

## **Outline**

**Title:** Cambodian Poetry, Prose, and Translation Today

**Number:** F219

**Date/Time:** 3:20pm - 4:35pm on Friday March 10, 2023

**Location:** Rooms 338-339, Summit Building, Seattle Convention Center,  
Level 3

### **Multiple Literary Genres Reading**

## **Background**

Cambodia has a rich but largely unknown and untranslated repertoire of diverse literature. Before the Khmer Rouge regime took over, the country had a robust arts scene with poets, musicians, philosophers, and novelists. In the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge destroyed much of the classical and contemporary literature and murdered tens of thousands of writers, artists, teachers, and intellectuals.

For many years after that, it seemed the literature emerging from Cambodia and among the Khmer diaspora centered on survival and trauma. The Cambodians who managed to flee to America and elsewhere brought with them memories that were so terrible they were reluctant to pass them on to their children. Without those memories—and with the loss of many masters of the arts—the generations of the Cambodian diaspora have had to recover a history and heritage that were lost to them in more ways than one.

This reading will introduce the literature that has been recovered and translated for the first time as well as new writing by Cambodians here and abroad: songs, poetry, stories, and folktales in English and in fresh translations; and nonfiction and poetry by younger writers. In a sense, this presentation bridges the pre- and post-KR periods. The volume *Out of the Shadows of Angkor* represents the larger arc of literature in Cambodia in a way that maintains a fidelity to writings that emerged post-KR while recognizing the need to move beyond the trauma narrative.

## **Event Description**

Moderator Sharon May will welcome attendees and describe how the reading came together as a result of working on *Out of the Shadows of Angkor: Cambodian Poetry, Prose, and Performance through the Ages*, a nearly 400-page anthology, featuring 1400 years of Cambodian literature from four continents, published by *Mānoa Journal* and the University of Hawai‘i Press in summer 2022. Panelists, including the moderator, will introduce themselves and read from their work, after which we will have a fifteen-minute Q&A with the audience.

## **Participants**

**Sharon May (moderator)** researched in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge regime and was a Wallace Stegner Fellow in fiction at Stanford University. For *Words without Borders*, she guest-edited the feature “In the Shadow of

Angkor: New Cambodian Writing.” In 2004, she guest-edited *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Writing from Cambodia*, the summer 2004 issue of *Mānoa*. With Christophe Macquet, Trent Walker, Phina So, and Rinith Taing, she guest-edited *Out of the Shadows of Angkor: Cambodian Poetry, Prose, and Performance through the Ages*, the winter 2021–summer 2022 issue of *Mānoa*.

**Sokunthary Svay** is the author of *Apsara in New York*. She is based in NYC and has received fellowships from Poets House, American Opera Projects, Willow Books, and the CUNY Graduate Center, where she is a doctoral candidate in English. Her first opera premiered at the Kennedy Center in January 2020.

**Putsata Reang** is a journalist and author of the debut memoir, *Ma and Me*. She is an alum of Hedgebrook, Kimmel Harding Nelson, and Mineral School residencies. *Ma and Me* was released in May 2022, received starred reviews in major trade journals, and was noted as a "Must Read" on many lists. It recently won the 2022 PNBA (Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association) award.

**Greg Santos** is a poet, editor, and educator. He is the author of *Ghost Face* (DC Books, 2020) and other collections, and is the editor-in-chief of *carte blanche* magazine. An adoptee of Cambodian, Portuguese, and Spanish heritage, he lives in Montreal with his family.

**Pat Matsueda (organizer)** was the managing editor of *Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing* from 1992 to 2022 and is the author of books of poetry and fiction published by El León Literary Arts and Mānoa Books.

### **Excerpts from *Out of the Shadows of Angkor***

(Examples of what panelists will read)

#### **Sharon May (from her introduction “Out of the Shadows of Angkor: A Personal and Literary Journal through Cambodian Literature”)**

It has been twenty years since I was asked to guest edit *In the Shadow of Angkor*, a special issue of *Mānoa* focusing on Cambodian literature. The moment I arrived in Phnom Penh, an American journalist wished me luck, telling me that Cambodians can't write and there wouldn't be enough material to fill a book. As it turned out, the volume demonstrated just how wrong he was. Nevertheless, many Western readers are likely to hold the same mistaken belief; compared to the literature of other Asian countries, Cambodian writing remains largely unknown to the English-speaking world. We hope that this companion volume, *Out of the Shadows of Angkor*, will help to change that.

