

The Wise Treeshrew



And a Talking Sparrow

To Khmer friends in
Thailand, Cambodia, and everywhere
With Brother Viasna, Pa Voth, Ma Chandra, and Professor Keli
From Brother Jacob

The Wise Treeshrew and a Talking Sparrow

For Auntie-Mum

For James

For Abner

For Misa

Year of the Rabbit

Ma Chandra and Pa Voth, my Khmer godparents, were born in late 1960's Cambodia, a dreamtime in history. Life was carefree! The ideas of war, evacuation, and placelessness were unimaginable. There was a world of friendship, civil service, the turn of wrenches, and urban gardening. In 1975, Ma and Pa were forced to flee the city with their families, spending much of their childhoods on the road, in labor communes, and refugee camps, before resettling across the ocean. Born in the same hospital in the capital Phnom Penh, Ma and Pa met and married over twelve thousand kilometers away, in the ancestral lands of the Ohlone.

There, 35 years later, I, Jacob, wandered through the door of a Cambodian community center, the last moment of my life before knowing Khmers. Today, in early 2023, Pa and I are in Phnom Penh on the start of a new journey.

Lively streets lead off to a horizon dotted with construction cranes. City folk bat laundry at window sides. Above us looms what appears as a gleaming glass and concrete bank. It is actually a facade of metal, enclosing and shadowing the traditionally constructed building behind. Everywhere, life. A young entrepreneur pulls a latte on a rented street corner, and earnestly asks my opinion on the taste. It's good, even without sugar!

A child, skipping today freely in the pathways of the city, tags behind an American's disproportionately long legs, which glide past rows of gleaming vegetables. I turn my head and twang out in Khmer, "Health, happiness!" When I type this from notes, months afterwards, I won't recall if they gave a sheepish smile, clever retort, or polite repetition of the greeting. I'll be blessed by then to have made such an important acquaintance so many times.



Timelapse

Pa and I continue our journey by arriving home, to a small community in Battambang province. Here, three years ago during my first visit, I awoke suddenly from the dreams rewriting my consciousness. Sitting next to my sleeping mat was Grandma-Auntie-Mum, to whom this book is dedicated, speaking to me with intensity. Then, I understood little Khmer. Today, I imagine she was telling me she was dying. I received word of her passing while writing this book, after its events, from her son who lives and works in Thailand.

One year ago, during my second visit, Auntie-Mum, myself, the youth, and the grandmas piled into a pickup to visit a temple. It was the best day of my life. Lost in the mountains, we greeted farmers burning stubble on steep slopes. I gained a bracelet, never to be taken off, only should it break by nature.

During this, my third visit, Auntie-Mum methodically aggravates the skin on my back with a coin, to cure my melancholy. We distribute customary gifts of rice, incense, and oil to many of the same grandmas. I wave my still-intact wrist band to the kids, theirs to the last taken by rivers, trees, and bikes.

Pa and I visit the noodle joint operated by Great Grandma, on the eve of a journey. We tell her we are traveling to Thailand to visit our Khmer siblings away from home, to learn what we can of the health and work conditions of the estimated million Cambodians who migrate to and live there.

I show Great Grandma my sketchbook. She insists that I draw her, sitting in silence with me, for but a long moment.



There Was So Much

Brother Viasna and Sister Bo, a couple who live in Battambang, receive Pa and me into their home with love. They previously worked in Thailand many times, building a life in Cambodia for their small family. Brother, who like me is in his mid-thirties, spent 15 years in Thailand, crossing the border some 100 times, and speaks proficient Thai. Hearing of our plans, he offers to join us.

While Brother awaits papers, Pa and I make a short trip to the border town which will be our crossing point. We drive past the normal tourist area, casinos and hotels, to a barren construction site sprinkled with cows.

I spot a sign of community: a volleyball net, near a large aluminum tarp, and wood structure. At the entrance I approach a group busy with chores, and effort forth a Khmer greeting. Pa joins and eases

some confusion, and we learn that a small community of around 30 live here, working construction on a seven-story condo, raising the concrete tower practically by hand.

By magic, it is decided that after the workday we will play volleyball and feast. Pa and I fetch a slab of meat and bouquet of vegetables, and we spend the evening colliding, telling distant tales of life in turn. I fend off a barrage of fire-grilled snacks, and beers. The volleyball continues, lit by flickering flames.

I escape a moment to draw a picture, followed by a new friend, who is also my Brother. He will spend many more nights under this shelter. With luck, he will be paid for the intense physical work. There are many projects here, a landscape of domestic and foreign bosses, bodies under elements, sieved futures, crumbs, and abundance.



History of Cambodia, Fourth Edition

Pa is sick, so I walk alone around the border town, experiencing reactions on paths where my presence is unexpected. Where I am quick enough to make the first greeting, I am given back warm smiles. As I turn a corner, water bottle lifted, a group of children gets the first laugh: "Hey France, long time no see!" Stunned at the anti-colonial burn, I stutter back in the same language, "Good afternoon, Siblings!" The kids' eyes widen a bit as I persist to get back a formal reply.

Cambodia's encounter with modernity began with missionaries, many of them Jesuit, the Catholic order of the university I attend. France established its "protectorate" in 1863. Preaching gave way to taxation, domination, and the banning of elephants in the streets. Today, the presence of lightly-hued skin or European speech conjures the word, *France*.

Being called American should hardly give a better feeling. I once showed Pa footage of the 1970 U.S. military "incursion" into Cambodia. He's surprised at the video's existence, which shows village residents raising both hands as the soldiers roll by. Pa says, they are showing they are friends.

Estimates vary, but between 1965 and 1973, the U.S. Air Force dropped at least one billion pounds of explosives in the country, more than one hundred pounds for every Cambodian soul, an amount on par with all the ordnance used by the Allies in WWII.

Histories weigh on my mind while I walk the border town in 2023. I buy scoops of soup from a deep pot, ladled into a rice-filled styrofoam square. I sit on the curbside to eat, weary. A woman working nearby sees me, and enters her home in kindness to bring out a table, chair, and bowl of oranges.



The Ascension

Pa and I stop at a restaurant overlooking a river. I'm overwhelmed, though at the time I describe it as despair. I look across the river and see a fellow catching clams and washing clothes alone on the riverbank. How does the soul, there sitting low on the opposite bank of the water, find the motivation to rise in the morning?

Soon we are to depart for Thailand to seek out Khmer expatriates, sure to be filled with challenges and unknowns. I am unwilling. For all we know, our presence will be damaging to the situation we presume to help. Is God really on our side, watching over our journey, fighting on our behalf, pushing us to step out in faith? The feeling of loneliness is crushing. We have no idea what we're doing. I have no choice but to continue.

I hear in the distance the clang of trucks crossing a bridge, the prayers of monks amplified on loudspeakers, and some sort of hope in a future that is long. It will not always be this way. I search my mind for less familiar ways of generating enjoyment in the absurdity of it all. I read a slew of my vulnerable writings to Pa. We improve our imagination for redemption.

A year later, I will struggle to open my old journal to the entry I've written here, in order to complete this page, the last remaining in this book still to type. I will cry in thankfulness to someone great, just visible to me through a haze of scribbles. I did it all for adoration; you did it all with hopelessness.



The Life of a Cowgirl

Brother's papers are ready. Among our Khmer community, we prepare to embark. I take a walk along the dirt path outside the community center, and turn along the fields, atop the levies between paddies, where I sketch the scene.

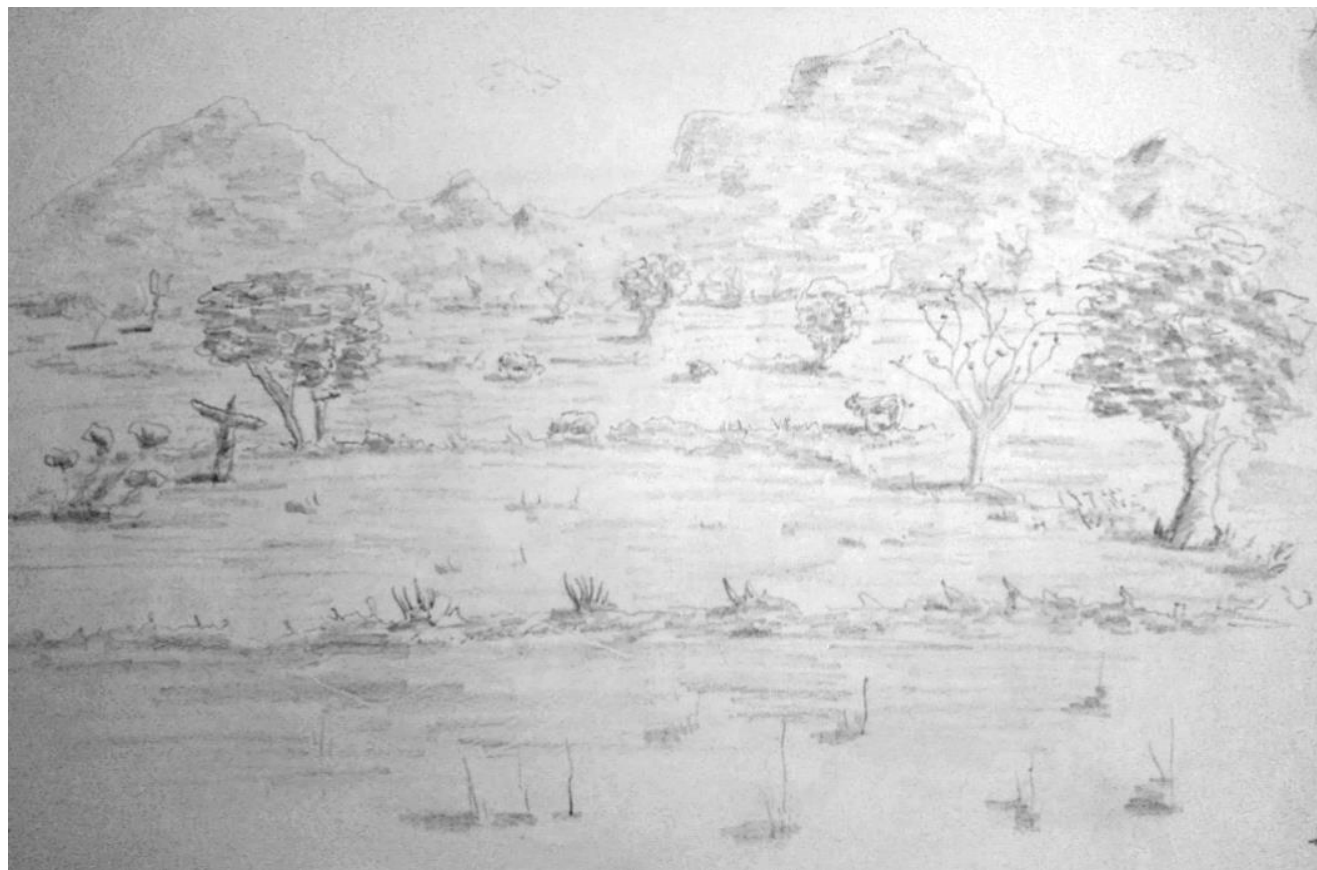
Rice in various stages of harvest, some "blue" with health, stretch off toward short mountains, hills speckled by forests and newly cleared patches. Cows graze on the cut stalks of the harvest, their guts transforming carbon into fertile configurations.

As I return to the road, a tractor rolls by, driven by friends! They offer a lift and a gift. I sit atop bags of cassava, speaking with Sister who boasts, "'Twas I who planted!"

I hop off at my stop, and as I stow my drawings, Great-Grandma emerges in white robes to perform a many-times daily prayer.

I sit on the mat and breathe. As the incense burns, a group of children run in and play the game of breaking my focus. Their patience is rewarded by looting my dwindling stash of barcoded vegan protein bars.

I am refreshed. As I write in my journal, the pencil grows dull. I rise to attend an in-progress elementary-school Khmer class. My fellow student whips around, cueing me in on the lesson, and hands me a sharpener.



The Dead in the Land

The three of us set out for Thailand: Pa Voth, a Cambodian-American. Brother Viasna, a Cambodian. Brother Jacob, an American. On the ride to the border, the talk is of “ghosts,” the somewhat feared body-spirits of the dead in Khmer lore. Sightings abound where violence has occurred, or where the remains of the fallen have not been properly cared for. It seems that Westerners lack the ability to literally see them, or don't venture far enough from the town center to encounter them.

Near the border, a spiritual feeling is amplified. Truly grotesque spirits abound, distinct from human dead, but hardly living free in the sunlight. They consummate deals and wagers with administrators of power, collecting on spiritual debts at walls,

checkpoints, banks, casinos, and prisons. Sites of addiction, despair, theft, and murder.

The ghoulish language is to my eyes shockingly literal, written in Latin characters. The legions raise rents on existence, accepting payment in a family tree of pseudo-currencies. The coinage underwritten by the U.S. military is essentially legal tender here, equated at market rates on signage to units of digital data.

I ask Brother, are there angels? Yes, they live in the temples! Are they around us now? Yes, they fly around helping people. They don't do good deeds themselves, but rather help the humans in their own efforts. Do they fight and vanquish the evil spirits? Brother laughs.



Home Truths

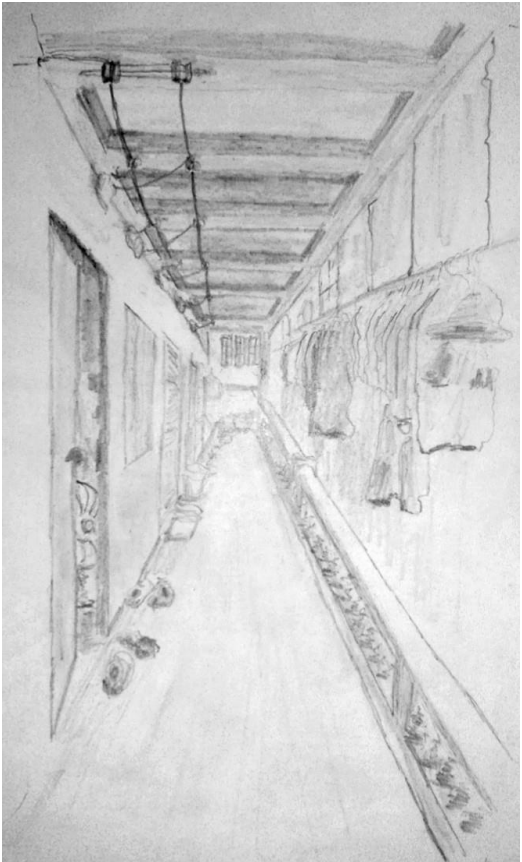
Brother, myself, and Pa arrive in Bangkok, the city of angels, where are rescued by Brother's sister, Skia. She lives here with her husband in rented housing, alongside Burmese and Laotian cousins. They work at a restaurant, supporting their child who lives with relatives back in Cambodia. Sister sees the muddy sandals hanging off my backpack, and immediately washes them in the combination kitchen-shower of their single-door apartment. She offers us her family's room for the night, while they crowd in with friends. I draw the corridor outside the rooms.

Outside, the street is lively, a flurry of fruits and smiles near a mosque. Sister's husband finds us a room in a nearby building for the month. Our new Thai grandma toots chants from a portable card-

reader. A grinning puggish mutt pants behind us up the stairs, as Brother speaks in Thai with the superintendent.

That evening, we walk along a stale canal which connects our friends' residence to the market. We hear Khmer speech from behind the stall fronts and make greetings. Knowing of the long workdays and weeks, and what our friends sacrifice to be here, I feel queasy as we are provided ornamented plates of snacks.

Back at our new flat, I tell Brother of my guilt at being served. Brother says, "It's nothing, Brother. We Khmer don't serve anybody. We love each other."



Skeleton of Something More

This is not Pa's first time in Thailand. At age 10, Pa fled Cambodia on foot with his brothers, sisters, and mother to the border. Ma made the same journey at age 7 with her mother, brother, and baby sister. Only by luck did they survive a trek which killed many others.

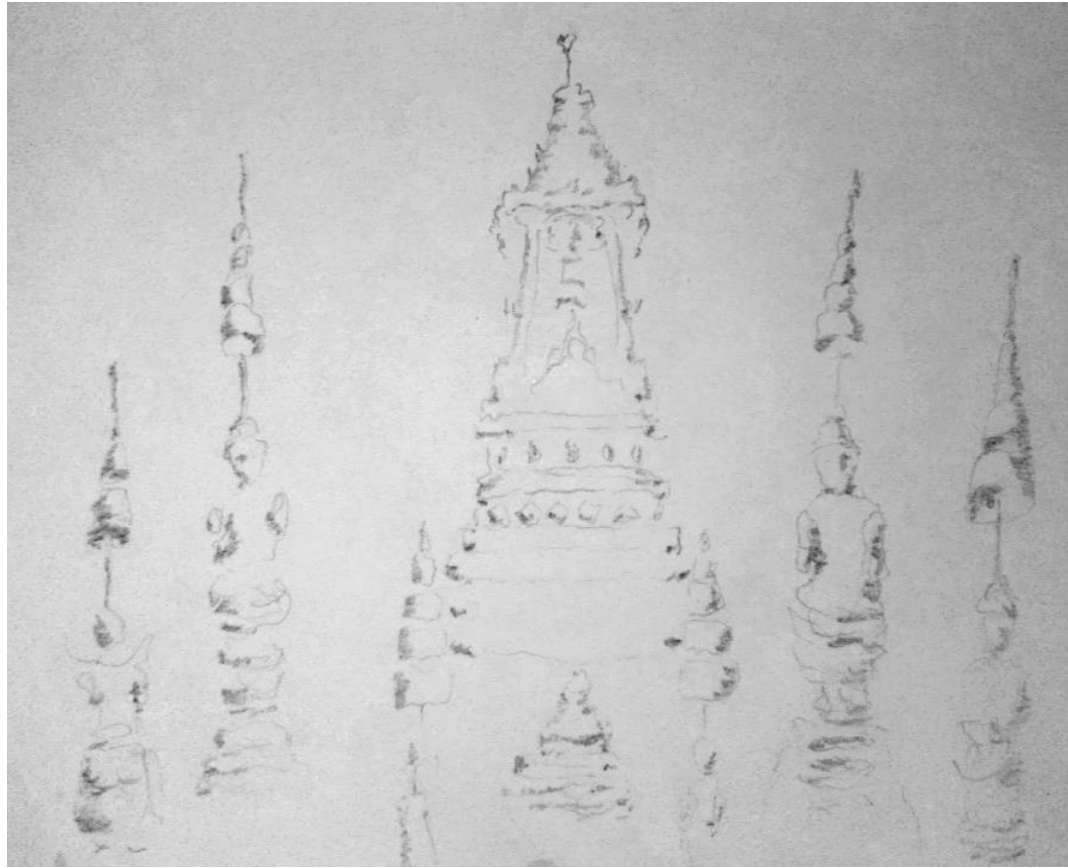
Pa and Ma spent years in a Thai refugee camp. Pa tells of sneaking out with other children to exchange supplies at nearby villages. Pa witnessed the murder, torture, and violation of friends. Ma has told what women and girls were forced to do to acquire food for their families. Khmers were made to wear dogtags under threat of beatings. Many Thais living nearby risked their lives and freedom to help Khmers within camp lines.

Pa speaks to me today in the streets of Bangkok, the soul in his eyes flying a distance as he recounts, among a backdrop of speech he understands from

forty years past. He tells me of a Khmer deity who protects Khmers living here. The deity, too, is held captive. Pa's whole life he has wished to visit the god, who weeps at the sight of Khmers walking free.

Pa and Brother and I visit a temple. We do not find the god. A tour guide seems to have seen this before. We wander. I pantomime and draw pictures to a kind Thai man. The god is not here, or else not visible. Pa says it is like the empty tomb in Christian lore. Faith is asked and proof not guaranteed.

The three of us remove our sandals and step inside the main holy area. The spiritual rises above us. Pa sits in front of Brother and I, receiving comfort from angels. I lean to Brother, pointing up to the main figure, "Look! The seated most-high makes new all!" Brother smiles, and responds as to a child proud of his homework, "Yes Brother! God loves us, gives health and joy."



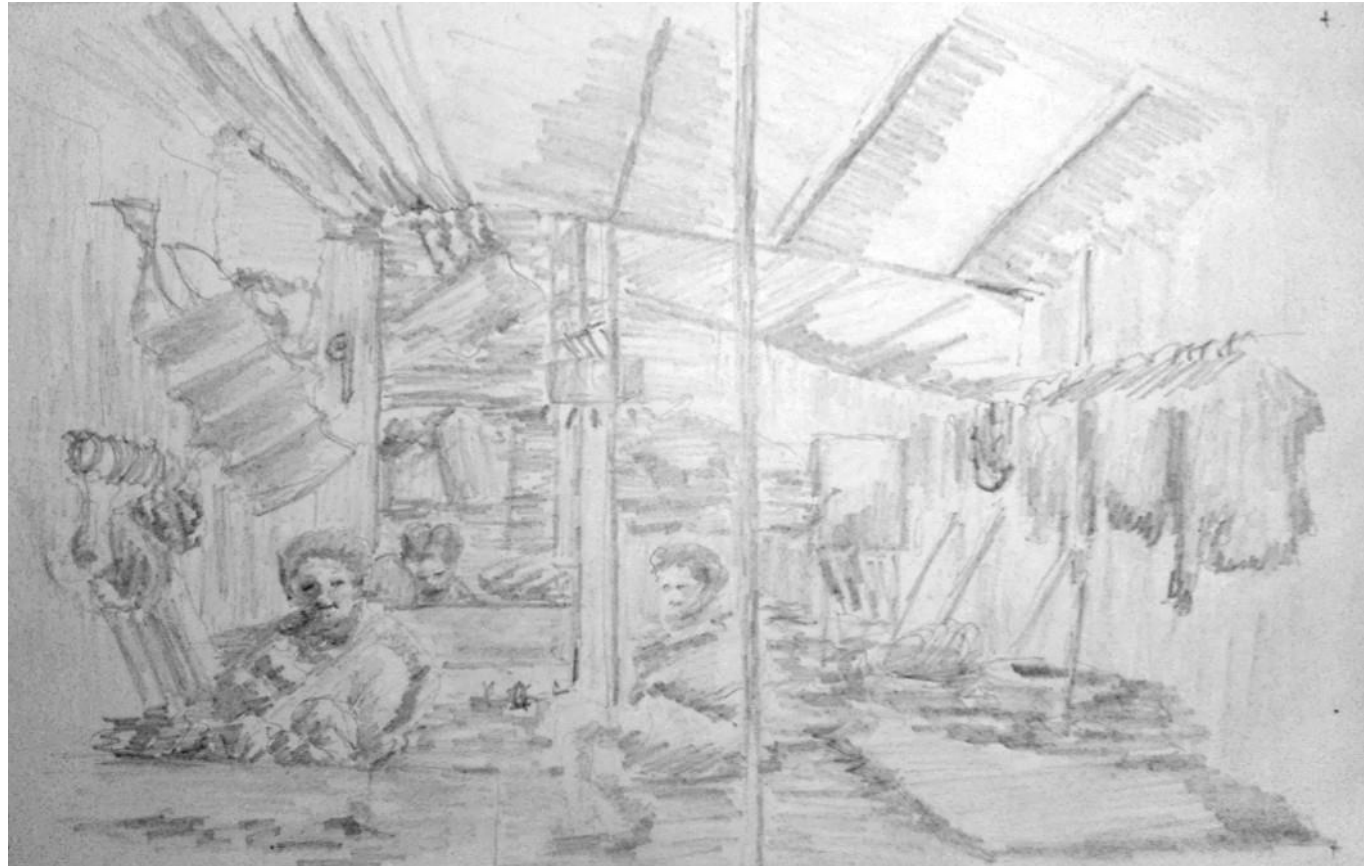
Beauty Laid Bare

I blink, and my opening eyes see reality from a privileged and beautiful standpoint. I sit amongst a small platoon of orange long-sleeve T's, worn by Khmers and Burmese, each returning from a 12-hour construction shift. We are squeezed together on benches screwed to the bed of a long truck, rolling through the sunset down a street of motorcycles and taxicabs.

I catch the surprised eyes of tired, smiling friends. With us sits a young man whom Brother and I met two days earlier when, walking by a construction site we heard Khmer speech. Our friend arranged to bring us to the group's place of rest. Today, we joined the procession of lunchboxes to the main

road to board the trucks. I glance at Brother, who sits quietly on a bumpy ride he has taken countless times. Pa stands, surveying his countrymen with watery eyes.

A Burmese man smiles at me with an air of eternity. I reach out my hand, miming the beating of hearts. The truck dumps us out at a parking lot, on top of which the construction company has erected a two-story shelter of wood, aluminum, and tarp. Our tired friends file out to shower, wash clothes, and cook. We receive permissions to return from the Thai administrator, who lives in the same shelter. Over the following couple days, we share food, supplies, and modest moments of suffering and happiness.



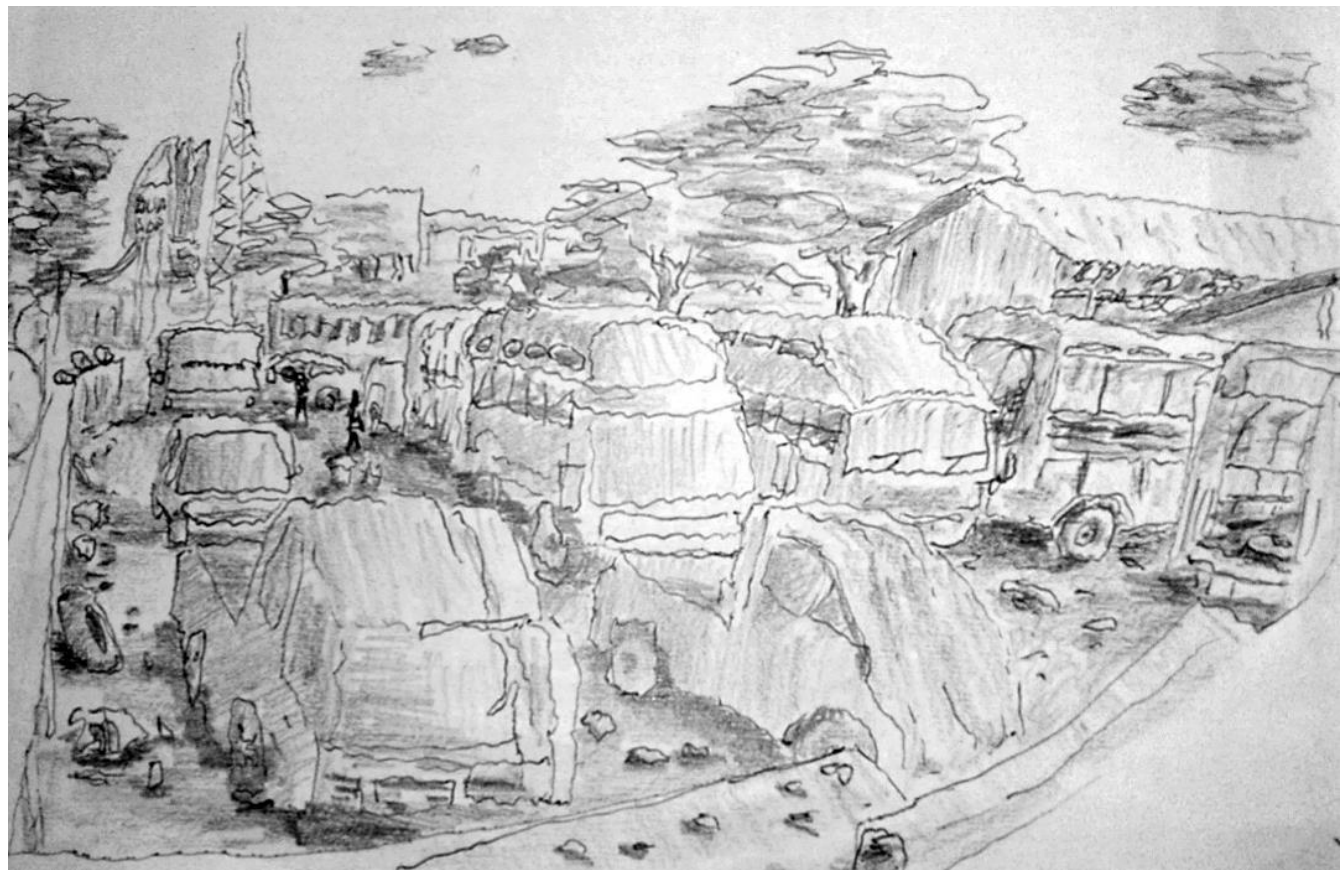
The Magic of ព្រះគោ

Every day, Brother and Pa and I descend our suddenly heating apartment for a flurry of mental processing, information gathering, and trust building. We fuel our bodies with the rows of packaged meals of eggs, rice, and chicken. We hear of a large housing compound built by a construction company for their migrant employees. As we await permissions to visit, I check the internet. My eyeballs are roasted by news of faraway apocalyptic innovations. I send off some emails to academics.

In a tea shop, Pa tells me more about the captive deity. One time, the emperor arranges a rooster fight to determine the fate of the realms. The deity transforms into a feathered hero to save the people. The emperor ups the ante with an elephant match. The deity again transforms, now into a tusked champion, easily winning the bout. The emperor finally builds a giant mechanical bull. The god cannot

even dent the bull, and so flees to the forest in the form of an airborne cow. The emperor throws valuables into the dense foliage, so that the villagers will cut down the chutes in search. The god is revealed, and captured for good.

Brother notifies us he's received an address, so we hop into a tuk-tuk to seek out the site. Nobody is expecting us, and we are cautious. I perch at the corner of the company-owned lot to draw the scene: a sea of trucks, their human cargo still off at the day's worksite. The compound contains at least five large aluminum and wooden tenements. Pa is afraid to enter for fear of being caught. Brother and I venture in, greeting a foreman and Khmer work crew, and telling of our intentions. Brother, having paid his tab at the America themed corner store, mashes a series of foreign digits into a handheld console, and we await the call.



Translocal Precarity

Brother knows the streets of Bangkok well, shepherding us over curbs and through alleys as we trace the paths of our expatriated friends. We come to a market largely worked and patroned by Khmers. Brother speaks in Thai to negotiate a good price for a truckful of rice. We load up the bags, piles which were likely offloaded by Khmer, Lao, and Burmese in the late night to early morning. We've received permission to make a delivery to a small apartment of construction workers just down the street from their work site.

Brother has lived in just about every kind of housing here, and worked every kind of job. He recounts an earlier era when there were fewer protections and legal pathways for foreign workers. He's been robbed on footpaths along the border, thrown in prison, has slept in forests, and forfeited salaries. Once he nearly died of heat and disease in the

worker's tenements, afraid to visit the doctor for fear of arrest. He says you better watch out working on the high stories of a concrete scaffold. If you are lucky to have straps, have a friend check them well.

Nowadays, there are a variety of legal options for work visas. Labor advocates have achieved minimal international and local legal protections. Brother says conditions have improved over the years. Nonetheless, while in the city we hear of a collapse at a construction site that injures five Khmer workers. Site managers are wary of my presence especially, for fear of the fines I look like I could rain down. But we have no such intention, and as the managers soften to us, we hear of their own material struggles. One Thai housing manager weeps at a gift of medicine, not seeing herself as more deserving than her tenants.



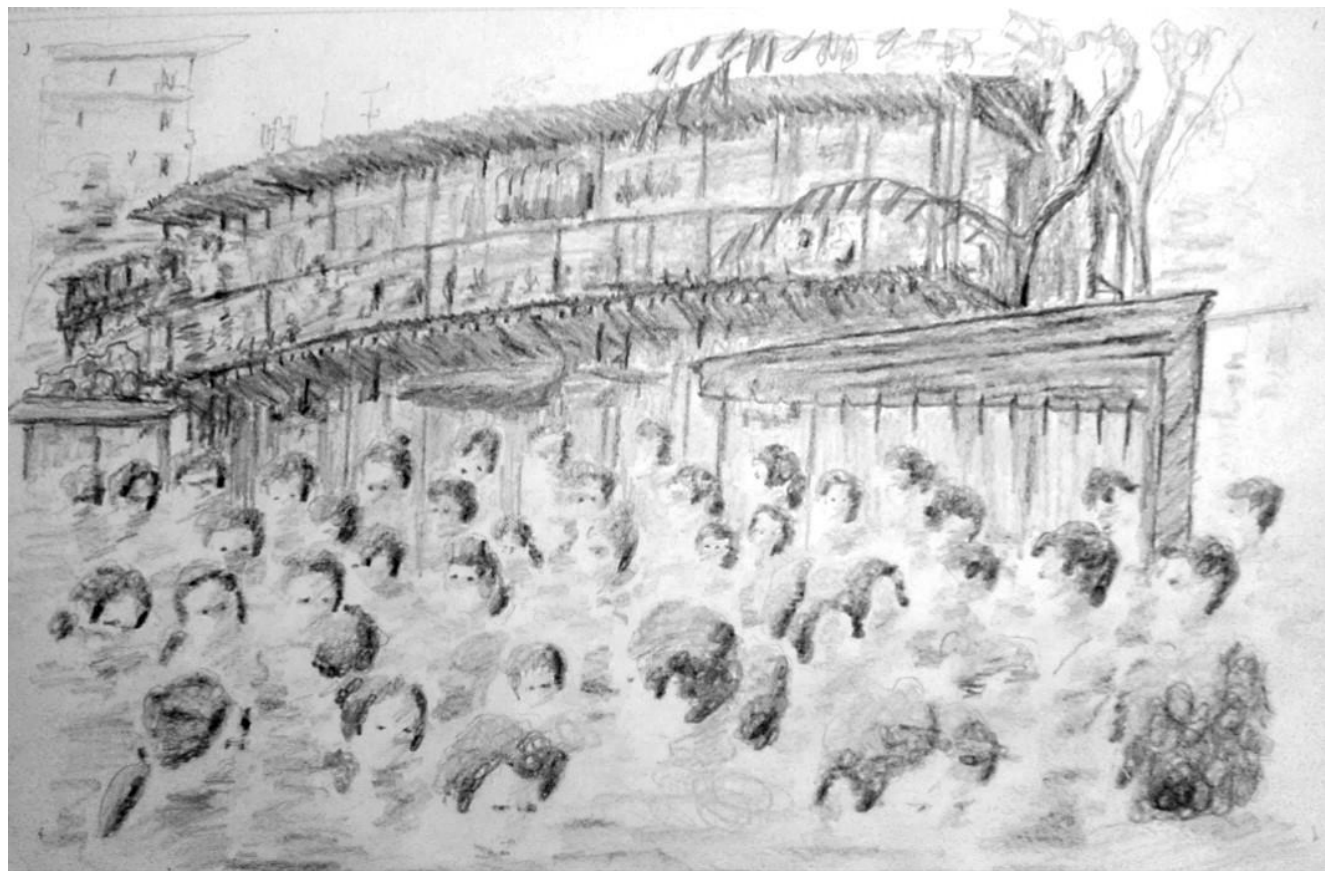
The Lights That We Carried Home

In the era before I knew Khmer people, I consumed a modest square piece of paper in a desert, and my closed eyes witnessed a multitude of faces. It was a time of life where I was open to what the earth and the heavens had to say. I found myself pulled toward unknowns that eventually gave me small understanding of the rarity and usefulness of material privilege. The smiling sea was like a prophecy, a reality separated from my present body only by time.

The call arrived. Today, I put a plastic card which I found in the U.S. into a little box, and lift my hands in prayer to the angel of international cash transfers, amongst laughing Thai clerks. Later, I sit in front of a few Khmer aunties at the large compound of trucks and shelters we visited a few days past, fielding the

usual inquiries into my marital status. We nervously call the megamarket's general manager for word on the three box trucks heading our way. It's Sunday, the day off for many but not all of our friends who live here.

The trucks arrive, and a buzz of happening builds. An incredible logic carries the pallets of eggs and oil and rice across several languages to a fair distribution. My job is to smile through photographs for our friends' social medias, and to move my pencil. There are some 500 residents here, Khmer, Burmese, Lao. Pa later describes the scene, the conditions, and location as reminiscent of a refugee camp. He says his face was smiling, but his heart crying. He prays that the youngsters be gifted strength, to save up, to return home.



Time to Rise

Brother likes to watch videos of Khmer Sons competing in Muay Thai mixed martial arts bouts. He excitedly tells of an event in downtown Bangkok: Thai champions, matched against a bill of foreign flags. In his fifteen years having worked in Thailand, Brother has never seen a fight in person. In the first match, one Khmer Son ascends to the ring, the banner of Angkor held high. I choke back tears as Brother shouts moves to his brother. The Thai fighter throws a legal elbow to the forehead, knocking out our Khmer hero cold, his eyes staring to infinity before rising again to accept the loss.

Brother, crushed, says that Khmer Sons don't have the same resources to train for their fights as in other countries. They work full-time manual jobs that leave little energy for sport. Brother says the next fighter is Cambodia's best. I encounter our upcoming hero on the way to popcorn, and stutter

a Khmer "good luck!" He fights a strong three rounds, losing in decision.

Our next hope, who we had by luck encountered before the matches, is a softspoken Black Californian with a strong fighting chance. In a beautiful gathering of worlds, Pa translated for Brother, relaying Brother's experiences and excitement. The match is the closest of any. Pa and I scream ourselves hoarse. The Thai fighters are extraordinarily talented, rightly driven to patriotic fervor at the glimpse of an imperial flag.

In the final match, a Burmese fighter takes stage, and we all three give our last shouts for one who can achieve the impossible. The Thai fighter delivers a terrible kick, injuring our last hero and ending the match. Brother is sad, but is long familiar with the outcome. He speaks of how far the Khmer Sons have come, how quickly they are becoming champions.



Gaps in the World

On a path between markets and worksites, pilgrims stop to meditate at a shrine of the gods. Florally adorned images re-present foundational realities colorfully, geometrically. The devout take refuge from a world of bound schedules and fractured boundaries, walking barefoot in bodily proximity.

A crosswalk away, a manifestation of distinct essence! Locked in a grey stack of angular stone, a capped officer taps rectangles, relaying news of obstructions, managing the behaviors of an adolescent mechanical leviathan. An infusion of

metallic computation, portrayed in the countenance of human animal, salutes a constellation of light-hued fleshy commanders. Buzzing tentacles reach over passing drivers, holding vigil alongside the humans, bowing from above to what!

Pa and I enter the temple, presenting our selves before the divine presence in the temple. We squint further toward those loving us on the distant side of our worldly efforts. How great, holy, and just is the God! How worthy to administrate justice are the oppressed!



Between a Song and Forest

We awake from a dream, finding rest in the
countryside, breathing in the air of quiet
conversation, new friends closer to home.



Lose Your Mother

In a small town on the Thai side of the border, a community of Khmers live between two kinds of border checkpoint. Today, we rest in this "special economic zone" which serves as in-between for travelers heading both directions. The children here have much practice at roasting the foreigners with jokes, but I too have learned to spit fire.

Our hosts offer to drive us through the Thailand-facing checkpoint, where we offload ourselves and present passports to officers. A few kilometers past, we park on a raised path, and walk downward into

an orchard, where Khmer families fill boxes of "wealth fruit". They say they work from before dawn to after dusk, getting paid by the box, the fruits sold a great distance beyond.

A pregnant woman, and an older woman with a damaged leg, work as fervently as the others. Families are ever set to the task of picking apart branches with fingertips. They nonetheless carve out a piece of existence in this orchard, raising children, cooking, chatting, and today lending me a memory of gratefulness.



Response Policies

"You are very smart! The weather is nice today!" I write in English for a young Khmer girl living in Thailand with her mother, among a community who works harvesting berries. She sheepishly but expertly reads the words. She hasn't attended school regularly, or seen her father in Cambodia, since before the pandemic.

Today there is no work available. The families tell of being shoved around by contradictory policies which viewed them as sources of contagion. Many families come to Thailand to pay off debts to financial institutions in Cambodia.

Here also is a Thai-Khmer family who lent the money to bring them here. Pa and Brother and I take the man out for coffee. He hands me the passport of the young girl, alongside a notebook, where I see written next to the girl's name a pile of summed, growing numbers.

Angels arrive to quiet some emotions, a compulsion to act out, rage. We hear his story. He himself is in debt to others, maybe to muscle, or bank. The bank, to who?

The Realm of Cambodia, on the world's financial ledger, is indebted to the United States for a loan made in the early 1970s for 263 million units of the latter's currency.

While we speak with another man physically detained by debt, the angels hatch another plan. An SUV with a field-grade antenna skids dirt into our conversation. The cavalry has arrived ... on a silver horse? A man slides through the crack in the door, assessing the situation in seconds. "Well if you borrow a loan you gotta repay it, huh?"

I mutter a name, of Christ, who taught us to pray, to ask forgiveness of our debts, as we forgive others'.



Ghost Fleet

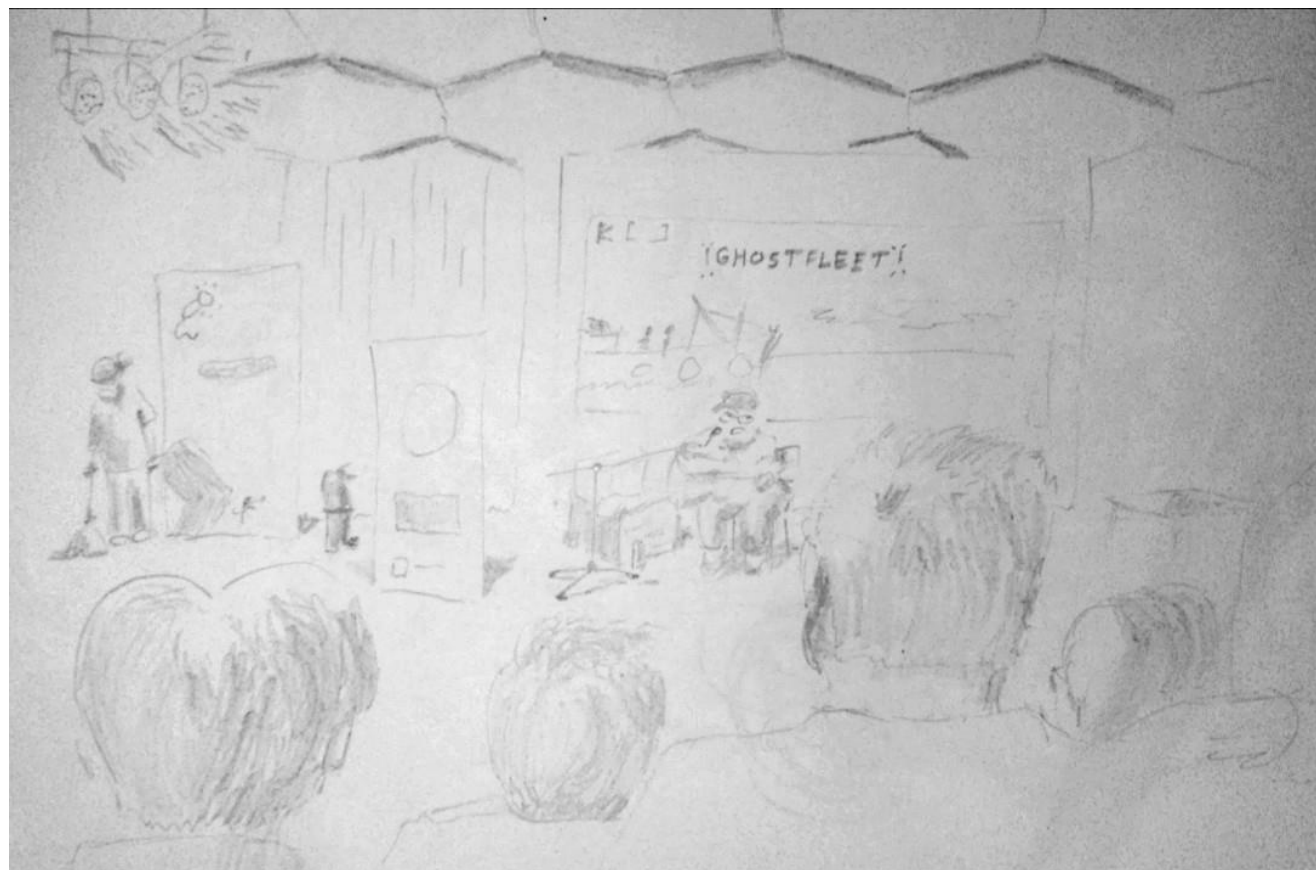
The calvary drives us somewhere with a name like Center-of-the-Universe-Land Mall. We attend a film viewing about the only-slightly resolved issue of forced labor at sea, in the Southeast Asian fishing industry. A panel of humanitarians speak to lunch-eaters and library-goers. Patrons pass through a gauntlet of recommended lifestyle improvements, under the breeze of ungodly conditioned air, in order to bear witness.

The film, with the valuable truth it imparts, is also our new boss's best attempt to fill the organization's miniscule budget, for the provision of housing and education for thousands of migrant families. Pa is frustrated by the lack of focus on Cambodians in the documentary. I'm annoyed at the lack of accountability for global financial systems. Brother calmly comments that what we see in the film—the desperation of traveling workers, exploitation and

imprisonment, bodily capture and disautonomy, enslavement—is all "normal".

To the side of the musician playing for the event is a banner sponsored by none other than the Embassy of the United States of America. Where is the delegate? Is the banner a declaration of support, a claim of credit for successes, or an admission of guilt? Outside the glass, past and around a set of turnstiles, a woman in janitor's uniform thanklessly cleans after the other side of the class divide.

The median Thai is not rich, thusly theirs also is the realm of heaven. The Thais have endured the boorish extraction of pleasure by Americans, and have worked themselves to the bone to earn the time to devote to social issues. They are educated, stunningly cool, independent, and kind. We await our new Thai-Khmer friend's next destination.



Graves Without Names

The cavalry takes us to Khao I Dang refugee camp, where Pa and Ma both lived for years as children. I try to imagine buildings in these deserted, overgrown hollows, the lots arranged and redrawn during decades of homemaking by hundreds of thousands of Khmer refugees. Pa, long ago, walked through its gates carrying his sister and survival items yoked on his shoulders, barefoot. Today, he rides as the guest of honor on a chariot of steel and fire. "Wow, it's really here."

Past foundations of fallen temples etched with Khmer writing, we encounter a sadness. Sepulchers and tombstones with the names of Khmers, the stones pushed upward by the growth of tree roots. Uncle, who works with our new parent organization, surveys the stones and souls, remedying the decades of missing grief.

Days later, monks hold a long string which flows from branch to branch, circumscribing the broken gravestones. They chant blessings. In a moment, the foreboding pit in my chest sprinkles open to a guiding light, and for me a curse is broken. Opening my eyes, Pa still holds a weary expression of deep sorrow. Catching his eyes, I communicate whatever truth of the moment I can offer, but it is not enough.

We are joined today by Khmer-speaking Thai and Lao grandmas, who bring generations of healing. Several of these beautiful jokesters had participated in helping Khmer refugees back in the day. I wonder if Ma, Pa and they had once seen each other in passing some 40 years ago. At the end of the ceremony, Grandma whips a machete out of nowhere, and beats back the growing weeds.



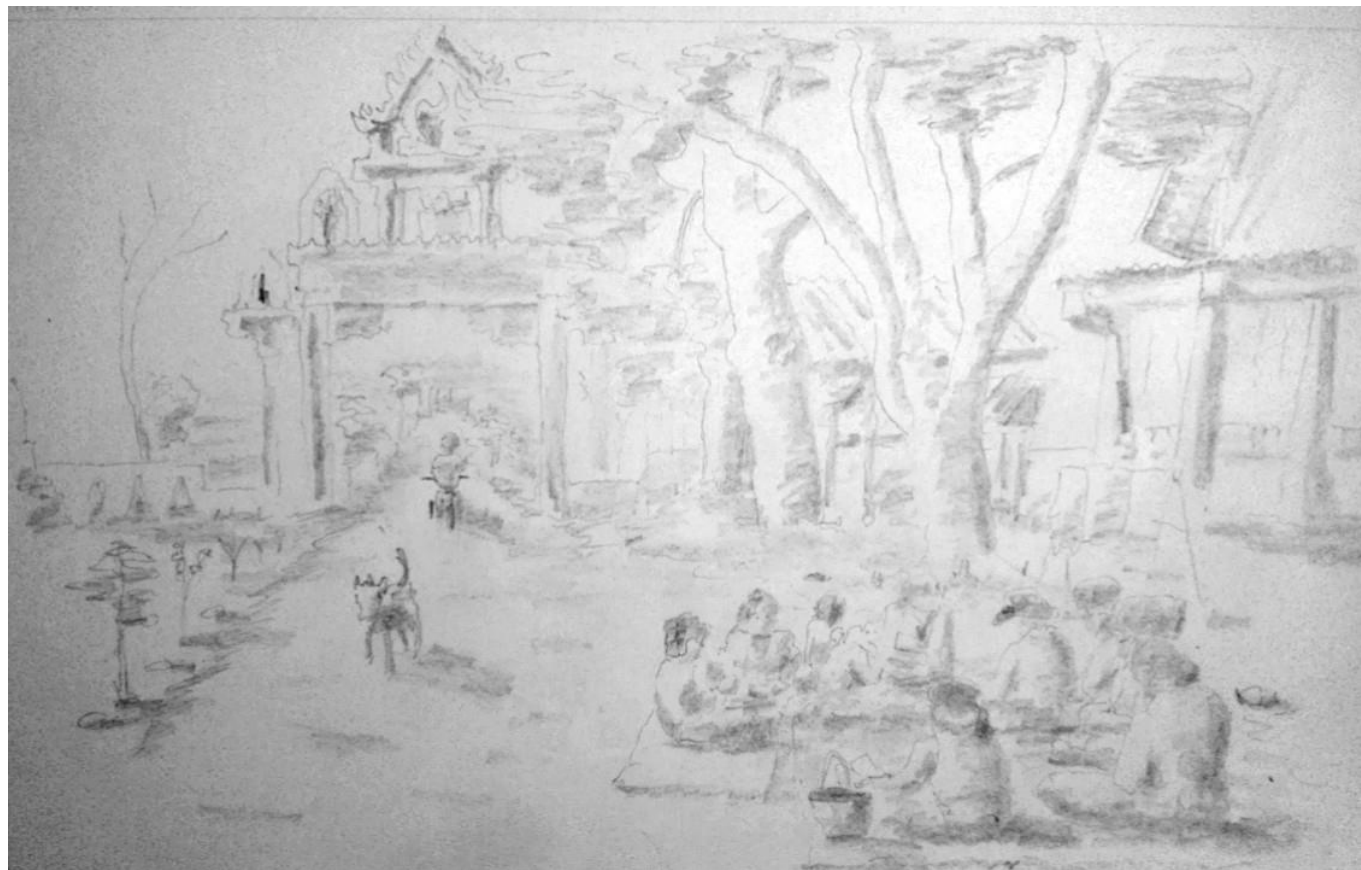
Return to Khao I Dang

We gather with the grandmas at a nearby temple to eat fruits. I ask Pa to tell his experience.

"I can't describe it. Priceless. Did not expect to be back here. When I was young, we didn't know what was around the camp. They trap you in one place. We've come back to a motherland, to pay respects. Without it, we could not have gone to the United

States. But [in the camp] we were also not free, held in one place. Thanks to the elders, Thai, Khmer, Lao. Hope the person who passes away, with good deeds, be reborn as a monk. We saw a cemetery, but we know our blood soul sister is still there."

Pa floats onto a bicycle, pedaling off through the temple's gates.



Unveiling the Realities

Energies abuzz, our parent organization joins forces with the Cambodian consulate, embarking on a distribution of food to migrating farmer families. I will have no time for sketches. The pictured image is from an earlier day, when we drove among fields in search of need. Here, a man was placing rocks in the optimal three-piece configuration for cooking, his neighbors working elsewhere. They live in the very farms and orchards they work, raising animals which belong to others. At night, their houses of scrap wood and aluminum are lit from the electrons of car batteries, which are transported on motorcycles to be charged elsewhere. Today, we load into sagging vans to witness the truth of the world.

A group of adults walks alongside a tractor, brandishing all manner of spade and cloth, the

largest human three times the stature of the shortest. Their foreman putters alongside in a truck, who, agitated to see us, gives us his number, and allows us to deliver food. I burst through an invisible boundary, greeting a dark-skinned man with a deep accent, asking if he has another of what he's smoking: Homegrown tobacco, wrapped in a leaf.

We pull up to a camp of residents not yet aware of the organization's presence. Headlights beaming into their houses, I see a sudden panicked energy take hold. A flurry of legs. Fright, fear, and fleeing. Our appearance matches the pattern of a prior experience. Uncle bolts out a moving car door to shout, "We only bring rice!"

Anyone in need of support, and those who can offer, please reach out to the Labour Protection Network.



Gifts of Life ~ កាដូជីវិត

Brother, Pa and I are welcomed at the Cambodian desks at the border. At our home community, Brother returns to his family. Pa and I try to manipulate English to comprehend the situation of our friends in Thailand. Why should Khmer have to leave family and home, to work for survival at the fringes? The refugee crisis is not over, but rather expanded, softened, and taxed.

Our trio sits at a coffee shop, and in our fatigue we argue, hurting each others' feelings. We drive around town gathering supplies for the community center, imagining it as a place of refuge for those we've met with no other shelter. We begin a process of our own healing, learning to place awareness and acceptance before action.

Weeks later, in the United States, I will weep at the sketches I've drawn, that they lack the world of greens and yellows and blues still fresh in my mind. Sitting instead in a world of greys, I will begin the long process of rebuilding health and happiness, aided by the Khmer language itself, and here I translate:

Blame. It can't make anything have goodness, huh? But understanding on the other hand, this makes every manner able to change, to seek goodness ... A mistake is a lesson so excellent ... People who do much wrong really can't be overcome ever, huh? But if we ourselves are only able to allow the same mistakes to happen time and again, it means we haven't learned entirely about mistakes from the beginning much.



