

## Representation from Cambodia to America: Musical Dramaturgies in Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band*

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For many, Cambodia and Cambodian American identities remain “unrepresentable.”<sup>[1]</sup> Jonathan H. X. Lee troubles the relationships between Southeast Asian, American, and specific national identities to suggest a rethinking of identity that might “arise from calibrating subjectivities and internal-alchemies of memories, histories, and visions.”<sup>[2]</sup> For people from Cambodia, questions of citizenship or status further come into play when considering how the United States shares responsibility for genocide because its policy of bombing the Cambodian-Vietnamese border instigated the political situation that allowed Pol Pot to come to power. Additionally, recent US immigration policy has resulted in the deportation of hundreds of Cambodian Americans to Cambodia, even though many of them have no memory of their “home” land.

How then does Lauren Yee in her new play *Cambodian Rock Band* (CRB) craft a moving story of a father and daughter in Cambodia while complicating discourses about Cambodian and Cambodian American identities and responsibility? One of the top ten most-produced plays in 2019 in US professional theatres, CRB will go on a highly anticipated national tour in 2022. The play tells the story of Neery, who is working in Cambodia to help bring the top villains of the Khmer Rouge to justice, and her father, whom she discovers is one of the few survivors of the regime’s infamous prison, S-21. Although physical violence is not completely absent from the play, it is not the focus of emotional or narrative impact.<sup>[3]</sup> Music moves the play from family drama into larger discussions of truth and healing, memory and politics. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials names this complicated relationship “Cambodian Syndrome,” “a transnational set of amnesiac politics revealed through hegemonic modes of public policy and memory.”<sup>[4]</sup> The often illusionistic play destabilizes truth through music. Jill Dolan describes the limits of illusionism and focuses on primarily the visual and textual apparatus of representation that might be used to destabilize hegemonic readings.<sup>[5]</sup> I am proposing using music outside the limits of Brechtian tactics; it is music, not the bodies onstage, that offers the dramaturgical means for representation.

Musical dramaturgy examines the way music functions, beyond invoking emotion or creating atmosphere, within a theatrical production; “what music *does*, rather than what *is*.”<sup>[6]</sup> Often, within musical dramaturgy, the focus is primarily, or even solely, on how music lives within or creates the dramatic text.<sup>[7]</sup> I expand this notion, because music, like the stage itself, is “haunted,” to borrow Marvin Carlson’s term.<sup>[8]</sup> In CRB, lyric, melody/harmony, cultures, and histories inform what we hear and what that sound means.

The play opens with a live band on stage playing two songs before the house lights dim and the dialogue begins. The bouncy, joyful sound of “Cyclo” (both the name of the song and of the band) begins in the diatonic scale commonly used by American rock bands. This is in contrast to the opening refrain of the next song “Uku,” which features a pentatonic scale, the five-note scale that often suggests an “Asian”

sound to the listener. A haunting flute dances lightly against the rhythm of the guitar and is complemented by percussion that invokes sounds of distant thunder or gunfire. A female singer adds another level of sound, as her voice invokes a feeling of longing. The words are in Khmer, but the sound suggests the meaning, even without translation:

The windy season makes me think of my village

I think of the old people, young people, aunts and uncles

We used to run and play, hide and seek

But now we are far apart<sup>[9]</sup>

This pair of songs challenges and supports various misconceptions of Asian identities as Other and complicates global connections between Asia and the United States. Music serves as a backbone for the play and a significant element of the story; the songs are a mix of Cambodian and American radio-hits from the past and new compositions by the California-based group Dengue Fever. The audience experiences the music in the immediate present, but the music invokes the past and another culture through language and sound. Just as the music jumps across time and locale, the story of Cambodian-born Chum reconciling his relationship with his American daughter Neery explores different cultural values and intertwined histories.

