

“The Whole World Is Watching”: Intimate Geopolitics of Forced Eviction and Women’s Activism in Cambodia

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Through fourteen in-depth interviews¹ conducted in February 2013 with women from Boeung Kak Lake—a high-profile community under threat in Phnom Penh—this article argues that the occurrence of, and activism against, forced eviction is an embodiment of “intimate geopolitics.” The article demonstrates the manifold relationship that forced eviction reflects and ferments between homes, bodies, the nation-state, and the geopolitical transformation of Southeast Asia. Forced eviction is framed as a geopolitical issue, one that leads to innermost incursions into everyday life, one that has spurred on active citizenship and collective action evidencing the injustices of dispossession to diverse audiences, and one that has rendered female activists’ intimate relationships further vulnerable. In doing so, it charts how Boeung Kak Lake women have rewritten the political script in Cambodia by publicly contesting the inevitability accorded to human rights abuses in the post-genocide country. *Key Words:* activism, Cambodia, forced eviction, home, women.

本研究在 2013 年二月，对来自万谷湖——金边一个具有高知名度的受惊吓社群——的女性进行十四次深度访谈，藉此主张迫迁的发生、以及反对迫迁的运动，是“亲密地缘政治”的体现。本文显示出迫迁在家户、身体、国族国家，以及东南亚的地缘政治变迁之间反映及酝酿的多重关系。迫迁被框架为地缘政治的议题，是对每日生活最深层的侵入；迫迁激发了积极公民权与集体行动，为各类阅听众揭示了迫迁的不正义；迫迁并进一步让女性运动者的亲密关系变得更加脆弱。本文藉由这么做，标识出万谷湖的女性如何透过公开对抗后种族屠杀国家根据人权侵犯的不可避免性，以重写柬埔寨的政治剧本。 *关键词:* 行动主义，柬埔寨，迫迁，家，女性。

Con base en catorce entrevistas a profundidad llevadas a cabo en febrero de 2013 entre mujeres del Lago Boeung Kak—una comunidad destacada y vulnerable de Phnom Penh—este artículo sostiene que la ocurrencia del desalojo forzado y el activismo contra el mismo se pueden considerar como una personificación de la “geopolítica íntima.” En el artículo se demuestra la múltiple relación que reflejan el desalojo forzado y las conmociones entre hogares, cuerpos, el estado-nación y la transformación geopolítica del Sudeste de Asia. El desalojo forzado es presentado como un asunto de naturaleza geopolítica, algo que lleva a incursionar hasta en lo más recóndito de la vida cotidiana, que incita a la ciudadanía activa y las acciones colectivas para poner en evidencia ante diversas audiencias las injusticias de la desposesión, y aquello, en fin, que ha dejado las relaciones íntimas de las activistas todavía más vulnerables. Al hacerlo, se muestra cómo han reformulado las mujeres del Lago Boeung Kak el guion político de Camboya al desafiar públicamente la inevitabilidad asignada a los abusos contra los derechos humanos en el país del posgenocidio. *Palabras clave:* activismo, Camboya, desalojo forzado, hogar, mujeres.

“The Whole World Is Watching.” Ever since my first visit to Boeung Kak Lake (BKL) in August 2012, this is the slogan I have regularly seen emblazoned across women’s T-shirts. Garnering both national and international attention, the community has become the most high-profile case of (collective resistance to) forced eviction in Cambodia.² As the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (2012, 8) noted, “The case is emblematic of the desperation that communities throughout Cambodia feel

in resolving their land disputes, and the ensuing civil unrest.”

In a journal issue devoted to forced evictions, Olds, Bunnell, and Leckie (2002) opened their editorial with specific reference to Cambodia, linking its forced evictions and associated forms of displacement to the social disruption that has concurrently emerged in other tropical cities. Cambodia is now infamous for the scale and brutality of forced evictions occurring in and beyond Phnom Penh under the auspices of development.

Located in the northern heart of Phnom Penh (Figure 1), the districts of Daun Penh and Toul Kork began attracting residents in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime (post-1979). Eventually providing concrete, corrugated iron, and brick homes to around 20,000 people, informal systems of land claim emerged from the 1980s onward through continuous residence or use (Bugalski and Pred 2009). Because the area skirts BKL Lake, the capital's largest urban wetland, local livelihoods were initially based on the harvesting of plant life and fish, before making way for tourist-oriented guest houses and cafes. In February 2007, however, 133 hectares of the lake and surrounding area were leased for ninety-nine years from the Municipality of Phnom Penh to a Chinese-backed private development company, Shukaku, Inc., who planned a satellite city with private villas, shops, and office buildings.³ Contravening Cambodia's 2001 Land Law, which conferred residents legal claim to formal possession rights, the company proceeded to forcibly evict thousands of families and in August 2008 began filling the lake with mud and sand, destroying further homes.

The city saw perhaps as much as 10 percent of its population evicted between 1990 and 2011 (Amnesty International 2011). In BKL alone, out of 4,000 original families, January 2014 community records show that only 794 remain. The tenure insecurity and protest that has arisen in Cambodia must be understood as both a problem and a response that is locally manifest yet implicated within a broader set of political and economic processes connected to neoliberalism (Springer 2010a; Biddulph 2011). Forced eviction is also a "global phenomenon" and "global crisis" (UN HABITAT 2011, vii), depicted by Hooper and Ortolano (2012, 1) as the "the most widespread home rights violations in the world." UN HABITAT (2011) figures concur that globally 10 million people were displaced each year during the 1980s and 1990s and that this was followed by an estimated 15 million people in the 2000s.

To understand forced eviction as an embodied, located, and grounded phenomenon, I conducted fourteen in-depth interviews with self-labeled "housewives" from BKL who had either been forcibly evicted or who had become active participants in protest.⁴ Rapport was established through discussions together on broader questions of gender and injustice that collectively concerned us. Here I was able to draw on ten years of research, and a monograph (Brickell forthcoming) on women's experiences of home unmaking in the country via spousal violence (Brickell 2008), marital breakdown (Brickell 2014), and, with their help, forced eviction.

The recorded Khmer language interviews that flowed from this initial dialogue were transcribed and then translated verbatim into English by a female research assistant whom I worked alongside. In addition to these interviews, material was gained via audio-recorded tours of BKL that the women took us on as well as more informal "hanging out" at Tep Vanny's house cum women's advocacy center (Figure 2).