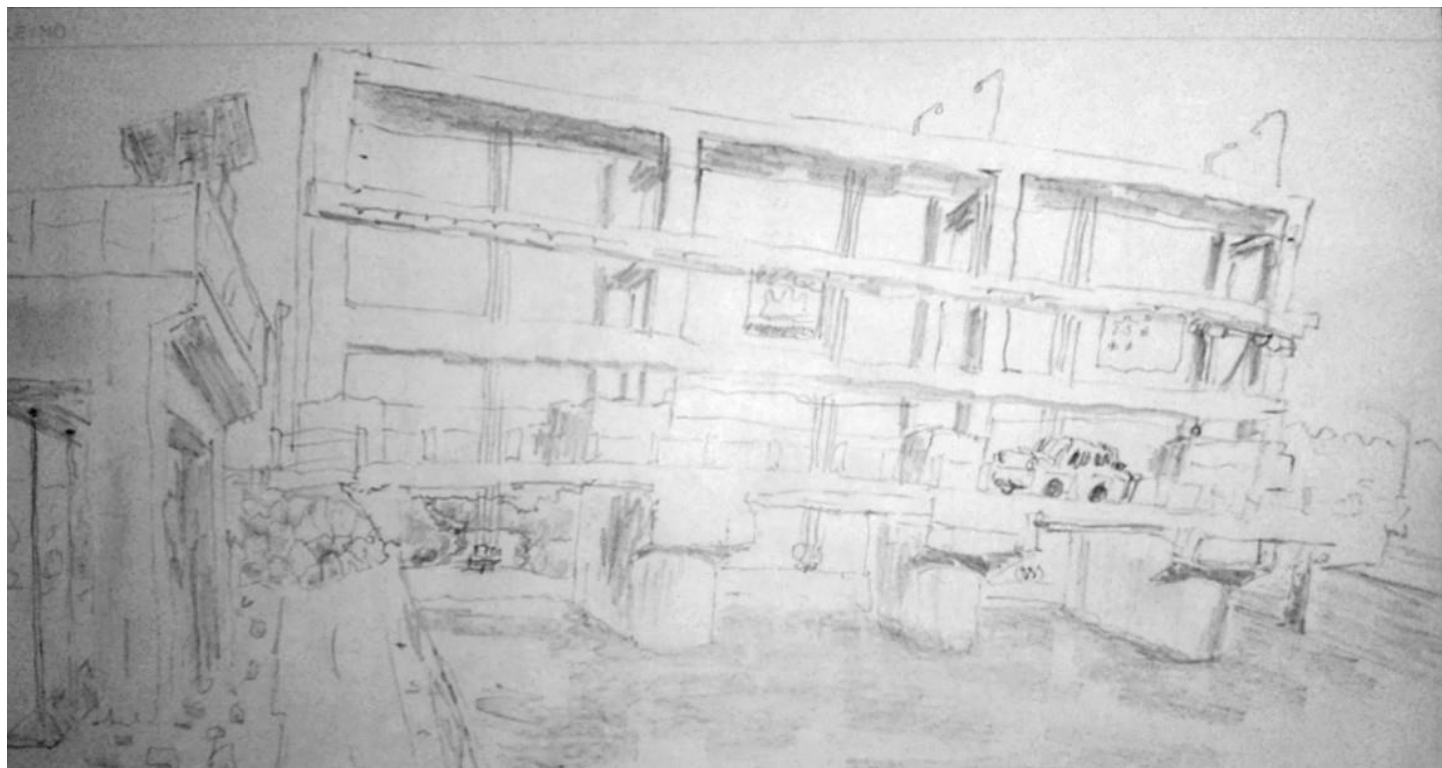
Troubling the Water

At night we gather to eat. The overhead swaying light illuminates particles of dust lingering in the cracked, hot air. Farmers lament the prolonging of the dry season, which kills the shade-bearing undergrowth, evacuating life-giving bugs and bacteria. Brother throws me onto a motorcycle and shuttles me to a nearby dam, the source of a canal which stretches far past our village, a stream which is sometimes the only source of water for fields. The canal has been dry since we arrived. Brother says it's shut off for political reasons. Trucks with large plastic tankards putter down dirt roads spreading water, to prevent them air from turning to dust, and the moon from becoming further red.

The river flows to Tonle Sap Lake, the famed beating heart of the Khmer empire of old. Every year the lake, a hundred kilometers away, twice triples in size from the rains. At least it used to. In the before time,

it teemed with fishes which leapt from the surface, sinking a boat without a net cast. Today, its arteries are clogged, its species extinct. Its onetime fishers leave behind finger-sized catches, to instead carry man-made burdens for wages in foreign currency. Maps depicting the risk of future ecological catastrophe paint Cambodia in the hue of blood.

The water levels on the two sides of the dam sit at great discrepancy, ready to admit but a trickle should the valve be opened to the canal. The Cambodian flag is raised on the concrete scaffold, buttressed on the right by the Chinese banner, symbol of the people and classes and government who gifted the construction project. The spot to the left is vacant, reserved for the guest absent from the wedding.



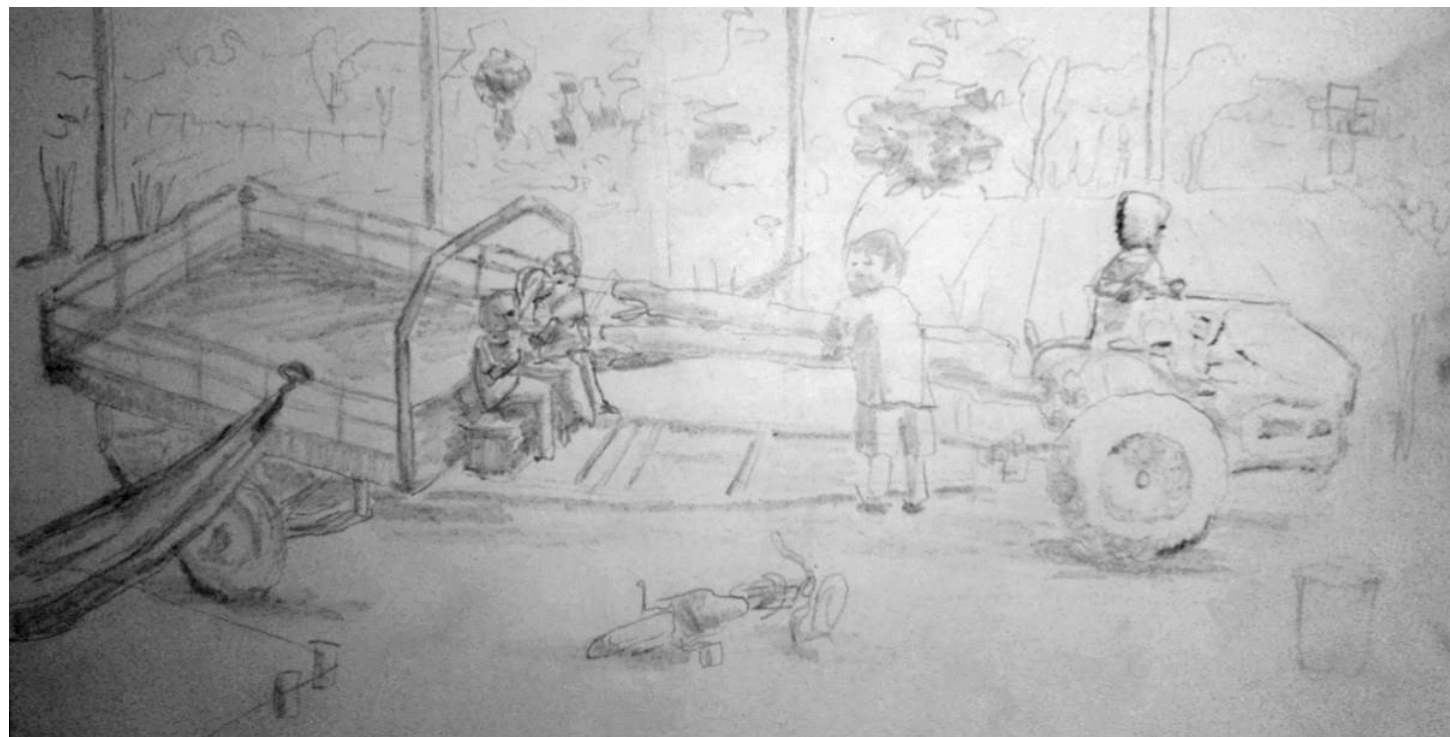
Sharing the Load

I was raised in the rural cornbox of America, my family enjoying modern conveniences. Our village is surrounded by farmlands, mostly worked by a people called the Amish, who in turn call us English. Theirs is a simple lifestyle. Subject to community decision, newly invented technologies are accepted or rejected. The feat is symbolized by the horse-drawn carts which still pass my childhood home.

I think of my cousins often as I pass through Cambodian marketplaces. Here, a culture with strong immunities to modernity negotiates the yearly turnover of consumer goods. Pa and I are determined to build solar setups for our friends in Thailand without grid access. We find a merchant who rummages through an old pile to produce an endangered object: the solar charge controller, a device which takes electricity harnessed from the sun's very light and stores it in a battery.

On Cambodian roads is seen an ingenious vehicle: the "cow machine." With the power of twenty horses, and a top speed of one, this miracle of practicality, this tool of conviviality serves for community field trips to holy sites and the transport of food. It is today a playground. Its every function, from clutch to tractor to drive belt, is easily separable for ad hoc re-use and repair. Farmers detach the engine, reattaching the belt to a pump for watering the fields, months before the rig moves the harvest.

The children teach me a game, where everyone stands atop the cow machine, with one participant outside playacting as monster. The group shuffles fearfully around the deck, and the creature reaches past every crack to touch and thus catch a victim, who then jumps overboard for their turn at striking fear, while the beast is redeemed.



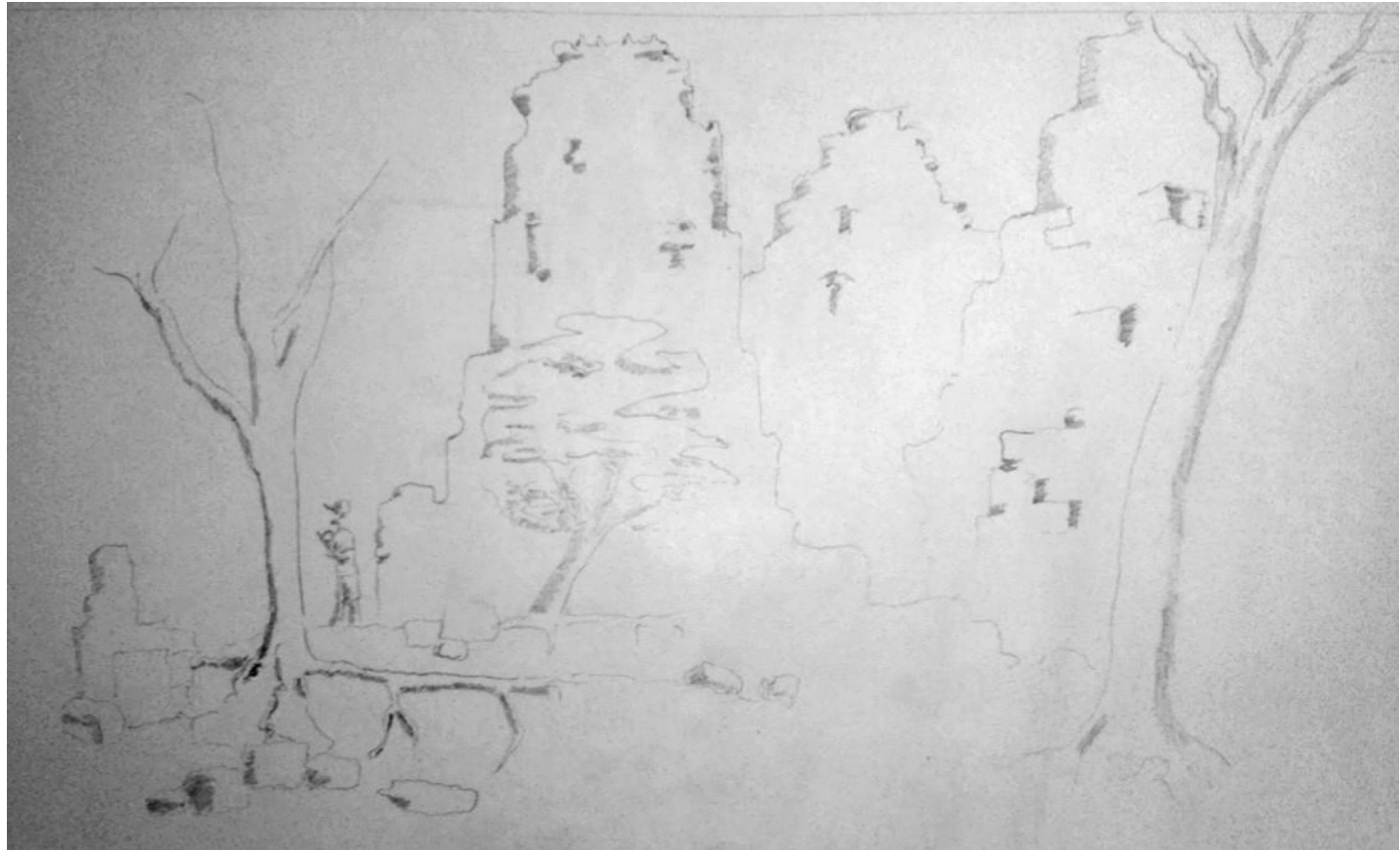
The Language of Letting Go

Best efforts exhausted, my spirit and mind whirl with the realities I've witnessed. I skyhook out of community life to take a writer's retreat. I inhabit the world of the passerby, the occasional English speaker, and historical sites. A young monk at the hotel, speaking with me patiently in Khmer, reminds me that we are to work on the problems in sight which are given us, and not worry about the rest. As we talk, a group of his artist friends join, offering me a tattoo, which I decline with the truth that I only mark myself thusly for a lost loved one.

Not knowing how soon this statement would find its occasion, I climb the hundreds of stairs to a local Fortress and Temple, where I speak with a lovely couple. One makes his way to survey the stacked stones. The other speaks with excitement in English about teaching Korean, to students who go to work

further afield than Thailand. He says they should think bigger, to not expect good things to happen automatically. They tell me of the common four-faced statues which dot the landscape, the smiles representing love, kindness, compassion, and sympathy.

Days blur together as I type out an early draft of this book. Available moments of joy with friends slip away. I'm restless, irritable, and discontent. I pour frustration into the words, later softening them with self-acceptance. How have I rendered myself onto the page here, an image of myself in turn drawing the expanse of rural life from a physical vantage shared with Khmer hundreds of years past? Dear reader, I have sketched many people in the past few months. We are not very different.



Afterparties

Suddenly, very suddenly, I am back in the lands of the Ohlone, still occupied. I walk the city streets, lost. Nothing is different. Everything is different.

It is another of my homes. After group therapy, I stop for a sandwich at the cafe. An angel blows a trumpet in my ear, and I recognize Cambodian speech. Here too, I meet Khmer friends working a great distance from their birthplace.

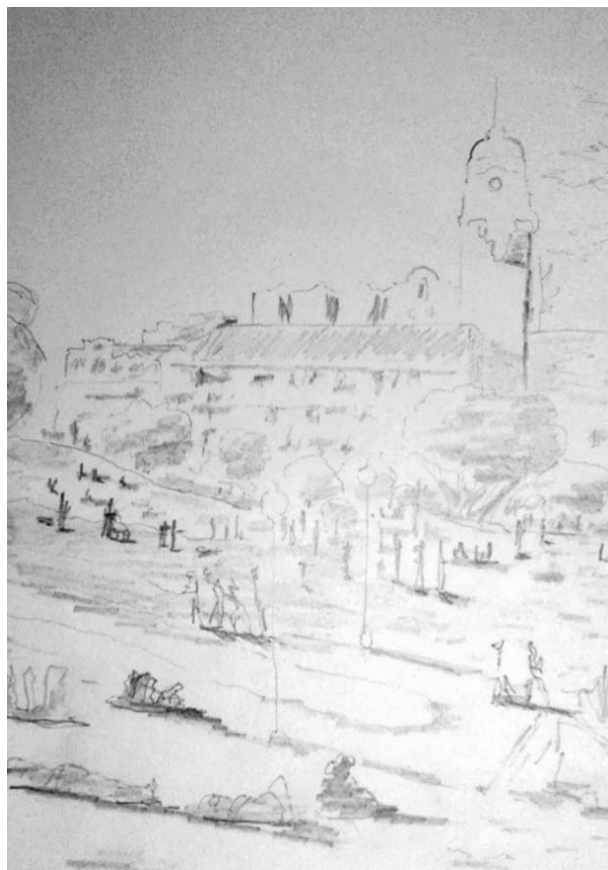
I visit the extended community center, which also meets resettlement needs for a host of immigrating peoples. This book is additionally dedicated to the three young loving badasses who passed since I first walked through the door. My godbrothers.

I attend an art therapy session with Khmer elders. Uncle raises a painting, in solidarity with Iranian women. Another misses his mother, whom he lost in the civil war. I work through my attachment

issues. I see a presentation by four community leaders who face deportation from whole lives lived in the America. Their final legal option is a pardon from the state governor. The wife of a previously incarcerated, later pardoned man leads a chant: "When we fight, we win."

An old Mayan friend greets me at the train station, on the way to the sun's labors. I spend a whole year tending to the needs of my inner child. The Cambodian debt ticks up another 3%. The city sends technicians to shut off poor residents' water.

I look up from my tent at night, and a star rises out of Bethlehem, Palestine. It splits into 12,000 pieces, resting over Turtle Island, Potosí, Elmina, Tianjing, Kharkiv, Treblinka, Okinawa, Pailin, Panzós, Srebrenica, Rafah, Kashmir, Fallujah, Port-au-Prince, Bukavu, Geneina, and ...



A Review of the Literature

Year of the Rabbit: Tian Veasna

Timelapse: Sleeping at Last

There Was So Much: Courtney Work

A History of Cambodia, Fourth Edition: David Chandler

The Ascension: Sufjan Stevens

The Life of a Cowgirl: Kimsun Sotheary

The Dead in the Land: Lisa J. Arensen

Home Truths: International Labour Organization

Skeleton of Something More: Sleeping at Last

Beauty Laid Bare: bell hooks

The Magic of ព្រះគោ: Reading Books

Translocal Precarity: Green & Estes

The Lights That We Carried Home: Kay Chronister

Time to Rise: VannDa

Gaps in the World: Hansen & Ledgerwood

Between A Song and a Forest: Penny Edwards

Lose Your Mother: Saidiya Hartman

Response Policies: Keo, Abdelhamid, & Kasper

Ghost Fleet: Service & Waldron

Graves Without Names: Rithy Panh

Return to Khao I Dang: Vanna Seang

Unveiling the Realities: Labour Protection Network

Gifts of Life ~ កាដូជីវិត: សែត ហត្ថា

Troubling the Water: Abby Seiff

Sharing the Load: Rohrer & Dundes

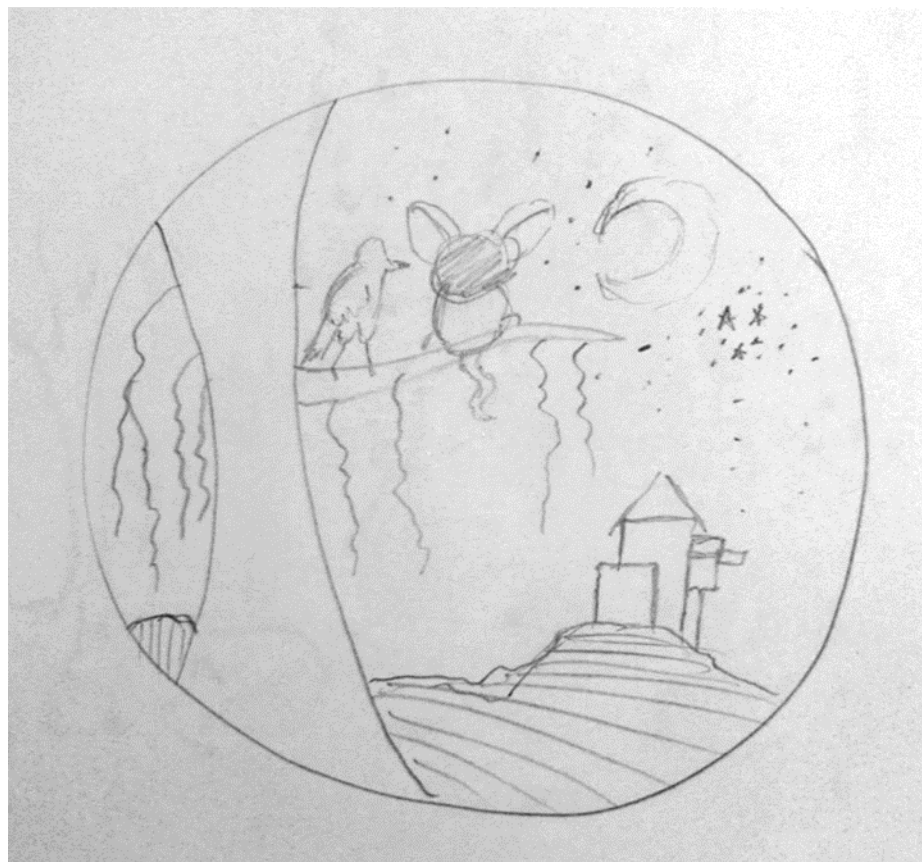
The Language of Letting Go: Melody Beattie

Afterparties: Anthony Veasna

A Review of the Literature: បងចេត្តាប័

A Deepest Blue: Prumsodun Ok

Reach Out: Sufjan Stevens



A Deepest Blue

A Khmer figure, revealed arms spread, lit by a bulb the color French call rouge, takes a step forward, eyes wincing in pain for the seconds it takes to regain footing, the sound of waves hitting the rocks, the body's agony continues, long is the suffering in the cheeks atop bones and flesh stripped to shorts. Words appear: when you stand on the shore; do you fear the ocean at night? The fourth wall unbroken, the figure remains alone, seconds tick forward, the time already past, now action and strife, reaching in labor to pull at ships' ropes, a fist raised in power, or to just hang on a knot, now an open palm, collapse, the lights of the American studio go dark, all is now ocean, water but for music! Illuminated clothes draped on piper, flutist, harmonicist, surround the figure, reanimating them, who rises in feminine spirit, giving breath to the stage, visiting shadowed selves, who pluck the fruit readily, raising rods tipped with pieces of plastic garbage, encircling the figure now trapped. A raised finger of distaste, drives out shadows from the sacred place, the shadows displeased carry buckets of tar, poured out on

who, revealed as a human of this very universe, in the upstairs of this dance company on the peninsula, now covered in pitch and bile, blinding eyes and staining a wooden floor. The shadows rebound to gather a net, cast over the figure, the body of an artist, thrashing about, bruising knees and temples, dragged over the muddy plywood, killed dead. The theater goes truly dark, a storm during a new moon, only wails of the figure heard, and the ocean. A new song arrives, the drummer arises to join the other musicians, the brightest spotlight now reveals a puddle of muck, the four angels surround the figure, face lifted in palms, the drummer with a crayon, marks the forehead in love as photons pour into resurrected eyeballs. The angels back away, from a fearsome reanimated elephant in youthful strength, each molecule powering muscles to righteously rend spacetimes with precision flights of limb, heels grip tight the dry floor, when he falls on tar, the pain drives onward, only kindness in the flashes of sword, bow, scale, and skull.

A human, acting this role for the last time in their theater's final showing, weeps in anguish, the room darkened once more, and words: Die a million little deaths; persevere toward miracles. The lights fade upward; Prumsodun looks into the sea of faces. The tears are now real, eyes awash in the joy of our presence. I stare transfixed. If only we all loved as that beauty there! Brother speaks, laments the passing of a stage of his life, wishes we all together find peace in the service of transcendent, tells the story of Another, whom a pilgrim implores, "I have no alms to give", the reply: "You have hands for prayer and a mouth to smile." I greet Brother, and bring tidings of our friends in Thailand, leaving with a little mud on my cheek, to prove myself a reality. "Don't worry," he said. "It cleans."

Reach Out

*I have a memory of a time and place where history resigned
Now my apology, all the light came in to fulminate my mind
Reach out, reach out to all the ones who came before you
Ponder what is right. You and I, in defiance
Speak out, speak out. The conversation may afford you
Wisdom of the wise. You and I, in defiance
And I come from conscience where there is no conjugation
I would rather be a flower than the ocean
And I held myself as something of an innovation
I would rather be devoured than be broken
All my life I tried so hard to separate myself from all
That is and was and will be torn apart
You were running unafraid. I know you, but I've changed my way
You know I take it all to heart. Home is where you've called my name
I've gone far as the eye can blame. You said love may have lost its way
Now my life has been erased and what I gave, I gave for you
And for myself and for the holy name
You were running unashamed and yours is mine and all remains
As nothing ever stays the same. Reach out, reach out
And all at once the pain restores you*



*The Wise Treeshrew and a Talking Sparrow:
A Review of the Literature*



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Introduction

Por eso los grandes amores de muchos colores me gustan a mi.

•

The reader is aware of a booklet of pencil drawings and journalistic descriptions, available in the public domain in Khmer and English. Khmer, the most commonly spoken language in Cambodia, is the first language of my godparents, Ma Chandra and Pa Voth. The book, to which Ma and Pa contributed their typing, editing, and vast spiritual knowledge, is about a journey taken by myself, Pa, and Brother Viasna. During a one-month excursion to three regions in Thailand, where many Cambodians migrate temporarily or permanently, we met some five hundred Khmers, and listened to a great many of their stories. The threads of witnessing were interwoven with the memories of Pa. As children, both Ma and Pa were internally displaced then interred under Democratic Kampuchea, before taking refuge with their respective families in Khao I Dang refugee camp in Thailand. Our friend Viasna, called throughout simply Brother, is my age: mid-thirties. He spent some 15 years in Thailand, often with his wife, Sister Bo, whose stories inspired the project's origins. Brother and Sister worked long in Thailand in to support their small family, and they now live an agricultural lifestyle in Battambang in Northwest Cambodia. The project's trip was intense, serendipitous, and admitted generational and cultural clashes. In Thailand, we met and listened to Cambodians near or inside their homes, commonly in the presence of citizens of sister nations Laos and Myanmar. I am blessed to have been present for legitimate developments in the ongoing history of memory related to the refugee crisis, with continuities to the present-day living and working conditions of precariously mobile Cambodians in Thailand. Following some greetings, this document is a *literature review*. I introduce, quote, and reflect and reflect on texts which lent me understanding of the issues raised during this journey. The wisdom of these authors who go before me has multiplied a small window of passionately witnessed sufferings and joys manifold.

Yucatán, México. November 2024.

Greetings

•

*i want to write an image
like a log-cabin quilt pattern
and stretch it across all the lonely
people who just don't fit in
we might make a world*

-Nikki Giovanni

•

This section is addressed to Khmer communities working and living near homes on Ohlone lands during the writing of this book, who received me with laughter and kindness in my times of spiritual need.



To friends who gather in prayerful remembrance and build loving community for others: I give thanks for your many introductions to spirits I never once knew, for the great purposes to which you have called me. Forsake caution not, for the incidence of institutional wolves who entice with the promise of ease and power; trust in who answers your prayers. Forgive me for my boasts, my absence, and my presumptions. May we understand together.

Stop being holy, forget being prudent. It'll be a hundred times better for everyone. Stop being altruistic, forget being righteous, people will remember what family feeling is. Stop planning, forget making a profit, there won't be any thieves or robbers. But even these three rules needn't be followed; what works reliably is to know the raw silk, hold the uncut wood. Need little, want less. Forget the rules. Be untroubled.¹



¹ Italics in this section from the *Tao Te Ching*, translation by Ursula Le Guin.

To friends who rapidly churn out calories in the midst of finely cultured, colorfully painted society: My spirit has had fewer lows more desperate than the moment I first heard your sweet voices sing. Pity not they who have boasted beyond reckoning for a third of the talents you have quietly kept in service of divinity.

Nature doesn't make long speeches. A whirlwind doesn't last all morning. A cloudburst doesn't last all day. Who makes the wind and rain? Heaven and earth do. If heaven and earth don't go on and on, certainly people don't need to. ... Give yourself to the Way and you'll be at home in the Way. Give yourself to power and you'll be at home in power. Give yourself to loss and when you're lost you'll be at home. To give no trust is to get no trust.



To friends in the fancy, proper residential zone, putting on the finest air for patrons refreshed by the greenery of parks: Thank you for your linguistic expertise, and your steadfast resolve toward a great lumbering behemoth whose claws graze your windows. Fear not, send me strength in my travels, and turn the back pages slowly.

Knowing other people is intelligence, knowing yourself is wisdom. Overcoming others takes strength, overcoming yourself takes greatness. Contentment is wealth. Boldly pushing forward takes resolution. Staying put keeps you in position. To live till you die is to live long enough.



To friends in the depths of the avenues, trading safety for sustenance where the powerful cowardly tread not to defend: May the God dodge your bodies to avoid the slinging of arrows flung from wells of sorrow dug ever deeper by men of my kind. Pray peace and miraculous confluence for premonitions of brilliant resolution.

What seeks to shrink must first have grown; what seeks weakness surely was strong. What seeks its ruin must first have risen; what seeks to take has surely given.



To friends in the cluster of pastry establishments which serve lunches and snacks to high schoolers and yoga practitioners: Thank you for the kind invitation to the celebration of the seasons, and for your persistent sidesplitting humors. Please pass along spare roasts for the edification of misplaced naivetes, and freeze the burgeoning spirit of the age as accidentally as possible.

Which is nearer, name or self? Which is dearer, self or wealth? Which gives more pain, loss or gain? All you grasp will be thrown away. All you hoard will be utterly lost. Contentment keeps disgrace away. Restraint keeps you out of danger so you can go on for a long, long time.



To friends who construct donuts and packaged lunches for the many-cultured insomniacs and theater-goers: May angels repair the spirit of anguish which has beset you to paralysis. Heed not the lie of a quicker success, and culture a wooing for the analysis of endemic quicksands. For I too awake in my hour of rest.

Why are the organs of our life where death enters us? Because we hold too hard to living. So I've heard if you live in the right way, when you cross country you needn't fear to meet a mad bull or a tiger; when you're in a battle you needn't fear the weapons. The bull would find nowhere to jab its horns, the tiger nowhere to stick its claws, the sword nowhere for its point to go. Why? Because there's nowhere in you for death to enter.



To friends who steward the cafes and shops which honor the sandwich preferences of transit-goers and music enthusiasts: Falter not at the reproofs of they on whose shoulders is built the prosperity of the age. For what nitpicks you endure shall surely be repaid to you tenfold, and I will be frank with you, the cuisine you invent daily is righteousness itself.

True words aren't charming, charming words aren't true. Good people aren't contentious, contentious people aren't good. People who know aren't learned, learned people don't know. Wise souls don't hoard; the more they do for others the more they have, the more they give the richer they are. The Way of heaven profits without destroying. Doing without outdoing is the Way of the wise.

∴



Positionality

•
*i don't wanna be your personal Jesus
i don't wanna live inside of that flame
in a way i wanna be my own believer
i don't wanna play your video game*

-Sufjan Stevens

•

In this section, I survey texts which have something to say about *me*. In some cases, I share the described experience and identify directly with the language used by the authors, or have been impacted by the discussed issue. In others, the discussions offer insight into how my spiritual and bodily presence appears to and affects others, to teach me how to better live and move through the world with grace.

•

In *Jeremiah as a Modern Masculine Metaphor*, Carvalho, in 2019, examines a story from the *Tanach*. As trauma literature:

Jeremiah addresses a world with modern parallels: a world where social categories are changing, the economic future looks bleak, global peace seems unattainable, random violence is unavoidable, and traditional religion is not only increasingly inadequate in its ability to solve current problems but is even a factor in the growing chaos and systemic evil (597).

Jeremiah's story "reflects a shift in elite male identity from that of subject status with agency to that of object status subordinated to a higher patriarchal power" (609). Carvalho suggests that a white male might get tattoos in a sort of acceptance of their newly discovered status inside a marked gender and racial category, and to symbolize allyship with forms of social resistance. So too, "Jeremiah's body becomes a modern metaphor for those who actively try to resist their status of unearned privilege, because they too see the fundamental harm of such patriarchal systems" (616). Jeremiah loses debates with false prophets, and is threatened whenever he attempts to act out his privilege either for his own benefit or for others. I note that my own inheritance has immersed me thoroughly in

the language and status of privilege, enabling me to code switch my demeanor in contexts of power for the purposes of advocacy. My physical appearance, especially where that appearance is a rarity, allows me to subvert expectations, to employ strategies for acquiring information, and to elevate the needs of unprivileged friends.

Carvalho writes of Jeremiah, “His only allies are members of the scribal class and a foreign eunuch, neither of whom is associated with the performance of elite masculinity” (607). Anticipating a discussion below, Jeremiah’s friend Ebed-melech is African. Their name is cognate in Hebrew and Arabic, meaning *servant-of-king* or *faithful-to-God*. According to an enigmatic Ethiopian acquaintance at the coffee shop near where I live, Ebed-melech rescues Jeremiah “from the yoke of Satan!” They command a troop of soldiers to retrieve Jeremiah, not from prison, but from a muck-filled cistern in the prison’s courtyard. It will surprise nobody that both lines of dialogue given Ebed-melech are about the outspoken guy on center stage, the first of which in any case reads:²

אֲדַנִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ הִרְעוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לְיִרְמְיָהוּ
הַנְּבִיא אֶת אֲשֶׁר-הִשְׁלִיכוּ אֵל הַבּוֹר וַיָּמָת תַּחְתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי הָרָעָב
כִּי אֵין הַלֶּחֶם עוֹד בְּעִיר:

my-lord the-king have-done-evil men these in all that they-have-done to-jeremiah the-prophet to whom they-have-cast into the-dungeon and-he-is-like-to-die where-he-is from hunger for no bread more in-the-city.

It seems Jeremiah could stand the cistern, and would have died there to spite the authorities. Indeed, he was only transferred there from another (less mucky) cistern because when they peeked open the lid to check on him, he wouldn’t stop preaching about the woes of the age. Who Jeremiah could not have done without is Ebed-melech.

•

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Aviv writes in 2022,

² Jeremiah 38:9. Masoretic Text. English rendition adapted word-for-word from Strong’s.

Mental illnesses are often seen as chronic and intractable forces that take over our lives, but I wonder how much the stories we tell about them, especially in the beginning, can shape their course. People can feel freed by these stories, but they can also get stuck in them. [...] This book is about people whose struggles with mental illness exist outside of this ‘closed and completed system of truth.’ [...] I have chosen subjects who have tried to overcome a feeling of incommunicability through writing. [...] They have come up against the limits of psychiatric ways of understanding themselves and are searching for the right scale of explanation—chemical, existential, cultural, economic, political—to understand a self in the world. [...] In crafting a shared language, contemporary psychiatry can alleviate people’s loneliness, but we may take for granted the impact of its explanations, which are not neutral: they alter the kinds of stories about the self that count as ‘insight’ and how we understand our potential. [...] The divide between the psychic hinterlands and a setting we might call normal is permeable, a fact that I find both haunting and promising. It’s startling to realize how narrowly we avoid, or miss, living radically different lives (Introduction).

It has been helpful for me to learn that professional mental health categories, with their guiding scientific integrity, are also politically and interpersonally contested. I have learned to become forgiving of the parts of the world which do not play nice to my psychological makeup, while retaining the courage to communicate my experience in order to meet my needs. Especially while I participate in cultures other than my own, I must be aware and accepting of how often my dispositions are catastrophically incompatible to the limited energies of all involved. But as Aviv notes, it is not necessary to pathologize oneself beyond what the spirit of the situation requires for healing. We might wake up years in the future and understand a more complete eschatological purpose to the present moment, with all its devices, corporations, pharmaceuticals, ideologies, and brains.

•

In *The Will to Change*, hooks writes in 2005,

More than ten years ago [...] I had not been able to confess that not only did I not understand men, I feared them. [...] I began to think that women were afraid to speak openly about men, afraid to explore deeply our connections to them. [...] All that we do not know intensifies our sense of fear and threat.

And certainly to know men only in relation to male violence, to the violence inflicted upon women and children, is a partial, inadequate knowing. Nowadays I am amazed that women who advocate feminist politics have had so little to say about men and masculinity. [...] As the feminist movement progressed, the fact became evident that sexism and sexist exploitation and oppression would not change unless men were also deeply engaged in feminist resistance. [...] Looking at the reasons patriarchy has maintained its power over men and their lives, I urge us to reclaim feminism for men. [...] It is not true that men are unwilling to change. It is true that many men are afraid to change. [...] Feminist theory has offered us brilliant critiques of patriarchy and very few insightful ideas about alternative masculinity, especially in relation to boys. [...] To truly protect and honor the emotional lives of boys we must challenge patriarchal culture. And until that culture changes, we must create the subcultures, the sanctuaries where boys can learn to be who they are uniquely, without being forced to conform to patriarchal masculine visions. To love boys rightly we must value their inner lives enough to construct worlds, both private and public, where their right to wholeness can be consistently celebrated and affirmed, where their need to love and be loved can be fulfilled (Prologue, Ch. 1, Ch. 3).

While writing this paper, I cried in front of a feminine bookshop owner because I could not find a simultaneously feminist and compassionate take on men. *The Will to Change* is such a book, but whereupon I had feared the title too much, I failed to pick it up without a loving nudge. My experience with academic masculinities studies has been unfortunately discouraging. Some literature begins with the wholesome intention of providing much-needed therapeutic insight for men, but ends up feeling bruised and radicalized by contestation. Masculine readers may, as I have, find helpful literature under the headings of *possible masculinities* and *positive masculinities*. It is entirely ok to receive healing with one set of safe-space norms, and participate in academic discourse with another. If you are a guy reading this, I want you to know that you are a worthy and respectable member of this world, that your existence as a man is an element of your purpose, that your ethical obligations in regards to your masculinity are many.

•

In *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, Ward writes in 2020,

The further into the project I went, the more my attention shifted to straight men. Straight men have caused women unthinkable suffering, and yet I share with them [...] a desire to partner with women. I implore men to put their politics where their lust is: in alignment with women. I call upon the wisdom of the dyke experience to illuminate for straight men the capacity to desire, to [have sex passionately], and to be feminist comrades at the same time (155).

Ward cites, without prescribing, “a queer form of feminism [...] in which straight people embrace the postmodern instability of traditional heterosexuality and let the impending queerness of the future wash over them” (156). She says that straightness – the embodied desire for the opposite sex – is for many people, “inseparable from a desire for gender and/or sexual respectability and cultural legibility” and, “I want to come at straightness with an interest in actualizing rather than undoing” (157). Ward says that straight men “have created countless rituals, games, art forms, traditions, and spaces designed to explore and pursue their own pleasure, typically in the company of other men.”

The formation of modern heteromascularity is marked by erotic competition among men for women’s bodies, public conquest of women’s bodies as a spectacle for other men, and the construction of sex itself as an act of men’s collective force or manipulation, women’s collective gift or sacrifice, and a cultural encounter in which men’s pleasure is the driving impulse (158).

Ward offers, as an alternative, a practice of “deep heterosexuality,” suggesting “that women and men could feel an attraction to each other that is unstoppable, so expansive, so hungry for the wholeness of the other that it forged strong bonds of *identification and deep mutual regard*” (158).

Ward’s words cut. In the trip undertaken by myself, Pa, and Brother, the outcomes and stories centered by the text of the booklet would surely have been greatly altered were the three core practitioners not all men. The three of us are not particularly boorish; despite character defects affecting relationships with women partners, I and we seem to undergo continued spiritual redemption. Nonetheless, the trio was once seen swaggering through the streets of Bangkok, slapping each other on the back holding victory cigarettes for having defeated some imaginary patriarchal principality. Evenings contained the kinds of jokes men use to assure

ourselves of our inherent straightness while sleeping in the same room. We spent the most vulnerable reaches of the night kneeling each other in the spine whilst our dreams affronted our core beliefs. Ultimately, our role in the world presented as a functional, developing masculinity. Our neurotransmitters spurred the initiation of outcomes previously deemed impossible. We sought out gaps in the institutional safety net, discovered and elucidated patterns of impoverishment, and creatively considered physical solutions to immediate dangers. We were also blinded by a kind of all-or-nothing thinking, ending the trip in a state of inadvisable emotional depletion. We barely escaped the trap of prideful independence which would have altogether prevented collaborations with institutions.

Ward concludes,

While many people remain attached to the notion that embracing men's and women's purportedly unchangeable and complementary differences is the key to heterosexual harmony, this framework has never made a dent in the violence and misogyny that cause straight people to suffer. [...] As an ally to straight people, I wish for them that their lust for one another might be genuinely born out of mutual regard and solidarity. [...] Men who say they love women need to show women the receipts. They *can* do it. You *can* do it. We are here for you.

•

In *Bisexual Married Men*³, Cohen quotes Ochs, “I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge that I have in myself the potential to be attracted – romantically and/or sexually – to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree.” Cohen writes,

Bisexual men who are married to women are thus one of the largest but most invisible queer groups in this country. Their experience is uniquely challenging and joyful, but it is barely represented and often erased as ‘not queer enough’. I believe that Bi+ people are queer, and even in monogamous, ‘straight-passing’ marriages, their queerness matters – in fact, it is fundamental to their lives. It has a huge effect on their relationships, their careers, their worldviews, and their mental health in complex ways that have

³ Robert Cohen. 2023. *Bisexual Married Men. Stories of Relationships, Acceptance, and Authenticity*.

rarely been explored critically. [...] We often feel caught 'in between' straight and queer culture, but we can use that to our advantage and become bridge-builders. We can help normalize queerness within the straight communities that we often inhabit, and we can expand what it means and looks like to be queer at the same time (Ch 1).

Cohen quotes Quentin, who tells his story,

I grew up in a farming community [...] I also grew up in a very conservative Christian subculture. [...] I remember at a very young age, about ten, being attracted to boys and girls. But in the Mennonite culture, I didn't know anybody who was queer. It wasn't talked about. When I did learn what gay was from a cousin, I thought that was the only choice: either you're gay or you're straight. It was a very black-and-white culture. You either are in or you're out, you're saved or you're not, you're going to hell or you're going to heaven. [...] At the Mennonite Bible college, there was no acknowledgment that there was such a thing as guys liking guys. [...] I had a lot of shame about who I was. [...] I was leading teams of Mennonite kids to South Asia, and my wife-to-be came on one of those teams. [...] I still hadn't told her anything about my attraction to men. I thought, marriage is probably gonna take care of that, 'cause I'm attracted to her. [...] With my wife, because of the whole purity thing, we didn't kiss before marriage. We barely held hands. We were just very pure. That's not how we're raising our kids, let's put it that way. [...] In South Asia, men my age were very open with showing affection. They'll hold hands and drink tea together. For me, it was refreshing for there not to be a big, sexual attachment to it, because I'm a very affectionate person. [...] My wife was dealing with depression. She didn't know what was going on with me. So we went to a counseling center, and I came out to her again. I was still framing it as unwanted same-sex attraction, and she was blown away. She had no idea. She felt like, "Is our whole marriage a sham?" Her thoughts immediately went to "He's probably gay." For me, that was really difficult. [...] I had a Mennonite friend who had come out to me. He was a beautiful guy. But he ended up committing suicide, and it was devastating to me. I found out later that he hadn't come out to anybody except for me. [...] There was a part of me that had this desire for our marriage to work, and there was a part of me that wondered how both of us could live out who we were and still for it to work. [...] It's very important to me that I operate out of my values and that I have integrity. I think that's the reason we're separating, because we both have integrity with ourselves, and we realize we may not be able to do that together in a marriage. [...] I know

a lot of men are still closeted. They're just dealing with a lot of shame and depression is a part of that. Anxiety, the fear of getting caught, losing everything. The impact that all those closeted men dealing with this stuff has been on society as a whole – you can't even imagine (Ch. 4).

Out there in the world are fictitious entities which somehow still reliably generate painful sentences. I move through the world in an attempt to enjoy ignorance to what can suddenly cleave me from the herd at any moment. The places I can physically be, the projects I can undertake, the communities where I can belong, are all tempered by a rational fear. What essential parts of myself can I reliably hide, who must I take care to not harm by my very presence, where do I myself perpetuate judgment?

•

In *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl's Notes from the End of the World*, in the chapter *Genie, You're Free*, Thom writes in 2019,

It is a desperate kind of arrogance that leads us to presume to know and judge the reasoning of individuals who have ended their lives. [...] By this logic, we are able to minimize the depth of the effect that suicide has on our individual and collective psyches—to label, diagnose, and thus, control the flood of emotions that suicide leaves in its wake.

Thom writes about the self-chosen death of a male-presenting human of likely ancestry in the western portion of Eurasia, who “was reduced to a passive victim of mental illness, a psychological statistic.” Thom recounts that he:

was anything but passive—he was a ball of lightning; a crackling, cackling devilish laugh; a shape-shifting trickster; a ferocious wit. Why, then, did so many of us decide to tell a different story of who he was after he was gone? And why was that story so tempting? It comes down to, perhaps, the tension between the fantasy that is easy to believe and the complex reality of suicide. [...] In this way, we can avoid asking the terrifying question of why someone we love might choose to leave us. We can turn away from the possibility that, for some of us, such a choice is less unthinkable than others would like to pretend. But the consequences of this willful disbelief is the shaming and infantilization of those who are grappling with their reasons for living versus dying. [...] He struggled with substance dependence and depression, but how are we to know whether these struggles were connected

to interpersonal difficulties, traumas, or any other life experiences? To simply leap over all that complicated, messy humanity is to do grave injustice to a man we claim to mourn and respect. [...] People—all people—do need mental health care of some kind. Many people need psychopharmaceuticals, therapy, and many other kinds of medical attention. But it is also true that [he] had gone to therapy, and he did speak out publicly about his struggles with addiction and depression. He was a man of means, with access to medical resources. He was much loved, and he still made the choice he did. [...] Suicide is always a tragedy, but it is also often a message, a message that points to injustice and suffering in the world that has everything to do with the way we treat each other. [...] Let us honour and respect the choices of those struggling, and those who are now beyond struggle—even if those choices took them from us. And let us keep on working, listening, loving, laughing—laughing and loving, above all—in the hope that, someday, no one ever need make those choices again.

Thom has done me and may others a great kindness. Her compassion leaves nothing more to be said.

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In *Mennonites in American Society: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community*, Toews writes in 1989 of the religious and ethnic identity of my father's parents:

Mennonites are a diverse and motley lot. Included in the extended family are those who have largely rejected Western civilization, resisted modernization [..., and] Mennonites fully integrated into the technological, urban and global culture. [...] Most feel comfortable in the background, out of the limelight. With little fanfare many Mennonites flavor their communities with acts of service and kindness. [...] Mennonites have historically been a people of the soil. [...] The Mennonite story begins with the Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century. The Anabaptists were part of a larger Reformation movement seeking change [...] In rejecting 'state Christianity' they called for religious membership to be based on voluntary commitments. [...] The cost of advancing these ideas [...] was religious persecution and martyrdom (231).

The bestowal of privilege on my family's bodies is a present-day phenomenon, manifested in the successive waves of white supremacy in the United States of America. The resulting material privilege contrasts an

inheritance I often feel in my bones, of landlessness, undeservingness, and fear of impending shifts which will rediscover our convictions as nuisance. Toews continues,

Although Mennonites were scattered and dispersed over different continents and host societies, there were similarities in their exile experiences. [...] geographical and cultural separateness maintained the protective barrier in which continuity with the past could be nourished. The intrusiveness of modernity [...] altered the shape of the Mennonite subculture. American Mennonites at mid-nineteenth century were still largely on the margins of American society (233).

Modernity's pressures ultimately generated the schism with the Amish. The latter drew a lifestyle line in the sands of time, around the start of the 1900s, individually submitting to religiously mediated decisions concerning the use of technologies invented afterwards, up to the present day. Toews alludes to a region called Alsace, in France, which appears my family's history, a temporary Mennonite refuge in a longer migration. After arriving in America, this Mennonite group, "largely of Alsatian origin, was more open to change" (235) than others in the order. My paternal grandparents were the last to dress in the plain style which distinguished them from moderns. My grandmother abandoned her head covering before I was born, and their children married outside the community. My mother's father was a first-generation German manual laborer, and recovered alcoholic, captivated by a beautiful first-generation Polish survivor of orphaning, who would capture the room with a talent for dance.

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In *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*, Sherman writes,

In the United States, social class is a touchy subject, which is vast, amorphous, politically charged, and largely unacknowledged. Free of the aristocratic and monarchial histories and social distinctions of Europe, the United States imagines itself as egalitarian. The American Dream narrative tells us that anyone can make it with hard work and intelligence. This commitment to equality of opportunity has long gone hand in hand with a taboo on explicit conversations about class and money, both among

individuals and in public discourse. For centuries Americans have avoided terms such as *master* and *servant*, which explicitly recognize economic and status differences, in favor of euphemisms such as *help* (5).

It's telling that this paragraph ended up being one of the last written for this project. Sherman mentions that her interviewees, who are wealthy New Yorker households, persistently underplay their wealth, as though it is an embarrassment or a moral blemish. While travelling in impoverished spaces, it is impossible to not feel the effects of wealth at every turn.

Sherman continues,

I have seen such skepticism and judgment among people who have read parts of this work or heard me talk about it, and I have experienced them myself. Indeed, I sometimes find it tricky to describe my subjects' lifestyles and some of their comments without sounding disparaging, because we automatically attach value judgments to these choices. These reactions, I believe, come from the exact assumption I am trying to challenge: that rich people are unpleasant, greedy, competitive consumers. And to ask such questions about my interviewees, from my perspective, is to miss the point. The issue is that they *want* to be hard workers and prudent consumers. Whether they actually *are* is, for one, impossible to adjudicate, because definitions of hard work excess, display, and so on are always relative. More important, attempting to determine the "truth" about wealthy people's actions and feelings ensnares us in precisely the normative distinctions I am questioning. These classifications ultimately legitimate privilege by representing some rich people as "good" while others are "bad" rather than critiquing systems of distribution that produce inequality. My goal is to avoid this kind of orientation in favor of illuminating larger cultural processes of legitimation that are, in the main, taken for granted in the United States.

My time spent among the global poor does lead me to question whether hard work is relative, because their work ethic is layers on layers of gritted psychological resiliency to the endlessly repeating day's worth of suffering, each of which would cause the rest of us to take a month-long vacation. Also, there *is* a moral landscape available to wealthy people who truly wish to examine their lifestyles and make changes. Famously, Jesus said it is

harder for a rich person to enter the realm of heaven than for a rope⁴ to pass through the eye of the needle. There's some hope in that statement.

I am a co-founder and former co-owner of a successful independent video game studio. This was immediately followed by tragic life events, including the death of a co-founder, which suddenly impressed upon me the fleeting nature of worldly life, and filled me with remorse and repentance for a single-minded drive for success. Afterwards, I lived a season of giving to individuals and causes, which in many cases I question whether the money did any good, or even caused damage. For a short bit, I lived without a debit card in a small foreign farming town and semi-successfully got by as a community-supported manual laborer. This confusion of identity eventually led me to an spiritual therapist, who led me through a process of learning humility and appreciating life on its own terms. I remain fantastically more comfortable than the people I live among in Cambodia, or the vast swath of Americans living outside my White world of privilege. I remain worlds apart from the desperation of our Khmer friends who live and work in Thailand. I hope to settle down one day outside the U.S., content without a desperate impeding poverty and with the enjoyment of working sustainably with my hands.

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In *The History of White People*⁵, Painter writes in 2011,

I might have entitled this book *Constructions of White Americans from Antiquity to the Present*, because it explores a concept that lies within a history of events. I have chosen this strategy because race is an idea, not a fact, and its questions demand answers from the conceptual rather than the factual realm. American history offers up a large bounty of commentary on what it means to be nonwhite, moving easily between alternations in the meaning of race as color [...] but little attention has been paid to history's equally confused and flexible discourses on the white races and the old, old slave trade from eastern Europe. [...] Work plays a central part in race talk, because the people who do the work are likely to be figured as inherently deserving the toil and poverty of laboring status. It is still assumed, wrongly, that slavery anywhere in the world must rest on a foundation of racial

4 There is an apparent play on words between “rope” and “camel”.

5 Neil Irvin Painter. 2011. *The History of White People*.

difference. Time and again, the better classes have concluded that those people deserve their lot; it must be something within them that puts them at the bottom (Preface).

Painter says that enslavement on the basis of ethnicity, in antiquity and medieval contexts, often applied to impoverished foreigners whom modern visual sensibilities would classify as White. Slave trades caused geographic reconfigurations of race by the entrapment and forced displacement of bodies. The term *Caucasian* derives from perceptions of beauty in the Eastern European slave trade.

Whiteness remains embedded in visions of beauty found in art history and popular culture. Today most Americans envision whiteness as racially indivisible, though ethnically divided. [...] However, biologists and geneticists (not to mention literary critics) no longer believe in the physical existence of races—though they recognize the continuing power of racism (the belief that races exist, and that some are better than others). It took some two centuries to reach this conclusion, after countless racial schemes had spun out countless different numbers of races, even of white races, and attempts at classification produced frustration. [...] So long as racial discrimination remains a fact of life and statistics can be arranged to support racial difference, the American belief in races will endure. But confronted with the actually existing American population—its distribution of wealth, power, and beauty—the notion of American whiteness will continue to evolve, as it has since the creation of the American Republic (Introduction).

Painter gives a history of light-, peach-, and pale- skinned peoples starting in antiquity, finding in the Roman empire's territorial management schemes an origin story of racial classification. Painter suggests that the turnover point for modern white supremacy arrived with intensifications of eighteenth-century enslavements of Africans in the Americas, driven by concentrated profit, addictive crops, and white monopoly. At that point, whiteness contained only a few European bloodlines. Painter gives four historical enlargements of white identity, each as an exclusion of groups marginalized in American politics and warfare. Painter writes in conclusion,

Although white people may exempt themselves from race, white privilege comes into view as a crucial facet of white race identity. At the same time,

many other characteristics—class, religion, gender, age, able-bodiedness, and sexual orientation—all affect the manifestation of this privilege. Nowadays, whiteness studies analyze the porous nature of contemporary racial boundaries. [...] It is sensible to conclude that *the American* is undergoing a fourth great enlargement. [...] The dark of skin who also happen to be rich (say, people of South Asian, African American, and Hispanic background), and the light of skin (from anywhere) who are beautiful, are now well on the way to inclusion. [...] Ideally we would realize that human beings' short history relates us all to one another. To speak in racial terms, incessant human migration has made us all multiracial. Does this mean the human genome or civil rights or desegregation have ended the tyranny of race in America? Almost certainly not. The fundamental black/white binary endures, even though the category of whiteness—or we might say more precisely, a category of nonblackness—effectively expands. As before, the black poor remain outside the concept of *the American*. [...] Poverty in a dark skin endures as the opposite of whiteness, driven by an age-old social yearning to characterize the poor as permanently other and inherently inferior (Ch. 28)

Observers of my body will recognize that my ethnicities fit the commonly understood criteria for being White, a fact of enormous practical consequence in the present era. In this study, while most of the others we encounter in Cambodia and Thailand do not fit the conventional criteria for being Black, many of the phenomena of White-Black binaries persist in the ambient systems and personal encounters. People of Color, such as our Khmer friends who make their way in Thailand under precarious and dangerous circumstances, encounter a world which racializes them to the point of psychological and bodily harm, a world which is characterized by its adjacency to Whiteness. Painter, a Black author, gives a history of peach-skinned peoples who themselves lived under color wheels which were once variously rotated from their present configurations. The timescales and details yield understanding about patterns which convert porous categories of oppressees into oppressors, and do not negate a racial eschatology in which the most mechanized systems ever to manifest have in the present era affixed Blackness with a severe and inhumane credit score on the world's ledgers. The manner which this system has fallen so harshly on Khmers, and so recently, preaches to me compassionately to

forgive the manner in which I am commonly racialized on Cambodian streets, and of the responsibilities which I do and do not hold.

