

MEDIA REVIEW

RHETORICAL MEMORY,
POLITICAL THEATER,
AND THE TRAUMATIC PRESENT

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*Eyes of the Heart:
A Play in Two Acts.*

FILLOUX, CATHERINE.

CATHERINE FILLOUX
COLLECTION AT THE
JEROME LAWRENCE &
ROBERT E. LEE THEATRE
RESEARCH INSTITUTE,
OSU LIBRARIES, 2003.*Photographs from S-21.*

FILLOUX, CATHERINE.

HB PLAYWRIGHTS
SHORT PLAY
FESTIVAL 1998
THE MUSEUM PLAYS
PLAYSCRIPTS, INC. 2002.

1 *Photographs from S-21* has been produced across the world; including at the 2004 Patravadi Theater, Bangkok Fringe Festival, Thailand; 2003 13 Venues in "Images of Asia" Festival in Denmark; 2003 "Deprivation, Violence and Identities Conference" /OSU Theatre Production, Columbus, OH; 2003 Arizona State University, Performance Studies, Empty Space Theatre, AZ; 2003 Asian Women Theater Director's Festival, New

"I am in a dream," a young Cambodian woman says. "No, you're in America," a young Cambodian man responds. The two characters in Catherine Filloux's potent short play *Photographs from S-21* stand dressed in black pajamas and ID tags, in front of their own life-size prison portraits. The enlarged photographs are historical documents of two individuals killed by the Khmer Rouge in Pol Pot's secret prison in Democratic Kampuchea (now Cambodia), and part of the Tuol Sleng museum and archive in Cambodia.¹ The Khmer Rouge revolution killed an estimated 1.7 million out of a population of 7.3 million. We realize that the play is set in a modern art museum in the United States when the young man steps out of the photograph's frame: "I just want to see what is nearby.... The people always seem to be passing through on their way to something called Picasso." "They look at me so strange," she says. "Like they are asking me a question.... I can never turn away."

Photographs from S-21 does not imagine viewers as voyeurs, but rather works against the spectacle of trauma and "an aversely fascinated mourning" by contesting the sentimentality of finding relief in the image of the dead (Berlant 52). The play aligns the audience with museum-goers, implicating both as potential perpetrators of suffering. "People pass by. And every time their eyes touch ours we're back there again." The young woman asks, "Who are they, who look?" "Ghosts, maybe," the young man answers. "Ghosts of the Khmer Rouge.... Why else would they come back again and again to see us? To check on us?" "Perhaps you are right, Vuthy," she says. "Perhaps they are the enemy disguised." Unlike museum-goers, the play's audience is given access to the victims' beyond death. This access extends trauma and memory to the afterlife and positions audiences as both objects and subjects of the play. We become objects of the victims' gaze. Similarly, as David Chandler notes with regard to the archival photographs themselves, "As we observe the victims, they are observing us" (6). Or, as Lindsay French puts it, "The directness of the people's gaze holds us. They are, in effect, facing their executioners in the lens of the camera, and we stare back at them from the place of the executioner. It is extremely unsettling" (135). The photographs, then, also position the audience as pedagogical subjects, prompted to contemplate our role in remembering Cambodia's traumatic past.

One of the standards against which political theatre is judged is whether a performance shakes audiences out of complacency and unset-

tle easy identifications, or as Dominick LaCapra puts it in another context, enables "empathetic unsettlement" (78). Empathetic unsettlement contrasts with projective identification (or the fusion with the other) insofar as it recognizes and respects the other and does not compel or authorize one "to speak in the other's voice or take the other's place, for example, as a surrogate victim or perpetrator" (27). Identification is one of the central strategies of rhetorical persuasion—and also one of the central tenets of human rights discourse, which relies upon witnesses to identify with victims. The presumption is that intervention is less likely if we are unable to identify with victims. But do identification and compassion necessarily enable moral and political action? As Susan Sontag argues, "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers" (101). Similarly, identification is an unstable rhetorical stance that, like sympathy, can function as an alibi for lack of action. It can be a way for us to feel, as Sontag suggests, that "we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence" (102).

