

The problems of politics in the postmodern were never made more clear to me than during a visit to Cambodia and Vietnam in 1990. The following is an autoethnographic tale of my struggles as a white, middle-class, female, political sociologist encountering these remains of the Vietnam War. I write about my problem of locating a stable place for political action in the antifoundationalist epistemology of postmodern thought and within the hyperreality of postmodern media culture. I juxtapose a journal I kept while in Cambodia with my subsequent reflections on this journal to explore the ironies of lines between the "reality" of war and the "unreality" of U.S. postmodern culture. Bringing the materiality of body, place, and time and the fictions and fantasies of desire into sociological writing may be a way of writing the political in a way that pursues social justice.

DALE CARNEGIE, THE CARPENTERS, AND CAMBODIA

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BETWEEN THE SYMBOLIC and the real stands Cambodia, at least for me and others of my generation. I was born into sociology a Marxist and became a feminist. I have found myself more often agreeing with my "modernist" colleagues in resisting this so-called postmodern tendency to see everything as a spectacle or a text. Do not get me wrong. I never believed in "truth"; realities are certainly inscribed by texts. I have even found Baudrillard interesting in his observations that we exist more in a world of hyperreal simulation than any illusion of reality.

But when talking about the death, violence, and the real human tragedy of war or mass genocide, is it the best use of our time to play in "textland" as Dorothy Smith (1993) calls it? Did the Gulf War really not take place, as Baudrillard (1995) titled his essay on the media construction of that war? Would the families of the 100,000-plus dead Iraqis disagree? Would the

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survivors of the millions of Cambodians murdered by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge disagree? Must the view from myself/ourselves always be playful, decentered, like watching a television full of fleeting images that we can turn off and on at will? I was always bothered by the overattention to popular culture, the political individualism, and the stifling of political action, implied in some so-called skeptical postmodernist writings. I always thought political action, resistance, and revolution involve something real that gives purpose, that is a beacon to justice.

But when Chaang (our Cambodian guide, all names used are fictitious) told me she read Dale Carnegie's self-help classic *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* to survive the bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, the murder of her husband, the possible rape of her daughter by the "Pol Pot men" (she'll never know for sure), and two years of forced labor under the Khmer Rouge siege of Cambodia, I was struck with such profound disunderstanding. It shattered many of the ways I have always thought about the real and the unreal, violence and tragedy, social justice and social action—that which we should take seriously and that which we should not. What is more real, I used to think, than the genuine tragedy of war, especially the Vietnam War that was such a part of my childhood? What is more unreal, more distraction, than "American" pop culture, of which self-help books such as Dale Carnegie's are a part? So was I ever confused when the war and pop culture collided.

This article struggles to dance at the feet of this disunderstanding. This article chronicles my search for the "reality" that matters, or whether there is any that matters. It is about my constructions of self and "other." It is about my desires and fantasies, and the Vietnam War and my politics, and Cambodia. I guess this article is really about how we/I construct a discourse of reality, that is, how we try and draw the lines around whatever we call reality.

Also, I have found that the only way I could write about this in a way that communicates anything is in autoethnography, a method developed in the writings of Carolyn Ellis (e.g., 1995). In particular, dwelling on the way my body feels my memories or rather marks my memories has given me the comfort of a place

to start writing my experience. This place has been much more comfortable than the traditional academic writing that I thought was the most convincing way to mark and communicate reality. Anthropologists Clifford and Marcus (1986) years ago recognized that the process of writing social science and ethnography was itself political. Writing is a site of struggle with a politics of authority over reality. So this article is also about constructing reality in writing as well. Writing is politics.

A final methodological note: I rely in many places on irony to chronicle the struggle. Donna Haraway (1990) in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" says,

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method. (p. 190)

I am consciously aware of the words I used to describe my identity, reality, my sense that truth has revealed itself to me, and my jokes on myself, on postmodernists, on Marxists, on us all. This is both a rhetorical strategy and political method. This dialogue with myself has many layers that continue to reveal themselves to me in different ways as I read and reread my words. I write this so that you may enter the dialogue as well.

HOLIDAY IN CAMBODIA

At one level, we were tourists in Cambodia. Of course, that was, after all, only one level. We went in May 1990, twenty years after Nixon's bombing of Cambodia. "We" included me, another professor and his wife, and two Vietnam War veterans who were also students. The Vietnam Veteran's Foundation funded most of our trip to encourage academics to see postwar Southeast Asia. I assume the foundation felt that sending objective social scientists to observe would lend legitimacy to their political efforts to open relations with Vietnam and Cambodia. Our research agenda was to "find out" about the political system, economic system, education system—you know, the Parsonsian

institutions. Some of us were also interested in ethnicity and racism. And of course, being a feminist, I wanted to find out about the "situation of women." We had ten days, no knowledge of the language, and given the embargo and travel restrictions the U.S. government had imposed against Cambodia and Vietnam, it was impossible to make any prior arrangements. Nonetheless, thanks to the cooperation of the Cambodian tourism bureaucracy and an extremely helpful and sympathetic English-speaking guide and translator, Chaang, we were able to interview relief workers, government bureaucrats, and a few people on the streets. Because she was our only link to understanding this strange world, we became very close to Chaang and her family. Each day brought a flood of unfamiliar sights, sounds, and smells that demanded translation, that demanded I be able to explain, as an academic. Each day, I struggled more and more to draw on my political sociological training to make sense. I would have to write about Cambodia when I returned. I did not want people to think we were just there on vacation. Each day brought questions, more contradictions.