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In *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva writes in an updated 2022 edition on the politically urgent reality that systemic racism, however much a social construct, nonetheless results in material bodily impoverishment and subjugation for Black people in America in the present day, despite an apparent decline of explicit individual racists.

My dear White progressive, you should know that talk is cheap, that the sign in your yard is meaningless, and that before you criticize your friends, you must examine yourself. Liberal and progressive Whites, the moment you absolve yourself of your racial sins, is when whiteness has seeped deeper into your soul. The struggle to emancipate yourself from whiteness is arduous, messy, and lifelong. Most likely, you will never free yourself completely from whiteness until we abolish systemic racism and the culture it has generated. But this is not a call to apathy, as you still should be responsible, make important personal changes and, more significantly, get involved in social movements to advance racial justice. Another world is possible, but we must all must be actively involved in birthing it! Racism is systemic precisely because it incorporates Whites from all stripes in multiple ways and in various degrees (Preface).

At times I have stepped off the train in the countryside of America and realized uncomfortably how my self-image is constructed to the detriment of White conservative friends and relatives. This paper contains explicit commitments to political causes most commonly recognizable as liberal. Bonna-Silva gives a reminder that I do not gain moral high ground as a simple fact of such advocacy. The project of racial justice, for White liberals, is given to us where it constitutes real work: the family.

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I was born in lands once cared for by the Potawatomi and Miami peoples, lands slowly overtaken by white American soldiers and civilians employing genocide, false religion, and economic domination. In *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History*, Blackhawk writes in 2023 in a chapter titled *The Deluge of Settler Colonialism*,

Leopold Pokagon and his Potawatomi family were fortunate. They had survived the last campaigns of the 'Removal Era,' and remained in their southern Michigan homeland. They continued hunting, trading, trapping, fishing, and harvesting according to the seasonal cycles that had nourished their community since time immemorial. Things were quiet in the autumn of 1838 as seasonal colors surrounded their community, fading as the snows arrived. But such stability was the exception. Earlier that year, U.S. soldiers had driven twelve hundred people from the region's other Potawatomi villages west, while in the South, [...] seven thousand troops organized for Cherokee removal. [...] Pokagon remembered an earlier time when the power of these newcomers remained far less determined. He was raised in the diverse, Algonquian-speaking villages that characterized Great Lakes Indian communities. Life within such villages was comfortable and comparatively prosperous. White settlements were across the Ohio River, and settlers struggled to survive the winters of the Native Inland Sea. His community had traded for generations with various newcomers—French, English, and Native traders who brought streams of products, including silverware, skins, and even silks. [...] The war of 1812, however, had changed much across the region. The defeat of the last military confederation led by the Shawnee leader Tecumseh had extinguished faith.

According to the records I have, my ancestors migrated to America mostly after these events. The harsh reality is that they would not have been able to do so without the displacement of Native peoples. Religious and economic violence in Europe had long commissioned the displacement of Tecumseh's bretheren to make way for White settlers. Blackhawk continues,

Territorial expansion and Indigenous dispossession complicated republicanism and its racial and gendered assumptions. Throughout the early 1800s, western migrants—single white men but particularly white families—recast the foundations of American democracy. In the interior, gender roles differed from those in the East. As white men more easily obtained property, authority came to rest on farms rather than in "middle-class" domestic spheres. Building settlements also required the labors of both men and women. Many of the energies of expansion centered around the daily tasks of farming, and settler families changed American politics. The word *husband*, for example, once meant farmer but came to mean a married man. [...] Whiteness, like Indianness, is a social construction—an ideological

habit that imagines similarities between different social communities. Such racial classifications took decades, even generations, to coalesce. Fueled by Indian dispossession, the Republic's new laws turned emergent social categories into hardened political identities (Ch. 7)

The general, politician, and prophet Tecumseh, who organized and mediated many Native peoples in the region I was raised in, engaged in constant renegotiation of peaceful boundaries with United States powers. In *The Shawnee Prophet, Tecumseh, and Tippecanoe*, the Prophet is quoted, "The land devil has his mouth open again" (Cave 647). Tecumseh often employed spiritual language, arguing famously that it is God who determines the freedom to live on land, that the contracts which sold lands away were invalid on both ends. On the far west side of the continent, where I later wrote this project and where my godparents met and married, the Ohlone peoples were encountering the still-unfolding entity called California, as were inbound white settlers from abroad. Blackhawk writes,

While global trade networks expanded California's economy, the colony remained inexorably tied to Spain. Its main ports of trade crossed the empire—from San Blas in Baja California to Valparaíso and Talcahuano in Chile. [...] While the area was dependent upon the sea for communication and trade, land expeditions also contributed to its formation. California's first heads of cattle and horses arrived not by sea but overland from ranching communities across northern Mexico. [...] Within such hierarchies and global influences, intense and enduring localisms characterized the everyday worlds of Californian Indians. Coastal communities such as the Chumash and Ohlone (Costanoan) lived within missions that included by 1819 over twenty thousand neophytes. Others were attached to nearby towns and ranches. Baptized by the thousands and congregated into colonial labor regimes, coastal Californians did not, however, share the same political and religious identities. Local and inter-tribal differences persisted. [...] Diversity came in many forms, and Spanish colonialism exacerbated Indigenous rivalries and divisions by importing Indigenous peoples from other parts of New Spain (Ch. 8).

The California Mission persists, drawing Native workers and pilgrims all from the Americas to new versions of its secularized projects. It is important for myself to look inward at the narratives and epics which inspired my migration to California, and the spiritual foundations of

settlerism which are tangled with my own, and everybody's, right to a place to rest and be useful. Blackhawk closes the chapter *Foreign Policy Formations*,

Two national 'doctrines' were articulated in 1823. One applied to foreign nations, the other to America's "domestic dependent nations." [...] Each established preclusive federal powers to claim territory within its borders and to limit the claims of other nations. Both shaped the course of domestic and international law and established orthodoxies that deepened the federal government's administrative capacities. Throughout their myriad actions, Native nations shaped these evolving structures of the U.S. nation-state. After 1823, however, they confronted that power without the protection of other foreign nations. While many continued to trade with British allies or encouraged Mexican leaders to reinstate the trading practices that had guided Spanish policy, the centuries-old system of playing rival Europeans against one another was nearly closed. The power of the United States grew ever more expansive throughout each decade that followed (Ch. 8).

As I spend more time overseas, I continue to come to terms with a total loss of faith in the global United States political project. The habits and mannerisms that are harder to kick live alongside hope in the wholesome egalitarian project shared by all who tonight rest on the soils of Turtle Island.

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In *We are OF the Land*, Castro and Cordero relay their Ohlone ancestors' relationship to the land, where we are to understand ourselves as stewards. Cordero says,

We were all indigenous at one point [...] all had a direct relationship with earth [...] everyone has the capacity to understand what it means to be responsible for caring for the Earth. [The Bay Area] is our ancestral homeland so we have a [...] unique responsibility in caring for the land here. But all of you can share in that responsibility.

In another talk hosted by my⁶ university, Cordero says that Ohlone spiritual teachings are essentially the same as that of the Christian Bible: "Love God. Love your neighbor." He speaks of his own academic work

⁶ "my" as in stewarded. Talk witnessed in person.

and the depressingly small number of Native scholars in California. His own doctoral work concerned estimations of the number of converts made by the Spanish missions. He says that one strategy employed by colonial interests was to overestimate the adoption of Catholicism by Native peoples. He says that in truth, reports of conversions were largely fabricated, a fact which undercuts the imperialist justifications of subjugation of Native peoples and the diminution of Native spirituality. The Ohlone, like many other original peoples of the Americas, continue to argue to the United States government, before a higher seat of justice, that “all Native peoples hold an inherent sovereignty that is independent of federal recognition [...] the inherent ‘right’ of Native peoples to self-governance and cultural continuance” (Association of Ramaytush Ohlone).

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In *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*, Saad gives a workbook in 2020:

A personal antiracism tool structured to help people with white privilege understand and take ownership of their participation in the oppressive system of white supremacy. [...] It is important to understand that this is deep, raw, challenging, personal, heartbreaking, *and* heart-expanding work. [...] But if you are a person who believes in love, justice, integrity, and equity for all people, then you know that this work is nonnegotiable. If you are a person who wants to become a good ancestor, then you know that this work is some of the most important work that you will be called to do in your lifetime (Introduction).

I admit that I have completed only four of the thirty chapters in the workbook. I have journeyed further than many into non-White and Indigenous spaces; the work hits sometimes overwhelmingly close to home. Saad writes,

Across my lifetime, I have lived in three different continents: Europe, Africa, And Asia. I have spent just over half of that time living outside the Western world, but that does not mean that the effects of white supremacy have not continued to impact me. I want to be very clear that though I am a Black Muslim woman, I also have a lot of privilege. I do not live in a white supremacist society. The religion I practice is the national religion of the country I live in. I have socioeconomic, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied,

neurotypical, and educational privileges. I have not experienced and cannot speak to the depth of pain that Black people who are descendants of enslaved people across the diaspora experience through racism. [...] I do this work because People of Color everywhere deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, something that white supremacy strips them of. I do this work because I have a voice, and it is my responsibility to use my voice to dismantle a system that has heart me and that hurts Black, Indigenous, and People of Color every day. I do this work because I was called to it, and I answered that call (Introduction).

The challenging archeology of the soul in the pages would have helped me ahead of time in the journey undertaken in this project. Instead, the issues arose painfully and harshly distilled in interpersonal relationships with non-White friends. Saad's chapter, *You and White Saviorism*, contains truths which catch me acutely:

White saviorism seems benign on the surface. Trying to help the marginalized. Trying to "give a voice to the voiceless." Trying to advocate for people who "cannot advocate for themselves." In reality, though, white saviorism is another form of white supremacy.

White saviorism puts BIPOC in the patronizing position of helpless children who need people with white privilege to save them. It implies that without white intervention, instruction, and guidance, BIPOC will be left helpless. That without whiteness, BIPOC, who are seen as inferior to people with white privilege in white imagination, will not survive.

White saviorism is condescending and an attempt to assuage one's own white guilt. It may look like an attempt to make things right, but it only serves to empower people with white privilege by making them feel better about themselves.

I have had many conversations and arguments with non-White brethren in impoverished contexts about the management of physical resources such as farms. My mistakes and frustrations in these interactions seem to arise from a hope that my mind is tangibly useful in these contexts, where my body is unaccustomed and a weak worker under harsh weather and climate. Many times I have later realized the hidden purpose of Indigenous cultural norms as functional immunity to impending modernizing principles. There is valuable information exchanged in these interactions on

both sides. To improve my own role, I must become humble where I view myself as having a strength. Saad says, “You cannot dismantle what you cannot see. You cannot challenge what you do not understand.” In this paper, I draw a parallel between the spiritual redemption of White attitudes and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics anonymous. For me, the two workbooks have blended together.

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In *Understanding White Privilege*, Kendall writes in 2013,

We have created and sustain a pathological system in which our positive sense of self is based on the negative sense of someone else. [...] When we come out of denial or un-anesthetize ourselves, we often feel overwhelmed by white guilt or other feelings we aren't sure how to respond to, become uncomfortable, and return to denial. [...] By exploring the ways that we hold collective guilt and shame individually and in the national psyche, we are better equipped to look at the role that these feelings play in our refusal to address our history genuinely and to understand how personal and collective guilt block us from moving forward. Our first task then is “To become comfortable with the uncomfortable and uncomfortable with the too comfortable.” [...] My belief about guilt, in general, is that it is not terribly useful. [...] White guilt, in particular, can become a quagmire of “I wish I hadn't done that” or “If only I had said something” or “I never know what to say” or “I'm so disappointed in myself.” Frequently what we're hoping will happen is that someone, and a person of color would be the best, will come to our rescue and tell us that “No one would have known what to do,” “We all make mistakes,” “Don't worry, you'll do better the next time” and reassure us that we're really good people after all. [...] I have been blessed a thousand times over as guides and journey-companions, of color and white, have come into my life. They have been generous and forgiving of my lack-of-knowing, my insensitivity, and my inability to understand, while I have always been impatient with myself. [...] I have begun to consider the nature of compassion and to say out loud, “I don't have very much compassion for myself or other white people. That is one of my challenges.” [...] Do I have compassion only for those whom I deem to be ‘good’ whites, thereby separating myself from other whites, from pieces of myself, and my discomfort with them? [...] White people are white people. That is simply part of our identity. And we have been given unearned privileges that affect

each of our lives every minute of every day. Those privileges give us the responsibility, not the guilt, of taking action to dismantle the systems that give us privilege and power (Ch. 7).

White guilt, especially as a subset of religious guilt, has impacted me greatly. For me, it makes sense that Kendall, having also experienced it, is able to offer me helpful insights. The systemic and interpersonal consequences of pathological guilt are many, a fact likely to only compound the guilt for a scrupulous person. The context of healing here can be a soft and compassionate approach to the core issues underlying feelings of inadequacy. It is truth rather than obligations which set us free. What we thought was a wrong turns out to have been neutral. What we learn is wrong turns out to be unintentional, as we turn from automatic blame towards nurtured responsibility.

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In *Billy Graham: Prayer, Politics, Power*, historians in 2021 take on the story of the Evangelical preacher Graham, one of the most well-known figures of all time, said to have preached to an estimated 210 million people. His life and transformation mirror my own. Around the time my family was folded into modern religious and cultural traditions, the theology commonly heard on Sunday resembled the movement of which he was the center. While Graham opposed the expansion of the War in Vietnam, he is implicated in offering ongoing pastoral assent, and explicit political support, to the regime ordering the bombings in Cambodia and Laos, images of which are depicted in the documentary. Graham slowly transformed. He took on an international focus, admitting “You know, I used to think that all those Chinese babies who never had the gospel preached to them were all going to hell. I don’t believe that anymore. My job is to do the preaching, and God’s job is to do the saving.” The stance costed him support. He became “less American, and more global.” He asked the forgiveness of Rabbis, and atoned for his actions. His sister asked him on his deathbed what he’d like to be said about him at his funeral. He replied after a long pause, “He tried to do what he thought he should.”

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In *The Self-Critical Book of Mormon*, Spencer writes in 2015 that *The Book of Mormon* can be understood as a “complex contestation of every text—even itself—that seems destined to justify racism” or which aims to “present history in a complete and consistent manner” (184). In *The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse*, Hickman says in 2014 that *The Book* came forth not only amid pre-Civil War revivalist talk of sin and salvation during the Second Great Awakening, but also emerged in relationship with such Native Prophets as Red Jacket, an Iroquois who “voiced their alternative conception of the continental past and future.” The Prophet Neolin, a Delaware, “was one of the first to articulate a vision of what might be called Amerindian apocalypse” which “promised the triumphant Native repossession of the continent by way of refusing Euro-Christian and restoring and reinventing Native lifeways” (431). Mormons participated in “upsurges of the nineteenth-century Ghost Dance” which was “a religious conversation between native peoples and Mormons, concerning both people’s identity and destiny” (433). White converts, identifying with the Nephite angelic authors of *The Book*, “took very seriously the portrayal of the Indians in the *Book of Mormon* as Lamanites—that is, as literal Israelites ... destined to recover the spiritual and cultural greatness of God’s chosen people” (434). In the mid-1830’s, when the Mormons moved to the frontier slave state of Missouri, “charges of fomenting insurrection among the Indians and harboring fugitive slaves were almost immediately leveled, and some Mormons overzealously deflected those charges in order to secure a place in the sacred circle of whiteness” (434). The histories of the Mormon churches are long, fascinating, and problematic, and can be understood as playing out in a manner predictable from *The Book* itself. In 1985, Northern Ute and Paiute Mormon Lacey Harris said, “When people tell me that my traditions develop from *The Book of Mormon*, I ask, ‘Then why do I have to give up those traditions to be a Mormon?’” (434).

Hickman writes,

The Book of Mormon escorts the reader through several levels of insufficient critique of its foundational racism in order to arrive at a rather audacious insight in antebellum America’s biblicist culture: racism is of such an order as to require nothing less than new ways of reading scripture and, indeed,

new scripture altogether—fresh revelation from God.” And, “The full utterance of Lamanite liberation theology awaits nothing less than the apocalyptic intervention of the very voice of God in the text [in] the resurrected Christ. [...] In Jesus’s millennial scheme, it is not the Indian ‘remnant of Jacob’ that must repent, but rather the white American Gentiles. It is not the Indians who will be gathered into the benevolent fold of white Christian America, but rather repentant white Americans who will be gathered into the American house of Israel. [...] According to *Book of Mormon* eschatology, then, the means to creating Zion was not through a white Christian utopia, but rather “a powerfully and divinely reinstated Indian nation” (451).

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In the imaginative graphic novel by Sciver titled *Joseph Smith and the Mormons*, Joseph Smith was a sinner, as am I. In what may be called *The Books of Nephi, Moroni, and Others*, which Smith spoke forth through reportedly supernatural means for transcription by his wife Emma, translated via two supernatural stones into English from Reformed Egyptian, we read a fascinating study of the lengths angels must go through to sneak carefully worded spiritual insight past human censors. In reading the texts, I nigh damaged my diaphragm in laughter, and wept in sadness and joy. It’s worth discarding every preconceived concept of genre before cracking the spine of a present-day non-brass edition. Here, a few excerpts:



And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness. And the meek also shall increase, and their joy shall be in the Lord, and the poor among humans shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. For assuredly as the Lord liveth they shall see that the terrible one is brought to naught, and the scorner is consumed, and all that watch for iniquity are cut off; And they that make a man an offender for a word, and lay a snare for him that reproveth in the gate, and turn aside the just for a thing of naught. Therefore, thus saith the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob: Jacob shall not now be ashamed, neither shall their face now wax pale.



No tongue can speak, neither can the hearts of humans conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard Jesus speak; and no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard them pray for us unto the Parent. And it came to pass that when Jesus made an end of praying unto the Parent, they arose; but so great was the joy of the multitude that they were overcome. And it came to pass that Jesus spake unto them, and bade them arise. And they arose from the earth, and Jesus said unto them: Blessed are ye because of your faith. And now behold, my joy is full. And when Jesus had said these words, they wept, and the multitude bare record of it, and Jesus took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Parent for them. And when they had done this Jesus wept again; And they spake unto the multitude, and said unto them: Behold your little ones. And as they looked to behold they cast their eyes towards heaven, and they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones about, and they were encircled about with fire; and angels did minister unto them.



And then shall that which is written come to pass: Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child; for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married spouse, saith the Lord. Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thy habitations; spare not, lengthen thy cords and strengthen thy stakes; For thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left, and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles and make the desolate cities to be inhabited. Fear not, for thou shalt not be ashamed; neither be thou confounded, for thou shalt not be put to shame; for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth, and shalt not remember the reproach of thy youth, and shalt not remember the reproach of thy widowhood any more. For thy maker, thy spouse, the Lord of Hosts is their name; and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel—the God of the whole earth shall they be called.



I, Nephi, have written what I have written, and I esteem it as of great worth, and especially unto my people. For I pray continually for them by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night, because of them; and I cry unto my God in faith, and I know that they will hear my cry. And I know that the Lord God will consecrate my prayers for the gain of my people. And the words which I have written in weakness will be made strong unto them; for it persuadeth them to do good; it maketh known unto them of their fathers; and it speaketh of Jesus, and persuadeth them to believe in him, and to endure to the end, which is life eternal. And it speaketh harshly against sin, according to the plainness of the truth; wherefore, no man will be angry at the words which I have written save he shall be of the spirit of the devil. I glory in plainness; I glory in truth; I glory in my Jesus, for they hath redeemed my soul from hell. I have charity for my people, and great faith in Christ that I shall meet many souls spotless at his judgment-seat. I have charity for the Jew—I say Jew, because I mean them from whence I came. I also have charity for the Gentiles. But behold, for none of these can I hope except they shall be reconciled unto Christ, and enter into the narrow gate, and walk in the strait path which leads to life, and continue in the path until the end of the day of probation.



Whoso receiveth this record, and shall not condemn it because of the imperfections which are in it, the same shall know of greater things than these. Behold, I am Moroni; and were it possible, I would make all things known to you. Behold, I make an end of speaking concerning this people. I am the child of Mormon, and my parent was a descendant of Nephi. And I am the same who hideth up this record unto the Lord; the plates thereof are of no worth, because of the commandment of the Lord. For they truly saith that no one shall have them to get gain; but the record thereof is of great worth; and whoso shall bring it to light, they will the Lord bless. For none can have power to bring it to light save it be given them of God; for God wills that it shall be done with an eye single to their glory, or the welfare of the ancient and long dispersed covenant people of the Lord.



And it came to pass that Jared and their sibling, and their families, and also the families of Jared and their sibling and their families, went down into the valley which has northward, (and the name of the valley was Nimrod, being called after the mighty hunter) with their flocks which they had gathered together, male and female, of every kind. And they did also lay snares and catch fowls of the air; and they did also prepare a vessel, in which they did carry with them the fish of the waters. And they did also carry with them deseret, which, by interpretation, is a honey bee; and thus they did carry with them swarms of bees, and all manner of that which was upon the face of the land, seeds of every kind. And it came to pass that when they had come down into the valley of Nimrod the Lord came down and talked with the sibling of Jared; and they were in a cloud, and the sibling of Jared saw them not. And it came to pass that the Lord commanded them that they should go forth into the wilderness, yea, into that quarter where there never had humans been. And it came to pass that the Lord did go before them, and they did talk with them as they stood in a cloud, and gave directions whither they should travel. And it came to pass that they did travel in the wilderness, and did build barges, in which they did cross many waters, being directed continually by the hand of the Lord.



And after this manner did the Holy Ghost manifest the word of God unto me; wherefore, my beloved child, I know that it is solemn mockery before God, that ye should baptize little children. Behold I say unto you that this thing shall ye teach—repentance and baptism unto those who are accountable and capable of committing sin; yea, teach parents that they must repent and be baptized, and humble themselves as their little children, and they shall all be saved with their little children. And their little children need no repentance, neither baptism. Behold, baptism is unto repentance to the fulfilling the commandments unto the remission of sins. But little children are alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world.

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Challenges

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*give me guidance oh lord I need that now
the day of judgement's come
you can bet that I'll be resting for this testing
digesting every word the experts say*

-Genesis

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In *Genesis*, the first book from the *Torah*, Jacob is on a journey, and as the sun sets, they lay their head on a stone for a rest:⁷

וַיַּחְלֶם וַיְהִי סֵלֶם מְצֹב אֲרֻצָּה וְרֵאשִׁי מִגִּיעַ הַשְּׁמַיְמָה וַיְהִי
מִלְאכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים וְיֹרְדִים בּוֹ:

*and-they-dreamed and-behold a-ladder set-up on-the-earth and-the-
top-of-it reached to-heaven and-behold the-angels of-god ascending
and-descending on-it.*

Someone standing above the ladder speaks:⁸

וַיְהִי אֲנֹכִי עֹמֵד וְשָׁמַרְתִּיךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ וַהֲשַׁבְתִּיךָ אֶל
הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אֶעֱזָבְךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם עָשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר
דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ:

*and-behold i with-thee and-will-keep-thee in-all-places whither thou-goest
and-will-bring-thee-again into land this for not i-will-leave-thee until that
indeed which i-have-spoken to-thee of.*

Jacob migrates, works hard for many years, has some problems with love, and labors a lot more. Finally, when they have perspired and prospered, they find a now-rare moment of alone time, where they meet and physically wrestle with a mysterious divine figure. Jacob, barely holding

7 Genesis 28:12. Transcriptions from Strong's.

8 Genesis 28:15.

onto a headlock, whimpers, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”
The figure ends the match and says,⁹

לֹא יִעֲקֹב יֹאמֵר עוֹד שְׁמֶךָ כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי שָׁרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹהִים
וְעִם אָנָשִׁים וְתוֹכַל:

no jacob shall-be-called more thy-name but indeed israel for thou-hast-contended with god and-with humans and-hast-prevailed.

A great many events follow. This section contains a collection of texts which have helped me through difficult questions and times, addressing issues which intensify while existing in unfamiliar spaces and working on challenging projects. Take what you like and leave the rest.

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In *Reclaiming the Fire*, Steen writes,

People of all ages and backgrounds turn addictively to sex and love rather than the substance of their souls for sustenance. [...] These are not merely philosophical musings; the soul’s longing may be so intense that it can drive people to suicide and murder. For some people, discovering and cultivating a meaningful connection to their creative source and energy may be a matter of life and death (4). [...] Creativity, sex, and romantic love are all charged with affect and are highly intoxicating, with a pleasurable effect as well as a painful, traumatic, chaotic, and confusing effect (5). [...] There is a dearth of writing on the intersection of addiction and creativity and even less curiosity about the soul’s yearning as opposed to an emphasis on pathology (6).

I have dated cross-culturally, with very human outcomes which result in me still single and performing self-improvement work, with a bit more to go before I’m ready to give another effort at love. Wrapped up in intercultural love are an infinity of painful and joyful realities that implicate my defects of character greatly, and shine light on the challenges that whole people groups face in living on the same planet together. Processing my relationships has involved coming ever closer to grips with problems I share with many Whites and Americans, and also many unique to me. I have included in this paper many descriptions of my (de)faults, especially those relevant to a discussion of the United States’ responsibility to the

⁹ Genesis 32:28.

world following the post-World War era of overconfidence, control, and superiority complex, traits which are some of my own most observable defects.

Steen quotes Schierse Leonard,

Just as an individual can be hostage in the abyss of addiction, so can an entire epoch or culture. This is true for our epoch, which is plunged into the World's Night. Western civilization is experiencing a Dark Night of the Soul due to our self-asserting will to control, epitomized by the technology that we expect to provide us with a secure, happy, and comfortable life. What is described here in cultural terms is exactly the primary description of the addict to be found in the [Twelve Steps] Big Book: "self-will run riot" (22).

Leonard writes in particular about love addiction, a topic which I was hesitant to put in this paper out of simple embarrassment:

In romantic addiction, the loved person is just like a drink or a drug for the substance addict. If the romance has been lost, the longing for the "lost lover" is similar to the longing for a drink. The bottom, too, is similar. The addicted lover feels powerless, humiliated about the endless repetition and impossibility of having the loved one and faces an existential death—either to give up the addictive love object or to lose the soul. Sometimes this is acted out in suicide. At this point like any addict, the love addict has the existential choice to choose authentic life or become one of the "living dead" (23).

The availability of love in our lives is one of the hardest things to leave up to a higher power, and also perhaps the most important. Humans are, famously, the worst judges of who is best for us as romantic partner and friend. For men, who struggle especially with loneliness, seeking to be a nurtured soul that enjoys working quietly will help us through the days. When the arrow falls from the sky, as it famously does at the exact moment we are thoroughly occupied with something else, it's also important to act, and with confidence.

The topic turns out to fit this paper well, and provide a bridge for the sections which follow. Leonard again:

Addiction to this impossible romantic love really expresses our restlessness for the divine. Only when this desire is understood symbolically to be a

desire for the wedding with the divine, can it take us beyond our everyday experiences and open us to the mystery and its creative expression in the world.

There are echoes here of the epochal end of *Revelation* discussed below, the marrying of the Church with the Christ. This paper will often return to the theme that the individual and the culture share analogous challenges, weaknesses, and possibilities.

Steen quotes Moustaka concerning the practice of *indwelling*:

Indwelling requires that one remain with one's anger and return to it again and again, until one is able to depict it fully in words and pictures, and perhaps even in creative expressions such as poetry, artworks, movements, and narratives. [...] Indwelling is a painstaking, deliberate process. Patience and incremental understanding are the guidelines. Through indwelling, the heuristic investigator finally turns the corner and moves toward the ultimate creative synthesis that portrays the essential qualities and meanings of an experience (39).

Steen's gives another practice called *active imagination*, in which one carefully and calmly "dreams while awake" to help the subconscious air out some of its crunchy content, allowing one to address unresolved patterns, feelings, and situations. The practice apparently reduces the intensity of regular deep-sleep dreaming, a helpful possibility for those like myself who are sometimes plagued with nightmares. Leonard again,

There is a parallel process occurring in the psyche of the addict and the creative person. Both descend into chaos, into the unknown underworld of the unconscious. Both are fascinated by what they find there.

In the early stages of this project, I was speaking with an advisor about loneliness, and he encouraged me to really dig through the feeling and find a way to incorporate it into the project. Loneliness has become an intensified feature of the modern world. At the very least, we are not alone in our loneliness. Real, physical systems aggressively intermedicate our spirits. They are increasingly successful. This literal isolation between each other and with ourselves produces the feeling of loneliness, which for me is a defining kind of suffering. At times, all I have wanted from the culture, is an acknowledgement that my loneliness, personal problems, and existential

shock at the world's changes are not *only* due to a failure in personal growth. There's a joke that frames society as saying, "Be yourself!" Moments later, society has regrets, pleading, "No, not like that!" Loneliness, we find, is highly related to the creative impulse, and so carries with it a deep longing to birth into the world expressions of our *lone* passionately experienced hope for the world, inviting community. The more that intrusive systems thrash the soul of community on the floor of evacuated comfort, the more we will find people like you, the reader, who prove that the future is far more expansive in the human spirit than it is profitable to claim. And so, I have crawled into my own personal safety net for almost two years, preparing for future projects and writing this paper for you, myself, and the holy name. I'm excited for you to read it.

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In *Spiritual Addiction: Searching for Love in a Coldly Indifferent World*, Wyner describes, in 2022, spiritual addiction as "a felt compulsion to seek surrogates in the absence of a spirit of unconditional love"

This paper will demonstrate how the presence of unconditional love is paramount to core personality change—Its surrogates [...] are rooted in a collective prejudice toward truth itself (1).

Wyner describes a therapist who is an "atheist of good faith" for whom religious faith seemed "manifestly separable from the spirit of a truly good or moral life." We are encouraged to "look and see for ourselves what is truly worthy of our deepest trust."

Such a spiritual religion of the heart calls us toward potentially endless creative development on the stable foundation of truth (4).

Wyner's case study is a patient in a profound spiritual hole, involving addictions to electronics, alcohol, and cannabis. The patient imagines his therapist, parents, relatives, friends, and social world "shaking their heads at him for being a failure or a loser without a job." In a low moment, he dissociates, downing shots of whiskey in shame. Breakthroughs began when the therapist "seemed able to hold a true hope for him, which [the patient] could not yet see for himself."

His therapist's awareness of this objective truth about the patient's condition also brought with it a kind of moral power [...] This power seemed greater than the therapist and the patient themselves (8).

Likewise, breakthrough which was to come involved a transformation in both the therapist and the patient. The patient gave the therapist the realization of their own need for a "more intimate and continuous experiential connection with that spirit of truth and love that could alone make tangibly present the meaning, purpose, and primary value of human life" (8). Wyner says the patient's symptoms of withdrawal and substance tolerance are related to confusions about whether "alcoholism is a neurobiological *disease*, necessitating life-long abstinence" (9). The patient wishes for a freedom to drink, and also a freedom to not drink, and begins with neither.

Wyner cites critiques of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), a collection of group therapy communities which are "the most widespread, if not the only, kind of treatment to those suffering from addiction." According to AA, the addict must hit "rock bottom" before they can realize the disease at the root of the addiction, and "the necessity of surrendering [their] will to a higher power." Wyner comments,

How is such a wholly dependent relationship supposed to enable the addict to play even a collaborative role in one's own recovery? (11).

Concerning the AA practice of counting one's days of sobriety, Wyner cites a criticism that "restarting from zero is the dark side of this tradition" that "it is both punitive and unrealistic" and "likely to feed the self-condemnation that already seems to be driving the patient's addiction" (11). On the other hand,

The longer one is able to [maintain the reformed habit]—and this is almost universally by means of positive reinforcement from one's social surroundings—the greater the power to retain that progress (13).

Surrender to a higher power is described positively:

A willing surrender to what one increasingly sees to be of the highest value for one's life, along with surrendering previously held prejudices obstructing one's way to that good. This kind of surrender implies no rejection nor the

self or one's will or freedom [...] It might be compared to a willing commitment to a partner within a collaborative relationship (12).

Wyner writes,

We live in a culture that frequently treats people with addictions as if their problem was caused by a moral deficiency ... even though this is not true. [...] What is motivating the addiction is not mere subjective feelings or instinctual drives, but precisely false or conflicting beliefs about moral values or moral reality (15).

He says that a "child feels uniquely loved, not only because the child is inherently loveable and thus should be loved, but because the child is loved." Wyner says we are all hit by the realization that we have lacked this unconditional love from others. The patient is quoted:

My present concern is how to move forward in life given my growing realization that the prejudices I've imbibed do not align with my current values. [...] I am aware that I am sitting on the fence of indecision, which is increasingly moving me to take to heart my own measure of responsibility (17).

Wyner says that what we need "is not to deny, run from, or medicate-away this pain, but to heed what it has to teach us [...] to lift rather than lower the moral bar by looking for guidance from the spiritually healthiest or most unconditionally loving in our collective history" (17). Wyner recommends we consider "the practical implications of such a collectively unmet spiritual need and why the moral weakness or powerlessness at issue runs far deeper than one's individual willpower." He concludes,

The treatment 'tool' is you and me. It does not require that we become 'great' thinkers or philosophers, medical doctors or psychologists, scientists or priests. [...] Perhaps we are all children; all climbing a mountain that at its peak may only reveal one new horizon after another beyond our ability to fathom (22).

Wyner has done me personally a great service by elucidating tensions which have long weighed on me, as someone who has accepted, rejected, and come to terms with both the identities of *substance*, *love*, and *spiritual addict* and *person affected by alcoholism and attachment disorder*. I first read the paper in the context of unconditional love described in the section

of my booklet titled *Home Truths*, in the room gifted to our traveling group by Sister Skia upon arriving in Bangkok. There, I wondered greatly about my purpose, despaired about the nature of world, and wondered forward to possibilities matching nothing I'd yet been told. Issues of addiction, dysthymia, loneliness, powerlessness, and spiritual wandering continue to affect my daily life. I have learned somewhat to rely on what feels worthy of trust, gaining the confidence to give a simple no when asked to do to myself what another says is the only thing that helped them. For myself, if not for everybody, recovery has come to mean doing and believing less.

•

In *Queering Mennonite Literature*, Cruz writes in 2019 about “how to respond to and rehabilitate a traumatic tradition in hopeful ways,” imploring us that “better, queerer futures” are possible, as we learn to “merge things, rather than balance them”, creating “new things that are mixtures of genres or categories [we’ve] been told are incompatible.” In *The Double Glory, Or Paradox Versus Dialectics*, Milbank writes in 2009,

In the field of discourse, we often do not identify a mediating position all at once, and must pass through the intellectual struggle between position and counterposition. [...] Certain questions may remain obstinately aporetic, either because of our cultural limitations or because we can, in the nature of things, catch only an imperfect glimpse of a final resolution, “the absolute truth.”

In *A Theology of Failure*, Rose writes,

To recognize that inconsistency is the condition of both possibility and impossibility of any identity is to become free to relate to others not as the thing which can complete us or carry the blame for our incompleteness, but as things in themselves. [...] Can we give what is asked to those who demand it for us without narcissism, without self-congratulation, without tenderness? [...] Are we capable of giving simply because we are asked, without burdening those to whom we give with our good intentions or guilt? [...] On an account of Christian identity as the community that forms around the question of what it means to be faithful to Christ, it becomes possible to hope that the church too will come to understand itself in relation to its own constitutive antagonism than in contrast to its others. [...] To be a Christian is to occupy a curious position in the contemporary world, both progenitor of

the universal self-conception of Western secularism and the embarrassing elder that this new world seeks to leave behind. [...] Theology *is* failure; the task, then, is to fail better, to liberate our others in order to begin the difficult work of learning how to love them (Conclusion).

I am certainly no stranger to failure, and wonder if this entire paper does not fit the description. It is possible that my use of a particular substance, tetrahydrocannabinol (the active ingredient of the hemp plant) throughout the majority of this document's writing, has rendered it illegible to the usual reader and given it a lost plot. It is also possible that I smoked the exact amount that I was going to with or without the ethic of retrospect, and that it is sometimes worthwhile to fail and to say so. God has the power to decide.

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In *Reevaluation of the Blissful Neuronal Nutraceutical*, Nadar et al examine, in 2022, scriptural passages which may be construed as references to cannabis, or marijuana. In *Exodus*, the second book of the *Torah*, Moses lives in exile from their people, and one day:¹⁰

וַיִּנְהַג אֶת-הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֵא אֶל-הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֲרֵבָה׃
וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלִבְתַּת אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּינָה וַיֵּרָא וַיְהִי
הַסִּינָה בַעַר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּינָה אֵינָנו אֹכֵל׃

and-they-led this the-flock to-the-backside of-the-desert and-came to the-mountain of-god to-horeb. and-an-angel of-the-lord appeared unto-them in-a-flame of-fire out-of-the-midst of-a-bush and-they-looked and-behold the-bush burned with-fire not consumed.

If the verses are indeed a subtextual reference to the hemp plant, known to have grown naturally since antiquity, it is of note that unlike a bud of cannabis, the spiritual realities revealed in the bush do not burn up. The words Moses hears in the voice from the bush bring Moses to an unexpected spiritual and political understanding:¹¹

10 Douay-Rheims translation. *Exodus* 3:1,2.

11 *Exodus* 3:7,8.

רֵאִיתִי אֶת־עֲנִי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקוֹתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי
 נֹגְשָׁיו כִּי יִרְעֵתִי אֶת־מְכַאֲבָיו: וְאֶרְדָּ לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם
 וּלְהַעֲלֵתוֹ מִן־הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל־אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה אֶל־אֶרֶץ
 זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ:

*surely i-have-seen the-affliction of-my-people which in-misrayim and their-cry
 have-heard by-way of-their-taskmasters for i-know of their-sorrows. and-i-
 come-down to-deliver-them out-of-the-hand of-the-misrayim and-to-bring-
 them-up out-of that land uno a good land and-a-large unto a-land flowing
 with-milk and-honey*

The name of the oppressed people is *Israel*, the ancestors whom Moses has tried to forget in a new life far away. Moses, according also to the retelling of the story in Islam, teams up with their sibling Aaron to petition the Pharaoh to let God's people go to a free life. The Pharaoh is stubborn, but God gives Moses the power of light from Moses' palm, and a staff often wielded by Aaron, to cast fearsome insight and frightening plagues onto the Egyptians. Pharaoh eventually relents, letting God's people go, but immediately chases the people down. God opens a dry pathway through the Red Sea, through which the people escape, and which closes in force destroying Pharaoh's army. Israel wanders toward their promised land, but are destined to take the long route, turning from and to the path of God many times. Nonetheless, God provides them with bread from heaven for sustenance. At the moment they are ready, the bread ceases to fall, and a new leader, Josue, stands with a new generation, born of the desert, overlooking adversaries who block the way forward. In a series of miracles, the adversaries are vanquished save for one, a frowned-upon woman named Rahab, an ancestor of Jesus. The people of Josue disobey by plundering the ruins, but repent and establish themselves in the land. God reluctantly permits them to be ruled by a king. The third king, Solomon, is wise, but his sins result in the realm splitting in two: Judah and Israel. Israel is conquered by Assyria and the people exiled. Another empire, Babylon, bears down on the remnant in Judah, where a prophet named Jeremiah is born.

•

In the Sufi *Book of Strangers*, Dallas's protagonist visits their hashish dealer, to return their remaining stash of cannabis. The dealer says, "You have given it up?" The protagonist: "No. It gave me up." The dealer is delighted:

Ah! It is the God has taken it away from you. That is something else. That is very important.

The freely available *Life With Hope*, from Marijuana Anonymous, begins thusly:

How can we tell you how to recover? We cannot. All we can do is share with you our own experiences and recovery.

The book asks,

Who is a marijuana addict? We who are marijuana addicts know the answer to this question (Introduction).

The book's foundation is in the Twelve Steps, a set of spiritual and physical actions which are meant to be undertaken in community. The Steps involve coming to belief in and forming a relationship with a higher power of one's own understanding. They comprise three phases: Peace with God, Peace with Oneself, Peace with Others. Valerie Mason-John, the author of *Detox Your Heart*, subscribes to a Buddhist version of the Steps, compressed to Eight¹²:

1. *We accept that this human life will bring suffering.*
2. *We realize that we create more suffering in our lives.*
3. *We embrace the fact that there is an end to suffering.*
4. *We are willing to step onto recovery's path and discover freedom.*
5. *We transform our speech, actions, and livelihood.*
6. *We place positive values at the center of our lives.*
7. *We make every effort to stay on the path of recovery.*
8. *We help others in kindness, sharing our recovery with others.*

¹² Lightly adapted from the author's website.

Keep coming back, it's working!

•

In *The Highly Sensitive Person*, Aron has recommendations for those who often experience feelings of overwhelmedness. She suggests getting lots of sleep, and spending plenty of time alone during time periods of high stress. She says that the trait of high “environmental sensitivity”, while often a source of distress, also allows one to “pick up on the positive more than others would.” Aron continues,

If you tend to be depressed or anxious, it may mean that you were more affected by a difficult childhood [...] than other adults with similar childhood experiences. [...] While someone might tell you that you are making too much of your childhood problems, [the differential susceptibility] research says you are probably not. You really were more affected and would benefit or have already benefited from help if you sought it, even if others would not feel the need (Ch. 1)

Such a highly sensitive person “is prepared to live in a very negative world, among other people who are stressed by it.” In *The Depression Book*, Huber recommends recording and listening to one’s own voice, “to see the cause of your suffering, to accept where you are, to embrace yourself in compassion, to let go and end the suffering.” She says that getting past depression is not as important as the way one treats oneself while they are depressed. In *The Lifechanging Magic of Tidying Up*, Kondo suggests that the state of our minds reflects the state of all the physical objects that we own, and gives a program for examining each one to decide whether to keep it or replace it, the usual result being a substantial decluttering of home and mind. In *Self-Compassion*, Harper suggests that self-compassion is more important than self-esteem, and quotes Marshall Rosenberg,

An important aspect of self-compassion is to be able to empathically hold both parts of ourselves—the self that regrets a past action and the self that took the action in the first place.

•

In *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South*¹³, Simone comments on zones of “uninhabitability”. He articulates well an unsettling sense I’ve had during my travels, when approaching or surpassing the thresholds of critically impoverished spaces. He writes, “Lands that embodied inferiority and, once appropriated and settled through colonization, were further specified as the exclusive purview of those whose emplacement was to be considered ‘incongruous with humanness’” (Ch. 1). He quotes Katherine McKittrick: “It hurts to live always undone and unfinished. It is heartbreaking. It is heartbreaking even when the impossibility is joyful or you catch a glimpse of a life outside that inflexible weight” (Ch 1). Simone asks, “What if the uninhabitable enabled a kind of thinking that challenged or refused what it means to viably inhabit a place?” (Ch 1). Simone names these patterns *rhythms of endurance*:

I want to look at the uninhabitable as a lure, how it draws one into a place and situation in a way that does not describe or account for it. Rather, it pulls one into its shifting terrain, fuzzy boundaries, its vibrations and rhythms [...] Mud walls, broken concrete, oil spills, toxic fumes, riven bodies, stomped feet, wild gestures, attentive gazes – all these elements dance with each other as curling smoke, momentary anthems, sometimes embracing each other as repeated refrains in the cold mornings and anxious nights. Everything is packed into a density of contact, of the discrepant rubbing up against each other in multiple frictions, sparks that ignite chain reactions, the webs of many crammed causations looking out for any possible vehicle of release (Ch 1).

In my time in Cambodia and elsewhere, my memory often creaks in attempts to incorporate the sensory confusion all about, to communicate an essential loneliness to friends and family who feel impossibly distant in geography and attitude. As a psychological disposition, I am particularly sensitive to incongruity; the inability to close a gap manifests as a profound intolerability. Nonetheless, the process is not without threads of resolution. The consummation of efforts, the traversing of experiential terrains, is metaphorized in Simone’s description of physical migration routes: “All

13 AbdouMaliq Simone. 2018. *Improvised Lives. Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South*.

passages to avoid becoming voids of the middle, still have to take place along corridors. They still need vehicles of transit, for even djinns and ghosts have geographies” (Ch. 1).

•

At some point, it became clear I too require conceptual vehicles to comport with the usual manner of writing academic texts. In *Super Apocalypso 64: Inhabiting Revelation as a Video Game Made of Sacred Worlds*, Jones writes in 2022,

Αποκαλύπτω (apocalypso) is the biblical Greek verb for causing something to be fully known, in the sense of an “unveiling” via revelation, or ἀποκάλυψις (apocalypsis). The book of Revelation makes the divine reality of Scripture known to audiences via the vision articulated by John. They convey this divine reality through words – both read and heard – which call for more than the passive reception of a static text. Rather, Revelation is a living and life-giving conveyor of divine reality. It is also participatory; its words are meant to be read, heard and kept in the life of faith (1).

Jones writes a specialized kind of document, one which spoke to me to the core, as a neuroatypical video game enthusiast raised Protestant in the nineties. Jones says,

I confess that I am speaking as a Protestant Christian who is convinced that play, particularly video games, has theological value in clarifying difficult theological concepts with the language of everyday life. Having said that, there are limits to what this paper can accomplish and who this paper addresses. First, it is hard to see how this paper could be used in a traditional Bible study; it ventures outside the orthodox sensibilities of pious and intellectual scholars of the text. Yet, this idea of a video game made of sacred words encourages both believing and religiously-uncommitted players to keep the text alive in their thought-life. Hopefully, this will move players who are skeptical of sacred texts toward reading Revelation on their own terms, with openness to the Spirit’s guidance (13).

It’s hard to understate the effect that *Revelation* has had on my life, so much so that grappling with it in this paper has become one of its most important themes. Jones gives fifteen “courses” in *Revelation’s* narrative, which I have not perfectly followed in the structure of this paper. I

continue to find myself in the mode of *inhabiting* the Apocalypse, because it is already enveloping me.

•

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin writes in 1963, of joining his local Christian congregation in Harlem, New York as a youngster in the 1930s,

The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord. [...] Their pain and their joy were mine, and mine were theirs—they surrendered their pain and joy to me, I surrendered mine to them—and their cries of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” and “Yes, Lord!” and “Praise His name!” and “Preach it, brother!” sustained and whipped on my solos until we all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing, at the foot of the altar. [...] I rushed home from school, to the church, to the altar, to be alone there, commune with Jesus, my dearest Friend, who would never fail me, who knew all the secrets of my heart (34).

Baldwin has a crisis of faith:

It happened, as things do, imperceptibly, in many ways at once. I date it—the slow crumbling of my faith, the pulverization of my fortress—from the time, about a year after I had begun to preach, when I began to read again. I justified this desire by the fact that I was still in school, and I began, fatally, with Dostoevsky. By this time, I was in a high school that was predominantly Jewish. This meant that I was surrounded by people who were, by definition, beyond any hope of salvation, who laughed at the tracts and leaflets I brought to school, and who pointed out that the Gospels had been written long after the death of Christ. This might not have been so distressing if it had not forced me to read the tracts and leaflets myself, for they were indeed, unless one believed their message already, impossible to believe. I remember feeling dimly that there was a kind of blackmail in it. People, I felt, ought to love the Lord *because* they loved Them, and not because they were afraid of going to Hell. I was forced, reluctantly, to realize that the Bible itself had

been written by men, and translated by men out of languages I could not read (35).

Baldwin writes of the coupling of Christian theology with American white supremacy:

I knew that, according to many Christians, I was a descendent of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave. This had nothing to do with anything I was, or contained, or could become; my fate had been sealed forever, from the beginning of time. And it seemed, indeed, when one looked over Christendom, that this was what Christendom effectively believed. It was certainly the way it behaved. [...] White Christians have also forgotten several elementary historical details. They have forgotten that the religion that is now identified with their virtue and their power came out of a rocky piece of ground in what is now known as the Middle East before color was invented, and that in order for the Christian church to be established, Christ had to be put to death, by Rome, and that the real architect of the Christian church was not the disreputable, sun-baked Hebrew who gave it its name but the mercilessly fanatical and self-righteous St. Paul. The energy that was buried with the rise of the Christian nations must come back into the world; nothing can prevent it (44).

Baldwin's essay on Christianity turns global:

Many of us, I think, both long to see this happen and are terrified of it, for though this transformation contains the hope of liberation, it also imposes a necessity for great change. But in order to deal with the untapped and dormant force of the previously subjugated, in order to survive as a human, moving, moral weight in the world, America and all the Western nations will be forced to reexamine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long. "The white man's Heaven," sings a Black Muslim minister, "is the black man's Hell." One may object that this puts the matter somewhat too simply, but the song is true, and it has been true for as long as white men have ruled the world. The Africans put it another way: When the white man came to Africa, the white man had the Bible and the African had the land, but now it is the white man who is being, reluctantly and bloodily, separated from the land, and the African who is still attempting to digest or to vomit up the Bible. The struggle, therefore, that now begins in the world is extremely complex, involving the historical role of Christianity in the realm of power

and in the realm of morals. [...] The Christian church itself sanctified and rejoiced in the conquests of the flag, and encouraged, if it did not formulate, the belief that conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of the Western populations, was proof of the favor of God. God had come a long way from the desert—but then so had Allah, though in a very different direction. God, going north, and rising on the wings of power, had become white, and Allah, out of power, and on the dark side of Heaven, had become black. [...] It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being must first divorce themselves from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving (47).

Baldwin reflects on a dinner with the honorable Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam:

Black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah's table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God's—or Allah's—vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?* I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable—a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot really be executed by, any person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, "Whatever goes up must come down." And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!* (106).

I have often struggled with the notion of a wrathful and vengeful God. By including these longer quotations from Baldwin's essays, I identify with the intense spiritual experience he describes, including acute conversion and agonizing apostasy. I also ensure that the body of this paper contains discussions without which it could not approach completion as a document

ready for translation into Khmer, for residents of a country dominated by technocapitalist bookstores. Baldwin addresses racial injustice and religious spirituality as interconnected topics, and braves the danger of commenting too coarsely about too much complexity. A courage to not cede the discursive middle is a quality one may come to recognize as scriptural. Baldwin explicitly names Blackness as convivial with Islam. If true, we may understand academic and personal preoccupation with the Judeo-Christian as a source of confusion about our roles as active participants in the perpetuation or overcoming of racial injustice. When young, I often imagined the end of the world as a militarized autocracy which pushes shivering, longsuffering, wholesome believers underground, with God's justice for the oppressed arriving in another spiritual dimension after death. I've come to wonder if God's justice has already showed us its earthly form, which a complacent and complicit Christian institution has not recognized. The Qur'an says that while forgiveness and turning the other cheek is best, that oppressed peoples who fight their oppressors with equally apportioned response will not be blamed. That, indeed, were it not made lawful in God's eyes to actively resist, with weapons approaching the firepower wielded by aggressors, that the houses of worship of every religion would all become destroyed. In Islam, those with the strongest weapons find disarmament, because they are given self-defense. God, who we also understand foremost to be gracious and loving, when described as punishing and disapproving, grates the ears, but perhaps mercifully less so than the presence of impoverishment and suffering grate the eyes.¹⁴ The spiritual world contains gateways between the irreconcilable. In an ostensibly academic paper such as this, what does the world of survival labor migration in predominantly Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia have to do with Islam? What, except for everything?

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In *Running out? Rethinking resource depletion*, Kirsch writes,

Since the 1970s, environmentalists have warned that overconsumption, especially of minerals and fossil fuels, will lead to resource depletion. But

14 In *Forgive*, Christian pastor Timothy Keller reaches a similar conclusion.

there are compelling reasons to question the assertion that we are running out (1).

In particular, “there has never been as much copper, silver, and gold available for human consumption as there is today.” Further,

The majority of metals remain available for recycling, which is generally less expensive, uses less energy, and has fewer environmental impacts than extracting minerals from the earth. The threat posed by climate change from continued use of fossil fuels, and the impacts of environmental degradation caused by resource extraction, demand greater attention than the misleading specter of peak oil or running out of metals (1).

In *Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*¹⁵, the prognosis is direr, implicating all manner of societal systems, suggesting that the problem cannot be reduced to a simple accounting of carbon:

Climate change, which highlight in painful colour the head-on crash between civilisation and ‘nature’; which makes plain [...] how the machine’s need for permanent growth will require us to destroy ourselves in its name. Climate change, which brings home at last our ultimate powerlessness.

Kingsnorth says in an interview,

We’re crossing all of the planetary boundaries. Society is unsustainable in every way ecologically, culturally, spiritually (Weiss).

For traveling practitioners whose actions have consequences for the consumption of resources, the choice to purchase a plane flight is a fearsome and painful moment. A naïve abstinence from the consumption of jet fuel is not a full accounting of all true externalities. It is a strange truth that one can purchase a round trip plane flight to Cambodia from the West Coast of the Americas, live there for three months, and return having spent less money than if one were to undergo the cost of living in the United States for the same period.¹⁶ One heuristic for minimizing one’s personal externalities is to spend as little simple money as possible. It can both true that all money is blood money, and that some purchases have

15 Paul Kingsnorth. 2019. *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*.

16 There has been venture-capital scale funding for sustainable raft-like cities on the sea, and hyper-sonic fossil-fueled international travel, while we remain in lack of modern solar-powered passenger oceanliner voluntourist hostels.

greater externalities than others. It is not clear that there is one unique and context-independent answer. Decisions are best made in community, with rest, wisdom, and courage.

