

Article

Apsara Aesthetics and Belonging: On Mixed-Race Cambodian American Performance

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Abstract: The image of the Apsara, a celestial dancer in Cambodian myth, is closely associated with Cambodian cultural preservation practices like Cambodian classical dance. The Apsara, its aesthetic features and its association with Cambodian cultural preservation have taken on new meaning in Cambodia's diasporic communities. In the diaspora, Apsara aesthetics have come to symbolize Cambodian heritage, history and identity, becoming a major feature of performances by Cambodian diasporic artists. However, orientalist expectations of Asian performers in the diaspora, paired with both the forgotten history of colonial intervention in Cambodian arts and state-sanctioned initiatives towards Cambodian nationalism, contributes to orientalist (and thus racialized) expectations of Cambodian diasporic performance. Mixed-race artists fail to fit neatly into the dominant narratives of Cambodian performance and have been marginalized by the Cambodian diasporic community's dominant conceptions of performance that are rooted in cultural preservation. As people that sit outside of the aestheticized markers of Cambodian-ness, mixed-race artists often struggle to have their work and their subjectivities recognized by their communities. To circumvent questions of their racial legibility, mixed-race Cambodian American artists construct performances that are strategically padded with markers of Khmer identity by engaging with Apsara aesthetics. This article will explore how three different SoCal-based artists have negotiated their Cambodian American identity and cultural politics through performance and/or performance related materials (ads, images, etc.). I will be using examples from the work of music artist and violinist Chrysanthe Tan, theater practitioner Klean Ung, and autoethnographic engagement with my own creative projects to show how examining the work of multi-racial Cambodian American performing artists can bring forth the complex dynamics of Cambodian diasporic cultural politics and belonging.



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1. Introduction, The Apsara Aesthetic

One cannot leave Cambodia Town in Long Beach, CA without seeing an Apsara on a mural, community flyer or in the shops of Cambodian American small-business owners. Dance scholar Judith Hamera notes that in Cambodian myth, "...Apsaras [are], the dancers who served as incarnations of Angkor's relief sculptures and are the celestial dancers who guard the heavens" (Hamera 2002, p. 72). This character is most associated with Cambodian classical dance and the dancers carved on the walls of Cambodian temples, like Angkor Wat. The Apsara character is often depicted featuring flowing long black hair, a slender feminine build, and a golden headdress. The wide use of this character in Cambodia and its diasporas show how important this character is to the feminine depictions of Khmer culture and identity. One might find paintings and images of Apsara dancers in Cambodian homes and cultural spaces. Images of Apsaras and Cambodian dancers are widely used in the Cambodian American community-based visual media and art, adorning hats, tee shirts, event posters and even jewelry created by Cambodian Americans of all generations. The

Apsara dancer's widely recognizable image, costuming and aesthetics, have truly become markers of Cambodian identity and cultural remembrance in the diaspora.

The Apsara's popularity in Cambodian American cultural products and productions is directly linked to the dominant cultural politics of the community, resulting in major efforts towards Cambodian cultural preservation in the United States. The Cambodian community's history as refugees and genocide survivors resulted in efforts to revive Cambodian cultural practices, like Cambodian classical dance, within its diasporic communities. For Cambodians, Cambodian classical (or court) dance and its associated characters, gestures, costuming, and aesthetics have become central figures that signify Cambodian-ness transnationally. After the devastation of the Cambodian genocide (1975 to 1979), Cambodians and Cambodian refugees all over the world sought to (re)construct their cultural practices according to strict standards of technical ability and aesthetics. Today, Cambodians all over the world see the survival of classical dance as a marker of resistance against the violent policies of the Khmer Rouge regime during the Cambodian genocide in which an estimated 90% of Cambodian classical dancers perished. Dance studies scholar Judith Hamera has theorized that the preservation of Cambodian traditional performance has played a major role in creating meaning for surviving Cambodian dance practitioners who have come to the US as refugees, adding to the complicated cultural politics of Cambodian dance and cultural preservation. Hamera says that the Apsara represents immortality for Cambodian dancers. It cannot die; thus, it is embedded in the ideal of the classical dancer for Khmer survivors (Hamera 2002, p. 78). Hamera also notes that the dancing Apsara body and the refugee body are continually reinscribed upon one another, constantly changing and opposing one another (Hamera 2002, p. 74). Thus, the Apsara stands in as a symbol of resilience and survival for Cambodians.