Follow my head while I was in and as I now relive Cambodia. I want to communicate my experience through a dialogue between the journal I kept while there and my search for understanding "the real."

Journal entry, Monday, May 21, 1990, Phnom Penh: Phnom Penh. Cambodia beautiful. See defoliation from Agent Orange from plane. Beautiful town. Beautiful, rich architecture and people living all over. Shanties on mansions. Poverty spread equally. Mahogany is everywhere. Hand hewn timbers. They are rebuilding our hotel without power tools.

Pol Pot so horrible and real, yet it is not real. I devote concern to bugs and water.

I remember vividly the scenes that moved past the van window as we were driven through the city to our hotel and after. The infrastructure, roads, sewers, water, housing, and electricity were in shambles. Everywhere we looked, mazes of wires were connected to already overloaded electrical poles. Electricity was erratic. We were told that lucky areas of the city got maybe four hours per week of electricity. Places that could

afford it had their own generators. Children played in the city's back alleys, where the sewer and water system intermingled, still in major disrepair. A major cause of death among children was diarrhea from bad water. The city looked extremely overcrowded. When the people moved back into Phnom Penh after the Vietnamese drove out the Khmer Rouge, the lucky ones got apartments on the lower levels that they now use for businesses. In areas that looked like they used to be parking lots, less lucky people built shanties against the existing walls of buildings with whatever materials they could find. Refugees have continued to pour into the city escaping war in the countryside.

Most of the urban population are women widowed by Pol Pot and the more recent civil war. Most had no marketable skills, but you could see the lucky ones who now owned small businesses on the streets selling cakes or bananas, making about twenty-five cents a day. Sochua Mu Leiper, consultant for Women in Development, UNICEF told us, "And now you see children on the street, collecting garbage. . . . If they don't bring in this extra income, they go to bed hungry."

Journal, Wednesday, May 23, Phnom Penh: The streets, children, mud brown and grey and grey-red. Beautiful brown skin. The colors. It makes it all so good. What can I say anymore? Words are clichéd. Are the feelings clichéd? This troubles me.

Two things keep recurring and continue to bother me as I begin to read back over my journal. One is a struggle with what I am supposed to be doing as an academic. Second was my struggle with references to popular culture. I have this preoccupation with my own inability to find a settled place for my feelings as a white Western newcomer sociologist—that is, the contradictions between (1) the "reality of war," (2) me as a middle-class kid, and (3) me as an alleged objective, all-knowing academic. I go back-and-forth among these alleged points of reference, these vantage points that are supposed to provide some frames of certainty in interpreting events, to mark reality, but that just do not seem to work.

About a year after I returned from Cambodia, I gave a slide lecture presentation on my trip to a university audience of about

two hundred people, although I do not think I ever noticed the audience. Before and during the talk, I felt like I was showing slides from my vacation. I started the talk with my inability to speak about Cambodia as a sociologist. The abstracted concepts, the objective distance we are supposed to use, did not get at any reality I felt while there. I think my sociologist colleagues were a little confused at that point.

It was true though. When I first returned from my travels, the more I tried to communicate what I saw and felt, the more it sounded clichéd, like a movie. I felt like no one believed me. I fell into a game of how many gory, shocking stories could I tell to counter, "Oh is this your first trip to a third world country?" or, "What's the big deal with Cambodia, you should see our own inner cities?" Everyone had already seen the movie *The Killing Fields*. I had to find a way to make my words go beyond these movie, fictional, invented frames I and others were using that took the reality away from my message. What I saw was real. I had to connect to the real—to capture the social—otherwise my feelings were not legitimate.

So even though I started my talk with the epistemological crisis of sociology, in the end I could find nothing else to do but grab my sociological voice and talk about global political relations. Yet, even then I thwarted myself, because the last ten minutes of the talk I flashed pictures of Khmer children playing on the streets while I verbally abstracted the foreign policy issues from their lives. My friends told me after that it must have been a cathartic exercise. I thought they just missed the larger epistemological point. I hoped that the emotional and visceral reactions people would get from the pictures in contrast with the abstracted foreign policy discourse would communicate what I thought I just was not academically smart enough to proclaim in words alone. In that method of communicating the discontinuities, I felt satisfied. Yet, for reasons I still do not understand, that was the first night in my life that I did not sleep one wink.

Now, I do not know if I could have explained it in words—at least the way I have been taught to use words. What strikes me so deeply in rereading my journal is this search for and rejection of a voice of some authority. Who am I, an academic from Las

Vegas, to speak? What can I legitimately speak of? I am disgusted with the abstractions some academics and foreign policy experts use to speak about these “foreign” lands and the U.S./our relation to them. Yet, how else could I speak or write believably about a situation in which U.S. foreign policy was contributing to the continued decline of a nation? How else could I speak or write believably in a way that did not rely on appropriating the tragedies and emotions of the Cambodians I met? I guess I’m just not a scientist.

Second, in my journal I struggle with constant references to Western texts to translate experiences. As you will see, I keep making references to K-Mart things saved from tourists. My *Weekly Reader*, *National Geographic* were frames that I used to try to grasp, to understand this new and frightening experience. Chaang described using Dale Carnegie’s book to get through; she described how she sang the Carpenter’s 1974 version of the song, *Yesterday Once More*; and she later compared her last night with her husband to the movie *Love Story*. This all really bothers me. Why did she feel the need to use these silly little pop culture icons to explain what it was like to endure such tragedy? Why did I? Did she tell me this because she thought it would help me understand? Was this how she, the same as I, translated the untranslatable? Were these the texts that even “real” third world people—the pure, the uncontaminated, the “natives”—used to frame life? How can this be? These were the people who had genuine experience, not the postmodern pseudo spectacles we/I/Westerners seek out to pretend reality. What did they need “our” pop culture for?