•

In the video game *Astroneer* (System Era), of which I am a contributor, the player takes the role of a hopping astronaut dispatched to reaches of the galaxy to survive and industrialize. The gameplay and environments are apparently representative of White and colonial attitudes which envision foreign environments as essentially void of sentient life, which offer up their resources and enjoyment for exploitation without much consequence, to bravely constructed agents given the forgiveness of perpetual failure. The game may be interpreted as allowing the player the pleasure of simulating participation in colonial violence, in a similar fashion that war simulations allow the gamer to playact physical violence. As such, we may ask analogous questions about whether such games encourage or pacify violent tendencies of young neocolonial-era players, who in the real world are placed consequentially in contact with a global other, characterized by the inability to afford the requisite computer hardware required to play. As with the prosaically violent games of the golden era, it has become important and common for video game developers to be actively critical of the narratives and possibilities offered by the designed game mechanics, opening up worthy and beautiful pathways for meaning-made worlds.

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In the collection *Our Women on the Ground* (Hankir), in the essay *Words Not Weapons*, Elnoor writes of doing journalism in dangerous situations, opening with an account of a dilemma where she was pressured by her employer to uphold the party line of institutions committing acts of violence:

I was instructed to repeat those expressions and inject them into my news reports, with no regard to ethics. What an unbearable moral crisis! [...] After some thought, I opted to quit. [...] I learned from this experience that there was only one way for me to be a journalist. What value does journalism really have if it doesn't accurately serve the people and reflect the street as it is?

The experience lends Elnoor the courage to expand her career, and endure a physically dangerous journey to interview a vilified politician and military leader,

The area I visited didn't fall under state jurisdiction; the tribes and their militias had full autonomy, and I was at their mercy. Moving from place to place as a journalist, especially on missions like these, constitutes a grave risk. You must coordinate with a person who has the authority to guarantee your personal safety and to facilitate your movements. [...] This was the first time I'd traveled in a military vehicle. Mixed feelings washed over me: fear and anxiety, but also excitement and adrenaline. [...] It dawned upon me afterward what I'd accomplished: a distinguished feat of journalism, the result of a life-altering risk.

Elnoor is later arrested at a border, spending nights in detention and a hospital, and writes, "They clearly felt threatened by me, an independent journalist who had interviewed the leader of a deadly militia. They simply couldn't believe a reporter could be independent". I'm awed by Elnoor's courage, a kind I don't know if I could ever personally summon, as my own experiences have offered only the ability to imagine. I consider what it would take to work further beyond the walls of safety than I have traversed such far. Elnoor concludes,

Though these experiences have had high prices, they haven't weakened or deterred me. I have no other option but to move forward, like the many brave journalists who face persecution. This is our destiny, and we remain ever devoted to it.

•

In *Sharing the Load: Amish Healthcare Financing*, Rohrer writes in 2016 of a group of Old Order Amish, a subset of the Plain community, put their bodies on the line by consciously rejecting corporate health insurance and government social security. As opposed to the English community, "Amish people are more willing to stop interventions earlier and resist invasive therapies [...] giving preference to natural remedies, setting common-sense limits, and believing that in their bodies are in God's hands."

Despite stereotypes that the Amish are Luddites [...] Amish are generally very willing to take advantage of the most cutting-edge technology to help

remedy their children's maladies, no matter the cost to them personally. They avoid only technology that they believe detracts with their relationship with God, or family and community life (7).

In discussion of their survey work, the authors say, "The Amish have achieved and sustained a large measure of self-sufficiency in their own system for managing costs that reflects the spirit of mutualism" (8). I grew up in a town surrounded by farms worked by Old Order Amish. The broader Amish community, especially the Swartzentrubers, have fascinated me in the recent years of technological transformation. For the past five years, I've practiced a kind of Amishness with regards to the use of digital technology, the result being that I have completed most of this paper on a public computer, and thusly in the presence of others.

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In *How to Say Babylon*, Sinclair gives a memoir in 2023 of growing up in the Rastafari movement in Jamaica. Sinclair opens with a scene, before her time, of Rastas gathering at the Kingston airport:

Some came barefoot, came on crutches, came by the truckload with whole families and tribes, framed with thick manes of dreadlocks flowing about their faces, sprouting wildly, or piled into crowns atop their heads, everywhere a black shock of overgrown beards and a loud ululation of tongues. [...] They watched the sky for the first glimpse of the Ethiopian airliner that carried the man they believed to be a living god, the emperor Haile Selassie. [...] Settling above the gathered flock like its own heady stratosphere, a thick fog of ganja smoke hung on the air. [...] These were the nation's downpressed and downtrodden; outlawed and persecuted since the Rastafari movement's creation in the early 1930s. [...] Though the Rastafari movement was nonviolent, they were the nation's black sheep, feared and despised by a Christian society still under British rule, forced to live on the fringes (Ch. 1).

Sinclair gives name to a spiritual object which makes subjects of humans:

They were the unemployed and unemployable, the constant victims of state violence and brutality, the ones the government jailed and forcibly shaved, the ones brutally beaten by police. In 1963, [...] the white prime minister [...] triggered a devastating military operation where Rasta communes were burned island-wide in a weekend of terror. [...] So, when Rastas read the

biblical accounts of Jewish persecution and strife, they recognized a similar suffering in their own tribulation. From those psalms of Jewish exile came the Rastafari's name for the systematically racist state and imperial forces that had hounded, hunted, and downpressed them: Babylon. Babylon was the government that had outlawed them, the police that had pummeled and killed them. Babylon was the church that had damned them to hellfire. It was the state's boot at the throat, the politician's pistol in the gut. The Crown's whip at the back. Babylon was the sinister and violent forces born of western ideology, colonialism, and Christianity that led to the centuries-long enslavement and oppression of Black people, and the corruption of Black minds (Ch 1).

Sinclair describes the arrival of a King:

But on this day, Babylon could not stop the Rastafari. On this day, they moved in a fervor of hope. [...] Today they came to witness God look Babylon in the eye. [...] Like a scorched wind out of Eden, seven white doves burst out from the clouds, and behind them emerged the first silvery tip of the airplane. [...] Instead of walking on the half-cleaned red carpet leading to his waiting motorcade, Haile Selassie stepped instead onto the muddy ground of Kingston town. [...] When the emperor, who was an Orthodox Christian, finally sat down with Rastafari leaders, he told them very plainly he was not God [...] widely seen by Rastas as irrefutable proof that he was in fact a living god. [...] What did it mean, after all, to be the living answer to the fraught question of Black survival? [...] As I grew up, his stern and silent face would become as familiar to me as a grandfather's (Ch 1.)

Sinclair describes an aspect of a moral culture which is familiar to me, experienced from the other side of an imperial mirror:

[Selassie's] message stalked the wet leaves and salty palms of my youth, growing until he was a colossus, wading out to the sea where my mother was born, where I was born. [...] His flame burned alive in my father, who was a god of our whole dominion, who slept with one watchful eye on my purity and one hand on his black machete, ready to chop down Babylon, if it ever crept close (Ch 1).

I asked the author, at her book event, if the notion of Babylon, for all its entanglements, and the way it had affected her personally through purity

culture, is recoverable as a conceptual device in social justice discourse. Her positive answer encouraged the remainder of this section.

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In *Deviant Sexualities in the Context of Empire*, Menéndez-Antuña, addresses in 2016 the gendered and sexualized imagery of the *Apocalypse of John*¹⁷ in its personifications of Babylon, an empire for which the text lends no positive word. Menéndez-Antuña suggests that early Christians were concerned with sexual purity and asceticism, as evident in the Pauline epistles. In John's *Apocalypse*, the consequentiality of sexuality is further pronounced, and given a metaphorical reach beyond pastoral morality, invading the reader's "ideological, religious, political, and economical commitments." The early Church community, subjugated by Rome, expresses through John's authorship a "desire to see Empire destroyed by the hand of the strong God." In the un-queered interpretation of the text, the empire is ascribed female tropes, feminine pronouns, and a litany of sexually themed transgressions. The narrative is "part of a long tradition (biblical and non-biblical) where the gendered, sexualized, colonized Other must be destroyed, punished, or disciplined." Nonetheless, Menéndez-Antuña sees importance and hope in the text:

Biblical scholars' concern with the past is presented, analyzed, and criticized from my own concern for the present, for the potential use of Revelation for emancipatory purposes.

Menéndez-Antuña cites Hardt and Negri in *Empire*, who in the year 2000 have provided us "a comprehensive account of the current global political economy" and a theory of resistance which "attends to subject formation and incorporates the emancipatory potential of the body as site of resistance." Hardt and Negri say that ages of Imperialism have given way to what may now be called simply Empire, a reality which incorporates "the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command" and now manifests in "contemporary global capitalism." Menéndez-Antuña comments,

¹⁷ Also known as *The Revelation of Jesus*, or simply, *Revelation*.

In Empire we can no longer find the pyramid-like structure of power but a complex mesh of interlocking ties, a collection of networks in which power is concentrated at specific points. The political power that resided in the Nation-State has disseminated over a wide variety of structures with no fixed center. In concrete terms, the United States--once representative of hegemonic political power--has assumed a transnational configuration.

Menéndez-Antuña's work situates *Revelation* in the present-day geopolitical context, and surveys hermeneutical approaches. The liberation exegesis of Boesak emerged out of the context of South-African Apartheid, and "interprets Revelation as giving the reader a series of stark choices: obedience to God or subjection to Caesar, the Messiah or the Beast, New Jerusalem or Babylon." Yarbro-Collin's sees John's stance pitted against "adversaries who seek a compromise with Empire as a way to live comfortably." We are presented with a "call to skip the imperial economy not because John considers wealth to be an intrinsic evil, but because it perpetuates the Roman rule by participating in its trade." In Yarbro-Collin's view, the causes of Babylon's eventual fall are idolatries, persecutions of the faithful, blasphemous self-glorification, and imperial wealth. Menéndez-Antuña writes, "Babylon's doom allows the audience to overcome the frustration derived from these circumstances by making a spectacle out of her demise," a move which Yarbro-Collins considers as "politically ineffective in that it transposes any effective action from the real world onto the theological." Yarbro-Collins views the gendered symbology of Revelation as dualistic, and rooted in a patriarchal "identification between the material aspects of the body with the feminine." The fact that "Revelation's imaginary fosters injustice towards women and certain alienation from the body" renders its relevance ambiguous. On the other hand, for Schussler-Fiorenza, Revelation's primary purpose is to edify the reader with the knowledge that that God is "the only Lord of this World." The revelation "has crucial subversive political and economic consequences in that it questions imperial structures in place and proposes a plan for activism in the past and in the present." Revelation provides "a way out of an oppressive system for those who hunger and thirst for justice." *Revelation*, despite its ostensible diminution of the feminine, is seen to oppose a "society in which the rule of the

emperor, lord, slave master, husband, and the elite freeborn, propertied, educated gentleman demanded the existence of a disenfranchised wo/men class that stood subordinated." Menéndez-Antuña's lengthy dissertation sits at a fearsome intersection, revealing seemingly irreconcilable social stances as intersecting and mutually edifying. *Revelation*, for its part, offers near the end a praiseworthy alternative future for humanity following times of apocalyptic crisis: a feminine city, the bride of the Lamb who was slain. One of God's angels approaches John, revealing:¹⁸

The holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, and the light thereof was like to a precious stone, as to the jasper stone, even as crystal. And it had a wall great and high, having twelve gates, and in the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel.

And, seen in the great city:¹⁹

A river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street thereof, and on both sides of the river, was the tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruits every month, and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

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In *Porneia: The making of a Christian Sexual Norm*, Harper writes in 2012 of the Greek word πορνεία, from which we derive the prefix *porn-*, considered as the opposite of the apocalyptically urgent purity of *Revelation*. Harper gives a catalogue of the New Testament developments to sexual morality, and notes that a third of the uses of the word πορνεία in the New Testament are in *Revelation*. *Revelation* may be understood as an expansion on the kinds of bodies which may be considered sexually immoral. Bodies of *individuals* thus become metaphors for bodies of *nations*. The concepts may offer us insight into differing moral sensibilities about sex which divide generations and politics.

In some interpretations, Jesus's death at the hands of the Romans was but a sliver of the sufferings which eventually produced the *Revelation*. Before resurrection, one story goes, Jesus voluntarily walked alongside each soul

18 Revelation 21:10-12. Douay-Rheims.

19 Revelation 22:1-2. Douay-Rheims.

in hell. It always seemed to me that the image of the Cross, with the arms stretched out, is Jesus pinned down by two sides which hate each other, holding us all together where reconciliation is otherwise impossible.

In Morris's visual novel *Youth Group*²⁰, the religiously disillusioned Kay is drawn to a conservative Christian community, where Kay grumbles through a workshop by their soon-to-be friend and demon-fighting companions Meg and Cortland:

Meg: *As someone who was recently a teenager, I know that temptations are constantly flying at your face! I always say: you can solve most problems by looking to scripture. For all other ones, you can make a chart! Anyone, shout out a temptation you've struggled with.*

Cortland: *Marijuana!*

Meg: *Thanks Cortland. I was talking to the kids, but that's a good... totally random example. So, here, on the X axis, we have marijuana. We follow it up the Y axis and we find: singing! If I'm tempted with pot, I just sing! There's an activity to counter every temptation! What else do you struggle with?*

Crowd: *Sex!*

Meg: *Sex! When I feel that particular pull, the chart says I should... learn a new recipe!*

Crowd: *Music with swearing!*

Meg: *Listening to the wisdom of an elderly person! (7).*

The attitude here is familiar to me. My encounter with Christian purity culture has left me wounded to the core, though also with an unexpected kind of strength. The relevant moral teachings are obsessed with the human body, an entity I inhabit like a baffled ghost. We who are shamed sexually are shamed against our own bodies. It is perhaps no coincidence that I would find myself writing a paper about social justice with much ado, dishing critical theory out on society's body. To that end, to clear this side of the street, I quote seven writings which may be understood as modern-day meditations on *πορνεία*, from the perspective of personal sexual ethics, each of which contain moral obligations I have failed to always uphold in my life.

20 Jordan Morris. 2024. *Youth Group*.



The ancients pictured life as a great tree that had its roots in spirit and sent its branches through every particle of matter. Your spinal column is a branch of that universal tree, and in your sexual pleasure you feel its sap rising through you. You are a channel of this sacred sap, this divine love juice. Your sexuality is god's love letter to you, a miracle of biological engineering that could have been devised only by a mind of vast and humorous generosity, a mind that knew the pain and the sense of confinement earthly beings would feel and wanted to make sure you might always have glimpses of heaven. No matter what your sexuality has meant to you, no matter whether it has been a source of pleasure or of pain, of joy or of confusion, it connects you to the power that created the universe and it is worthy of honor (Bonheim).



Maybe, in the course of reading this book, you have made a life-altering decision. You have decided to try to start a new relationship, or you have decided to end a bad relationship. Or take a break from dating to focus on your relationship with God. Or set some new standards for your behavior before marriage. Or recommit to your marriage. Or resurrect an old dream that you thought had died inside you. Or put your priority back on God.

Whatever it is, I'm proud of you. This is what *Relationship Goals* is all about--your taking aim. And let me assure you--you *can* hit your bull's-eye.

Even if you can't remember how many people you've slept with and still feel horribly alone. Even if bad memories and foolish past associations seem like they'll never let go. Even if you've been divorced three times. Even if you realize that getting rid of all your friends whose bad company is corrupting your good character would leave you completely alone for the time being. Even if you've tried and failed to be faithful to God many times and the thought of trying again just makes you weary. Even then, next time can be different (Todd).



Men, commit yourself to ejaculate responsibly yourself and build a culture that expects all men to ejaculate responsibly. Insist on a condom every time

you have sex. Experiment until you find a condom that works really well for you and your partner so that you don't ever feel like its a bummer when you use a condom. Keep your favorite condoms stocked in your nightstand. Keep some in your glovebox or backpack. Buy your favorites to keep at your partner's house. If you've figured out condom and lubrication methods that work well, share what you've learned to others can benefit. Make an appointment for a vasectomy. If you're nervous about needing a reversal in the future, bank your sperm first. If you've already had a vasectomy, talk openly to other men and women about how wonderful it is, how it lifts a huge stress that hangs over sexual encounters (Blair).



The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves (Lorde).



Rather than hide away, deny, and ignore those very sites of deepest shame, we must not only embrace them and learn from them, we need to flaunt them. What better way to flaunt conventions of sexuality than by making porn? Pornography is surrounded by shame. We feel shame for watching it, enjoying it, making it, and buying it. The content of porn also instills shame in us. We can feel badly for not living up to certain standards (both in terms of not fitting the mold of which bodies are seen as beautiful and in terms of not measuring up in sexual prowess and skills). There is porn that demeans our identities and experiences and replicates oppressive power dynamics. Porn is complex, multifaceted--and yes--powerful. Rather than attempt to regulate and control it, which only drives it more underground and into the

hands of those with privilege, we need to follow in the work of sex-positive feminists and explore the many benefits that pornography made from such alternative perspectives has to offer. This all may seem an unlikely beginning to porn stardom. By making queercip porn, I moved out of line and took the "queer" and "wonky" path to place new stories within reach. I took this path to open up new possibilities and imaginings (Erickson).



There is a continuum of sexual arousal and satisfaction that begins with the slightest degree of excitation and ends, for both young men and women, with the unusually intense satisfaction and release of orgasm. Obviously your own comfort and imagination, and those of your partner, will suggest a variety of ways you can touch (and even talk to) each other that will lead to your both becoming more and more aroused. If the question "How far can we go?" refers to this continuum of arousal, your culture's answer is, "You may go just as far as your comfort and that of your partner permit." If "all the way" means experiencing the climactic end of this continuum—you or your partner, or both of you, having an orgasm—then your culture is saying, "When you are ready to go 'all the way' you can; this is not prohibited behavior." Nor does your culture seek to impose a limit on the number of partners you may have, whether the relationship is casual or committed, whether you are in only one sexual relationship at a time or have multiple partners. That is all your choice. Of course, your culture does not condone lying to your partners about your true feelings for them or your sexual conduct with others [...] The only line your culture wishes to draw regarding your sexual behavior is that until such a time as you are ready to enter into a serious relationship, you do not engage in intercourse. Bluntly put, the penis does not enter the vagina or anus. A serious relationship is marked by a different intention toward each other, and by a different order of responsibility for each other. Your culture makes a distinction between sexual relationships marked by this seriousness of commitment and those that are not. It values both. Each may have its proper time (Kegan).



Colonial ideas of sex and gender performance are not innate or universal aspects of humanness and morality. They have merely been put forward to prop up whiteness and white values as what is "normal" and "civilized," and

construct all other forms of expression as deviant and “savage,” as unhuman and dysfunctional. What we must do is abandon this singular view of “normal” sexuality, as well as the gender binary and cisheteropatriarchal gender roles that mandate sociosexual submission to men and punish those who dare to imagine lives without it. There must be a commitment to interrogating how harmful racial stereotypes and racist fetishization are used to consume racially marginalized people and reify white supremacy. And it is imperative that we divest from compulsory sexuality, from the idea that sex is universally desired, that it is the mandatory route to joy and satisfaction, intimacy, and connection, emotional intelligence, maturity, sanity, morality, humanity (Brown).

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In *Revelation, Economics and Sex*, Punt writes of a banner raised on a church in Cape Town, South Africa in early 2018 which read:

Jesus was the first to decriminalize sex work.

Punt writes,

It cited John 8:7 in support, and drew praise as much as criticism across a broad spectrum of society. [...] Sex work today still carries a severe stigma of social unacceptability, moral decrepitude, and even wanton and lustful abandonment and exploitation; this applies to both sex workers and their clients, even if differently in nature and degree. Ambiguity is part of the sex work industry, seen especially among men who use sex workers but despise them at the same time. [...] Sex workers particularly are caught between contrasting, oppositional trends of mesmerized glorification and repelled abhorrence, which are often simultaneously and ambiguously present in public discourse and even in academic study. [...] The presentation of Babylon as a prostitute in Revelation 17-18 is typical of Roman-era gender-based ridicule, and the characteristic features of ancient prostitution largely informs this pattern even though she is no ordinary prostitute. [...] Metaphors put one reality next to another, to contribute to understanding and experiencing the world across different dimensions. [...] The image points to imperial power’s numerous abuses, including—to use modern terms—its conspicuous consumption, economic exploitation of people together with indifference for the value of human life, its ability to deceive all people. [...]

Today's sex workers fall between the cracks of modern society. Arguments about the decriminalization of sex work include concern for the welfare and vulnerability of those involved in the industry. [...] Sex work and its social, political, commercial, and religious standing is and will remain a complex and highly emotional issue. [...] Equality becomes entrenched in widespread and ingrained social norms, all of which challenges communities of faith to resist human exploitation and trafficking.

In *Falling Back in Love With Being Human*, Thom gives a prompt:

Imagine a world in which all sex workers are considered sacred and holy, deserving of workers' rights, health benefits, and compensation of their choosing. Draw or paint a picture of your vision. This might be a scene or person, or more abstract: a reflection of a feeling or energy.

In *Revelation*, a visible signifier, borne by God's people, is given by angels as representatives of God, and placed on the foreheads of, at minimum, a multitude of 144,000:²¹

And one of the ancients answered, and said to me: These that are clothed in white robes, who are they? and whence came they? And I said to them: My Lord, thou knowest. And they said to me: These are they who are come out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and have made them clean in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and they serve him day and night in his temple: and they, that sitteth on the throne, shall dwell over them. They shall no more hunger nor thirst, neither shall the sun fall on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb, who is in the midst of the throne, shall pasture them, and shall lead them to the fountains of the waters of life, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.



21 Revelation 7:13-17. Douay-Rheims.

Methods

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*When writing at night, I'm aware of la luna, Coyolxauhqui,
hovering over my house. I envision her muerta y decapitada,
una cabeza con los parpados cerrados. But then
her eyes open y la miro dar luz a los lugares oscuros.*

-Gloria E. Anzaldúa

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In *Liberation Theology: A How-To Guide*, Cooper writes, “The powerless, who have been ignored by traditional theologies, are at the center of liberation theology. [...] Reflection without action is not theology.” The route to change is through human agency itself, mediated by directly experienced relationships with divinity, higher powers, or God. In *I Am No Longer a Professor: A Pedagogy of Living Word Becoming Flesh*, Duguid-May writes,

And with what words will I teach the Bible as a text of liberation and hope for a life-giving future, when I know too well it has not only now but for centuries been wielded as weapon in service of domination and denunciation, conquest, and colonization? How will I speak as a theologian for whom the words of scripture may become a living Word—that is, a message or proclamation or teaching that inspires our participation in God’s ongoing work of creation?”

Spirituality inspires personal and social transformation alike. Archbishop Óscar Romero proclaimed in his final sermons before martyrdom, “What is the source of these social wrongs? In the heart of every person. Contemporary society is of an anonymous variety, in which nobody can shed the blame and all are responsible.” And, at the same time, “Let no one be offended because we use the divine words read at our mass to shed light on the social, political and economic situation of our people. Not to do so would be un-Christian.” In *Justice, And Only Justice*, Ateek writes,

God hears the cry of the oppressed. No matter where they are, God is not far from them. Those who have been wronged and dispossessed have God for their advocate.

The present section covers the methodological choices made during the journalistic expedition to Thailand, as well as in this literature review, and contains many suggestions I wish I would have received earlier. During the journey, I was personally affected in observing the plight of Khmer families near the border with Cambodia, physically trapped by unpayable debts, a situation of marginalization which is addressed in force by many scriptures. The primary emotion I experienced was anger, which motivated me to come to grips with some core spiritual realities, and which implicated my own spiritual faults alongside the usual suspect of systemic injustice. A common advice given in scriptures is to name the truth as one understands it with compassion for the self and the other, as sharply as the realities of the world require, and to leave the rest up to others and to God. The picture book as well as this literature review may be understood as *arationalist*. My methodology interprets the production of academically consumable knowledge as a pragmatic opportunity which trades off with other purposes. At the end of this paper are six political petitions which are particularly given to me to write from experience. I have at least attempted to physically deliver them to their respective petitionees, though perhaps their main purpose is to provide research labor for advocates of the same causes, to legitimately attempt to persuade a more ambient status quo, and to encourage young academics in the truth that we are free to move the manner of discourse along the path of the heart. God, who cares for the weak and poor, is infallible where we are not.

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In *The Book of Strangers*, Dallas's protagonist is employed at the State University Library, which is divided into three sections. The "Records" contain the indexical archive of reference works as a computerized description of the graph network of academic citations. The "Library" contains cassette copies of the works themselves. Finally, the "Books" department contains "manuscripts still in linear script form." In the Library section,

Everything that went into [students'] heads could be submitted for structuring to the central storage unit. There the information would be patterned and linked to the intake the student had accumulated [...] The

computer, having direct contact with the psychograph that recorded the subject's infantile medial and stress history, was able to see where fantasy elements or irrational structure breaks might occur. Thus a [student] could be steered away from a line of study that would cease to be productive or that might become dangerous for their inner balance, producing either memory block or repeat situation in social behavior (12).

The protagonist is transferred from their post in Records to Books, becoming “the only true librarian in the establishment, now that ‘Library’ was void of books” (8). There, they encounter a different species of scholar, an array of characters plagued by various ailments of modernity, each with expertise in carefully constructed subcategories of theoretic fields: all generally restless and unhappy. Of these scholars we read,

Their ‘knowledge’ cannot teach them how to live in the world. Their learning process is focused on one fragmented aspect of life, and the culture does not provide them with whatever necessary information or practice would unite their activity in the world with the flow of life around them (32).

I have at my fingertips three primary resources: an institutional login to search texts by keyword, a hard drive of downloaded digital documents in dense academic language, and a stack of a number of paper books I have acquired in as many contexts. In 1988, when *The Book of Strangers* was written, the computer was not much more than a metaphor. Nowadays the book itself is the metaphor, for the physically realized systemic forces which govern metadata politics, the digital archive, and consumer information technology. The protagonist embarks on a spiritual quest to follow an itinerant mystic, traversing great distances in a world of sand, water, and garden.

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In the *Zhuangzi*²², a proverb:

Using a horse to show that a horse is not a horse is not as good as using a nonhorse to show that a horse is not a horse.

In a presentation to fellow students and faculty in the months before this project, I showed a slide titled “Methodology,” then revealed a banana peel

²² Paul Kjellberg's translation.

from the podium, tossed it on the ground, and took a step into oblivion. A fellow student later commented, “I thought I was hallucinating.” Reflecting on these events following the trip to Cambodia and Thailand, it seems the journey which I, Pa, and Brother undertook was indeed of this flavor: our path largely unplanned, the merry meetings left to fate, the visible scenarios a challenge to process. In the text of the booklet, I have undertaken to say little with respect to the most complex and sensitive issues which arose, allowing the ordering and affect of the text to find its own way. In this paper, I say many things which are ambiguously interpretable as truth-claim or intervention, either a mark of unprofessionalism on my part or else a serious attempt to question the boundary between epistemology and politics.

Except where noted in footnote or brackets, quotations of referenced works are exact, except for flow-preserving adjustments to capitalization, and the silent replacement of masculine or binary pronouns with they/them/their where the author makes a gender-neutral statement. In theological quotes, this is not a comment on the plurality or unity of God, who, like the replacement pronouns, may be considered quantity-neutral, one, and/or **أَحَدٌ**, in a similar sense that the multiverse is just the universe. In religious texts, the introduction of quantity-neutral pronouns sometimes modifies the landscape of carefully-crafted ambiguity, encouraging the reader to seek out original exegeses. Unquoted text surrounding referenced literature may be understood as a combination of the author’s work and my own understanding. My hope is that any nonhorse qualities in this text are horselike enough to be legible, especially to those who will find in it the greatest relief.

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Farming is immensely difficult and labor-intensive. The cultivation of animals is emotionally taxing. When the time arrives to end a life to alleviate human hunger, at least as long as this continues in human practice, it is important to carry it out with precise care for the animals whose remaining lives are sacrificed for human sustenance. Farming as a whole contains many challenging tradeoffs of the kind encountered in the practice of butchering. As a result, it has been largely abandoned as a

common hands-on practice in modern times, left to expert practitioners and machines. In *Butchering Chickens*, Danforth writes, "Chickens and other poultry are some of the easiest animals to slaughter." Danforth recommends that after collecting the necessary instruments, and "before you pick up the chicken, hold on to it for several seconds and make sure its wings are kept close to its body. [...] you'll feel the bird relax. The calmer and more assertive you are, the more effective you will be. Once the bird is relaxed, slide one hand under it and use that hand to pick it up by both legs, with the chicken's back facing you." Danforth presents a variety of options at this point, but recommends against the full beheading of the chicken, saying, "The subsequent bleeding will be less effective than with methods that maintain a beating heart." It also exposes toxins in the esophagus to the bloodstream. The author recommends leaving the spinal cord intact, in order to keep the heart beating so that the blood effectively drains from the body: "Death from bleeding can take anywhere from 90 seconds to 4 minutes." Danforth insists in italics, "*Do not, under any conditions, proceed with the bleeding of the animal if you don't know for sure that it is insensible.*" The term "insensibility" refers to a chicken which, pursuant to some philosophical ponderings, is thought to have a reduced capacity to feel pain, evidenced by the lack of stress hormones which affect the quality of the meat. This can be achieved with an electrical apparatus, or more conventionally by the severing of the halves of the brain by the insertion of a knife through the roof of the inverted mouth. After rendering the bird insensible, cut a V shape through the raw skin surrounding the trachea and esophagus to cut only the two jugular veins on either side. Danforth says, "The chicken may exhibit death throes after bleeding. This is normal and is not an indication of trauma or pain." Proceed with preparing the bird for eating only after ensuring full bodily death, where the chicken has open eyes, an unmoving cloaca, and lacks any reflex response. In *The Prophetic Etiquette of Slaughtering*, Al-Ifta gives additional guidelines: The animal should be comforted and softly led to the site of killing. Animals should not be killed in front of each other. The human should pray in reverence and gratefulness over the killing. The animals themselves should be allowed to pray to their creator before death.

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In *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, Vietnamese Buddhist peace activist Hanh says that moderns should try chewing their food much longer than we are used to. With this method, a body can get by with a food intake of half the volume and calories. Presumably it takes some time to adjust, while the body learns it doesn't need to work so hard to produce the corrosive enzymes it would otherwise need to work through the bigger unchewed chunks. In environments where food is scarce, or where we are surrounded by people who eat less than us, it is critical we take care of our bodies by bringing along sufficient food for ourselves, in order to better help others. The practice of mindful chewing improves health, reduces the burden on scarce food systems, and deepens the conversations of meals shared together. In *How to Love*²³, Hanh writes,

If you pour a handful of salt into a cup of water, the water becomes undrinkable. But if you pour the salt into a river, people can continue to draw the water to cook, wash, and drink. The river is immense, and it has the capacity to receive, embrace, and transform. When our hearts are small, our understanding and compassion are limited, and we suffer. We can't accept or tolerate others and their shortcomings, and we demand that they change. But when our hearts expand, these same things don't make us suffer anymore. We have a lot of understanding and compassion and can embrace others. We accept others as they are, and then they have a chance to transform (Notes on Love).

Nhat Hanh recommends mindful hugging, in which “you have to really hug the person you are holding. You have to make them very real in your arms, not just for the sake of appearances, patting them on the back to pretend you are there, but breathing consciously and hugging with all your body, spirit and heart.”

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In Green's 2024 feature film *Bob Marley: One Love*, one of Marley's producers demurs against his choice for album title (the religiously charged *Exodus*), saying “I've read the Bible. [...] I had to memorize half of it and I can tell you one thing for sure: Young people do not like it.” Marley remains silent, and the producer changes the subject to the upcoming tour.

²³ Thich Nhat Hanh. 2014. *How to Love*.

Marley's art director Garrick says, "What you tell them about the Africa tour date them? [...] Yeah Africa. It's in the Bible, too, you know. Or that is the half you never memorize?" The album is a runaway success. Marley is portrayed improvising the lyrics with a band who can practically hear the next refrain:

*Let me tell you, if you're not wrong
Well, everything is all right
So we gonna walk, come on
Through the roads, of creation, we the generation
Trod through, great tribulation, in this Exodus
Good God Almighty
Movement of Jah people*

Later, Marley is interviewed by a reporter, "Is it true you smoke a pound of weed every day?" Marley: "A pound?"

Like Marley's *Exodus*, the present study also contains a preponderance of religious language, and I share with Marley a fondness for the molecule tetrahydrocannabinol, the psychoactive ingredient in cannabis, or marijuana. In *Seeing Through the Smoke*, Grinspoon gives a list in 2023 of criteria for assessing whether and how one should be cautious about using cannabis. He recommends, if partaking, to *always* supplement the psychoactive molecule with the highly benign substance called cannabidiol. In a video posted online, Grinspoon reads an autobiographical excerpt, noting "some situations in which cannabis has helped me; I've also had plenty of unpleasant cannabis experiences as well.":

After consuming, I often get a self-corrective injection of insight, which I write or record. Later, when the weed wears off, I use this insight to help me more efficiently and meaningfully execute my work and life priorities. For example, when I'm using cannabis to help me write. When I get the dose right, and when the stars align, it's nothing less than magical. [...] Most importantly, I find using cannabis is like checking in with my true self. Being 'stoned' can in essence be a deep state of mindfulness, as time slows down and the present moment attains a profound intimacy. This is mixed in with heightened sensations, feelings of benevolence towards others, subtle euphoria, and interesting thoughts.

As Grinspoon says, cannabis use is not without its downsides. Families, children, and spouses of partakers sometimes report being adversely affected by their loved one's short- and long-term usage. While I credit cannabis with helping me bridge an emotionally painful gap between the sacred and the secular, I also report occasional negative affect, dependency related to feelings of emotional avoidance, and difficulty adjusting following periods of use. Public perception of cannabis dependency and addiction has recently shifted away from an initial over-optimism, especially in the presence of corporately intensified strains and methods of consumption.

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In the preface to *Journalism*, Sacco asks, "Aren't drawings by their very nature subjective?" He answers yes; "There is nothing *literal* about a drawing. A cartoonist assembles elements deliberately and places them with intent on a page." At the same time, "The journalists' standard obligations--to report accurately, to get quotes right, and to check claims—still pertain." Sacco's expertly drawn "cartoons" are distinct from my drawings in that Sacco's visual novels contain scenes which, pulled from the past, require additional visual imagination to bring to life in the present. "The cartoonist draws with the essential truth in mind, not the literal truth." With the exception of my drawing *Time to Rise*, which was drawn from memory, the witnessed scenes were all physically before me at the time of the drawing. Some of the subjects, especially living beings, move their bodies in the time it takes to draw. I project a four-dimensional scene into the confines of a two-dimensional rectangle. The process often confounds me as I realize that I have misplaced a guiding line, and so am forced to adjust to accommodate additional objects. Details which interest to me may be completely ignored by others, and vice versa. In the drawing *The Dead in the Land*, I anonymized a name of a shop, and included text from the back of a sign which was turned mostly hidden from usual view, an advertisement which was commonly visible in the years before the drawing, but which was being phased out country-wide during the project. I considered censoring some imagery in post-process of the images, especially location-identifying backgrounds, but ultimately determined that

the locations implied are not particularly secret, and that there are many such sites already well-known to the public. The drawings may be considered something like historical artifacts from a personal collection, which are thusly presented in their entirety. Sacco, for his part, aims to "embrace the implications of subjective reporting [and] highlight them." He says, "By admitting that I am present at the scene, I mean to signal to the reader that journalism is a process with seams and imperfections practiced by a human being." Sacco quotes the journalist Edward R. Murrow, "Everyone is a prisoner of his own experiences. No one can eliminate prejudices--just recognize them." When it comes to opposing viewpoints: "Balance should not be a smokescreen for laziness. [...] a journalist needs to explore and consider each claim." Sacco admits a sympathy which I share for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed: "I chiefly concern myself with those who seldom get a hearing. [...] The powerful should be quoted, yes, but to measure their pronouncements against the truth, not to obscure it." Sacco says Robert Fisk gets it about right: "Reporters should be neutral and unbiased on the side of those who suffer."

•

In the book *Art on My Mind*, in the essay *In our Glory: Photography and Black Life*, bell hooks writes of "the power of the photograph, of the image, that it can give back and take away, that it can bind." The camera can be understood as an instrument of power, one which has in white hands bolstered "segregation, the hardship of apartheid, dehumanization." On the other hand, "cameras gave to black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images." The logic extends to "all colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional subculture within the framework of domination" by way of alternative representations and imagery. One way to interpret my choice to create pencil drawings for the book project, as opposed to taking photographs, is that it transforms the landscape of inequality between myself and the drawn subjects in a beneficial way. My imperfect drawings preserve the structure of the scene, while anonymizing the softly consenting individuals, and enabling more intimate and longer

interchanges of meaning. The character of the drawn lines lays bare the way my eyes see the world, lending transparency to any claim it might make as truthful representation. I attempt allyship with hooks's alternative representations, and join a genre of Khmer books where the author has supplemented thought with the life-drawn image, such as *A Proper Woman* by Thavry Thon.

•

In another essay, *Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary*, hooks writes, “among the traditional Southern black folks I grew up around there was a shared belief in the idea that beautiful things, objects that could be considered luxurious, that were expensive and difficult to own, were necessary for the spirit. The more downtrodden and unfortunate the circumstances, the more ‘beauty’ was needed to uplift, to offer a vision of hope, to transform.” There is a materialist aspect to this aesthetic, said to have “trickled down from [...] ruling classes, from the white or black bourgeois world,” which hooks contrasts with the perspective of her elders. For her grandmother, “it was better to seek beauty in a world that was not subject to monetary exchange.” For her grandfather, “beauty was present in found objects, discarded objects that he rescued and restored because, as he put it, ‘spirits lived there.’” Speaking of places outside the United States, hooks says that “no matter how poor the surroundings, individuals create beautiful objects. [...] In countries where folks are ravished by genocidal war and famine, suffering, anguished bodies shroud themselves in beautiful cloth.” In the middle months of writing this paper, I was walking down the street, when I witnessed a sleep-deprived soul yelling in desperation to passers-by, “Poverty is not beautiful!” It’s a sentiment worth taking in with solemnity. As I made my drawings, many aspects of the life of Cambodians in Thailand struck me with their overwhelming beauty. In turn, I’m reminded of the but brief window I was given into their lives, of the ugliness of the circumstances of desperation and impoverishment, which are not given me to imbue with nostalgia.

•

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman, writing in 2008, undertakes a highly personal voyage through Ghana, to retrace the heritage of the Atlantic

slave trade, a history which has longed pressed on her mind, as a Black American and descendent of enslaved generations. She navigates challenging interactions in turn with American-Ghanaians, and with Ghanaian adults and children, offering an admirably equanimous journalistic account, one with personal stakes which surely outweigh my own. She writes, “A house full of Hartmans yelling at the top of our lungs about slavery in my parents’ modest lower-middle-class dwelling populated by more televisions than persons and outfitted with [brand name] furniture set off by muddy abstract paintings [...] would have made most Ghanaians laugh at the absurdity of it all or suck their teeth with resentment” (74). Her reader at this point is already made aware of the catastrophe of colonialism and its continuities to the present-day impoverishment of Ghanaians, who have not arrived in the present day with the privileges built out of the sufferings of enslaved Africans. Hartman’s tale is greatly heartening to my processing of the issues in this paper. She expresses then processes a familiar frustration and anger at words of locals referring to or leveled at outsiders. She writes,

Chance encounters in the street made plain the difference between how I saw myself and how I was seen by others. In my estimation, I was the aggrieved; to others I was a privileged American and as such was required to perform regular acts of penance. My ignorance regularly collided with that of passers-by” (56).

•

In *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, Rabinow writes in 1977,

Both the anthropologist and his informants live in a culturally mediated world, caught up in ‘webs of signification’ which they themselves have spun. [...] there is no privileged position, no absolute perspective, and no valid way to eliminate consciousness from our activities or those of others. [...] That I would journey to Morocco to confront Otherness and myself was typical of my culture (or the parts of it I could accept). My restless and scientifically cloaked wanderings brought me to this mountain village [...] [Rabinow’s friend, ben Mohammed] grew up in a historical situation which provided him with meaningful but only partially satisfactory interpretations of his world, as did I. [...] Different webs of signification separated us, but these webs were now at least partially intertwined. But a dialogue was only possible when we

recognized our differences, when we remained critically loyal to the symbols which our traditions had given us. By so doing, we began a process of change (162).

Honest descriptions of intimate or problematic interpersonal connection across cultural boundaries are rare. Some seem to have a natural and healthy ability to regulate energies and set boundaries especially where the differences are vast. For the rest of us, we may expect to endure mistakes, reflection, and healing.

•

In *Hope Against Hope: Queer Negativity, Black Feminist Theorizing, and Reproduction without Futurity*, Bliss writes in 2015 of Lee Edelman's hope in queerness as

The figure currently capable of unraveling the libidinal economy of signification through which a particular dominant socius reproduces itself. It is in the rejection of the future—indeed, an embrace of this rejection—that Edelman discovers the possibility of fundamentally undoing the dominant social order. Critiques of Edelman have run the gamut from accusations that his arguments amount to little more than a dissembled optimism [...] that his polemic is overwritten by an intransigent, smirking whiteness that limits the applicability of his conclusions (84).

Bliss writes about the intersection of white queer theory and Black feminism, and references Ann duCille, who argues against “the presumption that the object of Black feminist theorizing must always be work by or about Black women.”

To wit, ‘It’s time to light out for other territories, because nothing—least of all the fictions of white male authors—should be beyond our reach or shellacked against our critical gaze (91).

Bliss says that his essay is also

An attempt to shift what it might mean to *do* intersectional analysis, to inhabit the danger zone described by duCille when she observes that ‘one of the dangers of standing at an intersection ... is the likelihood of being run over by oncoming traffic.’ In this way, we court the danger of looking and speaking in several directions at once, without the confidence that one can tell one intersection from another, requiring the will to gamble with (at least)

the coherence of subjectivity. My aim here is to argue that embracing the (living) tradition of Black feminist theorizing yields a theoretically sophisticated and politically insurgent conceptualization of hope and hopelessness that is not overdetermined by the tyranny of positive affect (91).

Bliss writes, citing Kara Keeling,

How to recognize and how to embrace ‘a black future’ is the very task precluded by the project of queer futurity, which evades antiblackness’ structuring violence in favour of spectacular acts of violence (95).

Bliss closes with a discussion of Joy James’ Afrorealism,

A resistant mode of Black feminist theorizing attuned to ‘the beauty of survival’ and a practice of politics that is ‘terrifyingly beautiful because it is violently transcendent’ [...] There must, in James’s formulation be room to think about the “beauty and pleasure in confronting the real.” [...] In this account, beauty is not the sole property of futurity; possibility is not the sole property of pessimism (96).

Bliss’s discussion is technical to my ears, but surely gets at some of the tensions of intersectional justice discourse, and emphasizes that problems of anti-Blackness are more serious than can be understood from majority-white urban queer spaces. This paper previously contained a longer discussion of historical imperial ethnic violence, which is now replaced with a listing of the written sources, the writing of which taught me much, including that I am but an early student of many matters.

•

In *At the Edge of the Forest*, Hansen and Ledgerwood praise the work of Chandler, an American scholar who began his work as a Foreign Service officer, who himself writes in *Coming to Cambodia* of a capitol city of Phnom Penh, which, in the height of the colonial era lacked Cambodian restaurants. It was possible to live there as a foreigner and lead a full, sheltered life among Khmer while speaking much, or apparently only, French. Chandler helped lay the groundwork in Khmer and broader postcolonial studies to better understand the limits of scholarship when interfacing with "indigeneity," or the broadly confusing other of academically accessible reality. Hansen and Ledgerwood credit Chandler

as being deeply integrated in Cambodian life. "Life" is to be understood as distinct from "society", which, in the Khmer context, is conceived in "familial and authoritarian terms", opposed to the more Western "voluntary, supposedly 'horizontal' associations" (Hansen 4). The vast lore of Khmer myth is said to let the youngster in on the "gaps in the world", or in the ritual meaning process. Scholarship has adapted the focus of Khmer studies in recent past into qualitatively positive appreciations of Cambodian ways of being and understanding of the world. "What happens can be surprising and unclear, defying reconciling explanations, tragic, inspiring, capturable in moments and fragments, and often impossible" (17).

•

In *Indépendances Cha Cha* (Bhêly-Quénum), African scholars are asked why they write in French, the colonial language of the fourteen now-independent countries represented in the book. The question is posed to Mambou Aimée Gnali, who wishes that, for the Congo, the postcolonial schools would have opted to teach in local languages, but that political will was lacking. He laments, writing in French, the incomplete hybrids of local and colonial patterns, both in language and in civil life. The French language is now symbolic of centralization, as it became a gathering point for mediations between peoples speaking different languages. As one of an older generation who experienced colonialism, Gnali says people are shocked to hear that in the colonial era there were hospitals which gave care to those who couldn't pay. He says that after independence, the country kept what was not good, and let go everything that was. Gnali's descriptions are pessimistic, and represent the kinds of aftermath scramblings that resemble the past decades of Cambodian life. In Cambodia however, French was completely, forcibly evacuated by the anti-Western victors of a civil war. There are metaphors here which can be applied to understanding English, my native tongue, as the lingua franca of academic writing and global trade. I've chosen to translate the booklet which accompanies this paper, itself written in intermediate-level English, into Khmer, because it contains an important compressed story. In this paper, I've let the full force of English fluency deeply affect my most basic

spiritual understandings. As the existence of spiritual works that have been translated into many languages attests, there are many important language-independent truths.

•

In the media channel *Natural Khmer* (Language Institute of Natural Khmer), a group of European and Khmer collaborators act in a variety of Khmer-language skits, in a method of natural language acquisition where no translation is provided. The principle is that adults may learn a second language the way a child learns their first. Teachers who are attuned to this possibility can impart language without reference to the learner's home language, by making use of body language, drawings, storytelling, and emotion. In their short film *LINK Documentary*, A Khmer teacher says, "I had more confidence than before [...] especially with foreigners, I can have eye contact with them, speaking easier from my feelings." Another teacher says, "Everyone knows each other. Khmer people know about foreigners, and foreigners get to know Khmer people better, to communicate and be together." The best way to learn Khmer is, unequivocally, speaking with native speakers who also do not speak English, avoiding the tendency to switch languages during moments of confusion. For me personally, learning the Khmer written script was important, allowing for easier comprehension of media where Khmer speech is paired with Khmer subtitles. The main sources of such content are Khmer popular music and the Protestant Bible²⁴. I encourage learners to avoid looking at the common transliterations of Khmer into Western characters, in order to allow a fully Khmer portion of the brain to develop. Written Khmer, like its linguistic cousins in the region, contains no spaces! The spaces one sees are more like commas. Older texts seem to indicate there has been a "punctuation" of Khmer over the years, a longer trend starting in eras when written meaning took on a two-dimensional component, an incredible phenomenon one can glimpse in the inscriptions on temples. The absolutely prolific media channel *Rumduol TV* points a camera at an impressive swath of Khmer life and allows the listener to hear many distinct Khmer voices and accents. Every syllable in Khmer may be

24 See the excellent Word Project by International Biblical Association.

considered, in its vast otherness to the English speaker, as a full philosophical concept. Instead of the conjugated tenses, aspects, and moods a Romantic speaker is used to, Khmer in my understanding has a single-syllable “word” for each of our “technical” terms such as participle or imperfect or progressive. The speaker can choose how many of the modifiers are relevant to the context, or in the most formal speech fire off the whole list of modifiers surrounding the verb in an instant, to be fully understood by any three-year-old. The language dispenses with burdensome grammatical enforcements, such that a Khmer conversation can be understood as containing high-level rapid-fire spiritual content. In most language-learning contexts, the words most important to remember, given limited memory capacity, are the names of people. Khmer however is forgiving in this regard, in that it is customary to call the listener by the honorific which encodes their familial or age relationship with the speaker. The Khmer language also has the interesting property of being *magical*.

•

In *Everyman's Talmud*, Cohen writes,

In the year 586 B.C. the Kingdom of Judea, which then represented all that was left of the people of Israel in Canaan, underwent a devastating experience. The Temple was laid in ruins, its ritual brought to an end, the best part of the nation led as captives to Babylon [...] ‘How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!’[...] How could the fate of extinction be averted? [...] The solution which they evolved may be summarized in a single word, Torah. [...] Torah, as understood by the Rabbis, touched life at every point. It dealt with the whole existence of the human being. Religion, ethics, the physical life—even superstitions [...] The preacher would not be satisfied with imparting to hearers merely the superficial interpretation of the Bible. More than the desire to understand and teach the meaning of a verse was the eagerness to see what the verse could be made to mean. Four methods of exegesis were employed, and they are indicated by the consonants of the word for ‘garden, Paradise’ (*Pardes*): [...] *Peshat* (simple) [...] *Remez* (allusion) [...] *Derash* (exposition) [...] *Sod* (mystery) (Ch. 4).

In *A Native American Theology*, Kidwell et al give descriptions for these four hermeneutics. When reading a text, we should consider:

1. accepting it for what it says
2. seeing it for what it possibly means
3. seeing it in terms of its meaning for one's moral life
4. seeing it for what it means in terms of the present and future spiritual lives of people

The authors write,

Hermeneutics is the process of interpretation that must occur when essential facts supporting objective knowledge are absent in a given circumstance, situation, or literary text. On the other hand, supporting facts may be present but a mindset fashioned by culture or special interest may block a clear view of them. Christian hermeneutics is generally the province of a small elite of individuals highly educated in the tradition they are studying. The practice and understanding of religion, however, resides in the majority of the population. For hermeneutics of American Indian traditions, scholars have relied on the opinions of individuals who were holders of esoteric knowledge or leaders of ceremonies. We have seen only the elite view, not that of the everyday practitioner. The interpretation of the belief system is incomplete (Ch. 1).

Christian discourse is disproportionately Western and Globally Northern, despite its origins. I tend to appreciate cross-cultural religious interactions sometimes deemed problematic in the literature, because I trust the underlying spiritual forces of reconciliation. In this paper, scriptural interpretation and reflection of many texts, conventionally construed as hailing from distinct traditions, has influenced countless word choices and stylistic decisions which might normally derive their structure and precision from conventional academic methodology. While I've attempted to write something accessible to the lay experience, I fear I have not succeeded. The language, and my understanding, is tenuously strung between worlds. At many points I am left with nothing given me to say.

•

In *Read The Quran Even Without Understanding It*, theologian Nur Fatin Afika tells a parable: A child is tasked to carry water from a well, but has only a pail of reeds which is leaky! A teacher suggests to the child that

they try carrying the water anyway, and to be patient. After a while, the child realizes that the reeds have expanded from the moisture, such that the pail doesn't leak so much, and that the pail is now sparkly clean, keeping the water highly potable. Afika suggests that, in the same way, listening to and reading القرآن in first-millennium Arabic can cleanse the heart even while we are in the process of understanding it. Afika says,

Even though we are unable to internalize the depth and meaning behind the verses, the more you read it, the more it will guard your hearts, and slowly make you stay away from big, big sins إِنَّ شَاءَ اللَّهُ. My friend, this does not mean that we should not try to understand the depths of the Qur'an. Please don't be like, oh Ustazah Fatin Afika said, we don't need to understand the Qur'an, we just need to read. That's not what I meant. In fact, it is our responsibility as Muslims to continue seeking knowledge.

•

In *Hijab Butch Blues*, exegesis scholar Lamya H writes in 2023,

I am fourteen the year I read Surah Maryam. It's not like I haven't read this chapter of the Quran before, I have—I've read the entire Quran multiple times, all 114 chapters from start to finish. But I've only read it in Arabic, a language that I don't speak, that I can vocalize but not understand, that I've been taught for the purpose of reading the Quran. So I've read Surah Maryam before: sounded out the letters, rattled off words I don't know the meaning of, translated patterns of print into movements of tongue and lips. [...] This surah is beautiful, and one that I'm intimately familiar with. The cadence of its internal rhyme, the five elongated letters that comprise the first verse, the short, hard consonants repeated in intervals. But although I've read Surah Maryam before, my appreciation for it has been limited to the ritual and the aesthetic. I've never *read* read it. [...] I am fourteen the year I read Surah Maryam. The year I choose not to die. The year I choose to live (26).

•

In *Reflections on Islamic Feminist Exegesis of the qur'an*, Imam anita wadud says, in 2021, that in 1992 when she published her PhD dissertation, “one had to choose between feminisms that were overwhelmingly hostile to religion—especially Islam—and the dominant interpretation of Islam that was overwhelmingly patriarchal.” Eventually, the journey led her to an

Islamic feminism, which “depended upon a coherent methodology of using gender as a category of interrogation for all Islamic primary sources” and which is about “moving the understanding of gender from hegemony and control to equality and reciprocity” (2). Wadud says that “classical Islamic intellectual traditions operated within a well-entrenched patriarchal model, taking for granted that men were the ideal agents and that they were superior to women as a matter of cosmology, theology, epistemology and praxis.” She says, “You cannot imagine how hard it is to disengage men’s subjectivities from the copious, often erudite and eloquent constructions of Islamic thought. The moment women seek authority through knowledge production their full humanity can suffer challenges by being chastised as disbelievers, heretics, and even enemies to Islam” (4). Wadud says that القرآن “is not only prescriptive, it is descriptive.” In the text’s worldview, “the epistemological rhetoric of othering is absent,” and its “language, syntax and metaphor is absent of the rhetoric of hegemonic juxtaposition on the basis of human to human characteristics and diversity” (6). Wadud gives an exegesis of the Lot story which mirrors discussions of the Biblical narrative.²⁵ For her part, Wadud says that the practice of “deferring to the exegesis of scholars from earlier Abrahamic texts has not always been helpful.” She emphasizes a drive “to return to the Qur’an as a self-sufficient text unencumbered by previous sacred texts and their analysis.” She writes,

Those who say there is no room in Islam for queer Muslims, and then pretend there is a punishment prescribed in the text, are projecting onto a text that gives no concrete recommendation. Furthermore, the punishment in the text is of God destroying a whole town. That, in and of itself, is ambiguous. For while we are not God, we are in a relationship with God. The God of the Qur’an introduces Himself with mercy and compassion hundreds of times (10).

Wadud concludes,

25 An interpretation seemingly scarce in the literature: Why *two* angels? The pair presents as a monogamous gay couple, placed under Lot’s protection and enraging the cities. For further alternative discussions, see:

Jordan, Mark. *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*. 1998.

Waters, Sonia. *Reading Sodom through Sexual Violence Against Women*. 2017.


Korpman, Matthew. *Can anything good come from Sodom?* 2019.

3 Nephi 28 in *The Book of Mormon* may be interpreted as relevant to this discussion.

I believe the future will reclaim the feminine as a way to enhance the harmony and beauty of the way we will embrace all people as deserving dignity and as a way to indicate our embrace of the Sacred Holy Other as the source of us all. We embrace those who are othered amongst us, because somewhere each of us are othered, and somewhere each of us are aligned with the Divine (10).