To move audiences to consider ethical questions and political action, political theatre must alter the relationship between audiences and the subject(s) represented. The mass media in the US often positions viewers as voyeurs or surveyors of atrocities and struggles outside of our borders, as well as potential saviors. These rhetorical strategies, common to earlier colonial discourses, presume access, authority, and control over the terrain of others. Given the endurance of colonial discourses, which survived the formal end of colonial rule, and their function as rhetorical commonplaces in US culture, one of the greatest challenges of dramatic works such as *Photographs from S-21* is to enable audiences to question the hold that such commonplaces have on US audiences.²

Likewise, one of the most complex pedagogical challenges that we face as teachers, particularly when we introduce students to representations of state-sponsored violence within or outside of US contexts, is to enable them to move beyond sympathy and pity for the distant "other." Consumptive models of identification dominate the US media, keeping audiences free from implication in the political, economic, and cultural forces that create or enable the conditions that the "other" must confront. In order to counter such commonplaces, we need to give our students the tools to recognize how cultural and national scripts cast certain groups as victims and others as saviors. To enable students to question such binaries, we need to explore with them the social hierarchies and circumstances that shape their relationship and response to such events, including reflection on the "points of connection" with another's memories that evoke empathetic identification (Simon 12). This process includes addressing the redemptive promise of remembrance. As Roger Simon puts it, "The hope enacted in and through such remembrance is dependent on a moralizing pedagogy: the provision of images and narratives against which the future is defined as different, a time in which the past 'must never happen again'" (4).

Delhi and Calcutta, India (Performed and Directed by Khmer Actors from the National Theater in Cambodia); 2002: Center for Peace & Social Justice, Rivier College, New Hampshire, "The Power of One Series"; 2002 The Spirit of Cambodia tribute, Providence College, RI; 2002 University of Leeds, England, International Interventionist Theatre program: Royal Armouries at Leeds; Gate Theatre and Riverside Studios (Out of Bosnia Festival) in London; Bretton Hall College at the Powerhouse Theatre in Wakefield, England; 2002 Lowell High School, Lowell, MA; 2001: Mahoney Auditorium, University of Massachusetts Lowell, MA; 2001 Boston Center for the Arts, Creasian Festival, Boston, MA; and 2001 Phnom Penh, Cambodia (In Khmer and French), French Cultural Center Theatre. *Photograph S-21* was the 1999 Winner of Nausicaa Franco-American Play Contest/Paris; Chicago, IL and in 1999 a finalist for the Heideman Award, Actors Theatre of Louisville, KY. 1998.

Different geopolitical contexts and locations, as one might expect, have yielded different interpretations. One interesting difference between the US production and a production in Cambodia was that the Cambodian production substituted the two historical prison photographs for photographs of the actual actors in the play. I attended a production of *Photograph from S-21* at The Ohio State University in October 2003, directed by Lesley Ferris and performed by two OSU students. The young woman was played by Tanya Chu McBride, and the young man by Christopher Lee.

2 I use the term rhetorical commonplaces to refer to classification systems and categories that are commonly shared among a given community and used to construe arguments, and to develop claims (Crowley and Hawhee 430).

3 See Hesford for extended discussion of the concept of rhetorical witnessing as it relates to the trauma of representing mass atrocity and genocide.

Photographs from S-21 is a rich pedagogical text because, by implicating audiences in the drama, it urges us to contemplate how our identifications and memories are shaped by cultural and national scripts and agendas. We are impelled to listen to and acknowledge the risks for those who speak out against human rights violations. Hence, one of the play's most profound pedagogical lessons lies in its prompting audiences to consider the complexity of subject positions and the responsibility toward "what has been deemed by some as beyond the range of human thought" (Mandel 205–6). *Photographs from S-21* calls for a relationship of rhetorical witnessing between the characters and audience—and between the past and present—that is rooted in an understanding of memory as a rhetorical and pedagogical practice.³ I use the term *rhetorical memory* in the title of this essay to define memory as a material (embodied) and discursive experience that is ideologically interpellated by prevailing cultural scripts and rhetorical commonplaces. Remembrance as a *practice* serves specific national, cultural, and political interests within particular contexts. In this sense, memory practices are at their core pedagogical; as Roger Simon puts it, "formations of memory carry implicit and/or explicit assumptions about what is to be remembered, how, by whom, for whom, and with what potential effects" (2).

In its projection onto the audience of the contrary identities of witness and perpetrator, *Photographs from S-21* effectively extends the circle of recognition and holds audiences morally culpable for a lack of attention to—and objectification of—the suffering of others. Numerous critical theorists have argued for the maintenance of a space for the "unspeakable," viewing translations or renditions of experiences of victimization by anyone other than the victim as an effacement of the victim's trauma (Mandel 224). The presumption is that to "speak the unspeakable is to somehow violate it" (227). In giving voice to the ghosts of the past, *Photographs from S-21* risks appropriating the "other's" silence and turning it into speech. Yet in doing so, the play also draws attention to cultural practices and the politics of remembrance for international audiences, and the risk of converting evidence of human suffering and cruelty, in this case the Cambodian genocide, into cultural currency. For instance, *Photographs from S-21*, in its explicit focus on the inseparability of art and politics and their relation to the formation of historical memory, draws attention to the risks of privileging the aesthetic elements of the photographs over the political, historical, and cultural contexts of their production.