Since 2008, BKL women as wives, mothers, and committed activists have steered the campaign of nonviolent social action against forced eviction. According to BKL interviews, the group emerged as a result of women's strong preexisting networks within the community, which solidified in the face of shared trepidation. Community members of both genders initially conceived of women's leadership as a means to maximize the associational value of Khmer women to peace. It was rationalized as a way to minimize the potential for (male) violence and reduce disruption to men's income earning. BKL women also couched their protection of home as an extension and elevation of their traditional responsibilities as wives and mothers to ensure family harmony and stability. Describing the situation as a "woman's struggle," Tep Vanny has publically spoken of the group's desire to show that "We can do more than take our husband's clothes, wash them, and hang them" (Vital Voices 2013). Many men, meanwhile, have worked to sustain the financial viability of their households and have taken on "behind-the-scenes" administrative and logistical roles to enable protest events. Rather than men acquiescing, the community collectively strategized their advocacy campaign with women on its front line. Despite BKL women, notably Tep Vanny, having been the subject of multiple documentary films and countless media accounts, this article represents the first academic engagement with them.⁵ As BKL women became embroiled in party politics related to the country's General Election on 28 July 2013, I chart their stories up to, and including, February 2013 when I conducted the research.⁶

I argue that the occurrence of, and activism against, forced eviction is an embodiment of *intimate geopolitics*, the term proposed by Smith (2012, 1513) as a means to conceptualize the relationship between the reproduction of babies and territorial geopolitics in the Leh District of India's Jammu and Kashmir State. Linking "the daily life of gendered subjects to geopolitical struggles most visible at broader scales" (Nelson 2006, 382), I take Tep Vanny's T-shirt as the starting point to explore the interconnections between Cambodia's integration into the global economy, home



Figure 1. Map of Phnom Penh.



Figure 2. Activist Tep Vanny. *Source:* Author photograph, February 2014. (Color figure available online.)

dispossession, and women's acts of defiance as Cambodian citizens against a phony vision of progress quite literally being sold by the government in cahoots with Chinese investors. In turn, I respond to Power's (2010, 436) call for deeper dialogue on "the political geographies of globalization and a more detailed consideration of the forms of resistance and anti-geopolitics that have emerged across the South."

I do so by building on feminist geopolitical scholarship that over the past ten years has established the global and intimate as mutually constituted entities (Hyndman 2004; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Pratt and Rosner 2006, 2012; Caluya 2011; Smith 2012; Masaro and Williams 2013). In tune with this work, this article aims to be the antithesis of what Anderson and Smith (2001, 9) described as "anemic knowledges predicated on the artificial separation of private and public, body and citizens, domestic and global." In addition to reasserting the interconnectivity identified in this field, I also contribute to this literature in four ways.

First, the article initiates a thematic lens within feminist geopolitics on forced eviction. Establishing the human rights abuse as an intimate phenomenon and emotive topography, it explores how women's lives as evictees and activists have become (geo)politically embroiled in this violence of home. As a corollary, a feminist geopolitics approach that honors embodied

practices and lived social relations has the potential to push forward a current wave of academic studies on forced eviction in geography, anthropology, housing studies, and development studies.

Although "the home is invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life" (Blunt and Varley 2004, 3), this literature has tended to neglect the emotionally saturated nature of domestic loss and resistance. Existing work privileges technical and theoretical language to describe the scale of dispossession, the contentiousness of property rights, compensation arrangements, the adverse employment impacts of resettlement, the ideological and practical constitution of social movements, and governmental policy (Otiso 2002; Zhang 2004; Kim 2010; Hooper and Ortolano 2012; Unruh 2012). Moving beyond a mainstream focus in geography on political behavior and economic rationality in "areas of public life whose emotional content is usually (deliberately) played down" (Anderson and Smith 2001, 8), activism against forced eviction animates rather than inhibits an emotive topography and language of activism in public (and private) spaces. From stripping in collective despair outside the Cambodian parliament, to nervously yet forthrightly speaking at an American Embassy press conference, the article privileges not only the grieving for home but also the airing of grievances in civically,

governmentally, and diplomatically significant places of the city.

Second, the article emphasizes how forced eviction is not just an imposition of geopolitics “from above” but is shaped by civic protest “from below.” Taking on board Smith’s (2009, 212) warning to scholars not to overlook the bringing of geopolitics “into personal spaces of the body, marriage, and intimacy,” as well as the ability for individuals to confute imposed “geopolitical identity categories,” this coconstitutional relationship is central to the analysis that follows. I have urged researchers to consider the influence of geopolitics on people’s domestic lives, including how geopolitics is influenced by, and emerges from, the home (Brickell 2012a), but this article provides the opportunity to empirically examine how this interfacing is operationalized and experienced by different agents of and against forced eviction.

Third, my contribution to feminist geopolitics lies in bringing back to the fore feminist dilemmas about the tensions of romanticizing versus rejecting home as an ideal (Varley 2008). The right to housing is recognized within international human rights instruments. It is also, as BKL women emphasize, a “gateway right” to normative values of privacy, security, intimacy, comfort, belonging, and control accorded to home. Although home is cast as an ambiguous “space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear” (Blunt and Varley 2004, 3) within the critical geographies of home arena, this article indicates the dangers of foreclosing ideals as resources for women deprived of home to draw on. As Pratt (1999, 157) poignantly asserted, “It is easier to criticize home from the position of having a secure one.” Forced eviction and its infringements on everyday life underscore the importance of holding up home as an ideal and universally ordained right that has the capacity to broker political leverage.

Fourth, the article develops interest in citizenship within feminist geopolitical literature by impressing its value for understanding the worldviews of women for whom knowledge of their rights has been simultaneously enlivened as they have been denied. BKL women’s protest is in large part premised on the articulation of active citizenship (Green 2008) to hold the Cambodian state legally and morally responsible for the toxin of forced eviction affecting their community. Whereas “the traditional discourse on citizenship has excluded the ‘private sphere’ from the realm of relevance” (Yuval-Davis 1999, 122), this article examines women’s engagement in politics to claim “intimate citizenship”—“rights, obligations, recognitions and respect around those most intimate spheres of life”

(Plummer 2001, 238). The article thereby contributes to a “more complete geography of citizenship” by delving into homes as “hidden spaces” of citizenship (Staeli et al. 2012, 641).

