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Who Cares?: Relationships, Recognition, and Rights in the Democratic Education of Three Cambodian Sisters in the United States

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Abstract:

This article argues that interpersonal relationships of care and cultural recognition as evidence of care are central to democratic citizenship education, particularly for students from marginalized groups. Utilizing two sets of data: 1) life history interviews of three adult Cambodian sisters and 2) three years of ethnographic data from their home and school contexts more than a decade before, the article documents their education, both in and out of school, and how that education has produced very particular kinds of citizens. Rather than seeing these forms of care as peripheral to the goals of democratic citizenship education, this article argues that they are central to ensuring the social and cultural rights of newcomers in the United States.

Have you read the book, First they Killed my Father (Ung, 2001)? It touched me so much. I wrote a letter to her [the author]… Since I was in school, I never learned anything about my culture…. I'm so glad I got to read this book. Oh my God. I love history…. If I was to be a teacher, I think this would be a book for a World History class. Some people don't know about the Khmer Rouge. People in America don't know that slavery is in every country. There's a lack of teaching.… Teachers don't make history interesting. They don't make it as fun as how it should be. In school, usually, it's like "I have to remember these things…or else."…When I was growing up, my parents would say, "You guys are bad children. You don't know how good you have it." And we were like, "Oh yeah, Khmer Rouge, whatever." Now I really know. (Nhor, 25 years old).

In Nhor's adult comments about this book, there are several elements that were not present in the curriculum of her formal schooling. She articulates opportunities for relationships and recognition across groups, excitement about history and about using words to communicate important ideas, and an intergenerational understanding of the experiences of refugee parents in the US in relation to the younger generation. As someone who knows Nhor primarily as a student who was often frustrated by her schooling experiences, I was surprised to hear that she loves history, that she wrote to the author and that she called me– 15 years after I first met her and 10 years after my formal ethnographic fieldwork ended– to tell me, a teacher educator, about something she thought teachers should be doing. Many of the themes of this study are present in what she said during that phone call. In her reading of this book about Cambodian and Cambodian American experiences, her writing of a letter to the author and her calling of me (her former tutor), she had finally used literacy to tap into the kinds of relationships and recognition she has so often been seeking in and out of schools in the US, but has had such a hard time finding.

This study investigates how care for and about others is central to democratic education and to democracy itself. It illustrates how, for these young women, care is not only a central part of how they talk about their desires for belonging and learning in school, but also central to how they frame citizenship and belonging in multicultural America. It analyzes the invisibility of Cambodians in Philadelphia (Skilton-Sylvester & Chea, in press) alongside the childhood and adult desires for relationships and recognition across cultural boundaries. This is a story of the US education of three Cambodian sisters over 15 years' time. It begins when Ty was in high school, Saporn was in middle school, and Nhor was in elementary school, and ends as they are all mothers, workers, and community members in three very distinct neighborhoods in and around Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As a research study, it explores the ways in which their education– in school, in their neighborhood growing up, and in the US economy– have prepared them in particular ways for life in a democracy. A central argument I will be making as I analyze data from their public schooling and life experiences has to do with the very specific ways their interactions with teachers and non-Cambodian peers, with the curriculum, and with the US economy have taught them that they are disconnected *others*– both as individuals and as a group– and that this has tremendous and potentially disastrous implications for them as individuals, for Cambodians as a group, for our schools, for our communities, and for our country.

One striking omission in this analysis is the role of Cambodian organizations and the Cambodian community in their development as citizens. This is not an oversight, but is rather connected to the particular lived experiences of these sisters in neighborhoods and schools in which there was not a significant Khmer presence, no Buddhist Temple, and no distinctly Cambodian cultural organizations. These organizations, temples, and Khmer churches do exist in Philadelphia, but in other parts of the city (Skilton-Sylvester & Chea, in press). If Nhor, Saporn, and Ty had grown up in South Philadelphia or in the (northern) Olney/Logan section of the city, where there are larger numbers of Khmer and Cambodian cultural and religious organizations, it is more likely that they would have had these wider interactions. However, interviews with community members in other parts of the city suggest that an emphasis on economic concerns, the dispersal of a community over several different neighborhoods in the city, along with a distrust of formal institutions because of previous interactions with the Khmer Rouge has made participation in formal institutions even within the wider Cambodian community fairly limited for many Cambodians in the city, including these sisters (Skilton-Sylvester & Chea, in press).

As the city with the fourth largest population of Cambodians in the United States, Philadelphia should feel the presence of the Khmer people in its midst. Even though the *Philadelphia Inquirer* describes Cambodians as the second most concentrated immigrant group in the city and the largest Asian group in the School District of Philadelphia, the leader of the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia says: "I think we are unknown to most Philadelphians…unless you live next to a Cambodian, you're not going to know them…I guess the squeaky wheel gets the grease…Our wheel is wobbling and about to fall off, but it doesn't make the squeaking noise" (Fifield, 2004, December 4). This quote emphasizes the limited visibility of Cambodians in the city, particularly in relation to non-Cambodians and mainstream institutions.

Although Nhor, Saporn, and Ty's parents and the majority of the Cambodian parents that I worked with during the 3-year fieldwork period (approximately 12 families in all, in West, South

and Olney/Logan sections of the city) were very committed to providing for the social, educational, and economic wellbeing of their families, most were also living in very challenging financial situations and had few interactions with formal institutions other than schools and the welfare system. In the particular family that I focus on in this article, the parents made sure that children went to school, did their homework, and obtained more education than they themselves had in Cambodia. For the most part, Nhor, Saporn, and Ty's mother and father emphasized respect for adults and for educational attainment. Certainly, these girls/young women were expected to act in ways that supported their family (e.g. helping out with younger siblings, going to the store for a parent) and did not embarrass their family or community (particularly with regard to relationships with the opposite sex, but also in terms of doing their best in school), but in their Khmer socialization, there was little emphasis on connections to the "common good" outside of their own extended family (Skilton-Sylvester, 1997).