**MY WEEKLY READER:
POP CULTURE ICONS AND REAL TRAGEDY**

Journal, Wednesday, May 23, Phnom Penh: I begin to think in short sentences trimmed of unnecessary prepositions, like our guide speaks. She is so, I don’t know, lays herself on the line. She tells us, “Ah, the rain. When it rain under Pol Pot we happy because then we can cry,” and she smiles.

She took us to her house. We walked up broken wet concrete stairs with hoses trailing down them. No lights. It is as though a construction site condemned long ago is partially restored. We walk into her house. The tile is clean. Lots of K-Mart-type things she save from tourists. Plants. Live ones and dead ones, to symbolize the living and what is dead she told us. Two daughters to symbolize the living hope, the good past and the bad. The first daughter is of my husband The second daughter is by Pol Pot man, but she don't know.

One book that help me to put the past behind. . . . She pulls off the shelf Dale Carnegie, "*How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*" (Who would have thought old Dale Carnegie courses from the 60s would help a Third World country survive extermination.)

I sorry, no fan. 15 minutes later the lights and the fan come on. 15 minutes later they are off. They don't come back on again. She serves us tea and we look at pictures Japanese and French tourists have sent her.

When I spied Dale Carnegie's *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* on Chaang's shelf, I freaked. She struggled to steal food off her own plate and sneak it, under the penalty of death, to her young daughter. She did not know whether her husband was dead or not; she just did not see him anymore. She was raped by the Pol Pot man and bore a child. So the second of her two beautiful daughters has a daddy who killed her sister's daddy. She returns to a city with nothing, liberated by a different kind of Communist regime, Vietnamese neighbors the Cambodians had grown up learning to hate, working for a government she hated. She returned to a city with no sewers, no electricity, no plumbing. She had to boil water every morning so her daughters would not get worms, but she thinks they have them already. Where buildings just blocks away burn to the ground because everyone hot-wires the electricity. And Dale Carnegie's *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living!*

Worrying has the marks of psychosomatic illnesses. But Chaang's experience was real, right? Dale Carnegie was meant to help people with invented problems. Part of the reason this is so incredible to me is that I used to stare at that book in the basement with Dad's other old books from college. As an adolescent, I toyed with the notion that Dale Carnegie was for incompetent people to rid themselves of the ghosts of self-doubt wrought by

inadequate personalities. The older I got, the more sympathy I had with the oppressed, and I began to see Dale's book as a mind-control technique to make people accept the fate bourgeois capitalist society dealt them. But this self-help book helping people through the reality of war? It did not make sense. To "start living," as Dale Carnegie said, never meant as opposed to "dying."

CAPITALISTS AND SOCIALISTS AND COMMUNISTS, OH MY!

And speaking of bourgeois, who is this Chaang? The mere fact that Chaang in 1976 knew of the movie *Love Story* and was singing *Yesterday Once More* by the Carpenters, an American pop band, means she was among the elite in Cambodia. She was the French-educated, American sympathizer, anti-Communist, colonized dupe that was part and parcel of those oppressing the real people of Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge were born of the U.S. bombing of Cambodia. They hated it. And they hated the colonizers. And they hated Western culture that degraded and defamed real Khmer culture. Talk about identity politics. No borderlands, no multiple identities for the Khmer Rouge! You were either in or you were out. Too bad they killed everyone who was out, but I could see their intentions. The Khmer had a vision of a rural agrarian society where everyone was equal and where the real Khmer culture could reign. What am I doing feeling sympathy for this colonizer of her own country? She was Western intelligentsia, civil servant elite. She benefited from the oppression of her rural country folk. She *wanted* the Americans there.

I remember when I came back to the United States, I felt this irrepressible urge to do something about all this. So I called the editorial-page editor of the local newspaper. I told him I wanted to write a "Nevada Views" article, space for op ed pieces by locals, concerning the embargo against Cambodia and Vietnam. Now, this guy was a right-wing, libertarian ideologue, and I was taken aback when he thought the idea was a good one. I spoke to him after he read the piece to find out when it would be

published. He proceeded to tell me all about those Communists like Pol Pot and Danny Ortega and Fidel Castro who all hung out together in French Socialist intellectual circles. I hung up, at first confused as to how he could link Danny Ortega, the good-looking symbol of Nicaraguans' fight against Reagan-led U.S. oppression, and the evil, genocidal, Pol Pot. Ah, but in his cold war, anti-Communist mind-set, what held them together was their common Communist identity. He thought my opposition to the Khmer Rouge was an opposition to Communism. Ha! After my trip to Vietnam and Cambodia, I was more than ever convinced that Socialism was better than capitalism and that what was going on in Vietnam and Cambodia was not "real" Socialism, just as certainly as Soviet-style Communism was not real Socialism. It seemed to me that being a Communist in the late-twentieth-century global economy was more analogous to the cultural, economic, and ideological implications of supporting the Dallas Cowboys over the Washington Redskins (pardon the labels) than supporting any political-economic system. Besides, it was the Vietnamese Communists that liberated Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge "Communists." Luckily, my educated conception of what a really good economic system might be was still intact. That right-wing editor was silly for letting his stereotypical essentialist conception of Communism get in his way of seeing reality.

