



May 18th, 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM

## Teaching Historic Trauma: Centering the generational trauma of Khmer youth

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Leng, Chantheari, "Teaching Historic Trauma: Centering the generational trauma of Khmer youth" (2017).  
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# TEACHING HISTORICAL TRAUMA: CENTERING KHMER-AMERICAN YOUTH

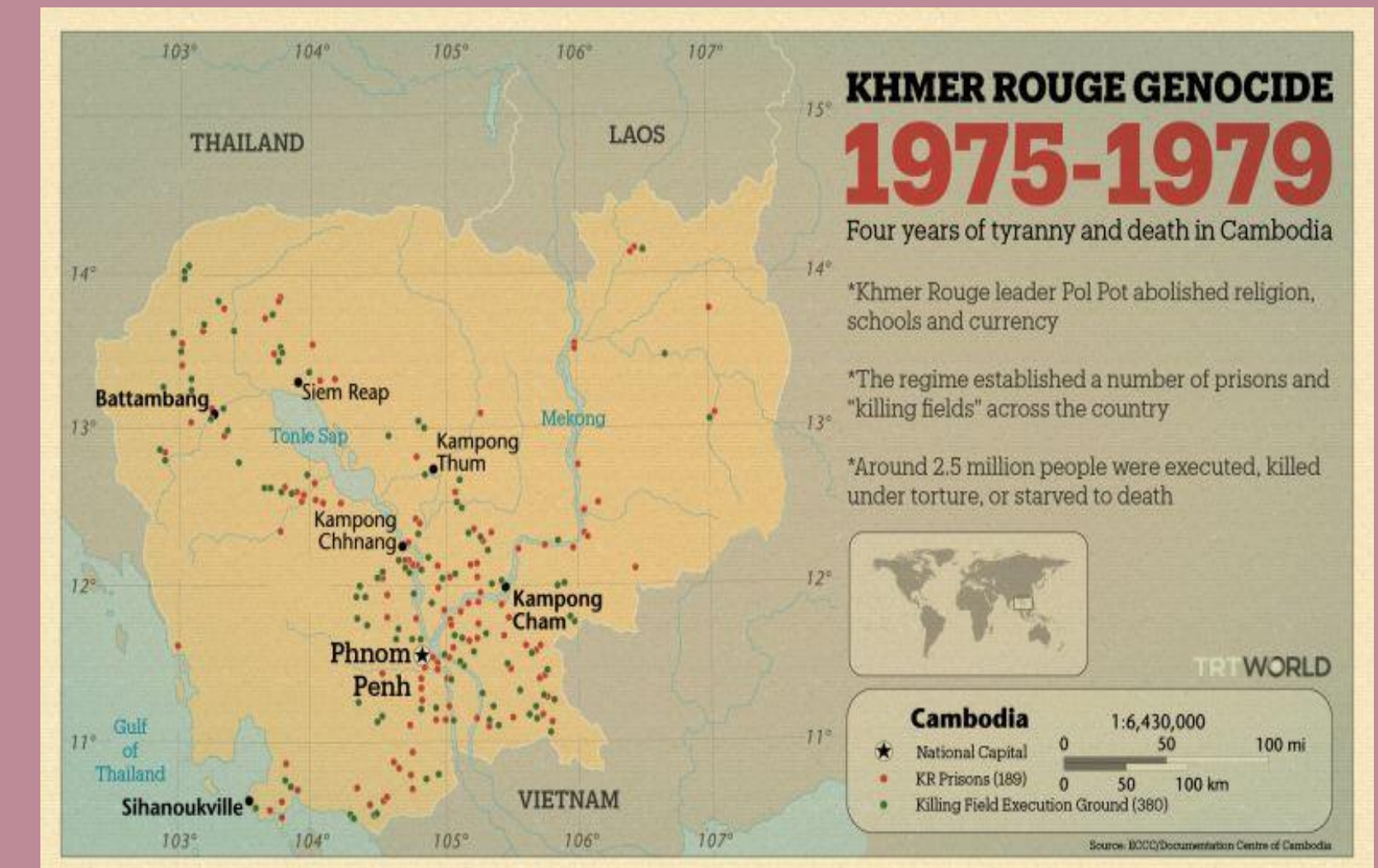
CHANTHEARI A. LENG, BA, SUPERVISED BY BRETT R. COLEMAN, PHD