In light of the geographically dispersed nature of the Cambodian community in Philadelphia, and their parents' limited involvement with mainstream American or local Khmer organizations, these girls' experiences as students have had a particularly powerful role to play in their democratic socialization. However, the curriculum in school was not specifically oriented toward democratic participation. In fact, as schools continue to test discrete literacy skills, push social studies and civic education to the side, and emphasize individual achievement and needs over relational justice (Abu El-Haj, 2006), we have limited the rights of these young women, and are fundamentally limiting the possibility and potential of our democracy. As Abowitz & Harnish (2006) suggest, "Rather than blaming democratic disengagement on the apathetic choices of young people, we should perhaps be looking at how we reduce, confine, diminish, and deplete citizenship meanings in our formal and taught curriculum" (p. 657) . In this article, I will suggest that what these young women have learned about participating in democracy has been taught to them not only by teachers, but also by the harsh realities of the US economy and their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lived experiences that have, as Ong (2003) suggests, positioned Cambodians as undesirable Asians, or what some have described, in contrast to the model minority myth, as "the other Asians" (Reyes, 2007).

Documenting Pathways to Adulthood in an American Democracy

Much of the literature on citizenship education has not focused on newcomers to the United States or what Rubin (2007) calls "traditionally marginalized communities." The literature that is available on civic identities, civic participation, and civic engagement often focuses on surveys done with large numbers of students. This study, in contrast, focuses on a traditionally marginalized community– Cambodians in the United States– and looks closely at three sisters' school and life experiences. There are multiple reasons why ethnographic methods were used for this longitudinal study. In the initial phases, participant observation in home and school contexts, interviews, and analysis of student assignments over three years allowed the study to emphasize these students' distinct experiences, how they changed over time, and the ways that they themselves understood their educational experiences. In the first phase of data collection, it was possible to see the very distinct paths these three sisters took through school at different points in their educational career. The later life history interviews and the analysis of those interviews made understanding their school and life experiences possible. Although

there are macro-level forces that have shaped the childhood and early adulthood of each of these young women from the same family, they have created very different Cambodian/American lives. This study seeks to explore big questions about citizenship and belonging in a multicultural society while highlighting the very particular experiences and decisions of these three sisters across time and space.

One of the most profound influences of the qualitative, inductive analysis of the data is the ways that it has made "care" the central dimension of understanding the orientation of these Cambodian girls/young women toward their educational experiences and toward the US. Although I had intermittent contact with all three sisters from time to time because of weddings and baby showers in their lives, my decision to conduct life history interviews with these participants from my initial ethnographic study more than a decade later was to find out about the role that schooling played in their understandings of their adult lives and the ways that they perceived themselves as citizens/permanent residents in the US. During these interviews, it became clear that care was not only a central way that they discussed relationships with teachers and connections to the curriculum, it was also a central term they used in talking about the United States and whether or not people in the US care about them, and therefore whether they care about this country. Interestingly, their emphasis on care, belonging, and recognition is something that is being investigated in the civic education literature as a critical, but sometimes overlooked, component of education for democracy (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Russell, 2002). As Kahne & Sporte (2008,) state:

> Theorists like John Dewey (1900) and reformers such as Deborah Meier (1995, 2002) link experiencing a sense of belonging to a caring and supportive school community with the development of commitments and capacities for democratic ways of living....When students expressed more of a sense of belonging to the school, they reported higher levels of commitments to civic participation. (p. 743)

Unfortunately, there are few examples of "belonging to a caring and supportive" school, neighborhood, or nation in the experiences and discourses of the participants in this study. What this study shows, however, are the reasons why issues of care and belonging are central to democratic education at the interpersonal, curricular, and civic participation levels.

Critical to the analysis that follows is the idea that the education of these young women into US democracy took place not only in classrooms and schools, but also in communities and workplaces where racial discrimination, invisibility, and the economic bottom line were often the most prominent "teachers." Many (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Banks, 2008; Carr, 2008; Labaree, 1997) have discussed the power of neoliberal discourses– what Wells, Slayton, and Scott (2002) call "democracy for markets"– in US schooling and society. Although Abowitz and Harnish (2006) suggest that many find it hard to see neoliberal discourse as an explicit discourse of citizenship because this model "reflects an individualism so severe as to be incompatible with the civic ideals long associated with democratic public life and common schooling" (p. 662), it will become clear in the analysis that follows that for these girls/young women, a neoliberal emphasis on testing and memorized facts in school has often morphed seamlessly into adulthood in community contexts individualism and economic mobility are the primary focus. In each case, meaningful relationships across intercultural boundaries in a caring, supportive

environment have been hard to come by in their lived experiences thus far.

Contextualizing Three Sisters' Experiences in Philadelphia

A majority of the Cambodians in Philadelphia were part of what Long (1993) describes as the Second Wave (1978-1982). This wave is sandwiched between an earlier wave (1975-1977) and a later wave (1983-1986) of Southeast Asian refugees. The data she presents from refugee camps in Thailand shows that the number of Cambodian arrivals peaked in 1979 and 1980, reaching nearly 150,000 in a single year. In describing this period of flight, Long (1993) states:

> In December 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, which was followed by China's invasion of Vietnam. Since the Khmer Rouge had massacred several million of their own people, the Vietnamese justified their invasion of Cambodia on the grounds that they were liberating the country. The Vietnamese were therefore astonished when they were subsequently universally condemned. The Vietnamese precipitated the Second Wave of Khmer refugees. Escaping fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the advancing Vietnamese, approximately 100,000 Khmer fled into Thailand.... Crossing mine fields for three days, the Khmer had little food or water. Several thousand died. Others remained stranded in the border zone for months.... The outside world did not really know what was happening in Cambodia.... The refugees themselves said that they fled both Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese forces and few wanted to return until they knew the conflict had ended. (pp. 41-44)

This description of flight, death, and confusion about the dangers of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese troops, and long periods of waiting in refugee camps is a part of many of the stories Cambodians in Philadelphia have told me. Many talk of working and starving in work camps, and watching members of their families be tortured and killed (Chan, 2003, 2004; Ong, 2003; Ledgerwood, Ebihara & Mortland, 1994; Skilton-Sylvester, 1997; Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1993; Ung, 2001).