Those Cambodians still cannot figure out who is a true Cambodian and who isn't. Today I am amused as I read the papers about the various coups, pseudo coups, and odd coalitions, the death of Pol Pot, and fights over his body. (I suspect Pol Pot's "death" will be a lot like Elvis's.) I do not feel so profoundly sad or driven. Just mad. The current Cambodian government seems to be fighting over who really was or was not Khmer Rouge. For heaven's sake, they all were at one time or another allied with the Khmer Rouge. They just defected at different times. Maybe they should read Gloria Anzaldúa's (1990) *Borderlands* or Trinh Minh-ha's (1989) *Woman, Native, Other* and stop worrying and start living. At least the United States is not shipping weapons to keep the civil war going, I hope. And I go on, looking forward to buying the new edition of *The Communist Manifesto*.

FOUR DEAD IN OHIO

One day it occurred to me to ask Chaang if she was actually in Cambodia during “the bombing of Cambodia.” Now granted, the link between Nixon’s bombing and the rise of the Khmer Rouge mentioned in so many analyses of Cambodia was not lost on me. Nor did I miss that fact that I was indeed in Cambodia. But it occurred to me that she may have actually experienced, in reality, in that place, that same bombing of Cambodia that I heard Nixon announcing on our black-and-white television—that same bombing that I experienced in a different place, as “four dead in Ohio,” as scenes of the protest at Kent State shown in subsequent television movies. The same bombing that gave a name to Peace Park, a small park near my graduate Sociology Department building. The same bombing that sparked protests that caused such a huge rift in that same graduate Sociology/Rural Sociology program that some people still do not trust each other twenty years later. Was she really there in an event I had experienced in so many different places?

I blurted out to Chaang, all of a sudden, like when I finally remember a word I’ve been trying to think of, “Were you here when the Americans were bombing?” It was probably unlikely that she knew the actual moment, I remember thinking, since we bombed the Cambodian/Vietnamese border, the Ho Chi Minh trail, and she was miles away in Phnom Penh. We were sitting in the outside seating of a restaurant, in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon as everyone called it), as she was accompanying us back to the airport so we could fly home. “Yes, they bombed across the river from my house, and I feared my daughter would become deaf,” she said softly but covered her ears as if she could still hear it. “Why did the U.S. bomb so close?” I asked, not ever having someone as qualified as this to answer. “To kill the Khmer Rouge, but we knew that was not the case.” “Did the U.S. have much to do with Pol Pot coming to power?” I asked, cross-checking the history books. “Yes,” she said gently. “I’m sorry,” she said to me, knowing I would feel bad about it. And I did. My parents voted for Nixon. I bombed her. There it was. Since I was not part of the solution, I was the problem. After a minute, she

looked at me again: "We never thought the U.S. would leave us to the Khmer Rouge. We never thought the U.S. would abandon us." Abandon you! You were a pawn! There was that colonized mentality again, I thought to myself.

THE WAR MUSEUM

Before we left home for this trip, I had not really thought much about the place where I was really going, for whatever reason. It was not until we were landing in Ho Chi Minh City that it occurred to me that I would finally get to see the Vietnam War. The war ended just as I graduated from high school, and I was always frustrated that I could not take part in all the campus protests. But as I grew up, the images of those protests fueled my growing activism. I had seen that young people could influence world events, and I kept searching for movements that would allow me to influence the world for good. The campus protests of which I was a part—the antinuclear movements, the anti-Contra movements, the anti-Apartheid protests—seemed pale in comparison, as if they were incomplete, tentative, not as real as the ones I saw pictured and named on television when I was a youth.

I was now going to see my war, and I was going with two Vietnam vets. I distinctly remember flying over the fields as we were landing in Saigon. I asked them if they recognized anything. They pointed out still-burnt-out fields that had been the result of Agent Orange. As we landed at the airport, I found myself staring and searching for something that would give me a clue. And the thought kept going through my head over and over—this is what all that fuss was about?

Journal, Saturday, May 19, Saigon: Day of understanding/not understanding the Vietnam War. Day of trying to figure out what this city is. What socialism/communism is. From love of this city as a city to mass confusion on how it is not what it should be. Then seeing Roman and John experience this, understanding what war is, why we are here. What I don't know of the world. A TV war . . .

Journal, Monday, May 21, Phnom Penh: So much it is hard to write. Left Saigon yesterday. Yesterday was impossible to write. One day that set in deep, it was yesterday (Yesterday—it seems like years ago) (Time has gotten weird). Hours are like weeks. Events—We find someone recommended to us to drive us around the city. We try and visit hospitals, pediatrics, but we can't get in because its Sunday.

I get hit by a moped for comic relief . . .

We visit the market—smells, people, crowds “exotic” spices. I feel like I'm in the Orient—Wait, I am. . . . Poverty, Buddhist Temples, incense.

War Atrocities Museum. After three tries it's finally open. Rains. Intense. I couldn't write about this yesterday. I remember my reaction was humans suck. Men/masculinity is this aggression? Photos after photos/captions after captions. Pictures of pushing people out of helicopters. Water torture. Agent Orange. Setting up heads for display. I read every line. Force myself to examine every picture.

I ask Roman and John. Yes it's real. Yes we did this in this country I am standing in. Did we really do this? John—yes. It's real. Death, murder.

These words as written become all that I knew before. Why now is it real?

