

Courage in the Face of History: Cross-Cultural Portraits

Sandra Matthews

A portrait is always more than a representation of an individual human being. Like people themselves, portraits store multiple narratives within, offering only enigmatic hints to onlookers. A portrait can be the starting point for unravelling the narratives of history and culture so central to each person's life.¹ Four American women artists – Alma Lopez, Delilah Montoya, Sheila Pinkel and Meridel Rubenstein – use photographic portraits to dramatise powerful narratives of history and culture. Although these artists have not been influenced by each other, their work is connected by a complex web of ideas. All four work with histories of war and upheaval, struggle and resistance; all employ myths to tell their stories; and all present models of courage. Though they work with culturally specific material – Lopez and Montoya with the Chicano icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Pinkel and Rubenstein with postwar portraits of Cambodians and Vietnamese – all four artists deal with issues of physical, cultural, and spiritual survival that transcend the specifics of culture.

Although a military conflict may officially end when the fighting stops, wars have consequences that reverberate for many generations. At the end of the Mexican-American war, in 1848, thousands of Mexicans living in northern Mexico suddenly became, by treaty, Mexican-Americans. More than 150 years later, Chicanos – present day Mexican-Americans – still frequently suffer discrimination in US society. The Virgin of Guadalupe is a potent icon used

by Mexicans and Chicanos as a sign of cultural identity and a source of support in times of difficulty.

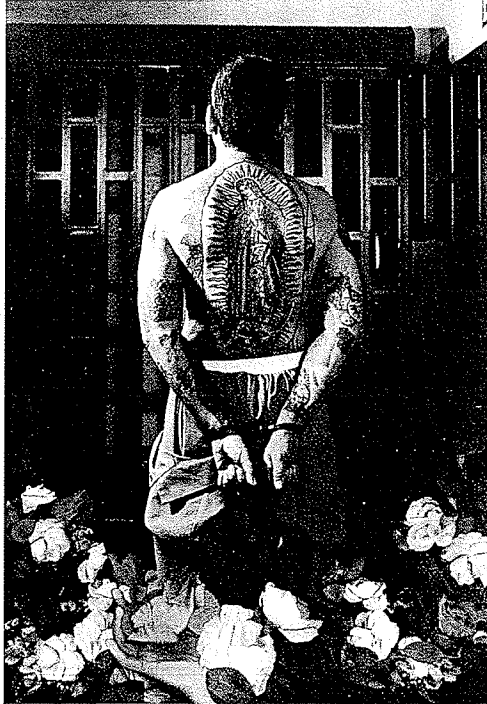
The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe's apparition is important to understanding her meaning. According to legend, the Virgin appeared several times to a humble Aztec (Nahuatl) Indian named Juan Diego in 1531, ten years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Juan Diego had recently converted to Catholicism. She appeared to him on the hill at Tepeyac, the former site of the temple to the Aztec mother goddess Tonantzin. The Virgin commanded Juan Diego to tell the local bishop he must build a church to her on this site. When the bishop asked for proof of her appearance, the Virgin instructed Juan Diego to gather flowers from a nearby location. Juan Diego found roses blooming there, although it was winter, and he filled his cape (tilma) with them to bring to the bishop. When he opened his cape in the presence of the bishop, the roses spilled out and both men saw that an image of the Virgin had been miraculously imprinted on the inside of the 'tilma'. This cloth image still resides in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which was in fact built on the hill at Tepeyac, on the outskirts of present-day Mexico City.

In this way the Virgin of Guadalupe, with her church on the temple site of an equivalent Aztec goddess, provided a way for the conquered Indians to outwardly practise Catholicism and still be connected to their own culture, to take 'a subversive path away from the patriarchal, Jesus-centered European church toward an Indian, matriarchal

spirituality'.² The Guadalupe appears in countless paintings as a dark-skinned Madonna standing on a crescent moon which is supported from below by a small angel. She wears a cloak decorated with stars, and her body is surrounded with 'rayas', rays of the sun. She is a hybrid figure who graciously mixes conquest with resistance. While many Mexicans revere her, calling her the mother of their people, she has taken on another level of meaning in Chicano culture, as a symbol of minority pride. When farm workers in California, under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, successfully struck for fair treatment, her image was on their banners. Thus she is called on to support the status quo by making it bearable, and also called on to support the struggle for revolutionary change.