There is some debate about the number of Cambodians who live in Philadelphia. As with many immigrant groups, census figures are often lower than community estimates, in large part because of distrust of the government and how the information will be used. In one study, in a neighborhood where local officials completed their own sample, the Cambodian population in Long Beach, California was found to be 18% higher than official census figures (US Conference of Mayors, 1999). The 2000 census puts the Philadelphia Cambodian population at 6, 570 people (Fifield, 2004, December 4), with a concentration in neighborhoods in three main sections of the city: Olney/Logan (North), West, and South Philadelphia. The Cambodian Association says Philadelphia's actual Cambodian population is three times the census figure (nearly 20,000); this higher estimate is confirmed by the director of the Southeast Asian Mutual Aid Assistance Coalition, who suggests that the size of the Cambodian population in the city "grew in the late 1990s as a result of secondary migration from California and the New England states and was estimated at the turn of the twentieth century to be somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000" (Chan, 2003,p. 173).

Although West Philadelphia, where Nhor, Saporn, and Ty grew up, was the original settlement site for many Cambodians arriving

in Philadelphia in the 1980s, in the past decade this neighborhood has seen a significant reduction in its Cambodian population. Some now suggest that there are probably only four to six Khmer families living in this region (C. Suy, personal communication, May 31, 2007; K. Chea, personal communication, June 6, 2007). The statistics on enrollment at the local elementary school tell the story in quite dramatic ways. During the 1992-93 school year, the school's population was 25.5% Asian (primarily Khmer) and 73.2% African-American. By the 1999-2000 academic year, this same elementary school was 7.6% Asian, and in the 2006-07 academic year, that number had dropped to 5.4%. The school has remained predominantly African-American, but there has been a significant shift over the past 15 years from a cluster of Cambodian families and businesses that saw themselves and their children as part of a local Cambodian community to a very small number of families. The biggest causes of this shift (with families migrating south and west) are the gentrification of this neighborhood, which borders a large university. As housing costs have risen, Cambodians have moved to find more affordable apartments.

Even at the height of the Cambodian population in West Philadelphia, the neighborhood had a majority of African-American residents. In many ways, it was as if the Cambodians had moved into what remained an African-American neighborhood. Although other immigrant groups (especially Africans) have now settled in this community, there has been little or no contact across these groups as a result of language and cultural barriers.

Who Cares?: Democratic Life for Newcomers to the United States

Ong (2003) suggests that, "to become 'good enough' citizens, newcomers must negotiate among different forms of regulation, and be taught a new way of *being cared for* and *caring for themselves* in their new world (p. xvii, emphasis mine)." With arrivals that peaked in the mid-1980's, the adult Cambodian newcomers in California with whom Ong worked, as well as those I have known in Philadelphia, have experienced significant adjustments in their flight from oppression, genocide, and war in Cambodia, and their "education" into the ways of being cared for and caring for themselves in refugee resettlement, welfare, and work institutions in the United States after years of negotiating the bureaucracy of refugee camps in Thailand.

Their children, the focus of this study, either born in the refugee camp (as Ty and Saporn were) or in the United States (as Nhor was) are still very focused on care. However, while their parents have focused on caring for themselves or being cared for in ways that ensure that they and their families have what they need to survive, and for their children to have more education and economic stability than they do, their children have also begun to focus on other levels of care. Critically, the 1.5 and 2nd generation Cambodian youth in this study are not just focused on whether or not they are cared for in instrumental terms (food, shelter, a school to go to), but whether they are cared *about* in interpersonal terms that recognize who they are as individuals and as members of a particular ethnolinguistic group in the US. This contrast in their perspectives about instrumental care and interpersonal care can be seen in the ways that Nhor describes her parents' perspective on school and her own perspective. She says of her parents:

> [My parents believe] you just go to public school. If they pick on you, you just go; it's mandatory even if you didn't understand the work, even if you didn't have enough communication with your teacher, even if

> they picked on you. School is school [and it] is good for you.

In contrast, she explains her own perspective in this way:

> A lot of teachers do not open up to their students…that's the problem right there. They don't like to talk to the student, there's not enough communication… Instead, they just teach. That's it. And then they say "I'll see you tomorrow. Bye." I think teachers need to talk to their students a lot to get involved, not just involved with their life, but have a relationship, make sure they are open and comfortable. If you don't get involved it can get very dangerous, like the Columbine shooting and stuff.

To these girls and young women, democratic education– education that would prepare them to "care" about the US– would show care toward them as individuals and as a group in school, as well as local and national contexts.