Prison S-21 was a secret detention, interrogation, and torture camp used by the Khmer Rouge regime to extract forced "confessions" from accused traitors. As David Chandler notes, "Because prisoners at S-21 [its code name] were often accused of plotting to overthrow DK their confessions were of interest to Pol Pot. . . copies of important confessions and summaries of related texts were routed to the minister in charge of national security Son Sen or to Pol Pot himself" (4). Nearly sixteen thousand prisoners passed through S-21 between 1975 and 1979, and only seven are

known to have survived.⁴ All prisoners who were brought to the camp were photographed upon intake, and some after death as well. Why the Khmer Rouge created a photographic record and recorded prisoners' confessions is not entirely known. But scholars have suggested that the portraits and confessions served as a bureaucratic message of control and as a means to document the history of the Communist Party of Kampuchea for the upper-level party (French 152).⁵ Significant documentation, including photographic negatives, memos, confessions, and the bodies of a dozen recently murdered prisoners, were found at the prison site by Vietnamese forces during the fall of Democratic Kampuchea on January 8, 1979.⁶ The photographs are archived, along with thousands of confessions and other documentation, at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, which now occupies the former site of prison S-21.

Filloux's play was inspired by a controversial exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1997. The exhibition, entitled "Photographs from S-21: 1975–1979," presented twenty-two photographs of prisoners held in S-21. The print negatives were from the Tuol Sleng archive but were cleaned, catalogued, and printed by the Photo Archive Group in 1993—a process around which there has been some controversy about who holds the copyright (French 131). Among the critical responses to the MoMA exhibit were claims that it failed to elucidate the interconnectedness of Cambodia's traumatic past and the US role in the conflicts. For instance, the opening sentence of the text that accompanied the exhibit indicated only that "[I]n April 1975, Cambodia had just concluded five years of a disastrous civil war" (Hughes 36). Apparently, the MoMA exhibit did not provide much information about the circumstances under which the photographs were taken or the connections between the Cambodian genocide and the United States (French 141). Neither the US bombing campaigns on Cambodia between 1969 and 1973 nor the US involvement in Indochina, for instance, were mentioned in the exhibit in terms of their pivotal role in generating support for the Khmer Rouge at that time.⁷ Other critics suggested that the MoMA exhibit fetishized the unspeakable and thereby created an aesthetic of "affective access," making a spectacle of cruelty and mourning (Hughes 38).⁸ Still others argued that the location of the exhibit was inappropriate, because MoMA, as an art institution, gestures toward humanitarian sensibilities rather than political discourse, and therefore framed the prints as art photography.

Lindsay French argues, for instance, that the MoMA exhibit engendered a "decontextualized aesthetic gaze," which made it possible for MoMA visitors to view the photographs as "icons of something larger than life rather than evidence of a specific historical atrocity" (142). This is precisely the risk that Naomi Mandel warns against in her interrogation of the construction of "unspeakable" atrocities in writings after the Holocaust. But the gaze—that is, the looking relations between the images and their audience—is not stable or necessarily predictable. The MoMA exhibit may have framed the prints in primarily aesthetic terms for many viewers, but the documentary and historical value of the prints for others

4 Exact numbers are not known and estimates vary.

5 When the archive was opened to foreign scholars in 1980, it consisted of approximately 6000 photographs, among other forms of documentation, including confessions, administrative material, instructions for interrogators, and execution lists. The photographic archive was cleaned and catalogued by the Photo Archive Group, after American photographers Chris Riley and Doug Niven found thousands of damaged negatives. Cornell University and the Cambodian Ministry of Culture have micro-filmed the written archive (Chandler 4–5). See Chandler *Voices from S-21* for more information about why the photographic record was created.

6 The People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), the government that succeeded the Khmer Rouge, was a Vietnamese installment.

7 See Power for an extended discussion of the political and economic factors surrounding the Cambodian genocide, especially pages 87–154.

8 See also Roma.

is no less significant. For instance, exhibitions of the photographs from S-21, including the exhibit at New York University's Grey Art Gallery, which I attended in the early 1990s, may have functioned in more forensic terms, helping Cambodians identify missing relatives. Inadvertently, the MoMA exhibit aligns remembrance with a moral lesson about the burden of representation and context and the ideology of the aesthetic. More particularly, the wide-ranging reception of the exhibit suggests that museums cannot, in effect, be isolated from the political domain. Moreover, museums can be considered pedagogical spaces, in the sense that their architectural features and spatial organization of exhibits set up certain interpretive frames and respond to prevailing understandings of culture and evidence. Museums therefore provide numerous pedagogical opportunities for teachers to explore with their students the construction of history through an analysis of how particular museums or exhibits display, contain, and present information, artifacts, and peoples of the world.