Delilah Montoya takes the icon of the Guadalupe back to its Indian roots. She has focused specifically on the tattoos of the Virgin frequently found on the backs and arms of Chicano men. Montoya knows that certain Aztec rituals prescribe the skinning of a female sacrificial victim, whose skin is then worn ceremonially by a male who will also be sacrificed. She therefore feels that skin is a particularly appropriate 'canvas' for the image of the Guadalupe. The tattooed image becomes like a 'second skin', worn on a man's back as a protection from unseen harm.³

Montoya also explores the gender-specific meanings of the Guadalupe. Apparently human skins were worn in Aztec ritual to bring the powers of male and female energies together. Her monumental work *El Guadalupano*



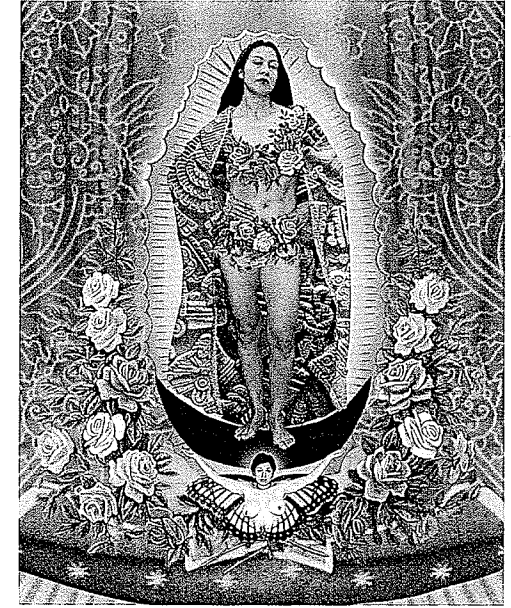
El Guadalupano, 1998
© Delilah Montoya
9.5' x 15'

is a mural-sized composite photograph picturing, larger than life, the head and upper body of a male prisoner, posing with his hands handcuffed behind him. He is wearing prison-issue clothing, the upper garment dropped to reveal a large tattoo of the Virgin of Guadalupe on his muscular back. Montoya's image is a portrait both of the man, taken from behind, and of the image of the Virgin, facing the viewer. This double-gendered image is full of irony: the icon of the Virgin is a sign of Chicano cultural pride, yet this man, Felix Martinez, has lost his autonomy by being imprisoned, perhaps in part because of his

ethnicity. It is thought that he was jailed not for a crime he had committed but as a possible informant on members of a gang with which he had formerly been involved.⁴

In a tragic twist, shortly after posing for this picture, Felix Martinez was murdered in prison, leaving behind his wife and young daughter. When exhibiting this mural, Montoya makes it into an altar with candles and offerings laid out beneath it. Her original intention was to recreate a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, but the installation has also turned into a memorial for Felix. He has become a martyred figure, who was caught between the demands of two masculine cultures – the gang culture of the barrio and a flawed criminal justice system. His tattoo represents an attempt to express cultural identity and personhood against all odds, and poignantly invokes the needed qualities of maternal protection. In his body he brings together, without resolution, the extreme polarities of 'macho' masculinity and nurturing femininity.

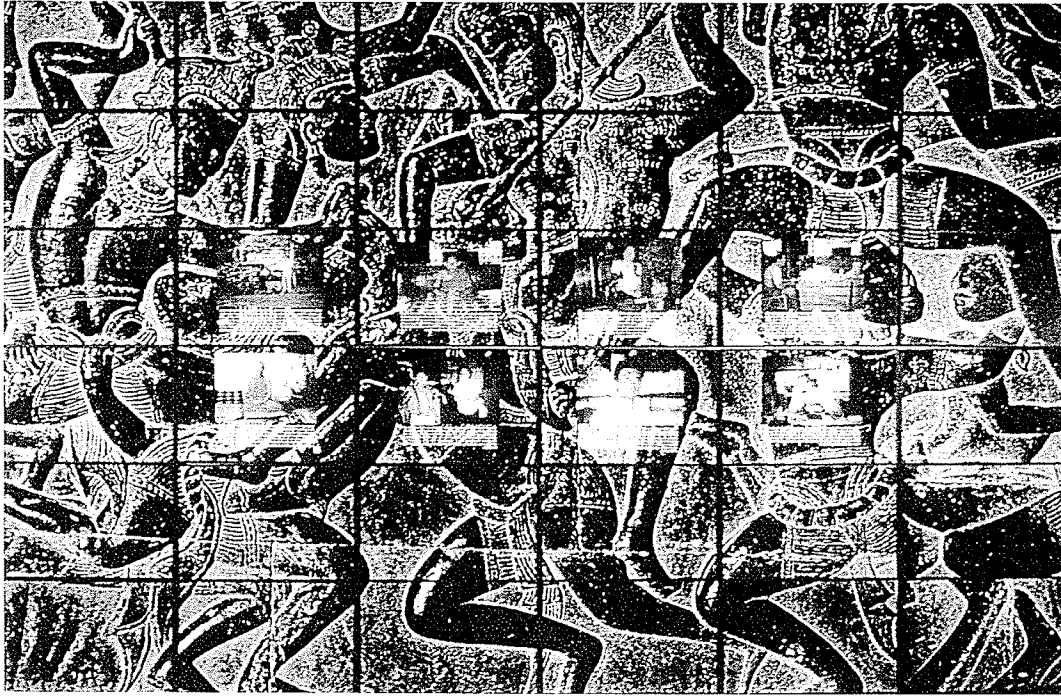
While Montoya looks at the Guadalupe image in relation to men, Alma Lopez addresses the possible meanings of the Guadalupe for women. Her digital composition entitled *Our Lady* allows the Virgin to come down from her pedestal and relate more directly to the viewer, as a strong, beautiful Chicana woman who owns her own body and is not ashamed to show it. Lopez was inspired by an essay by Sandra Cisneros, which speaks of the traditional Guadalupe as 'an ideal so lofty and unrealistic' that it is difficult for real women to identify with her.⁵ Usually the Guadalupe's body, including her feet, is completely covered in cloth. This Guadalupe is clothed only with an open cloak and multicolored roses, which modestly cover her breasts and genitals. Lopez has recast the traditional iconography of the Virgin, taking the design on her cape from an Aztec stone carving of the dismembered body of the goddess