In looking at the orientations these young women have toward citizenship, many would call their actions passive rather than active (Castles & Davidson, 2000). My analysis of their childhood experiences and their adult reflections illustrate that the level of care they feel toward the United States and their level of participation in local communities and the national political process is strikingly connected to whether or not they feel cared for by American people and institutions in their daily lives. The dimensions of care they have been seeking in the United States include, as children, whether they felt cared about by teachers and acknowledged through recognition of their lived experiences in the curriculum, and, as adults, whether they see tangible evidence that the local, state or US government cares about them as individuals or as members of a Cambodian community in the United States. For example, Nhor talks about her disappointment that more of her Cambodian friends did not vote in the 2004 presidential election, saying, "I think they didn't because *they didn't care*." There is a deep sense of both interpersonal and civic disengagement. She goes on to say:

> …*When it comes down to it, people really don't care. They just care for themselves*…. I was also upset with people who had a lot of stuff to say and didn't vote at all. I didn't really like the outcome; it was just ridiculous, the percentage of people that vote…. I think money is power here. Money buys people. It's sad. I don't think that's ever going to change; this is the United States; this is a place of business. It didn't used to be like that. It's sad that it is.

Here, Nhor articulates a sense not only that people do not care about what is happening in politics or the country at large, but also that people do not seem to care about each other. To her, all they seem to care about is themselves and the bottom line. Her analysis of why her peers do not vote may, however, not capture the complex and somewhat contradictory sentiments of many youth about the importance of voting on the one hand, and the feeling that their votes will not make a difference, on the other (Chareka & Sears, 2006).

The key question these young women seem to formulate when they are asked about their role as citizens in the US is, "Does this country care about me?" In many ways, this is similar to what Valenzuela (1999) describes as the often stated desire for Latino students to "care" about their Texas high school, and the ways that the school ignores or fails to "care" about them. Instead, the school's curriculum

often "diminishes or derogates their ethnicity," and teachers and administrators "often hold their culture and community in contempt" (p. 24). In the following section, I will look at the ways that Ty, Saporn, and Nhor talk about critical relationships they have had in the United States with people and institutions outside of the Cambodian community. In particular, I will emphasize the ways that they talk about whether and how teachers, co-workers, fellow citizens, and the government have cared about them, and what people, institutions and economic realities have taught them about democratic life in the United States.

Who Cares About Me?: Learning in Relationships with/in Schools and Communities

In her ethnographic study of working class children and literacy teaching and learning, Hicks (2002) posits that "what is required for critical literacy teaching is not just the right kinds of discourses, but the right kinds of relationships… students' searches for social belonging are as much a part of learning in school as anything that might be described as cognitive or even discursive" (p. ix; 1). As adults, both Ty and Nhor talk about not having had very many friends in elementary school. Nhor explains her limited friendships in this way:

> It has a lot to do with being picked on a lot.… I was little and I was different. Different meaning certain stuff I would wear would be different from the kids because we didn't really have much and I was like always not in the crowd, like even with the Asian kids, they would have these like brand name stuff, clothes matter when you go to school, you know? Especially when you're known as the odd one, like you kinda sense it from the teachers that they don't like you as much.… I was mismatched, like my mom and I would go shopping at the thrift store and stuff, like I would have these crazy colors, like green pants and a pink shirt, and everyone would be like, "How come you never match?"…I was also kind of quiet when I was in school. I was quiet like a mouse, not talkative.

What is perhaps most striking about Nhor's limited social belonging in elementary school is 1) that the differences she found socially isolating were socioeconomic and personal rather than cultural and linguistic, and 2) that she felt disconnected from both peers and teachers. What stands out even more in their discussions of relationships at school are the limited number of positive relationships they had with teachers and administrators and how much more they talked about relationships with teachers than with peers.

Relationships with Teachers: Names, Phone Numbers, and Stereotypes

The inaugural issue of this journal suggests that key pedagogical concerns about democratic citizenship education have to do with questions such as: "How are the relationships between and amongst teachers, students, and administrators being reconsidered as an essential component of education for democracy?...How much is the form of teaching and learning, the texture of school life, being considered as essential to DCE [Democratic Citizenship Education] as the textbooks and the curriculum?" (Levinson, Schugurensky, & González, 2007). This investigation into the kinds of relationships these girls/young women had with their teachers, therefore, has a lot to do with education for democracy. In a very real way, in these relationships, these girls were trying out their relationships with the wider world of

non-Cambodians in the US for the first time. Would they be welcomed as full members of this multicultural society?

For the most part, the discourses that these young women have about relationships with teachers follow the pattern of Saporn's when she says, "At public school, they don't care about the kids… kids get out of control, the teacher just don't do anything. And that's why, that's what makes the school system not as good because they *don't care*." In spite of this overarching evaluation of teachers, Ty and Saporn each discussed an interpersonal connection with one teacher. For Saporn, it was particularly striking because her answer (in eighth grade) came in response to a question that asked her to describe a pivotal learning experience she'd had in school. I had expected her to discuss the curriculum and what she did in class. Instead, she said she liked her teacher "because she knows my name." As an adult, Saporn said "she was a very nice lady. She was very good with kids."

For Ty, the relationship with one of her high school teachers went even deeper. As a high school student, she marveled that this teacher had given out her home phone number to students. As an adult, she describes her high school English teacher in this way:

> She helped me a lot. She would stay after school and help me sometimes when I needed help. She was always there for us, you know. She looked out for us.… She was a really good teacher—very helpful…. She made me feel very comfortable. I could call to her house and talk to her about anything.

For Ty, this teacher's palpable personal care was connected to a school climate in which many of her teachers knew she was struggling and worked hard to support her. But it was this personal connection with a single teacher that stood out to her both as a student and as an adult.

Neither of these young women have anything to say about what they learned in the classes that these two teachers taught. Indeed, there was very little discussion of content or curriculum in any of their adult discussions of the positive impact of their schooling. In many ways, this is not surprising. There was very little school learning in their experiences that was not about rote memorization. The memorable learning that contributed to their understanding of participation in a democracy had to do with the ways that the power structure– here in the form of teachers– cared about them and connected to them as individuals. It is perhaps surprising, then, that Nhor has continued to be so open to learning in her adult life. Unlike her sisters, she does not tell stories about teachers that knew her name or gave out their home phone numbers.

