



**STUDY
GUIDE**

WHAT YOU ARE NOW

BY **SAM CHANSE**

DIRECTED BY **STEVE COSSON**

STUDY GUIDE BY **ALLISON BACKUS**

DESIGNED BY **EMILY BOYER**

APRIL 23-MAY 11, 2025



MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

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PRESENTS

WHAT YOU ARE NOW

BY
SAM CHANSE

STARRING

SONNIE BROWN*
GREG MARAIO*

JOE NGO*
PISAY PAO

KALEAN UNG*

SCENIC DESIGNER
NEIL PATEL^

COSTUME DESIGNER
YAO CHEN^

LIGHTING DESIGNER
BRIAN J. LILIENTHAL^

SOUND DESIGNER
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STAGE MANAGER
BRIAN M. ROBILLARD*

DIRECTED BY
STEVE COSSON+

APRIL 23-MAY 11, 2025

SAM CHANSE
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GRADES 9-12

SYNOPSIS & FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM CHANSE

Theatre Arts – *Responding*

T.R.07, T.R.08, T.R.09

English Language Arts – *Reading Literature*

RL.2, RL.5

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Health, Public, Community and Environmental Health

12.3.MH.1, 12.5.CE.2, 12.5.CE.5

12.5.CE.1, 12.5.CE.3, 12.5.CE.5, 12.5.CE.6,
12.7.CE.3, 12.3.HR.4

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RI.1, RI.4, RI.10

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HS.LS.3.4

THE DEPORTATION OF CAMBODIAN REFUGEES

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HSS.GOV.T1.09, HSS.GOV.T4.07

English Language Arts – *Reading in History and Social Science*

RCA-H.1, RCA-H.2, RCA-H.10

COMMUNIST THEORY AND PRACTICE: POL POT AND THE KHMER ROUGE, THE CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE, SLOGANS OF THE KHMER ROUGE, THE UNITED STATES' BOMBING OF CAMBODIA, RESEARCH QUESTIONS & TIMELINE

History and Social Science – *World History II,*

US History II

WHII.T7.01, USII.T3.10, USII.T3.12

English Language Arts – *Reading in History and Social Sciences*

RCA-H.1, RCA-H.2, RCA-H.9

MEMORY RECONSOLIDATION: NADER, SCHAFE, AND LEDOUX'S STUDY & DEFINITIONS

English Language Arts – *Reading in Science and Career and Technical Subjects, Reading Informational Text*

RCA-ST.2, RCA-ST.4, RI.2, RI.3, RI.4.

Comprehensive Health – *Mental and Emotional Health, Public, Community and Environmental Health & Healthy Relationships*

12.3.MH.1, 12.7.CE.3, 12.3.HR.4

Science and Technology/Engineering – *Biology*

HS.LS.1.2

SUGGESTED VIEWING: DON'T THINK I'VE FORGOTTEN: CAMBODIA'S LOST ROCK AND ROLL

History and Social Science – *World History II,*

US History II

WHII.T7.01, USII.T3.10, USII.T3.12

Music – *Responding, Connecting*

M.R.07, M.R.08, M.Co.11

PROJECT: FAMILY AND GUARDIAN INTERVIEWS

English Language Arts – *Speaking and Listening, Writing*

SL.1, SL.2, SL.4, SL.6, W.3, W.4, W.5

MAKING CONNECTIONS: "OUR WAR IS IN THE MIND" BY SOKUNTHARY SVAY

English Language Arts – *Reading, Reading*

Literature, Speaking and Listening

R.9, RL.1, RL.3, RL.5, RL.10, SL.1, SL.4

ABOUT POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER & SUGGESTED READING: MARK WOLYNN'S IT DIDN'T START WITH YOU

Comprehensive Health – *Mental and Emotional Health, Public, Community and Environmental*

Health, & Healthy Relationships

12.3.MH.1, 12.3.MH.2, 12.3.MH.11,

12.6.MH.1, 12.6.MH.2, 12.6.MH.3, 12.6.MH.5,

WHAT YOU ARE NOW SYNOPSIS

Pia, a thirty-one-year-old Cambodian-American, begins the play. Fear, she says, “has been with us since the beginning.” It is ingrained in all animals with central nervous systems. Pia introduced her brother, Darany, who demonstrates what fear looks like in rats. Pia explains that fear is critical to survival, but both instinctive and learned fear can become “deranged.” Pia shows the audience what “deranged fear” in a human might look like by showing a memory from when she was eleven. As her younger self, Pia comes across her mother, Chantrea, in the darkened kitchen, unmoving and gazing out the window.

In 2012, Pia is working in her office. A woman named Siobhan knocks and enters. Pia and Siobhan seem to have a history of some kind, and seeing Siobhan makes Pia feel on edge. Siobhan, who works for the non-profit Khmers Taking Action, explains that she is collecting the testimony of Cambodian genocide survivors for a tribunal, and she urges Pia to convince her mother to participate. Pia tells her that her mother doesn’t talk about that part of her life, but Siobhan explains that giving testimony can be empowering and tells Pia that she only wants to help. Pia reminds her that the last time she tried to “help,” things ended poorly.

In a memory from 2002, Pia, then 21, comes across Darany in the kitchen listening to the 1960s Khmer singer Ros Serey Sothea. Pia asks why he hasn’t gotten groceries and why he wasn’t at the donut shop where he works, but her brother changes the subject

by talking about Siobhan, a customer at the donut shop who he’s befriended and who has promised him a job at a non-profit. Pia asks if the non-profit will run a background check on him, and Darany again brushes her off, saying that his prison sentence was over ten years ago. Chantrea enters, angry that music is being played without headphones, and she turns the music off. She chastises Darany for not getting groceries, and he angrily goes to get them.

In 2012, Pia calls her mother from her office, and the two have a stilted conversation. Pia mentions Siobhan’s tribunal, but her mother says she “doesn’t think about that stuff.” Back in 2002, Pia and her colleague Evan chat while unboxing supplies in the UMass Lowell laboratory. They bond over their excitement for a recent scientific study by Karim Nader and Joseph E. LeDoux, which explores the unstable nature of memory. Evan asks Pia about her interest in PTSD and fear-based memories, but Pia quickly becomes standoffish. Evan admits that he’s only trying to get to know her, and when she softens, he asks her on a date. In the play’s present, Pia explains Nader and LeDoux’s experiment and its potential to change and overwrite fear memories.

In 2002, with Darany at the supermarket, Pia tries and fails to get her mother to open up. Darany returns with groceries, but they argue when Chantrea discovers he’s forgotten some. Pia shifts the conversation by mentioning her brother’s new potential job with Siobhan. Later, Darany and Siobhan

chat while smoking weed. They bond over their complicated Cambodian-American identities. Elsewhere, Chantrea approaches the boombox in the kitchen. She removes the CD inside and hides it in a drawer.

A few days later, Pia comments on the now-missing boombox, and Darany mourns the loss of his CD. Pia tells her brother that the music upset Chantrea, which Darany counters by saying she’s “always upset.” Pia shares her excitement about the Nader and LeDoux study and what it could mean for those living with PTSD, but Darany is preoccupied and less enthused than she is. In 2012, the recently broken-up Pia and Evan chat on the phone. Pia then calls Chantrea to check in about their dinner on Friday. Chantrea says that Siobhan won’t stop calling her.

In 2002, Evan invites Pia to dinner with his family. Pia shares a memory with him: when she was in fifth grade, she came home early from school excited to share a grade she had gotten on a math test with her mother. She recalls finding her mother unmoving and silent in the dark, having a “sort of fear memory,” and shares how her mother’s reaction has shaped her own cautious behavior. She describes her mother’s habit of softly patting her and her brother’s shoulders.

Chantrea again approaches the boom box. She puts on the headphones and reaches for the hidden CD but cannot manage to play it. At the community center, Darany and Siobhan chat and smoke outside the community center, where they’ve just watched a presentation on the United States’ bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Darany says that he sometimes hears his mother when she has nightmares, and Siobhan

criticizes the Buddhist monks at the center for telling survivors to focus on the present rather than the past.

Pia and Siobhan sit at the kitchen table, waiting for Darnay to return from the DMV, and their conversation quickly turns strained. Pia accuses Siobhan of dating Darnay to get closer to her Cambodian heritage, and Siobhan points out that Pia is dating Evan, who is white. In the heat of the conversation, Pia reveals that Darany was forced into a gang when he was in high school and that he was framed for a crime for which he served time. Darany calls, and Pia picks up the phone.

Darany has learned that he is not an American citizen and that because of his criminal record and illegal status, he is to be deported to Cambodia. Pia talks with Evan, and Chantrea and Siobhan search for legal advice and loopholes to no avail. Evan comforts Pia, and Darany begs Siobhan to join him in Cambodia. A few months later, Darany calls Pia from Cambodia, where he’s struggling to adjust. He says that the returnees are hated by the people in Phnom Penh and that many commit suicide. He’s desperate to hear from Siobhan and asks Pia to call her.