Weaving in women’s perspectives and experiences throughout the article, I begin by outlining forced evictions as a geopolitical issue before framing associated human rights violations within feminist geopolitical literatures on the intermingling of the geopolitical and everyday. Two further sections follow. The first considers women’s grassroots activism as the articulation of geopolitics from below. The second then explores the familial and conjugal vulnerabilities that have been compounded by women’s contestation of wider power relations. Taken together, the material signals the dynamic and interactive connections that exist among forced eviction, women’s civic activism, domestic life, national-level politics, and geopolitics in twenty-first-century Cambodia.

Geopolitics of Forced Eviction

Commonly described as a “global epidemic” (du Plessis 2005, 135), forced eviction is a foremost geopolitical concern on four main, nonexhaustive, grounds. Forced evictions are connected first to the rise of China as a global economic and political actor. Beyond the transnational flows and networks of Chinese capital that facilitate forced eviction, over the past ten years “the Sino-Cambodian relationship has reflected a newly evolving geopolitical landscape characterized by flexible and opportunistic arrangements” (Burgos and Ear 2010, 615). Although China has become the biggest source of foreign direct investment to Cambodia (UN General Assembly 2012), this “evolving geopolitical landscape” links to wider changes in territorial politics since 1997. Postfinancial crisis, China rescaled its centralized power structures to embrace economic development via “transnational regionalization” (Su 2012, 1327) to Africa (Power and Mohan 2010) and Southeast Asia (Glassman 2010; Dwyer 2014). As part of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program, Cambodia (as a country exemplar here) became the recipient of Chinese-backed aid packages and preferential loans.⁷ Unlike their Western counterparts, these aid packages are not conditionally tied to democratic reform and good governance. This has created apposite conditions for the marrying of politics and business—a relationship that has resulted in well-connected elites exerting

power over land title procurements and their material rewards (Springer 2011).

Second, forced eviction as a geographically specific yet interconnected phenomenon has links to the “accumulation of dispossession” (Harvey 2003)—a process whereby assets and wealth are transferred from the masses to elites. As Casolo and Doshi (2013, 802) identified in disciplinary terms, “The ubiquitous intensification of dispossession through neoliberalization . . . has ushered in a resurgent focus on the geoeconomic in critical geopolitical debates.” Used to make reference to “the reframing of territorial security to accommodate supranational flows; the recasting of social forms of security through the market; and the reframing of the state as geoeconomic agent” (Cowen and Smith 2009, 22), geo-economics encapsulate the market logics that challenge home and nation through forced eviction.

The challenge that geo-economics makes to the “geographical mapping of population and state security” (Cowen and Smith 2009, 32) relates to the third geopolitical dimension of forced eviction—the security–development nexus. For too long it has been “assumed that the domain of the (geo)political is discrete and separable from the supposedly economic and technical domain of development” (Power and Mohan 2010, 487). Yet taking a grassroots perspective to forced eviction offers up contradictory narratives on the security–development strategies that claim to “secure” and “develop” a country and its population. Indeed, as Casolo and Doshi (2013, 1) noted, “Geopolitics today is increasingly marked by the violent convergence of (in)security, market integration, and dispossession.”

Akin to the millions of home demolitions in reform-era China “carried out in the name of economic development and urban modernization” (Zhang 2004, 255), corporate vis-à-vis government power in Cambodia has aligned development with the necessity to bulldoze homes. Such is the level of international concern that in May 2012 the UN Special Rapporteur to Cambodia underwent his seventh mission specifically focused on economic land concessions and human rights. Although Surya Subedi was careful to preface that he “understands that Cambodia, as a developing country, wishes to capitalize on its land and natural resources with a view to promoting development and bringing prosperity,” his report states that “that the human cost of such concessions has been high” (UN General Assembly 2012, 2). Communities, for instance, are resettled often debilitating distances from the city, destroying people’s livelihoods and support networks; inadequate housing,

health, and education facilities are provided; and families and marriages are put under so much emotional and financial pressure that breakdowns have become more commonplace (see also Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions [COHRE] 2010). That the annihilation of home is still justified as being in the public interest by the Cambodian government is found within a February 2013 letter from the Minister of Economy and Finance and Deputy Prime Minister Keat Chhon, who thanked Shukaku, Inc., for their investment to date:

The Ministry of Economy and Finance strongly hopes—and is confident—you will continue to be a good example and co-operate closely with the government to continue to reduce residents’ poverty and contribute to national development. (cited in Yuthana and Worrell 2013)

These inflammatory proclamations are set against the perspectives of BLK women and thousands of others marginalized through land dispossession in Cambodia who have taken to the streets to problematize the notion of development.

Fourth and finally, while the Southeast Asian region’s “battlefields into marketplace-battlefields” transition (Glassman 2010, 64) has been framed largely as a political–economic tussle between investors and governments, forced eviction can also be realized as a “micro-geopolitical” issue. Harnessing the phrase *micro-geopolitical* to reference the locally grounded and domestically controlled politics of enclosure, dispossession, and displacement in Laos (Cambodia’s neighbor), Dwyer (2014, 378) argues that “to equate Chinese investment with foreign interest, and to see its geopolitical dimension as simply Lao-Chinese misses a key piece of the story.” Rather, forced eviction calls for a closer inspection of the practices and meanings of local politics and territorial relations that are invariably complex and place-dependent (Wolford et al. 2013; Dwyer 2014). In these four senses, then, it is possible to read a geopolitical intimate dynamic through forced eviction and the reconfiguration of state–society relations in Cambodia.