When I observed Nhor in third grade, I was shocked that the bubbly, inquisitive girl that I knew outside of school and in her pull-out, mixed grade-level ESL classroom was reduced to such a quiet, nervous student in her third grade classroom. In discussing her with her teacher after class, he mentioned that he thought she was "on the barefoot, pregnant, obedience track." In high school, she heard this same expectation face-to-face:

> Before me, there were a lot of Cambodians that went to my school and there was a lot of gangs going on and there was a lot of kids dropping out and becoming pregnant and everything, and I guess a lot of teachers thought they know Cambodian people or Asian people.… I have this counselor that was working at my school… and I can tell he's like "you

> guys come to this country and aren't even happy to come to this country, you guys don't even try to learn, you know." And he'd look at everybody as just one category which really upset me a lot.... So one day my boyfriend dropped me off at school and he's like, "Are you gonna drop out and just have kids?" which I thought was really rude.... He was a white man and I was like, you know, "You're saying this to me because I'm Asian, because I can feel it like if I was a black girl you wouldn't be saying this to me because it would be looked at as prejudice, as color, but for an Asian girl it wouldn't really look at it like color or prejudice or anything," so I was upset.

In these examples of Nhor's most memorable relationships with teachers and administrators, gendered and racialized stereotypes overshadowed meaningful interpersonal connections.

If these teacher/student relationships were the foundation of these young women's understandings of how people in the US care about them, what were they taught about belonging in US schools and communities? First, they were taught that having authentic, respectful connections with those they perceive as "official Americans" is the exception rather than the rule. Second, they learned that these connections, when available, were often not deep or wide enough. Although Saporn's teacher knew her name, she did not seem to know too much else about her. As an adult, she says:

> My situation, like I had problems at home and I wish I could have been in a school environment where people are more caring to see what happened, you know. There's times when I didn't go to school for months at a time and the school *system didn't even care. They didn't even care.*

They were also taught that these relationships with teachers, when they existed, were based on needing help in one way or another. Ty could call her teacher if she needed help, but their relationship was not based on knowing her interests and aspirations; it was based on her need to successfully complete her coursework. When these meaningful relationships did not exist, the stereotypes of Cambodians as "less desirable Asians" (Ong, 2003) who were likely to be living in poverty and experiencing teenage pregnancy were left unchallenged and unexplored-- a missed opportunity for belonging for these young women and their peers, and a missed opportunity for teachers and schools to tap into the strengths and local understandings of an underrepresented group.

Do people in this country/city care about me?

If we think about Ty, Saporn, and Nhor's democratic citizenship education being shaped by their classroom experiences as well as their experiences as adults, it is useful to look at the ways that they discuss whether or not people and institutions in the US (outside of school) care about them as well. Before discussing the ways that they describe care in relation to their levels of belonging in the United States, I will highlight some of the ways that the Khmer language defines two ways of caring that come up in these young women's discourses about care: *caring for* and *caring about*. When I asked a local biliterate Khmer researcher about how "care" is translated in Khmer, she discussed a very interesting conversation with her own parents. At first, they said there was no difference in the Khmer language between *caring for* and *caring about*. However, a Khmer-English dictionary translates

"care about" as love; whereas "caring for," according to her parents, is more connected to someone's physical well-being. In talking about taking care of children, her father discussed "physically taking care of them and leading them in the right direction." She then asked, "Can you demonstrate care through listening to me?" and he shook his head no and said, "We share with them what's the right path and what's the wrong path" (Keo Chea, personal communication, May 4, 2009).

In what follows, Ty, Nhor, and Saporn express fairly different views of how the US has cared for them. Although Ty's definitions are much more in line with Khmer definitions of *caring for* someone or something, both Nhor and Saporn expect something more than taking care of instrumental needs– more of a *caring about* that includes being listened to and shown respect as an individual and member of an ethnolinguistic group.

What have their experiences as adults taught them about belonging in the US? Just as Ty had the most significant connection with a teacher in school, she has the most positive associations with people in the wider US caring about her health and well-being-- particularly in contrast to Cambodia. She explains:

> As an American, I feel America means freedom. It's better than in my country. I can do anything I want. *Back there they don't care* if you're harassed; if you're being harassed, they don't do anything about it. But here you can sue somebody if they harass you. They help you. Here it's like freedom. Nobody can discriminate you or harass you. You can find some help. And nobody can abuse you. Like back there, there's so many abuses too. People hitting kids and nobody saying anythingor they ignore it. Here if they see somebody hurt they tell on you. So here it's more like freedom. *People looking out for you*. That's how I think America is like. I'm proud to be in this country because there's a lot of freedom out there, and *people look out for you*. [emphasis mine here, and hereafter]

Although Ty has this general take on being cared for in the US, she feels less of a sense that city government cares about her needs. She explains:

> I don't like the inspection people who work for City Hall. I don't like them because they're not doing their job. Because when you call them, they say we're going to have somebody come inspect the wall, my backyard wall, it needs to be fixed. It's been about 2 years already, and they didn't do anything about it. Sometimes the people that work for the city, they don't really help you.... *They don't care about people*. That's what I don't like about the city people. They don't really listen to you. I see that in a lot of cases.

Nhor has a somewhat different take on how welcome/cared for she is as a Cambodian in the US. She says:

> I'm a citizen, I'm an Asian American.... For other people I know it's very hard for them to accept, like immigrants that were born here like a generation, like it's hard for them to accept that [we're] American also.... I am proud and in a way I don't really care because *when it comes down to it I know they wouldn't care to watch [out] for me anyway.* Like being an American, like sometimes

> you feel proud and sometimes you just don't… I think we overwork too much, everything is money, I hate money, I hate the word money right now. Money is like the power, you don't have money you can't do anything in America, which is really crazy.