Back in 2012, Evan stops by Pia’s office. He apologizes for telling Siobhan to stop by but tells Pia that her goal of having her mother’s memories scientifically altered is not an “immediate solution.” He reminds her that her research is years away from any kind of practical application and that talking about trauma is often beneficial to survivors. They argue, and Evan leaves. Darany and Pia chat over Skype. He doesn’t blame Siobhan for his deportation and believes the tribunal could help their mother. He tells Pia to talk to

WHAT YOU ARE NOW SYNOPSIS

Chantrea, but Pia is doubtful since Chantrea has never opened up to her.

Pia arrives as her mother is preparing dinner. Siobhan is there, and she apologizes for never reaching out to Darany and responding poorly to his situation. Pia lashes out, telling her that she could never understand because she's "basically this white girl from Yale." Siobhan reminds Pia that her mother is Cambodian, but Pia correctly assumes that her mother immigrated to the United States before the genocide. Pia tells Siobhan that she will never understand what it's like to live and grow up alongside trauma the way she and Darany did. Siobhan wishes Pia and her family the best and leaves.

Later that night, Pia and Chantrea eat their spaghetti dinner. Pia finally tells her mother that she and Evan broke up. She then encourages her mother to reconsider the tribunal despite her dislike for Siobhan. Chantrea is firm in her refusal, and Pia goes to leave, but her mother stops her, telling her that she wants to talk to her, not Siobhan. Chantrea shares her story: her childhood accident, her career as a young singer in Phnom Penh, her love for Pia's father and their bandmates, how she survived when the Khmer Rouge seized power, and how she fled with Darany. Chantrea, Pia, and Darany's memories overlap. Chantrea begins to sing.

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FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH SAM CHANSE

Sam Chanse is an American playwright and educator. Her plays include *What You Are Now*, *Trigger*, *Monument* or *Four Sisters (A Sloth Play)*, *Lydia's Funeral Video*, and *Disturbance Specialist*. Her plays have been performed and developed at La Jolla Playhouse, The Public Theatre, Boston Court, The Lark, Ma-Yi Theater, Cherry Lane, the Civilians Ensemble Studio Theater/Sloan Project, and the Ojai Playwrights' Conference. She is the resident playwright at New Dramatists and a recent Lark Venturous Fellow and MacDowell Fellow. She has taught writing and playwriting at Columbia University, New York University, and the University of Rochester. Chanse's plays frequently explore the intersections of race, gender, science, and technology, focusing on characters who occupy some kind of marginal space. As a writer and artist, Chanse strives to create theatre that "challenges and transforms our perspective, that rouses and deepens our compassion, that connects us to one another."¹

¹ Sam Chanse, "About," Sam Chanse, accessed November 2, 2024, <https://samchanse.com/about/>.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO WRITE *WHAT YOU ARE NOW*? HOW DID THIS STORY AND THESE CHARACTERS EMERGE?

It was a couple of different things coming together. One was coming across a *New Yorker* piece years ago about how fear memories develop and function, which also profiled neuroscientist Dr. Daniela Schiller and her work with fear memories – and, crucially, the possibility of altering them. In the article, she discusses growing up with a father who survived the Holocaust, an experience he never spoke about. I was struck both by the science of trauma memories and by the idea of a kid growing up in a home embedded with these silences – with a parent whose memories you can't fathom when you desperately want to. There's a real yearning but struggle to communicate and this seemingly impassable gulf between generations. All of this resonated deeply with me – it's something that I think resonates with a lot of children of immigrants who grew up within a framework of silence, if of a different nature.

When I read the article, I had already been thinking about the trauma of deportations in Cambodian American communities, how it constitutes a double trauma - first in surviving and fleeing a genocide, and then enduring this second trauma if you or your child or another family member is deported – another severing from home, family, community. So I think I almost immediately found myself imagining this family and these characters

... I HAD ALREADY BEEN THINKING ABOUT THE TRAUMA OF DEPORTATIONS IN CAMBODIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES, HOW IT CONSTITUTES A DOUBLE TRAUMA - FIRST IN SURVIVING AND FLEEING A GENOCIDE, AND THEN ENDURING THIS SECOND TRAUMA IF YOU OR YOUR CHILD OR ANOTHER FAMILY MEMBER IS DEPORTED - ANOTHER SEVERING FROM HOME, FAMILY, COMMUNITY.

– who would become Pia, Darany, and Chantrea – as I read this article about memory and family and silences.

My family is not Cambodian, so I came to this as an outsider in a crucial way, and I was very aware of that. At the same time, I'm Asian American and multiracial (I'm mixed Chinese and Pennsylvania Dutch), and drawn to Asian American stories – so I also view myself as sharing a broader Asian American identity and experience with the characters. And I guess that – being drawn to another Asian American story – was another piece of it, in a much broader sense of how this play emerged.

WHAT YOU ARE NOW HAS HAD MULTIPLE WORKSHOPS AND STAGINGS. HOW HAS THE PLAY CHANGED SINCE ITS EARLIER ITERATIONS?

I developed this play for years before its first production, and it's gone through a lot of changes. When I was first writing it, there was another character – a friend of Chantrea, the mother. With this character, I was able to explore Chantrea more deeply, especially outside of her children. But

ultimately, it felt that this character wasn't serving the play, and removing him helped to really focus the story. There also used to be more scenes in which Pia more explicitly addresses both the science of memory and the history of the science of memory. For me, those scenes were crucial in understanding Pia's character, how deeply invested she is in her work, and how deeply she believes she needs this work – the science of fear and fear memories – to help

her mom. In the development and rewriting process, some of these scenes were cut, as there was a lot of paring down to distill the play to what was essential. Still, all the earlier versions and explorations were necessary to get a deeper understanding of the story and characters, and I definitely feel the earlier versions and explorations are alive in the play.

... ALL THE EARLIER VERSIONS AND EXPLORATIONS WERE NECESSARY TO GET A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE STORY AND CHARACTERS, AND I DEFINITELY FEEL THE EARLIER VERSIONS AND EXPLORATIONS ARE ALIVE IN THE PLAY.

WHAT YOU ARE NOW DELVES DEEPLY INTO THE SCIENCE OF MEMORY, PARTICULARLY TRAUMATIC MEMORY. DID RESEARCH PLAY A ROLE IN THIS STORY COMING TOGETHER? WHAT WAS THIS RESEARCH PROCESS LIKE?

The science research was fairly straightforward – it involved different books, articles, and videos about fear and fear-based memories – particularly on how fear and trauma memories function, key studies and discoveries that have evolved our understanding, and what might be possible moving forward. And I did have the chance to meet Dr. Schiller in person, which was incredible. She’s a remarkable scientist and human being. Taken together, the science research definitely played a role in

the story coming together. I remember one book in particular being especially helpful, and a fascinating read – Eric Kandel’s [In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science Mind](#). One of the experiments described in that book, testing for security memories as opposed to fear memories, is crucial to one of the final moments of the play.

YOU DID A RESIDENCY AT MRT A FEW YEARS BACK; WHAT WAS THAT EXPERIENCE LIKE?

That was thanks to the director-in-residence at MRT at the time, Megan Sandberg-Zakian. She had attended a very early reading at the Lark (which, devastatingly, closed during the pandemic) and invited me up for a residency that fall. It was a wonderful chance to spend some time in Lowell and get a better sense of the place and community. Megan connected me with various community leaders and organizations – Sovanna Pouy with the [Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association](#), Dahvy Tran with [Angkor Dance Troupe](#), Linda Sopheap Sou with the [Lowell National Historic Park](#) (and with Angkor Dance). They were all incredibly generous in chatting with me. Linda even gave me an unofficial tour of the city and different spaces, including stopping by an Angkor Dance Troupe event. The residency also included some writing time, and we did an internal reading at the theater on my last day. It was brief, just a couple of

[MRT RESIDENCY] WAS A WONDERFUL CHANCE TO SPEND SOME TIME IN LOWELL AND GET A BETTER SENSE OF THE PLACE AND COMMUNITY.

days, but meaningful in terms of the play’s development. I was really grateful it came together.

MANY OF YOUR PLAYS FEATURE SCIENTIFIC THEMES, INCLUDING NEUROSCIENCE, BIOLOGY, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND ECOLOGY. WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE SCIENCES THAT DRAWS YOU IN?

I guess I don’t think of the sciences as this distinct, separate concept drawing me in – I think about science as one of the many ways we, as humans, try to understand our world and ourselves. I think when I’m writing plays, I’m writing about what it is to be human in this complicated, changing, textured world, all these different interconnected facets of the world that are always colliding and shaping our experience, and the questions we have about our experience. Our natural world (and how it functions, and where it’s come from, and where it’s going) feels integral to being human, as do science and technology, and our relationship to that, as does our relationships to one another, how we try and sometimes fail to connect. Maybe what draws me in is how different pieces of the human experience are interconnected or at odds with one another and how we attempt to reconcile these interconnections and differences.

... I THINK WHEN I’M WRITING PLAYS, I’M WRITING ABOUT WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN IN THIS COMPLICATED, CHANGING, TEXTURED WORLD, ALL THESE DIFFERENT INTERCONNECTED FACETS OF THE WORLD THAT ARE ALWAYS COLLIDING AND SHAPING OUR EXPERIENCE, AND THE QUESTIONS WE HAVE ABOUT OUR EXPERIENCE.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG WRITERS?