Many people over the past thirty years have helped create *Out of the Shadows of Angkor*. They have sought out old booksellers; visited dusty and somewhat derelict libraries; tracked down authors or their relatives, in the city, countryside, and overseas; and contacted anyone who might have a photocopy, or microfilm, or posted work on the Internet. The permissions alone were a monumental task. Finding and translating the ancient texts preserved

in stone or in fragile manuscripts and in ancient languages such as Sanskrit and Old Khmer also posed challenges. For example, much of the poetry of Brah Rajasambhar (a seventeenth-century contemporary of John Donne) has been lost to time. The only complete copy of some of his poetry is a black-paper manuscript hidden in the vaults of the British Library. Fortunately, guest editor Trent Walker identified this Cambodian treasure on a research trip and translated it for the first time for this book. The story of finding this text is no less dramatic than its content.

**Putsata Reang (from her essay “At Sea, and Seeking a Safe Harbor”)**

Over the years, my mother bragged to her friends about how I had bought my own home, sent her and my father on vacations, and traveled the globe as a journalist, even when she protested certain dangerous destinations like Afghanistan. (“I brought you safely from war,” she told me. “Why do you want to go back?”) After I went against her wishes that time, she didn’t talk to me for nearly a year.

I was a good daughter. But out of my parents’ sight, I rebelled, dating people I knew they would find inappropriate. Yet I had plenty of conventional boyfriends, too, and these I brought home. I also brought home an occasional girlfriend, but my mother didn’t take any of them seriously.

I hadn’t considered, until way too late, that tacking between genders could be confusing to my mother.

Since visiting her last December, I stumbled into a newer understanding of her while watching a documentary film set in Cambodia.

In one scene, as a young Khmer bride gets her face drawn up with mascara before her wedding, the camera pans to the bride's beaming mother, who announces how happy she is that her daughter is fulfilling her duty.

*Duty.* As I considered that word, I finally understood the depth of my mother's disappointment. It was tied up in an ancient pain left over from when she was corralled into an arranged marriage after being badly beaten by her father with a steel rod for shaming the family when, instead of marrying someone chosen for her, she tried to flee.

**Greg Santos (from the introduction to poems reprinted from *Ghost Face*)**

As the story goes, my adopted parents had always wanted children but were unable to have any of their own. A family acquaintance who worked with immigrants and refugees knew my birth mother, a teenager who was unable to raise me but was steadfast about finding a loving family for me. From the time I was an infant, I was part of a supportive environment and was always made to feel cherished. My adopted family raised me to be "color blind," and would tell me I would be loved and appreciated no matter my color.

It wasn't until I became a parent with two children of my own that I realized if I were to dig deeper into my own roots, it would help them reclaim and understand the diversity of their heritages. My collection *Ghost Face*, from which the following poems are gathered, is the result of my working on this for over ten years. I view the book as a memoir in a poetic stream, touching on themes of absences, family mythologies, loss, parenthood, and ultimately hopefulness. These poems are a gift to my children and family. They are a record of my grappling with questions of identity, struggling with losses such as the devastating death of my adopted father when I was a teenager,

and learning how to embrace the full spectrum of my Canadian, Khmer, Spanish, and Portuguese heritages.

I carry on trying to fill in some of the gaps of my childhood by connecting with other adoptees and fellow Khmer diaspora writers and artists. I am so grateful to have been welcomed with such warm and generous spirits.

**Sokunthary Svay (from her essay “On Cambodian American Writers”)**

As a member of the 1.5 generation of Cambodian immigrants in the U.S., I could sense the fear of language loss within our community. When my generation was growing up, we were admonished at get-togethers for not being able to reply to our elders when they spoke Khmer to us. After so much had already been lost, the deep anxiety of losing this linguistic link was palpable. If we as the children of the first generation couldn't speak, read, or write Khmer, we couldn't communicate directly with the older generation or read the literature of our ancestors. And even those of us who could speak the language with fluency or at a practical level often missed out, during those early years of survival, on the exchange between parent and child in which we could learn about our history. My parents were typical; they didn't have time to sit and tell us myths, folktales, or family stories. Working several jobs at a time, they were frequently exhausted from cleaning other people's dirt. They were glad just to sit down at the end of the day with familiar food, knowing their children were safe.

**Possible Questions**

1. For Sharon May: can you summarize the difficulties involved in putting this volume together?

2. For Sharon May: what has been the reaction to the volume?
3. For Putsata, Greg, and Sokunthary: have you shared the volume with your family and friends? If so, how have they reacted?
4. For Putsata, Greg, and Sokunthary: how did the volume add to or change your knowledge of Cambodian literature?
5. For Sharon May: can you tell us what it was like to work with Christophe Macquet in France and Cambodia and Phina So and Rinith Taing in Cambodia? What challenges arose as a result of these distances?
6. For Putsata, Greg, and Sokunthary: how has the volume inspired you?