2. Apsara of the Past

While it is very important that the Apsara has been embraced as a symbol of post-genocide survival today, we must also consider how this symbol has operated in the past. France colonized Cambodia from 1887 to 1946. The resemblance between dancers and Cambodian temple carvings signaled an aesthetic connection to Cambodian land, history and power to the French. By colonial logic, the value of Cambodian dance and the Apsara lies in their aesthetic connection to an orientalist construction of Cambodia's past; one that the French thought was more noble than its present. The French colonial projects that worked to construct our modern understanding of Cambodian dance aesthetics and history have been hidden behind the guise of post-independence Cambodian nationalism. Both Michael Falser and Penny Edwards, historians of Cambodian history, have examined the ways orientalist colonial cultural priorities have found themselves re-iterated in Cambodian nationalism after Cambodia's independence from France. Cambodian temples and large religious monuments became tools that were used by French colonial powers to solidify connections between Cambodian performance, spectacles, history and ancient land. As Edwards details in her research, this colonial power tactic shifted the loyalties of Cambodians away from the Cambodian Monarch and to the land itself. This would benefit France as the colonizers of that land (Edwards 2007). Because of the similarities of Cambodian dancers with carved images on Cambodia's stone temples, and in conjunction with dance tours, staging and photography that occurred under French colonization of Cambodia, the Cambodian dancing body has also become linked with these manipulations of power.

Moreover, the effect of colonialism has continued to control Cambodian national identity at the will of Cambodia's French-educated elite. The dancer and her body have been shaped by colonial rhetoric that beguiles her to perpetuate a false image of authenticity. In the 1920s, Parisian spectators of Cambodian dance commented on the beauty of the costumes, but felt the performances were too long and the dancers were "unattractively massive" and "heavily built" (Cravath 2008, p. 138). Over time, Cambodian cultural markers shifted away from their previous form to suit the standards of western globalization.

Modern choreography has been truncated to suit the tastes of European audiences, while physical standards of beauty for dancers have been strictly defined to invoke coherence of feminine Cambodian identity. Falser's research points out how the creation of the Apsara dance by Queen Kossamak in post-colonial Cambodia is a prime example of the state "Feeding the movement of an 'anti-colonial cultural nationalism' . . . ironically based on French colonial ideas" (Falser 2014, p. 712). The aesthetic construction of the Apsara that we see today is from this time.

While the French manipulation of Cambodian performance is largely forgotten by Cambodians themselves, we can see that through dance, colonial ideologies have lived on within Cambodian nationalism through the adoption of a neo-colonial perspective of Cambodian culture. These neo-colonial ideas find themselves in the diaspora through the practice of Cambodian classical dance and the spread of the importance of its image. Rather than fully prioritizing the practice of the dance form itself as an important priority for the community, dance instructors hold on to the aesthetic ideals of the dance form. These ideals contribute to a transnational racialization of Cambodians, by emphasizing a person must look like the ideal performer, rather than dance like the ideal dancer.

With an eye to history, we can understand the Apsara and Cambodian dance as complicated symbols of Cambodian national identity. While today Cambodians and its diasporic communities hail the Apsara and classical dance as the quintessential marker of Cambodian-ness, its history is not free of gendered and racialized ideas of Cambodian beauty and performance standards. The Apsara aesthetic is used to construct a racialized notion of Cambodian diasporic performance, one that is rooted in neo-colonial notions of Cambodian nationalism, authenticity politics and mono-racial constructions of Cambodian-ness.