Especially now, given the recent election and everything that is currently disrupting and devastating our country and our world, I think connecting with friends and community is so essential, nourishing, and life-giving. I’m wary of giving advice since I know everyone is in such wildly different circumstances, but I do think focusing on nurturing those friendships and relationships – not in the sense of networking or building a platform or anything, but in the sense of really paying attention to and investing in one another, investing in that community – feels healthy, and the way to build a real foundation for a sustainable career. Because we can write and write and write and submit our plays to every theater and development opportunity under the sun – and, of course, do that, too – but being a writer is a long and often isolating road, and so much of our society and how our culture is built doesn’t support being a writer. And what really sustains us in the rougher, even brutal times, is our relationships with one another and our communities.

POL POT AND THE KHMER ROUGE

POL POT, 1980. (IMDB)



Pol Pot ruled as dictator of Cambodia from 1975-1979. During this time, he took many of Mao's ideas to the extreme. Inspired by the **Cultural Revolution** and Mao's campaigns for **re-education**, Pol Pot didn't just send people deemed a threat to the countryside; he cleared every urban center and city in Cambodia, sending people to collective farms where they were often worked to death.

While Mao's **Red Guards** had destroyed religious shrines and temples, the **Khmer Rouge**, under Pol Pot's leadership, outlawed Buddhism and Islam and persecuted anyone of religious faith. More than 90% of Khmer Buddhist texts and artifacts were destroyed over the course of four years. **Anti-intellectualism** also rose far beyond what it had in the People's Republic of China, leading to the torture and death of anyone who had ever been educated in a Western country. Doctors, lawyers, scientists, teachers, and other intellectuals were targeted, as were people wearing glasses or people able to speak a

In the 1950s, Saloth Sar, a Cambodian student studying in Paris read French translations of Mao Zedong's writings. While the communist writings of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin heavily influenced Mao, this was nothing in comparison to the ways in which Mao influenced the man who became known as Pol Pot.

Sar returned to Cambodia in 1953, and by 1960, he had adopted the name "Pol Pot" and had secretly co-founded the Communist Party of Kampuchea, a party that would become known as the **Khmer Rouge**.

Pol Pot and his party's political ideology was heavily influenced by Mao's ideas surrounding the "Sinification" of Marxism. Pol Pot believed that as a formerly colonized Asian country, Cambodia's path to communism would look similar to China's. Furthermore, like China's hostile relationship with Japan, Cambodia faced a similarly tense relationship with the neighboring Vietnam. Like Mao, Pol Pot applied a nationalist bent to **Marxism-Leninism**. In 1977, once he had seized power, Pol Pot visited China and reported to a magazine:

After assessing the specific experience of Kampuchea and studying a number of instances of world revolution, and particularly under the guidance of the works of Comrade Mao Zedong, we have found an appropriate line with China's specific conditions and social situation for the realities of Kampuchea.²

foreign language. In Mao's China and even Stalin's Soviet Union, families of believed traitors were watched carefully, though not always punished for their association. In Pol Pot's Cambodia, however, targets were tortured and killed, and to avoid potential revenge plots, the **Khmer Rouge** nearly always killed their victim's spouses and children, too.

Mao had preached the value of the collective over the individual, but Pol Pot took this further; Anything that distinguished one individual from another was deemed dangerous. All citizens were forced to wear the same simple black clothing and forbidden from wearing jewelry and other adornments. Marriages had to be approved by the CPK (Communist Party of Kampuchea), and children were told to renounce their mothers and fathers and view the party as their single-parent figure.

Like Mao, Pol Pot favored poor peasants and children, believing them to be the most moldable citizens. The Khmer Rouge organized the Cambodian population into a series of three classes. The first class, called *pénhsèt* or "Full Rights," consisted of the poorest members of the peasantry and the lower-middle and middle-middle peasantry. The second grouping was *triem*, or "Candidates," a grouping made up of the upper-class peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie. The third grouping was the *phnae*, or the "Depositees,"



POL POT (HISTORYTODAY)

capitalists, foreigners, and minorities. However, these groupings were not definitive. Anyone living in an urban area after April 17, 1975 (whether they had fled there or resided there) was immediately deemed a depositee regardless of their social or economic status. These individuals were seen as traitors and

cowards, enemies of the rural utopia the CPK was trying to build.³

TERMS TO KNOW

- DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA
- NATIONALISM
- KHMER ROUGE
- ANGKAR
- YEAR ZERO
- THE KILLING FIELDS
- THE CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE
- IMPERIALISM
- COMMUNISM
- MARXISM-LENINISM
- MAOISM
- RED GUARDS
- CULTURAL REVOLUTION
- COLLECTIVIZATION
- RE-EDUCATION
- ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM
- ANTI-URBANISM
- NEW PEOPLE

² Matthew Galway, "From Revolutionary Culture to Original Culture and Back: On New Democracy" and the Kampucheanization of Marxism-Leninism, 1940-1965," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, 6, no. 2 (November 2017): 639-667, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/ach.2017.0022>.

³ Michael Mann, "Communist Cleansing: Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot," In *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, 318-52. *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/dark-side-of-democracy/communist-cleansing-stalin-mao-pol-pot/SBC0D5F39EF9C5A1F6BA171572F419E9#>.

THE CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE

APR 17, 1975 – JAN 7, 1979

When the Khmer Rouge took power, they began their rule by murdering the officials of the former government and military personnel. In a matter of days, urban areas, including the capital city of Phnom Penh, were emptied. Schools, banks, businesses, and even hospitals were closed and destroyed. Seen as enemies of the rural agrarian utopia Pol Pot sought to create, city dwellers, labeled as “New People” were forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to the country. Those who refused were killed, as were those who lagged behind. On the long treks from city to country, many individuals were told that the cities were being emptied in order to protect the citizens from American bombings.

Many of these victims, particularly the sick, disabled, and elderly, died on the way to the countryside. Those who survived were immediately put to work in labor camps and farming communes where they were overworked, underfed, and beaten. Families were separated, and communes were divided up by age and gender. Unauthorized meetings with family were forbidden and resulted in execution. Living conditions were poor, and rations were small; many forced laborers starved to death, and others perished or suffered from diseases like malaria, typhoid,



AN EXHUMED MASS GRAVE IN CAMBODIA YIELDS SKELETONS OF THE EXECUTED. OCTOBER 10, 1981. —DAVID ALLEN HARVEY/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE (USHMM—UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM)

cholera, dysentery, intestinal worms, and infection.

While many toiled to death in the countryside, other individuals were deemed too large a threat live. Intellectuals and professionals were targeted and branded as “capitalist imperialists.” They were tortured and executed along with their families. Religious individuals of various denominations were targeted and killed, Buddhists and Christians among them. However, it was the Cham Muslims who were particularly singled out; nearly 80% of the Cham population in Cambodia was eradicated during the Khmer Rouge’s reign.



LONG LINES OF REFUGEES ON THE MOVE SOME 17 KILOMETERS FROM THE CAPITAL IN CAMBODIA IN 1975. BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES. (TIME.COM)

In political prisons like the infamous S-21 (Tuol Sleng), prisoners were interrogated and tortured with waterboarding, hosing, sleep deprivation, suffocation, and various forms of maiming.⁴ Bodies piled up by the thousands, and unable to bury bodies quickly enough, individuals were marched to mass graves, today known as “Killing Fields,” where they were beaten to death. Western medicine was considered a product of capitalist-imperialism, and was no longer practiced. With nearly all doctors imprisoned or executed, the regime

relied on child medics who were encouraged to perform medical experimentation without anesthesia on political prisoners. There are only 12 known surviving prisoners of the S-21 prison.⁵

The rate of killings spiraled as the Khmer Rouge became more paranoid. Frustrated that food production wasn’t being met by the forced labor, the Khmer Rouge looked for scapegoats at every turn: the intellectuals, the monks, the petty bourgeoisie, the individualists, the New People and the secret capitalist-imperialists, all sought to undermine their rule and return Cambodia to the days before the “glorious revolution”. By the end of the reign, the increasingly paranoid Khmer Rouge had begun executing members of the party. Officials were killed for failing to meet impossibly high harvest demands or for failing to find and punish any number of imagined traitors.

By the time the Khmer Rouge was removed from power, between 2 million and 3 million Khmer citizens had died by execution, starvation, over-work, and disease. **Nearly 25% of the Khmer population had been wiped out in less than four years.**



CAMBODIANS TOIL AT AN IRRIGATION PROJECT IN KOMPONG THOM PROVINCE IN 1976. DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA. (USHMM—UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM)

⁴ David Chandler, *Voices From S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2000), featured in *The New York Times*, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/c/chandler-voices.html>.

⁵ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “S-21, Tuol Sleng - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.” www.ushmm.org, 2024, www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/s-21.

CAMBODIAN REFUGEES WAIT IN LONG LINES FOR FOOD RATIONS OF EGGS AND RICE INSIDE A CAMP ON THE THAILAND/CAMBODIA BORDER IN 1979. PHOTO BY JAY MATHER. (COLORADO.EDU)



SLOGANS OF THE KHMER ROUGE

Communist leaders Vladimir Lenin and Mao Zedong wrote swaths of manifestos and essays both before coming to power and during their reigns. Both men left behind a trail of texts detailing how they had re-designed Marxist ideology to serve their purposes. Pol Pot was a voracious reader of communist texts, Mao's writing in particular, but he did little political writing of his own.