And I had these reactions after just looking at pictures, at representations of what I was told were real events. I did see real concrete bunkers, rooms with bars on top that I was told people (people, ha) were kept in, just small enough so they could not stand or sit, bars on top. I still see these bunkers, plain as day right now. For some reason, it reminded me of when I went with my dad to Custer's Last Stand in Montana. There it was, just rolling hills and little signs telling of the battles between the Indians and Custer—how the Indians slaughtered Custer. I just could not picture a war or people killed. That was just cowboy/Indian stuff. On the other hand, there were some similarities. The concrete bunkers in Vietnam reminded me of the restrooms at rest stops in Montana.

Journal, Monday, May 21, Phnom Penh: For the first time in my sheltered life, death, war is real. We did it. We do it. In the name of any and every cause we kill. I snapped. I'm not a dramatic person. I keep saying, am I just dramatizing this? I crossed a boundary in myself to insensitivity. I keep returning to John and Roman

who lived this and I feel I get a small taste of what their lives were for two 1/2 years.

Did you kill? I asked them. They just looked at me.

Vietnam Vets aren't just a word anymore. A whole generation of men in their forties and fifties now who have buried an event. (I say one because it only happens once, and then it becomes something else) so deep as to never live the same. Then return and no one can relate. So 20 years later, it is still as real as it was then. They return to say I'm sorry.

Why didn't you say anything to me or anyone else for that matter, I ask them. No one could understand. They didn't want to hear, to listen. I hate war. Under no circumstances is war justified, John says. We came here now to prevent this from ever happening again.

We/they journey to a side of humanity that all long for (real experience) that makes you special and part of a secret club. But the secret is horrible. No one should have to live this. Horrible. I struggle with my own shock, my jolt to a new stage of insensitivity just to deal with it, and I understand how you can kill.

Stefano and Marlana at the war atrocities museum sit on the steps and quietly but firmly remark, it was a little too much to handle. They had left quickly. I checked out of reality to enjoy my torment.

Ah museums, little displays of reality. These recollections reminded me of the children's museum in Fort Worth where my picture of the elephant got displayed when I was in first grade. I had drawn a white elephant in chalk on a green piece of paper. But the teacher drew in a palm tree with colored chalk. It won third place in some children's art contest and was selected to hang in the Fort Worth Children's Museum. I thought because I did not draw the whole thing I was cheating, and I was concerned. But when I saw it hang in the museum I knew it must be okay, because they would never hang anything that was not real.

Chaang told us of one of the first times she went in the Toel Sleng museum in Phnom Penh after they opened it to the public. She took tourists in there regularly, and she had one group of French tourists this time. This museum had been a school before the war, and when the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh, they turned it into a prison. Apparently, Pol Pot liked to take pictures of all the people he killed, similar to Hitler's enjoyment of

photos. And so they all hung on the walls in this now restored museum. The museum also had rooms full of unidentified skulls. Some of the rooms were still set up like they were when the Khmer Rouge were finally defeated, with blood and chains and stuff in little rooms. Chaang was doing this tour and looked on the wall and saw a picture of her brother. She could not continue. She had not known what had happened to him before. When I heard the story I remember asking myself, if his picture was there does that make him really dead?

Journal, Wednesday, May 23, Phnom Penh: We visited the vice chairman of foreign affairs. Hot. Then lunch. Then we walk back from the restaurant. Risking trouble for our guide in case we get caught without an escort. Mud, poverty, kids, they followed us everywhere. So much fun. They laugh and fight to get in the picture. Poverty. What word conveys life like this? Squatters in an area that used to be a home. So misplaced. Lost found. "A Land of Many Contrasts" a word I recall from grade school geography texts, or My Weekly Reader. Brown skin is truly beautiful.

I don't know. I feel so selfish, Wow a cosmic experience. It will make me a better person. So special only we who have been here will understand. I want to die and suffer too.

Later that day The orphanage. Dancing, exotic dances. National Geographic special. This is weird. Weird people weird reactions. Only I am real. The rest is a Felini movie. What am I doing? I can't cry. I can't feel. I wonder what is happening on *Days of our Lives*.

Only this is real, when you feel what people you care about have suffered. Only that is allowed to feel. Dale Carnegie, shit. Too much. I want to cry, cry out, feel my own anguish. I am numb. Who isn't? Alone and like everyone else. What makes me so special?

I longed for a privileged place of suffering, where one could authenticate oneself through "real" experience, "real" physical, bodily suffering. I wanted to belong, like my veteran friends, to this club where only those who have been there, who have really suffered, belong. I wanted the solace of having my experience count, like theirs did. It was a secret club. More Vietnam vets committed suicide in the years after their return than actually died in the war. This simple fact alone should say something about the implications of how we construct the line between

reality and fantasy. I cannot now talk about how horrible the experience was without sounding clichéd. Like I am making it all up. Was it the same for Vietnam veterans? After I came back, I heard all this stuff about post-traumatic stress syndrome. Then I figured I had it. Is the inability to reconcile reality (like uh, war is) and fantasy (like uh, war is) and make it fit into the fantasy/reality of home that is easier to take as reality, that fits more neatly, is that post-traumatic stress syndrome? Maybe if we did not make such a big deal about the line between fantasy and reality we would not have post-traumatic stress.

I remember taking a pain killer later that night. We had brought some in case someone was injured and we could not get modern drugs. I do not know if I thought this was something I was supposed to do or not. Revel in the pain? Or revel in the numbing of the pain?

THAT LOVE SONG

Journal, Wednesday, May 23, Phnom Penh: This keeps echoing, Yesterday Once More. The Pol Pot Man.