These racialized notions of performance aesthetics exclude Cambodians that fail to fit into the Apsara mold. This is especially difficult for multi-racial subjects who fail to fit neatly into the dominant narratives of Cambodian performance. If these artists sit outside of the aestheticized markers of Cambodian-ness, can their work and their subjectivity be accepted by the community? How do racial politics affect "belonging" for mixed-race Cambodian American performing artists? The remainder of this article will explore how three different So-Cal-based artists have negotiated Cambodian American identity and cultural politics through performance and/ or performance related materials (ads, images, etc.) to show how examining the work of multi-racial Cambodian American artists can bring forth complex dynamics of Cambodian diasporic cultural politics and belonging.

3. Multi-Racial Artist Engagement with Apsara Aesthetics

Mixed-race Cambodians in the diaspora, like me, struggle with cultural legibility, acceptance and belonging within Cambodian community spaces. Scholars of Critical Mixed-Race Studies (CMRS) have spoken about the complicated ways that mixed-subjects contend with issues of belonging, categorization or identification. Paul Spickard, the author of numerous books on this subject, recognizes that the mixed subject, regardless of self-identification, must always be in conversation with outsiders and how outsiders define them (Spickard et al. 2015, p. 180). In particular, he notes the differences between dominant and subdominant discourses about race for mixed-people of Asian descent. The dominant discourse regarding the racial standing of multiethnic Asian Americans, is that mixed-Asians are seen as Asian by white hegemonic standards. According to this dominant discourse, multi-racial Asians must be categorized into their Asian ethnic groups. The subdominant discourse, however, states that multi-racial Asians are not "Asian enough" to be accepted into their categorization. The subdominant discourses are driven by monoracial Asian Americans who impose their attitudes and beliefs on multiethnic Asian Americans (Spickard et al. 2015, p. 182). Leaders in the field of CMRS have recognized that mixed people are often pushed to the margins of mono-racial structures, and are often subjected to the negative feedback from society: "Monoraciality, along with rules of hypodescent, has suppressed multiracial identities through macro-aggressions and meso-aggressions involving institutions and organizations respectively that structure the behavior of actors

in the political and cultural economy” (Daniel et al. 2014, p. 13). However, by studying cultural production made by mixed-race performers and art-makers, we can see how their subjectivities and storytelling tactics can disrupt social categories. As performance studies scholar Rena Heinrich suggests, “. . . multiraciality illuminates both the dominant culture’s desired fixity of race and the various subdominant groups’ co-opting of these constructs” (Heinrich 2018, p. 11).

Mixed-race Cambodian American artists have been marginalized by the community’s dominant conceptions of Cambodian performance and cultural preservation, which rely heavily on mono-racial ideals of Cambodian-ness. Mixed-race artists do not fit neatly into these racialized notions of Cambodian performance. So, to be seen as Cambodian by others, these artists must put themselves and their work in conversation with the dominant aesthetic ideals of Cambodian performance. Mixed artists’ urge to be understood as Cambodian both reflects a longing for personal recognition from their community and interprets or critiques the overall cultural priorities of the community. By engaging with aesthetic facets of Cambodian classical dance, i.e., jewelry, crowns, accessories and costuming that occupy the Apsara aesthetic, mixed-race artists attempt to navigate the terrain of Cambodian transnational identity.

3.1. Klean Ung

Klean Ung (she/her) is an actor, theater-maker, and opera performer. She is the daughter of Chinary Ung, a well-known Cambodian composer and professor of music. Klean Ung’s solo-show *Letters from Home* (hereafter, LFH) divulges her exploration into her life, Cambodian identity, and her discovery of her Cambodian family’s story during the Cambodian genocide. The work does not shy away from Klean’s half-Cambodian, half-Sicilian¹ ethnic identity. Rather, it uncovers some of the tensions and uncomfortable realizations of cultural belonging that mixed Cambodian Americans contend with.