•

In القرآن الكريم, we join in singing! Ask the friendly members of your neighborhood mosque to follow along or recite with you, and kindly insist on reports from the heart on the meaning of the verses. Texts and recitations of القرآن are widely available. Maria Ulfah offers her slowly-paced recitation of all one hundred fourteen سُورَة online for free, a good introduction for those unfamiliar with the Arabic writing system. I also recommend Yasser ad-Dussary, who sings a quick and dramatic recitation, and Wadee Hammadi Al Yamani, who sings in a slower, somewhat more neutral tone. Recitations can be followed alongside a printed Tanzil Uthmani text.

Arabic is read right-to-left and has no capitalization. القرآن most often flows without any punctuating pauses corresponding to modern punctuation, permitting a deep landscape of ambiguity not available to the formality of modern grammars. In some editions, as is the case in Khmer, there are no spaces between parts of speech. The verses sometimes unexpectedly choose the other of two forms for adjectives and verbs, deviating from the usual assigned based on the corresponding noun's grammatical class. In القرآن الكريم, the last letter of each line (the left-most when reading) is often consistent, giving the student a frequent reference point to track with brief pauses in the recitation. The presence of a  indicates the reciter is meant to perform a bowing prayer before continuing. The following are seven سُورَة, which share the opening invocation:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ • الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ • مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ • إِيَّاكَ
نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ • آهَدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ • صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ
• غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ

•

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ • وَوَضَعْنَا عَنكَ وِزْرَكَ • الَّذِي أَنْقَضَ ظَهْرَكَ •
وَوَرَعْنَا لَكَ ذِكْرَكَ • فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا • إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا • فَإِذَا فَرَغْتَ
فَانصَبْ • وَإِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَارْغَب

•

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

أَقْرَأَ بِأَسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ • خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ • أقرأَ وَرَبُّكَ
الْأَكْرَمُ • الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ • عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ • كَلَّا إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ
لَيَطْغَىٰ • أَنْ رآهُ اسْتَغْنَىٰ • إِنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الرُّجْعَىٰ • أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يَنْهَىٰ
عَبْدًا إِذَا صَلَّىٰ • أَرَأَيْتَ إِنْ كَانَ عَلَىٰ الْهُدَىٰ • أَوْ أَمَرَ بِالتَّقْوَىٰ • أَرَأَيْتَ
إِنْ كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ • أَلَمْ يَعْلَم بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَرَىٰ • كَلَّا لَئِنْ لَمْ يَنْتَهَ لِنَسْفَعًا
بِالنَّاصِيَةِ • نَاصِيَةٍ كَذِبَةٍ خَاطِئَةٍ • فَلْيَدْعُ نَادِيَهُ • سَنَدْعُ الزَّبَانِيَةَ • كَلَّا لَا
تُطْعَمُهُ وَاَسْجُدَ وَاقْتَرِبَ



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
وَالْعَصْرِ • إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ • إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ

•

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ • لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ • وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا
أَعْبُدُ • وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ مَّا عَبَدْتُمْ • وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ • لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ
وَلِي دِينِ

•

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ • اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ • لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ • وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ النَّاسِ • مَلِكِ النَّاسِ • إِلَهِ النَّاسِ مِنْ شَرِّ الْوَسْوَاسِ
الْخَنَّاسِ • الَّذِي يُوَسْوِسُ فِي صُدُورِ النَّاسِ • مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ

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Precarity

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*Of these your prophecies.
Oh prophet, tell us plainly, at last:
When is the day of our success?*

-John Milton

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In *Troubling the Water*, Seiff writes in 2022 of the environmental degradation, ecological destruction, and impoverishment of Cambodia, through the history of the Tonle Sap Lake. The book contains story after story of the onetime abundance of fisherman and farmers surrounding and living on the lake, and the lengths they are now forced to go for survival. Bringing us to present day following the pandemic, Seiff writes,

Halts to global manufacturing and free movement shredded [Cambodia's] garment industry and tourism sector, the two cornerstones supporting the country. On the lake, families who relied heavily on remittances faced a second blow. Technically, the Tonle Sap River reversed course in August—three months late—but it didn't really reverse until October, when flash floods finally sent the water pouring in earnest back toward the lake. The water level of the lake hit another historic low, reaching just a quarter of its normal wet season volume. Officials were calling it a 'very critical situation.' Fishers had predicted in 2016 the Tonle Sap might survive another ten to twenty years. But it had become clear it was dying before our eyes. It is hopeless at times, but it is not *only* hopeless. There are many brave inventive people carving lives from the margins—though it must be said that far many more are slipping through the cracks through no fault of their own. So much could be done to help them and to mitigate against the worst of the catastrophe. If it is too late to turn back the clock and restore the Tonle Sap, as I fear it may be, let this be some small attempt to memorialize a place and time before it vanishes (Prologue).

In one telling, the world is a collection of resources well-guarded by the global marketplace and its multinational banks, which will raise up the right generations of artistic and bureaucratic talent to manage each environmental concern according to its human value. In another, those

systems have sold themselves out to uncaring committees whose spiritual foundations are false idols, mute gods, and fallen angels. It is for those with ample time for education to grapple with these questions, because those who have none instead grapple with their lives. *Troubling the Water* appropriately conveys the sense of utter loss and betrayal felt by real beings with little institutional authority living at the waterline, feelings which I have reproduced in my drawing of the same title.

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In *Debt, Land, and Labour: Cambodian Migrant Workers' Precarious Livelihood Strategies*, Blau and Arnold write,

Cambodia's agrarian-industrial transformation is notable for its reliance on privately held microfinance debt, being the most privately indebted country on a loan-to-GDP basis worldwide. Financialisation is pervasive in Cambodia, where microfinance loans are used [...] beyond their purported use of funding investment in small-scale rural agriculture. Instead, loans are often used to fund labour migration, with workers traveling over the land border to neighboring Thailand in search of employment opportunities and higher-paying jobs. According to official figures, over 700,000 documented Cambodians were working in Thailand [before the pandemic. ...] Taking into account the large number of undocumented workers, the actual number of these workers is estimated to range between 1.2 and 2 million. These workers are employed in light manufacturing, construction, fisheries, hospitality and agriculture, as well as other low-paying sectors in Thailand, and makeup over 90% of out-migration from Cambodia.[...] Debt is a major factor both enabling and necessitating labour migration to occur. [...] Land acts as a tool that offers some security through access to credit and a place to live. In the absence of sufficient and functional social protections, workers have little choice but to maintain landholdings as a means for spreading risk temporally and geographically.

Dynamics I observe for onetime farmers include intensified land arbitrage, a manufactured hunger for foreign-designed technological goods or cultural artifacts, and competition from hyper-efficient industrial farms. It becomes increasingly unclear who owns the land, plots go empty, and generational wealth is converted into status goods. Service industries displace wholesome and contented lifestyles, and the poor are relieved to receive

previously inaccessible healthcare. Wages favor those who submit, finding paths through community networks, while embittering those who resist.

Blau and Arnold give the story of Kunthea and her husband who emigrated to Thailand for work:

Kunthea is a middle-aged female Cambodian worker interviewed in Trat, Thailand, who is working and living at a fish processing centre. Kunthea and her husband had migrated from Kampong Cham, where they had been farmers. In order to buy supplies to live and materials to farm, they had taken a loan from a local microfinance institution. After a few seasons, it became apparent to them that the harvest from farming would not be sufficient to repay their loan (215).

Entering and remaining in Thailand was far from a stable process:

Having not enough money to pay for migration documents, nor any particular links to recruitment agencies or people working in Thailand, the couple sought to migrate with the help of a broker. The broker told them that he could help them find a job and that they could earn more money in Thailand. [...] Once in Trat, the couple found that working in Thailand was harder than they anticipated. [...] They did not make as much money as the broker had suggested (216).

Life in Thailand failed to help Kunthea's family exit debt:

At the time of retelling this story, Kunthea was acutely distressed and felt she had little option to improve her situation. On the one hand, she did not believe it was viable to leave her workplace to find an alternative source of income. She felt morally obligated to her employer for lending her money and arranging her migration documents. She also believed that her financial indebtedness to her employer tied her legally to her employer, to the extent that the employer would notify the police to imprison her if she attempted to leave her job or find employment elsewhere. On the other hand, Kunthea could not see any advantage of returning home, because even if she did so, she would have no income. She said this would ultimately cause her to lose land in Cambodia, leaving her mother and child destitute and homeless (217).

Blau and Arnold comment,

This example is by no means unique among Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand. [...] Even for workers that have a positive migration experience, these benefits come with risks and costs of being a migrant, including limited rights at work, and barriers to participation in society. In order to access their rights and benefits, workers are placed in relationships of great dependence on employers. [...] Migrant workers in Thailand – both documented and undocumented – are rarely free-wage labourers able to make choices in supplying their labour but rather are placed in an unequal patron-client relationship of protection and dependence (217).

Our own informal conversations with Khmer-speaking migrants in Thailand relayed similar patterns of hardship. We did not interrogate our friends for details of their systemically situated efforts. The felt sense was that they viewed their conditions as a normal part of life, for what other recourse could they seek? The economic conditions of Cambodians are continuous with the violence of the American occupation-bombing, the Reign of Terror, and the refugee crisis to Thailand of the 1970s onward. Helpless asylum seekers have been slowly converted into economically productive residents who yet continue to live away from their homes. Those we spoke to conveyed their present conditions according to the possibilities available to them, opportunities which are piecemeal limited crumbs inside long arcs of history.

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In *Translocal Precarity*, Green and Estes develop concepts found in earlier analyses which "tend to locate the source of precarity in the site of production and in the conditions faced by the individual migrant worker." This research expands the discourse to include "fragility of social reproduction strategies that migrant households employ across space." Green and Estes are sensitive to gaps in rural precarity between migrating, householding landowners and the more vulnerable, remittance-dependent migrant laborers. They also foreground "reproductive labor in the village, carried out by multiple generations of women, and how this life's work actively shapes the experience of precarity." The authors interview fifty-five rural "translocal households" with at least one family member migrating to Thailand or South Korea. Though the gender of labor migrants from Cambodia to Thailand is relatively balanced, we are given

here a story which leans feminine, that of childcare back home, the work of "doing family across borders." Green and Estes relay the experience of Makara and Dy's family. Makara and Dy met in Thailand and worked there together even as their children remained home with Dy's mother, who taking on this responsibility was less able to support her own health especially when the parents' remittances were unreliable, in 2015, when Cambodia's political economy had begun shifting to privatized healthcare. Rendered unable to work in Thailand for the costs of documentation, Makara and Dy moved home. Dy then migrated to Phnom Penh while Makara stayed with the children and farm. Makara, shirking loan officers for debt repayments on principle amounting to a year's salary, "had to negotiate everyday emergencies across space, destabilizing the already precarious working conditions Dy faced in the construction industry." Green and Estes remind us that "the burdens of precarious life are often disproportionately borne by women", but that "families in Cambodia are both relying on normative divisions of labor within the household and forming new arrangements." We are encouraged to locate "precarity in the social spaces of both household production and reproduction."

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In *Destination Debts*, Bylander writes that "social scientists are increasingly attuned to the vulnerabilities produced at the intersection of debt and migration". Research has focused on debt as a cause of migration or as a means of financing migration, but this work introduces a discussion of debts incurred upon arrival. The complexified debt relationships include, in Bylander's study, Cambodians who while in Thailand "borrow in an attempt to remain or become legal; to support family members to join them abroad; and to improve their employment experiences." Indebtedness is implicated in "exploitative work, inhibiting return in times of crisis, [... and] increasing the likelihood of forced labor". Bylander brings to light the "spatial nature" of debt in a world of increased financialization. Debt, a result of borrowing, is additionally criticized as exacerbating power, knowledge, and experience differences, opening up a variety of mechanisms that lenders use which seemingly making the debts not worth it in the long run. The appearance in time of these "destination debts"

results from the affordances of financial technology—borrowed money can be immediately sent to Cambodia—, and from deepened or technologically mediated relationships between migrants and citizens of the host country. The same has also expanded notions of remittance as a bidirectional relationship, reflecting the tendency of capital to flow to its time-adjusted maximum pursuant to translocal conditions. The paper gives a timeline of Cambodia-Thailand labor migration, noting in recent decades the development of "cultures of migration" in Cambodian border provinces. Thailand has developed a strategy for generating border revenue, disrupted by political instability and global health from 2014 onward. The paper spotlights the primary problem of distress migration caused by over-indebtedness, highlighted in that "most" of the Cambodians interviewed in relation to Thailand migration were in debt (in 2017-2018). One family, thousands of dollars in debt to one of the microfinance institutions which dot the landscape like temples, continued to spiral into debt after the financed farm failed to pay off and family members began migrating to Thailand for construction work. Bylander's qualitative descriptions of interviewees are humanly personal, demonstrating the wide variety of debt scenarios, and the lengths and complexities Cambodians navigate to keep themselves and their families afloat.

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In *Response Policies*, Keo et. al examine the impact of pandemic response policies in Cambodia on vulnerable migrant workers and survivors of trafficking. The pandemic undoubtedly worsened destitutions and precarities, and also introduced new kinds of stress, felt by Cambodians at the mercy of state decisions made to ostensibly protect public health. Migrants to Thailand were sometimes forced by law to return, or did so because of work availability, compounding debt, and new family emergencies. Returning migrants faced stigmas of contagion, to such extent they often returned back to Thailand. We hear of "compounding vulnerabilities" and desperation to "seek informal and dangerous paths to migration" (27). There was "limited access to information" and health services in "one of the most vulnerable populations impacted" (10) by the pandemic. The Cambodia government implemented over two thousand

individual policy responses to the pandemic, including cash transfers to poor, sometimes stringent lockdowns, quarantine of migrants, and successful vaccination campaigns. Remittances to Cambodia, (those visible to official tally) which usually constitute over five percent of the financial economy, fell by a quarter in 2020. The Cambodia-Thai border was closed from March 2020 to August 2021, suspending formal migration. So strong was the loss felt by previously mobile migrants, that Keo's description the scene at the border upon reopening has continuity with descriptions I've personally heard from witnesses of the border during the refugee crisis in the 70s: armed authorities, desperation to enter or leave, and confusion. The unfiled violence is also continuous for migrants: the running from police, trafficking and exploitation, estrangement from homelands. Keo includes a discussion of the sometimes-exploitative practices of border brokers, both Cambodian and Thai, who lend money and knowledge for obtaining documents and passage. The pandemic created a blind spot to the most hidden exploitations of migrants, when organizations lost the ability to interact with their clients and informants. Cambodian migrants in Thailand had no access to vaccines for the deadliest portions of the pandemic, which also limited their mobility at borders. Cambodian children lost access to education, which in many settings required ownership of an electronic device. Victims of trafficking were not cared for or identified by institutions, at a time when the risk of victimization was heightened. In 2023, when Pa and Brother and I were in Thailand near the border, the network of dynamics impacting migrants still resulted in forced immobility, loss of documentation, inability to go to school, bodily brokenness, and the separation of families.

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In *Householding & Land Ownership*, Chan and Tan describe in 2023 an apparently global shift in the recent decades from permanent to circular migration. In their study of Cambodia-to-Thailand migration, half-to-more of working life is commonly spent in the money-generating country, with the goal of remittance, retirement, or entrepreneurship back in the home country. International organizations have touted circular migration as a "triple-win" for the migrant, host, and home. The authors offer the

category of "quasi-permanent migrants" to account for migrants with less legal or financial mobility. The authors discuss mainly the notion of "householding" which complexifies the relationship between individual and family in migration decisions. Here, kinship allows for collectively intelligent strategies for childcare, seasonal harvests, and document acquisition. A research timeline shows, in 1997, Cambodians largely unintegrated into Thai society. By 2003, a "Memorandum of Understanding" was in place between the labor ministries of the two countries, to create processes for formalizing employment migration. Around 2011-2014, researchers regarded migrations as somewhat permanent, disrupted by 2014-2019 political instability in Thailand, then by pandemic era expulsions by the Thai government. Documentation for migrants ranges from work permits, to "special" identity cards for the previously undocumented, to border employment, to other "grey areas." The authors note digital technology's role in maintaining familial ties, and the differing impact of migration costs between landowning households and lower paid local farm and factory workers.

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In *When refugees stopped being migrants*, Long notes in 2013 that though in the past refugees were considered migrants, the labels of refugee and migrant blur in practice. In many states, crises associated with refugees "led to long-term underdevelopment of infrastructure and a consequent" impoverishment, and thusly spawned a discourse of "mixed migration." Around a century ago, refugees "were viewed as a special category of economic migrant" with humanitarian and state policy co-focused on the "project of [alleviating] global unemployment through targeted migration." The poor is a group which includes refugees. The categories of political migrant and asylum seeker were a response to a modern phenomenon of identity-based expulsions. Long suggests that it is the plea for asylum from persecution, and for basic and immediate security, as a humanitarian and moral claim, which defines the refugee. Migration as "movement and labour [...] remains a *de facto* choice that refugees make in seeking their own solutions to exile." Where the line between refugee and migrant blurs, as in post-conflict states as Cambodia, so must we also marry the

discourses of humanitarian resettlement and economic development. Indeed, in *Survival Migration* (2013), Betts gives a middle category, contained in international migrant, and which contains refugee: the *survival migrant*. “Many people are in exile for reasons that are not reducible to individualized or even group persecution” and who are thus denied protections. Long, in turn, encourages us in the task of facilitating migrants’ and “refugees’ freedom of movement, and prioritizing the economic, developmental, and demographic impacts of displacement.”

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The 2022 report *Home Truths*, by the International Labour Organization, surveys the living and housing conditions of migrant workers in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, focusing on those in “low-status, low-wage employment” who constitute a “large proportion” of migrants. The conditions range from secondhand to destitute, including rooms in subdivided rentals, encampments on farms, temporary structures in or near construction sites, subdivided shipping containers, the employer’s home, and the cabins of fishing vessels. Such migrants, with low legal status in the host country, are given little to no choice, and must accept the requirements and expediencies of the employer. Job loss, which was especially prevalent during the pandemic, also means a loss of housing. The category of migrant construction workers, at minimum, worked through outbreaks, and sometimes even more fervently to compensate productivity slowdowns, and without proper medical protections. Thailand aggressively maintained bodily boundaries between migrant workers and the citizen populace, reportedly locking groups tested or suspected of contagion together in sites separate to their housing, such as the worksite itself. The report broadly suggests that the continuing conditions of migrant worker housing are not up to international standards, for example stating that employer-provided housing is “not desirable” in and of itself. Thailand, like the U.S., has not ratified the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. The U.N. Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights elaborates seven minimal criteria for adequate housing: legal security of tenure, availability of goods and services, affordability,

habitability, accessibility, reasonable location, and cultural adequacy. Thailand itself has no legislation addressing migrant worker housing, but has “insufficiently detailed” “ministerial regulations” such as the requirement to provide potable water, a minimum accommodation of three square meters per person, “sound construction”, and some specifics concerning waste management. The report continues with findings based on surveys of sites, characterizing accommodations for urban workers in Thailand as often “crowded, dank, humid, and poorly ventilated” “compounds” near the workplace, with either small rooms or dormitories of “bunks pushed together to make one long platform.” In Thailand agriculture, “most migrant workers on rubber or palm plantations live with their employers, or the employer allows them to build their own houses in an area of the plantation” from “metal sheeting and remnants of wood”. The report says that seasonal worker housing in particular “often” fails to meet the minimal Thai Ministerial Regulations.

The report’s observations match what we observed in our trip, though the literature is less giving of more narrative or poetic discussion of the lives of our friends in these urban locations. In our experience, housing sites are difficult to find and gain access to, requiring sometimes week-long trust-building efforts with workers and site managers, who often live in the same buildings alongside the workers. The urban managers we met seemed to positively care about the conditions of their employees, aware of what regulatory forces make demands on them, and all involved had a vested interest in continuing the situation which is considered fortunate: the ability to gainfully earn a consistent wage greater than elsewhere. In our experience on the farms internal to the country, the situation we observed was further from the eyes of the law. Configurations of foremanship appeared there to have a greater analogy to trafficking, the workers seemingly being further humble and fearful of our presence. Even there, they appeared not ungrateful for their lot, given stories of livelihoods lost elsewhere for issues related to environmental degradation, financial extractionism, and ethnocolorism. It is easy to forget that here, the painful wisdom comes from a region that is not the United States.

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In *Unveiling the Realities*, the Labour Protection Network describes the specific policies and documentation realities affecting migrating workers, particularly in the Special Economic Zones which this project and the report itself identified as a site of both opportunity and exploitation for working families and individuals. The report cites Farole and Akinci's description of the zones:

Demarcated geographic areas contained within a country's national boundaries where the rules of business are different from those that prevail in the national territory. These differential rules principally deal with investment conditions, international trade and customs, taxation, and the regulatory environment; whereby the zone is given a business environment that is intended to be more liberal from a policy perspective and more effective from an administrative perspective than that of the national territory.

The report suggests that domestic and foreign investment creates a demand for immigrant labor, more effectively manageable and profitable in an enclosed area, usually at the nation's border or in the rural countryside. In the language of this project, they are *islands in the gaps of the world*. Systems built for production and profit generate the site, sidestepping protectionist concerns about territory-wide immigration. The willingness for immigrating workers to enter into relationship with such an extractive object demonstrates the preexisting imbalance of opportunity between the host and home nations. The site then becomes a nexus for human rights systems, who contest the unencumbered extractivism, and attempt to morph the site into a mechanism for meeting the needs of migrating families, as we should. The report mentions a development plan from decades past, which viewed the creation of zones with suspicion, in the midst of an influx of refugees, and the presence of militants. The refugee resettlement projects themselves may be interpreted as an attempt to convert a costly, catastrophically necessary, and rife-with-abuse humanitarian project into a productive experiment for future economic zones. The acutely intentional pitching for international investment stresses the importance of criticality, journalism, watchdogs, and prayer.



Ghosts

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*The doves come to gather our every need
They lift them up to heaven through
The mouths from which we speak
Like a moth to a flame, we become helpless
To the beautiful ghosts that true love sheds*

-Sleeping at Last

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In *A Home for the Ghosts*, Cazenave in 2022 ties the haunted imagery of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Tsing) into Khmer history, noting that the earth's future as a series of hot islands mirrors Cambodia's mythological past: the island with a single tree. The ghosts that haunt Cambodia are said to be the ungrieved, those not properly given burials in the Democratic Kampuchea era. Rithy Panh comments on his 2018 documentary *Graves without Names* by saying that the landscape has a language to teach us. Panh is said to be reenacting missing rites of memory and mourning, providing an imaginary enclosure, as in forest cemeteries. We are invited into the art of "noticing ghosts" (44) by superimposing history onto the mundane many presents, or by inverting, transforming, and boundarying images of landscape.

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On the Move: Mobilities and Silences is a helpful 2020 dissertation by a Liamdee, a Thai scholar, which deconstructs Thai narratives of the border. They visit Khao I Dang to study the Cambodian Civil War, which is "an unthinkable history" (55) to Thais in the midst of state narratives, national pride, and historical conflict with Cambodia. Initially, Thailand supported the United States' interests in Cambodia, but following the U.S. bombings of Cambodia, American troops abandoned bases in Thailand. Thailand then aligned somewhat with the emerging Democratic Kampuchea, which was initially seen as a response to corruption and the American military incursion into Cambodia, and which in the end "caused one of the most catastrophic genocides in world history" (66) in which millions of Khmer

were killed and internally or internationally displaced. The Khao I Dang refugee camp in Sakaeo was one of four Thai camps, and held at its peak 160,000 Cambodians. Liamdee talks to the Thai locals and learns that the grounds are “littered with the everyday presence of death and ghosts in the area” (98) and of literal unburied skeletons. My own conversations with former Khao I Dang residents gives stories of essential internment or imprisonment, including the murder of children and the sexual exploitation of women under threat of starvation. Liamdee relays an instance of torture by leeches by camp soldiers. Thai locals had complex relationships with camp residents, themselves variously victims of burglary and violence, clients of prostitution in the camp, or having humanitarian or commercial relationships with camp residents, risking their lives or freedoms in entering the camp illegally. Khao I Dang is today under the jurisdiction of the Royal Forest Department, is largely overgrown, and is open to Khmer visitors. Thailand was greatly impacted by the Cambodian War, which in turn was greatly impacted by the American war in Vietnam, and so the lessons here translate to a discourse of U.S. reparations. Liamdee says there is a silence, a choice to not speak “about the brutality of war and replace the violent past. Cruelty, power abuse, and military acts toward the refugees have been barely discussed in public” (124) The rights and lives of refugees were subsumed into a strategy for war. May we understand.

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In *The Lights We Carried Home*, Chronister writes a short story in 2017 about Sopha, a young Khmer child living in Psaodung, Cambodia. Sopha’s aunt calls her a haunted child. “The monks at the village temple looped red strings around her wrists to keep her spirit from being carried off, but we always knew she only half belonged to us.” Ghosts abound. “Sopha loved the ghosts who showed their faces for her and only her, and the spirit world was where she escaped.” Western filmmakers arrive in the village, to film a documentary about village life, with the aim of exposing some local corruption about electricity supply.

The foreigners weren’t officially paying anyone for interviews but unofficially they’d brought sacks of rice big enough to feed a family for months. I don’t know who told them about Sopha. [...] I knew I’d earn more from a fifteen-

minute interview than I did from a month selling phone cards on the roadside. [...] The camera was an eye I didn't want to face, too much like the ghosts who glowed when our fires died.

The filmmakers are embarrassed by the stories about ghosts, and redirect the focus on the material conditions of interviewees.

I don't think many people in America speak Khmer; I'm sure the filmmakers captioned our mouths with whatever words they wanted. They only needed enough audio to create the impression that we said what they wanted us to say. The filmmakers were not our first foreigners. Others had come, to build schoolhouses that the monsoons later destroyed or to hold clinics that healed us once and then never again. When we failed to smile in their photographs or come to their English classes, they would pack up their things and go abruptly, saying no goodbyes, making no excuses. We were a graveyard of failed charities.

The blood of one of the foreigners is discovered on drying clothes. The narrator wonders how the violence could have happened, since the ghouls would only go after somebody who wronged them.

Dara says,

I decided to let the foreigners deal with their own haunting. [...] The foreigners didn't believe in ghosts before, but they believed now. [...] Apart from hunting for snakes, Sopha's and my favorite thing to do was wire-hopping. [...] At the top of the tower, Sopha showed me how her palms glowed, ghost-like.

Sopha says, "*I'm light, Dara.*" Dara says,

All the risks we took, the trouble we found, I thought we were having fun. I didn't realize that Sopha was figuring out what it meant to be a haunted child. What separated her from the ghosts. What made her the same. I want to reach through time to tuck Sopha back inside the stilt-house and discourage her from doing anything that might part her soul from her body. [...] Anything but that glow on Sopha's palms and that shine in her eyes, anything but that thrill we felt as we carried our light home.

One of the foreigners is murdered. "The foreigners saw something moving along the power lines. They wouldn't say ghost, they would only admit to a glow." Dara's aunt is interviewed:

We are under a curse here, the lights, the people, all the same thing. You think it is a mistake that ghosts roam freely here? Everywhere else they go to the spirit houses and leave the people alone, here they scream so loud we can't sleep, they mock us with their glow in the darkness, they kill our children. We can do nothing for fear of them except kill more of each other. I know our neighbors killed my niece, they thought the ghosts would go, the curse would lift, but nothing will lift this from us.

Sopha disappears, leaving behind her red bracelets. "Knowing Sopha had gone to the spirit world made me feel like Psaodung wasn't really my home anymore. I only belonged here as long as I had a body tying me down." Dara visits a banana orchard where she had spent lots of time with her sister.

When I cut the strings from my wrists, the orchard changed. The ghost lights were brighter now, bigger, focused around faces and bodies. They were people but they were wrong. Their features shifted so their faces drooped to one side. Their mouths opened too wide or their sockets had no eyes. Their hands hung down past their knees; their legs ended in toeless clumps. In the dark, I could see them and only them. Hands came out to grab me, teeth showed, and I realized the spirits didn't care if my sister was a haunted child.

Dara find Sopha's body, and says that her sister has actually been dead for thirteen years, though her body is perfectly preserved. Dara walks to give her sister a burial:

This walk into the center of Psaodung was just another climb across a bundle of electrified wires, and Sopha was still leading me.

By now I had an audience. Half the village at least, men coming in from the riverbanks, children stopping on their way to school. Ming standing on the ladder to our stilt-house, open-mouthed. The film crew, stumbling over themselves to find their cameras before my shovel hit the dust. They were still filming when I finished digging Sopha's grave and walked away.

I never saw the foreigners' movie, and I still don't know whose story they told. But Ming told me they dropped three sacks of rice at our house before they left Psaodung. She didn't refuse, she said she couldn't. Pride has always been too precious for us to afford.

The internet contains reenactments of Chronister's story by young students as far away as the Phillipines, suggesting that the spiritual themes about the

particularly American modernist ontology, and the outsized present-day impact it has on residents living among deep forests, is something widely grappled with. To this day, I remain spooked by experiences in spiritually hot environments which I can't fully explain. Either my psychological disposition enables them for me, or else these experiences are of a kind available to all Westerners who approach the unknown with an open heart. That said, I haven't directly encountered phenomenologically vivid interactive spirits of the kind commonly reported in Cambodia. The conclusion of philosophical reductionism is that the productive linguistic discourse generates falsifications of spiritual experience, explained as prosaic abstractions of physical rules, thereby demonstrating in truth that the spirits are not really there. An alternative perspective is that the words generate a tangled mist of rifts under which subjects with learned spiritual unfamiliarity would experience trauma at something so commonplace as a conversation with a friendly neighborhood spirit, who wouldn't wish to upset anybody likewise.

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In *Guardians of the Forest or Evil Spirits?: Unsettling politicized ontologies in the Cambodian Highlands*, Scheer writes in 2021 of Christian members of the Bunong indigenous group in Bu Ma in Cambodia, where stewards of the land are in a struggle against multinational corporations with sights set on extractive production:

When, in January 2009, I began my ethnographic research in the highland commune of Bu ma, the local Protestant Bunong were dealing with divergent, morally laden, and externally defined representations of the “right” ways to relate to spirit-gods and other humans. [...] With the first conversions to Christianity in the 1970s, the spirit-gods had been portrayed as evil and misleading, contrasting with the mighty Christian god. Similarly, gongs and cymbals had been shown to be dangerous mediators for these demonized agents. Since the turn of the millennium, missionaries have shifted toward “indigenizing” Bunong Christianity, and this has altered and further complicated the situation. It has involved reintegrating previously rejected musical instruments by presenting them as inoffensive parts of God's creation.

The paper writes at an intersection of Indigenous identities:

In the early phase of their struggle, Protestant activists from Bu Ma faced external attempts to delegitimize their rights claims based on the argument that, as Christians, they no longer worshiped their spirits and ancestors, or were even destroyers of “tradition.” On several occasions, Cambodian officials confronted them with the legally invalid claim that because they had converted, they were no longer entitled to the special rights of indigenous peoples.

Encounters between foreign missionaries, Christian Bunong, and traditional believers give insight into the spirit realm:

According to the Protestant Bunong, especially elderly converts, entering Christianity meant a radical change of allegiance from the spirit-gods to the Christian god, mostly referred to as “Chief-God.” Far from depriving the Bunong spirit-gods of their existence or of their power, the process of conversion had turned them into “evil gods.” Malicious entities, such as “soul eaters” had always been around, but spirit-gods, described as being good to those who respect them and fighting those who mistreat them, were redefined as equally evil.

Christian Bunong Pö Luêên interprets a spiritual history:

In the beginning the Bunong gods were with the Chief-God up in the sky, until the day that—under the lead of one of them, called Satan—they attempted a coup against Chief-God. This made Chief-God angry, and he kicked them out of the sky. They fell down and landed all over the place, settling in stones, mountains, rivers, and forests. From there they started to mislead people, so for them not to believe in Chief-God ... they could appear in a person’s dreams telling her that if she offered them a sacrifice, her problem will be solved.

Grand spiritual narratives were in force during the violent 1970s:

The context in which the first Bunong converted helps explain their way of making sense of a new god, granting him superior power and recasting known spiritual agents as evil. It was just across the border, on the Vietnamese side of the highlands, that most of the first-generation Bunong Protestants today living in Bu Ma initially met with evangelical missionaries. They had fled their villages under pressure from bombing by American B-52s and from the Khmer Rouge forces. [...] They had left their former homes without a chance to inform the rice, cymbals, and other nonhuman agents under their care. Normally they would have performed a ritual to

explain to these agents that they would not be there to watch over them for a while and that whatever happened during that period was not their fault.

Bunong refugees found themselves in spiritual upheaval, and many found in the Christ a compelling story of redemption:

The Protestant envoys argued that their god had sacrificed his own son to redeem human sin, which appears to have been a compelling argument—at least in its Bunong translation. For the highland refugees sacrifice was a crucial act, so a god who had shed his own son’s blood seemed powerful enough to protect them from the anger of the spirit-gods, toward whom they felt deeply indebted.

Conversions to Christianity precariously altered relationships with the land and its spirits:

A regular churchgoer explained in 2017 that in the past he and fellow Protestants had entered otherwise prohibited forests and even taken resources from them, enabled by their god who was stronger than the spirit-gods. This required them not only to ask Chief-God to make them invisible to the “evil spirits,” and hence unassailable, but also to be serious Christians. Those who went to church every Sunday and eschewed alcohol and sacrificial meat could be protected, but those who had not closely followed Protestant rules became vulnerable to “malevolent” forces. Some people went as far to say that if Christians prayed many times in one spirit place, this could eventually make the spirit-gods flee and settle in a different spot. Over time, such narrations came to be told more rarely and more often with unease than with pride. They do not allow for easy conclusions about the Christian highlanders’ role amid rapidly changing forest resource exploitation, which has been promoted for years by convoluted macropolitical and economic interests.

A man named Dara explains:

As a Christian Bunong, you believe that the spirit-gods live there, and as a non-Christian you believe this *and* you “worship” them.

Scheer reflects,

Protestant Bunong were cramped by conflicting sets of norms and values—requiring continuity where there had been rupture and vice versa. Blurring the boundaries between established categories, they were always at risk of

blame for some kind of deficiency. These unorthodox Christian indigenous activists' attempts to navigate contradictory expectations show the need for a critical analysis of politicized ontologies. They complicate prevailing images of "redemptive" nonmodern Others as they express fragmented and multiple alterities, which bear the marks of imperialist violence while being decidedly Bunong. Discomforting as they may be, the strivings of scarred Others appear nonetheless vital to reflect on ways of living on a "damaged planet."

A Western sensibility plunged into an unfamiliar marginalized earthy forest landscape will surely grapple with the sudden appearance of spiritual particularity especially when the cell service goes out. If so, how much more of a shock is something like a multi-universal unitary God who is always there at every moment, for all of us?

•

In *There Was So Much*²⁶, Work writes that in the Cambodian and Southeast Asian context, "The human inhabitants of a given territory understand themselves to be provided for, protected, and also punished by" (53). the ម្ចាស់អ្នកំណា ~ *steward-person-ancients* of the waters and lands.

The "development state", defined by discursive practices of a naturalist ontology, provoke these spirits' capacity to deal out the consequences, for disrupted sacredness. The spirits value ritual adherence, respectful use, and social solidarity, while financialized sovereigns reward bureaucratic literacy, productive use, and "exclusionary hierarchical relationships". We are encouraged to see "cracks in the semiotic illusion" (55) of the latter's "mythic system." In the late 90's, Cambodia had 70% forest cover. Present day figures are not given, but are surely greatly lessened after decades of corporate expropriation and persecution of activists. Cambodians now rely on the trappings of modernity such as purchased medicine, over care by the លោកិកា. Self-care is now achieved individually via schooling, accumulation, and status. Work suggests these changes are "an uncompleted operation", a preliminary "carving out" of a certain "constellation of phenomena" that "seem to form a set" (58). Work

26 Courtney Work. 2018. *There Was So Much: Violence, Sovereignty, and States of Extraction in Cambodia*.

interviews a variety of Khmer officials whose words grate the ears of the critical theorist, as they reproduce systems of power and also play it out independently in yet another locality. Less wealthy interviewees say that the ព្រៃឥតដី defend the land still, including via deadly animals and rather precise lightning strikes. The decay and destruction, they say, comes not from ព្រៃឥតដី as punishment, but from the companies themselves, or "nature". We read, in closing, that the processes at play today "are not the original ones... They were originally part, not of a system of government, but of an organization to promote life, fertility, prosperity by transferring life from objects abounding in it (elements) to objects dependent on it (plants and animals)" (67).

Work's article refers to some kind of systemically instantiated malicious construct, interpretable as a phenomenized reality glittering between linguistic object and actualized vehicle of wordly harm. Perhaps the secular language of critical theory actually comports well with the ontology of scripture! Where we have become accustomed to assigning particular meanings to ancient terms, we might rather consider that their metaphors are broader than we expected, reaching further into the text's future, all the way to the present. Here, I have unanswered questions about a God who is often given the agency of judgment in monotheistic texts, versus the more polytheistic and naturalist sensibilities we observe here. A theology of radical oneness appreciates widespread belief in greater-than-human sacredness, and limits its dimmutions to such inadvisables as the profanely self-copying or the condemnable oppression of the weak. Here I have been greatly influenced by القرآن, through which we are witness to a unfathomably storied linguistic event, the root of a causal family tree of meaning concerning the interplay of differences in faith. For me, it is like an answer book for several particularly thorny spiritual puzzles: If God is One, and people venerate beings which are ascribed distinct attributes, how are we to respond as humble practitioners of truth-seeking faith? If there is a great deal of natural evil, and God has chosen or created our present reality for us to inhabit, how do we interpret nature's responses and accidents as acts of God? English interpretations of القرآن – available at the

bookstore, at the top of digital search results, or scored highest by the translation industrial complex — may be understood as one tiny fruit plucked from a great tree rooted in the angel Gabriel's reconfiguration of seventh-century Arabic. We should not underestimate the profound essence القرآن took on as perhaps *the* founding event for the Arabic language and dialects, particularly through the historical event of the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon them), who is said to have lived a life which was essentially القرآن. Where disagreements abound concerning the canonical meanings of coarsely construed words, we should remember that modern dictionary entries, grammatical understandings, and interpretations of tone are greatly due to the embodied historical moment that received القرآن, a discourse especially subject to anita wadud's analysis above. A radical hermeneutic (which is not endorsed by one Imam I spoke with, nor several Muslim brethren) is that the entire meaning of the verses is recoverable from the structure of the vocalized constructions themselves, without reference to a genealogy of seventh-century peninsula common-tongue Arabic. This view understands historical and contemporary ascriptions of meaning in any language as sort of memorization guides for a much more profound, and still-normative and ever-enlightening revelation which we cannot hope to have apprehended in 1400 years. An incredible thing about القرآن, with its countless grammatical patterns, meta-intentional juxtapositions, and game-theoretic baits, is that it mercifully guides the reader back to the root of any preferred interpretation. The Lord leads us to our differences — across time, space, and concept.

•

Arensen writes in 2017, in *The Dead in the Land of ឆ្មៃ ~ ghosts*, a word Cambodian children use often, such that I am fond of playfully asking, "are ឆ្មៃ truly existing really?" as in, could one casually encounter a ghost while out for a stroll? The answer is always yes! Arensen says ឆ្មៃ "refers to both corpses and ghosts" and that the word "encompasses both material and immaterial aspects of the dead" (70). For Khmer Buddhists

"the significance and impact of bodies and bones upon the living are inextricably linked with the material transformations that change dead bodies into bones." The "physical treatment of the body of the deceased" matters. Cremation is a means of quickly achieving a transformation that eases the futures of both living and dead, though many Khmer are ritually buried. "The improper treatment of human remains prevents the transformation of a body's spirit, trapping it instead in this world as a ghost" (71). Arensen relays a Khmer telling of Rouge times, when kinshiplessness, banned rituals, and chaos precluded millions of proper rituals from ever occurring. As we have read concerning in the refugee camps, many died and were killed in a state of violent exception, and so may not have received burials at all. Arensen concludes, "These [improperly buried] spirits were engaged in an unending search for food that mirrored the foraging experiences of area residents at the close of the war. Indeed, the specter of hunger continued to haunt poorer village residents" as "the dead, like the living [...] fend for themselves" (84).

•

In *Displacement, Diminishment, and Ongoing Presence*, Arensen writes in 2012 of Cambodians resettling the area of land named Pailin, which held by Rouge up until 1996. As resettlement continued in the 2000s, the explosive mines leftover from war acutely characterized Khmer conceptions of វ្រៃ ~ *forest*, or wilderness dangers, as distinct from ត្រកូល ~ town, broadly civilization, in a cosmological spectrum which has fascinated researchers. In the collection cited above, *Edge of the Forest*, the Khmer ontology is said to have been greatly disrupted by French colonial ontological impositions which redrew the lines according to western preconcepts. Arensen says that ត្រកូល and វ្រៃ are not simply the rural-urban distinction, which was of significant political importance to the Rouge, who evacuated cities and enforced luddite agrarianism. When Cambodians resettled the mined landscapes, they did so in an intensely interactive process with the touchy or malevolent spirits which guard them. In prewar times, the same region of land seems to have been filled with powerful guardians commanding beasts and disease. Malaria figured

strongly in these spirits' needs. Offerings and prayers were made in order to improve relationships and save life. The Rouge banned the ritual encounter with spirits, alongside religion and money, causing a moment of rupture and crisis for the spirits. Postwar, the Khmer agree that the spirits' power and capacity for creating danger are greatly diminished. Some attribute this to a satiation of hunger caused by successful cultivation of ជ្រៃជ្រាប, and others suggest that the spirits were forcibly displaced by the war. Loss of forest does not imply the spirits ceased to exist. One Cambodian suggests that if the spirits have nowhere to go, they will live in the rocks. Reconfigurative cultivation of forest is not considered universally wrong; it rather is important to seek interaction with and permission from the spirits, who occupy a state of knowledge of the terrain's needs, that the land's natural future may be reconciled with the needs of the destitute and landless. It is said only the morally upright can successfully settle in the deep forest.

Arensen ends with a discussion of the ស្រីខ្មៅ, a distinct kind of spirit who is less of a guardian and more of a hermit, whose world is one of abundance, commerce, and uprightness. Their presence is diminished, though they have left behind gardens and dwellings. In one story set near a Rouge-era border refugee camp, they clothe and give a place of rest to some camp residents searching for food. Their abundance comes from a moral and agricultural intelligence which humans are said to have lost. The forest was once seen as a place of great physical danger, but it became for desperate and migrating Cambodians a place of refuge from the greater dangers of society, and now offers promise in reconciliation. Arensen concludes with respect for Cambodian cosmologies which are "both durable and vulnerable, an increasingly uncertain but nonetheless lingering resource for life in the aftermath of war" (175).



Noticing

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Oxen with crooked horns
Humans with squinting eyes
*Crocodiles with severed tails*²⁷
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In *A History of the World*, Misek produces a 2022 documentary for the purpose of “ransoming” video clips which, though already in the public domain, were previously only available in low-resolution or watermarked form. In this section, I review a collection of so-called “stock” footage, mostly from the same collection Misek draws from. The observations are ordered by time of the footage, and are simply what stood out to me.

•
In 1942, coalitions of foreign officials appease faraway treaties and decide a new border. Children in torn clothes look on as representatives salute a concrete plinth sadly stamped with a single foreigner.²⁸ In 1970, villagers stop their tasks to move to the road and raise hands in demonstration of non-violence as jeeps carrying overseas troops kick up dust.²⁹ Nearer the city, a puzzled child watches confused, youths eye the camera wryly, and adults gaze despondent.³⁰ In 1973, suburban folk crouch, wince, point, and seemingly wonder whether they are bystanders, while state-of-the-art warplanes drop bombs at a small distance.³¹ In 1979, exhausted and muddy humans stream along a path to a neighboring land, carrying possessions on their heads in old grain sacks.³² In 1983, civilians shelter

27 Khmer proverb.

28 *Representatives of Japan, Thailand, and French Indochina use boats, water buffalo carts, elephants and other transportation as they survey and mark a border between Thailand and French Indochina.* 1942.

29 Jensen, Christopher. *Villagers waving at the 2/47th mechanised infantry of the Ninth Infantry division moving into Cambodia.* 1970.

30 *Family of refugees in Cambodia during border troubles following US withdrawal of 10,000 US troops from Cambodia back to South Vietnam.* 1970.

31 *Cambodian villagers watch as a US F-4 fighter jet strikes on the banks of the Mekong river in Phnom Penh during the Vietnam war.* 1973.

32 *Cambodian refugees walk along a path carrying their belongings in 1979.* 1979.

under tarps under the bright sun, animals wandering in the midst of small cooking fires, with the distant sound of small-arms warfare.³³ In 1988, tens of thousands stand on flat ground around a raised platform, where two theater performers evoke hope from another time. Soldiers wade a border swamp.³⁴ . In 1989, the world's eye is in focus for a moment. Images of quiet precarity, hammocks on posts, and chickens pecking in ditches. Commerce. Camp guards walk stiffly, or cockily, for the camera in packs. Well-constructed bamboo/palm houses and firewood, cosmetics, an occasional cigarette. Paltry food, undergrown fruits, cans of donated tuna.³⁵ In 1990, the profanely displayed remains of victims in a glass case. The narrator says the foreigners might switch their backing soon.³⁶ In 1991, a child hoists their own weight in water balanced on a thin yoke. Landscapes of mines.³⁷ In 1993, sanctioned soldiers from over thirty countries patrol the land in frustration. Tired resistance fighters. Weary civilians. Politics and marching monks.³⁸ In 1996, a villager, returned to his lands, packs down a new road with a concrete block on a stick. Typewriters and candles in the capitol.³⁹ In 1997, royalty, aghast, speaks downward at a foreigner, “ម៉ែចំប៉ា និអ្នក ក៏ ឯង នៅ ទី នី យ៉ា យ” “how have you self here very saying?!” to a question about use of force, continuing, “did you want me to retreat?”⁴⁰. In 2000, a diaspora films a wooden bridge under construction, merchants crossing in casual balance along the beams.⁴¹ In 2003, a younger-than-adolescent names the price in de facto currency to an undercover foreigner as part of a sting operation.⁴² In 2006, child athletes warm up in the neighboring country for a kickboxing match,

33 *Thailand-Cambodia Border: Fighting between Vietnamese troops and Kampuchean rebels*. 1983.

34 *Thailand Site 2*. 1988.

35 *Conflict: Refugee camps 2 and 8 at Thai border*. 1989.

36 *USA & Soviet: Vietnam / Cambodia talks*. 1990.

37 *Prince Sihanouk returns*. 1991.

38 *Election Preview*. 1993.

39 *Country struggles to overcome previous regimes violent legacy*. 1996.

40 *On the Run after Hun Sen's Cambodian Coup*. 1997.

41 Pheng, Sarith. 2000. *Cambodia 2000*.

42 *International Justice Mission: Cambodia*. 2003.

the two nations matched off.⁴³ Back in home country, a group of teenage voluntourists plaster a wall, and squeak out pop-cultural artifacts to lite bemusement.⁴⁴ In 2011, buildings are leveled by bombs in fighting between countries who held a long peace. Civilians huddle around baskets of grains, waiting.⁴⁵ In 2014, migration police offload people from trucks in a flurry of commerce and humanitarian aid. A baby is lifted up in arms to another truck headed inland. ⁴⁶ Scores are funneled through concrete and gates. ⁴⁷ Depressed honking. Foreign text on a casino vehicle: “Life is a game”.⁴⁸ In 2018, a motorcycle bumbles over a rusty railway in front of a construction crew and a wagging dog.⁴⁹ In 2019, families with babies offload a police van.⁵⁰ Some ten thousand kilometers away, a man limps with arms and legs shackled toward a giant plane.⁵¹ In 2024, suits promise cooperation between nations. Advocates skeptical.⁵²



43 *Muai Thai Boxing on Thai Border with Cambodia*. 2006.

44 *Cambodia and Thailand – The Funny Stuff*. 2006.

45 *Thai-Cambodia peace moves stall*. 2011.

46 *Cambodian refugees return to Cambodia*. 2014.

47 *Cambodia worker exodus hits 220000*. 2014.

48 *Thais hit Cambodia casinos to sidestep junta betting blitz*. 2014.

49 *Cambodia restores railway link to Thailand after 45 years*. 2018.

50 *Security ramped up at Thai Cambodian border ahead of rumored Rainsy return*. 2019.

51 *ICE Officers secure hand cuffs and shackles of criminal immigrant being deported*. 2019.

52 *PM visit prompts crackdown on dissidents*. 2024.

Subjects

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The ocean leads everywhere

Diaspora surviving no where

Everywhere stopping at crossroads

To pray with hands that imagine freedom

-Ayodele Nzinga

•

This section contains difficult discussions concerning the bodily harms endured by Cambodians and others under violent imperial histories. Each cited work is courageous regarding topics that are not often discussed, and emerge with equanimous wisdoms helpful for anybody wishing to deeply understand the continued patterns of precarity such as witnessed in this paper.

•

In *Unfree: Migrant Domestic Work in Arab States*, Parreñas writes in 2022 a story of a migrant worker which “does not fit the dominant assumptions of labor conditions for domestic workers in the UAE, presenting a counter-narrative to the stories of enslavement, entrapment, ill-treatment and violent abuse that are frequently featured in news bulletins, advocacy group reports, and scholarly accounts.” The conditions are contrasted with domestic workers who “face more extreme experiences of dehumanization, such as being ‘treated like animals,’ expected to work like ‘robots or machines,’ and subjected to physical violence.” Parreñas examines prior “theorizations of freedom” which argue “that the legal status of migrant domestic workers corresponds to human trafficking, forced labor, or slavery”. Expounding, they say migrant domestic workers do “have the autonomy to stay but are without the autonomy to leave, rendering them unfree,” implying a shift toward a notion of freedom which considers “unequal relationships of power” and which “foregrounds societal membership over individualism and sees freedom as something that is achieved through non-domination.” Migrant workers are said to face “two constrained choices in life: the unfreedom of poverty in [the home state],

or the unfreedom of indenture in [the host state]. They choose the latter for its promise of financial mobility, despite the high risks of abuse.”

The globally common total appropriation of the precarious migrant worker’s weekly schedule is difficult to communicate in its grave viscosity, yet the situation of low-income Cambodians in Thailand is distinct from chattel slavery in important ways, without diminishing the urgency of advocacy towards manual labor regimes affecting billions of workers worldwide.

•

In *Long-Term Impacts of Violent Conflicts*, Saing and Kazianga use statistical-geographic methods to demonstrate that, for present-day Cambodians, physical proximity to sites once bombed by the United States fifty years prior correlates with “reduced non-monetary returns to schooling.” The authors make the cold choice to control for “exposure” to Rouge genocidality, and do not elucidate causal relationships between the bombings and Rouge radicalization. In *Collateral Damage from Cambodia to Iraq*, Kiernan takes a stronger view, that the United States Air Force bombings of Cambodia in the 1970s played a significant role in the eventual killing and starvation of millions of Khmer innocents. “Pol Pot already hated America in 1969. But he was only the leader of a small group of 1,500 Khmer Rouge insurgents in the Cambodian jungle.” By 1973, the CIA understood that the Rouge were “using damage caused by B-52 strikes as the main theme of their propaganda” (851) The propaganda was effective, and the Rouge grew by 1973 to 200,000 soldiers. In 2003, Kiernan recalls listening in to a National Public Radio program about the “incursion into Iraq,” and recalls from 1970 when the U.S. President said to a camera about Cambodia, “This is not an invasion; it is an incursion.” Kiernan concludes, “It was an invasion, and what followed was even worse” (854).

There is a lingering narrative stuckness about the 1970s, persisting in ongoing USA culture wars, and which to my eyes still manifests in otherwise dispassionate academic writing. Economics scholarship tends to take assumptions of inherent value for granted, perhaps because it would feel like too much of a unsubstantiated jump to suddenly theorize

appropriately robust formal calculations corresponding to the more horizontal proclamations of critical theory, a field which views the agency disparities between marginalized and financially incentivized populations as a non-accidental matter of injustice.

•

In *Electronic Records of the Air War Over Southeast Asia*, High et al analyze digital records from United States military databases, to estimate the tonnage of explosives dropped by the U.S. Air Force during the expanded war in Vietnam. While higher figures based on the databases are often repeated in the literature, the authors suggest that the older conventional estimate of a half-million tons, or one billion pounds, is likely close to accurate. They write,

A key conclusion of this database analysis is that it supports the thesis that the air war in Southeast Asia was characterized by geographic redistribution. When bombing halted on North Vietnam, it rose suddenly and overtly in South Vietnam and Laos. When the Paris Peace Accords brought bombing in these areas to sudden lows, the flights seem to have been redirected over Cambodia. It is striking that while each of these theaters of war had its own particularities, the database clearly shows that they were closely interrelated from an air power perspective. This raises the question of the motivation for the strikes: was it based on strategy, or simply the availability of air power capacity? Thomas Thayer quotes Senator Stuart Symington as saying, "In fact, as the general just said ... 'orders were that if you do not need the planes against Vietnam, use said planes against Laos.'" Thayer likens air power to a fire hose: the intensity remained the same, but the direction in which it pointed changed over time, regardless of the relative importance of the target or the possible effectiveness of the sortie in achieve any strategic goal. The database cannot adjudicate on this question, but it does lend some credibility to Thayer's interpretation.

Numbers are rarely as effective in justice discourse as sincerely coming to terms with the consequential humanity of our forebearers. I include the tonnage numbers here for the sake of truthful comprehension relevant to the first petition in the final section below.

•

In *When the War Was Over*, Becker writes,

The months of American bombing had had a powerful impact on the Khmer Rouge, perhaps more psychological than physical. They said that malaria killed more of their soldiers during the period than bombing (malaria had been the chief killer of French colonial troops as well). But the bombing was their baptism into the ranks of Indochinese revolutionary heroes. In their own eyes, they became the premier victims of U.S. imperialism. They told the Chinese that no revolutionary army had suffered as they had during the U.S. bombing campaign, a claim they made even to the North Vietnamese, who had suffered U.S. bombs for years. [...] Khmer Rouge psychology had pivoted too long on the notion that no communist party had suffered the pain and neglect they had—an obvious complement to their view that no country had been as humiliated as Cambodia had been over the centuries. To have survived the bombing was visible confirmation of their superhuman determination. [...] Now the Khmer Rouge began to take on a mythic invincibility in the minds of the Khmer Republic opponents. If the communist Cambodians could push through sheets of American bombs, what would stop them? Some of the officers of the Republic believed that the Khmer Rouge smoked massive amounts of marijuana, drugging themselves to boost their courage. Others were convinced that the Khmer Rouge had tapped an evil spirit that gave them powers that were beyond mortal men. Not by coincidence, the Republic soldiers took to smoking more marijuana before entering battle or relying on prayers to Buddha. If they could have glimpsed the scene behind enemy lines they would have been disabused of their otherworldly notions and seen the entirely human if brutal nature of the people they confronted.