Like the exhibition of "Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979," the Tuol Sleng museum that houses the image archives is fraught with cultural, national, and political implications and carries certain moral and pedagogical expectations. The Tuol Sleng museum, which opened to the public in 1980, has been a site of ongoing struggle over the meaning of the Pol Pot years and the construction of a national past. The most widespread and popular narrative told through the Tuol Sleng museum is that experiences at S-21 were common throughout the country, the result of deliberate policy decisions, and proof of crimes against humanity committed by the Khmer Rouge (Ledgerwood 104).⁹ The controversy over the museum indicates its political and pedagogical dimensions as a site for the production, exhibition, and reception of cultural, national, and international memory. Controversy emerged early on, for instance, over whether the site was refashioned as a "holocaust" site by Vietnamese experts, and whether or not crafting the museum as a "genocide" museum "superseded and distorted preserving S-21 as it existed in DK times" (Ledgerwood 109). Controversy also surrounded the large map of Cambodia, made of skulls gathered from "killing fields" throughout the country (the skulls are a key icon of Khmer Rouge brutality), with the rivers and great lake painted blood-red, which appeared between 1979 and 2001 in the last room of the museum. The public display of skulls and bones at Tuol Sleng and the famous "killing fields" in Choeung Ek re-emerged as public issues when the re-crowned King Sihanouk suggested that the remains be cremated following Khmer Buddhist traditions. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP)—the former PRK-period communist party—objected, and the proposal was abandoned.¹⁰ In March 2001, officials dismantled the decaying map of skulls, and planned to erect a Buddhist shrine on the site.

The Tuol Sleng Museum (Tuol Sleng is translated as "the hillock of the Sleng tree," the fruit of which is poisonous) used to be a high school called Tuol Svay Prey ("the hillock of the wild mango") (Ledgerwood 104). The young woman in Filloux's play *Photographs from S-21* reveals that

9 Michael Vickery refers to the latter narrative disparagingly as the Standard Total View [STV]. In *Cambodia: 1975-1982*, he describes varied circumstances of life in the DK period and refutes some of the commonly told stories of the period, including claims that everyone who wore eyeglasses was killed (Ledgerwood 112). Vickery, as Ledgerwood notes, traces the origins of STV distortions to refugees, namely those in border camps in Thailand. Vickery claims that most refugees were urbanites trying to enter "one of those Western paradises about which [they] had always dreamed" (quoted in Ledgerwood 113). His argument, as Ledgerwood alleges, is not that refugees lied but that the media highlighted the more sensational information in order to garner public support and disregarded contrasting evidence. Ledgerwood takes issue with Vickery's claim about refugees as the source of STV, and also points out that recent work demonstrates that peasants fled to the borders as well and that many poor peasants died under hard labor of Khmer Rouge (113).

10 There are a number of political and cultural factors that shaped the King's proposal and the CPP's objection. As Ledgerwood notes, "The king was trying to lay to rest not just the souls of the dead, but the deep divisions between the coalition partners in the new royal government—those placed in power by Vietnamese 'liberators' and those who fought a war of 'liberation' against Vietnamese 'occupation'" (115).



Photo, courtesy of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Property of the Tuol Sleng Museum.

CAPTION #1: KONG SA'AAN, PRISONER #606, MAY 17, 1978.

At the bottom of the frame a young child's arm is visible. Infants and young children were often brought to S-21 with their parents; they were executed eventually along with everyone else.

she learned to read and write at the site at which she was later held as prisoner and killed. The tragic irony of the young woman's return, like the recent transformation of the site to a museum, highlights what it might mean, as Simon puts it in another context, "to live not *in* the past but *in relation with* the past" (4). To live in relation with the past is to acknowledge the past's claim on the present while also questioning the redemptive promise and consolatory assurances of historical memory (4).

The prisoners' stories in *Photographs from S-21* draw attention to the historically, socially, and rhetorically mediated character of memory by countering the confessions attained by prison guards through intimidation and torture. The two young Cambodians testify to the coercion, terror, and torture they experienced under the Khmer Rouge. The young man, Vuthy, indicates that he was shocked with electric current, starved, beaten, and shackled to other men—his "blood joined the blood of others on the floor..." After his disclosure, the young woman reveals something she was hesitant to disclose earlier. When Vuthy asked her about "something strange" that he noticed at the bottom of her photograph, she replies, "You saw right." "There was something at the bottom of my photo... A child's hand... They took off the blindfold. My daughter reached up for me. I did not move. Did not move. They shot her first. I did not protect her." The actor reaches for her child's imaginary hand, the memory of her daughter's and her own death in this gesture.