Do you know what I was doing when the Carpenters sang Yesterday Once More? It was on the album with Do Run Run and 50s songs. I was 18. Maybe infatuated with Jim then. Listen to the song and fantasize about mythical whatever feeling adolescent hormones. That 50s radio station and Jim's impala wagon with the red hood. She sang the song to herself one night, when it was raining, thinking the rain would conceal her voice. The next day the Pol Pot men said some woman was singing in a foreign language. I was so scared they would find it was me, but I said nothing, I was so scared. But God protect me.

What is it that has caused me so much pain? I still get tears in my eyes to reread this. It is as if these texts, the Carpenters, and Dale Carnegie were a part of my childhood, my set of images, my escape. But here, this person from the other side of the television, had (was using) my head.

I talked on the phone with my girlfriends, and our black-and-white television showed Nixon announcing the bombing of Cambodia. And in the basement Dad's old books from college,

including Dale Carnegie, became the pictures of my adolescent memories. Maybe I really did pull out Dale when I was struggling with my own fear of confident survival in the adolescent world around boys. But then, maybe Chaang's fears were also about "boys."

But the Carpenters were my fantasy. That song, *Close to You*. The place that took me from reality when I was thirteen. The place as a teenager I sought maybe to find my identity but certainly where I sought my delight, which of course I defined as opposite to my reality. My world was to be like the world of that song. It was that place of fanciful fulfillment embodied in "boys." It was my erotic or what I now see as my erotic. It was the one place where I was in control of my possibilities of failure in the world of romance. I could be swept away where and how I wanted to be swept.

That this world that popped into my head every time I heard the Carpenters was not reality was something I constantly reminded myself. I remember around age seventeen, Bill Horton called, and as my head began to dance with the possibility of a "date," I consciously stopped that thought cold. I knew I could possibly ruin it all because the fantasy would become more real to me than the reality, and not only would I be disappointed, I would miss whatever was really going on between me and Bill.

Now Chaang throws death and destruction into my fantasy. Grown-ups are not supposed to do this. Especially grown-ups who are real people who existed in the television world of Vietnam. It was that television Vietnam that came out of the television and into my politics as I grew up. The Vietnam War was my politics. It was what I came to construct as I grew up as reality. Real people were living and dying as a direct result of our system of us here earning money to watch television so we could forget about the rest of the world. War was real. The Carpenters were my fantasy.

This person from the other side of the television was also throwing my femininity back in my face. She was a walking example of the stereotypical feminine from my gender classes. She was other oriented. She was nothing without a man. She

was into "romance." One night, we asked what happened to her husband. She told this poignant, tragic story of her last night with him. He had been a pilot in the Royal Air Lines. They were in the rural camps where they had to work long, hard hours in the fields. He was recovering from pneumonia. Even though they were kept apart in the camp, she had been able to spend some time with him, and in the evenings as he recovered, she brought him food she had saved from her own meal. The last evening she remembered well—it was a full moon; he was weak but she was holding him up, helping him walk outside. It was so romantic. She never saw him again. She was later told he was taken away and killed once he had recovered. She compared it to the movie *Love Story*.

Give me a break—*Love Story*?! Now, that is where I draw the line. This was blasphemy to the reality of war. As an adolescent, I may have privately enjoyed romance fantasies while listening to the Carpenters, but I knew what was sappy, and *Love Story* was sappy. I even thought my girlfriends who watched it were sissies. Even though I did like Ryan O'Neal. But I look back with my feminist eyes proud of my disdain for *Love Story* and the utter helplessness of the soon-to-die female character (Ali McGraw). I teach about these messages on women's and men's proper roles, not only from that movie but from all those love songs. Even though I did not like *Love Story*, as a child I still would imagine fainting, and the man of my dreams would catch me, notice me, and then profess love forever. I even had this dream as a kid that I fainted on the street and someone was looking over me when I came to, and I would remember that face and that was prophetic of the man I was to marry. Now I teach my students about the images of female helplessness—the almost total lack of female control that eroticizes love, the passion of being swept away, to be carried where rational thought cannot go but where true love can take you forever into bliss. Of course, I also teach that in Harlequin romances, the woman always wins. It is, after all, my fantasy, and it turns out how I want. Even now, I play *ER* in my head. I am wheeled into the emergency room, and George Clooney is immediately

passionately aroused, and after saving my life follows me back to my room to profess his desire for me.

Granted, Chaang's husband was sick and she was the strong one, but I knew what she was really thinking. But it is a shame, nonetheless, that these very real tragedies of Chaang's life were explained, understood, endured, eroticized, and fantasized with *Love Story* and the Carpenters. The romance fantasy is for a woman to fantasize control. She had no control. War is real. *Love Story* is for sissies. You would think war would separate the genuine from the sappy. (War is for boys. The Carpenters is for girls.) (Real is masculine. Representation is feminine.)

Speaking of gender and fantasy, in 1990 64 percent of Cambodia's population was female, 34 percent of the population are widows.

The line between reality and fantasy. We have constructed fantasy as other. For my adolescent childhood, fantasy had been the place before reality. For Chaang, it was the place after reality. Was it the same? Did we use the same strategy of coping? Her "boy" was possibly dead. My "boys" just existed differently. Was it the same world, a world that was as unreal as my teenage fears?

If her world was as made up as mine, what then was real? Was my reality "other"? Was my reality fantasy? My war? My Cambodia? My boyfriends? My Chaang?