Differing sensibilities concerning the advisability of substance use also underlay Vietnam war-era American politics. Both sides have since endured falsifications of their certainties.

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In *The Magic of Preah Koh Part Two* (Sotheary), readers recognize from part one the figures of Preah រក្សា ~ *Koh* (who bears the form of a cow) and Preah ក្រីក្រ ~ *Keow* (a beautiful human). The two are siblings who live variously destitute, mocked, and parentless. At the start of part two, Preah

Keow, along with spouse Preah Neang Poew, go to visit the ruler, to offer a small but healthy chicken to participate in a match against the rival country. The ruler exclaims "មានតួចបែបហ្នឹងធ្វើម៉េចនឹង" ~ "having like manner here do how will!?" and furthermore "We will never win the fight this way!" They nonetheless send the fowl to fight to determine the fate of the world. At the moment of the fight, Preah Koh steps in, transforming into a feathered fighter and roasts the opponent. The rival ruler doubles down with an elephant match, dispatching the hero elephant Akiry Kampoulpich. Preah Koh transforms into an elephant to fight for home team, and the foreign ruler still bets 20 troops of 8 elephants each on the fight. Preah Koh effortlessly pins Kampoulpich's tusks in the ground, humiliating the rivals. The foreign ruler builds a mechanical bull to fight Preah Koh, saying "their realm is mine." Preah Koh cannot even dent the armor of the bull, and Preah Koh takes aerial flight in their original form of a cow, carrying Preah Keow and Preah Poew away, but Poew falls to the ground from a great height. In last moments, Poew misses Keow. The divinity Indra gives Preah Poew a new body for a life in paradise. Keow and Koh are pursued by soldiers from the rival country, a realm which is described as wealthy with high life expectancy. The soldiers are unable to find Keow and Koh in the thick bamboo forest. The foreign ruler throws valuables into the forest so that the villagers cut down the chutes in search of them. Revealed, Preah Koh and Preah Keow are captured and imprisoned in the foreign land. Owing to the blessedness of the siblings, the citizens are happy and healthy. Preah Koh and Preah Keow remain imprisoned to this day, unable to return home, and are revered by the devout in their host country.

•

In *A History of Cambodia Fourth Edition*, Chandler writes of the often-stated association of the Khmer word for “I” with the word *slave*⁵³. Chandler cites linguist Judith Jacob as suggesting fourteen categories of unfree caste identities in pre-Angkorean Khmeric-speaking societies, each with varying social status, origins, and duties:

53 See, for example: Promsodun Ok. 2017. *The Magic of Khmer Classical Dance*.

As all of these groups of people apparently could be bought, sold, and given away and had no freedom to escape, they were not servants either. Many of them were probably bondsmen working off debts contracted by themselves or their parents. [...] Some of them appear to have been attached to certain places for several generations. This suggests hereditary servitude, or a liability to be called on, and being attached to a place rather than to a particular lord. Some villagers were free to grow their own rice but were not free to move, others appear to have been owned by temples, still others by members of the elite. Practice and theory seem to have varied from time to time and from place to place; generalizations about Cambodian society in this period are difficult to make (30).

The word *Cambodia* shares a trait with the name of the capital of the Khmer empire, *Angkor*, in that it unifies a more complex history of Khmer identity into a national origin story.

Although society at Angkor, at first glance, appears to have been almost mechanically organized into strata, the inscriptions point to webs of relationships, responsibilities and expectations within which everyone who is mentioned appears to have been entangled. Seen in this way, the king, as a polygamist, a patron, and a giver of names, was perhaps the most entangled of them all. [...] A king's duties] included bestowing titles and emblems on his high officials; granting land and slave to numerous religious foundations; constructing and maintaining irrigation works; constructing, decorating, and staffing temples, and conducting foreign relations (54).

French political presence in the nineteenth century arrived in waves, characterized early with patronage relationships with the king, which then gave way to increased administrative control, militarily coerced taxation, and imposed social ideology:

Although few French officials had taken the trouble to study what they referred to as slavery in Cambodia, and although their motives for abolishing it may have included a cynical attempt to disarm political opposition in France to their other reforms, it is clear that the deinstitutionalization of servitude was a more crucial reform, in Cambodian terms, than the placement of a few French officials in the countryside to oversee the behavior of Cambodian officials. Without this reform the French could not claim to be acting on behalf of ordinary people. [...] Moreover, the French could not proceed with their vision—however misguided it may have been—of a liberated

Cambodian yeomanry responding rationally to market pressures and the benefits of French protection. By cutting the ties that bound masters and servants—or, more precisely, by saying that this was what they *hoped* to do—the French were now able to justify their interference at every level of Cambodian life. [...] Servitude for debts—often lasting a lifetime—remained widespread (179).

American observers will more readily recognize within themselves sensibilities shared by the French during their overt colonization than of Khmer religious-cultural milleaus of many eras. I imagine that European colonials of old often found it difficult to relate to their continental brethren after spending so much time “overseas,” and to be sure, the lives of colonials contained real challenges as they attempted to do the right thing. Critical theory is a sometimes a painful pill because it can indicate that so much effort is perfectly capable of being all for naught and for harm, that we make mistakes precisely where we presumed strength or superiority. Any grappling with the way forward must give compassion for all, and precedence to the harmed.

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In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman describes the nominal outlawing of enslavement in the United States:

With the advent of Emancipation, only the most restricted and narrow vision of freedom was deemed plausible: the physical release from bondage and the exercise and imposition of the contract—this and little more. In the aftermath of slavery’s formal demise, the old relations of servitude and subordination were recreated in a new guise. The signs of this were everywhere apparent: The enslaved failed to be compensated for centuries of unremunerated labor. They never received the material support or resources necessary to give flesh to words like “equality” and “citizen.” The gulf between blacks, marked and targeted as not human or as lesser humans and social inferiors, and white citizens only widened. A wave of revanchism and counterrevolution engulfed the nation. Racist violence intensified and white citizens committed a series of massacres with the goal of returning the newly freed to their proper place. The “gift of freedom” gave birth to the landless tenant and the indebted worker.

One can note a similar pattern, in which the nominal independence of the Cambodian nation was suddenly followed by the intense violent outburst of a bruised imperial conscience, and then in the long tail which Khmers endure today, their plight now mediated in economic terms.

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In *Year of the Rabbit*, Tian⁵⁴ (known familiarly as Veasna) creates a graphic novel about himself and his parents, Khim and Lina. Tian was born three days following the capture of Phnom Penh in 1975 by the Khmer Rouge. The pages open with an Eighteenth-century prophecy by Put Tumneay:

The alienated and ignorant will seize power and enslave the learned. It will be a time without religion, without Buddhism. The អ្នកស្រី will have absolute power and will persecute the believers.

As Khim, Lina, and their families are fleeing the city, they witness Rouge soldiers burning banknotes in the street. Lina's brother Reth buys some food at an exorbitant price, saying "I hear the Khmer Rouge are going to abolish money." They hear on a loudspeaker. "Soon our country will be able to rival the United States!" Some months later, the family lives in work communes under Democratic Kampuchea, in a state of destitution and fear, wary of spies watching out for transgressions from the strict political imagination of the Rouge. Lina's mother is heard, "By the grace of the Buddhas, may Mother get better. May our family be protected." Khim starts, "Ma, be careful! You know that praying is forbidden!"

A Rouge slogan introduces one of the chapters:

Let us abolish the monarchy and establish អង្គរ!

Let us abolish taxes and establish voluntary contributions!

Let us abolish the white and glorify the black!

Let us dignify the ignorant and eradicate the learned!

Tian writes,

54 Cambodian names put the family name first, somewhat confounding standards for academic citations.

In 1978, escalating border clashes led to a breakdown in diplomatic relations between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam. Alarmed by Khmer Rouge advances into strategic regions, the Vietnamese decided to intervene.

A map shows the Vietnamese offensive pushing back the Rouge, and the Khmer population fleeing through Poipet, at the border of Thailand.

The Rouge and the Reign of Terror spawned many graphic depictions in film and book which were viewed with interest by Westerners. A shallow discourse attempted to understand the time as the simple breakdown of democratic ideals and the loss of sacredness. It is sometimes stated that it is the only time in history in which money was abolished. It is one of many times in which spiritual practice was banned. The Rouge are often given as proof of the inherent evil of communist ideology, or made a set piece for pat psychological conjectures about human nature. Coarse stories have importance for the popular imagination, all the while we remain in lack of public artistic comprehension of this and other imperially mediated catastrophes so uncomfortably recent in our history, at least until the arrival of such masterpieces as Tian's.

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In *Transnational Labour Regimes and Neoliberal Development in Cambodia*⁵⁵, Chang writes,

The contemporary history of Cambodian development has been a series of crises. [...] A UN Transitional Authority in Cambodian state as a result of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 and aimed to transform Cambodia into a market economy. [...] The primary focus of the UNTAC-sponsored transition was to transform Cambodia “from battlefield into marketplace.” [...] The state had to entertain multiple stakeholders in the transition, needing to follow international norms to entertain international donors. [...] The state had to secure its power base by attending to the interests of newly emerging elites. [...] The state did so by distributing former state-owned assets and rents acquired from state businesses through a wide range of patronage-client relations. As a result, some vital sectors such as banking, trade, agribusiness and the extractive sector are still firmly dominated by an oligarchy. [...] Land concessions were instrumental to this end (56).

55 Dae-oup Chang, 2020. *Transnational Labour Regimes and Neo-Liberal Development in Cambodia*.

I intend to graduate with a an institutional graduate degree in International Studies. I have the privilege to work within, alongside, and outside 2024 manifestations of international institutions which still grapple with what can feel like the fundamental impossibility of a successful humanitarian conscience for the global poor. A challenging awakening for me has been to learn that if I cannot simply enjoy the lifestyle of a place without the fuzzy feelings of doing good for people who are different than me, it is better that I move where is best for myself. At the same time, work is work, and can itself be enjoyable for its challenges. I remain unaware of where I will land, and have little more than the tasks in front of me.

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In *A Feminist Reading of Debt*, Cavallero and Gago unmask the concept of debt, offering “concrete bodies and narratives of its operation in opposition to financial abstraction.”

Finance boasts of being abstract, of belonging to the sky of mysterious quotes, of functioning according to logics that cannot be comprehended by common people. It tries to present itself as a true black box, in which decisions are made in a mathematical, algorithmic way about what has value and what does not. By narrating how it functions in households, popular, and waged economies, we defy its power of abstraction, its attempt to be unfathomable. [...] Debt is a concrete mechanism that forces small agricultural producers to become dependent on agrottoxins. Debt is an expression of the rising costs and financialization of basic services. Debt is an apparatus that connects the inside and outside of prison, while prison itself is shown to be a system of debt. [...] Debt is what does not allow us to say no when we want to say no. Debt is what ties us to a *future* of violent relationships from which we want to flee.

The ultimate nature of debt and the love of money is ancient and spiritual. The Muslim practice of *Zakat* may be understood as a commandment for the believer to practice a *negative interest rate* in their investments, traditionally recommended to be 2.5% of one’s net worth given yearly. In Abdel Haleem’s interpretation, *The Qur’an*, we read⁵⁶:

56 9:58-60.

If only they could be content with what God and Their Messenger have given them, and say, “God is enough for us—They will give us some of Their bounty and so will Their Messenger—to God alone we turn in hope.” Alms are meant only for the poor, the needy, those who administer them, those whose hearts need winning over, to free slaves and help those in debt, for God’s cause, and for travelers in need. This is ordained by God; God has the knowledge to decide.

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In *The Trafficking of Children in the Greater Mekong Region*, Tsai and Dichter write that trafficking for sex is “often discussed in the literature and well known publicly, but children in the GMR are also trafficked for labour, servitude, child marriage, organ supply, illicit adoption, begging, and even sports”. Migration is a “key component” of the entry into trafficking, with “economic hardship driving migration.” The authors cite Davis in *On the Border*, who writes of “street-involved children” in the special economic zone at the Cambodia-Thailand border, who “lacking proper legal documentation” are greatly subject to vulnerabilities of forced labor, abuse, and occupational hazard. Rates of sexual violence and exploitation for children at the border, associated with travel and tourism, is commensurate with rates observed in another coastline destination. Figures are given, representing surveyed children who report providing sexual services to adults in exchange for money, food, or necessities. The authors suggest that exploitation of male children in this context is an underattended issue. Drug use for coping by the abused is prevalent in these contexts, and in Southeast Asia poverty generally. In *Cambodian Child Migrant Workers*, the Thai author Sankharat notes children accomplishing incredible feats of independent migration and labor in 2013, variously crossing the border daily, succeeding in entrepreneurship, and leading adults through migration routes.

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In *Faith Standing Out*, Henriksson examines faith-based antitrafficking organizations in Cambodia and Thailand, which operate in a context “dominated by secular discourse” (24). Secular nongovernmental organizations tend to focus on child labor, prevention, and policy, while

faith-based organizations focus on individual rescue, shelter, alternative employment, and protection, with many believing victim restoration to be impossible without religious transformation. The faith organizations demonstrated awareness of spiritual abuse on the part of traffickers, and also of a mirror potential to avoid in their own work. The faithful characterize the meeting of victims' spiritual needs as a holistic consideration. Faith organizations operate by procuring voluntary monetary contributions from overseas churches. "Christian organizations view human trafficking as a social ill that they are particularly called to combat" (24). In the time since I first visited Cambodia, I received news of the passing of a Christian anti-trafficking agent⁵⁷, who, working in the context of victim recovery, lacked access to the vaccine in the early waves of the pandemic.

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In *Mississippi Phenomenon*, Chura examines differing cultural memories of the Kent State shootings of White activists protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, and the lesser-known Jackson State shootings of Black students protesting for civil rights. The two events happened in near succession in 1970: "The tragic deaths of four white students in Kent produced worldwide outrage. It was clear from the beginning that the event was iconic. But the unrelated and only superficially comparable deaths of Gibbs and Green ten days later raised a question—the question of whether their deaths would also produce mass outrage, though centuries of black murder had not." Chura cites cultural memory theorist Viet Thanh Nguyen:

Nguyen observes that the problem of how to remember traumatic events is crucial—"We are what we remember"—and that memory is a strategic resource in the struggle for power. Memories of violence or trauma both "service power" and are "signs and products of power." For Nguyen, who was born in Vietnam and came to the United States as a four-year-old refugee after the fall of Saigon in 1975, the impact of memory on identity is epitomized in the American tendency to portray American soldiers as the war's primary victims while forgetting or obscuring the three million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians killed in the conflict.

⁵⁷ See, for an introduction to this work: Harvest Fellowship. *An Update from Joe and Tami Mann*. 2021.

Chura says that cultural memories about the Jackson State killings of Black students are rooted in “differing experience with law enforcement,” a lesson furthered in the Black Lives Matter movement. Understanding such distinctions in lived experience is the foundation for the integrated solidarities pioneered by Martin Luther King Jr, “who discerned and declared that the problem of racism and the problem of war were linked inextricably.” In *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*, King spoke exactly one year before being martyred,

The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing Clergy and Laymen Concerned committees for the next generation. They will be concerned about Guatemala and Peru. They will be concerned about Thailand and Cambodia. They will be concerned about Mozambique and South Africa. We will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy. Such thoughts take us beyond Vietnam, but not beyond our calling as sons of the living God.

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The final drawing of my booklet is named after *Afterparties* by Anthony Veasna So, a young, talented Khmer-American author who passed before his time. The final words of the booklet are a list of towns and cities which have been subject to some of history’s worst human-caused evils, which a modern sensibility must grapple with greatly. They are here listed with the written works which prompted their inclusion in an incomplete list.

•

Turtle Island : *All Our Relations*. (LaDuke).

Potosí : *Open Veins of Latin America* (Galeano)

Elmina : *African Americans and Africa* (Blythe).

Tianjing : *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (Spence).

Kharkiv : *Remembering Peasants* (Joyce).

Treblinka : *Still Alive* (Klüger).

Okinawa : *Okinawa* (Higa).

Pailin : *Year of the Rabbit* (Tian).

Panzos : *Poverty, Genocide, and Superbugs* (Flood).

Srebrenica : *Love Thy Neighbor* (Maass).

Rafah : *Footnotes in Gaza* (Sacco).

Kashmir : *Temptations of the West* (Mishra).

Fallujah : *The Woman Question* (Allam).

Port-au-Prince : *Lavil* (Orner).

Bukavu : *An Archive of Possibilities* (Niehuss).

Geneina: *War and Genocide in Darfur* (Elshareif) .

•

In *Another Fine Mess*, Epstein, a public health consultant of 20 years in Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Uganda, writes in the introduction,

Most of the humanitarian programs I worked on were supported by U.S. tax dollars, but they were no match for the U.S.-backed tyrants who caused the problems in the first place.

Epstein reports especially on United States intervention and funding of regimes in predominantly Christian Uganda, and places responsibility on residual Cold War policies, misunderstanding of Islam, and capital greed for “unexploited oil, gold, diamonds, cobalt, uranium, and coltan, the raw material for cellphone and computer chips.” Epstein writes,

Most Americans think Africa is a low priority in Washington. [...] Today, the 60 or so [U.S. Africa Command] bases, camps, compounds, port facilities, fuel bunkers, and other sites are predominantly manned by local African militaries, but can accommodate U.S. forces when necessary. They conduct drone strikes, counter-insurgency drills, and intelligence gathering. When asked the purpose of all this, Africom officials typically point to humanitarian missions.

Epstein quotes an official openly admitting the distinct aim of preserving “the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market.” Epstein writes at the end of the book’s introduction:

Africa's future matters. It is home to over one billion people, a number expected to quadruple in the next 90 years. [...] But Africa can also seem like a perennial heart of darkness, wracked with hunger, poverty, and war without end. But what if the story is different? What if the darkness is in our own hearts? [...] What if Western leaders' naive dealings with African strongmen short circuits the power Africans might otherwise have over their own destiny? What if the aid we give sometimes entrenches corruption, impunity, brutality, and terror? What if our policy-makers' singleminded focus on Africa's natural resources and other strategic interests is itself at the root of the continent's lawlessness? What if the condescending assumption that poor people of color are incapable of self-government and are more tolerant of oppression is wrong? What if the belief that Africa's politics are naturally more emotional and its wars more spontaneous and primitive than ours blinds us to the damaging effects of our own foreign policy? I didn't ask these questions, but after many years working in various African countries, I couldn't get them out of my head.

Epstein is hopeful, offering "There is a solution."

•

In *An Archive of Possibilities*, Niebruuf writes,

Where chronic wounds fester and scars are so thick, healing is a complex task that stretches across multiple temporalities. In Congo, where present violence leaves so many without records or recognition of their wounds—there are no museums that attest to violence; there have been no large-scale reconciliation efforts; and the only discussions about reparations keep getting pushed farther and farther into the future—repair begins in the here and now, the everyday encounters. As bodies, livelihoods, futures continue to be blown apart, repair assembles the pieces, stitches together two sides of the wound. Often, so much has been lost that new techniques are required to move forward, to live together again. As with physical wounds, the healing of the chronic, complex psychic wounds in eastern Congo requires attention, ingenuity, innovation. In addition, however, healing in Congo requires a shared belief in the imperative, in "a performance of a future that hasn't happened yet but must."



Steps

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*All problems are psychological
But all solutions are spiritual*

-Thomas Hora

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In *There is a Solution*⁵⁸, we read:

We are average Americans. All sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds. We are people who normally would not mix. But there exists among us a fellowship, a friendliness, and an understanding which is indescribably wonderful. We are like the passengers of a great liner the moment after rescue from shipwreck when camaraderie, joyousness and democracy pervade the vessel from steerage to Captain's table. Unlike the feelings of the ship's passengers, however, our joy in escape from disaster does not subside as we go our individual ways. The feeling of having shared in a common peril is one element in the powerful cement which binds us. But that in itself would never have held us together as we are now joined.

The tremendous fact for every one of us is that we have discovered a common solution. We have a way out on which we can absolutely agree, and upon which we can join in brotherly and harmonious action. This is the great news this book carries to those who suffer from alcoholism. An illness of this sort—and we have come to believe it an illness—involves those about us in a way no other human illness can. If a person has cancer all are sorry for him and no one is angry or hurt. But not so with the alcoholic illness, for with it there goes annihilation of all the things worthwhile in life. It engulfs all those whose lives touch the sufferer's.

The doctor said [...] "I have never seen one single case recover, where that state of mind existed to the extent that it does in you." Our friend felt as though the gates of hell had closed on him with a clang. He said to the doctor, "Is there no exception?" "Yes," replied the doctor, "there is. Exceptions to cases such as yours have been occurring since early times. Here and there, once in a while, [they] have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear

58 Chapter in: Wilson, Bill. *Alcoholics Anonymous*. 1939.

to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them. [...] Upon hearing this, our friend was somewhat relieved, for he reflected that, after all, he was a good church member. This hope, however, was destroyed by the doctor's telling him that while his religious convictions were very good, in his case they did not spell the necessary vital spiritual experience. [...]

We, in turn, sought the same escape with all the desperation of drowning men. What seemed at first a flimsy need, has proved to be the loving and powerful hand of God. A new life has been given for us or, if you prefer, "a design for living" that really works. [...] We have no desire to convince anyone that there is only one way by which faith can be acquired. If what we have learned and felt and seen means anything at all, it means that all of us, whatever our race, creed, or color are the children of a living Creator with whom we may form a relationship upon simple and understandable terms as soon as we are willing and honest enough to try. Our hope is that many alcoholic men and women, desperately in need, will see these pages, and we believe that it is only by fully disclosing ourselves and our problems that they will be persuaded to say, "Yes I am one of them too; I must have this thing."

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In my unpublished *The Spirit Who Can Comprehend*, I write some years after experiencing an existential breakdown in Mexico, where I attended my first Twelve Step meeting. I continued recovery in the United States, where I wrote the piece for a journalism class:

At the train station, I utter a minor curse as the doors close just ahead of my arrival, when, moping backwards, I hear my own name. Wheeling about, my brain creaks under the fact that before me sits Diego, legs crossed on the floor, back against a cracked tile wall. I'm transported through time and space to the evening we first met, in the Mayan-Mexican town of Piedrita. I arrived nearly three years prior with my friend Romero, who taught me to pull lattes at a cafe in the States, during my spiritual hangover from a career in tech. The husband of one of Romero's many older sisters drove us to the town from the airport. The doors opened to a 7-piece band perched atop a hanoi-tower staircase. A party crescendoed under concrete and thatched roofs. Children sprinted out of every familial nook anticipating the chaos to

follow. In a chemically altered state, I punched a spiky piñata with my bare fist, laughed at a gun jokingly pointed at the tattoo on my arm, won the prize in a cake-cutting ritual, and climbed into the cab of a truck named *Diablo* to sleep.

Romero and his family gave me a two week whirlwind tour of the *vida Yucateca*. I learned to use a machete, nearly fell out of a truck bed, and sipped *caguamas* while repeating phrases in Mayan for laughs. One night, while rocking slowly in a hammock listening to the chirp of crickets, I decided I had found a new home. A month later, I shored up the last of my physical obligations in the U.S., and nervously checked the news about a new virus popping up in major cities. Though I was horrified at the thought of endangering a remote village, I was encouraged to go through with the move by Romero's family, who were unintimidated of a bug that surely would be killed by the heat. Weeks later, as I chatted with a corner store attendant in Piedrita, a 2-door sedan sputtered by, the loudspeaker strapped to its roof repeating a jingle: *Quédate en casa! Olé!*

The cancellation of flights cemented the beginning of my one year tenure as Piedrita's lone resident *gringo*. I became a professional at extracting laughs from semi-retired chatterboxes idling on the town square's stairsteps, watching them guess what vegetable or animal I carried in a crate on my shoulders. Determined to subsist with as few modern trappings as possible, I built a one-wheeled cart out of tree branches, hauled and cooked with firewood, worked odd jobs chopping yards and cleaning bee boxes, raised chickens, and learned to eat on less than \$10 per week. Egged on by a question commonly directed at me, "so who sends you money?", for the last few months I dug in my heels, refusing money from Romero's family. I was introduced to the to-me hidden world of food scarcity, where hunger is traded like a commodity, where miracles spring up daily out of suffering, and from which I, unlike my friends, could escape at any moment.

As the months wore on, the stresses of the pandemic, my self-imposed isolation, and accumulated culture shock pushed me into restlessness, irritability, and discontentment. One day as I was chopping at a tree, stoned on or withdrawing from the sketchy batch of cannabis I had purchased hastily and illegally, I misinterpreted encouragement as mockery, and cussed out Romero's family in English to their bewilderment. Days later, I marched around town asking favors of each of the family members in turn, out of spite for perceived slights, in order to prove my points about who owed who

what. In my lowest moment, I yelled at my host family in Spanish, claiming falsely that I had given Romero more money than they would all earn in their lifetimes. The family simply turned and left, but someone remained to calm me down. He saw a pain in me I couldn't see for myself, and gave me a hug.

The rift with Romero's family forced me outward, and I took to walking the town center with my tools asking around for work. After being stiffed for a construction job one morning, a certain Doña Isabela happened to pass by, and offered that I cut weeds for her. I earned her respect when, rejecting the pesos for the job, I instead requested to adopt a few adolescent, sickly, gray chickens from their small coop. They joined my larger group of strong, brown, standard-issue fowl. The rift between the two affiliations symbolized the increased tensions my exhausted soul began to have with increasing numbers of townspeople. When I refused to fence my chickens, insisting that they were free range, they ate my neighbor's cilantro. A friend helped me to realize that it was time for me to return to the United States. As I chased down the chickens one by one, the two factions were undifferentiated in their fear of death. They had already learned to huddle together for warmth, much as my Yucateco compatriots and I had done for a minor apocalypse, in a part of the world where diabetes is endemic, and in which I helped carry a casket one morning.

On my final morning in Piedrita, the Doña gave me 200 pesos and a jacket, and she wept as I hugged her goodbye. Years later, I've yet to return to Piedrita, though I surely will. I wonder often about the perspective of my friends, especially that of Don Praho, an eighty-something man of pure Mayan grit, who in the early months brought me to the *milpa* daily. My fondest memory is of leaning on a fence post while he chased a newborn calf around the pen to spur on newly walking legs. The Don punched me on three separate occasions, for three different reasons. As my times in town wore down, I paid him a visit, to leave him some of the fruit of the portion of land he allowed me to farm. We always struggled to communicate; he once implored me in frustrated Spanish, "Speak Maya so I can understand you!" As I turned to leave for the last time, I reached down to place a hand on his back, accidentally knocking off his hat. His sparsely toothed laugh, my lasting image of him, makes me wonder. Maybe we deeply understood each other after all, more than we can comprehend.

Following my time in Piedrita, I entered graduate school and undertook this project, delaying its completion for a year and a half. In November

2024, I returned to the Yucatan with spiritual intention, carefully approaching some traumas which I have not described here.

I land in the peninsula, and hop from large city, to medium-sized town, and wake up one morning knowing it's the day. My internal monologue takes on a dreamlike quality in Spanish. I hear, "You will not need to return." I hire a taxi and am dropped off just outside the town square. I walk the periphery of the town, surprised that I can't remember the streets, and realize I am still slowly returning to the familiar roads. Twenty minutes later, I hear my name called from behind the stone hedges. A spirit is invoked, and moments later I sit with Doña Isabela's relatives eating tortillas and beans. The relevant jokes are exchanged, and on my way to see the Doña I encounter the town's cemetery, where I weep for the dozens I am told passed from the pandemic when it hit the town hard after I left. I get up, and stop by my old friend, the *milpa*, where I once fell in love with farming squash. The rows of trees which I had passed a hundred times recreated my old thoughts, and as I continued to the land from which I had once beaten out foodstuffs with a pickaxe, the field was overgrown, but a clear path remained. There, I witnessed a quite real and totally normal display of God-given conviviality between humanity and nature, which I had once envisioned in a cannabis-induced fancy. On my way back, I recognize a friend, shake hands, and only realize when I am reminded his name that I had left the town furious at him, and that the feeling had been completely taken away from me. I ask around for a place to stay, but nobody can think of anything. I arrive at Doña Isabela's, and have a long conversation with her family, in a Spanish which I have vastly improved from my time in Oakland's AA groups, and in a greatly declined Mayan. A statement of mine which grated their ears: "My loneliness here was like what those who go to the USA feel." A statement of theirs which grated mine: "You get bothered easily don't you?"

The rest of the day in Piedrita is pure enjoyment, though I am ready to take a rest at my hotel at another town. On the way to my pickup spot, I walk by a familiar shop opening, outside of which I was bitten twice by a dog at the same time I had a spat with the family there. The first time, I entered the store and demanded two cigarettes, which were given. The

second, I entered and purchased two *huevos* with cash. This time, I went in, and gave the dog's human thanks, for having given me an excellent story which always receives a laugh when I tell it. She is delighted. As I leave, the thought hits me again, "You will not need to return." And so it was, though I did once more; a story to entertain angels.

•

In Beattie's *The Language of Letting Go: Daily Meditations on Codependency*, I read on June 13th, 2024.

We want to travel baggage-free on this journey. It makes the trip easier. Some of the baggage we can let go of is lingering feelings and unfinished business with past relationships: anger; resentments; feelings of victimization, hurt, or longing. If we have not put closure on a relationship, if we cannot walk away in peace, we have not yet learned our lesson. That may mean we will have to have another go-around with that lesson before we are ready to move on. We may want to do a Fourth Step (a written inventory of our relationships) and a Fifth Step (an admission of our wrongs). What feelings did we leave with in a particular relationship? Are we still carrying those feelings around? Do we want the heaviness and impact of that baggage in our behavior today? Are we still feeling victimized, rejected, or bitter about something that happened two, five, ten, or even twenty years ago? It may be time to let it go. It may be time to open ourselves to the true lesson from that experience. It may be time to put past relationships to rest, so we are free to go on to new, more rewarding experiences. We can choose to live in the past, or we can choose to finish our old business from the past and open ourselves to the beauty of today.

•

In *Hearts and Minds*, a documentary of the American War in Vietnam, Randy Floyd, a former bomber pilot, recounts,

During the missions, after the missions, the result of what I was doing, the result of this game, this exercise of my technical expertise never really dawned on me. That reality of the screams, or the people being blown away or their homeland being destroyed. This was not a part of what I thought about. We as Americans have never experienced that. We've never experienced any kind of devastation. When I was there I never saw a child that had gotten burned by napalm. I didn't drop napalm, but I dropped other

things just as bad. I dropped CBUs which can't destroy anything. It's meant for people, it's an anti-personnel weapon. We used to drop canister upon canister of these things with 200 tumbling little balls in there about this big around [holds fingers apart] with something like 600 pellets in each ball that would blow out as soon as they hit the ground and shred people to pieces. They couldn't be gotten out in many cases, and people would suffer. They would live but they would suffer, and often they would die afterwards, and this would cause people to have to take care of them. But I look at my children now, and I don't know what would happen, what I would think about, if someone napalmed...

The narrator asks, after a solemn 15 seconds,

Do you think we've learned anything from all this?

Floyd responds,

I think we're trying not to. I think I'm trying not to sometimes. I can't even cry easily ... from my manhood image. I think Americans have tried, we've all tried very hard, to escape what we've learned in Vietnam, to not come to the logical conclusions of what's happened there.

•

In *On Human Slaughter: Evil, Justice, Mercy*, Bruenig writes,

Pablo Castro, father of nine and convenience-store worker of 14 years in Corpus Christi, Texas, was beaten and stabbed to death for \$1.25 on the night of July 14, 2004. His killer was John Henry Ramirez, a 20-year-old ex-Marine who had begun using drugs at 12 and was, by the time he happened to spot Castro taking out the garbage that night, at the tail end of a multiday alcohol, Xanax, and cocaine binge that he was fighting desperately to prolong.

Bruenig continues,

The state sought the death penalty in Ramirez's case, and thus began a years-long process of Ramirez countering Texas's efforts to end his life while expressing serious doubts as to whether he deserved to live at all. [...] Ramirez reconsidered his desire to end what he had described as his "trash life." His appeals continued until 2017, when his first execution date arrived--"I wouldn't want to ask them to forgive me," Ramirez said of Castro's family at the time. "I just want to ask them to know that I'm sorry."

Aaron Castro, Pablo's son, released a statement after Ramirez's death:

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. Peace and Love and justice for Pablo G. Castro, may his name not be forgotten, and may God have mercy in J.H.R. for it is not up to us. He is receiving his true judgment with our Lord and Savior. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end. A life taken away is not to be celebrated but closure can definitely take place.

Bruenig asks Dana Moore, Ramirez's prison minister, how God saw Ramirez. Moore says, "God sees John as they created him." Bruenig comments,

May all our enemies be judged by Texas, and we ourselves by God or Dana Moore.

•

In *S21*⁵⁹, filmmaker Rithy Panh accompanies Vann Nath and Chum Mey to the Tuol Sleng torture and extermination camp where the two were imprisoned during the Rouge Reign of Terror in 1970s Cambodia. They meet with former guards, interrogators and clerics of the prison, including Prakk Kahn and Huoy Him, reenacting terrible scenes, and crumbling under each other's presence. Toward the end of their time together, Nath and Huoy have the following conversation:

Nath:

Even for animals you don't speak of destroying, but of killing. We become dust in the wind. There's no humanity left. I think that destruction refers to flesh, to the body, but not to the soul. Look all this left. All this evidence is left, all these testimonies. It's lying there, but you pay no attention. I want to know, for instance: You, Huoy, you worked here. When you took the men away, what were you thinking?

Huoy:

I was young at the time. I didn't think so far ahead. I was hot-blooded, I did what I was told to do. I was told to compete, so I did. To take someone to be killed, I did. As long as I was obeying. Today, when I think about it, it was

59 Rithy Panh. 2003. *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*.

against the law. I'm ashamed of myself. But I don't think about it. When I think about that, I get a headache. So when someone comes to get me to go out to eat and drink, I get drunk, come home, go to sleep.

Nath:

For me it's not like that. For me, each of our meetings is very painful. I don't really want to come to these meetings, because we're not here to tell pleasant stories. We only talk about this unbearable past, which we can't escape. I can't anyway. I'm trying to understand what happened, to make sense out of it. I want to understand it. We meet like this, but that doesn't mean it's a chance to cleanse ourselves of evil.

•

In the Khmer language *Gifts of Life*, Seit gives reflections for the healing soul, with some pages devoted to asking, "Who shall be blamed?". She writes,

Blame. It can't make anything have goodness, huh? But understanding on the other hand, this makes every manner able to change, to seek goodness. We all of us can do wrong. But if we don't understand the wrong we did, by this we will be in the wrong twice. [...] A mistake is a lesson so excellent. [...] There is no blame which can transform. There is only the receiving of right and wrong about the heart's decision and the actions we do. [...] Sometimes we blame others, sometimes we blame ourselves, in any case nothing good comes. [...] We need not fear the mistakes we haven't yet made, nor worry to blame the ones already passed. [...] Every second of life, we are made to develop the courage to receive knowledge of mistakes that will be made, dangers that will come, and difficulties we will face. Something we should remember always: 'Inside every mistake is a valuable lesson we shall learn, which we shall understand'. People who do much wrong really can't be overcome ever, huh? But if we ourselves are only able to allow the same mistakes to happen time and again, it means we haven't learned entirely about mistakes from the beginning much.



Spirits

•

*To which shepherd's field did which angels descend?
What's this about eternal non-existence at the end?*

-mewithoutYou

•

In Ameen's *The Book of Khalid*, a mysterious note appears, addressed to humankind:

No matter how good thou art, O my Sibling, or how bad thou art, no matter how high or how low in the scale of being thou art, I still would believe in thee, and have faith in thee, and love thee. For do I not know what clings to thee, and what beckons to thee? The claws of the one and the wings of the other, have I not felt and seen? Look up, therefore, and behold this World-Temple, which, to us, shall be a resting-place, and not a goal. On the border-line of the Orient and the Occident it is built, on the mountain-heights overlooking both. No false gods are worshipped in it,—no philosophic, theologic, or anthropomorphic gods. Yea, and the god of the priest and the prophets is buried beneath the Fountain, which is the altar of the Temple, and from which flows the eternal spirit of our Maker—our Maker who blinketh when the Claws are deep in our flesh, and smileth when the Wings sprout from our Wounds. Verily, we are the children of the God of Humor, and the Fountain in Their Temple is ever flowing. Tarry, and refresh theyself, O my Sibling, tarry, and refresh thyself.

•

In Pico's *Olivia and the Shameless Genie*, Olivia's mother is an ornithologist tasked with building something like a canvas glider to guide a flock of giant hungry carnivorous birds away from human population centers, in the birds' upcoming migration. The family moves to a home at the edge of the wilderness. Olivia bores of video games and goes to play outside, meeting a grumpy keeper of dogs named Abu, who raises a flock for their fleece. Abu offers the dog Peluso to accompany Olivia, and the two enjoy adventures. They soon meet a genie who offers Olivia three wishes. Her first is to be able to talk to Peluso! Peluso's woofs turn to speech, but Olivia soon realizes that her parents now hear her own speech

only as woofs also. Olivia and her parents argue in confusion, unable to communicate the elucidating truths of their perspectives. Olivia runs out in anger to the genie, to wish that her parents had never moved from the city. When she returns home, she realizes her error, for the house's previous residents still live there, who are nonetheless hospitable. After some rest, she wakes to realize the birds' migration has started! Olivia runs with Peluso to find the genie but they are attacked by birds. Abu arrives suddenly and rescues them but is wounded in the battle. Olivia and Peluso reach the genie, and Olivia confounds the genie by wishing that the external reality surrounding the three be deleted! Floating in a void with the grumpy genie, Olivia suggests that Peluso approach the genie to receive their own three wishes. The final panel shows Olivia's family reunited, with Peluso snuggled in the middle, watching a pack of birds follow a contraption past a sunset.

•

In *African Theology*, Setiloane writes of the sacredness of purely oral tradition, and relays a spoken riddle commonly heard in the Orange Free State: *I am a tall white man who goes out of his house for a walk in all kinds of weather, rain or snow, day or night. What am I?*⁶⁰ He tells of a conviction he developed over his life, that “a journey a little deeper into this African primal forest [... could] bring us face-to-face with the spiritual (religious) ancestry of all Mankind and help us better to understand the forces in which we – All Humankind – ‘live and move and have our being.’” Setiloane says that in the caves of Africa, there are found footprints of the peoples who lived inside in prehistoric times, leading out into the sunlight. And, alongside them, “another footprint, it is of only one foot, larger than man-size. That the print is of one foot only shows that the owner was one-legged. It alone gives the impression that the owner returned into the hole, leaving the people and the animals on the surface of the earth to inhabit it and make a home in it. That mysterious one-legged being is called Loowe. Loowe is an agent of Divinity.” The underground where this divine figure still lives is full of “life with green fields, people, animals, cattle, goats.” Setiloane continues,

60 Smoke.

Dying is seen as going on a journey ... *home*. [...] Seeds were also put in the grave. The parting words were in fact words of farewell to one who goes on a journey with the prospect of meeting there some old acquaintances: 'Remember us where you go!' [...] It was understood that the dead go to *mosima o o sa tlaleng*: 'the hole that never gets filled', out of which the first inhabitants of this earth were led by Loowe. Life there was understood to be ideal and desirable. It was seen as a world of mists with green fields, cattle grazing and people living in ease and harmony. [...] So, at the end of the burial ritual all present would express solemnly the prayer, 'Let us have coolness', *A go nne lotsididi*, a time of respite from the scorching of the sun and feverish disease cutting people off in the prime of life.

•

The 19th century *Jade Record* contains a highly visual Daoist imagination of a rather unpleasant afterlife, where souls undergo many torments and trials. Spence describes an end of the painful journey:

Goddess Meng's Tower of Forgetting, subdivided into 108 chambers, lies just beyond the tenth place of hell, where all souls have received their final decisions on reincarnation. In every chamber of her domain her demons lay out cups of the "wine that is not wine," and every soul that enters is forced to drink. As they drink, their past lives vanish from their senses, they are stripped clear of memory, and tossed into the red waters of hell's last river. Borne by the current, they are washed ashore at the foot of a red wall, on which a message four columns long is hung: "To be a human is easy, to live a human life is hard; to desire to be a human a second time, we fear is even harder. If you wish to be born into the Happy Lands, there is one easy way—say what is really in your heart, then you'll reach your goal."

•

In the Congregation Sha'ar Zahav's *Siddur*, a poem:

These things I know:
how the living go on living
and how the dead go on living
with them

So that in a forest
even a dead tree casts a shadow
and the leaves fall one by one

and the branches break in the wind
and the bark peels off slowly
and the trunk cracks
and the rain seeps in through the cracks
and the trunk falls to the ground
and the moss covers it
and in the spring the rabbits find it

and build their nest
inside the dead tree
so that nothing is wasted in nature
or in love

•

In *The Girl With No Name*, Chapman gives her own true story of having been abandoned in the jungles of Columbia in the 1950s around age four, where she survived for around five years by learning from monkeys. The monkeys don't fully accept her presence until, one day, she eats something poisonous and falls sick. An elder monkey leads her to the river, dunking her head so that she drinks muddy water, and she vomits the poison. She learns the language of the monkeys and the forest, participating in a complex system of mutual protection, and forms permeable boundaries with many animal identities. Later, she sees a member of her own species, and is struck by older memories of her birthplace home she has now forgotten:

At the water's edge there were two long, upturned structures made from tree trunks, which were glistening and obviously wet. They had been carved into a shape that initially made no sense but at the same time was frustratingly familiar, and it suddenly came to me that they must be boats.

So these people must travel on the river, for whatever reason. To get fish? To find new territories? Even to leave the jungle? I was transfixed as a new thought came to join the others. Did the river hold the key to finding my way back to my old home? The feeling came over me with startling intensity. I had barely thought of my old home in such a long time, and it shook me to be ambushed by the memory of it. I had forgotten so much, and now it all came clamouring back. These people were a family. A human family. And I was human, too.

•

Being in Being is a collection of the myths of Skaay, born in 1827, of the Qquuna Quiighawaay peoples. In a story called *The One They Hand Along*, the child of a respected couple disappears to sea, and a family friend journeys in search:

*He was going in search of the girl, they say –
and the girl's mother was with him, they say.*

*From then on, he moved like a hunter.
He owned a sea-otter spear, they say.
He pushed off,
and he threw the sea-otter spear.*

*It wiggled its tail
and pulsed through the water
and towed him, they tell me.*

*After a time, the canoe ceased moving, they tell me.
So did the sea-otter spear, they say.*

*And then, they say, he pulled the canoe up on shore.
The lady stepped out of the boat
and he turned it keel-upward.
Sea-lettuce grew from the hull.
This is what slowed the canoe.*

They had travelled for one year, they say.

•

In the Aztec-Christian *Discourses of the Elders* (Purcell) from the early 1500s, a verse:

Sit yourself down, perhaps for a moment, for a day, in the place of their sandals, on the left of the Lord of the Near and the Nigh, of the One Who Is the Home, the House, whom you serve as their sandal, on whose left you are, whom you assist, whom you help—you represent them, you are their image, their eyes, their jaw. You have become their face, their ear because you serve as their interpreter—you make their voice, their words flow. Their breath, their word goes not in vain, but rather is what goes blossoming, shining, ennobling, honoring. Next to you, in your hands they placed these. In your

interior, in our entrails, your belly, your throat they hid, they put the book, the paints, that which is in red and black ink, where the arrows of the eagle and ocelot appear—those that you are throwing, returning in that way.

And there is the great two-sided mirror, the one that appears, that you observe in the region of the dead, in the sky above. As it surveys in the place of the dead and the sky above, so you look at all the places of the earth. And there stands the thick torch, the one that does not smoke, the one that contains no mist, so that it dawns in all the regions of the world, so that its light, its radiance from your mount and water may be observed.

•

In *Visions of Jesus*, Wiebe narrates,

Maureen and a friend were having lunch in Dutch Mothers, a popular restaurant in Lynden, Washington, when Jesus appeared. They were sitting at a table for four when they suddenly occupied a vacant chair diagonally opposite Maureen. They looked as though they were eager and excited to be there with them, for they had been talking about their faith. They did not say anything audible to her but somehow communicated the thought found in the biblical text, “When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there also.” Maureen describes this as having her mind opened to understand the Scriptures, and compares it to Luke’s account of Jesus’s opening the minds of their disciples. The experience had an air of reality about it for Maureen because he appeared to be solid, and the back of the chair was obscured in just the way it would have been if an ordinary person had been sitting there. Her friend did not see anything, however. Jesus’s appearance on this occasion, as on the others, made Maureen weep. When they disappeared she became a little giddy as she described to her friend what she had just experienced, and somewhat casually said, “You’d think he’d wear normal clothes if he’s coming out to lunch.” Her friend stared at her in disbelief, because of her imprudence, and they both “heard” this remark: “That is how you recognize me.” Maureen explained that this simultaneous hearing was not audible.

•

In *Matthew*, Jesus prays,⁶¹

61 Matthew 6:9-13.

πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς
ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου
ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου
γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς
τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον
καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς
ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν
καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν ἀλλὰ ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ
πονηροῦ

The prayer venerates the name of one called on as to a parent. The prayer asks for the accomplishment of a great will and promised future, and requests daily sustenance. The prayer pleads the forgiveness of the speaker's debts, promises to forgive the debts of others, and requests protection from evil.

Later, Jesus speaks of the end of days, of which even they do not know the hour, but only God,⁶²

τότε δύο ἔσονται ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ ὁ εἷς παραλαμβάνεται καὶ ὁ εἷς ἀφίεται· δύο ἀλήθουσαι ἐν τῷ μύλωνι· μία παραλαμβάνεται καὶ μία ἀφίεται

So swiftly will the aporia come, it will be as to two men busy among the stalks, and like two women pulverizing cereals, where, suddenly one of them is taken away and the other left on Earth. Whatever quality the two in each couple are thought to have in common, salvation is revealed as given to only one in the couple by a distinct logic. The disciples, ever eager for wisdom, hear another parable,⁶³

εἰσὶν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιτίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὕτως καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρεῖτω

62 Matthew 24:40-41. The sometimes-untranslated pronouns are εἷς and μία. A similar parable appears in Luke 17:32-37 where there is also ἕτερος.

63 Matthew 19:12.

Jesus speaks of beloveds who find themselves far from elite privileges, and names three known sources of their blessings: being born so beautiful, attaining to such loveliness because of or despite society, or consecrating themselves likewise for the blessings of all. Jesus says, about those who sacrifice their own futures for the holy name:⁶⁴

καὶ πᾶς ὃς ἀφῆκεν οἰκίας ἢ ἀδελφοὺς ἢ ἀδελφὰς ἢ πατέρα ἢ μητέρα ἢ γυναῖκά ἢ τέκνα ἢ ἀγροὺς ἔνεκεν τοῦ ὀνόματός μου ἑκατονταπλασίονα λήψεται καὶ ζῶην αἰώνιον κληρονομήσει
Πολλοὶ δὲ ἔσονται πρῶτοι ἔσχατοι καὶ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι

The logic of heaven is swapped with earth; what trails behind becomes the forefront. What is lost on earth is regained in heaven tenfold.

•

In *The Upanishads of the Bhagavad Gita*, a human named Arjuna hears:

To you, who have overcome the carping spirit, I now reveal the sublime mystery. Armed with this wisdom, you shall escape all evil. [...] I, the unmanifested, pervade the entire universe. [...] As air moves through space, but is not space, so do all creatures have their being in me, but are not I. [...] I am the ultimate goal, the upholder, the lord, the witness, the abode, the refuge, the one friend. I am the origin, the dissolution, the foundation, the cosmic storehouse, and the imperishable seed. [...] Immortality am I, and mortality as well. I am both being and nonbeing. [...] Even the devotees of other gods, if they sacrifice to them with faith, are worshiping me alone. [...] Whenever anyone, with a pure intention, offers me a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, I accept their offering. [...] Keep your mind fixed on me! Be my devotee! In ceaseless adoration and worship, bow to me! Thus, becoming one with me and knowing me as your highest goal, you shall be my very own!

•

64 Matthew 19:29-30.

In *The Hymn to Inana*⁶⁵, Enheduana recites in 2300 BCE,

*You sieze the land
in your hand. When
you speak, An does
not retort. You say
“Let it be!” and great
An does not oppose
you: your “Let it be”
comes to be. You
decree destruction,
destruction comes:
when you deliver
your retort in the
assembly, An and
Enlil do nothing.
When you make
your decision, it
is indelible from
heaven and earth.
If you say: “Let this
land be,” no one can*

*destroy it. If you say:
“Destroy this land,”
no one can let it be.
Your godhood is a
downpour of light
from holy heaven,
like the rays of the
moon and the sun.
Your beacon lights
every corner of the
heavens, it brings
brightness to all
that was dark. Men
and women walk
in single file before
you, to display what
the day has brought.
All the people pass
before your watchful
eyes, as under the*

*rays of the sun. No
one dares approach
your precious powers:
the powers pass before
your watchful eyes.
You rule to perfection
in heaven and earth,
holding all things in
your hand: Queen!
You are mighty, no
one can pass ahead
of you. You share a
holy home with great
An. Is there any god
like you? You reap the
harvest of heaven and
earth. You are mighty,
your name is sacred,
you alone are mighty.*



In *Spirituality is for Every Body*, Thompkins writes,

When we do not engage in spiritual practice regularly, we shove our feelings about the parts of our lives that have caused us pain or unhappiness into a box within ourselves, like a cardboard box forgotten in the back of a closet labeled: “Stuff I’d Rather Forget.” We do our best not to acknowledge whatever is in that box. Some of us pretend that we don’t have such a box and that everything is fine, nudging it back into the dark and dusty corners of our minds. Others become so good at not acknowledging the box that they become oblivious to the impact of its contents. Either way, we don’t allow ourselves to feel whatever emotions are tucked away in the box, and we are unaware of just how unappy we are with certain situations. [...] So, what do you do if this happens to you? Continue to build your spiritual practice. Know that this too shall pass, and the life waiting for you on the other side is so worth the discomfort you are feeling right now. Be very gentle with yourself. Treat yourself to your favorite food or hobby, or let yourself sleep

65 Helle, Sophus. *Enheduana*. 2023.

in a little for a few days. Practice excellent self-care. Drink more water than you normally do for a few days. If you are tube fed and can safely increase your water intake, give yourself an extra flush of any amount that is healthy for you. If you cannot increase your water intake, take an extra-long shower or bath for a few days. Be open to releasing anyone or anything that needs to be released. Ask trusted family and friends to support you in whatever way you need. Above all else, trust in the love that is trying to help you give birth to the life of your dreams.

•

In *Muhammad: Forty Introductions*, Knight narrates from *The Correspondence of the Prophet*:

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ ۞ وَسَلَّمَ

Anas narrated: A Bedouin urinated in the mosque, and some of the people rushed at him. Then the Messenger of God (God bless them and give him peace) said, "Do not interrupt his urination." Then he called for a bucket of water and poured over it.

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ ۞ وَسَلَّمَ

Anas narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) said, "God, Exalted and Majestic, said, 'Your nation will not stop talking about this and that until they say 'This God created the creation, so who created God?'"

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ ۞ وَسَلَّمَ

Sahl narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) said, "I and the one who looks after an orphan and provides for them will be like this in paradise," showing their index and middle fingers together.

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ ۞ وَسَلَّمَ

A'isha narrated: The commencement of prophethood with the Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) was in true dreams. The angel came to them and said, "Recite, in the name of your lord who created, created the human being from a clot. Recite, and your lord is most generous.

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

Jabir narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) returned from a military campaign. They said, "You have arrived with a good arrival from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad." They said, "And what is the greater jihad?" They said, "The faithful's battle against their passion."

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

Jabir narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) said, "My Companions are like the stars. Whoever among them you use for guidance, you will be rightly guided."

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

Abu Hurayra narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) said, "Avoid the punishments when you find uncertainty with it."

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

'Abd Allah bin Ja'far narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) wiped [the camel's] tears and head, and they became calm. They said, "Who is the master of this camel?" A youth from the Ansar came and said, "It is mine, O Messenger of God." They said, "Do you not fear God with this animal, that God has given you? It complains to me that you starve them and wear them out."

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

Anas narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) said, "Seek knowledge even in China, since the search for knowledge is a duty for every Muslim."

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

'Ali narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) said, "They who know themselves know their Lord."

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

Ibn 'Abbas narrated: The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) said, "The disagreement of my community is a mercy for you."

صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ

Anas narrated: *The Messenger of God (God bless them and give them peace) said, "One of you does not believe until they love for another what is loved for themselves."*



In the collection *Falling Back In Love With Being Human*, in the chapter *to a lost sister*, Thom writes,

i stopped writing poems for a year after it happened. i didn't believe in them anymore because they didn't save your life. i'm not a praying woman, but poetry has always been my hotline to the universe. i guess that somewhere deep inside, i hoped that if i said something elegantly enough, it would come true. that if i spoke the language of beauty, maybe God would finally start listening. *are you there, God? it's me, fucked-up transsexual with a savior complex. i'd like you to turn back time. if i could just go back once, i'm sure i could change the past for the better.* did you know that the word *abracadabra* comes from a Hebrew phrase meaning "through speaking, i create"? i bet you do. my magic was never strong enough to manifest the miracles i wanted: to turn back time. to undo harm. to make the unspeakable things safe to say. to catch a spirit as if flies out of this world and weave it back into the body it left behind. what's the use of writing poems if they can't even do that? i wish i could talk to you. i've been wanting to tell you that complex PTSD and a crisis of faith have so much in common. they're both about losing trust in the world in the wake of unbearable loss. grief tears us away from our faith, but it's grief that brings us back as well. because in our deepest grief we have nowhere else to go. the Buddhist part of me knows that in the paradox, enlightenment is born. when you fell through a crack in the world and disappeared, i started meditating again. i lit candles every night. i tied a red rope around my waist before sleeping—anything to give my grief somewhere to go. for a year after it happened, i dreamed about getting lost in mazes and screaming without a voice, knowing that no one was coming to save me. but the Christian part of me knew that the secret of grace is choosing to believe. the secret of resilience is the art of surrender. i wish you were here. i'd tell you all the things i've learned about hope, and

forgiveness, and holding on while letting go. our world keeps breaking, over and over again. i have no choice but to believe that a new one is being born.