Perhaps the most significant insight into Pol Pot's version of "Kampuchanized" communism can be found today in *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The*

Sayings of Angkar. First published in 2004, this book, compiled and researched by scholar Henri Locard, contains hundreds of short political slogans. These slogans served as Khmer Rouge propaganda, and Locard's compilation provides invaluable insight into one of the world's most ruthless dictators and his regime. In the forward to the anthology, historian David Chandler reiterates how and why these sayings were weaponized to erase thousands of years of Khmer history and culture:

...a favored method for undermining [Cambodian] institutions was one that was already deeply rooted in Cambodian culture. This involved the oral transmission of edifying sayings, rhymes, and proverbs. Before the revolution these short, commonsensical texts had provided generations of Khmer men, women, and children with diversion and moral guidance...For thousands of years they had furnished the thought-worlds of ordinary Khmer. They lay at the heart of Cambodian culture.⁶

Traditional Khmer sayings that preached wisdom and advice were replaced with brutal reminders to self-criticize and put the Party (Angkar) above all else; reminders to inform on your neighbors, to work harder, and to abolish individual

thought; Reminders that the CPK and the Khmer Rouge were always watching. These sayings and slogans were so often repeated that survivors of the Cambodian genocide carried them in their memories years and years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

SLOGANS PRAISING THE REGIME

- "Democratic Kampuchea is clean and pure: there is no corruption."
- "The Angkar has not only liberated you all, comrades, but liberated our territory, liberated our riches, liberated our liberty, gaining complete independence, and it has equally freed you from the very notion of class."
- "The Angkar is the master of the waters, master of the earth."
- "Long live the correct and incredibly clear-sighted Communist Party of Kampuchea!"

SLOGANS ON THE GLORY OF LABOR

- "The Angkar only favors those who are indefatigable"
- "While alive, you must work!"
- "There are no Sundays, only Mondays."
- "If you do not complete your task during the day, you will complete it by night."
- "Dear comrade, let's fight [work] until our last drop of blood."

⁶ David Chandler quoted in Henri Locard, *Pol Pot's Little Red Book: The Sayings of Angkar* (Chiang Mai, Thailand : Silkworm Books, 2005), xiii.

SLOGANS INSPIRED BY MAO

- "The wind from the East always vanquishes the wind from the West."
- "With the Angkar, we shall make a Great Leap Forward, a prodigious Great Leap Forward."
- "When pulling out weeds, remove them roots and all."
- "Completely get rid of the castoffs from imperialistic, feudal, and reactionary days."
- "Everyone must know how to do self-criticism and conduct criticism of one another."
- "The spade is your pen, the rice field your paper."

SLOGANS ON ENEMIES OF THE STATE

- "The sick are victims of their own imagination."
- "He who protests is an enemy; he who opposes is a corpse!"
- "Better to kill an innocent by mistake than spare an enemy by mistake!"

SLOGANS ON SURVEILLANCE AND INTERROGATION

- "The Angkar has the many eyes of a pineapple."
- "Comrades, the Angkar already knows your entire biography."
- "The Angkar never repeats the same question twice."
- "Report everything to the Angkar!"

SLOGANS ON THE DISSOLUTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

- "Give up all personal belongings: renounce your father, your mother, all your family."
- "Do not harbor private thoughts!"
- "The Angkar is the people's brain."

CAMBODIANS PULLED CARTS OF THEIR BELONGINGS BACK TO THEIR HOME VILLAGES AFTER THE FALL OF THE DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA REGIME, IN JANUARY 1979. (COURTESY OF DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA ARCHIVES) | (VOACAMBODIA.COM)



OTHER INFLUENCES: THE UNITED STATES' BOMBING OF CAMBODIA

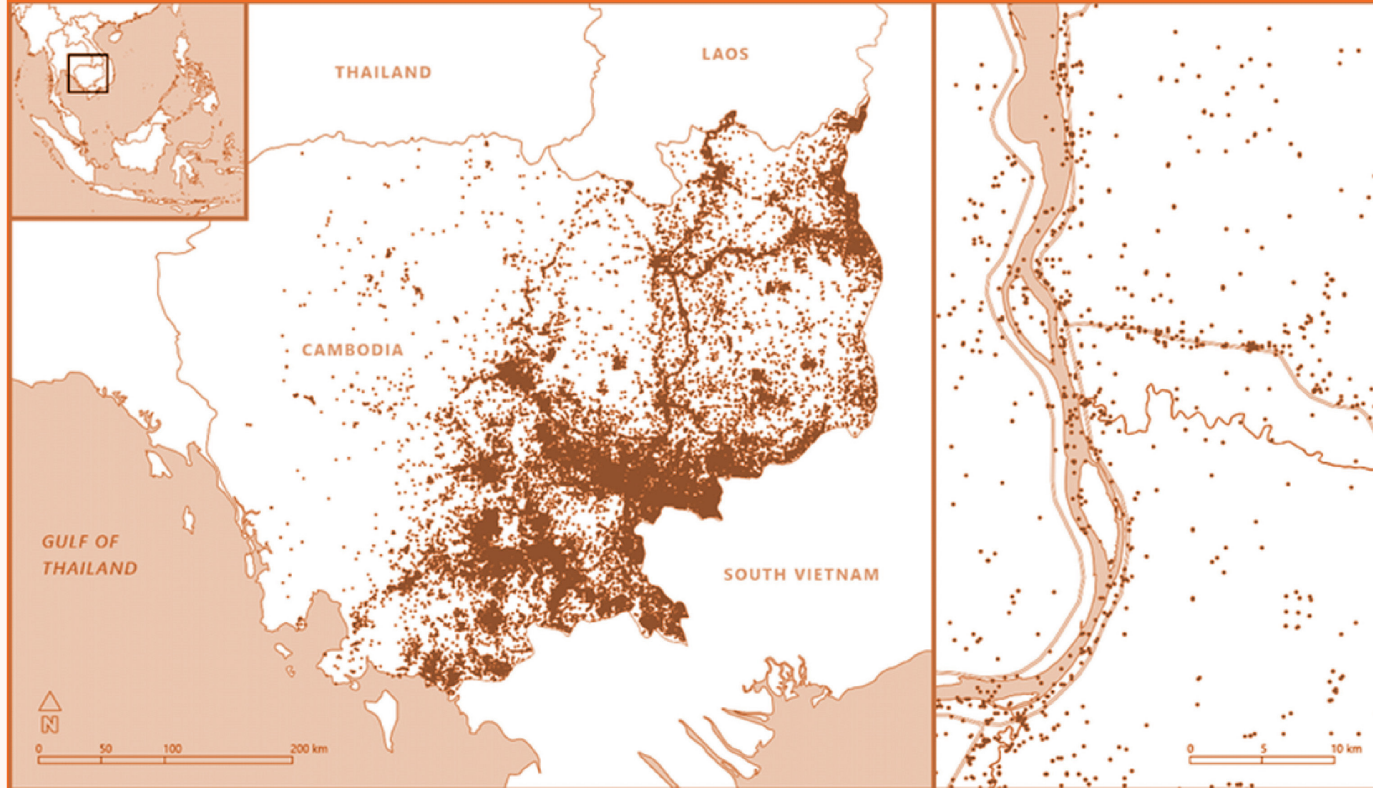
SITES BOMBED BY THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE 1965-1973. (RESEARCHGATE.NET)

By 1965, the United States was years into a losing conflict in Vietnam, supporting the Southern Vietnamese troops against the Communist Viet Cong to the north. Cambodian Prince Sihanouk cut ties with the United States, attempting, he claimed, to stay neutral in the American-Vietnam War. Sihanouk nevertheless allowed communist North Vietnamese troops to utilize Cambodian ports and take refuge in Cambodian towns and jungles. In retaliation, the United States under President Johnson, launched a number of covert targeted airstrikes along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. Bombing increased drastically in 1969, and the United States began carpet bombing the mobile headquarters of the Viet Cong as they tracked them through the Cambodian jungles.

retreating U.S. troops with cover, President Nixon ordered Operation Menu to be carried out. Operation Menu involved extensive carpet bombing deeper inside Cambodian territory, across both jungles and densely populated villages and towns. The extent of this operation was mainly kept secret, for it blatantly disregarded Nixon's promise to Congress that the bombing in Cambodia would only occur thirty kilometers from the Vietnam border, and always avoid civilian towns by a minimum of one kilometer.

Between 1965 and 1973, the United States dropped 2,756,942 tons of bombs on Cambodia, a net weight larger than the total weight of bombs dropped by all the Allies in World War II. The result was the loss of hundreds of thousands of Khmer civilian lives. One Nixon Administration official stated years later: "We had been told, as had everybody...that those carpet bombing attacks by B-52s were totally devastating, that nothing could survive." The death and destruction brought forth by the United States attacks perpetuated anti-western, anti-American sentiment among the Khmer people. The Khmer Rouge capitalized on this growing hatred and unease, shaping their propaganda tactics around American-induced devastation.