Chaang was gone. Vanished. She was me. No more could she lead me to "the truth," tell me what counts. No more could the fantasy of her, the exotic tragedy of her war, the experience of violence that I would never know completely but I could concoct as "pure" and worthy object of my politics, no more could any of this be the real I needed. But now, I had to rely on what my own eyes saw, my own mouth tasted, my own body recoiled from, the knot in the pit of my stomach I remember from then and I feel again now as I write this, the uncertainty I experienced, the incompleteness (?) of my experience, my memories, my desires, my now. That was all. She could not give me, be my, certainty.

FINISHING OUR CARCASS

Mike and I were eating our Sunday morning breakfast in the backyard when he said to me that writing this article was like crows feeding off a dead carcass. Yea, I agreed. Not only is writing this academic exploitation of the spectacle of destruction in third world countries, but my lefty, antiwar, armchair politics is also like crows feeding off a dead carcass. We took another bite of our bagels and decided postmodern thought would say there really is no such thing as the carcass. We laughed, enjoying the joke on postmodernists. But what about all the dead people, dead cultures, dead lives? I said, as I chewed the bagel, the point to me was not debating the existence of the carcass but examining what U.S. culture, politics, economy, television does with whatever we think the carcasses are. The politics of those who “fight injustice” becomes a rally for a hologram of the carcass. And the hologram becomes a referent for what is on television about violence—the Vietnam War became Huntley and Brinkley, *Apocalypse Now* and the competing television specials on what the Vietnam War really was. Nicaragua’s television show became Ronald Reagan and *Saturday Night Live* and *Salvador*, the movie. Cambodia is hard, because it does not have its own television show anymore. So I have to use old shows to explain what war is like to people, and nobody cares because real war is long out of our psyches. The Gulf War television show kept all that nasty blood off the screen, thank you very much. But even Baudrillard, who claimed the Gulf War did not happen because it was a virtual war to media viewers, agreed that this had profound political and social consequences.

As I chew my kale and romaine salad months later (I gotta stop eating this stuff), I am struggling to finish this part of the article. The conclusion. Where I write what I “really” meant, in case you did not get it. But I cannot. That is the point. The search for reality, the desire for that external object that would affirm and justify my existence, affirm and justify my politics, affirm and justify my sociology, the search for what I really meant in this article so I can write a conclusion, is all the same search for some constructed authentic “other.” Writing is politics.

One of the reviewers asked, "How can writing the social after the epistemological crisis of losing the other still be a vocation central to the pursuit of social justice?" That writing the social has implications for the pursuit of social justice is important. How one can still write after realizing the "social" depends on constructing an abstracted other is the critical question. The joy in writing this article for me has been that I have written a series of my epiphanies, many coming as I wrote. I wanted to open spaces where words could trigger in myself and a reader's bodily reactions, emotions, epiphanies, memories, and meanings—yours triggered perhaps in ways different than mine. Through these, the fantasy/reality of war can be felt personally, physically. Ultimately, that felt sense that something is wrong is where much collective action begins to emerge.

Yet, while everything I have written leads me to conclude that the real is no more than constructed other, I still just cannot let go. The intensity of our search begs me to figure out what it is I am searching for that seems to feel settled in an external object. What do we act on in pursuing social justice? If the search for the real is nothing more than the construction of any old external object, what are we left with? Is it all just a television full of fleeting images that we can turn off and on at will?

I wrote a note to myself in the margins of some draft or another, "what makes this easy to write and to claim a voice is that it is about war, which is real." Whatever is real about it allows me to speak or write. War has some correspondence with a nasty "reality" that allowed me to have a voice, to have legitimacy. I do not even have to proclaim a truth of war; I can just write why I dance around it. Even Baudrillard's claim that the Gulf War did not happen rests on the notion that it was not a traditional war because it was not hand-to-hand combat. The Gulf War was a virtual war, a war in the media without bodies. While his play on war skirts the 100,000 bodies that were killed, his essay revolves around a notion that a bodily war is the ultimate materiality.

My political sociology friends will think I have gone over to the dark side, but I have to agree with recent writings on ethnography identifying the body, desire, time, and place as something

left out of most sociological discourse. Ann Game's *Undoing the Social* (1991); Featherstone, Hepworth, and Turner's collection on *The Body* (1991); Patricia Clough's work (1994, 1992); and several other works argue that sociological discourse has rested on abstracting out the materiality of body, place, and time and the fictions and fantasies of desire. Bringing these notions back in to writing are a start toward writing a social that pursues social justice. They give a sense of materiality back to the notion that all is discourse, without essentializing. Writing as if I had a body, was in a time and place, had desires all were the markers for me. They held me to the ground while I began to speak. They mark what Cambodia was to me, what "war" was. And they drive action.

THE BODY

I have been telling people that this was the easiest article I have ever written. The thoughts flow directly from my memories and my gut and my pain and my anger and my frustration and my confusion to my fingers to the screen in what feels like a free, unmediated channel. It is unmediated because it is from the places before my brain can objectify and analyze. It is unmediated because it is about now, from now. The subject is memories, but the writing is about how my body is experiencing the memories now. It is from my experience as I feel it at the moment I write it. All I know is that this writing seemed to be the only way to express what I discovered or did not discover. This writing seemed more real to me.

The experience of Cambodia is the bodily rendering of the memories. These memories have been so acute, so profound, so visceral that they defy my tendency to reduce all I see and feel to spectacle or text and therefore to render it what I have defined as unreal. I have written the past in the present. I have written that place in this place, with the emotions and pains of my body now marking the memory. It is only my impression. But every time I think about Cambodia, my body changes, my heart rate goes up, my tongue gets a metal taste, and I retreat back into undefined memory. Is this the real I have been looking for?