Yee's deep obsession with the music of Dengue Fever inspired her to write the play, but as the play developed, the music also became central to the play's dramaturgy. The songs do not always propel the action forward, as it would in a musical, but director Chay Yew explains, "the music is actually another character in Lauren's play."<sup>[10]</sup> Discussions of the play often mention that the music makes the play accessible because rock music would be familiar to an audience generally unfamiliar with Cambodia—"music is universal and defies borders."<sup>[11]</sup> I argue that the music does more than make the play accessible.

In this essay, I use *CRB* as a case to explore how musical dramaturgies might articulate complex Asian identities that complicate the limits of visibility. Similarly, recent scholarship on Asian and Asian American identities also focuses on the aural.<sup>[12]</sup> I use music, as Daphne Lei describes, to move identity from a binary of Asian/Asian American to a neither/nor state where "the past is 'forgotten' but the future is not yet reached," and ends with the hope that "interlinked Asian and American ethnicities can be created, negotiated, and performed."<sup>[13]</sup> I argue that the music within the play offers an alternative means to engage some of the complex relationships between Southeast Asia and the United States and mirrors a similar need for engagement within scholarship between Asian performance and Asian American performance.

From the beginning, the play establishes the limits between visual versus aural regimes of knowledge. As the opening music concludes, everyone is seated and the house lights dim. A man appears onstage to thank and introduce the band. He says, "From their first, last, ONLY album, recorded in Phnom Penh, April 1974. A tape that—like so much of Cambodia's music of the time—no longer exists," then he changes his tone, "but that's not what you think of when you think of Cambodia, is it? YOU think of

something a little more like this.”<sup>[14]</sup> The man clicks through several slides of Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge that the stage directions describe as “Black and white. Gruesome.”<sup>[15]</sup> The images are from Cambodia in 1975-1979, when the Khmer Rouge, the name commonly given to Cambodia’s Communist Party, attempted to turn the country back to Year Zero. They emptied the cities, abolished the currency, dismantled education, and sought to eliminate any reference to the past or foreign influence. More than two million Cambodians died, some from starvation or illness, but many were also killed for petty crimes, such as stealing food. The country’s elite prisoners, including artists and intellectuals, were held at detention centers where they were tortured, forced to confess their “crimes,” and driven out of town to dig a shallow grave before they were killed. More than 20,000 people are thought to have been tortured and executed at Tuol Sleng (commonly called S-21), a former high school in Phnom Penh. When the Vietnamese liberated the city, only seven people were left alive in the prison.<sup>[16]</sup>

Now a museum, Tuol Sleng represents both the power and limits of visual representation. This site of both horror and later attempts at reconciliation is one of the most popular tourist sites in Cambodia. When I visited in 2016, I was overwhelmed by the hundreds of photos hanging on the walls—mug shots of victims and documentation of the torture they endured. Scholar and Khmer Rouge survivor Boreth Ly describes how “the Khmer Rouge was very visually focused. It was a scopic regime that enforced visual surveillance on its victim and deliberately traumatized and destroyed their vision.”<sup>[17]</sup> When he was twelve years old, he and his grandmother finally returned to their home after four years of forced labor. The house was empty, and they searched for any photographs of their relatives, but they were all gone. He contrasts this loss with the multitude of photos at Tuol Sleng, documenting the prisoners who were executed.<sup>[18]</sup>

These photographs have circulated globally in museums, books, and online as the primary representation of the genocide. Michelle Caswall, describes how, “a complex layering of silencing is revealed”<sup>[19]</sup> and “Because of both the transformative power of the creation of these mug shots and the complete oppressiveness of Tuol Sleng as a total institution within a totalitarian state, there are no whispers of the victims in these records; the photographs, like the dead they depict, remain frustratingly silent.”<sup>[20]</sup> The problem is that the images confound the viewer and render the victim silent.