The power of this scene, in both the play and the archival photograph, lies in its emotional appeal to childhood innocence and the projected identification with viewers of the horror of witnessing the death of one's own child. This photograph captures the trauma of representation in that what *pierces* the viewer (the

11 In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes a “photograph’s punctum” as “that accident which pricks me but also bruises me, is poignant to me” (27).

12 Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” is perhaps the most referenced classical example of the darkness and silence of truth construed in Western philosophical traditions. In Book VII of the *Republic*, Socrates continues his description of how the philosopher-king should be educated. He creates the metaphor of a dark cave to describe how most people are bound by the darkness of ignorance. To attain enlightenment—to be able to see the light—is a painful experience. As Socrates notes,

‘And if he [one of the prisoners in the cave] were forcibly dragged up the steep and rugged ascent and not let go till he had been dragged out into the sunlight, the process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so dazzled by the glare of it that he wouldn’t be able to see a single one of the things he was not told were real . . . he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the upper world outside the cave.’

For Plato, the key to truth lay in its visibility. “Truth is correctness of the gaze, not a feature of beings themselves” (DuBois 133). DuBois also discusses Aristotle’s distinctions in his *Rhetoric* between master and slave and the role of torture in revealing the truth (66). See Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (1376b-1377a).

13 The forum “Abu Ghraib: A Public Discussion” was held on June 4, 2004. Amnesty International and The Institute

photograph’s punctum) is what we cannot see or stop.¹¹ But the scene also makes problematic the notion of the confession as a truth-telling mechanism by drawing attention to the torture the prisoners experienced and the forced confessions and false “evidence” produced by the Khmer Rouge leadership. What this scene highlights, then, is essentially the pedagogical value assigned to trauma—which in the context of torture is presumed to produce truth.

In Western philosophical, rhetorical, and more recently psychological traditions, truth has been depicted as an inaccessible and buried secret retrievable through an effort of memory—which often involves trauma and pain.¹² Violence has been rationalized as a producer of truth. The construction of a pedagogical relationship between torture and truth is traceable to the courts of ancient Greece, where it was believed that techniques of torture produced truth from slaves, who presumably lied. The association between truth and torture did not end with the courts of ancient Greece; as Page DuBois notes, practices based on such associations appeared in a range of societies and discourses throughout history and continue in the present day (144-57). The pedagogical and rhetorical functions of torture today, however, may not be so much about the production of truth but more about the global spectacle and drama of fear and revenge, especially if we consider recent images of prisoner abuse by guards at Abu Ghraib.

Many of the Abu Ghraib photographs represent the pleasure of perpetrators (soldiers and guards) witnessing acts of violation and sexual objectification. For instance, the “thumbs-up” poses of Private First Class Lynndie England and Specialist Charles Graner over the tortured bodies of Iraqi detainees might be said to reflect the pleasure of inflicting pain upon another. Even if one were to argue that the guards should not be held accountable for actions endorsed by military culture and provoked by an “atrocious-producing situation” (Lifton 4), as did several students at the Ohio State University in a forum on Abu Ghraib in which I participated as an invited speaker, these arguments normalize torture as part of war.¹³ War photography rarely shows perpetrators among their victims. That perpetrators are depicted with their victims in the Abu Ghraib images is historically resonant, however, with lynching photographs taken between the 1880s and 1930s, which show white American bystanders watching as complicit participants in the lynching of black men and women.¹⁴ Inflicting pain on the body of the “other” and recording the process creates a theater for violence and the pain of perception. Like earlier spectacles of torture, many of the Abu Ghraib photographs place value on the act of witnessing retribution and revenge—their power lies in their public viewing. The spectacle of cruelty as a repulsive attraction reflects an ancient pairing of violence and theater (Enders 7-8). Not all of the Abu Ghraib photographs, however, were posed. Some seem to have been taken as evidence to expose the violations.

To what degree has the circulation of such images aroused the citizenry and served to motivate action on behalf of the human rights of prisoners? To what degree, and with what consequences, is the public served in witnessing images that engorge a state of conflicting consciousness and repulsive attrac-

tion? How is it possible not to get caught in the cathartic reflex induced by the coupling of pity and terror, which has been characterized in theatrical terms as an expurgation of an impurity, or as a disappearance of the audience’s pain into another location (Kubiak 18-19)? How are we to work with our students in examining these tensions when integrating works that represent trauma, political terror, and atrocity in our teaching? One pedagogical strategy would be to consider, as I have been suggesting, the complexity of identification practices. We might begin by asking students how different rhetorical elements and contexts construct different lines of identification. Who is considered the subject of the images? Are we as viewers made to identify with the prisoners or guards?