In 1970, a military coup removed Prince Sihanouk from power. Cambodian nationalist Lon Nol became prime minister with support from both the United States and South Vietnam. In order to buy the increasingly unpopular Lon Nol government time against the encroaching Khmer Rouge, and in order to provide the



U.S. BOMBING TARGETS IN CAMBODIA 1965-1973

EACH DOT REPRESENTS A SITE OF U.S. BOMBARDMENT (115,273 IN TOTAL). TARGETS IN SOUTH VIETNAM AND LAOS NOT SHOWN.

DETAIL ALONG MEKONG RIVER NEAR KRATIE

BOMBARDMENT FOLLOWED ROADS AND RIVERS, TARGETING STRUCTURES, VEHICLES, AND BOATS.



UNITED STATES AIR FORCE BOMBING CAMBODIA. (COURTESY OF CRIME MAGAZINE | AP FILE | BLOGS.DICKINSON.EDU)

Former Khmer Rouge officer Chhit Do explained that it was common practice for the Khmer Rouge to lead civilians to the bombing sites:

Every time after there had been bombing, they would take the people to see the craters, to see how big and deep the craters were, to see how the earth had been gouged out and scorched. . . Terrified and half crazy, the people were ready to believe what they were told. It was because of their dissatisfaction with the bombing that they kept on co-operating with the Khmer Rouge, joining up with the Khmer Rouge, sending their children off to go with them...⁷

By 1973, the United States Congress became aware they were being deceived about the extent of US military destruction in Cambodia. Congress ordered a halt on the operation, but by then the damage was irreparable; civilian lives had been lost, and villages destroyed, and the Khmer Rouge had amassed an additional two-hundred-thousand

troops. Two years, later the Khmer Rouge took the capital of Phnom Penh, and Pol Pot's reign of terror began.

⁷ Chhit Do, quoted in Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, "Bombs Over Cambodia," *The Walrus*, October 12, 2006, https://gsp.yale.edu/sites/default/files/walrus_cambodiabombing_oct06.pdf.



(THE WEEK.COM)

TIMELINE

- **1949** The Republic of China becomes a communist country under the leadership of Mao Zedong.
- **1950** Khmer communists form an alliance with the Vietnamese against the French colonists.
- **1953** Cambodia gains independence from France. The exiled monarch, Norodom Sihanouk returns from exile to rule the country.
- **1954** Vietnam is split between the American-backed Republican South, and the Soviet-backed communist North.
- **1956** The United States Army begins training the South Vietnamese troops.
- **1958** Chairman Mao launches the Great Leap Forward, leading to famine and the death of millions.

- **1965** The United States begins bombing the eastern boarder of Cambodia and Vietnam. Pol Pot becomes the leader of the Khmer Communist Party, he visits with Chairman Mao in the Republic of China.
- **1966** Mao's Cultural Revolution begins in China. Millions of scholars, teachers, doctors, and middle class professional are sent to the countryside to be "re-educated."
- **1967** The Cambodian Civil War begins: the communist Khmer Rouge against the government forces of the Kingdom of Cambodia
- **1969** **OPERATION MENU BEGINS:** Under president Nixon, the United States Air Force drastically escalates the bombing of the Cambodian border with Vietnam. Nixon hopes to decimate the Viet Cong armies hiding in the Cambodian jungles and keep the Khmer communists at bay. Thousands of Khmer civilian die.
- **1970** Sihanouk is removed from power. The Khmer Republic is formed under Lon Nol, whose Republican government is supported by the United States.
- **1973** The United States Congress calls for a halt of bombings in Cambodia. Khmer support for the Khmer Rouge continues to rise.
- **1975** **"YEAR ZERO"** -- The Khmer Rouge takes control of the country. People living in cities are relocated to the country and forced into labor camps. The educated middle class people are tortured and executed, and religion is banned. Millions die of starvation, disease, and execution over the course of four years. In Vietnam, the South surrenders to the Northern Viet Cong. The last American troops are evacuated, ending the Vietnam War.
- **1976** Pol Pot becomes prime minister, and Cambodia is renamed Democratic Kampuchea. Mao Zedong dies in China, bringing the Cultural Revolution to an end.
- **1977** The Cambodian genocide rages. Cambodia launches military attacks on its borders with Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. Thousands of civilians die.
- **1978** The cruelty of Pol Pot's regime leads to a rebellion in the east of Cambodia. The rebels are defeated and they retreat to Vietnam, seeking aid.
- **1979** The rule of the Khmer Rouge ends. Vietnamese troops occupy the capitol of Phnom Penh. Pro-Vietnamese Heng Samrin, is made Prime Minister of Cambodia. The Cambodian-Vietnamese War begins, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge flee to the Thai border.

- **1989** Vietnam forces exit Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge tries to wrangle back political control.
- **1993** General elections for the State of Cambodia are boycotted by the Khmer Rouge, who attack government forces.
- **1994** The party of the Khmer Rouge is outlawed in Cambodia.
- **1998** Pol Pot dies while under house arrest. In his final interview he declares that his "conscience is clear," and that everything he did, he did for his country.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How did Mao's Cultural Revolution influence Pol Pot?
2. Why did Pol Pot view Stalinism as Marxist "revisionism?"
3. What similarities exist between Stalin's reign in the Soviet Union and Pol Pot's reign in Cambodia?
4. Mao "Sinified" Marxism-Leninism to fit the socio-economic situation in China. How did Pol Pot "Kampuchanize" Marxism-Leninism?
5. Why were those in urban areas on April 17th, 1975, immediately deemed "depositees?" Explore the anti-urbanism practiced by the Khmer Rouge.
6. How did a history of Western imperialism shape Khmer Rouge ideology?
7. What led Vietnam to invade Cambodia and overthrow the Khmer Rouge? Explore Vietnamese/Khmer relations between 1960-1979.
8. What were the lasting effects of the Khmer Rouge's rule on education and literacy?
9. What is Cambodia's political climate like today? How is this a reaction against the rule of the Khmer Rouge?
10. Why were ethnic and religious minorities so heavily targeted during the Cambodian Genocide? Explore the persecution of Cham Muslims, Buddhist monks, or the Vietnamese people living in Cambodia.
11. How did the Khmer Rouge's "Great Leap Forward" differ from the Great Leap Forward in the People's Republic of China?
12. How was the Khmer Rouge influenced by the ancient rule of the Khmer Kingdom? What contradictions came with this influence?
13. How did the US bombing of Cambodia affect Khmer politics? How did it pave the way for the Khmer Rouge's regime?

THE MAIN TEMPLE OF ANGKOR WAT, AS SEEN FROM THE PHNOM BAKHENG TEMPLE. MORE THAN TWO MILLION TOURISTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD VISIT IT EACH YEAR. | [JERRY REDFERN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES](#)



DON'T THINK I'VE FORGOTTEN: CAMBODIA'S LOST ROCK AND ROLL

Music plays a vital role in *What You Are Now*. Darany's new-found love for the singer Ros Seray Sothea causes tension in his family home because Chantrea cannot bear to hear it. At the end of the play, we learn that Chantrea worked as a singer in Phnom Penh before the Khmer Rouge came to power.

John Pirozzi's 2014 documentary film, *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll*, chronicles the bustling music scene in 1960s and early 1970s Cambodia. Pirozzi's film explores the musical influences of mid-20th century Cambodia and profiles numerous Cambodian musical stars, many of whom were killed under Pol Pot's regime. *Don't Think I've Forgotten* also delves into the events that preceded the Cambodian genocide, including Cold War relations, the Vietnam War, and the national and global politics of the era. Through first-person survival accounts, archival footage, and expert interviews, this film provides excellent context for *What You Are Now* and gives students a deeper understanding of Cambodian culture, history, and music.

Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll is available to watch for free on [Kanopy](#), which is available through [Boston Public Library's digital resources](#). Access to these resources is free for all Massachusetts residents and employees with either a BPL library card or a [BPL eCard](#).



PIROZZI'S "DON'T THINK I'VE FORGOTTEN." [HTTPS://WWW.IMDB.COM/TITLE/TT2634200/](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2634200/).

"OUR WAR IS IN THE MIND" BY SOKUNTHARY SVAY



SOKUNTHARY SVAY. WWW.SOKUNTHARY.COM

Sokunthary Svay is an award-winning Khmer-American writer, musician, and opera librettist. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, she was born in a refugee camp in Thailand. Her family then immigrated to the Bronx, where Svay and her two brothers grew up. Svay's work frequently explores topics of family, music, culture, memory, and intergenerational trauma. Her books include the poetry collection *Aspara in New York* (2017) and the essay collection *Put It on Record: A Memoir-Archive* (2023).

Before or after seeing *What You Are Now* at Merrimack Repertory Theatre, have students read and discuss Svay's essay, "[Our War Is in the Mind](#)."⁸ In this essay, Svay reflects on her childhood in America, her inherited trauma, her relationship with her daughter, and her mother's love of Khmer music.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What was Svay's emotional reaction to watching *The Killing Fields* as a child?
2. What does Svay attribute to her complicated relationship with her mother?
3. How did Svay's mother's love of Khmer music offer a connection between mother and daughter?
4. Svay writes that, for many Cambodian Americans, "the war is in our minds." How is this reflected in the behavior and actions of her parents? How is this reflected in her own behavior?
5. Why does Svay want to stop writing about the Khmer Rouge?
6. What was Svay's daughter's reaction to watching *Don't Think I've Forgotten*?