Our Lady, 1999
© Alma Lopez
Giclee/Iris Print on Canvas
17.5" x 14"
(special thanks to Raquel Salinas and Raquel Gutierrez)

Coyolxauhqui.⁶ The angel supporting the crescent moon has become a nude woman with large maternal breasts and wings of the Viceroy butterfly.⁷ But, most importantly, Lopez's model, Raquel Salinas, projects an image of female power. She becomes a positive role-model, standing up for her gender as well as her culture, courageously providing an alternative to the all-nurturing, ever-supportive Virgin. This Virgin asserts herself under difficult circumstances.

In fact the image was a risky one to make. Lopez's version of the Guadalupe, distinctly feminine but not particularly maternal, immediately stirred up vocal controversy among the most serious of the Virgin's



Remember Cambodia: Survivors, 1997
 © Sheila Pinkel
 66" x 102"

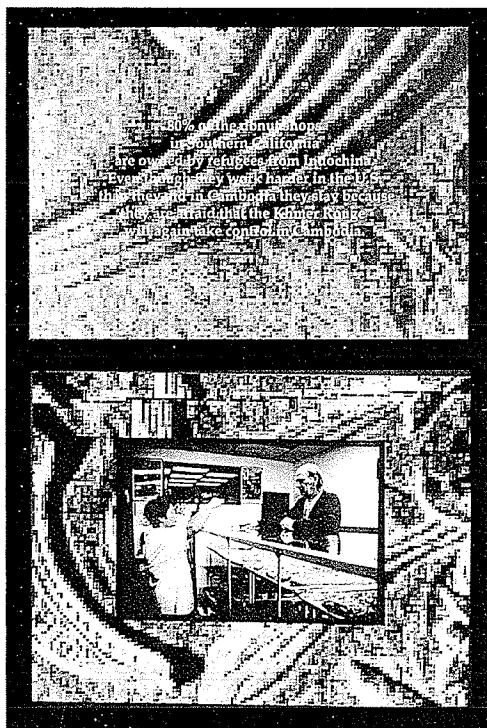
devotees. Their principal objection centred around the portrayal of this sacred mother-figure as a real woman with a real body.⁸ Although those offended by Lopez's image are a tiny minority, the intensity of their response is a reminder of how powerful a force an icon can be. Yet surely the icon can also be a force for change, as it has been in the past, responsive to shifting cultural needs. In the long Mexican tradition of establishing a personal relationship with the Virgin, Lopez has created an image that speaks to her personal concern for the needs of contemporary women.

Both Lopez and Montoya honour an important cultural and religious icon, while at the same time they work to demythologise it, to show where the myth does not apply. They connect the Virgin of Guadalupe with contemporary political issues, reminding us that this icon served political purposes from the start. Since Chicano culture is a hybrid culture, formed out of the experience of displacement, these images are already internally multicultural. But in addition to contributing to the ongoing vitality of Chicano culture, Lopez and Montoya are also building bridges between their cultural tradition and the rest of the world.

Sheila Pinkel and Meridel Rubenstein are also interested in building bridges between cultures. Their work comes in the aftermath of the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and early 1970s. As young North Americans, Pinkel and Rubenstein both actively protested against the US military involvement in these countries. Both independently have returned to south-east Asia years later, to investigate the continuing impact of those wars. They also have each, as adults, become deeply interested in Buddhist meditation.