Intimate a Geopolitics of Forced Eviction

My situation is cruel [crying]. I had to tear down my own house to receive compensation. Later, when I went to the City Hall for help, the authority said that I had come only to annoy them . . . that I had already gained compensation. They did not want to listen to my miserable life after I had left. This is an inhumane act . . . they made me ruin my own house . . . it is so distressing. This development is not fair at all. Why do the authorities treat us badly this

way? Honestly speaking, my husband blames me every day that I was wrong to accept compensation; he blames me for being too impatient. On the other hand, my children begged me to accept the compensation and leave. They didn't want me to face arrest and detention. I cannot even describe how I felt after leaving my home. (Phorn Sophea, married with children, forties, evicted BKL resident)

Turning a gaze on the micro-geopolitics of forced eviction means taking home seriously as the "territorial core" that the "average citizen appears to expend more effort personalizing and defending . . . than any other level of fixed physical space" (Porteous 1976, 385). Buoyed in 2002 by the prospect of gaining formal titles to her land ten years after moving to BKL, Phorn Sophea attended a meeting at a local pagoda during which assurances were given that BLK residents who had peaceful possession prior to land registration would qualify (see Bugalski and Pred 2009). Despite these rights set out in a multidonor-funded Land Management and Administration Project (LMAP), her request was rejected. It was years later that she learned about plans to develop the area. With Shukaku, Inc., setting up an office in the community, her family was offered US\$8,500 (around £5,500) as compensation (below market value) and resettlement 20 km outside of Phnom Penh. At the same time, as residents continued to withstand intimidation at the hands of armed police and company employees, Phorn Sophea acted as representative of village six in appeals against the development to no avail. The company proceeded to fill the lake with sand, even pointing the pumping machines strategically toward certain houses (Amnesty International 2011). Although her home was located 70 m from its shore, it was flooded and she and her family regularly slipped and injured themselves wading through their home. Fearful that she would soon be left without a property to gain compensation for, and scared for her children's safety with electricity cables and water meeting all too often, she accepted compensation. Referring to this as the most difficult decision she has ever been forced to make, and against her husband's wishes, Phorn Sophea faced a dilemma that is more widely shared. COHRE (2010, 8) contended that forced eviction disproportionately burdens women, as they "are most often charged with taking care of the children and family before, during and after an eviction, and for providing a sense of stability of home."

Phorn Sophea described her family as a once middle-class one in BKL, owning publishing machines and

running a successful business. She went on to chart the downward spiral she has been desperately managing since. The family has been financially unable to purchase land closer to the city; her oldest child has dropped out of school; her two younger children now work as waiters; and her husband has become a *motodop* taxi driver. She is also consumed with regret for leaving the house that she "loved" and regret for the "misery" and "torture" that she feels as she sees the positive dividends of women's resistance for those who stayed.⁸ Phorn Sophea's narrative demonstrates the intimate incursions of geopolitics into the entirety of everyday life, rendering vulnerable the security of her family's finances, her marriage, her ability to mother and educate, her self-esteem, and her hope. In Pratt and Rosner's (2006, 18) words, "Global forces penetrate and haunt the intimate spaces of our psyches and bodies in ways that we can only intimate, and there is no territorial defense of privacy or domesticity that protects the intimate from the global." The fact that prior to resettlement the family was forced to dismantle their own house to assure authorities that they could not return only emphasizes Pratt and Rosner's assertion further. Phorn Sophea's story illuminates not only the material nullification of eviction in Cambodia (Springer 2012) but also traumas that Wright (2012, 1114) argued are too often cloaked in "the intractable silence of and about emotions in development."

For too long the home has been considered an apolitical space inconsequential to geopolitical analyses. The home is not, as Enloe (2011, 447) argued, "pre-political" or "unexceptional." Rather, as feminist geopolitics has demonstrated, "seemingly non-geopolitical sites and concerns are key to the operation of global power" (Massaro and Williams 2013, 570). As the "distinction between the (public) 'battlefield' and the (private) 'homefront' have ceased to have any meaning" (Hyndman and Alwis 2004, 539), forced eviction has come to personify the geopolitical realm of commercial interest meeting, battling, and destroying the boundary walls of home that stand in its way. Porteous and Smith (2001, 3) conceptualized the "deliberate destruction of home against the will of the home dweller" as "domicide" (see also Baxter and Brickell [2014], on broader ideas of home unmaking). Domicide, as Phorn Sophea's experiences testify, can lead to

The destruction of a place of attachment and refuge; loss of security and ownership; restrictions on freedom; partial loss of identity; and a radical de-centering from place,

family, and community. There may be a loss of historical connection; a weakening of roots; and partial erasure of the sources of memory, dreams, nostalgia and ideals. (Porteous and Smith 2001, 63)

Domicide, associated mass eviction, and uprooting from home have particular historical resonance in Phnom Penh and other urban centers of Cambodia. Amnesty International (2011, 7) made reference to BKL as “the largest forced eviction since the Khmer Rouge.” Immediately after the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975, Khmer Rouge leaders began evacuating approximately 3 million people from towns and cities throughout the country, illustrating the idea that whereas other revolutionaries had “distrusted cities . . . only the Cambodians have emptied them altogether” (Stretton 1978, 118). Drawing on direct experience and collective memory, BKL women frequently draw analogies between the genocide, which saw the demonization of urban dwellers, the annihilation of familial intimacy, and the complete disregard for emotional and personal attachments in the pursuit of (agrarian) progress and forced eviction. Here, two women painted comparisons with the predatory political economy they contest today:

We do not want Pol Pot to happen again . . . the fact that no one stood up and protested resulted in massive killing in our country. We were too quiet during Pol Pot Regime because many of us were illiterate, and our parents wanted daughters to keep silent and did not send us to school. I cannot let this tragedy happen again. (Shoy Kolap, married with children, mid-fifties, evicted BKL resident)

I think Pol Pot may be more equal because they evicted all citizens to move out from homes regardless of the poor, rich, or powerful. Citizens lived equally and worked at equally. Nowadays, the authority evicts only the poor . . . this is what is meant by poverty eradication! (Tep Vanny, married with three children, early thirties, current BKL resident)

Shoy Kolap draws on the historical antecedent of genocide to emphasize the necessity for social action against forced eviction. Providing a gendered analysis, she highlights the norm constraints at the time that quashed any potential resistance to the regime by women. She also indicates the educational progress since that has improved women’s knowledge of their rights and has emboldened her to encourage others to embrace active citizenship as modern citizens. Bringing a different perspective, Tep Vanny boldly explains why the Khmer Rouge period could be considered more

equitable than the current one. The regime killed the poor and the rich, including former high-ranking government officials, businessmen, and military officers. Forced eviction today falls instead predominantly on vulnerable citizens whose homes and bodies are considered by the government as deleterious to its aspirations to showcase Phnom Penh as a world-class city unoccupied by poverty and the poor. BKL women’s evocations directly conflict with state rhetoric on show at Committee of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) meetings (this UN treaty has been ratified by 187 out of 194 countries, with the United States a noteworthy exception). During Cambodia’s 2013 periodic examination, a government representative denounced the use of the term *forced evictions* to make reference to nationwide problems of landlessness. Forced evictions, he argued, were only applicable to the Khmer Rouge regime and not to his current government.