"When I was a teenager, my mother, mostly unprompted, would share snippets of her life with me. We would be listening to Khmer music on loop on our multi-disc CD player—classical wedding songs by the famous Sinn Sisamouth or Ros Serey Sothea, Khmer rock legends, or 90s synth versions of their classics—and she had associations for each of them... There was rarely a Khmer song that she didn't know. This was her connection. And so it became mine, through the nostalgia it evoked of a time when I didn't exist, when my mother was a relatively free young woman."

⁸Sokunthary Svay, "Our War is in Our Minds," Asian American Writers' Workshop, April 18, 2017, aaww.org/our-war-is-in-the-mind/.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Like Sokunthary Svay, the character of Pia is given little information about the struggles her mother faced under the Khmer Rouge's regime. How did this lack of information shape the actions, emotions, and relationships of both Pia and Svay? Did they deal with this uncertainty and this intergenerational trauma in similar ways?
2. How is Svay's complicated relationship with her mother similar to Pia's and Chantrea's relationship in *What You Are Now*? How are these relationships different?
3. While Svay acknowledges that she was once "fixated" on the Cambodian genocide, she writes that "to continue to read about this time is to relive the war for the rest of my life, and there's more to my parents and my home country than that." How do you feel about this assertion? What problems can emerge from closely examining traumatic history? What problems can arise from choosing not to examine traumatic history?
4. On the uncertain fate and likely execution of the singer Sinn Sisamouth, Svay writes: "Some times it's the not knowing that makes these losses all the more tragic." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? How is this concept of grief and uncertainty explored in *What You Are Now*?
5. Consider Svay's essay's style, tone, structure, and language. What makes this a compelling piece of writing? What techniques would you like to apply to your own writing?

MORE RECOMMENDED READINGS BY SOKUNTHARY SVAY

- "CHANGING HANDS" (ESSAY)⁹
- "NO RADIO" (POEM)¹⁰
- "CODA" (ESSAY)¹¹
- "I AM THE ASPARA'S DAUGHTER" (POEM)¹²
- "MANCHESTER CHINATOWN 2022" (ESSAY)¹³

⁹Sokunthary Svay, "Changing Hands," *Hyphen: Asian American Unabridged*, December 1, 2008, <https://hyphenmagazine.com/magazine/issue-16-consumption-winter-2008/changing-hands>.

¹⁰Sokunthary Svay, "No Radio," Asian American Writers' Workshop, July 11, 2017, <https://aaww.org/no-radio-sokunthary-svay/>.

¹¹Sokunthary Svay, "Coda," Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network, October 5, 2022, <https://dvan.org/2022/10/coda-sinn-sisamouth/>.

¹²Sokunthary Svay, "I am the Aspara's daughter," Poets.org, March 24, 2021, <https://poets.org/poem/i-am-apsaras-daughter>.

¹³Sokunthary Svay, "Manchester Chinatown 2022," Asian American Writers' Workshop, April 15, 2022, <https://aaww.org/manchester-chinatown-2022/>.

ABOUT POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

"Still, all is not silent: words, images, and impulses that fragment following a traumatic event reemerge to form a secret language of our suffering we carry with us. Nothing is lost. The pieces have just been rerouted." -Mark Wolynn

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health disorder affecting those who have witnessed or experienced traumatic events, including assault, death, injury, combat, and abuse. PTSD was first recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, following a period of extensive research on Vietnam veterans, Holocaust survivors, and victims of sexual assault.

While PTSD only entered the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) in 1980, its existence prior to that is well documented. The symptoms of PTSD have been associated with various diagnoses at different points in time. What we now call PTSD has been known and referred to as *shell shock*, *railway spine*, *soldier's heart*, and *combat stress reaction*.

SYMPTOMS OF PTSD INCLUDE

- Intrusive memories associated with the traumatic event that are frequently and involuntarily recalled.
- Disassociations and flashbacks where individuals feel and act like the traumatic event is recurring.
- Difficulty remembering certain aspects of the traumatic event.
- Strong, persistent feelings of guilt, fear, shame, or anger.
- Strong startle response, aggression, and hypervigilance.
- Difficulty concentrating and sleeping.
- Self-destructive and impulsive behavior.
- Active avoidance of external reminders (people, objects, sounds, activities, places) associated with the experienced trauma.¹⁴

TREATMENT FOR PTSD

Treatment for PTSD frequently involves therapy and/or medication. Therapy treatments include Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Prolonged Exposure Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and group

therapy. Medications prescribed for PTSD include SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) and SNRIs (serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors), both of which are regularly used to treat anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders.

¹⁴Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, "Appendix: Exhibit 1.3-4, DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria for PTSD," in *TIP 57: Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) 57 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/box/part1_ch3_box16/.

ABOUT POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

RESOURCES FOR PTSD

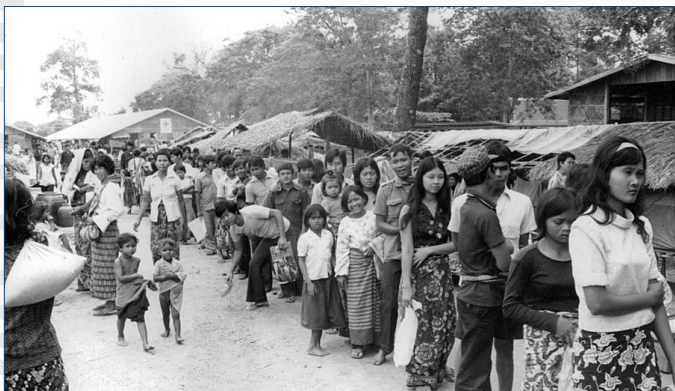
- Call or text the Suicide & Crisis Hotline at 988, or chat [online](#). This hotline is confidential and available 24/7 for those in crisis and for those concerned about someone in crisis.
- Find a clinician, therapist, psychiatrist, or support group online at [Anxiety & Depression Associates of America](#), [International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies](#), or [Psychology Today](#).
- Learn about coping skills, relaxation techniques, and other strategies online at [The National Center for PTSD](#) and [PTSD Coach Online](#).



PTSD AMONG CAMBODIAN REFUGEES

A 2005 study found that roughly 62% of American Cambodian refugees who lived in Cambodia during the reign of the Khmer Rouge suffered from PTSD (compared to only 3% of all Americans diagnosed with PTSD).¹⁵ Before immigrating, the majority of these refugees experienced starvation,

violence, and the loss of loved ones in their native country. The study also showed that 70% of these refugees experienced or witnessed violence (including assault and robbery) after immigrating to the United States.



CAMBODIAN REFUGEES. "TREATING LONG-TERM WAR TRAUMA FOR CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE SURVIVORS" BY CHJ FELLOW SOREATH HOK. (PHOTO VIA SOREATH HOK) | CENTERFORHEALTHJOURNALISM.ORG

¹⁵ Grant N. Marshall et al., "Mental Health of Cambodian Refugees 2 Decades After Resettlement in the United States," *JAMA* 294, no. 5 (August 3, 2005), <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/201332>.

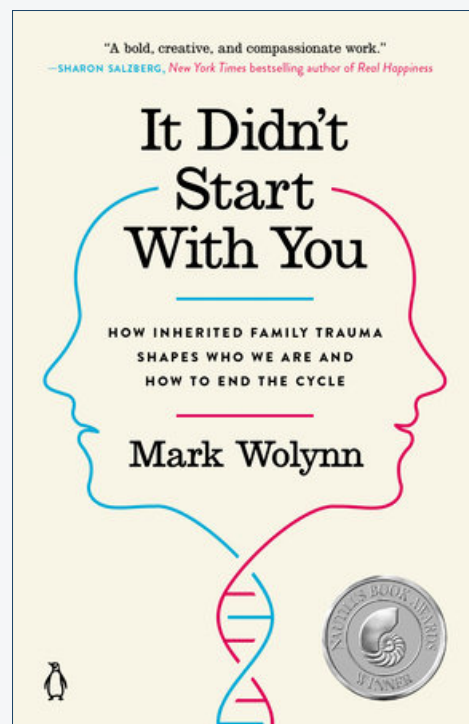
SUGGESTED READING:

MARK WOLYNN'S *IT DIDN'T START WITH YOU*

Mark Wolynn is a writer and educator who is considered a leading expert in inherited trauma. His 2016 book, *It Didn't Start With You*, explores the roots and complexities of intergenerational trauma while engaging with relevant scientific and clinical research. In Chapter 1, "Traumas Lost and Found," Wolynn introduces and characterizes traumatic memory and inherited trauma by illuminating the discoveries of numerous renowned psychiatrists and neurobiologists and drawing on his own case studies.