The contrast between Ty saying, "People look out for you," and Nhor saying, "They wouldn't care to watch out for me," is striking, as is the contrast in their discussion of what it means to not have money in the US. In some ways, it has to do with the kinds of care they are talking about. Ty is talking about what would happen if she were harassed or needed to be hospitalized– a very basic level of being *cared for*, being protected from harm, even if you are poor. Nhor, other the other hand, is talking about another level of care, which has to do with being *cared about*– regardless of how much money you have. Much like her lifestyle and its alignment with her parents' practices, Ty's definition of care is more in line with the older generation's instrumental conceptions of care. Nhor's definition has more to do with being known, respected, and understood.

Unlike Ty and Nhor, Saporn positions herself very clearly as not an American in spite of the fact that she is married to an African American man– the only one in her family to have married outside of Cambodian culture. As a result, her personal relationships with non-Cambodian Americans are much more extensive and much more caring, but her understanding of the way that Americans care for her and others is much more critical. Unlike Nhor, she does not see any reason to vote. She explains:

> I wasn't born in this country. I would never want to be a citizen of this country…. Like here, *they don't care* and it's like the way the government, the way the system works here…. I wouldn't want to vote, cause I don't trust any of them…. We don't make the decision who we want to run for president. I don't, I don't have any say…. For example, people pay a lot of money in city tax, in city wages, people who work in the city. But they don't do anything…But there's other people who live out in the city where they live in the projects or they live, and *they're not being taken care of*. Like, you know, for example, the tsunami story. It's nice and all, everybody helped donate money to tsunami victims, but how about your own people that's here in this country that's poverty that's sad, you know, *nobody cares*…. Like, help yourself first before you help others….I don't feel like there's nothing I can do to change it. I can't. I don't have no authority. I'm not the decision maker and we're living in a, a country that they're too selfish. So we don't have, we don't have a say.

One of the most interesting things to me about Saporn's discussion is how politically conscious she is, alongside how clear she is that she cannot do anything to change the situation. In her case, she has many critical attitudes and much knowledge about how systems work, but doesn't feel that any action she takes will make any difference. There is a striking contrast between her rhetoric and sense of justice and the actions she takes in her life to maintain her social and economic position. In many ways, she illustrates what Castles & Davidson (2000) are talking about when they discuss new models for what it means to be a good citizen that focus on working and obeying the law, rather than a focus on taking action. When she talks about her neighborhood and the rules of conduct in it, this is the closest she comes to a

stance that includes a sense of participation in the community. As she says:

> I don't have any say because, like I respect [the rules] here, Cause if you don't mow your lawn, you get a five hundred dollar fine. And I understand that because you have to learn how to keep the house and your area nice.

This version of citizenship focuses on "doing your part to keep things nice" rather than a focus on the common good. She makes an insightful critique of the economic inequality of the United States, but does not see a role as a citizen for voicing those concerns. As the sister who is most clear about not wanting to be a legal citizen, and not wanting to exercise the political rights available to her, she has, in many ways, bought into the suburban American dream as well as language patterns, musical tastes, and decorating/clothing choices that would typically be considered American more than her sisters have.

In each case, care and economics are critical components of these young women's analysis of their relationships with non-Cambodian Americans. On the one hand, their relationships with Americans outside of the Cambodian community have taught them that if harassed or sick, they will be taken to the hospital; on the other, there is a deep sense in their narratives that what happens to them (and to others who do not have significant economic resources) doesn't really matter. In the end, their lives and their particular concerns– especially as 1.5 and 2nd generation Americans-- are not very important in the United States, unless they forget to mow the lawn. In this next section, the analysis shifts from their understanding of their individual experiences of care in the United States to the ways that the school curriculum, their neighborhoods, and the nation have recognized the contributions of Cambodians – whether or not others have been interested enough to learn about Cambodians and their experiences as a group of fellow Americans. Recognition has everything to do with visibility, and my discussions with these young women as adults and as children illustrate the ways that persistent invisibility– not being seen– feels like a form of neglect and an absence of care, not just a missed opportunity for belonging.

Who Cares About Us?: Recognition of Cambodians in the Curriculum & Beyond

Exploring the experiences of 1.5 and 2nd generation Cambodians is of particular interest in understanding citizenship in a global era in part because of the ways that citizenship has typically been conceptually linked to a single nation of origin (Castles, 2000). That is, the practice of immigrants becoming citizens raises fundamental questions about how transnational affiliations and national belonging can co-exist. In addition to this inherent contradiction in thinking about citizenship in relation to newcomers from other nations, the experience of being Asian in the United States is caught up in another, more specific contradictory frame of otherness: what Tuan (1999) has described as a tendency for Asian Americans to be seen either as "forever foreigners" or "honorary whites." In her discussion of education for democratic citizenship in relation to the experiences of Chinese immigrants in Canada, Mitchell (2001) highlights the complexity of democratic citizenship for those of Asian ancestry:

> The "generous" inclusion of "others" aids in the ongoing constitution of the beloved national community. Precisely because of Asian "otherness," however, [these] residents represent the constitutive outside

> of the nation; they can never participate fully or unproblematically as democratic citizens because they are always already located outside of it. (p. 69)

In spite of their legal status in the United States, the educational and economic struggles that Cambodians have faced in this country since their arrival in the US as refugees (Chan, 2004; Ong, 1996, 2003; Rumbaut, 1989; Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1993; Takaki, 1989) have located them even more "on the outside" or as "forever foreign" than the middle class, educationally savvy Hong Kong residents in Mitchell's study. Ong's (1996) analysis of the ways that race and class have influenced the positioning of Cambodians in the US is particularly useful in that it illustrates the ways that successful Asian-American groups have been "whitened" in a way that Cambodians have been "blackened." She writes:

> The ideological formation of whiteness as the symbol of ideal legal and moral citizenship today continues to depend on the "blackening" of less desirable immigrants. Immigrants situated closer to the black pole are seen as at the bottom of the cultural and economic ranking… Th[e] positioning of Cambodians as black Asians is in sharp contrast to the model minority image of Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese…who are celebrated for their "Confucian values" and family businesses. (p. 742)

The complicated positioning of Cambodians in the United States– and the young women in my study– includes their status as refugees and daughters of refugees, but also their status as a group that is commonly living in the inner city and below the poverty line.