In order to explore these contrary impulses—these repulsive attractions and identifications—we need to rethink the relationships among empathy, identification, and persuasion and consider students’ potential resistance to such material and its traumatic effects, as well as their general faith in empathy and emotional appeals. In other words, we need to unsettle identifications, yet keep students engaged. Critical empathy and moral action are not built upon the complacency of secondary witnesses or facile identifications. Hence, to acknowledge discordance is not to dismiss the rhetorical and pedagogical power of identification as a form of persuasion, but rather to suggest that the pedagogical appeal of empathetic unsettlement is that it calls into question individual and collective culpability and frames memory as a difficult return. Understanding memory work as a *difficult return* throws into question redemptive or consolatory narratives and practices of remembrance, pushes against easy identifications, and renders “impossible any final stable assimilation” of the past (Simon 5).

Despite its turn to the past, *Photographs from S-21* does not present a nostalgic narrative or historical closure, and therein lies its dramatic power. The characters look toward the future, employing ceremonial rituals that transform, but do not transcend, the past. The past does not retreat. “We must have some peace, darling. A proper funeral for us,” the young man declares. Outside, under the fountain mist, the young man takes incense from his pocket and lights it. The young woman holds out a clenched fist. “When I am newly born in my next life,” she says, “I will still remember the Khmer Rouge.” She opens her hand; he takes a child’s hair ribbon from her palm. The stage goes black. The characters reappear in their frames. A bright flash appears followed by the click of a shutter. The play ends.

Memory: A Difficult Return

The preponderance of documentary drama in the US mass media post-9/11 appeals to memory as a rhetoric of promise. Many mainstream productions foreground binary narratives of victimization and heroism in which national identification—in particular the nation imagined as family—is offered over other forms of remembrance.¹⁵ Allen Feldman raises profound questions about how victim narratives are employed and structured by the presumably “restorative powers of legal, medical, media, and textual rationalities as post-violent” and plotted via “quasi-medicalized tropes of trauma,” which authen-

for Collaborative Research and Public Humanities at Ohio State University sponsored the event.

14 See McBride for discussion of the overdeterminacy and rhetorical performativity of slave’s testimony and the positioning of black bodies within abolitionist discourses as more “truthful than the word of white abolitionists” (4-5).

15 See Taylor and Zelizer for discussion of documentary representations (photographs and journalism) of the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001.

16 Feldman characterizes this narrative as a three-part structure: 1) the identification of a pathogenic situation—chronic violence, racial, gender, ethnic, or sexual inequity and oppression; 2) an inventory or symptomology of the aberrant situation, usually in the form of critical life incidents; and 3) a set of prescriptions to effect redress, cure, and historical completion, a component of which is the very recitation of biographical narrative and its public dissemination for a forum of witnessing (170).

17 *Eyes of the Heart* received the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays and the Eric Koehler Playwrights Award. I attended the production of *Eyes of the Heart* on October 23, 2004 at Intar 53 in New York City.

18 The author would like to thank Lindsey French for highlighting this irony. Personal correspondence 2.03.05.

ticate experiences of terror and trauma as curative (164).¹⁶ To what extent, we might ask, does contemporary political theater and human rights pedagogy follow a similar trajectory? And what are the implications of such patterns for thinking through the pedagogy and politics of representing mass atrocity, terror, and trauma? I share Feldman's observation that the therapeutic frame tends to universalize victim narratives and to make atrocities palatable for a Western market (169). But the drama of identification, whether predicated upon emotional or rational appeals, need not be construed as seamless or harmonious, as uncritically serving the restorative powers of medical solutions or, for that matter, as enforcing the powers of violence and war over other forms of persuasion. I am interested in how affective identifications may enable empathetic unsettlement and nonviolent, though critical, forms of persuasion. Indeed, Catherine Filloux's award winning play, *Eyes of the Heart*,¹⁷ effectively calls into question geopolitical identifications, locations, and culpability, and situates empathy and justice as interpersonal and political concepts.