It Didn't Start With You is currently available for free, in its entirety, on Internet Archive.¹⁶ After seeing *What You Are Now*, have students read and discuss the short first chapter of the book, refining their understanding of trauma and inherited trauma and making connections between Wolynn's text and Sam Chense's play.

NOTE: This chapter makes reference to suicidal ideation, which is not acted upon.



WOLYNN'S "IT DIDN'T START WITH YOU." | [PENGUINRANDOMHOUSE.COM](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com)

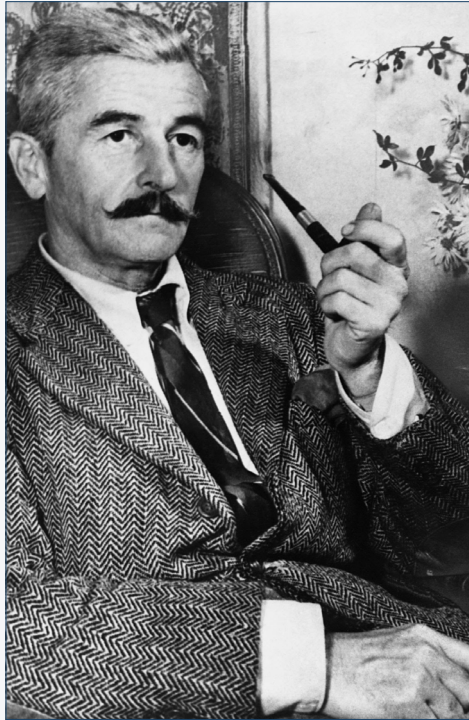
COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What happens during traumatic incidents? How are memories affected?
2. What did Freud and Jung observe about traumatic memory?
3. What is "the speechless terror" described by van der Kolk? Why does it occur?
4. What was the turning point in Jesse's treatment?
5. Who is Rachel Yehuda, and what did she discover about inherited trauma?
6. What is cortisol?
7. What did the author do to help Gretchen "deepen her understanding" of her emotional turmoil? What did Gretchen realize?
8. What is "epigenetic change"? What is its purpose, according to Yehuda?

¹⁶ David Wolynn, *It Didn't Start With You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2017).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Wollynn begins this chapter with an epigraph from William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." How does this quotation set the tone for the rest of the chapter? Do you agree with this quotation? Why or why not?
2. How does Wollynn's description of trauma and inherited trauma shape your understanding of the characters in *What You Are Now*? Consider the characters of Pia, Darany, Chantrea, and Siobhan.
3. Wollynn notes that "not all effects of trauma are negative," in part because these effects can aid us in survival. Yehuda makes a similar point by asking: "Who would you rather be in a war zone with? Somebody that's had previous adversity [and] knows how to defend themselves? Or somebody that has never had to fight for anything?" Does *What You Are Now* explore the positive as well as the negative effects of trauma? If yes, how so?
4. Consider the title of Sam Chanse's play. Why might she have chosen this title? Does the title infer something about trauma? Inherited trauma? Who might the "you" in the title refer to?



AMERICAN WRITER WILLIAM FAULKNER (1897 - 1962), CIRCA 1940. FAULKNER, BEST KNOWN FOR HIS SERIES OF NOVELS KNOWN AS THE YOKNAPATAWPHA CYCLE, WAS AWARDED THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE IN 1949. (PHOTO BY © CORBIS/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES)

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Looking to delve deeper into the science of inherited trauma? Wollynn's second chapter, "Three Generations of Shared Family History: The Family Body," explores the cellular biology and epigenetics of inherited trauma.

THE DEPORTATION OF CAMBODIAN REFUGEES

In May of 1975, President Gerald Ford passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, which allowed around 13,000 South Asian refugees to enter the United States legally. This act was passed to aid and resettle the many Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian people who had been displaced during the Vietnam War.

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act into law. This law was designed to deter illegal immigration by taking punitive measures against noncitizens who had committed a crime or overstayed their visas. In 2002, the United States and Cambodian governments signed a repatriation agreement negotiating deportation processes for Cambodian Americans with criminal records who were not US citizens.

Since then, more than one thousand Cambodian Americans have been deported back to Cambodia. The majority of these deportees are men in their twenties and thirties who were born in refugee camps. Many have no memories of the home country they are forced to return to. Reporting on the issue,

journalist Vivian Ho notes that the formerly convicted deportees have "already repaid their full debt to society when they [are] sent back... They are, for all intents and purposes, handed a second sentence – this time for life."¹⁷ Many of those deported leave behind families, communities, and careers, and many face language barriers, economic difficulty, isolation, addiction, and other mental health struggles after leaving the United States. The Khmer Vulnerability Aid Organisation (KVAO), a non-profit seeking to aid, settle, and integrate newly arrived deportees, reported that 8% of its members have died since returning to Cambodia, some by suicide.

In 2022, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, met with President Joe Biden. He urged the United States to reevaluate and "amend" the 2002 repatriation agreement due to the "humanitarian aspects of the issue."¹⁸ Nine months later, US representatives Judy Chu, Pramila Jayapal, Zoe Lofgren, and Ayanna Pressley introduced the Southeast Asian Deportation Relief Act of 2023 (SEADRA),

a bill that would "limit the Department of Homeland Security's ability to remove"

"We must restore humanity to our broken immigration system. Deporting over 15,000 Southeast Asian American refugees who fled violence and genocide decades ago is a betrayal to our duty to refugees and needlessly rips apart families."

– Rep. Judy Chu (CA-28)

¹⁷ Vivian Ho, "Like becoming a refugee again: They paid for their crimes. The US deported them anyway," *The Guardian*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/17/cambodia-prison-sentence-deportation>.

¹⁸ Ry Sochan, "PM asks US for 'humanitarian' shift in deportation policy," *The Phnom Penh Post*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/pm-asks-us-humanitarian-shift-deportation-policy>.

THE DEPORTATION OF CAMBODIAN REFUGEES

members from Southeast Asian refugee communities, and “strengthen the process of reopening deportation cases, ensuring that Southeast Asian refugees who have already been deported can return home to the U.S.”¹⁹

Have students read and consider the proposed **Southeast Asian Deportation Relief Act of 2023**.²⁰

DISCUSS

1. Consider Sec. 2 of this proposed bill.
 - a. What are some of the findings presented?
 - b. What is the purpose of sharing these findings? How do they shape your understanding of the proposed bill?
2. What would this proposed bill achieve? Summarize Sec. 3, 4, and 5.
3. What arguments could be made to support this proposed bill?
4. What arguments could be made in opposition to this bill?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- **“Like becoming a refugee again”** by Vivan Ho, *The Guardian*
- **“US Deports Dozens More Cambodian Immigrants, Some for Decades-Old Crimes”** by Denise Couture and Ashley Westerman, NPR
- **“The U.S. Immigration Debate”** by Diana Roy, Claire Klobucista, and Amelia Cheatham, *Council on Foreign Relations*²¹
- ***The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975***, H.R. 6755²²

¹⁹Judy Chu quoted in “Reps. Chu, Jayapal, Lofgren, & Pressley Introduce Southeast Asian Deportation Relief Act to Keep Refugee Families Together,” press release, August 22, 2023, <https://chu.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-chu-jayapal-lofgren-pressley-introduce-southeast-asian-deportation>.

²⁰Judy Chu, et al., US Congress, House, Southeast Asian Deportation Relief Act of 2023, 118th Congress, 1st sess., H. Rep. 5248, <https://chu.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/chu.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/seadra-final-text-updated-8-18-2023.pdf>.

²¹Diana Roy, Claire Klobucista, and Amelia Cheatham, “The U.S. Immigration Debate,” Council of Foreign Relations, August 7, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background/us-immigration-debate-0>.

²²US Congress, House, Judiciary, Senate Foreign Relations, *The Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975*, 94th Congress, 1st sess., H. Rept 94-197; H. Rept 94-230, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/94th-congress/house-bill/6755/text>.

MEMORY RECONSOLIDATION: NADER, SCHAFE, AND LEDOUX'S STUDY

*“This means we can change fear memories. It’s the first time we’ve got proof that memories are unstable after they’ve been consolidated. It means we’re not just stuck with our memories as they are. It’s incredible.”*²³ -Pia

In *What You Are Now*, Pia becomes deeply preoccupied with the science of memory and how memories might be susceptible to change. One study, in particular, drives her scientific ambitions: Karim Nader, Glen E. Schafe, and Joseph E. LeDoux’s 2000 published study, “Fear memories require protein synthesis in the amygdala for reconsolidation after retrieval.” In the words of LeDoux, this groundbreaking experiment and its findings “changed the course of memory research.”²⁴

Since the early 20th century, the term *memory consolidation* has been used by scientists to describe the process by which short-term, unstable memories become long-term memories, which are more fixed. The term *memory reconsolidation*, however, was a newer phenomenon

in the 1990s, when Joseph LeDoux’s lab was exploring the “neural basis” of Pavlovian fear conditioning, the process where organisms are conditioned to fear a neutral stimulus, like a tone or a bright light.²⁵

Memory reconsolidation refers to the process by which an already consolidated memory becomes modified upon its reactivation (remembering). In the 1990s, the theory of memory reconsolidation was relatively new, and scientists were divided as to its plausibility.