Yet just as the “Khmer Rouge leadership demanded an unmaking of space as a means of ushering in a communist society” (Tyner 2008, 106), so too does the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) demand the unmaking of home to further cement Cambodia’s economic development through large-scale infrastructure projects (see also Lunstrum [2009] on related ideas of emptying in relation to the Mozambican civil war and attempts to displace rural dwellers indefinitely out of their villages). As Tep Vanny underscored, forced eviction has a profound influence on the material sustainability of everyday life for ordinary Cambodians (again referred to as “citizens”) disenfranchised by a ruling elite who are intent, at all costs, on literally and metaphorically clearing space for its self-serving agenda. Indeed, the Cambodian government commonly stresses “the supposed ‘necessity’ of the free market, premised on a dichotomous ‘either–or’ political imagination that sees the wholesale embrace of capitalism as the only alternative to communism, which is considered inextricable from genocide” (Springer 2010b, 941). The relationship painted by BKL women between genocide and neoliberalism is far removed from an either–or construct, however. Rather, in contrast to state rhetoric, the intimate invasions that both periods engendered have as many synergies as differences. In both, affective relationships to and contained within the home have come to signify “matters of state” as much as “matters of the heart” (Oswin and Olund 2010, 60) as ordinary Cambodians’ emotional bonds to domestic spaces stand in the way of elite territorial control.

Contesting Domicide: Women's Active Citizenship against Forced Eviction

Exemplifying Sparke's (2007, 65) assertion that "everywhere, but always somewhere" there is struggle "to take back and sustain human geographies in spaces of inhuman violence and dispossession," this section of the article returns to Tep Vanny's T-shirt as a starting point to explore the resistance and protest tactics of BKL women. Although the concept of domicile is useful for framing the malevolent manifestation of geopolitics within the home, it is less effective at considering the agency of those who are referred to as its victims. It is also the case that women particularly are too often represented "as passive objects of impersonal and unstoppable economic forces" (Pratt and Rosner 2012, 3), and in Cambodia specifically, as "in need of protection" (Lilja 2013, 87). BKL women's actions can be conceptualized as geopolitics from below used "to articulate a political platform outside overarching scales of power, domination, and control" (Fluri 2009, 259). Before her controversial retreat from BKL activism (along with Heng Mom featured later), Srey Pov commented to me:

I have been told that villagers are eggs, and those powerful are rocks, that we cannot win against them. But I don't think that way. It is probably true that we are the eggs, and they are the rocks, however, we have to clash against the rocks even though we might be crushed. At least I shall make those rocks smell badly. Analogously, it is similar to water which drips on a rock and over time makes a hole. . . . I am optimistic that my efforts are not valueless. (Srey Pov)

Srey Pov's reference to eggs and rocks connects to several Khmer proverbs that imprint the importance of tradition and respect for the way things have always been done. "Don't hit a stone with an egg" (*pong man kom chual neung thma*) signals the futility of trying to challenge the dominant or powerful. This message and sentiment reflects the "broad legitimation of hierarchy and privilege" within Cambodian society that perpetuates acceptance of the social order and the navigation of relationships (Hughes 2004, 61). Challenging the fatalism and culture of impunity surrounding these mores, BKL women collectively pursue active citizenship—the claiming of legally and morally enforceable rights in relation to the state (Clarke and Missingham 2009)—in their contestation of domicile. Understanding how they are doing so invites both in-

formal and formal arenas of political participation to come into greater view (Secor 2001).

Opening the door onto civic activism in BKL means entering the front courtyard and shop of Tep Vanny's home, which soon became the advocacy office for the women's campaigning (Figure 2). Understanding "alter-geopolitics," the collective building of "alternative non-violent securities" through "material and/or discursive forms of resistance" to the geopolitical practices of the ruling elite (Koopman 2011, 275), translates likewise into an attentiveness to the home as a space from which geopolitics emerges (Brickell 2012a). This includes the home as the site of both planning and consciousness-raising but also as the impetus and ideal driving activism in the first place. Tep Vanny's T-shirt and the empirical material that follows vouches for BKL women's ability to "jump scale" (Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Sharp 2007) from their self-confessed interiority of their prior lives as housewives "living like frogs in a well" (T. Vanny, participant), to the national and international stage.

Tying into a feminist geopolitical analytic that emphasizes the body and intimacy as sites of resistance to a wider politic (Hyndman 2001; Bosco 2006; Fluri 2009; Smith 2012), a first central element of BKL women's strategy to communicate the injustice of forced eviction within and beyond the local has been to "embody eviction." In her work on intimate geopolitics, Smith (2012) explored how geopolitics and territorial aspirations can become known through bodily enactment. In the case of BKL, there appears to be a keen awareness of the role of the visual "in determining which violences are redeemed and which remain unrecognized" (McLagan 2006, 191) by the Cambodian government and international audiences. Drawing on the axiom "seeing is believing," Srey Leap took me through a photo book the group had kept as a record of their protests, which facilitated a long discussion about the utility of their female bodies to bring injustice into the public domain and consciousness. Flipping to a picture showing the women wearing hats covered by bird nests and rafts of eggs nestled within them, Srey Leap, the youngest of the group, explained the thinking behind their imaginative creations:

The idea of putting the eggs in the nest on our heads was to express our need as humans for a house to live in. This picture [pointing to the photo book] shows the demonstration where we protested to free Yorm Bopha, who has been sentenced to imprisonment . . . as the result, her children are taken cared by their father alone. We compared the warmed eggs sat on by their hens to Yorm

Bopha's children who do not have the opportunity to have their mother close by. (Srey Leap, single, mid-twenties, current BKL resident)