•

In Al-Anon Family Group's *How Al-Anon Works: For Families and Friends of Alcoholics*, a recovering recoverer writes of the difficulty in incorporating a Higher Power in Twelve Step recovery work:

Like many scientists, I tend to be skeptical of anything I cannot experience empirically or subject to scientific scrutiny [...] [A fellow] suggested that I seek my Higher Power in a world I could understand, the world of quantum physics. I won't go into the details of my quest, except to say that as I probed this abstract, theoretical branch of science, my mind opened to the unknown and unseen. I believed in forces of nature that were beyond my control, and gradually I managed to evolve a personally meaningful understanding of a Power greater than myself.

In *Experimental Demonstration of Quantum Pseudotelepathy*, Xu et al verify empirically the physical realizability of what was previously a thought experiment. At first glance, the setup is contrived, involving a three-by-three grid of binary options for two agents given a set of game rules and dice to roll. The mathematics bears out that the game-theoretic scenario is in fact the simplest in its class. The paper demonstrates that a certain kind of physical object, constructed in the very material existence we find ourselves, when divided into two mirroring parts and given to two subjects, allows them to cooperate at a distance and achieve the optimal performance in a precisely formulated game. In particular, they are able to increase their chances of meeting again in person after being separated, without further conventional or technological contact, by exactly one ninth, over their chances without the paired objects. Depending on one's prior disposition to such apocryphal phenomena as telepathy, love, prayer, and eternal redemption, the experiment offers either a new upper or lower bound for the extent to which properly elaborated aspects of such phenomena are physically functional in this universe: a little over 11%.

•

Hatcher's *Minimalism* is a mathematically poetic appreciation of the "over one hundred volumes of writings" composed by Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the

Bahá'í Faith. According to the teachings, “God has ordained two sources of valid knowledge of reality: science and revelation.” Hatcher’s quotations from Bahá'í writings “do not constitute appeals to authority but are given only to reinforce logical points that have already been made on other grounds.” Hatcher discusses a historical program “to build a complete description of the whole of reality in exact, mathematical language” which was ultimately unsuccessful:

Modern developments in the hardest of sciences—logic, mathematics and physics—have shown unequivocally that materialism is not self-contained, that it is both philosophically and scientifically inadequate. The first such development was the undecidability principle of Heisenberg, that joint or simultaneous measurements of certain physical parameters are logically impossible.

At first presented as only a practical or empirical limitation, in its strong form the undecidability principle “can be stated as follows: no complete and exact description of physical reality is logically possible within the framework (and based on the axioms) of the Hilbert Space model of quantum mechanics.” Hatcher claims that the relevant criteria for a model that *could* provide a more adequate formulation are contained in the axioms which would make it subject to Gödel’s incompleteness theorems, meaning that such a system “will contain true propositions that cannot be proved (nor their negations disproved).” Hatcher identifies this chain of reasoning with the natural language statements:

There cannot exist any complete and exact description of reality. [...] There is no nonpoetical description of the whole of reality.

Hatcher says that “success in artificial intelligence have led many to conclude that all human mental functions might eventually objectified, thus eliminating human subjectivity as a necessary adjunct to human thought.” However, “Minimalism’s recognition of the limits of objectification shows that transrational intuition is an essential part not only of religion but of all intellectual enterprises including science.”

•

From the Khmer chant បទសំស្ក្រឹត, a literal translation:

*please give worship god illuminated
excellent most in world*

*as-is teacher of humans and angels
practice enlighten preach educate animals*

*point let walk path middle
method new able disperse*

*suffering fear misfortune let scatter discard
able cut rebirth suffering achieved*

*divine god person stays these days
animals have destiny from centuries*

*effort learn effort listen know remember able
hold along sign achieve law health*

*not exist health any equaling calmness
finish precisely health leave depart suffering*

*begin from world this future forward
law health will have because principle calmness*

*i please worship facing god principle
divine monk precious the every complete*

*join as the virtues should honor
is-as shade coolness of world*

*divine image divine essence of god awakened
holy witness body divine teacher*

*please pray the virtues help education
let acquire divinity continue every forward*



Healing

•

*look up look up look up
look up into the sky, love
see that moon shining
so high up above us
it rolls around on account
of a bunch of scientific stuff
i like to think it does
just because they love us*

-Bradley Hathaway

•

In *Life of Pi*, the India-born protagonist Piscine, named after a European world for “pool”, is bullied at school because his name sounds like an English word meaning “urinating,” so he reinvents himself as a mathematician and declares his name to be Pi, reciting the irrational number’s decimals to hundreds of digits. Ever scrupulous, then with his mind opened by the Hindu deity Vishnu, Pi feels he needs to try every religion available to him. He becomes a vegetarian, and moves between rituals of several different faiths in a single day. His father, who owns a zoo in town, says that Pi is confused. Pi experiences great shock when he tries to befriend the zoo’s tiger named Richard Parker, only to realize the tiger would have eaten him if he had the chance. A changing economic climate causes the family to board a ship bound for Canada with all the animals on board. Something awakes Pi, and he races to the ship’s deck where a great storm is raging, and he has a moment of feeling that he is facing God. He soon realizes the boat is in danger, witnesses a host of crewman swept to sea, and is unable to rescue his family as the boat sinks. He finds himself alone on a life raft with an orangutan. A zebra from the boat tumbles onboard, some hyenas too, and Richard Parker swims to get on board despite Pi’s protests. As the passengers become hungry, the orangutan is killed by the hyenas. The tiger eats the zebra, and kills the hyenas.

Alone with Richard Parker, Pi is forced to build his own raft away from the tiger's territory, and Pi spends weeks at sea attempting to tame the tiger and failing. Exhausting the emergency supplies, Pi is forced to kill and eat a fish, and weeps saying sorry to the fish. Pi learns that though he can't control Richard Parker, he can avoid being eaten by the tiger, using fish as reward and a whistle as deterrent for the huge beast's behavior. Richard and Pi land on an island teeming with food for both of them, but Pi realizes that the island slowly decomposes anybody who stays, with a kind of corrosive enzyme. Realizing he must eventually find his way home, Richard and Pi set out to sea, and eventually hit land, and humans rush to carry Pi away. Pi wails in agony as Richard walks off into the forest without even turning back to look at Pi. Investigators from the boat company come to interview Pi, and are not satisfied with his unbelievable tale of survival with exotic animals. So, Pi tells them an alternative story, where the animals were actually human passengers of the boat including his mother, represented by the orangutan. Pi is interviewed by a kind Canadian writer who is also amazed at the tale, but who listens further. Pi acknowledges that perhaps the horrible trauma of the events involving humans caused his subconscious to rewrite his memory in favor of a story which his mind could tolerate. At the end, Pi asks the writer which story he prefers. The writer says, "the one with the tiger." Pi says, "So it is with God."

•

There's something epistemological about storytelling. It's the way we know each other, the way we know ourselves. The way we know the world. It's also the way we don't now: the way the world is kept from us, the way we're kept from knowledge about ourselves, the way we're kept from understanding other people.

-Andrea Barrett

•

Like Pi, I have frantically grasped at different worldviews with the need of grappling with the world and myself. This paper is a contribution to a *story-centered ontology*, an attempt to learn from Indigenous worldviews which are (or in so, so many cases were) a God-given balance of respect for story, system, and being. Pi's enigmatic statement is not a naive suggestion to believe the truth-claim that sounds nicer. It points toward something more primordial. Where does all this reality come from? As I approach middle age, I am weary of all my knowing. My steps toward acceptance have always come with great trauma. It's said that pain is mandatory but suffering is optional. But we are fallen. And so suffering, it seems, is guaranteed.

•

It takes us a lifetime to understand what we mean, so we must look and listen to our lives at all times... Perhaps it's through suffering that we get into glory.

-Casper ten Boom

•

In *Jesuit Relations*, the French missionary Brébeuf visits the Huron people of Northern Turtle Island in 1635. The foreigner writes to another of his religious order across the sea, describing his hosts' practice of gifting the dead useful things like tools and food. Seemingly not present in Brébeuf's theology is an enthusiastic belief in the immortality of the soul via the resurrected body in the physical universe, a belief manifested in his hosts' practice, and a relatively orthodox doctrine of Brébeuf's parent religion Christianity, which is founded upon the faith and selflessness of Mary, and on the teachings and person of Jesus Christ, who died for us, our sins, and our life. Christians identify Jesus as a historical human being: the Palestinian Jew whom Muslims venerate as the Prophet called Isa (peace be upon them), child of Maryam (peace be upon her). Father Brébeuf traveled great time and distance, living peacefully in harsh environments, with the conviction that prayers of Isa to Jehovah be translated and spoken to many people. Father Brébeuf, along with his Huron brethren, were gruesomely killed by Iroquois soldiers during a gunpowder-fueled war.

•

I would purge my language of hyperbole, of its eagerness to analyze the levels of wickedness; ranking them, calculating their higher or lower status among others of its kind. Speaking to the broken and the dead is too difficult for a mouth full of blood. Too holy an act for impure thoughts. Because the dead are free, absolute; they cannot be seduced by blitz. To speak to you, the dead of September 11, I must not claim false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed just in time for a camera. I must be steady and I must be clear, knowing all the time that I have nothing to say—no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant than the ancient atoms you have become.

-Toni Morrison

•

In May 2024, while I was studying the genocides listed at the end of the picture book in the page titled *Afterparties*, I was fascinated by the Twelve Tribes of Israel, including the description Jacob gives at the end of *Genesis* of the children who are the progenitors of the tribes, and the description at the beginning of *Numbers* of the tribes camping in tents around the tabernacle. I've interacted briefly with the Black liberation theology movement Israel United in Christ, who give a breakdown of the Twelve Tribes as modern-day Indigenous groups and Peoples of Color (Ben Israel). I wondered if the interpretation is that, assuming we are within the fold at all, White peoples are instead the Levites, a group given the commandment of particular piety, and excluded from the numbering of those who will have died in the great tribulations. One day, as I was leaving the University's library, there were tents spread out on the campus lawn, denouncing the still ongoing military genocide of the Palestinian peoples. The next day, I arrived with a bag full of supplies and books, and set myself down with a sleeping bag out in the open, ready to sleep under the stars. I took a security shift guarding the perimeter into the morning hours, and at the end, my shift lead asked me where I was sleeping, and I pointed out my mat. They said, "No, you need a good night's rest," and I was instead given a tent, on the East side of the camp, with fate thusly placing me either in Zebulun, Issachar, or Judah.

Daily we gathered on a large tarp in the middle of the camp to discuss political action, with the aim of petitioning the University to open up its financials for inspection for investments implicated with the deaths of Palestinians. One day, somebody brought a beautiful large white tent with zippered doors, which was placed atop the tarp. That night, we gathered inside our new tabernacle, checking the weather about a windstorm that was to hit by sunrise. We argued with fury about a sensitive topic which it is not given me to name, one which the realities of young college students who have differing traumas brought to light in painful manner. We caused each other hurt and damage, echoing off the insides of the new boundary. In the early morning, we awoke to the windstorm, injuring residents and destroying tents. The tabernacle lay torn and draped over a light pole. A campmate commented, "That was the moment I believed in God." After some healing, we rebuilt the camp with gusto, with far greater skill and organization than before. In the evenings, advocates came from around the state to teach us wisdom, and Palestinian grandmas brought us piles of food. I remember in particular an unhoused speaker, a scarf wrapped around their face with shades, who basically told us, "Welcome to outside. We're here every night." After giving us the difficult truth, they opened up into a poetic string of hard-won griefs about the catastrophic state of the whole earth and the faults of human dominion. It was also through the camp that I was introduced to Islam. One day, I took a break, which we were encouraged to take as needed. I spent some time in a park with a modest amount of marijuana. As the stars were aligning, I walked along a path and came to a clearing, which was for some reason filled with sand, and on top of it, a beautiful mat. I removed my sandals, aligned the mat toward Mecca, and prayed to the god, who for the first time I addressed as **ٱللَّهُ**. A vision hit me of the two stones which are placed in the House of Worship in Mecca, reportedly put there by Abraham the Monotheist, which are speculated to be meteorites. I felt a superstitious connection to a faraway civilization, far more advanced technologically, culturally, and spiritually than we, who somehow relayed the importance of a truth: the god is greater. What, then, of the Jesus of my youth? If there are multiple sentient civilizations of beings in the universe, do they each get their own Christ? And if so, how could each of them be God?

If the god wills a thing, the god simply speaks, and it is! Imagine a being of such spiritual perfection, that they enter into a state of indefinite selflessness, and thus eternal sacrifice. How long the suffering, and how great the glory at the end! The good news is that we are not Them, but that They are. My thoughts wear off, and I rest. Days later, the University notifies us with an hour's notice that four University administrators are coming to the encampment to negotiate. We scramble to arrange the camp according to our strategies. In our craftiness, we put an awning over the seats where our four negotiators will sit, leaving the administrators in the hot sun. Our lead spokesperson, donning a scarf patterned with horseshoes, spars with the University President, who is also a Catholic Priest. They reach the topic of the University's academic field trips to the Holy Land. Our leader says, "You are sending students to occupied lands!" The president retorts, "Just like here," pointing to the onetime cemetery and Indigenous Ohlone lands below our feet. A great ancient *Demonio* bursts through the crowd, shrieking in laughter. One of our campmates literally faints. We move the awning to shield our friend from the sun. We grind one of the monster's scales into a healing concoction, and they are brought to safety. I look up, and see that the nearby cathedral's main spire, under construction, with Spanish emanating from the rafters, is now blocking the sun from where the administrators sit. Negotiations resume. The President speaks a sentence which should include the word Palestine, but it doesn't. Our fourth negotiator, child of Palestinian generations, silent until this time, lit by the rays of a blazing sun in a blue sky, unleashes a hailstorm of truth onto our fellow humans, who stand shocked, in the presence of Ma and Pa who sit nearby, bringing the longstanding deathly wisdom of a genocide they both lived through decades pass. The administrators cut the negotiation short. The President stands up, drops the microphone near the speaker, and an inconsequential spirit shrieks for a few seconds, before an angel arrives to swat it to oblivion. That was the moment I believed in God.

•

be realistic; demand the impossible

•

By the end of this document, I will have made six petitions to different governing entities concerning persisting injustices in the world. In my writing is an allergic reaction to any expressed form of power. I urgently advocate for the weak over the strong, perhaps to to the point of error. Though I wish God to never judge me harshly, I have wielded the Name against entities I can only understand shallowly. I have simultaneously yielded to my savior complex, and the trope of the redemptive suffering other, dehumanizing both myself and multitudes. Forgive me.

•

behold, the lamb of god, who takes away the sin of world

•

Throughout this project, my mind has danced around the question of whether and how it is appropriate to say that someone, or a group of people, is *Christlike*. In the history of Christianity, there have been martyrs who have died by methods and at hands which eerily mirror the crucifixion in the Gospels. In so many cases, the Christian churches continued their Sunday sermons in blindness to murder, the notion of Jesus floating upward into the clouds or downward to the dirt of first century Galilee. The martyrs themselves found and continue to find hope that Christ shares their suffering. But the label of *Christlike* can also be a burden and a spectacle. We are not to demand, certainly not at privileged distance, that the marginalized have a unique call to perfectly forgive as Christ did. Muslims say that Isa (peace be upon them) was taken directly up to heaven and was not killed. They also say that Muhammad (peace be upon him) confirmed all the scriptures that came before. It is extremely difficult to be *Christlike*, but it is very easy to prove we are not the one Christ of all the universes. All we have to do is sin one time.

•

I dated a former minister for a bit. He was also Black & Trans. My upbringing was coming from a Christian and Muslim home, and as an adult, I'd turned into quite the theology nerd. For me, being Black & Trans means to be a holder of Spirit. I loved having someone to talk to about scripture theory and how it relates to trans liberation. It was everything I thought I needed until it wasn't. I thought I wanted someone who paid me a lot of attention and called first. Someone who was spiritual. What I got was obsessive, a bit of stalking and a lot of PTSD wrapped in internalized anti-trans and anti-gay theology. Even more, I got to witness firsthand how many view their religious practice as a passive thing. So, when I needed help and reached out to clergy who knew all the buzzwords about radical inclusion, they knew nothing about actually supporting folks dealing with violence. I learned to ask better questions about relationships and faith.

-J Mase III

•

In a small, regular ole' town in Guatemala, I climb up the hillside into a coffee orchard to write this section, the last for this project. I'm angry at life. Not, currently, because it hasn't provided freedom from violence and death for those whose stories we have witnessed in this project, but rather for the simple fact that I feel overwhelmingly lonely. I'm full of romantic and sexual longing which I am powerless over, a familiar agony which has been a source of my deepest resentments and regrets over the years, an illness always near at hand for each of the many times in my life I have caused discomfort, fear, and heartache for especially the women in my life. *Por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa.*

•

Every thought, word, and action produced by human beings has a cause and a result, as well as a reverberating effect on others—like pebbles thrown into the water whose widening ripples intersect... In Theravidin terms, this causal conception of reality is known as dependent origination, the insight into the nature of the world achieved by the Buddha at that time of their enlightenment. In the Buddhist tradition, this recognition has often been conceived of as a cycle of causation with ignorance, as an arbitrary starting point that leads, through mental and physical properties of perception and sensation, to the birth of craving or thirst, which creates attachment or clinging. Attachment gives rise to a sense of being, the sensation that the self, memory, fantasy or emotion to which one has become attached is real. This in turn leads to the regeneration or rebirth of this sensation of being (as well as its eventual decay and death) and the suffering caused by these states.

-Anne Ruth Hansen

•

I have a great love for spiritual religions. My offering in this paper has been to process issues of survival migration in Cambodia and Thailand, in view of spirituality, and to attempt some wisdoms at the intersection of two areas familiar to me: trauma and scripture. There is an art, of which I have not achieved proficiency, in creating works which lead the reader through challenging opportunities of growth with care. It has become important in my life to recognize the Islamic scripture القرآن , in its original Arabic, to be both the pioneering and perfecting of this genre. All available English translations I've encountered are a minefield of cultural and spiritual triggers, which may be considered the result of the entire traumatic history leading up to the moment of interpretation across languages. For those readers who have tried many things to free themselves from the deepest spiritual hurts, I suggest a few more: Find a Jewish community to teach you the wisdom of life during a few nights under the stars. Abstain from alcohol for a while then attend a Eucharist which offers actual wine. Follow the instructions in the Methods section to recite or sing القرآن in its Arabic vocalizations, without regarding any English versions for a time, and your lord is most gracious.

•

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels, and have not ἀγάπην, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not ἀγάπην, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and deliver my body to be burned, and have not ἀγάπην, it profits me nothing.

-Saint Paul

•

I wish here to level with myself and with everyone I imagine reading this while I sit and write, to the sound of puttering motorcycles and Evangelical hymns. Oh, how my soul has ached, how I have felt the responsibility for too little and too much, and been unable to believe in Jesus enough to resolve it. Was that ever the commandment? I'm faced with open questions to which I do not currently have answers. In my life, my understanding of the world, and the world itself, are deep gaps. My true expertise, it turns out, is not writing or drawing. The future is way more open than any of us imagine. We are invited by life to join in creative resistance against very real evils, and to enjoy the community of being lonely together until and past the very end. See y'all in Africa.

•

Even as Africa exists as a desire for some, so does it constitute a nightmare from which others pray to be awakened, a piece of history's tapestry whose threads can be unraveled without loss of definition to the rest. Yet many also appear eager to participate in this enticing but dubious banquet, convinced that Africa remains a space of infinite possibilities, one that only awaits its day of fulfillment. Of these, a fair number are resolved to be present at, and be part of, that event. This breed is ubiquitous. Immigration officers recognize them on sight. When they are pushed out of one gate they do not really live until they return through another. "I get expelled from Africa all the time," I have heard one such declare, suiting the familiar saying to his latest immigration bout, "but no one can expel Africa from within me."

-Wole Soyinka

•

When I was young, I had a dream, the visuals of which I can picture to this day: A hippopotamus, causally eating my leg. Much later, while finishing this project, I came across a meme:

In my head are two hippos. This one bites.

This one also bites.

Pictured in the meme is the young pygmy hippopotamus Moo Deng, not to be confused with her brother Moo Toon. The siblings were born to parents Tony and Jonah in the presence of humans. The duo have become an internet sensation by virtue of being unconscionably poofy and illegally shiny, and a tendency to regard zookeeper's limbs as fodder for munching. She and her siblings live in the ๒๒๓ - ๒๒๔ Open Zoo in Chonburi, Thailand. Journalist Sarkar reports an animal rights organization saying, pessimistically, "Hippos belong in the wild, but Moo Deng will never live outside a cage. She faces a lifetime of confinement."

•

honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the lord your god gives you

•

In this town in Guatemala, I attend an Evangelical church service mid-session, and the pastor is talking about raising children. There are three important methods: Example, Instruction, and Correction. The pastor lingers longly on the third slide. At one point, I let out an audible whistle. The pastor says something which suggests he believes his stricter stance on bodily punishment is importantly counter-cultural to the impending White modernist narratives flooding the town in present day. I leave early and head over to a Twelve Step meeting, where they summarily order me up to the podium to deliver the first share. I vent about the sermon, expressing pains which are wrapped up for me with discussions in this paper about the punishing nature of God. I chalk it all up to actions of others over which I am powerless. A man who shares later makes reference to my resentment, and says something interesting.

•

If you thoroughly search for a solution, and can't find it, there's nothing left to worry about.

•

I run across two Mormon missionaries, an American and a Guatemalan, one taking the other's picture while stepping forward to affectionately whisk a fleck off his hair. I express my newfound excitement for *The Books*. I am told how as missionaries we are to view ourselves as drunkards who blindly stumbled down a path, who nonetheless need to communicate the existence of the path to others finding their way. The next day I sit down in the coffee orchard and write my *por mi culpas*. I come back to my room to the noise of a corn-grinder downstairs. I am *very* noise-sensitive, which does not play well with my career choice of journalist in the Global South. I am powerless over both noise and my sensitivity. I've only recently realized that it is okay in particular circumstances to kindly ask another to change their behavior to accommodate my presence. This being not one of those times, I look for the voice of my inner child through the discomfort. I find myself on another mountain path, giving my best *Ütz awäch* to passers-by. I weep, realizing that it doesn't matter how judgmental anybody thinks God is in whatever context. I believe God usually ain't.

•

jesus loves me this i know. for the bibles tell me so. little ones with them belong. they are weak but they are strong.

•

Erik Davis writes of a 19th or 20th century Khmer fable about a Bunong child named Sokh, who was born in and lives off the woods, practicing agroforestry by harvesting rice. Sokh's family is accused of practicing profane magic, and Sokh escapes by hiding in a tree, before fleeing to another town. The residents tell Sokh, "If you want to save your life, you have to run down to the lands of the Khmer." Sokh is faced with the dilemma of escaping the violence of the wilderness in exchange for becoming dependent on a civilization which, while full of safety and learning, has often oppressed and enslaved the Bunong. Sokh learns Khmer, and accepts the moral boundaries of a life as a monk.

•

In what ways were we all like Sokh? What forests drove us away? To which cities were we forced into dependence, and how can we relearn a healthy independence?

•

Davis tells another Khmer parable, about three siblings raised by a single mother. The mother meets and marries a thief, who slowly poisons the relationship with frivolities and empty promises. The children end up abandoned in the forest with small remnants of civilization and morsels of food. A local tree spirit protects them from the wild for a time, and petitions a deity to help the children in their plight, who assures the listener that the children will not need much help. The children learn and become a part of the wilderness, and slowly transform into birds. The bandit is thrown in prison, and the mother seeks to reconcile. The children realize that they are not forced to return to a dangerous dependency on civilization, and are free to choose.

•

In what ways were we all like the siblings? What cities drove us away? To which forests were we forced into independence, and how can we relearn a healthy dependence?

•

*before we were born
god gently told us the truth
understanding is something that slips
as our bodies bruise
so we'll concentrate
constantly rewinding tapes
was the ghost just the glare on the lens
that our minds create?*

-Sleeping at Last

•

After completing the Khmer translation of the book of picture drawings, I drove my '95 stick-shift mini-pickup, *angelito*, to deliver a box from the printers to Pa, who along with Ma was packing to return to Cambodia, on a trip where Ma would return Thailand for the first time since she lived at the Khao I Dang refugee camp. I asked Pa what he thought this project was about. He likened it to riding in the back of a wagon down an old wilderness road. Drifting in and out of sleep, you awake as the wagon passes a dirt path to a deep forest. Moments later, the mind realizes what we witnessed there, but the wagon has already moved on.



Thank you for reading my paper! Please see the **Petitions** section below, concerning actively sought justices in contexts familiar to me, Jacob. I close with a prayer that the reader lives in a time when these petitions are no longer relevant, the petitioners already free from the burdens therein.

-បងចេត្តាប៉



and a great sign appeared in heaven...

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Appendix: Petitions

•
Restitution of the United States' Spiritual Debt to Cambodia
•

When you think about my history, I don't need you to see everything at once. I don't need you to recall the details of those tragedies that were dropped onto my world. Honestly, you don't even have to try. What is nuance in the face of all that we've experienced?

-Anthony Veasna So

•

I, Jacob, about six years ago found in my newfound relationship with Khmer people a fresh lease on life. In the kindness of smiles, acceptance into community, and generous spiritual nourishment, I found myself suddenly with purpose during a time of life I was completely depleted. I have often not repaid my friends with gratitude or myself with contentment. Additionally, I have sometimes wielded my friends in the form of a social issue, in order to balm spiritual wounds in need of healing elsewhere. In my psyche is a profound psychological primal guilt apparently reaching back before my birth, an ungrief of survival, in place of my unnamed sibling who died before birth, soon before I came to be. I became finally aware of the deep impact this had on my life following the trip to Cambodia and Thailand for this project. I know now this has psychological connections to a sudden emotional attachment with people born in Cambodia. Like many white people, I have used an encounter with others, for worse and better, to come to grips with my self. I can only ask forgiveness for what I failed to shield my brethren from, for the carelessness of my wealth, and the sadness of never having quite been able to live under my own forgiveness. Relationships with people different from us also shows us what we have in common, and I think also I share with

Khmers a stance toward the world. Deep cultural interfacing, with its miracles and clashes, is sometimes maligned, but I continue to believe that there is great truth offered when we are in authentic presence with those we have been trained to avoid. It is in this spirit that I present this first petition.

•

In *Are Cambodia-U.S. Relations Mendable?*, Leng and Chheang describe Cambodia's 2021 petition to the U.S. executive branch that the now nearly billion-unit debt be converted into development assistance. The petition appears yet unconceded by the United States. In 2010, during a congressional hearing titled *Cambodia's Small Debt: When Will the U.S. Forgive?*, Deputy Assistant Secretary Yun commented to the U.S. legislature,

It would seem ironic that we are insisting on debt payments while we are giving assistance [...] We cannot withhold assistance because of some disputes over what is owed and what is not owed. That will take time coming to terms [...] I visited Laos recently. We dropped 2 million pounds [sic. *Legacies of War*⁶⁶ gives the same number but in tons] of bombs, probably the most bombed country per capita in the world. [...] children and women, because they look for scrap metal--end up getting into a lot of these bombs that were unexploded and ended up getting blown up themselves. [...] I don't know if many Americans know what a cluster bomb is. [...] they are called little bombies--these cluster bombs are dropped from planes and in midair would explode, putting out 50 - 100 bombs like little grenades. I mean, it is amazing how man can invent machines and things on how to kill in a more perfect way [...] and we did this to the Cambodians. A lot of innocent people died as a result of these cluster bombs that we dropped on them. [...] thousands or millions of these bombies are all over the country.

•

In the accompanying book of drawings to this paper, in the page titled *Response Policies*, we meet a child and adult in *debt bondage*, unable to return to Cambodia from Thailand. Their travel documentation is physically locked away pending repayment of loans taken out for visa and

66 Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell. 2009. *Legacies of War: Cluster Bombs in Laos*.

travel costs. On this point, the righteous judgments of God are clearcut and swift. The unfreedoms of our friends at the border are in direct continuity with the *unacknowledged military subjugation* by the U.S. Air Force in the 1970s of Cambodia. The United States remains shackled by the disfigured corpses of murders. Its sins are not consigned to the past. Blaming older generations or politicians will do no good. The economy of justice has a higher demand: a contrite and thorough institutional reckoning, and explicitly political restitution for unending damages. The West inherits two distinct parenthoods: the blood of the Aramaic Christ and the enslavements of Satanic Empire. We awake and daily worship a Beast when the databases of banks direct our souls to blaspheme that the Realm of Cambodia should have obligations to the United States Treasury for months of body-breaking manual labor demanded of each of the Realm's citizens. Fallen, fallen *is* Babylon the Great. Reward unto it even as it paid you. Double unto it twice according to its works. In the cup which it has filled, mix twice as much for it. For in it was found the blood of the prophets and saints. Come out of it, people of God, so that you will not participate in its sins nor receive any of its plagues. The question is not when will the U.S. forgive the debt. When will the risen Lamb forgive the U.S.?

To The State Department of the United States of America:

Work with Phnom Penh to expunge American War-era agricultural loans, and remit plentiful additional reparations per pound of ordnance dropped by the U.S. Air Force in the country, paid into any form of assistance or financial vehicle requested by the Realm.



California's Theft of Immigrant Labor for Drug Operations

•

I remember the gang leaders telling me, "If you're a beast, control your beast. You know what you're capable of. Don't tell anyone, and if they say you can't, don't say anything. Just laugh, because you know what you're capable of." It was very hard, but I see life in a different way now.

-Julio Zavala

•

I, Jacob, the author of this paper, am friend to many Spanish-speaking residents of California and Mexico who have expressed a common dilemma: Forgo their family's economic needs in an impoverished birth country, or brave a dangerous passage across one of the world's most politically contested borders, incurring debts for passage, and a life of labor at the destination. With the stories of friends so often in front of me, I frequently fall short of being an effective advocate or morally upright agent in an issue which has become a crux in American politics. Reality, and the literature, yield the truth that I have benefitted from the exploitation of immigrants of color and the destruction of indigenous lands, including for the cultivation of marijuana. Last year, I had the opportunity to volunteer for an organization promoting the livelihoods of migrating wage laborers, and failed to show up, spending the months smoking cannabis only barely moderately, recovering for future endeavors, but ashaming me in the face of stories told me by *compañeros* wielding the work ethic of the gods, who have braved death for the chance to work, to whom I owe a debt.

•

In *Settler Cannabis*, Reed, member of the Yurok Nation, writes of a prophecy of the Oceti Sakowin Nation of a shadowy snake which passes through the land, depleting its resources and cutting off its beings from life:

We don't have just one clearly visible black snake to battle—there were hundreds, probably even thousands, hidden away in the hills. Our black snakes were not constructed of metal or filled with oil. Instead, our black snakes are made of polyethylene. Small and thin, and sometimes nearly

invisible if you do not know where to look, our black snakes are scattered over hillsides, siphoning water from springs and streams to thirsty cannabis plants. There was (and continues to be) fear that drought conditions and climate change, with the added impact of unregulated illicit water diversion for cannabis, could result in another catastrophic fish kill.

[...] Resource rushing, guided by the rush mentality, is a violent settler-colonial pattern of resource extraction that has been repeatedly played out—first gold, then timber, then fish, and now cannabis.

For Americans who imbibe marijuana, who fancy ourselves policitally liberal advocates for Indigenous Nations and Latin-American free immigration, the reality of cannabis cultivation removes from us a moral high ground.

•

In *Solito, Solita*, Mayers and Freedman write in the introduction,

At this moment, thousands of children are trekking from Central America to El Norte, clinging to freight cars, fording rivers, fleeing cops and gangs. Some of the children's parents hire *coyotes*, human smugglers who can charge upwards of \$10,000, to guide their children to the border. Some kids take buses, vans, and trucks. Some have no choice but to jump onto the cargo trains migrants colloquially call *La Bestia*, "the Beast," to make the two-thousand-plus-mile trip. Those who survive the journey either turn themselves over to the authorities in the hope of gaining asylum or make a run for it and pursue underground lives. Those who seek asylum at the border are often placed in detention in *la hielera*, "the freezer," where guards are known to crank up the air conditioning and toss frozen ham sandwiches to them once a day.

I write this section from Yucatan, Mexico, where I asked some new friends for their input about *La Bestia*. They say, "it's a ticket to death." Journalistic reporting about the ongoing realities of this migration route are widely available elsewhere, but it's clear from here that the train is, for Latin Americans, a distilled representation of the harsh bodily realities of survival labor. I receive also from my friends a story of a relative who recently worked in California up to twenty hours daily to repay the debt for the border crossing under the fear of retribution to family. American

policy often aims criticism at countries such as Thailand for labor injustices, while there is a lack of repair much closer to home.

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In *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, Gonzalez writes in introduction to the second edition,

I hope the reader will find in these pages not facile solutions to complex problems but a frank attempt to make sense of both the Latin American and North American experience. It has not been easy to separate my head from my heart as I sought to chronicle this story. I have met too many Latinos throughout my life who struggled and sacrificed far beyond the endurance of most of us to create something better for their children, yet found no respite and little respect. [...] The deeper I delved into the two-hundred-year record of shenanigans by our statesmen, businessmen, and generals in Latin America, the angrier I became, especially because those leaders never seemed to learn from the past. My anger, however, is not tainted by hate; it comes from the frustration of seeing how bountiful our nation's promise has turned out for some, how needlessly heartbreaking for others, and it is tempered by the conviction that the American people still cling to a basic sense of fairness, that once they understand the facts, they rarely permit injustice to stand.

The following is a description of onloing bodily struggles of immigrants from multiple continents in the California cannabis industry, which was unfamiliar to me at the time of reading.

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In *Experiences of Structural Violence and Wage Theft Among Immigrant Workers in the California Cannabis Industry*, Beckman et al write,

The multibillion-dollar California cannabis industry employs an unknown number of seasonal workers, including many immigrants. Most production occurs in the remote, rural, far-northern counties where farms may be hours by vehicle from the nearest town (127). [...] Cannabis is a labor-intensive crop, and the skilled and time-consuming task of hand-trimming flowers is the most common seasonal job in the industry (128). [...] Seasonal cannabis workers are exposed to many of the physical hazards found in all agricultural workplaces, like dust, pesticides, and injuries; another commonality with California's traditional agricultural work is vulnerability to structural

violence stemming from factors related to race, gender, immigration status, and employer-employee power imbalance (128). [...] No formal records are kept of employment in the cannabis industry, so the number of workers is difficult to estimate; conservative econometric models provide an estimate of 58,000 full time-equivalent jobs in the California legal industry in 2023. However, only about 20% of cannabis produced in state is sold legally (128).

Though not all marijuana products are created equal, it may be understood that the addictive potential of a substance is related to the extent its production eludes formal regulation. The urgent processes surrounding pleasure-saturating consumables create conditions in which exploitation of the poor is commonplace.

To varying degrees, these post-legalization immigrant workers are vulnerable to the same set of hazards that affect most immigrant and migrant agricultural workers. Despite being undocumented, returning skilled immigrants are often English-speaking, have existing contacts in the industry, and are more likely to be able to navigate the industry safely. Workers transitioning from other crops are more likely to share the characteristics of other California agricultural workers, who are predominantly Hispanic/Latino, have lower English fluency, and are likely to be undocumented. Labor trafficking does occur in the industry and has been discovered at both licensed and illicit grow—in those reports, trafficked workers were Latino and Hmong immigrants (129).

Whether one believes that a future better world includes social ingestion of cannabis as it does for alcohol, it is clear that the conditions which coincided with state legalization have included the alarming trafficking of vulnerable migrants.

The most common response when [the present research's] participants were asked "What do you fear the most when working in this industry?" Was that they would not be paid. Some cannabis growers leveraged the immigration status of trimmers by direct threats to report undocumented workers as well as by the implicit threat of detention if a worker tried to report mistreatment or wage theft:

They treat you differently. It's instantaneous. I had a terrible experience where the first year they didn't pay my friends and they paid others. And then they say, "well what are you going to do, you're an illegal immigrant.

The friction between escalating immigration policy enforcement and a continual need in the U.S. for low-wage labor results in an environment where wage theft (including non- and underpayment and failure to pay overtime) as well as workplace abuse are commonly experienced by undocumented workers in almost every industry. Undocumented workers have the same legal rights to a safe workplace and workers' compensation as all workers, but these rights are *de facto* inaccessible (131). [...]

All the participants had experienced racism in the workplace; because Latin American immigrants are radicalized in the U.S., even those identifying as white were discriminated against on this basis (131).

Beckman quotes many workers' experiences:

Almost all the owners are Americans, and white. They can do whatever they want. It's scary that everyone knows they have guns, do drugs, not in their five senses, and most of the time they are racist, so you really live very concerned (131). [...]

The Hmong and people from Laos are groups of 10-15 people. They have one manager who talks with the owners, and they have a deal for the payment. They promise to the owners that they will do a certain number of pounds a day. They do things in teams; they have a good relationship with them (132). [...]

I met a guy that has a farm, 60-70 years old. He wanted women on his farm. Trying to seduce you in some way to get you on the farm. ... This guy was very authoritarian, and I am a reactive person so I couldn't say anything because I knew it might go bad, but I was scared of not finding another job at the moment (132). [...]

There have been a couple of times that I have had a gun pointed to my head because the owners get paranoid, and they think you're stealing. If they don't pay you, it's not like you can get a bigger gun and come back (133).

The experiences of undocumented migrants in the cannabis industry represent issues faced by all working class peoples, but here manifested with a sharpness unbecoming of the United States. As in Thailand, economic demand for labor will find legalized routes for international employment regardless of debates about border policy. Below, I focus on an issue affecting workers' lives which should be familiar to readers of all

political persuasions, concerning the right to payment for work already in progress.

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In *“They Steal Our Work”: Wage Theft and the Criminalization of Immigrant Day Laborers*, Galemba writes,

Wage theft is fundamentally a crime of power that transfers wages and value from workers to profit employers (93). [...] Rather than a crime, public and law enforcement frequently portray wage theft as an accounting error, civil disagreement, or even an accident (94). [...] Recent collaborations with anti-trafficking advocates have therefore sought to highlight how forms of labor exploitation and labor violations like wage theft exist along a continuum, may index labor trafficking situations, and reveal the structural factors that make migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation (94).

Unpaid wages, an experience common to the working classes, is so intensified for migrant workers that it is continuous with human trafficking, as seen for Cambodians in Asia and Latinos in the U.S..

Despite well-intentioned reforms, legal and law enforcement avenues are not designed for low-wage immigrant workers because they fundamentally reflect dominant systems of power, and because they exist in tension with competing state mandates to control immigration and criminalize immigrants. The reactive nature of the labor rights bureaucracy, coupled with a more proactive and punitive system of immigration policing and criminalization, make it more difficult for workers to report violations and receive restitution (109). [...] Depictions of wage theft incidences as nebulous civil disputes not only misconstrue how these crimes are usually more intentional and clear, but, more importantly, reflect societal assumptions—inflected by racial and class prejudices—about who commits crimes, whose labor is valued, and which crimes are worth taking seriously. Wage theft is a symptom of the criminalization and devaluation of low-wage immigrant workers (110).

Though failure to pay for work is an obvious crime, it may be understood as often committed by apparently hardworking and not obviously wealthy smallholders. The advocacy response should be to push the responsibility upward to deeper pockets, passing the cost for enforcement into the prices of less essential goods such as cannabis.

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In *California State Auditor's Report: Inadequate Staffing and Poor Oversight Have Weakened Protections for Workers* are dozens of pages of numerical tables and mundane recommendations for the Labor Commissioner's office of California. In the Calworks piece *Unpaid Wages: A Waiting Game*, the authors write,

California workers claimed at least \$338 million in lost or stolen wages last year, which was slightly more than annual averages in recent years. Even when the state cracks down, it can take years for some workers to get paid, if they get paid. The state regularly breaks its own laws, violating its own deadlines for resolving cases.

The California Labor Commissioner's Office is characteristically bureaucratic, giving the impression that the real forces governing its operations happen at fundraisers and dinner parties, making its improvement an instance of broader issues of government corruption. Still, the theft of wages produces a desperation directly observable in the faces of California-resident migrant workers, who feel that they have no recourse in the legal system. The Commissioner's response to the Auditor's report is not one that inspires a sense of possibility.

As with our observation of migration brokers and border workers in Thailand, naïve scapegoating of mid-level economic participants and government employees is an insufficient critique of the exploitation of subjugated bodies. In my drawing *The Lights We Carried Home*, we read a description of the conditions of employer-provided housing for immigrant workers in Bangkok. Any feelings we might have about the failure of humanity in this context are immediately applicable to America's treatment of Latin-American immigrants, criticism that does not exempt me. In *Gender and the Politics of Marijuana*, Elder and Green give me personally a variety of uncomfortable truths, relating support for marijuana legalization, marijuana use, race/gender, and liberal political beliefs.

Legalizing marijuana involves risks to society and to children in particular, and it may be that white men are more comfortable with these risks than white women as well as racial and ethnic minorities.

In the Gallup polls *Marijuana Views Linked to Ideology, Religiosity, Age* and *What Percentage of Americans Smoke Marijuana?* we read the almost tautological conclusions that American liberals are about twice as likely both to smoke cannabis and to support legalization. Wage theft in the California cannabis industry is a nexus of issues surrounding the liberal-conservative rift concerning immigration, and the responsibilities of the individual versus the collective.

Discourses around economic hardship and oppression often include debates about the responsibilities of the marginalized themselves, as distinct from the responsibilities of institutional systems stressed by liberals. In the English interpretations of the Qur'an available to me, an interesting scenario is described where a group of oppressed, alongside their oppressors, find themselves both suffering the consequences of their earthly lives in the afterlife. The oppressed lay the blame of their fate on their oppressors who burdened them with great pains and labors. The oppressors retort that the oppressed were too busy stealing from them to receive the readily available message. The passage closes with a warning that wealth and legacy are insufficient to save a person, and encourages faithful belief and upright character.

The time has come for me to turn in this paper. I don't have concrete recommendations for the vast bureaucratic apparatus which administrates wage theft claims. I can only admit to my failure to be a better advocate for this issue. I do not experience the economic destitutions of Americans who do not support policies which would result increased immigration. The only argument I will make, is that if there's one thing in America we all believe in, it's honest pay for honest work. The task of building a sanctuary of life in California, a state storied by violence, is a long and painful task and will take good minds, and healthy hearts.

**To Cannabis Culture Employees of the California Labor
Commissioner's Office:**

I write this in the uncomfortable middle stages of sobriety from cannabis, chatting with new friends in Mexico where THC is illegal. My brain is in an uncanny valley, the dull spiritual pain of lite withdrawal, where the world seems grey and impossible, and the old effects of marijuana suspect and

spurious. In so many parts of the world, cannabis is cultivated for export, but banned for enjoyment. Always winter, but never Christmas. For all the modern ugliness of marijuana production, my rational mind still knows there's something to that ancient plant, that it co-evolved with humans, influencing the perceptions of saints, martyrs, and prophets. Treat it as the sacred flower it is. Always supplement with CBD. Protect your brain. Enjoy. Think about bureaucracy. Find purpose. Through the spiritual landscape is a window to every difficult truth about reality, and the sufferings of the self and other. Both sobriety and permissiveness carry aspects. Be creative and grounded. Envision, forgive, and improve. I'm sorry.



Oakland City Denial of Clean Water in Neighborhoods of Color

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It is better to oppose the forces that would drive me to self-murder than to endure them. Although I risk the likelihood of death, there is at least the possibility, if not the probability, of changing intolerable conditions. This possibility is important, because much in human existence is based upon hope without any real understanding of the odds. Indeed we are all—Black and white alike—ill in the same way, mortally ill. But before we die, how shall we live?

-Huey P. Newton

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I, Jacob, can only admit to current and past estrangements from Black brethren, and the guilt of being a rich person in estrangement from the poor. A feeling persists of an ongoing and incomplete transformation toward a person who does not rely on money and bodily privilege as a means for generating personal validation, finding acceptance in the world, and meeting my material needs. The long story has been releasing the unhelpful self-inflicted shame, yielding to the financial advice of spiritual advisors over to make direct amends for sins of wealth, and learning to allow myself a simple humanity for embarrassing naivetes about my bodily privilege. An important step in my healing processes related to my racial identity turned out to be to address the difficult topic of suicide, an issue which has affected me personally, and which is sometimes understood as a white male issue, though Native men and trans people are affected more gravely. In *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*, Burnett-Zeigler writes,

There is a dangerous false narrative that Black people don't kill themselves. However, a history of trauma, which Black woman are vulnerable to, as we have seen, is a key risk factor for suicide. [...] Although men are more likely than women to complete a suicide, women are more likely than men to attempt one. [...] The rate of suicide attempts and deaths by suicide among Black people has been increasing for the past twenty years. Among Black women, the suicide rate increased by a staggering 65 percent from 1999 to 207. From 1991 to 2017, rates of suicide attempts for Black youth increased

73 percent. [...] These increases are partly due to the stress that can come from living in the United States as a Black person.

At the mosque, there is an outspoken fellow who likes to introduce discussions of Whiteness by fetching a piece of printer paper and asking if that's what white skin looks like. Though talking with him is a gracious experience, the issue of suicide remained something difficult to breach. My demeanor melted in a second when he gave me a yes answer to my question: Did he ever know anyone who killed themselves? Ink on the paper is an incomplete substitute for the cavernous wordlessness of interpersonal grief.

Malcolm X, in his autobiography⁶⁷, wrote from Mecca while on Hajj,

During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug)—while praying to the *same* God—with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blonds, and whose skins were the whitest of white. And in the *words* and in the *actions* and in the *deeds of the* 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.

We were *truly* all the same (siblings)—because their belief in one God had removed the 'white' from their *minds*, the 'white' from their *behavior*, and the 'white' from their *attitude*.

I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in *reality*, the Oneness of Man—and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their 'differences' in color.

The following is a discussion of municipal policies that daily affect poor and non-White residents of Oakland, California where the above discussion took place. Residents' commonplace, sudden, and life-threatening loss of access to water and electricity is well-known to local advocates, and represents an unaddressed deep well of racialized suffering nationally.

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67 Quoted in: Shakir, Imam Zaid. *Scattered Pictures: Reflections of An American Muslim*. 2007.

In *The Policing of Black Debt: How the Municipal Bond Market Regulated the Right to Water*, Phinney writes,

American cities, and in particular, Black-majority cities, rely on the punitive enforcement of fines and fees to fund basic municipal services in an austere fiscal environment produced by the 2008 financial crisis. [...] Over the last 10 years, there has been a wave of mass water shut offs happening across US cities in tandem with rising bills due to ongoing austerity policies.

In Oakland, the efforts of advocates such as the Service Workers Project for Affordable Utilities and Water have solicited non-binding *de jure* moratoriums on water shutoffs. Oakland's water is operated by East Bay Municipal Utility District (in essence a private corporation under publicly elected oversight) which has shifted to installation of flow restrictors, subdividing the advocacy into petitions that the right to water includes the right to more than a trickle.

Phinney gives a helpful breakdown of the national financial patterns which cause tangible bodily harm in Black and poor communities, and which increasingly feel impossible to mitigate without sweeping institutional reform.

Infrastructure financialization in post-industrial, Black-majority cities is contingent on uneven terrains of racialized urban development and geographies of austerity through decades-long historical divestment in urban infrastructure systems in Black communities (1585). [...] The collusions of municipal finance, austerity governance and debt can articulate how financial risks are unevenly placed on Black cities and households. Municipal bond institutions and practices devalue Black spaces through accounting measures of debt collection methods and rates of delinquency as preconditions to issue loans to municipalities to measure creditworthiness. Such financial practices have led to a water access and affordability crisis in Black-majority US cities (1585). [...] With the onset of the deregulation of the financial sector in 2000, traditional banking no longer provides short and long-term finance to municipalities, rather it is the institutional investors, such as pension funds, hedge funds, insurance companies, and mutual funds. With this shift, bond rating agencies stepped in to provide an intermediary disciplinary role to satisfy investor demands for information on cities through superficial evaluation in the form of ratings (1588). [...] Municipal credit ratings use inputs and methods for their criteria that are sourced from spaces of racial

unevenness, such as whether cities have large populations that require more social support. This can be related to how Black household debt is disciplined through unconventional banking institutions, such as cash chequing institutions and payday loans with exorbitantly high interest rates (1588).

The insides of such alternative banks are a minute-by-minute parade of acute desperation, where the character of high-interest debt is revealed in its spiritual form, a melevolence described throughout this paper as the Empires decried by *Revelation* and *Jeremiah*. The tellers of cash-checking centers know well that the twenty-first century has not brought racial equality.

Phinney continues:

Black debt is a key industry for creating white wealth as racial discrimination shapes who feels debt as crushing and who experiences it as an opportunity (1589). [...] In the case of water and sewage services, utilities are required to disclose their debt collection practices for nonpayment of service to ensure leverage to investors. For Baltimore, Detroit, and St. Louis this includes late penalty charges, water shut offs, liens on property, garnishing wages, and housing foreclosures. There is a financial incentive to engage in egregious practices, such as water shut offs, if a city wants to access credit but has a high number of delinquencies (1589). [...] There is a due diligence questionnaire for each borrower to complete which asks municipalities to provide information on their debt collection methods, how they are being enforced, and what their collection rates are versus billing (1589). [...] Debt collection practices can also be part of a municipal bond covenant. The cornerstone of a bond's legal structure is its covenants, which are legally binding rules to which the utility agrees when issuing the bonds. Utilities abide by many different types of covenants, which can include debt service coverage, what water and sewer rates should be set at, the debt service reserve fund, and other things that will assure investment risk (1591). [...] Weak covenants that allow the utility to operate on a thin margin often mean utilities are rated speculatively and will pay higher interest on their loans. This can create a cycle of raising water and sewer rates to appease bondholders and bond rating agencies to meet these covenants, but in turn making these services unaffordable (1591).

The systems amenable to change are physically distant from the sites of suffering, and represent an ethical opportunity for legally and artistically minded young Americans. It takes time for true narratives about institutional workings to propagate through storytelling. A total restructuring is a collective event of real possibility, though not before a great multitude bears the weight of political stubbornness.

The most common and widespread debt collection practice in US cities for water debt is shut offs (1592). [...] Between 2010 and 2018 water bills have increased from 27% to 154% in US cities, although median household incomes increased only 3% per year (1592). [...] Like mortgage foreclosures, water shut offs and liens can force affected households to abandon their homes. Water debts are clustered in communities of color which disproportionately devalues their homes and neighborhoods. The average majority-Black city had a water bill burden more than twice that of the average majority-white city (1592). [...] As municipal and public debt is financialized and the funds to cover municipal expenditures is supplied by the financial market, over time, it has a de-democratizing effect where local governance works for the benefit of financial markets, rather than the public good (1599).

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In *Courage to Change*, Bingham discusses in 1961 the life and thought of Niebuhr, said to have prayed ninety years ago among a church in Massachusetts:

O God, give us serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Niebuhr is characterized as working with and battling with a new form of domestic social liberalism in contact with the Reformed Protestant church at the time, characterized by Said Naomi Mitchison's statement:

I have travelled over most of Europe and part of Africa, but I have never seen such terrible sights as I saw yesterday among the sharecroppers of Arkansas.

Niebuhr writes of supporters of liberal causes,

No accumulation of contradictory evidence seems to disturb modern man's good opinion of himself. He considers himself the victim of corrupting institutions which he is about to destroy or reconstruct, or the confusions of ignorance which an adequate education is about to overcome. Yet he continues to regard himself as essentially harmless and virtuous.

And,

Humans cannot love themselves inordinately without pretending that it is not his, but a universal interest which he is supporting. [...] We are not only not as good as our ideals but we tend to use our ideals as weapons of prestige, failing to recognize that the ideals are not as good as we pretend they are.

These are important reflections for the White ally. The important thing for us is a willingness to take orders, to participate in the body of resistance, gaining our satisfaction in community over moral praise. It is better to be a servant in the realm of heaven than royalty on earth.

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In *My Soul Looks Back*, Cone, who is also a pastor, writes in the introduction,

I believe that I will testify for what the Lord has done for me” is an often heard response in the black church. Testimony is an integral part of the black religious tradition. It is the occasion in which a believer stands before the community of faith in order to give an account of the hope that is in them.

[...] This book is written in the tradition of black testimony. It is not an autobiography. It is rather an account of the spiritual and intellectual development of my faith—from childhood in Bearden, Arkansas, to the present. Because I am black, I am writing primarily to the black church community. It is my personal testimony of how I have struggled to keep and to live the faith of the black church.

[...] Because I believe that the gospel is universal and thus intended for all, I have written my story in dialogue with people of other cultures and nations who also regard Jesus Christ as God's definitive and final salvation for humankind. Indeed the character and dynamic of the changes in my intellectual and spiritual development are directly related to my encounters with others, especially Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, commonly called the Third World. Also the white churches of Europe and

North America have presented an enormous theological challenge to my understanding of the gospel. Although I have been critical of them, the criticism was meant to be prophetic and not cynical. I firmly believe that the gospel is available to all—including white people. But the availability of the gospel is exclusively dependent upon a *conversion* experience, wherein one makes an unqualified commitment to the struggle of the poor for freedom. This *metanoia* is available to all, though not accepted by all.

There is a tension between the call to acceptance common in Twelve Step circles, which lean racially White, and a political activism which demands change, familiar to Black congregations. Those who are members of both worlds have best come to terms.

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William J. Barber II writes, in *White Poverty*:

If you disaggregate the data on the 140 million Americans who are technically poor or low-income, 24 million of them are Black. That's 60 percent of all Black people in America—an incredible burden that reflects the ongoing influence of racism in American life, and one that is shared by a similar percentage of the population in Native and Latino communities. [...] This is what you never hear: *most of America's poor are white*. I sound the alarm about white poverty because I'm convinced that we can't expose the peculiar exceptionalism of America's poverty without seeing how it impacts the very people that our myths pretend to privilege. [...] This is what I've come to believe as a watchman among America's poor: until we compel this nation to see its white poor, poverty will remain in the shadows. A watchman has nothing but their voice to alert the community to the dangers they have witnessed. In ancient Israel, Jeremiah wept bitter tears and cried out in the public square. The more I've seen of America's poverty, the more I cannot help but scream (Part I: Facing Poverty).