The artist created the show to represent her subjectivity and positionality, creating a pathway for her to be showcased as a Cambodian American artist. In her essay in Christine Su’s book, *Voices of a New Generation: Cambodian Americans in the Creative Arts* (Su 2021), she states: “Writing *Letters from Home* was so emotional and so empowering because it is my story. There is no category for me. Even in acting, there is no category for me, no one looks like me or is me. I used to shrink because of that. But with LFH, I realized that I can’t wait to write for someone to write for me or a character of me. I have to do this myself. This is my path to being seen; someone will see my work and recognize that oh, there is someone like Klean and that Klean can and must be a part of this or that project. But until then, I have to keep going, and hope that people catch up” (Su 2021, p. 233). Clearly, it is important for Ung to be recognizable as a Cambodian artist through this show. With this quote, she is seeking recognition for her subjectivity. She hopes that by telling her Cambodian American story, she is creating a pathway for her career in the arts to flourish.

We see the extension of this idea in the LFH show poster. The poster is an example of a mixed-Cambodian American artists’ irreverent engagement with Apsara aesthetics. The stunning imagery features two chest-length images of Ung back-to-back. On the left, the artist is shown with dark curly hair down behind her shoulders with a white plumeria flower in her hair above her left ear. She wears an intricate collar piece that is recognizable to Cambodians as part of the Apsara dance costume. Those of us that recognize the costuming can almost see the red and gold gleam through the image despite the sepia tone color filter. Typically, we see Apsara characters with long straight hair, but in this case, Klean showcases her naturally curly hair, opting for a plumeria flower instead of an Apsara headdress. The plumeria flower, in particular, can be read as a call out to Cambodia. The plumeria is commonly used to adorn Cambodian dancers and is used (in both floral and plastic iterations) in Cambodian dance costuming in the diaspora. With this hair styling, we might understand the artist to be highlighting natural features that call to her bi-raciality and individuality. The image of Klean on the right has much more muted

costuming. She simply wears a black baseball cap and plain black V-neck tee shirt. The two images juxtaposed signal to different histories with their costuming and gaze. On the left, the Apsara Klean somberly looks down. The image signals to Cambodia's past, thus invoking the memory of war and Cambodia's pre-genocide past. This idea is especially solidified by the choice to wear Apsara costuming, as the Apsara became a major symbol of Cambodian nationalism during Cambodia's post-colonial independence period. The baseball cap, a classic symbol of Americana, serves as the main costuming for the Klean on the right. Her gaze looks up and out, towards the future. Clearly the left side of the photo is a nod to Klean's Cambodian heritage, while the right signifies her American-ness. While these two identities may typically be seen at odds, they are shown as connected rather than separate.

The two images of Klean on the LFH flyer are also conjoined at the bottom by an upside-down image of Angkor Wat, the Cambodian temple featured on Cambodia's flag. It is surprising to see this temple turned upside down in the context of Cambodian cultural production, as it is widely considered a symbol of Cambodian nationalism and heritage. Rather than engaging with the symbolism and positioning of the temple, it seems as if the artist chose to separate the temple from its traditional upright usage.

Ung's show poster uses the aesthetics of both the Angkor Wat temple and the Apsara character to solidify her connection to Cambodia. Rather than engaging with the traditional usage of the temple and costuming pieces, she turns tradition on its head by utilizing these symbols of Cambodian history, heritage and identity to signal diasporic and bi-racial belonging and connection. This sentiment is echoed in the performance itself. Within the context of the show, the artist does not attempt to engage with preservationist performance methods, as they were not part of her artistic life or training, further demonstrating the artist's symbolic use of the Apsara aesthetic to establish a connection with Cambodian heritage and identity.