Alluding to the loss of habitat and warmth once provisioned through BKL homes, the women's donning of the customized hats was also aimed to draw attention to the plight of Yorm Bopha. Their fellow group member was convicted of intentional violence with aggravating circumstances and sentenced to three years in prison in December 2012. She was later named a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, and pressure saw her released on bail in November 2013. Just as "intimacy does not reside solely in the private sphere" (Pratt and Rosner 2006, 20), the women's tactic rendered public the intimacy removed from them, and particularly to Yorm Bopha's children, who lived without their mother. The use of women's heads to carry the home was not an isolated occurrence. On World Habitat Day in October 2012, the group made and wore cardboard houses to again symbolize the right to have a roof over one's head, and women's intimate connection to the homes they were fighting for as imagined ideals and spaces of familial togetherness. Handwritten on them read, "Have residence, have life." The donning of the house links to ideas about homes as bodies "sharing the common features and fates which affect the sense of self" (McDowell 2007, 93). They also bring "the privately emotional into the rationally public, despite the obvious interpenetration of these spheres" (Anderson and Smith 2001, 8).

Such tactics followed from others tailored to highlight the emotional vulnerability of BKL women and their simultaneous defiance in the face of government-backed developers. In early 2012, BKL women stripped to their underwear in protest against forced eviction outside the Cambodian parliament. In a conservative Buddhist society in which women's modest comportment is venerated, this was a bold act. I went on to ask interviewees about the decision making behind it:

If we do not have a house to live in, it is akin to a body without clothes on. We are cold and hot with the changes of weather without houses ... we wanted to show the differences between them and us, while they are sitting in a comfortable and cool room. We do not vote for them to sit in a relaxed room without finding resolutions for citizens. (Srey Pov)

Stripping our clothes means there is nothing left which is valuable. Before, we had our houses; we had our private places and rooms, especially for our daughters. Currently, we are faced with eviction and demolition; losing our

houses means nothing remains and our values are gone. What's more, stripping the clothes is a message to the government that our villagers are no longer shy. Instead, the government should feel ashamed of *their* acts. (Heng Mom)

As Srey Pov and Heng Mom indicate, undressing had an analogous potency, not only highlighting the inequality of forced eviction but also the stripping of their housing rights and heightened exposure to corporeal vulnerability. The taboo nature of women's semi-naked presence in public space also works to display women's commitment to defending their rights at any cost. This insubordination warns the Cambodian government that BKL women will transgress traditional gender ideals, including modesty, timidity, and shyness, to make their voices heard and exert agency over their lives. BKL women thereby sought to simultaneously embody the personal and political injustices of domicile writ large through and on their (im)moral bodies to shame the Cambodian government, which they hold responsible for their suffering.

In this sense then, it is important not to negate the intimate geopolitics embodied in BKL women's fractious relationship with the ruling government that this 2012 protest speaks to. The entrepreneurial state is "the acid of geoeconomic calculation" (Cowen and Smith 2009, 41) linking citizens' homes and bodies with the market excesses of Chinese investment in Cambodia. Indeed, "states are not simply passive victims in these deals; they are not coerced into accessing foreign capital by selling off pieces of their national territory to more powerful economic or political players" (Wolford et al. 2013, 192). As broker, intermediary, and major beneficiary of external state relations, an intimate geopolitics needs to be inclusive, rather than exclusive, of activism against a national-level government complicit in China's now enormous hold over economic land concessions in the country (and Southeast Asian region).

BKL women's jumping of scale beyond the grassroots is displayed, second, by their tactic to provoke foreign government response to their situation. The activists have variously stood in Freedom Park waving Chinese flags in protest against Shukaku, Inc., and rallied outside the Chinese Embassy threatening the boycott of Chinese products (see Figure 1 for locations). Withstanding these efforts, China has continued to promote itself as a "peaceful giant" in Cambodia (Burgos and Ear 2013, 101) by refusing to comment on BKL and other capital investments. In rare instances, China's silence has been broken by the denouncement of BKL

women's "uproar" and "aggressive" tactics as influenced by the West (O'Toole 2011). Herein women's social protest taps into geopolitical tensions between China and the West over the place of the human rights agenda in economic growth.

BKL women also frequently make a beeline to Western embassies seeking international diplomatic assistance as human rights defenders and framing the injustices of forced eviction as being of international significance. Riling the Cambodian government, in January 2014, Tep Vanny and four other BKL women were (again) arrested as they tried to deliver a petition to the French Embassy (in close proximity to BKL as shown in Figure 1) calling for pressure on the CPP to release fellow activists arrested at a garment protest.

BKL women have been visibly successful in their influencing of Western geopolitical actors and institutions accountable and receptive to their calls for justice. On behalf of 4,250 families facing forced eviction, the women spearheaded a challenge against the World Bank's collusion in forced eviction. In April 2009 with the help of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the World Bank Inspection Panel was forced to investigate their claims that its LMAP had adversely affected residents (e.g., Phorn Sophea) by arbitrarily excluding BKL and thus failing to uphold systematic land registration. The panel not only ruled that the Bank had "breached its operational policies" but "found that these failures contributed to the forced eviction of BKL residents, who were unfairly denied the right to register their land through LMAP before the Government leased the area to a private developer, ultimately leading to their involuntary resettlement and forced eviction" (UN General Assembly 2012, 65). The result was hailed in the national and international media as a rare victory. Following these findings, the World Bank reportedly attempted to remedy the breaches under the LMAP, but the government ended its project, unwilling to cooperate with the Bank's suggested remedial actions (UN General Assembly 2012). The World Bank subsequently suspended funding for all new projects to Cambodia. In January 2014, a draft law in the U.S. Congress was also passed that directs the World Bank to report regularly on their efforts to provide appropriate redress for BKL families negatively affected by the LMAP.

