

Abstract for:

Cambodia, from then to now: Memory and plural identities in the aftermath of genocide
5th, 6th and 7th of May, 2011
Concordia University, Montreal

Shifting Identity, Traumatic Memory and Community Integration: Lessons from the Past?
by Trina A. McKinlay

Between 2003 and 2005, I conducted life-history interviews with former refugees from Cambodia to shed light on how their experiences of violence and displacement had affected their abilities to “move on” and rebuild their lives in Canada. Many narratives revealed the challenges that traumatic memory played in their ability to engage in the functions of everyday life that would enable them to re-build their lives. They described their new terrors: leaving the home and family members each day, learning a new language, finding a job, meeting new people.

According to the 2006 Canadian Census report, more than 200,000 immigrants and refugees come to Canada each year, and much of Canada’s projected social and economic development depends on their successful integration. Upon arrival, however, most face an adjustment period and structural barriers including racism, discrimination and a general lack of understanding. Additionally, many newcomers, like Cambodian refugees in the 1970’s, must also cope with difficult memories that keep them from fully engaging in social life.

What lessons can we take from the experiences of Cambodians who settled in Canada thirty years ago, and how can they be applied in a meaningful way to newcomers of today? How has more recent events in Cambodia, such as the realization of a UN-backed war crimes tribunal, affected the ability of the diaspora to more fully engage in their lives- if at all? Has it changed the way in which they perceive their identity within Canada or their sense of belonging? And how can this be used to inform advocates, service workers, educators and others working in communities to best assist the people who come to them for help?