The play, produced by The National Asian-American Theatre Company, is based on oral histories of Cambodian refugee women at St. Rita's Refugee Center in the Bronx, which Filloux compiled over a five-year period. Filloux has also done extensive cultural research and worked at length in Cambodia; she taught playwriting at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. *Eyes of the Heart* focuses primarily on the character of Thida San, powerfully performed by Mia Katigbak at Intar 53 in New York City in October 2004. Thida is a reasonable, witty, and resilient middle-aged woman, a former midwife and widow from Cambodia, who reluctantly comes to California to live with her brother and his family. Thida's brother Kim (James Saito) and his Americanized teenage daughter Serey (Eunice Wong) want to make her happy, but they soon realize that Thida simply wants to be left alone. Thida suffers from psychosomatic blindness, which has afflicted hundreds of predominately middle-aged women who witnessed and survived atrocities under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge traumatized victims who were literally and figuratively kept in the dark. Victims were blindfolded as they were transported to Tuol Sleng, literally plunging them into the dark, and recording interrogations through the blinding flash of the camera. As Boreth Ly points out, the Khmer Rouge disseminated terror and power through various modalities of surveillance, which are captured in the metaphors used by the regime; one conveyed Angka's panoptic vision: "Angka has the eyes of a pineapple" (Ly 5). The Khmer Rouge also forced many to witness brutal violent acts, such as watching their son or daughter being beaten to death or executed. Over a hundred Cambodian women survivors in the US have reported devastated vision, from blurred vision to complete blindness. The sad irony is that in losing their vision these horrific scenes were *all* that these women were able to see afterwards: these visions crowded out all the others.¹⁸

Thida San lives with the traumatic memory of witnessing the brutal death of her daughter, Oun. The play depicts the recursive nature of trauma by shifting between scenes from the past and the play's present (the 1980s), by presenting a sequence of flashbacks that lead to Thida's revelation of what

happened to her daughter, and by giving the audience (though not the characters on stage) access to Thida's internal thoughts. A microphone distinguishes between Thida's inner and outer speech; her internal thoughts are filtered through a microphone, which contrasts with unmiked external speech. The audience thus has information that the characters are at first denied. Our access establishes an immediate identification with Thida, and this identification serves as the foundation upon which the dramatic tension builds throughout the play. Thida's internal thoughts become traces of trauma, traces for the audience of what cannot be spoken, what is heretofore not represented. Our access to Thida's internal thoughts contrasts with the portrayal of the American eye doctor (Nadia Bowers), which opens the play. The doctor faces the audience and speaks into a microphone as if addressing colleagues in a seminar: "Everything is spectacularly ordered. In night blindness you know exactly what to expect. This is a floating world, a world where there is no speed, no weight. See there's nothing on this retinal cell—it's clear. You wait for the oddity. It comes rarely. There it is. The night blindness has this white, murky surface, sometimes like a floating string. It's all here in front of us. Everyday you wonder what you will discover."

The play moves among past and present contexts, and projects images onto a silver screen backdrop to visualize the mobile nature of memory and to depict the repetition of trauma. For the scenes during the Khmer Rouge regime, actors become workers in a rice field doing backbreaking labor in black uniforms. Present scenes take place in Thida's brother's home and garden in Long Beach, which is near a construction site. Single actors play multiple characters, a casting decision that creates a sense of the co-existence of past, present, and future, and the friction between cultures and generations. The newer generation, Thida's niece Serey, for instance, wants to both respect traditions and move on. These differences are captured, often humorously, through shifting cultural practices, such as dating rituals and ideas about marriage (arranged versus chosen). Chhem (Virginia Wing), an elderly traditional Cambodian woman, comments on Serey and the younger generation. She says to Kim at one point, "You know, the young do the 'slow dance' with the bodies pressed so close together." Demonstrating with her hands this closeness, she continues, "I have seen it on TV. Skin-to-skin. The 'slow dance.'"

While sitting before an open window in Kim's apartment, listening to construction, Thida remembers how after her husband Sipa disappeared, she dressed herself and her daughter as peasants to work in the field, praying that the soldiers would not see them. But "They find us, force Oun to marry." Thida remembers the young soldier yelling, "come here! You are the mother, you must watch!" Thida remembers, "Sun shines in my eyes—I leave my hut, walk towards the tree. Magnolia flowers fall." Her memory stops. A young soldier yells, "You must watch your daughter." Thida thinks, "The people watch, expressionless. I search their eyes for clues. Stone faces." Communist propaganda music plays louder and louder. The scene shifts to Kim's garden.

For Thida, the past is present but out of reach, embodied yet unspeakable. At intervals throughout the play, Thida recalls her daughter swimming

and herself on the shore calling to her. Thida's memories visually appear on a backlit transparent silver screen made of Plexiglas. The actor who plays Serey performs Thida's memories of Oun from behind the screen. The screen functions as a memorial of desire and loss—as an image-metaphor for Thida's memories. The image of Oun multiplies. “Memory is ever changing, growing. It is haunting, fluid, and ever present. It morphs between beauty and horror. Even at the very end of the play Oun is still swimming,” Filloux notes. “It's a terrible truth that Thida's memory of Oun is tied between beauty and horror. That is trauma that will never go away, and that is why crimes against humanity are insane in their legacy” (personal correspondence).