## Brief Historical Background

- The Khmer Rouge was a political party led by Pol Pot, who became the 30<sup>th</sup> PM of Cambodia
- The goal was to establish “Year Zero”, and this meant burning down record of tradition, culture, and knowledge – “erasure of history”
- Intellectuals, artists, craftsmen were murdered
- Civilians were forced to do extreme agriculture, starved, beaten, and murdered
- After the genocide was considered over, survivors passed through refugee camps, awaiting their relocation

## Purpose

- Communicate the experience of historical trauma/community trauma in the Khmer community
- Emphasize the importance of knowing one's history, ethnic narrative, and power in resilience
- Shifting power to youth of this ethnically marginalized community in order to create transformative space for learning
- Focus on the stigma Khmer-Americans have on mental illness and treatment
- Continuum of ethnic cultural narrative and practices



“Killing fields and prisons run by Khmer Rouge across Cambodia.”

## Methods

- Qualitative research
- Interviews with Khmer-American community members and teenagers
- Thematic analysis of interview notes, event notes, and reading notes
- Attended events relevant to topic
- Weekly reflections



“Students having a discussion about the importance of remembering history of the Khmer genocide.”

## TRAUMA V. REMEMBERING

### Transmission of Trauma v. Resistance Through Storytelling

Communities that have experienced violent trauma can pass this trauma through biology as well as oral storytelling, viewing documentaries, and general interactions, especially within the family household. The way parents and elders who are experiencing PTSD or other mental illnesses due to trauma related to the genocide and diaspora interact with young people (born in the U.S., post-genocide) can also contribute to this transmission of historical trauma. But storytelling and the process of remembering is also used as a form of resistance from erasure and a form of validation of Khmer existence.

## Qualitative Findings

### Common Interview Themes:

- Storytelling and diaspora
- The past/current forms of resilience of Khmer people
- Mental health stigmas in Khmer community
- Defense mechanisms: silence, humor, alcoholism
- Normalizing pain but not healing
- The lack of literacy of the Khmer language by Khmer-Americans
- Community disconnect
- Erasure from conversations around social justice and in schooling curriculum
- The need to validate and follow the voice of Khmer youth
- Disaggregating education data on Asian ethnic groups

### Common Themes Found in Research:

- Mental health
- Western view of mental health being very individualized
- U.S. American imperialism in Southeast Asia
- Historical trauma being a community issue, and not individual
- Sharing of narrative passes down identity and possibly trauma
- Forms of resistance from groups experiencing historical trauma

## Curriculum Outline Draft:

Introduction	Reflection	Imagination	Continued Imagination and Action
Historical Background of the Khmer Rouge era and genocide. (Reading: Morelli, P. T. T., (1996))	What Is Historic Trauma? (Reading: Evan-Campbell, T., (2008))	Give students time to reflect on what the Khmer community, or lack there of, feels like currently.	Brainstorm organizations and institutions we would like to connect with (learn from, teach, engage)
Discuss why the Khmer narratives and experiences are not present in education, specifically history and social studies.	Have students research lecture/readings introducing historic trauma and groups dealing with historical trauma	What kind of representation of Khmer people does our community need? What representation do we already see?	Who are we going to ask for resources from? (Donations/fundraising for projects and transportation—possible partnerships)
Discussion on general timeline of how the Khmer Rouge came to power, the involvement of the Vietnamese government, and the monarchy	Discussion on what historical trauma looks like shown by other groups? (This may give students a more tangible experience that will allow them to see their own experiences more concretely).	Khmer people are very much present in the U.S., but how come it seems like the issues of this ethnic group are minor in society? (Mental health, education, poverty)	Doing further research and gathering material to create an archive on Khmer-American diaspora and the continuum of Khmer culture outside of Cambodia
The effect of American imperialism on Cambodia and other parts of Southeast Asia during this period	Writing sessions: Group reflections and personal reflections: (how can we allow pain and healing to be present? What has healing looked like in the Khmer community? What has resilience looked like in the Khmer community?)	The importance of the continuum of Khmer literature and the information it would allow one to access	Celebrate resilience, progress, and the choice to push back and be resistant to systems and institutions that force populations experiencing historical trauma to be silent and erased
	Group Poetry: “I Am”/“We Are”	Cultural teachings/Continuous historical teachings & research	Connecting and communicating with elders

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