Yee engages the problem of visual representation through the many overt mentions of photographs and seeing in the play. The man in the opening is Kaing Guek Eav, or Comrade Duch as he was known, the head officer of S-21.<sup>[21]</sup> He taunts the gruesome images of the genocide—“boring,” “tragique,” “genocide, genocide, genocide, boo,” and threatens that he is always “watching watching always watching.”<sup>[22]</sup> Later, Neary realizes that her father, Chum, is likely the eighth survivor featured in a photograph. She confronts him; he confirms his identity but refuses to testify. Chum argues that the truth cannot be found in a photograph, and that if Duch is guilty, so is he. In a flashback, Yee suggests that the photographs that really matter are the ones that never existed. Chum delayed his family’s escape so his band could record the last song on their album. They want to take a photograph, but they forgot to bring a camera; there was no photo and there was no escape. These examples illustrate the complicated ways that visual evidence is threatening, unreliable, and incomplete. Another method is required to sort through the various relationships between Cambodia and American identities in the play and music offers that means.

Two songs played within the prison space towards the end of the play are especially effective at dramatizing this history. Chum is eventually arrested and brought to S-21. He tries to hide his identity by claiming he is a banana seller, but he eventually ends up in a room with Duch himself. Duch asks about

some words that Chum wrote and learns that they are the lyrics to Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'." Duch orders Chum to play the song, but Chum requires a guitar because, "I just want you to hear how it's supposed to be played. So you know the absolute truth," and for the first time in months, the sound of music calms Duch and allows him to sleep.<sup>[23]</sup> Chum's words echo Dylan's own feelings that a song is more than its lyrics; "they're meant to be sung, not read."<sup>[24]</sup> Dramaturgically the insertion of this quintessential American anti-war song echoes perceptions about the futility of the American effort in Southeast Asia, and especially Cambodia. Even though Dylan conceived of this song as a big statement to unite the civil rights movement and folk music, many critics dismissed it as an "empty gesture" with "little political relevance."<sup>[25]</sup> Perhaps Duch is lulled to sleep by this reminder that likewise America has little relevance and is unlikely to come save the suffering people in Cambodia.

While in prison, Chum writes, and on the night of his scheduled execution, he plays one last song, "Hammer and Nail," the first half of which is in English:

Something old

Something new

Something borrowed

And something blue

Couldn't keep me from trying and fighting

Doing everything I can

To somehow end up with you again.

You can call me a fool

And I know that I am

Won't let you slip through my fingers

Just like sand<sup>[26]</sup>

On the surface, the song is about a pending wedding and a possible break-up, but the singer promises to fight for his love. Musically it bridges the sound of American folk and Cambodian surfer rock. From the first line, "Something Old," until "just like sand," the chord progression moves slowly up the scale, and structurally is not unlike the Dylan song. The second part repeats the lyrics in Khmer, but this time with back-up singers adding an angelic, otherworldly quality. In the context of the scene, it is about fighting for life, about fighting for something bigger than oneself.

The play ends with Chum and his daughter playing “I’m Sixteen,” originally by Ros Serey Sothea, together in the prison/museum. Sothea was one of the most beloved singers of Cambodian rock before the Khmer Rouge, and “I’m Sixteen” functions as an anthem connecting Cambodians to the past. Also, this mesmerizing anthem both inspired and is featured on Dengue Fever’s first album.[27] The song and the moment onstage combine to create a kind of, to borrow Sean Metzger’s term, “temporal folding,” where “subjects emerge in a relation of figures through one another, through actions in the present associated with those in the past” that allows for a simultaneous representation of past/present and Asian/Asian American.[28] The staging reinforces the power of music, as the stage lights shift to indicate that the sun is coming up and the stage directions read “behind them, the sun rises higher and higher, blinding us. We see the bandmates’ silhouettes as they rock out to one last song.”[29] Sight is obliterated, and representation happens in the music alone.

### Postscript

Since the world premiere of *CRB* in 2018, the context of the show and even this article has changed, making the play’s message even more imperative, and music continues to be the crux of representation. On July 20, 2020, in response to cancelled productions due to Covid-19 shutdowns and the growing Black Lives Matter protests after the death of George Floyd, Lauren Yee and Joe Ngo[30] announced the #CRBChallenge. Ngo articulated a debt to the Black civil rights movement and the intertwined histories of rock music: “Who hasn’t borrowed Afro-Caribbean beats?”[31] The challenge called for singers around the world to recreate songs from the show or Cambodia more generally in order to raise awareness about and to fundraise for organizations working for both Black and Cambodian American communities. The resulting videos, with #CRBChallenge, demonstrate a multi-faceted connection to the play, its story and music, and the depth of talent among Asians and Asian Americans.