The show has gone through several iterations, from its initial 2017 and 2018 works in progress showings at the Independent Shakespeare Co. in Los Angeles and its 2018 performance at the Cambodia Town Film Festival in Long Beach. While small narrative changes have been made, the cultural statement of the piece remains the same. Ung's work expands the scope of Cambodian diasporic performance by operating outside of cultural preservationist performance styles. She centers her own interests and skills at the core of her story telling methods. LFH incorporates monologues from her past Shakespeare performances, multimedia footage from her wedding and music composed by her father. The value of the performance largely lies in its ability to demonstrate the importance of telling stories about the varying experiences of Cambodian Americans in the present by exploring theatrical performance outside of preservationist methods.

3.2. *Chrysanthe Tan*

Chrysanthe Tan (they/them) is a multi-instrumentalist, composer and sound artist, known for their skilled violin performances. Chrysanthe identifies as half Greek, half Cambodian and grew up in Long Beach, CA. Chrysanthe's artistic work has long engaged with questions of their multiraciality, Cambodian American identity and the cultural politics of their community.

Chrysanthe is often seen performing in a set of ear cuffs that are commonly used as part of Cambodian classical dance costuming. The golden metal earpieces, or *jor trachiek*, sit behind the artist's ear. Each cuff features a pointed design with traditional Cambodian filigree, springs and carved metal flowers. These earpieces are often used in full-costume performances of Cambodian classical dance and come in a variety of styles that correspond to the character played by the dancer. I sat down with Chrysanthe (virtually) to discuss their choices in costuming, and to get a sense of their ideas on the Cambodian component of their identity.

According to Chrysanthe, the purchase of the ear cuff was part of her brother's idea to do an Apsara-style photoshoot while in Cambodia. Chrysanthe modified the concept of

the shoot, saying, “I’ve never worn the full Apsara regalia or anything like that because it doesn’t quite feel right to me from a gender perspective. So that’s why for the photo shoot, I only did the cuffs, the ankles, the wrists, the headpiece, and stuff like that. Sort of minimal things”.² The jewelry and accessories for the shoot were purchased by Chrysanthe’s brother, who reported that he bought them from a shop that refused to sell these types of good to tourists, as they have high cultural value. For Chrysanthe, these cuffs hold an even higher significance with this story in mind. Being able to be recognized as Cambodian enough to purchase and wear these pieces “sort of felt special too, it felt validating”.³ The ear cuffs have remained in their performance repertoire, helping them take on performances with a tangible symbol of ethnicity, identity, and artistic expression. “The ear cuffs felt something that not only validated me as a Cambodian person, but also felt “me” as just an artist and a person, period. It felt very well integrated into who I am. I didn’t feel like I was putting on something that I didn’t feel comfortable in”.⁴

Their story of how the ear cuffs became part of their performance personae reflects a critique of the gendered components of the Apsara aesthetic. Chrysanthe is aware of the Apsara as deeply connected to Cambodian transnational identity politics, yet they have chosen to strategically place themselves in conversation with aspects of the look that adhere to their intersectional identity politics. Instead of fully falling into the femininity of the Apsara, the ear cuffs symbolize their attachment to their Cambodian lineage.

While Chrysanthe only continues to utilize small aspects of these dance costumes in their performances today, their use of these pieces is not purely aesthetic. The ear cuffs also symbolize the artist’s childhood practice of Cambodian classical dance in Long Beach. This practice was short-lived, as Chrysanthe felt as if they did not fit in with the other dancers, stating “I felt really ugly doing Cambodian classical dance. I felt. . . I felt like—I don’t know—some sort of a white whale or something, I think is how I felt. . . which is funny”.⁵

Chrysanthe’s interview prompts a reminder of the vulnerability of multiracial children participating in heritage-based arts. Chrysanthe commented on their feelings of alienation and discomfort, fueled by the strict body politics of the art form. They said, “I remember we’d start out the practice by putting our *kabun* [dance skirt] on and having it all rolled up by the parents and everything, and that annoying leotard with the snaps and stuff. . . And I just remember always kind of feeling like, “oh my gosh, I have to suck in”. The teacher also would make comments about people’s bodies too. So, I was very aware of that from a really young age—and I felt like my skin color was a big source of embarrassment for me too”.⁶