As a high school student, Ty, the oldest sister, struggled with the issue of whether or not she is foreign. She says, "I guess I'm not really foreign. I mean I always think that all Asian people are foreign, that I'm foreign, but I'm not really." It is not surprising, perhaps, that the Cambodians I know in Philadelphia-- both children and adults-- consistently refer to whites and blacks as American and almost never refer to themselves as American, even if they were born in this country. They have come to see themselves as they are seen by others, as outside of the definition of what it is to be "American."

In this section, the analysis turns first to the ways that the curriculum recognized the experiences of Cambodians as part of the "American" experience. This dimension of the care argument focuses on the interest that the curriculum (and later the wider community and country) has taken in recognizing the contributions of Cambodians (and other Asian-Americans). This discussion has everything to do with the neoliberal emphasis on individual testing of narrow literacy skills that was very much a part of these sisters' schooling and even more a part of today's school context. As Taylor (2005) writes:

> When literacy is narrowly defined, children's lives are left behind. As the curriculum is narrowed by policymakers who dictate how literacy is taught in public schools, I advocate for the recovery of symbolic spaces that have been lost or taken away from both teachers and students. This means creating opportunities for students to bring together their past and present lives. It means creating *caring communities* in which children have the opportunity to share their stories, make connections between the symbolic spaces where they live, and link their family

> experiences with their experiences in school. (p. 341, emphasis mine)

In fact, when one looks at the curriculum these young women experienced as children and adolescents, one sees an incredible emphasis on copying words from a textbook and/or the blackboard and rote memorization of decontextualized facts, and a de-emphasis on anything related to their lived experience and their affiliation with other Cambodians and Asian-Americans in the United States.

When I think about the levels of belonging that the Cambodian girls in my study felt in school, I immediately think of two questions: one posed by Ty when she was a high school senior in 1995 and the other posed to Nhor when she was a high school senior in 2002. The first question came after I was reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* with Ty during her senior year. At one point in our discussion, after comparing the protagonist's experiences with school in a new language to her own, she looked up from the text and said, "*Is she the only Asian writer?"* I heard this question with a sense of shock, even though I knew that in the 3 years I had visited her school, I had not come across any mention of Asians or Asian-Americans in the curriculum. Seven years later, as I ate dinner with Ty's younger sister, Nhor, she recounted a story that started with another unforgettable question from a teacher at her largely African-American high school. The teacher told them that they were going to write an essay and that they needed to answer the following question, "*How does it feel to be black?"* As the only Asian student in the class, her response is perhaps not surprising. She, a 17-year-old Cambodian-American student, shrugged and wrote about what it feels like to be black. The level of invisibility of Asian-American experiences in the curriculum illustrated in the first question is unsettling; the level of invisibility in the second question, and perhaps even more the acceptance of that invisibility in her response, is shocking.

These two questions frame the most dramatic examples of a lack of recognition in the school curriculum, but there are others that are also illustrative. During high school, Ty's social studies textbook (published in 1990) had a statement that did not deny her Cambodian ancestry, but did deny her experiences of living in poverty in very dramatic ways. It said: "The economic gap between workers and owners has narrowed almost to the point of extinction in most capitalist countries. The poor have not become poorer. They have, in fact, become much, much richer. (field notes, May 5, 1995)" Both Nhor's example of being asked to write about what it feels like to be black, and Ty's social studies textbook's example of saying that poverty does not exist, do more than create an absence of care in the curriculum toward the experiences of these students in the United States. Each of these examples is an assault on their lived experiences.

As adults, both Nhor and Saporn talked about how their cultural experiences are not a part of what happens at school. In commenting on her experience, Nhor says,

> I remember that teacher who asked me, "How does it feel to be black?" and I thought that was so stupid. How am I supposed to know how it feels to be black? I'm Asian!... If my kids were to be in school and their teachers was asking them all these questions, I'd be really upset…. I think it happens because we're quiet and we don't really have enough programs, Asian support and stuff for our people so a lot of people think it's OK to yell across the street and say, "Hey Ching

> Chong, hey Chinese" you know. I'm not going to say it doesn't happen to black people but I… grew up with a bunch of African-Americans and I can't say that people are always yelling, "Hey nigger." For me that happens every time, and I think it has a lot to do with not enough support, not enough programs, not enough support from Asian people and everything.

The lack of recognition in school is compounded in both Nhor and Saporn's examples by a feeling that others don't understand who they are. It is also clear that the recognition of African-Americans (who are in the majority in the schools they attended) has provided recognition for some, but at the expense of others. Saporn explains the lack of cultural recognition in this way:

> You go to school and you have Black History Month.... I still don't understand this; they don't do anything for [us], like they even do stuff for Spanish too. 'Cause I guess Spanish speakers are citizens now, part of the States. But like Asians-- we aren't really as well known as that. And then here I have my daughter who is mixed [African-American and Cambodian]. She's going to go to school and yeah she's going to learn about, a lot about Black History Month. In the school system, [it's not] fair that… there is nothing about… other cultures. That's why a lot of the kids that are in the city…think, oh Asian, you're Chinese.