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[1] Ashley Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and ‘Cambodian Art’ in the Wake of Genocide,” *diacritics* 41 no. 2 (2013): 82-109.

[2] Jonathan H. X. Lee, “Southeast Asian Americans: Memories, Visions, and Subjectivities,” in *Southeast Asian Diaspora in the United States: Memories and Visions, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, ed. Jonathan H. X. Lee, Cambridge Scholars Publisher (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: 2014), 1.

[3] The script calls for several scenes of torture and violence, however, I have read hundreds of reviews and these scenes are not the focus and rarely mentioned.

- [4] Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 13.
- [5] Jill Dolan, *Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 1-3.
- [6] Kim Baston, "Not Just 'Evocative': The Function of Music in Theatre," *Australasian Drama Studies* 67 (2015), 5. Emphasis in original.
- [7] Carl Dahlhaus and Mary Whittal, "What is a Musical Drama?" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1, no. 2 (1989): 95-96.
- [8] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
- [9] Lauren Yee, "Cambodian Rock Band," *American Theatre* 35, no. 6 (July/August 2018), 49. The songs used in the production are written by Dengue Fever. In my descriptions of the music, I am relying on my memory of the 2019 production at the Victory Gardens, Chicago, IL, directed by Marti Lyons, and the cast album that was released in May 2020.
- [10] Donatella Galella, "Listening to Cambodian Rock Band: An Interview with Lauren Yee and Chay Yew," *Performance Matters* 6, no. 2 (2020), 127.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 130.
- [12] For more on Asian American identities and accents see Shilpa Davé, "Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies," *Cinema Journal* 56 no. 3 (2017): 142-147. Also for insight on performing race and the music of Dengue Fever see Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), especially chapter 5. Spoken word as music, which playwright Chay Yew calls the "nonmusical musical," is also key to identity in Stephen Hong Sohn, "Calculated Cacophonies: The Queer Asian American Family and the Nonmusical Musical in Chay Yew's *Wonderland*," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 29, vol. 1 (2016).
- [13] Daphne Lei, "Staging the Binary: Asian American Theatre in the Late Twentieth Century," *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*, ed. David Krasner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 301-317.
- [14] Yee, *CRB*, 49.
- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] David P. Chandler, *Voices From S-21: Terror and History In Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- [17] Boreth Ly, "Of Performance and the Persistent Temporality of Trauma: Memory, Art, and Visions," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 16, no. 11 (2008), 118.

[18] Ibid., 115-116.

[19] Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 7.

[20] Ibid., 158.

[21] For a history about Duch and his trial, see Alexander Laban Hinton, *Man Or Monster?: The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

[22] Yee, *CRB*, 50.

[23] Music as a tool of survival is perhaps taken from the real-life story of Arn-Chorn-Pond whose life was saved because he played music for the Khmer Rouge. This story is retold by Patricia McCormick in the novel *Never Fall Down* (New York: Balzer + Bray, 2012).

[24] Dylan quoted in Larry Starr, *Listening to Bob Dylan* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 1.

[25] Starr, *Listening*, 34.

[26] Yee, *CRB*, 65.

[27] Nic Cohn, "A Voice from the Killing Fields," *The Guardian*, 19 May 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/may/20/worldmusic.features> (accessed 25 January 2022).

[28] Sean Metzger, "At the Vanishing Point: Theater and Asian/American Critique," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (2011), 279.

[29] Yee, *CRB*, 69.

[30] Ngo, whose parents are Chinese Cambodian and survived the Khmer Rouge, played the original Chum in *CRB* and has recreated the role for numerous productions.

[31] "Welcome to the CRB Challenge! #CRBChallenge," Facebook, 5 July 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=282008519582298> (accessed 20 January 2022).

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