sup>36</sup>See: KORSANG Risk Reduction Saves Lives, <http://www.korsangkhmer.org/> (accessed October 15, 2009).

<sup>37</sup>See: Returnee Integration Support Center, <http://www.risccambodia.org/> (accessed October 15, 2009).

<sup>38</sup>Tram Nguyen, "Sent Back" in *New America Media*, November 21, 2002, <http://news.ncmonline.com/news/> (accessed August 13, 2009).



### Postwar Pledge

*A classroom of schoolchildren, most in traditional Chinese dress, recite the Pledge of Allegiance at the Quincy School in Boston's Chinatown in 1946. Courtesy of the Chinese Culture Institute/Chinese Historical Society of New England.*



### Flying High

*Rose Lok was the first Chinese-American woman to fly solo at what has become Logan Airport in Boston. She grew up on Tyler Street in the city's Chinatown and was twenty when she received her pilot's license from the U.S. Commerce Department in 1932, the year this portrait was taken. Courtesy of Layne Wong and the Chinese Historical Society of New England.*