Pain has always been a cultural marker for what we define as real. Just today, in response to a student's request to waive a language requirement because the fear of speaking made her sweat and shake, I told her, "no pain no gain." Transformation rituals in many cultures exist to embed through pain the experience and the memory into the body. Meaning is literally incorporated.

Every time I think about Cambodia, the visceral, the acute that I experience attaches itself to the discourse of a war that frames not just my life but many, many others. The bodily experience that marks war is death and life collectively defined. The secret club. The post-traumatic stress. War, so rendered, has marked my life as it has so many others.

But as well, who among academics approaching middle age did not find themselves sociologists in some way because of the Vietnam War? It is a part of most of our biographies. It is sociology's biography.

DESIRE

Last spring, I used Patricia Clough's (1994) book, *Feminist Theory*, in a graduate seminar. For a long time, I could not get what she meant by the term *desire*. I even asked her when she was on campus to give a lecture. I tried to explain to my students that it was that which is untouched by conventional sociology yet defines and refines all our thought, action, writing. But desire for what? Sexual desire? Freudian desire? I desire chocolate, but I do not desire theory in the same way.

What is it? Sure, it is the place of writing about my sexual desires in sociology. It is that tingly feeling, similar to when I sat near Cecil when I was thirteen in the bleachers, that subtly drives my passion about theory and social justice? My writing, my feeling, my experiencing, my writing this article, my thinking, my wanting, and wanting and touching but not wanting to feel entirely. That moment of feeling my body is surrounded by, frames, swims in and around and through desire. The feeling of wanting more, of wanting to be satisfied, but not the feeling of being satisfied. A passage of the journal I now keep describes

both wanting and not wanting to finish this article because then it would be over. All this is desire. I think of the concept now as a verb not a noun. In other words, it is writing about desire and desiring as a method of writing.

PLACE

Chaang exists in many places at once. She was in a place I was. In Cambodia, I sat next to her, I was in her apartment, looking at her bookshelf, seeing her things. She was also in a place I was when I watched her, or my image of her, on television. She was my television war. She was in a place I was not as she became my Vietnam War. She was the distant object of my politics. My oppressed other whom I must fight for. She was my construction unaltered by interaction with her body. Now as I write, she is in a place I am not. All are constructions. All are real. What is important now is that I think about her in time and space, in relation to my embodiment and materiality in time and space.

My confusions of the bombing of Cambodia. Being there and here and in Ohio but on television. Writing from the place I am at. Now. All this is nothing more and nothing less than the necessity to see ourselves in time and place.

I have struggled to write this article from the here and now, on my laptop that roams from hammock to new antique table (ah the joys of academia) to lap as I lay on the couch watching *Days of Our Lives* on television. Whatever is here and now I have tried to write. Its only a marker. But it feels better than abstracting the telling to some universal.

THE POLITICAL

Mike reminded me of the irony of my writing about political action and Cambodia. I was there eight years ago and have done nothing to change that situation. And it has taken seven years to write anything. I got mad. It is not true. After I got back, I was obsessed with doing something. I helped my veteran friend organize a trip to return to Vietnam to start a Cambodian Education Project. The project never quite panned out. I had arranged

to go to Washington D.C. to try and testify on renewing relations with Cambodia. But the Gulf War started, and they canceled hearings. So I poured my life into speaking out against this war. I lived by the notion that if I did nothing, that was as good as killing someone with my own hands. It did not matter what I did. I stopped writing. I went to a counselor. I risked tenure. I helped organize teach-ins, protests, media events, fund-raisers.

It has taken me eight years to find a voice as an academic in all this. And what did I learn? I always thought being an activist was a good way to do theory; this just proved it to me. Any theory, modern or postmodern, is better, more “meaningful” when engaged in time, place, desire—action, experience of some kind. Theory is always written from some time, place, body, desire, be it the material point of being poised at the computer surrounded by books, anxious about promotion or some one else’s theory; or poised at a microphone at Senate hearings; or poised in a group, angry at a particular injustice, trying to decide what to do. Swimming in Cambodia, as Spaulding Grey might call it, did this for me. I searched for a real Chaang in the hopes that she could lead me to exactly what to do and found that she was no more but no less real than I was. Yet, my struggle with her struggle, my experience with my veteran friends’ experience, my own interaction with other bodies drove my action and my theory. These have contributed to an understanding that, if I may say so, sheds a different and more relevant if not more true light on people’s lives than analysts who rely only on fleeting images of journals, statistics, and other illusions of reality as their real other. The space of anxiety is a better place to do political activism and academic writing than a space of certainty. Did I do the right thing? If we wait to decide that after we know for sure, nothing will ever happen.

I have learned that the construction of a reality can stifle political action as much as it can empower it. The pages of newspapers and talk-show airwaves are filled with voices intending to stifle political action by broadcasting the discovery that the objects of our crusades for social justice are flawed. That Chaang likes Western pop music, that welfare mothers are cheats, that Pol Pot is a Marxist, that Hun Sen, the current

Cambodian ruler, commits human rights violations. That people deserving of social justice are not pure. If we act based on pure truth, we may never act at all.

And I learned just in writing this ending, that in this style of writing I am able to communicate my belief that what has happened to Cambodia we recreate every day. We do it by dissecting the political/social justice as the other. And we do it by abstracting ourselves out of sociological discourse and by abstracting ourselves as sociologists out of a material world.

In the words of Dorothy (from Kansas, not Dorothy Smith), home was right here all along.

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