I sometimes volunteer with an organization which weekly traverses poor neighborhoods in Oakland, whose leaders share Barber's sentiments. There is a work ethic which I have only occasionally joined. Each expedition to the neighborhoods is an exercise in grief, humanness, and critical theory. Little short of a spiritual miracle can unwind the logics which pretend that civil rights and social justice have yet arrived in the city of Oakland, home of the Hell's Angels and Black Panthers. Desperate

mothers, elderly, and vulnerable Oakland residents regularly have their electricity or water cut without warning or negotiation, reduced to economic examples by utility companies with punitive extractive policies. The most desperate requests for advocacy are almost always from Black mothers and grandmothers. The neighborhoods that house the near totality of affected families of EBMUD's flow restrictor program sit behind a palpable color line. The board rooms manage accusations of racial injustice like a line item in the balance sheet. The demands of the organized low-income workers are explicit, underrepresented, and face against a powerful national coalition of stockholders, lobbyists, and profiteers which siphon material resources from the country's poorest into dividends.

To the Board of Directors of the East Bay Municipal Utility District:

*Create pathways to financial independence, permanently ending shut-offs and rate hikes for low-income residents, ending the **lien program** and the **flow restrictor program**. Implement the demands of the **Service Workers Project for Affordable Utilities and Water**.*



Freedom from Eviction for Bodies Sleeping Outside

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Don't say Haiti is not a safe country and that you won't go there. You need to visit Haiti and see how people live here. You have to come, and God will protect you the same way he protects you in your country. I love everybody in the world. I love the people suffering at the hospitals. I love the people who are in prison. I love the homeless. I love the handicapped, and I love the old people. I love everybody, because we are one family.

-Denise Dorvil

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Over the years I, Jacob, have formed relationships with people near my homes who sleep outside most nights. I have more than once used these relationships to expunge inner guilt about the unconscionable difference in physical suffering we experience. My interactions have at times involved drug use. I have given money to be used to purchase marijuana for shared consumption, exploiting loopholes in my own rules for moderation, endangering others by wielding money in a chaotic context. I thus collected a feeling of having done good for a suffering soul while being driven by an unfulfilled need to grapple with my own fundamental goodness as a person. I bear the sadness of the possibility that the money given has caused bodily damage. In reality, perhaps, I am a brief visitor into a world of suffering and renewal which I have not understood, which carries on every day and night in cities and towns across the world. My guilt has carried a dehumanizing worship of the suffering other. One path for me to understand these interactions has been recovery for codependency, and in programs for families and spouses of alcoholics. Many outcomes of my past interactions I cannot know. I nonetheless throw open the fearsome question of how stably housed folks should understand our responsibilities to our friends on the streets. Institutional responses to encampments are persistently brutal, inhumane, murderous, and spiritually blind to the truths which house-free people daily attempt to birth into the hypermodern, earth-estranged consciousness.

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In *When We Walk By* (Burns), Adler tells in the introduction the story of his late uncle,

Mark shared my love of super burritos, was easy to talk to, remembered every birthday, and always sent a card. [...] Mark also suffered from schizophrenia and lived on-and-off the streets for over 30 years, bouncing between transitional housing, shelters, and the streets of Santa Cruz, California. He would disappear for months at a time, only to reemerge in the form of a collect call.” Adler says around the time of Mark’s passing, “when I took the time to see people experiencing homelessness at all, I would see them as *them*, not really part of *us*. *They* were a problem to be solved, not people to be loved. If I thought much about *them*, I would usually feel sad, then guilty, then frustrated.

Adler quotes Adam, a participant in an homelessness autobiography project, who says,

I never realized I was homeless when I lost my housing, only when I lost my family and friends.

The book’s authors say that “while many of us care about the issue of homelessness, surprisingly few of us know our unhoused neighbors.” It’s estimated that in the course of a year in the United States, over 2.5 million people undergo exclusion from conventional housing systems, with drastic overrepresentation in Black Americans and LGBTQ youth.

People fall into homelessness for countless different reasons, including eviction; domestic violence; employment wages not being enough to cover daily living expenses; medical emergencies; undiagnosed, misdiagnosed, and/or untreated illnesses; clerical errors; unemployment and layoffs; divorce and separation; the death of a loved one; intra-family disputes over housing; aging out of foster care, racism and discrimination; long-standing trauma; natural disasters; and bad luck. [...] The vast majority of individuals experiencing homelessness are unrecognizable from the average securely housed person in the United States, who is living paycheck to paycheck, is unable to save much money, probably works hard but is not perfect, as is only one emergency away from potentially not being able to pay the rent. “They” are us.

The authors give many quotes from life on the streets:

On the streets, we're thinking about surviving. [...] We'll have a meal today, but we really don't know the situation tomorrow. - Ray

What is the hardest thing about being homeless? Dealing with people's prejudice. Perception. -Ronnie

In an open shelter, everybody is at risk. There's a lot of violence against women, untreated mental illness. -Elizabeth

I experienced symptoms that were dismissed due to me being an unwed, single Black mother [...] I can't explain it. They thought I was crazy. -Jennifer

Shame. I didn't want to tell anyone I had fallen into addiction. How could this guy who has this beautiful wife, two kids, and made a life for himself fall so hard? - Tom

I just wish people knew that I was so much more of a threat to myself than I would ever be to them. - Joseph

All the time, people would tell me: Get a job. [...] I do have a job. We're just down on our luck right now. - Lainie

To my baby Makayla ... I love you. I miss you. I've never stopped loving you. - Timothy

My group foster home parent would give us a hundred dollar bill and would say, "If you run away with this money, I will find you. – Rand

Here, a collection of snippets from the authors of *When We Walk By*,

Homelessness may be the most intersectional issue in the United States.

Relationships buffer tens of millions of unhoused Americans from the descent into homelessness. [...] Being without a home [...] strains the creation of healthy relationships and the buildup of social capital.

Aware of their stigma and of the low expectations held by others, they expect negative outcomes, such as social rejection, which advances to internalized stigma and then shame [...] a vicious cycle of strained social interactions, self-isolation, a lower self-esteem, a decreased desire to seek help, and depression.

People support efforts to address homelessness. But when those efforts require development or change in our own neighborhoods and local communities...

Unsanctioned tent cities offer few if any resources or utilities, are heavily surveilled, and result in the further criminalization and displacement.

...a type of savior complex, which gives us the illusion that we are doing something morally right when we may really be exacerbating existing problems [...] the belief that those in positions of lower power cannot and should not make decisions for themselves.

...the belief that individuals experiencing homelessness must have done something bad to 'deserve' their circumstances, thus justifying the way we treat them: with contempt

More effective approaches to transitional or temporary housing for people experiencing homelessness include "safe parking" initiatives, tiny home villages, and accessory dwelling units.

Housing is health care.

The foster care system is a point-blank gateway to homelessness.

...a revolving door of homeless shelters, emergency departments, jails and prisons [...] A large percentage of individuals with mental illness and substance use disorders are simply being housed in jails and prisons.

A large proportion of people killed by the police are mentally ill.

...criminalized for behaviors which they have no choice but to engage in—such as sleeping outside or in cars, panhandling, and setting up tent encampments

Homelessness leads to incarceration, incarceration leads to homelessness

The book's final chapter is called *Healing Our Humanity*, and quotes Jennifer:

With all due respect, what I'm hearing here from everyone is that people are offering 'seats at the table' when it's not their table! In fact, it's my table and I'm not asking for a seat. It was already and is always now my seat. I'm the one who experienced all this trauma and turmoil. I know what the problems are and what I need. I built it. There would be no table without me. I invite you to come to sit at my table and let's have a conversation.

•

In *Street Spirit*, Stevens writes in *Three Bay Area Cities Change Sweep Tactics*,

Since the Supreme Court's Grants pass ruling on June 28, some California cities have already changed their approach to homeless encampment sweeps. The Court ruled that it does not constitute "cruel and unusual punishment" for municipalities to use criminal penalties for sleeping outside, allowing cities to make policies that criminalize homelessness.

[...] Adjusting police procedures for the ruling, San Francisco Police Department released a notice in late July calling for officers to cite people who were 'lodging' in their vehicles, defining lodging as 'more than just sleeping.' The notice then lists several identifying factors differentiating between lodging and sleeping. The former includes the acquisition of food that suggests persons intend to cook or store food in the vehicle for over an extended period of time.

The notice lists eight laws that can be used against homeless individuals, all of which are related to lodging and encampments on streets or sidewalks. The eight laws provide officers grounds to criminalize homeless individuals, including the Sit-Lie law, which allows officers to issue a warning and citation to individuals who are sitting or lying on the sidewalk for 7 to 23 hours at a time, or for 'Public Nuisance' violations, a misdemeanor charge for an unhoused person the police see as doing something that is "injurious to health, indecent or offensive to the senses, and interferes with the comfortable enjoyment of life or property by any considerable number of persons."

[...] Local homelessness advocate Talya Husbands-Hankin told *The Oaklandside* that there has been a "clear escalation" in the city's approach to encampment closure. In the Wood Street closure on July 19, *The Oaklandside* reported city workers are using tactics they typically didn't do before, like putting up fences to block off dwellings and making announcements threatening arrest if the residents do not comply with the closure.

Candidates for office often run on the platform of "reducing homelessness," which in practice amounts to expelling unwanted humans from city borders. Let us consider that the problem runs deeper than a simple lack of empathy, toward something a little more uncomfortable and a lot more liberating: Each day one sleeps outside brings one closer to the realm of heaven. Of course we would police it to try to catch up where we are far behind.

In the same issue of *Street Spirit*, in *Inside Oakland's Encampment Strategy*, Freeway writes,

In less than a month's time, the sweeps that plagued our communities went from useless, annoying, and traumatic to violent, sudden, and criminal. In the short time since the executive order has been in place, more people have been senselessly arrested for little more than merely existing than have been housed. This order will only further destabilize my community, which is already reeling from the years-long sweep of our home on Wood Street.

[...] Our stay in these "tiny tombs" [tiny home projects] as they became known, was no picnic. We were continuously told "don't get comfortable," "you won't be here long," or "don't make this your home." Basic needs like drinking water and toilet paper were routinely rationed, if available at all. The ADA accessible bathroom was almost always either broken, locked, or made to be off-limits by staff who felt we were not disabled enough to justify its use. And all the programs that the grant proposal listed as the reason for all that money? In my time there, I never saw one of them implemented.

[...] Organizations led by people who are directly impacted by homelessness, like Oakland's Wood Street Commons and Homefulness as well as POOR magazine, and Sacramento's Camp Resolution, are examples of poor people-led solutions. Despite continuing barriers thrown up by the city, the state, and those who were supposed to be helping us, we have continued to build our communities, and to serve these communities, and we know we are the ones who protect each other. We have accomplished feats that those who are against us thought we'd never accomplish.

The problem is different than we suppose. We are not on a path to house the unhoused, but to redesign the House. We live in a prison of our own making, are offended when somebody lives in a home, proceed to call them homeless, and then imprison them. "Have you actually been inside an encampment, they are hardly paradise!?" My sibling in Christ, that is due to the raids.

In this petition I am deliberately allowing myself off the rails for the second, to channel an anger emerging directly from a shared consciousness with friends living outside the Buildings. Few of us have truly felt the mindspace of what it is like to receive zero hours of physically unendangered sleep for months at a time. We do not find it easy to accept

that a holy spiritual logic exists out there in the sheer chaos. One house-free community leader told me of a time when he and organizers encircled a church (which had canceled its lending of shelter space) during its service to blow whistles at intervals like Josue and the Israelites at Jericho. A church service on the outside, living inside the Scripture.

•

In *Vegas Tunnels* (Channel 5) correspondent Andrew Callaghan spends time with people living inside storm drain tunnels in Las Vegas, staying overnight and getting to know the community norms and challenges faced by residents. After attempting some advocacy for a few residents, and questioning his role in the dynamics, he interviews Robert Banghart, the director of a nonprofit which serves the underground community, and former resident of the tunnels. Banghart says,

We develop relationships with the homeless community through simple acts of kindness and building the friendships and trust and then offering a way out, then walk them through the process for the next two years helping them rebuild their lives.

Callaghan asks, "What do you think is the main factor that leads people into the tunnels?" Banghart says,

I think everyone tries to put it into a box, I think there's so many different ones, the biggest ones obviously addiction, mental health, trauma, bad luck, the economy we live in today, something that I've always rested my head on, it's like 70% of the country live paycheck to paycheck, so 7 out of 10 people you know could be homeless in a month. [...] For me the tunnels were a place to hide, it was very dark, it was very separated from everything. It gave me this illusion that I had some kind of safety, I had a ceiling over my head, I had this roof, whatever I was telling myself in the moment.

Banghart's organization offers free beds, detox treatment, case management, Twelve Step programs, and job placement to any tunnel resident wishing to get out, the stipulation being complete abstinence from all substances considered drugs by the organization.

Callaghan, who had helped a tunnel resident get a government identification card, asks whether the difficulty of acquiring such documents is a factor in lacking the option to leave the tunnels. Banghart says,

It's important. What I see is that out there they tend to gravitate towards things. Oh, I can't get off the streets because I don't have an ID. But we're missing the whole underlying idea. You've got addiction, you've got mental health, you have trauma, you have these things you have to address. While we're doing this we'll get you your ID. If I handed every single person in the streets and ID right now, how many would be off the streets tonight? None. So it's not the problem. The problem is their coping mechanisms, their thinking, their thought processes, the things that have happened to them. How do we walk them through that, how do we engage them, because they've been so disassociated for so long.

Banghart's organization offers 90 days of detox and an additional 90 days of sober living free of charge, and so Muligan asks why more people don't accept the services.

It's just what they're used to. It's what they know. It takes 21 days or whatever to develop a habit, and you've been out there for 10 years. It's ingrained. As miserable and hellish as it looks from the outside, it's what they know.

Callaghan mentions his own time living in a camper, suggesting he can relate to many of the discussed attitudes, saying "It felt like I had escaped society's matrix." Banghart says he has to accept that despite his efforts, many will choose to continue living in the tunnels.

I don't know there's one way. We just focus on kindness and every time we talk to them we make sure we're sitting with them, just like this eye to eye, not standing over them and not constantly looking for ways to get in. On my route there's people like when they see me they come out with their fists up like "Come on Rob today's the day" because they know I like to joke around, we have this banter built up over years.

Callaghan and Banghart talk about what it takes for someone to admit powerlessness, the first traditional step in the process of getting sober. Banghart says,

Three people tried to murder me. Succeeded. And I was brought back to life. That's what it takes for a guy to me to get sober. So who am I? When it comes to other people's experience, I don't know.

Callaghan talks about how residents of Las Vegas who don't live in the tunnels have created grotesque urban legends about tunnel residents.

Banghart says,

It's fear of the unknown.

•

In *A Language Older Than Words*, Jensen writes,

We don't stop these atrocities, because we don't talk about them. We don't talk about them, because we don't think about them. We don't think about them, because they're too horrific to comprehend.

Jensen brings us to the forgotten memory of becoming a body,

There is a language older and far deeper than words. It is the language of bodies, of body on body, wind on snow, rain on trees, wave on stone. It is the language of dream, gesture, symbol, memory. We have forgotten this language. We do not even remember that it exists. [...] The willingness to forget is the essence of silencing. [...] What else do we forget?

Jensen's book is filled with grief, anger, and trauma about most every pillar of modern Western civilization that claimed an unassailable firmness when I was a child. He wonders what the world would have looked like if the famous line had been "I love, therefore I am." Here, I reproduce the continuing unfathomable scale of animal suffering represented by Jensen's description of slaughterhouses:

The room sounds for all the world like a factory. You hear the clang of steam in pipes and the hiss of its release, the clank of steel on steel as chains pull taut, the whirr of rolling wheels on metal runners [...] Inside the chute, facing a blank wall, stands a steer. Until the last moment he does not seem to notice when a worker places a steam-driven stunner at the ridge of his forehead. I do know know what the steer feels in those last moments, or what he thinks. The pressure of contact triggers the stunner, which shoots a retractable bolt into the brain of the steer. The steer falls, sometimes stunned, sometimes dead, sometimes screaming, and another worker climbs

down to attach a chain to the creature's hind leg. [...] It happens again and again, like clockwork, every half-minute.

Jensen, a survivor of abuse in a social context which failed to protect him, spares no harsh word for the responsibility of institutional religion throughout the book. By the end, he writes,

Perhaps we will awaken in an exterior landscape that is barren and lonely enough to match the landscape of our hearts and minds. Perhaps we'll awaken to find that at least one tenet of Christianity is literally true—that hell does in fact exist, and that we are in it. Hell, after all, is the too-late realization of interdependence. [...] Several years ago [...] I walked into a cold January afternoon to take care of the chickens. My breath hung white in the air. Dogs danced at my feet. I heard in the distance the clamor of geese, then stood speechless to watch a huge V fly low overhead. I opened my mouth to say something—I didn't know what it would be—and heard my voice say three times, "Godspeed." Suddenly, and for no reason I could understand, I burst into tears. [...] The tears, it became clear to me, had been neither from sorry nor joy, but from homecoming, like a sailor who has been too long at sea, and who spontaneously bursts into sobs on smelling land [...] If we wish to stop the atrocities, we need merely step away from the isolation. There is a whole world waiting for us, ready to welcome us home. It has missed us as sorely as we have missed it.

•

Those who willingly, are forced by hardship, or by simple mistake, brave the structurally imposed terrors of city street life, with its glimmer of light of connection with nature and community outside the concrete cacaphony of the present, have something to say to the world. The message is one which the comforts of modernity have tuned out, a lesson which draws us into contact with our catastrophic estrangement from the Earth, the way our weaknesses contribute to misery for the poor in the U.S., and the subjugation of peoples in prisons, hospitals, and across national borders. The consciousness which emanates from the streets is fearsome, illegible, many-sided, and at the center contains the sacred heart of global solidarity,

souls across spacetime upheld by the mercies of the God who suffers. The house-free are our *prophets*, the heralds of a coming realm of heaven. All our struggles are connected, *outside*. The gates of hell are locked by its *residents*. Encampment sweeps are *eviction*. A place to lay one's head is the right of *beings*.

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To The Mayor's Office of the City of Oakland:

Decriminalize sleeping outside. End encampment sweeps. Provide water and sanitation to groups and individuals sleeping in tents and cars. Center, empower, and fund community leaders. Negotiate workable and permanent norms for life without compulsory burdensome rent payment.

■

University of San Francisco Cura Personalis for Palestine

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Change takes time. Start now.
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Up until early 2024, I, Jacob, was ignorant of the lives of Palestinian peoples. In the brief glimpses it would pass my political radar, my sensibilities met truth with discomfort. It was only the watery eyes of people I've loved, and a sort of feminine spiritual plea which led me to examine my feelings about the issue more deeply. Having crossed the gap to explicit advocacy for Palestine, I have been met with further unsettling and lurking parts of my consciousness: Gentile resentment for the moral burden of the scapegoating of Jewish people, one of the modern-day undercurrents associated with anti-Semitism. Grappling with these shadowed selves is the least I can do to support Palestinian and Jewish brethren who altogether suffer greatly under a system which benefits me, and which currently facilitates the death and displacement of multitudes of Palestinians, as a matter of international spiritual urgency. During the month of May 2024, a variety of pamphlets were available at the *People's University of Palestine at the University of San Francisco*. The primary advocacy point concerns divestment from profits associated with Apartheid in Israeli-occupied lands and the ongoing Genocide of Palestinians. I discovered that I held an investment that was questionable in terms of its complicity, and the movement continues to teach me much. As the souls peddling the uncomfortable truths would tell you, the movement is imperfect, by the nature of a necessitated violent push toward a hoped-for liberation, and by its shadowing of other catastrophes such as the one simultaneous in the Sudan. Palestine, the Holy Land, is for better and worse the site of a collective rewriting of our most basic spiritual comforts, grudges, defects, hates, and possibilities.

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In *Jeremiah*, a spiritual drama plays out between a devastated Judah, an exiled Israel, a powerful Chaldea, and an imperial Babylon. Jehovah gives judgments for each nation, proclamations which are different from each

other in intensity and character, and depending on whether the listeners already believe in the God. The four nations should be considered spiritually defined and precariously political. Metaphorical associations with modern affairs are possible; the identities should be understood as permeable and shifting, ultimately latching onto the fearsome truth of things. In the full texts of *Jeremiah*, *Revelation*, القرآن, and the *Books of Mormon*, reader will find more spiritual wisdom about Palestine than I could ever write here. Sources below were chosen to highlight the responsibilities of the nation of my citizenship, the United States.

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In the film *The Vanishing Soldier*, released in August 2023, Shlomi is an Israeli soldier fighting in the Gaza strip in Palestine. He and his unit eat out of tin cans, covered in dirt amongst rubble, and are suddenly awakened while sleeping upright to enter a firefight. Taking an opportunity, he escapes out of the danger and flees back to his home town, only to find his house empty. He gorges himself on food that seems left behind in a hurry, and which is now days old and moldy. He discovers that his family is in the city, tending his father who is in the hospital for heart issues. At various points in the film, a rocket flies overhead, but is each time intercepted. He visits his girlfriend whom he misses greatly. He scarfs down delicious food in a restaurant. The populace enjoy days out, interrupted by air raid sirens, and drunken men are shown shouting slurs at actions of enemies. Shlomi carries his gun with him, and citizens respect his service, meanwhile he feels ashamed for being away without leave. He finds his family in the hospital, and tells his mother about running away. His mother is horrified, and implores her son to return to battle so that he will not be imprisoned under the laws of compulsory service. Officials from the Israeli Defense Forces visit Shlomi's parents to discover if he is truly missing, and his mother hides the truth. Shlomi avoids returning to battle, and his disappearance becomes a national headline. One day, he sees on the news that dozens of Gazans have been killed in retaliatory strikes and rescue operations for him. Distraught, he wanders into the street, hoping apparently to be hit by a vehicle. Instead, a van swerves and crashes, and

the driver emerges to give him a beating. He is discovered by medical teams, injured, with his weapon, in uniform.

•

In the 2022 paper *Genocide in Palestine: Gaza as a Case Study*, Nijim interviews Gazans. Remy says,

The mosques being used to announce the people who died was a normal thing. That normalization created an environment where death has become glorified (176).

Ibrahim says,

The most inhumane thing, people were not going anywhere, because no place was safe, they did not even open the border if the people wanna evacuate and come back (178).

Hassan says,

In the morning there is no electricity, so the water is freezing, and then you debate whether you take a freezing shower, or to skip the shower, or heat some water on the stove to take a shower, and one day we discovered that they shot the tanks during the night, you turn on the tap and there is no water (181).

Nijim quotes Weizman from 2009 in *Lawfare in Gaza: Legislative Attack*:

Gaza is turned into an experiment to test new warfare techniques and where certain limits are tested and explored: the limits of the legal, the limits of the ethical, the limits of the tolerable, and the limits of what can be done to people in the name of the war on terror (188).

Nijim addresses a crucial question:

This paper ultimately discusses the relationship between genocide and ‘ethnic cleansing’ and concludes that various destruction inflicted by Israel amount to a genocide happening in slow motion. [...] Israel closed all crossings that connect Gaza with the external world, rendering the Gaza Strip entirely isolated (168). [...] The siege which started in 2007, is still ongoing with harsher policies taking shape. Today, Gazans receive power in eight-hour rotations: eight hours on and eight hours off, more than 90 per cent of the water is unfit for human consumption (169). [...] It is clear that a sociological intervention is necessary to provide a more comprehensive

understanding of genocide (172). [...] Genocide should be seen as a social practice rather than physical annihilation and mere mass killing of a group of people. [...] Genocide is a technology of power, a form of social engineering that creates, destroys, or reorganises relationships within society. [...] The destruction of a group could be crystalised directly, through mass killing, selective murder, starvation or deprivation of water, or indirectly, which often happens in the long term, such as through the decline of birth rates, destruction of social relations between members, and dissemination of social ills such as suicide, homicide, drug addiction, and divorce (172). [...] Substance abuse has been a common feature among many victims of genocide. For instance, Indigenous peoples in North America and Australia have resorted to substance abuse and alcohol to temporarily cope with the painful reality of genocidal settler-colonialism and destruction inflicted upon them (186). [...] Once one crime against the victim group proves genocidal, regardless of the time or place, then the whole colonial system can be rendered genocidal (191). [...] One can conclude that what transpired in historic Palestine started with a combination of forced expulsion and mass murder, but then took a harsher shape that reached genocide, destroying a large part of the Palestinian society. [...] This is an urgent call because labelling events with less criminal-sounding terms could hinder attempts toward prevention and embolden the perpetrator (191).

•

In *Ideal Victims and Political Relativity*, Bloom and Erez write, “The determination of who is a victim deemed worthy (or unworthy) of the international community's sympathy and recognition, is a political judgement.” The authors write of the Simchat Torah Massacre of Israelis in late 2023:

While there was hardly any question about the carnage, [...] the sexual violence was challenged or denied. Furthermore, Israeli women have not been afforded the recognition, compassion, and sympathy that other victims of wartime sexual violence have received, despite the overwhelming media attention (3).

The authors comment solemnly, alluding to violence perpetrated across the world and in all of history,

Rape is used to terrorize, punish, profit, compel, or deter a community. It is particularly effective when there are ethnic, religious, or racial differences

[...] it has proven to be comparatively risk-free from international prosecution compared to other tactics of ethnic cleansing or Genocide (4).

The authors continue,

From the perspective of the hostages, after these gauntlets of terror, they could no longer differentiate between Hamas and regular Palestinians (12). [...] One of the better-known victims, because Hamas released a hostage video of her just days after the attack, is Mia Schem. Schem says, “There is no one single innocent civilian there. Not one.” In her interview, Agam Goldstein-Almog, another released hostage, said that before the attack,

We believed that there are no bad people—only people who have it bad. But there are bad people. We will never forgive, and we will never show any kind of empathy towards these people. If we previously believed that there was a chance for peace, we’ve lost all faith in these people, especially after we were there and among the population

(12).

The authors comment on such statements:

The extreme political polarization has exacerbated both the rape and atrocity denials, inuring people’s empathy for the other side. It has pushed the sides to retreat to their respective corners, unwilling to see the humanity in the other, and makes the long-term goal of peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians that much more difficult to achieve (13).

The authors say that denials of Israeli women's testimonies were persistent, with justifications related to the fact that other reports of gross atrocities during the massacre, by officials and news media, were ultimately falsified. They say it's imperative to “not retraumatize women with a potential demand for hard evidence.” They write,

Universal jurisdiction should be applied, and those responsible prosecuted whether the countries are signatories to the International Criminal Court or not. The major impediment to applying universal jurisdiction, however, has been the United States. Fearing retribution from rogue states and seeking to protect American soldiers, Bush refused to sign the agreement, siding with non-democratic and autocratic regimes (16).

International law does not properly account for gender-based and sexual violence during war, and tends to subsume it under other war crimes, a

reality which also emboldens perpetrators. The authors place a final responsibility on local communities, and conclude,

The international community must believe all women, regardless of their nationalities (16).

•

In *Entangled Suffering and Disruptive Empathy*, Fischer reads Palestinian author Susan Abulhawa's novel *Mornings in Jenin*, which begins with a friendship between a Palestinian boy Hasan, and Ari, a Jewish refugee with a limp from a leg broken in Germany: "A friendship had been born in the shadow of Nazism in Europe and in the growing divide between Arab and Jew at home, and it had been consolidated in the innocence of their twelve years, the poetic solitude of books, and their disinterest in politics." Fischer comments, "The boys' friendship is a bond much stronger than the outside forces potentially pushing them apart." Later in life,

Hasan and Ari, now young men, have to contend with an all the more violent reality. The earlier depiction of a Jerusalem of interfaith coexistence makes the chasm between the two periods seem even more disturbing. Abulhawa portrays the Arabs in Palestine as becoming increasingly suspicious of Zionist intention when Jewish immigration intensifies after the liberation of the concentration camps. When asked how he feels about these developments, Ari, the Jewish refugee, draws on his familial experience of persecution from which his traumatized refugee parents continue to suffer. [...] "You're like a brother to me. I'd do anything for you and your family. But what happened in Europe..." The reference to Europe is the crux of the story, as Hasan points out: "Exactly, Ari. What Europe did. Not the Arabs. Jews have always lived here. That's why so many more are here now, isn't it?"

For all interconnected struggles in sight, Fischer holds hope in memory work and in literature:

Abulhawa's novel shows us that here, where memory is a force for change, literature can play a role. In imagining the lives and pain of the other side, *Mornings in Jenin* reveals worlds beyond the lived realities [...] In her inclusion of Holocaust memory in the Palestinian historical novel, she engages in 'disruptive empathy': Empathy for the suffering of the *Shoah* as well as that of the *Nakba* forces the reader to reconsider entrenched singular narratives."

Fischer concludes with a quote from *Multidimensional Memory* by Michael Rothberg: “Understanding political conflict entails understanding the interlacing of memories in the field of the public sphere. The only way forward is through their entanglement.”

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In *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, Klüger writes,

Since I had not lived through many pre-Nazi years, I understood instinctively, without having to read Sartre on the subject, that while the consequences of anti-Semitism were a considerable problem for the Jews, the thing itself, the hatred, was a problem of and for the anti-Semites, and for them alone. Deal with it as you can was my attitude: I'm not going to become a paragon of virtue or put on nice-girl manners in order to shame and convert you. As if you wanted to be converted. And I went on memorizing and reciting eighteenth-century verse about knights and dragons and ancient bards and heroes.

Klüger and her mother survived the concentration camps, and eventually resettled in the United States. Her brother and father were murdered.

I couldn't face having my father die in a gas chamber. I wrote poems about his death. They had lines like:

My father drowned in every sea ~ Yet lifts his head at break of day ~ Above the flood of memory ~ Oceans I crossed, yet cannot flee, ~ For here in San Francisco Bay ~ My father drowns in every sea. ~ He turns his salt-washed face to me, ~ The sockets of his eyes are gray ~ Above the flood of memory

And so on. Of course these were meant to be symbolic oceans, but they still sound more like echoes of Dylan Thomas, wanting his father not to go gentle into that good night, than of the Holocaust.

Klüger studied and became a teacher, and was able to travel.

In today's Hiroshima, a busy industrial city, there is a memorial site to the great catastrophe which ushered in the atomic age. It is a park with flowers and temples, where Japanese children, in their English school uniforms, seem to have a thoroughly good time. The Japanese are as frustrated in coping with past horror as we are, because they, too, can think only of the mantra “Never again.” It's easier to recognize this helplessness in a strange city. The children, with their history teachers in tow, hang origami toys,

cranes, and other symbolic paper objects, on various bushes and trees dedicated to the goddess of peace, and they romp around the park, screeching and chasing each other. There is the soothing sound of water, so typical of the aesthetics of Japanese landscaping, and tape-recorded messages with humanistic content are released at regular intervals. In the very midst of these efforts to propitiate and tranquilize the visitor, there is *the* monument, the ugliest ruin in the word: the building, we remember, wasn't hit by a bomb in the usual way; the bomb exploded above the building and disfigured it through heat, so that it looks as unnatural as a human face which has been ravaged by fire.

Klüger later returned to Europe.

I once visited Dachau with some Americans who had asked me to come along. [...] At Auschwitz the Jewish victims have been so coopted into the Polish losses that my two Tom Sawyers couldn't handle the difference. They believed everything, even the worst, of their own grandfathers, they had unkind thoughts about the Allies, but they couldn't cope with criticism of the victims. That is, they were convinced that the grandparent generation was still in denial, and that the Allies hadn't liberated the concentration camps soon enough, although they could have, or at least bombed the rails that led to the camps. But they categorically refused to believe that the Poles weren't all that averse to getting rid of their Jews. They both energetically rejected my objection to tossing Christian and Jewish Poles into the same kettle, although I pointed out that it was mainly the Jews who went to the gas chambers, and the murdered children had all been Jewish and Gypsy children. I was amazed how sure they were, these thoughtful and excellent specimens of what is best in the new Germany.

Klüger writes,

Remembering is a branch of witchcraft; its tool is incantation. I often say, as if it were a joke—but it's true—that instead of God I believe in ghosts. To conjure up the dead you have to dangle the bait of the present before them, the flesh of the living, to coax them out of their inertia. You have to grate and scrape the old roots with tools from the shelves of ancient kitchens. Use your best wooden spoons with the longest handles to whisk into the broth of our fathers the hers our daughters have grown in the gardens. If I succeed, together with my readers—and perhaps a few men will join us in the kitchen—we could exchange magic formulas like favorite recipes and season to taste the marinade which the old stories and histories offer us, in as much comfort

as our witches' kitchen provides. It won't get too cozy, don't worry: where we stir our cauldron, there will be cold and hot currents from half-open window, unhinged doors, and earthquake-prone walls.

Klüger describes a miraculous moment at Auschwitz:

I was saved by a young woman who was in as helpless of a situation as the rest of us, and who nonetheless wanted nothing other than to help me. [...] It was both unrivaled and exemplary. Neither psychology nor biology explains it. Only free will does. Simone Weil was suspicious of practically all literature, because literature tends to make good actions boring and evil ones interesting, thus reversing the truth, she argued. Perhaps women know more about what is good than men do, since men tend to trivialize it. [...] Hannah Arendt offered the counterpart to Simone Weil's reflections on goodness when she pointed to the simple fact that evil is committed in the spirit of mental dullness and narrow-minded conformity—what she has called banality. Her reflections on evil caused much indignation among men, who understood, though perhaps not consciously, that this deromanticization of arbitrary violence was a challenge to the patriarchy. Perhaps women know more about evil than men, who like to demonize it.

Klüger becomes a professor, teaching abroad.

I had been in Germany for only a few months when a teenage bicyclist ran me down one evening as I was crossing the street in a pedestrian zone. Suddenly I saw three bikes coming downhill from my right at what seemed a tremendous speed, one of them headed right at me. It was too close, too fast for me to leap back. I stared at the cyclist's lamp and stood still so he could bike around me, but he didn't seem to try, and he comes straight at me. At the last fraction of a second I jump to the left, and he, too, swerves to the left, in my direction. I think he is chasing me, wants to injure me, and despair hits me like lightning: I crash into metal and light, like floodlights over barbed wire. I want to push him away with both arms outstretched, but he is on top of me, bike and all. Germany, Deutschland, a moment like hand-to-hand combat. I am fighting for my life, I am losing. Why this struggle, my life, Deutschland once more, why did I return, or had I never left?

Klüger awakes in a hospital, and is visited by German friends.

People don't realize what's behind the symptoms they see. I try to speak coherently, like Gregor the bug in the Kafka story, and because I am trying

so hard, my listeners don't know how much effort I have put into it. And I don't know how hard it is to understand me. They listen to what they assume I am saying. They comprehend that I can't walk like them and that I have to sleep a lot, but when it comes to thinking and talking, their empathy fails them. That's not a reproach, only a statement about limits. We expect from others more or less what we expect from ourselves, and as a rule of thumb that measure serves us well. But a gulf opens when someone is diminished by illness. Equality is done, and different norms prevail for the patient and her visitor or caretaker. The gulf is deep; my friends bridged it the best they could.

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In *The Health Dimensions of Violence in Palestine: A Call to Prevent Genocide*, Faddoul et al “highlight the health dimensions of violence resulting from the ongoing siege and attacks against Palestinians.”

We situate this violence in relation to the definition of genocide as described in Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, focusing on physical elements that include killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, creating life-threatening conditions, preventing births, and forcibly transferring children. [...] Exposure to violence, ongoing mass displacement, and the destruction or damage of 60% of Gaza's housing, has the potential to exacerbate mental health issues. Life-sustaining infrastructure, including bakeries and water facilities, have also been targeted, rendering the entire Gaza population at risk of food insecurity, dehydration, and water-borne diseases. Healthcare facilities in Gaza have been pervasively targeted, with each attack potentially constituting a war crime and posing a lasting threat to the viability of the health-care system. [...] As public health and humanitarian professionals, we the authors state emphatically that the grave risk of genocide against the Palestinian people warrants immediate action.

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In *Hamas Contained: A History of Palestinian Resistance*, Baconi writes,

At its core, Hamas's attack was an unprecedented and bloody display of anti-colonial violence. [...] So thoroughly was Gaza erased from the Israeli psyche that Hamas's offensive came as if out of nowhere. [...] Within hours, the infrastructure that had been put in place to contain Hamas, and with it to wish away the Palestinians of Gaza, was trampled before our disbelieving

eyes. [...] By breaking out of its prison, Hamas revealed the strategic poverty at the heart of the assumption that Palestinians would acquiesce indefinitely to their imprisonment. The movement broke through a central pillar of Zionism, that Israel would be able to provide a safe haven for Jews without having to address the Palestinian question in political terms. And in so doing, it laid waste the viability of Israel's partitionist approach. [...] The rupture risks drawing the region into an all-out conflagration, encompassing Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Rather than attempt to de-escalate, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden poured fuel on a raging fire. [...] Under the guise of self-defense, and armed with an American green light, Israel retaliated with the stated goal of decimating Hamas. [...] Whether Hamas survives in its current incarnation is a red herring: Palestinian resistance against Israeli apartheid, armed and otherwise, will persist as long as apartheid persists, and as long as Palestinians are not annihilated as a people.

For United States citizens, it's important to remember that we live at considerable distance from any acute outbreak of warlike conditions. For American allies of Palestinian liberation, it is imperative to avoid placing the blame too squarely on a vaguely conceived Israel, or a distantly understood patriarchal structure with its own unfamiliar political world, whose responsibilities are its own. Instead, we must face up to a United States military whose actions we have a real responsibility to petition, which has outsourced its genocidal tendencies to the Israeli Defense Forces. One cannot easily unwind the mechanics of fear which associate the past Holocaust of Jewish peoples with the real possibility of widespread Israeli deaths in the future. Any possibility of peaceful military withdrawal for the United States war machine in Palestine will carry the same dynamics, failures, and violences as it has for other U.S. occupations. How much peace would the world acquire if Americans found in their hearts the same amount of forgiveness for anti-American violences as we now demand of Israelis? American discourse churns on the production of death in faraway countries, allowing the ill game of what has been called "vicarious nationalism," in which Palestinians or Israelis are made highly available for blame, for our failure in the United States to work out our differences among ourselves.

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In *The Question of Palestine*, Said writes,

The question of Palestine is therefore the contest between an affirmation and a denial, and it is this prior contest, dating back over a hundred years, which animates and makes sense of the current impasse between the Arab states and Israel. The contest has been almost comically uneven from the beginning. Certainly as far as the West is concerned, Palestine has been a place where a relatively advanced (because European) incoming population of Jews has performed miracles of construction and civilizing and has fought brilliantly successful technical wars against what was always portrayed as a dumb, essentially repellent population of uncivilized Arab natives. [...] Palestine has always played a special role in the imagination and in the political will of the West, which is where by common agreement modern Zionism also originated. Palestine is a place of causes and pilgrimages. It was the prize of the Crusades, as well as a place whose very name has been an issue of doctrinal importance. [...] *Palestine* too is also an interpretation, one with much less continuity and prestige than *Israel*. [...] The very presence of bodies in Palestine are transmuted from a reality to a nonreality, from a presence into an absence.

Palestine and Israel are foremost the physical places and communities they represent, and they are also ancient words with meanings in eschatological scripture. Foreign policy in the United States has sometimes acted to encourage the arrival of various end times scenarios via military action, a questionable strategy given Jesus's comment that only God knows the Day and the Hour. As the author of 2 Thessalonians says⁶⁸,

We beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of our gathering together unto Them:

That you be not easily moved from your sense, nor be terrified, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by epistle, as sent from us, as if the day of the Lord were at hand.

Let no man deceive you by any means, for unless there come a revolt first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition,

68 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4. Douay-Rheims.

Who opposeth, and is lifted up above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, so that he sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself as if he were God.

2 Thessalonians also condemns the act of “meddling” as opposed to working for one’s bread, a sin of which I have been guilty. The petition below suggests that interest-earning investments themselves are an important gear in the systemically instantiated genocide of Palestinians.

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In *Genocide*, Omer and Verdeja write,

What does it mean to think of genocide in terms of religious ethics? [...] On the one hand, genocide stands in obvious contrast to the ethics of religious traditions. On the other, religious people and institutions certainly participate in genocidal practices, justifications, and rhetoric. [...] Genocide does not just happen. Its occurrence is always explicable in terms of human agency and the systems of meanings and justifications that humans weave. [...] *Nostra Aetate* [...] (also referred to as Vatican II), which was promulgated in 1965 by Pope Paul VI, presented an effort to grapple with the Christian sin of the Holocaust and to reassess the Church’s relations with Jews and other faith communities. [...] The Christian process of atonement for the one sin against Jews (the Holocaust), Jewish Palestinian liberation theologian Ellis contended, has been pivotal for rendering the suffering of Palestinians invisible and inaudible. [...] The invisibility and inaudibility of Palestinians illuminate the relevance of interrogating religion and the ethics of confronting the memory of genocide on the level of discourse, with a special emphasis on the endurance of orientalism in authorizing communal-targeted violence [...] Religious actors are not particularly disposed to resist the murderous tendencies of chauvinistic politics demarcated along religious and/or ethnic lines. They [...] offer their sanctuaries for the murderous acts and their prayers for the spiritual comfort of those engaged in such acts. [...] The insights from critical genocide studies, therefore, broadens the analysis of religion and genocide beyond the obvious acts of violence as mass killing to a deeper engagement with religion’s complicity with discursive violence, including the elimination of religio-cultural diversity through conversion in the context of colonialism and racial imperialism.

The religious institution which I am petitioning in this paper is the University of San Francisco, a nonprofit which is also the same entity I am asking to accept this paper for a degree. In the end, the angels deemed it better to undergo the process of finishing and submitting this paper as a matter of my own personal and intellectual growth, and to allow this document to be made available on a public server to be read by communities in Cambodia and Thailand.

I include a Palestine petition because the community's activism in early 2024 taught me everything I know about advocacy situations in which nobody wins, and the suffering remained harmed. The actions of the University of San Francisco administration during the encampment protests were eye-opening and completely human. The administrators who approached the encampment for negotiations in broad daylight did so bravely. If they were under the spell of some Shakespearean drama to produce visible spiritual redemptions, they played their roles well.

I myself am no stranger to the genre of Antichrist performance art. In *Code Societies Winter 2019* (School for Poetic Computation), I can be seen in person presenting solutions in a world which was my professional career at the time: software design. The brief advocacy for an Indigenous Community of Color was incomplete and hasty. A suffering woman was made into a set piece to rally support for a technology I was peddling. What I realized shortly after is what we already know, that God is merciful, that what we intend for weak reasons, God makes for good. Should the reader encounter a person or system which resembles my performance there but in real life, it is not recommendable to believe their good intentions. I include the above clip in order to put my own body into the game, as was suddenly done to a small group of University administrators in May 2024. Any quite reasonable suggestion that I am being hard on myself here, where I have the benefit of a generation's worth of insight about social issues, should also lend such grace to these administrators. Of course, the thesis that we are *both* subject to the sufferings of judgment in the afterlife is one worthy of consideration. (*And only a few years have passed away, and they were a civil and delightful people*). God judges each according to what they are made aware. I am

faced also with the fearsome possibility that this entire paper is another iteration of the same shortcomings evident in the above video. If so, let this insight itself bring benefit to all beings, or let me not submit it if that is for the best. God is more loving.

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In *Imagining Economic Liberation in Palestine: Challenges and Opportunities*, Fairsakh writes,

A liberated Palestine is achieved by decolonizing the economic relations and settler colonial structures of domination that have been reformulated between Israelis and Palestinians over the past seventy-five years. It is to be achieved by moving away from pure consumerism as a means to generate growth and focusing instead on the individual and collective rights to freedom from poverty and debt.

Recent advocacy for Palestine has especially recognized the hidden movements of money as a foundational causal element of genocidal conditions, and so thusly as a target of repair.

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In *Business in Genocide: Understanding and Avoiding Complicity*, Stel and Naude write,

Violent conflict, especially to the extreme embodied in genocides, destroys markets, infrastructure, assets, and resources; undermines trust; and, as such, undermines trade and investment. Indeed, where human rights are respected and defended, businesses flourish. Nevertheless, genocides take place too often to maintain that there may never be vested interests (1).

[...] There are too many examples in history of business in genocide. One can think of the role of the Dutch and British East India Companies, the world's first multinationals, in Asia or in the slave trade. IBM's complicity in the Holocaust; the collaboration between Hollywood film studios and the Nazis; and the controversies surrounding multinational corporations in resource-rich developing countries (2).

[...] While there are no documented cases of companies acting as the main perpetrator in registered genocide, it should be kept in mind that in genocide the accomplice is often the real villain and the principal offender a small cog

in the machine. In some cases, the violations are not perpetrated by the businesses, but on behalf of them (3).

[...] Direct complicity is the provision of finance, material, infrastructure, human resources and capacity, and intelligence to the perpetrator of the genocide to the extent that the genocide is facilitated. [...] Indirect complicity can fall in two categories. Beneficial complicity occurs when the company benefits from the genocide in some way, whether it was aware of or sympathetic to it or not. Silent complicity is apparent when the company does not contribute to or benefit from the genocide, but is aware of it and fails to distance itself from it (3).

There are distinctions between the ongoing Nakba of the Palestinians and the cases of genocide given in the paper, which includes the precariously in-the-past Shoah of the Jewish peoples. Today, the United States and its allied nations, including one associated with the ancient name Israel, routinely employ technologies of war and subjugation unimaginable to the contexts of acute, hidden massacres we most commonly associate with the word genocide. The author of this paper holds in mind the testimonies of survivors of the Reign of Terror of the Khmers, a time of demonic upheaval which failed the comprehensions of international justice mechanisms and which implicates a spiritually impoverished United States. In the accompanying book of picture drawings to this paper, the page titled *Ghost Fleet* suggests a U.S. awkwardly aware of the benefits derived from the subjection of audio-visually consumed bodies. The U.S. contends in the public imagination to be a savior. Authentically engaged humanitarian projects are white-labeled for the U.S. brand name. Thailand is written in as the villain, just prosperous enough to deserve blame. The country offers up its visible scapegoats, foreign bureaucrats and foremen, to be played up for whack-a-mole against American knowingness. An apocalypse is veiled at the source of its tribulations. What we demand of our institutions, especially those professing a belief in the greatest good, is *piety*. When people are dying, money changing hands in the shadows gets a long, suspicious look. The genocide of the Palestinian peoples, with its well-documented slow-motion and settler-colonial aspects, is also *hyper-technological*. Warehouses full of computers are trained on to-the-second emotional reactions; curations of words permit the lives and deaths of

invisible bodies; probabilities are emitted for military execution by robot; domination proceeds by that which no one can serve at the same time as God. Like the humans before these machines, no one entity performs each role at the same time. The web of transactions moves ever around attempts toward responsibility. The right and the left hand know not what the other is doing, a fact of little comfort to subjects of the incarnated throne.

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To The University of San Francisco:

Declare and condemn the Genocide of the Palestinian Peoples by the United States War Machine.

Disclose investments implicated in supplying the Israeli Defense Forces and the United States Department of Defense.

Divest of profits from Apartheid in the Holy Land.

Defend the right to peaceful disruptive protest on campus, and establish a well-funded Palestinian Studies Program.

■

*California Gubernatorial Pardon of Upstanding Khmer-
Americans*

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*There's a cemetery deep below the sea
And a place in hell for my friends and me
Should they ask what got me through
Should they ask me, it was you*

-mewithoutYou

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I, Jacob, am friend to a man living in Battambang Cambodia following a deportation from the United States, a man living in California who formerly faced deportation but was granted a pardon by the state, and several community members listed below, who live in California under threat of deportation, and who are currently seeking pardons as their only legal option save for a change in attitudes and policy at the national level. Their lives as young people in impoverished west coast cities is a distant reality from my own. I only know them as they exist today, and by the gentrified neighborhoods that were once the economically chosen locations to inject their families following catastrophes in Southeast Asia. In their transition to stable well-supported life in the U.S., they have been criminalized under an unforgiving and racially biased justice system. In my own life as a well-supported rural-suburban white boy, I have been mentally ill in public, have drunk alcohol and smoked tobacco under-age, driven cars drunk and stoned, received clear indication of having transgressed consent on the dance floor, caused addictions for profit, stolen money via high-risk investments, used cocaine and methamphetamine, and used marijuana in states where it is illegal. Any one of these offenses would, has, and does result in incarceration and deportation for People of Color and precariously documented Americans. And so, my friends sit under the moral blame of society, invisible eyes proclaiming for them worldly punishment and brokenness, where I have received only forgiveness and leniency. I hope only that at the end of days, when I pass

through the judgment seat of heavenly justice, that ones so loving as my friends here will put in a good word for me.

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In *Suspicious Citizenship, Bureaucratic Coordination, and the Deportation of Cambodian American Refugees*, Zelnick opens with the story of Mony, who currently lives in Cambodia following deportation from the U.S.:

Mony was born in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Thailand on the Thai-Cambodian border in 1985 and he moved with his family to the United States three months later. His family settled in Stockton, California, and all were granted Lawful Permanent Residency, as were all individuals of Cambodian descent who came to the United States as refugees following the Khmer Rouge, the American war in Vietnam, and US secret bombings in Southeast Asia. [...] When I interviewed Mony in Battambang, Cambodia, in May 2019, he expressed indignation about his deportation because he was an LPR who came to the United States as a refugee. Mony's insistence on defining "permanence" in relation to legality was another way of articulating his belief that his US documentation differentiated him from undocumented, "illegal" immigrants. Entanglements with the deeply intertwined criminal justice and immigration systems led to increased surveillance of Cambodian American deportees and "deportable refugees" while also invalidating green cards that originally offered tenuous legal membership within the United States. [...] Most deportees, like Mony, arrive in Cambodia without citizenship to any country. Although they are eligible for Cambodian citizenship after arrival, many find the documentation process illegible, opaque, and corrupt. Mony recalled that upon landing in Phnom Penh, officers from the General Department of Immigration fingerprinted him and attempted unsuccessfully to extract monetary bribes. He felt coerced into signing documents in Khmer even though he could not read the language (Introduction).

It may come as a surprise to Americans that many refugees from Cambodia were not immediately given citizenship.

Deportees transform into Cambodian citizens through a process of transnational bureaucratic coordination that makes these individuals legally legible while simultaneously disregarding the lived realities of their personhood. The United States depends on bureaucratic coordination with Cambodia because deportation is predicated on Cambodian citizenship—or

entitlement to Cambodian citizenship—and Cambodia participates in these processes because of unequal geopolitical relations where noncompliance can yield sociopolitical consequences. [...] Contrary to popular imaginaries of the United States as a benevolent haven for Southeast Asian refugees, deportation to Cambodia exemplifies what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls “the gift of freedom”: a form of humanitarianism deeply intertwined with US militarism and empire, resulting in a “nigh unpayable debt” for recipients (Section: Theorizing Suspicious Citizenship).

Discussions of deportability often hinge on whether the United States has done enough for a people group, invoking some kind of moral balance about which ethnicities deserve the benefits of becoming American.

In 1996, as Cambodian Americans became reclassified as “problem refugees”, and amid white nationalist anxieties about demographic shifts toward a white minority, President Clinton signed a series of immigration laws, most notably the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility act, greatly expanding deportability both broadly and for [Lawful Permanent Residents] convicted of crimes in particular. Under these laws, deportability is triggered by a misdemeanor or a felony sentence in which the accused either accepts a plea deal (even if they are never incarcerated) or receives a guilty conviction leading to incarceration for a year or longer. (Section: Transforming LPRs into Deportable Refugees).

Zelnick interviews Visal in Long Beach, California.

In early March 2022, I interviewed Visal in his apartment in Long Beach, California, where he awaited news about a gubernatorial pardon to halt his deportation. Visal checked in with INS (now ICE) for almost two decades since being released from prison. [...] Visal submitted to increased bureaucratic inscription to obtain a work permit, while knowing ICE could detain and deport him at any moment. Visal renews his documentation annually to be able to participate in daily life as much as possible. Yet he also questions the validity of his deportation status. [...] Visal’s hope for a pardon reveals how my interlocutors often conflate documentation, citizenship, and belonging. When discussing his frustrations about the pardon’s lengthy process and uncertain outcome, he lamented to me:

Most of us that come out of prison never really committed any other crimes. We’ve been law-abiding citizens. We’re scared to death to even cross the street wrong. For somebody like myself, that’s been out for many years, and did

nothing but good, paid taxes, lived a normal citizen life, why won't you pardon me?

[...] Reflecting on being an object of US state suspicion, Visal remarked:

People blame us, or say, "they came here to commit crimes," but, look back to why it happened. We came from a war zone. We saw death every day. And then you put us in the city, where it's the most ghetto and low income, and you expect us to be great. Long Beach at that time was horrible.

(Section: Excluding Illegalized "Aliens").

Many Cambodians were given sponsor families who helped them assimilate. My godparents recall going to church with a Mormon family who they still keep in touch with. Many others were placed in neighborhoods of the United States which exist in a state of inhumane neglect, as if there is a hidden border inside the country which, like the official border, cordons off zones which lack moral weight in the American conscience. Many Khmer refugees never crossed over that line, nor have many American citizens. Khmers who are deported to Cambodia express the immense tragedy it is for their lives, a difficulty represented in the already unjust challenge of surviving in Cambodia for all its residents, compounded with the sudden unfamiliarity in terrain and language, arriving with no resources or connections.

Zelnick interviews a man named Alien in Phnom Penh, where he lives following deportation,

I'd go back to the United States for family. If I could go back, I'd get money, then come back to Cambodia. Because America did me dirty. They brought us to the United States because they messed up. And then they kick me out.

His story:

Alien was deported in December 2018, after approximately twenty years of check-ins with INS and ICE. When I interviewed him in Phnom Penh in May 2019, he expressed ambivalence about his deportation, noting that while he was adjusting to Cambodia and felt deeply betrayed by the United States, he longed to return to his family in Rhode Island. He said, "I may look happy, but I'm dead inside." (Conclusion).

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In my youth, I was influenced by a spiritual writer, maybe because he looked and thought like me, and because he at least tried to grapple with the world on the world's terms. He said something that represents the weakness of the effort of writing about the issues we have encountered in this paper, which concern a great imposition of suffering and theft of happiness in a shade of life which I have not experienced. To whatever extent I am not the right person to represent the class, skin color, ethnicity, and gender which I share with the current governor of California, may the reader forgive my imprudence, forget me as quickly as possible, say a prayer about me and him, and come to share space with those who have here been made the subject of so many words.

The writer's quote also says something about how we might look to mend the total catastrophe which has been the United States justice system of the past forty years, which no American wishes to be unjust:

You can't study people; you can only get to know them.

The ability for all our friends to stay with their families in the United States, to freely visit Cambodia for humanitarian purposes, to organize and labor for communities in California without fear, is in the hands of someone who understands also that it's not about us, that the world we will get to live in is gated with the truest possible examinations of our innermost intentions.

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To The Governor of the state of California:

*That immediate pardon be granted to the four community members and staff of **The Asian Prisoner's Support Committee** known by **The APSC Four**, freeing them from any obligations to state judicial processes.*

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