Chrysanthe expressed that they failed to fit the “image” of the Cambodian dancers we saw in posters and paintings growing up. Their lack of belonging was also confirmed by the absence of attention, affirmation, or time investment from their teachers: “I felt too defeated to even take it on as something that was going to master. I sort of just felt like it was never—I don’t even think the defeat that I felt was as conscious as it is now. . . It was more just an obvious thing. Like: “Obviously, I’m not going to be that. It’s just obvious”. It just felt like a given. I felt like I was invisible at the same time. I felt just sort of, it doesn’t matter if I’m here. . . who cares? They’re not invested in me getting good”.⁷

Chrysanthe also felt their rebellious personality did not fit in with the docile behavioral ideals of the practice. All of these perceived failings and lack of support led Chrysanthe to pursue other creative ways to express themselves, saying, “I grew disinterested with it because I was just like, oh, I’m going there just to feel bad, feel bad again. So yeah, I felt bad about myself doing it, and then I didn’t”.⁸

Instead of merely engaging with the aesthetic aspects of Cambodian cultural production, Chrysanthe turns to the popular music of Cambodia to creatively explore their heritage through music. In 2017, Chrysanthe played alongside other students from California Institute of the Arts in a recital entitled Homecoming. One of Chrysanthe’s pieces in this recital was a song entitled “Pel Reatrey/Christos Anesti”. While I did not have the honor to see this piece live, Chrysanthe pointed me to the performance posted on their YouTube page. In the video description, Chrysanthe states: “This is a medley to honor my

dual Cambodian-Greek heritage. The songs are “Pel Reatrey” (by Norodom Sihanouk) and “Christos Anesti”, a traditional Greek Easter chant. Performers: Chrysanthe Tan, Eyvind Kang, Jonathan Tang and Henry Webster Homecoming Recital California Institute of the Arts 25 April 2017”.⁹

In conversation, the artist told me that they did not seek out to create a song medley that directly reflected their ethnic identities, rather these songs happened to reflect the temporal space that the artist’s concert would fall into: “It’s not like I set out to be like, okay, let me pick a Greek thing to piece together with this. It wasn’t like that. It was more like my recital was in April. It was the height of Cambodian New Year and Greek Easter, which is when people start to sing that chant. And I was like, these things always happen at the same time for me, every April. There are people singing Christos Anesti, and there are people celebrating Cambodian New Year. It always happens at the same time. And my recital was in April. . . so I was like, this is in my head, and this is in my life. It’s bound to happen, so it’s just going to happen [during my show]”.¹⁰

Their beautiful medley was arranged in a way that felt seamless, as if the two songs belonged together. The unique instrumentation did not feel like imitation, rather it was constructed by the artist to be unique to their subjectivity. While donning their ear cuffs in this performance, Chrysanthe’s take on expressing identity politics beyond the aesthetics of the Apsara, reflects their lived experiences, their undeniable individuality and their deep thought work about their positionality within their community.

3.3. *Tiffany Lytle*

I am Tiffany Lytle, a performing artist with roots in dance, music and theater. My family lived just outside of Long Beach, in San Pedro, CA. My mother is a very resourceful and creative Cambodian refugee, who came to the United States in 1981. Years later, she settled in San Pedro, CA where she met my father, a white American rock climbing enthusiast. I grew up in San Pedro but spent every weekend for over twenty years in Long Beach’s Cambodian community as a Cambodian classical dance student. While Long Beach’s “Cambodia Town” had not yet been established in the late 80s and early 90s, my family visited the Anaheim corridor for many years to buy groceries, textiles, clothing and other specialty goods from Cambodia. The walls of the community center that became our dance rehearsal space, featuring framed posters of Cambodian Apsaras and dancers. We looked up to these images. It was in these cultural spaces that Cambodian identity, authenticity politics and racialized notions of belonging conjured the Apsara aesthetic for me and the other young Cambodians that attended class.