By 1996, LeDoux’s lab had shown through experimentation that fear memories are stronger, longer lasting, and less susceptible to change than other, less emotional memories. It was around this

time that Karim Nader joined Joseph LeDoux’s lab. He was keen to test the reconsolidation theory, even though LeDoux was doubtful and advised against it. But in 1999, Nader and his colleague Glen Schafe set up their experiment. They conditioned a number of rats to fear a tone by shocking them after the tone was played.

This association provided the rats with a strong fear memory that was strengthened every time the tone was played, eventually resulting in a fearful reaction when the tone was played, and the shock was absent.²⁶

“Excitedly, Karim [Nader] told me that we had the perfect brain and behavior model to test reconsolidation. I said, ‘what’s that?’ He said, if we block protein synthesis in the amygdala several days after learning, the next day the rats will not be able to remember and won’t freeze. I said, there’s no way that will work. He dejectedly walked out and said nothing about it for a month. Then he walked in grinning and said, ‘It worked.’ I said, ‘what worked?’ He said that he and Glenn [Schafe] had blocked reconsolidation in the amygdala. I had to eat my words.” – Joseph E. LeDoux

²³ Sam Chense, *What You Are Now*, 28, March 14, 2022.

²⁴ Joseph E. LeDoux, “The day I told Karim Nader, ‘Don’t do the study,’” *Brain Research Bulletin*, 189, October 15, 2022, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0361923022002052>.

²⁵ LeDoux, “The day I told Karim Nader, ‘Don’t do the study,’” 2022.

²⁶ Michael Specter, “Partial Recall” *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/19/partial-recall>.

MEMORY RECONSOLIDATION: NADER, SCHAFF, AND LEDOUX'S STUDY

After they had been conditioned, Nader gave the rats 24 hours of rest so that their fear memories could be consolidated. The next day, the tone was played again, and the rats were then immediately injected with anisomycin, an antibiotic and protein synthesis inhibitor with the potential to stop the process where neurons produce the proteins required to store memory. The rats were injected into the amygdala, a small, almond-shaped section in the brain's temporal lobe responsible for associating emotions (like fear) with specific memories. After injecting the rats, Nader and Schafe played the same tone the rats had been conditioned to fear. But this time, the tone garnered no fearful reaction, and the rats failed to have any fearful response for 14 days after being injected.

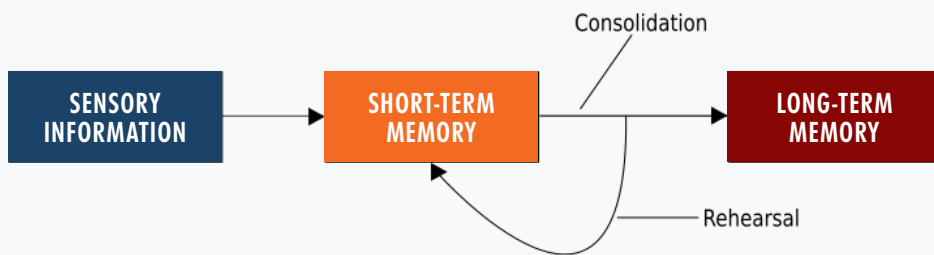
Nader and Schafe also conducted a similar experiment with two control groups of rats; one group was injected with a placebo, and the other group received no injection. The rats in both control groups remained terrified of the tone they had been conditioned to fear. Nader and Schafe also injected another group of fear-conditioned rats with the anisomycin, but

they injected this group without playing the tone immediately before. This group also remained terrified of the tone, meaning that memory reactivation was necessary for the protein inhibitor to have its desired effect.

Nader's experiment proved reconsolidation theory and helped to spur a new era of scientific memory research. Nader, Schafe, and LeDoux published their findings in *Nature* in 2000.²⁷ The same year, they published a review, writing that "it might be possible to treat persons with post-traumatic stress disorder or other related anxiety conditions by reactivating traumatic memories under conditions that would prevent reconsolidation." This assertion led to a strong interest in the fields of therapy and psychology, and LeDoux recalls that after the article and review were published, reconsolidation scientists became bombarded with "calls and emails from patients desperate for help."²⁸ Over the past 20 years, reconsolidation research has continued to advance, but as of now, no reconsolidation treatment or therapy for PTSD exists.

DEFINITIONS

MEMORY CONSOLIDATION The process by which new and unstable short-term memories become long-term memories, which are more fixed. Studies show that the process of memory consolidation happens primarily during sleep.



²⁷ K. Nader, G. E. Schafe, and J. E. LeDoux, "Fear Memories Require Protein Synthesis in the Amygdala for Reconsolidation after Retrieval," *Nature* 406, no. 6797 (August 17, 2000): 722–26, <https://doi.org/10.1038/35021052>.

²⁸ LeDoux, "The day I told Karim Nader, 'Don't do the study,'" 2022.

MEMORY RECONSOLIDATION The process by which consolidated memories become susceptible to change during reactivation.

SHORT-TERM MEMORY The storage and remembrance of small amounts of information for a short period, usually around 30 seconds. Examples of short-term memory include remembering someone's name immediately after being introduced or remembering a phone number or license plate after reading it. Some short-term memory is lost, and some become long-term memory.

LONG-TERM MEMORY The storage and remembrance of information for extended periods (days, months, years). There are two types of long-term memory: explicit and implicit. Explicit memory consists of consciously recalling information, like completing a test you studied for or remembering the details of a recent trip. Implicit memory consists of unconsciously recalled information, like tying your shoes or riding a bike for the first time in years.

FEAR MEMORY Fear memories are memories associated with a strong sense of fear. Because of their strong emotional association, they are more durable and less labile than other less emotional memories. Fear memories are the most widely studied type of memory.

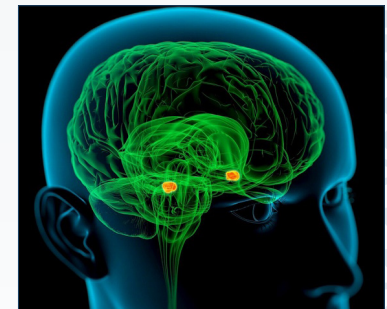
PAVLOVIAN FEAR CONDITIONING A type of learning where an organism is conditioned to fear some kind of neutral stimulus like a light or tone. This type of conditioning is named after the Nobel Prize-winning Soviet scientist Ivan Pavlov.

MEMORY REACTIVATION The process of bringing forth and recalling a long-term memory. Research indicates that when memories are reactivated, they become susceptible to change. Memory reactivation can be either conscious or unconscious.

MEMORY REHEARSAL The conscious process of repeating information or a memory in order to retain it.

AMYGDALA A small almond-shaped section of the brain's frontal lobe. Each person has two amygdalae, one on either side of the brain's base. Processing emotions is the amygdala's primary function.

A PICTURE SHOWING THE LOCATION OF THE AMYGDALAE (IN RED). [HTTPS://WWW.SCIENCE-PHOTO.DE/BILDER/11565987-AMYGDALA-IN-THE-BRAIN-ARTWORK](https://www.science-photo.de/bilder/11565987-AMYGDALA-IN-THE-BRAIN-ARTWORK).



This is an opportunity for students to interview a family member or guardian of their choosing, explore identity and family dynamics, and find writing inspiration in their own lives. Conducting interviews helps students hone their communication, listening, focusing, reflecting, planning, and quick-thinking skills.

INSTRUCTIONS

In small groups, have students reflect on how family dynamics and relationships have shaped their identity. In their small groups, students should then discuss what they think makes a good interview question before making a list of at least ten questions to ask their chosen interviewee. Remind students that what they learn about their families need not be earth-shattering or surprising. The point of the exercise is to converse and reflect, to gather details that might otherwise have been missed. While students should use their prepared research questions as a guide, not all these questions must be asked. Interviewers should ask follow-up questions and tailor their interviews based on what their interviewees share. Students can take notes during their interviews or audio/video record them.

NOTE: If time allows, students are encouraged to conduct two interviews (one with two different family members or guardians) so that they have options about what to write about later.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How has your relationship with guardians and family members informed who you are?
2. How has your relationship with your family/guardians shaped how you see yourself?
3. Who in your family do you think you're the most like? Who are you most different from?
4. What about your family members/guardians do you wish you knew, but don't?
5. What have you learned from your family/guardians? What have they learned from you?
6. Do you share the same beliefs (moral, religious, philosophical, political, etc.) as your family/guardians? If yes, why do you think that is? If not, why not?
7. Do you think your life experiences thus far have been significantly different from the experiences of your family members/guardians? Why or why not?

WHAT MAKES A GOOD INTERVIEW QUESTION?

- Questions should be clear and easy to understand.
- Questions should be open-ended (no yes-or-no questions).
- Questions should be specific and should encourage the interviewee to reflect on particular experiences/beliefs/memories.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

These interviews make an excellent starting point for student personal essays. Have students reflect on the information they've learned from their interviews and reflect on their own memories, relationships, and personal identities. Personal essays allow students to creatively practice and improve their writing, prepping them for future assignments like college admissions essays and scholarship application essays. Students should complete an outline and at least two drafts of their personal essays so that they can practice organizing, editing, and refining their writing.