With the American eye doctor, Dr. Lynn Simpson, Thida begins a journey toward healing, but the play does not culminate in a therapeutic resolution. Instead, Dr. Simpson functions as an emblematic figure who stands in for the professional and distant gaze of Western medicine, and its ethos of expertise. Thida describes the doctor as “quick—she has no time. Empty—without a soul.” Physical exams reveal to the doctor that Thida's eyes are sending signals to the brain, and the doctor becomes suspicious. “Your sister may be malingering, Mr. Lok. Is she applying for disability? Benefits for blindness are the highest in California.” “My sister would not lie,” he replies. “It's not strange. I've seen many other women like her. They are not making it up.” Dr. Simpson seeks a “logical” cause to Thida's silence and blindness, and only at the end of the play does she accept the obvious, that Thida's blindness is a symptom of traumatic witnessing—a survival mechanism. The audience is not at first made to identify with the doctor, but with Thida and her family. But this identification shifts toward the end of the play, at which time an alliance between Thida and the doctor emerge. Their relationship moves from difference to identification based on comparative grief and experiences of loss. Toward the end of the play, the doctor talks about her husband, who died from a nervous-system disease. She drops her professional aura and suspicion, as she begins to identify with Thida.

But it is not the doctor who finally sets off Thida's revelation. Not until Thida hears Kim's plea to his daughter to honor the arranged marriage and Serey's reply, “I won't marry him,” is Thida's traumatic memory triggered once again. Haunted, Thida hears the Communist propaganda music and turns to Kim. “Yes, she will she will. Give me a moment. Let me speak to her. Say yes, Oun my girl. You must say yes.” Thida continues, speaking aloud to Kim and Serey:

Rays of sunlight shine into my eyes. The loudspeakers are hanging in the trees. There are flowers on the tree. She is tied. Water drips from a tiny hole in a bucket, on her head. The drops of water mix with her tears. They tied Oun to a tree. A magnolia. They're forcing her to marry. The official, he unties her. He points to young soldier. “Will you marry him?” She, very weak, shakes her head no. She is stubborn. Will not accept. The official takes out his blade. He grabs Oun by the hair. They cut off her head.... He looks at me. He holds her head.... He throws it into a fire where a pile of

corpses and body parts burn... Smoke got in my eye... Don't cry, don't cry, or they kill you.

Dr. Simpson eventually helps Thida not by curing her blindness, but by enabling her to console others, including the doctor herself. When the American doctor “finds herself” in relation to Thida's trauma, larger political implications emerge. The relationship between Simpson and Thida is resonant with the colonial gaze (namely the consumption of the “other” in defining the self), but the colonizing impulse is complicated in the play's critical portrayal of the American doctor. Similar to the risk Filloux takes in giving voice to photographs as cultural artifacts in *Photographs from S-21*, framing Cambodia's traumatic past in interpersonal terms through the relationship that develops between the American Dr. Simpson and the Cambodian refugee Thida could be highly problematic. *Eyes of the Heart*, however, achieves social and political commentary about the historical consequences of mass terror and atrocity precisely through the development of connections among characters, the paradoxically poetic language of trauma, and aspects of the play particular to Cambodian culture. For instance, suffering is one of the core emotions of the play, and in Buddhism suffering is believed to be something we all share (Filloux, personal correspondence).

Finally, metaphors of vision in the play's title and throughout point to the significance and evidentiary value of seeing, of rhetorical witnessing. The reference to “eyes of the heart” is taken from the Biblical epistle to the Ephesians, in which Paul exhorts believers to remain faithful and to see not only with their minds, but also with their hearts. The centrality of seeing and not seeing is also about evidence, as eyewitnesses to the Cambodian genocide are scarce. Layers of witnessing are at work in the play. These include the victim, Thida, as witness to herself (a retrospective testimonial act), and other characters and the audience as witnesses to Thida's memories (a rhetorical space of intersubjectivity in that listeners are needed to turn Thida's memory into testimony).

But *Eyes of the Heart* is not a conversion or cure narrative. Thida still cannot see; her blindness is not cured. In the end, however, Thida's role is not that of the victim but the pedagogue. The lesson Thida teaches us is that if we objectify suffering or mobilize its telling for solely forensic and legal purposes, we risk repressing the terror and pain inflected on the body. On the other hand, if we only individualize atrocity we risk forgetting the scopical regimes, national fears, identifications, and ideologies from which such atrocities emerge and are enforced. The power of both *Eyes of the Heart* and *Photographs from S-21* is how they move us between these tendencies and unrest comfortable identifications.

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