As a performing artist and scholar, my creative work stems from my history as a Cambodian classical dancer, as well as my scholarship in Asian American and performance studies. I spent my entire childhood and early adult life trying to grow, master, and preserve this dance form. Yet, for most of that time, my hopes for belonging and acceptance from my own community were spurned. My body was constantly a negative topic of conversation. My face and skin made me stand out from the ensemble. Even my dark brown hair was considered too light colored for performances. So, I made time to explore performance styles outside of Cambodian dance, while still dedicated to my weekly practice. In some arts forms I was still too Asian to play certain roles or advance, while in others, my racial ambiguity did not matter. I spent my free time outside of Cambodian classical dance practicing musical theater, ballet, jazz and other dance styles. Eventually I joined a professional dance company based in Los Angeles called KPA Fusion.

While I was able to grow and thrive outside of Cambodian classical dance, I always came back to it because it had become a part of me. Though I was frustrated by not being able to advance or feel like I was accepted as a Cambodian community member, I would never take for granted my many years of training in Cambodian classical dance. While my presence at Cambodian cultural events as a performer continues to perplex audiences, and make me feel like an outsider, I choose to use my creative and scholarly work as a form of activism by building representation for Cambodian Americans at large.

In 2017, I released my first song, “We”, a single that would later become part of my first music EP. The album cover for “We” features an image of me in an Apsara costume. Rather than opting for a photoshoot where I planned to wear this costume, I found an image from a performance in which I performed the Apsara dance at California State University of Long Beach around 2010. I wanted to make sure that I was featured in a way that captured the real Tiffany. For me, engaging with Cambodian classical dance and the image of the Apsara is not at all an aesthetic nod to my heritage. Instead, I use my personal collection of Cambodian dance costuming and equipment in my creative projects because they have been a major part of my life. Wearing the Apsara costume was something that I had earned. Becoming an Apsara dancer was not just an aesthetic symbol of my heritage, it was a marker of my life’s work.

“My Neary Chea Chour” is a two-part song from my 2020 LP *Cambodian Child*. The song is an adaptation of the Cambodian classical dance song, “Neary Chea Chour”. This dance is popular in the diaspora because of its relatively short length and simple choreography. The piece is usually taught to adolescent female Cambodian dancers. The lyrics of this classical dance song describe beautiful young women standing in a line, commenting on their physical beauty and synchronicity of gestures and movements. Neary Chea Chour reflects many of the internalized lessons of femininity and Cambodian-ness that dance students, like me, take with them beyond the walls of the dance studio. As young girls, our bodies were our biggest insecurities, and as dancers our bodies were constantly being critiqued and judged. Whether it was for my race, my weight or my height, my body was the thing that held me back from success in dance. We are also taught to listen and follow a leader, rather than exhibit opinions, pushback, or resistance. So, I sought to create something that spoke to a more feminist perspective in Cambodian American performance.

My version of this song, “My Neary Chea Chour”, critiques the way the feminine form is coveted in Cambodian classical dance, reminding us that the dancer is more than just a vessel for someone else’s stories and perspectives. The introduction to the song features a contemporary musical twist to the Cambodian classical dance song, using piano instead of traditional pinpeat instruments. The second part of “My Neary Chea Chour” offers a critique of the spectacle of femininity that is featured in the song’s original version. At the time that this song was written, the perspective of this song felt like it was coming from the male gaze. Instead, the song expresses the necessity for dancers’ personal development and self-confidence to combat objectification.

Lyrics:

Neary chea chour

You say I’m beautiful, but you don’t know me well.

Neary chea chour

You say I’m beautiful, but only time will tell.

How do I trust a man whose focus is on beauty?