BKL women's notoriety within certain elite circles also stems from their imprisonment. Thirteen BKL women were jailed for two and a half years in May 2012 for "illegally occupying" land as they set about rebuilding Heng Mom's house. The women included Heng Mom, Srey Leap, Srey Pov, Tep Vanny, and Kong

Chantha, whose voices feature in this article. Drawing the attention of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the women's incarceration garnered the sympathy and support of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The U.S. government responded by calling on the Cambodian government for fair treatment of the thirteen. On the verge of resulting in an international embarrassment, given Cambodia's then chairing of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), on 27 June 2012, a Cambodian appeals court set the women free. In February 2013, images of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama adorned the walls of the advocacy center and were transplanted on my last day of research outside the U.S. Embassy (Figure 3) where a press conference was being held by Ambassador William Todd on human rights issues and to which two BKL women, Tep Vanny and Heng Mom, were invited.

The pictures of the two U.S. leaders were held up by BKL women in thanks but were also used to lobby for further pressure on the Cambodian government to free Yorm Bopha. The poster underneath them profiles her and is accompanied by the message in Khmer "Stop using the court system to arrest land activists." Giving legitimacy to the cause of the BKL women, the placards remind authorities that the "The Whole World Is Watching" the injustices that BKL residents are still encountering. Indeed, in April 2013, Tep Vanny traveled to Washington, DC, to receive a Vital Voices Global Leadership Award for her work as a human rights defender and spokesperson for BKL (see Brickell 2013). Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden took to the stage at the event to advocate for the improvement of women's lives around the world. Tep Vanny shared the limelight, "jumping scales" from her home under threat in Phnom Penh to an awards ceremony that recognized how BKL women have tried to rewrite the script affecting communities from across the global south—"developers seize a valuable land, throw the existing community out, and after protests ebb away, a new development arise" (Vital Voices 2013). In numerous ways then, domestic traumas created through forced eviction have been politicized across multiple scales and challenged the (in)action of different geopolitical stakeholders.

An Unhappy Marriage: Activism and (In)Securities of Family Life

To this point, this article has established forced eviction as a geopolitical issue. It intrudes deeply into domestic life. It has also galvanized collective action,



Figure 3. Images of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama displayed outside the U.S. Embassy, Phnom Penh. *Source:* Author photograph, February 2013. (Color figure available online.)

harnessing the intimate insecurities it produces to ram home the injustice of dispossession. This final empirical section goes one step further, arguing that forced eviction is an embodiment of intimate geopolitics by focusing on BKL women's activism and its impact on their own family lives. "No consideration of contemporary citizenship can be complete without examining the varied and changing ways in which people's intimate lives, their families and their networks of friendship affect and are affected by their activities as citizens" (Yuval-Davis 1999, 123).

Women's public actions reverberate back into the home, profoundly influencing conjugal and parental relationships, not to mention the activists' own mental health and emotional well-being. Their very pursuit of intimate security via active citizenship has, in the short term at least, sacrificed it ironically further. In the public sphere, BKL women have been, and continue to be, subject to violence from police and security guards. This has led to a miscarriage in one particularly tragic example. With implicit reference to BKL women, the UN CEDAW Committee (2013, 8) expressed concern "that female human rights defenders who advocate for women's land rights are often subjected to intimidat-

tion and harassment by law enforcement personnel" and called for the prosecution of perpetrators. Indeed the "violences of property" that Springer (2013, 608) argued forced evictions represent should be understood as gendered violences of property. They include state-sponsored physical and psychological violence against women, challenges to BKL women's capacity to mother, and conflict within and the breakdown of marriages. It is the latter theme of unhappy marriage that I concentrate on next. Just as Smith (2009) showed how geopolitics enters into the personal spaces of marriage through the reproduction of babies, this section talks to marriage as the collateral damage or geopolitical ground zero of external state relations that expedite forced eviction.

Although it cannot be said that every marriage or every home was necessarily a happy one prior to women's protest, the interviews strongly indicate that marital strain or breakdown has become an issue that some BKL women have encountered alongside their activism. Although men in the community have been overwhelmingly in favor of women's leadership role and public representation of family interests (and their own), spousal conflict has often born out. On the one hand, for some supportive husbands, anxiety for their wives'

safety has created low-level tensions. Tep Vanny's husband, Ou Kong, reports nevertheless that he has taken on a greater share of the housework and adopted a more flexible attitude to gendered responsibilities in the home (even learning how to cook for the first time). While confirming this, Tep Vanny brought to the fore still the emotional consequences of development and her prominent role as an activist, which affects their lives together:

I used to be a simple housewife, but immediately I had to turn myself into an activist who confronts authority. . . . I stand in a very dangerous position. This instant shift has deeply influenced my emotions and thinking. And now I have to deal with problems in the family! Before, it was fine although my husband and I had arguments. Now, even though it is a little argument, it turns very big . . . it is caused from a mixture of mental problems, and one of their root causes is from this development. (Tep Vanny)

On the other hand, for some husbands, their wives' protest has jarred against their valuing of traditional gender roles. Women likewise alluded to the difficulty of combining protest with domestic duties such as housework. This is a perceived correlation between housework negligence and family breakdown previously identified in Cambodia (Brickell 2012b). With Cambodian women normatively expected to provide "shade," including "shelter, safety and prosperity—for her children" (Kent 2011, 197–98), BKL women discussed their gendered duties as a (public) evolution rather than transgression of their domestic roles. Rather, to some men, BKL wives' inability to fulfill both their private and public commitments as housewives was the source of annoyance:

Well, there are family problems like arguing within the family. Because women spend their time protesting, we leave our children at home, we do not have time to cook. After our husbands come back from work, they sometimes feel angry about this unpreparedness in the family, so there are arguments. Several families have decided to divorce. (Srey Leap)

The difficulties that Srey Leap mentioned, of maintaining home life in combination with advocacy work to ensure that they can provide "shade" in the most basic sense, links to pressures felt in other Southeast Asian countries. In respect to Thai labor activism, Mills (2005, 133) details how women's protest was acknowledged as a "conflict with gender- and kin-based obligations." In a similar vein, Srey Leap made named reference in her interview to Bo Chhorvy, whose marriage was jeopardized by her public activism and dereliction of domestic

duty (this is also the case for Yorm Bopha, who after her release separated from her husband). Bo Chhorvy explained how this conflict was favored by government authorities:

At the moment, I am divorced because I go out to protest a lot. . . . I do not have time to take care of housework, like cooking, and my husband disagreed with my protest. He wanted to keep me at home, but I opposed him. Therefore, we divorced . . . everyday, the authority prays for us to have problems at home like this, so that we have less time to protest against them about the land dispute. The authority hates my activism, and it is good for them to see me having family problems, they want revenge on me. (Bo Chhorvy, divorced with children, early forties, current BKL resident)