Their discussions of the lack of a presence of "Asian" content in the texts and units they did in school lead me back to my original data collection to see how often Asian, Asian-American, Cambodian or Cambodian-American "texts" were a part of the curriculum. In reviewing the data from three years of working with six Cambodian students across grade levels and classrooms, I found just three examples: *The Good Earth* (Buck, 1931) (a novel written by a white woman in 1931 about rural China), *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* (an assimilationist story about a Chinese-American girl who loves baseball and her Christmas tree) (Bao Lord, 1984), and a teacher and student written text about going to the temple for Cambodian New Year (a less-than-common practice for the girls in my study and many of their Cambodian classmates). In each of these cases, an idealized and/or assimilated one-dimensional version of what it means to be Cambodian in Philadelphia was emphasized. Rather than creating opportunities for connection and evidence of care in the curriculum, these few "opportunities" for recognition actually increased the feeling of not being known in the school context. As Saporn said at one point in elementary school, "Why does everyone suddenly care about Cambodian New Year?"

This same discussion of a lack of recognition and valuing of their experiences comes up in the ways that Saporn talks about the value of her native language, Khmer, in the school context, and the ways she sees herself as Asian and/or American. She says:

> And because I speak my language still where other [Cambodian] kids that consider themselves American, forget about the Cambodian language. Their language is only English, and that's why I feel so strongly. My husband, he's American, but I still feel like I'm Cambodian. I don't feel like there's a part of me that is American. [When] it comes to clothing, to stuff, you know [I'm] the materialist, but inside of me, I feel I'm not American; I'm Asian because I speak

> my language…. The same thing when I was in high school, I didn't understand why I had to take Spanish or French. English is my second language. I didn't feel like that was fair. I was telling my teacher that and they told me that I could write a letter to the government…. And I thought that was unfair. Why do I have to learn another language…?

The implicit message here is that her language is not as valuable as French or Spanish and that it is not recognized as a language that "counts" in the school context.

In this discussion of recognition, there is a persistent level of invisibility. This invisibility extends beyond their school experiences into their adult experiences. Their education in and out of school has stressed that being Cambodian--or even Asian-American– is not a central part of the fabric of this nation. This clearly has had an impact on the sense of belonging these young women have in this country, but it is also striking how their discourses of care are linked to their own sense of civic participation and engagement. They articulate their role as citizens in relationship to how (and if) they care about the United States; and their sense of caring is based, in turn, on whether or not they themselves have felt cared for– by teachers, neighbors, the curriculum, and the US government.

Care, Needs, and Rights: Individuals and Groups in a Multicultural Democracy

In spite of the fact that those concerned with democratic education typically "want schools to develop the skills and commitments that students need in order to be concerned for the well-being of others" (Kahne & Sporte, 2008, p. 739), the ways that these young women discuss care at interpersonal, intercultural, and policy levels surprised me. In addition, their emphasis on care maps onto some established theories of care that emphasize our inherent interdependence. As Noddings (2002) suggests:

> Our interdependence is part of the original condition and in no way a product of some social contract….Culture and individual prosperity sometimes lead us to believe that we are independent, but the reality is obvious to anyone who thinks deeply on it…All of us remain interdependent both economically and morally. (p. 234)

Thus far, I have argued that interpersonal relationships of care, and cultural recognition as evidence of care, are central to democratic citizenship education both in and out of school– particularly for students from marginalized groups. Although care ethicists tend to discuss needs as opposed to rights, I would like to end by arguing that care needs to be incorporated fully into a rights discourse and not considered only as a part of discussions about the needs of marginalized groups. The connection between care and rights is not just based on a belief that establishing and officially recognizing this connection would better meet the needs of these young women and others whose families are new to the United States or who speak languages other than English. I believe that an ethic of care needs to be included in our understanding of rights– particularly social and cultural rights– that are central to citizenship in a multicultural democracy. Only by incorporating care into our conception of rights can we move beyond legal protection from discrimination and toward belonging and full participation. To illustrate why I think our discussion of care and citizenship needs to be grounded in the rights of these young women rather than their needs, I would like to draw on a very concrete example

debated at the World Water Forum at the Hague in 2000 about whether access to water is a fundamental human right or a basic human need. As Barlow and Clarke (2002) state:

> The debate over whether water should be designated a "need" or a "right" was not simply a semantic one. It went to the heart of the question of who should be responsible for ensuring that people have access to water – the essence of life itself. Would it be the market or the state, corporations or governments? ...A statement, signed by the government officials attending the Ministerial Conference, declared that water was a basic "need." It said nothing about water being a universal "right."... Being designated a need, water has been subjected to the supply and demand forces of the global marketplace, where the distribution of resources is determined on the basis of the ability to pay. (pp. 79-81)

Much like the water debate, a local educator once asked me, in a purely market-driven frame, "Why do we need bilingual Asians?" As long as the frame is the needs of the market– or even the particular needs of a group or individual– it is all too easy to say that another need is more important.

If we consider social rights those that provide individual "citizens with the health, education, and welfare needed to participate fully in their cultural communities and in the national civic culture" (Banks, 2008, p. 129), it is not hard to see how caring relationships with educators and fellow citizens might be an essential component of the fulfillment of those rights. Banks (2008) also suggests that modern democracies should include cultural rights and group rights that ensure recognition and allow non-mainstream groups to become full members of society without abandoning their native languages or cultures. In each case, to embrace the full measure of social and cultural rights for Ty, Saporn, and Nhor's children, we would need to work hard to create classroom and community contexts that go beyond basic civil rights and access to pubic schools. We would need to work to create communities of care, where building meaningful relationships between teachers and students, and creating curriculum that recognizes the contributions of all members of the community, are essential precursors to engaging in pedagogies that allow students to experience democracy in and out of the classroom.

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