How can you understand that my mind is my duty?

When can I be the one I love, the one who matters?

Change can only come when we can see the patterns.

My neary chea chour

Taing tour yang sros jomnan

lerk dai pout rom kbach khmer

The new lyrics are juxtaposed to some of the original lyrics, representing the complexities of cultural preservation and the desire for cultural and societal progress. This song contests orientalist perspectives on the Asian dancing body, while also recognizing the importance of heritage-based cultural production.

Despite my deep love, respect, and admiration for the practice of Cambodian classical dance in the diaspora, I recognize its limitations. I was born mixed-race, born outside of the

“acceptable” mono-racial standards of this dance form and the Cambodian community’s cultural politics. Thus, as I entered adulthood, I had to carve a path that allowed me to represent myself fully. I took my own creative endeavors more seriously, creating work that I felt reflected my growth. My creative projects now reflect my past, my present, and project an expansion for belonging within Cambodian American performance futures. Yes, I am a Cambodian classical dancer, but I am also a mixed-race Cambodian American woman who has grown into her own skin.

4. Conclusions

The Apsara and Cambodian classical dance stand in as both colonial-constructions of Cambodian cultural priorities, and as deeply meaningful symbols for Cambodian genocide survivors and diasporic subjects. The aesthetic ideal brought about by the image of the Apsara and by the practice of Cambodian classical dance in the diaspora unfortunately also bring with them racialized notions of Cambodian femininity that are used as transnational signifiers of Cambodian-ness. Recognizing this, mixed race Cambodian American artists have to make strategic choices when creating performance about their Cambodian American identities. Their performances must be padded with these markers of Khmer identity, or the artists’ racial legibility comes into question. This lack of a sense of belonging for mixed-race Cambodians only serves to marginalize Cambodians from non-Khmer or non-dominant backgrounds. Mixed-race Cambodian American artists’ engagement with these Apsara aesthetics, in conjunction with their lived experiences in Cambodian communities, show how complicated Cambodian diasporic belonging and identity politics are.

Throughout this article, we have seen how artists that operate outside of cultural preservationist arts irreverently use the aesthetics of Cambodian identity as part of their social and cultural signaling. We have explored how diasporic artists engage with physical symbols of identity and develop new meaning for those symbols through a return to “homeland”. We have also seen how engaging with Apsara aesthetics can be seen as a sign of continued resilience and belonging despite rejection in the realm of cultural preservationist arts.

By studying mixed-race Cambodian American artists, we see how important the Apsara aesthetics are to the overall diasporic community. In addition, we see how current racialized notions of performance fail to adequately define Cambodian diasporic performance. The performances and various lived experiences of mixed-race artists shows that dominant conceptions of race and ethnicity are not open categories, forcing mixed race artists to construct their identities on stage to become legible to others. Rather than keeping Cambodian culture alive in the diaspora, the racialized construction of authenticity politics can hinder the wide array of ways that Cambodian Americans can participate in the arts and support one another. To move beyond these authenticity politics, we must open our eyes to the complexities of our actual communities. By recognizing how we are racialized, and by understanding that these ideals are constructed through colonial and white hegemonic social, cultural and political processes, we can work towards expanding our signifiers and methods of cultural expression. We can work to honor our past without sacrificing the creative present and futures of the Cambodian diaspora.

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Notes

- 1 Kalean talks about her heritage in the context of the play, but these statements can also be found in her essay in Christine Su's book, *Voices of a New Generation: Cambodian Americans in the Creative Arts* (Su 2021). pp. 221–34.
- 2 Chrysanthe Tan, remote interview with author, 29 August 2023.
- 3 See notes 2 above.
- 4 See notes 2 above.
- 5 See notes 2 above.
- 6 See notes 2 above.
- 7 See notes 2 above.
- 8 See notes 2 above.
- 9 Youtube: Pel Reatrey/Christos Anesti.
- 10 See notes 2 above.

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