The implication here is that the micro-geopolitics of forced eviction manifest in marital strife are not just collateral damage, but rather instrumental to a government intent on undermining the ability of BKL women to sustain their activism. This is sought not only through state-sponsored violence and detention but also through familial disruption. Indeed, for at least two forefront BKL women—Tep Vanny and (at one time) Srey Pov—an additional complexity arose from their husbands' preexisting employment by government authorities. For Ou Kong, who was a high-ranking military officer, his situation became untenable. He was threatened with military court action and forced to find an alternative source of income. Srey Pov explained, too, the intimidation experienced by her husband,

My husband's supervisor was threatened by City Hall and said "If you allow your wife to continue her protest, you will have nothing to eat." I continued to protest, and from therein my husband did not receive any more project work. For five years of protest, my family survived on U.S. \$60/month.

Whereas marital problems outlined so far foreshadow a sense of women's subordination, both families' handling of marital conflict speaks in relative terms to agency. Whereas Tep Vanny and Ou Kong adopted a flexible approach, Srey Pov and her husband engaged in "creative conjugality" (Jackson 2007, 126) to innovatively manage their performance of marriage. Srey Pov described how:

So I told him that we should divorce. My husband still can work, and I still can protest [laughing]. We could then get back together when the protest had succeeded. My husband said he would consider this. In the meantime, I told the community the situation. Next, the community spread this news to the media, and my husband's supervisor read

the news. The supervisor took pity on my husband when hearing that we divorced because he had no intention to see this. The supervisor then became quiet and does not blame my husband anymore.

The strategic potential of divorce highlighted by Srey Pov was not an isolated consideration; rather, other BKL women were also concerned that their activism should not affect their husbands' jobs. Indeed, as reported in the media, this was a remedy that many vowed publicly to pursue (Worrell and Kunthea 2012). The narratives of BKL women speak to marriage as a site of intimate geopolitical disruption and resilience. Although marriage and activism have a largely unhappy relationship, creating further gendered vulnerabilities within the home, this does not deny the potential for conjugality to be understood as an area for agency and influence that defies the deliberate stripping of intimate citizenship by the Cambodian government.

Conclusion

This article has spoken to the intimate geopolitics of forced eviction and women's activism in Cambodia. I started with the women's evocation that "The Whole World Is Watching," provisioning a sense that forced eviction and the fate of women's everyday lives belongs simultaneously to the global and local. BKL has received the attention of national and international media as well as through NGO and UN reports, but this article sought to provide an academic record and feminist geopolitical reading of this ongoing struggle. The article demonstrates how forced eviction foregrounds links among homes, bodies, the nation-state, and the geopolitical. The conceptual construct of intimate geopolitics embodies these connections in myriad ways.

First, forced eviction is a geopolitical phenomenon linked to Chinese expansionism and the neoliberal stripping of nonelite assets that has intimate ramifications for men's and women's domestic lives, their relationships, and gendered obligations. Second, women's protest has centered on exposing intimate incursions and inequities to national and geopolitical audiences through public evocations of home and gender ideals denied to them. Women's activism against forced eviction in Cambodia relies on affecting political change through emotionally laden practices that infuse both "physical feeling and a conscious making sense of that feeling" (Askins 2009, 9). Whereas the "ontological security" of the family home in most countries "comes to signify the security (social and political) one ought

to have in the nation" (Caluya 2011, 205), it is ontological and material insecurity of the Cambodian state that women have come to so publicly define. Women's inability to uphold their rights to intimate citizenship under circumstances of forced eviction has resonated far beyond Cambodian borders, with BKL now a regular feature of diplomatic tension among the U.S. government, donor agencies, and a Southeast Asian elite intent on development, however contradictory. Women's ability to jump scale to these realms thus showcases the feminist contention that "Geopolitics is not simply some Great Game to be played by Great Men" (Koopman 2011, 281). BKL women rebuke, moreover, the commonplace notion that Cambodian women are "non-political" (Lilja 2013, 99).

Third, in the territorial defense of their homes and families, protesting Cambodian women have not only incurred further insecurities in, and demands on, their conjugal lives but also have dealt with intimidation and imprisonment by officials who have vested interests in destabilizing activists' support networks. What manifests is a double enactment of what Legg (2010, 70) theorized as "invasive governmentalities" in the BKL case. Home dwellers who have already made sacrifices to claim their rights through the subversion of elite power are subject to further domestic precarities by a government seeking to "extend the realm of the political into that of the intimate." In other words, "in its internal intimacies and through its interfaces with the wider world," the home is invested in as "intensely political" site (Blunt 2005, 510).

Intimate geopolitics thus emerges from, traverses, and oscillates within and between scales. The intimate geopolitics of forced eviction and women's activism in response has the effect of blurring through relentless coproduction the "global/geopolitical" and "local/everyday" binary (Pain 2009, 467). Although "the weight of the past is such that 'tragedy' seems to be one of the more descriptive words, and most enduring explanations, for the ongoing process of Cambodian history" (Chandler 1996, 325), women's harnessing of intimate geopolitics has challenged the inevitability of such narratives and has given rise to a less fatalistic era in which human rights abuses do not go unwatched.

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Notes

1. The women whose stories form the basis of this article all chose to have their real names used.
2. Forced evictions are defined as "when people are forced out of their homes and off their land against their will, with little notice or none at all, often with the threat or use of violence" (Amnesty International 2012, 2).
3. Directed by Cambodia Senator Lao Meng Khin, Shukaku, Inc., operates in collaboration with the Chinese firm Erdos Hong Jun Investment Corporation.
4. Although a further five interviews were held with evicted residents of the Cambodia Railway Rehabilitation Project, only BKL material is included.
5. See the film *Even a Bird Needs a Nest* about Tep Vanny.
6. In January 2014, I returned to BKL to interview the husbands of activists.
7. In 1992, six countries bound together by the Mekong River entered into a program of subregional economic cooperation called the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).
8. In 2011, Hun Sen unexpectedly signed an order for 12.44 hectares of BKL to be divided among remaining residents.

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