Driven by the desire to know about the long-term impact of war in south-east Asia, for which the US had heavy responsibility, Sheila Pinkel made a series of extended trips in the 1990s to Cambodian and Hmong refugee camps in Thailand, and to Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, where she gathered photographs and stories of survivors of the war. She has also followed closely the lives of several Hmong and Cambodian refugee families in the US. Based on these experiences, Pinkel has produced a large multifaceted work entitled *Indochina Document*, which she continues to expand and update. The images reproduced here come from the portion of this work entitled *Remember Cambodia*. They are structured as large-scale grids, the rectangles of each grid together forming a large black and white background image. The background images represent details from the stone carvings found in the ancient Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat. These carvings picture the epic stories of classical Hinduism, the precursor to Cambodia's present-day Buddhist culture. Pinkel has inserted color photographs and text elements into the grids. In this way, her portraits of present-day individuals are seen against a backdrop of mythic proportions.

In the first grid, Pinkel pays homage to people she met who acted, often in the midst of genocide and personal

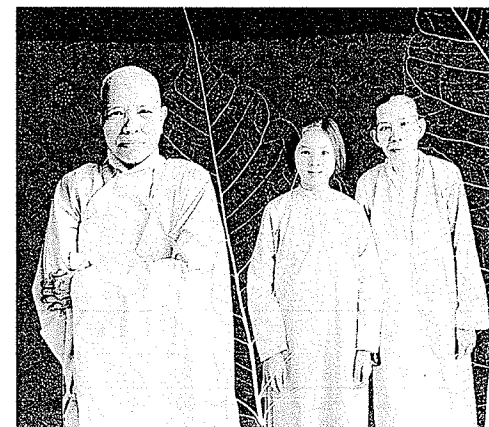


Donut Shop (detail) 1996
© Sheila Pinkel
11" x 18"

trauma, to preserve human and cultural life. Eight remarkable individuals – five Cambodians and three Westerners – are pictured, with their stories briefly recounted beneath their portraits (see Appendix A). Their achievements include translating key Buddhist texts into Khmer and distributing the texts to temples throughout Cambodia, reuniting hundreds of refugee children with their families, establishing a psychiatric centre in a large refugee camp, advocating women's rights, and instructing a generation who had lost the opportunity for education in

Buddhist practice and tradition. Because the devastation of the war made many Cambodians strangers to their own traditions, cultural repair was accomplished by both outsiders and insiders. These individuals attended to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of a traumatised people, often at significant cost to themselves. The background image against which we see them is a carving of an epic battle, the Battle of Kuruksetva. In front of this ancient image of figures in heated combat, Pinkel has placed the small, bright pictures of these people who effectively countered the effects of massive destruction. They are quiet war heroes of a very special kind, significantly different from the heroes of battle pictured behind them.

In the second grid, Pinkel has concentrated on a specific family of Cambodian refugees living in Los Angeles. The small inserted words and images describe their struggle to survive. One text insert reads: 'For the last eight years they have been working eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, making and selling donuts. They have supported a large extended family in the US and continue to send money to relatives in Cambodia. Every night he wears a shirt with the image of Angkor Wat. He thinks he can last another five years. She laughs and says that she is "tired, so tired".' Pinkel places images of the family members at work in their doughnut shop against a huge image of a stone carving representing the giant demon Ravana 'using all his strength to shift Mount Kailasa, the Himalayan abode of the god Siva, back into position after an accident tipped it to one side'. Pinkel sees this hard-working family as engaged in a similar struggle, trying to set their lives back into proper position after terrible personal and cultural upheaval. That the man wears a shirt with the image of Angkor Wat is a moving



Forest (detail) 2000-1
© Meridel Rubenstein

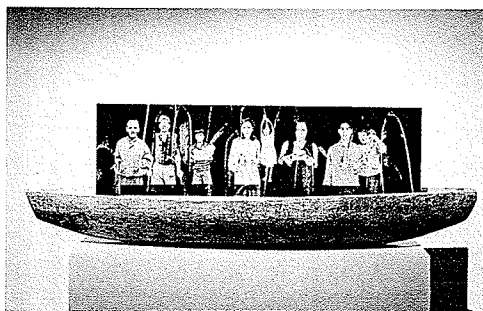
detail which seems to speak of the power of images to perpetuate culture across time and space, as well as of his attempt to remain culturally 'grounded' as he occupies a space somewhere between Cambodia and the US, not yet comfortable in a hybrid identity.

In both works the carved stone image in the background contextualises the present-day individuals, and lends their struggles epic status. By visually connecting the recent traumatic events and immigrant struggles of Cambodians to the nation's rich artistic and religious history, Pinkel demonstrates the possibility of continuity in the face of cataclysm. Her work participates in the simultaneous cultural reclamation and adaptation that preoccupies Cambodians today. As such it also speaks to issues faced by diaspora communities and threatened cultures everywhere.

While Pinkel's extensive journeys involved the in-depth gathering of a 'peoples' history' of the war and its

aftermath in Cambodia, Meridel Rubenstein's journey was part of a different, poetic project. The two works shown here are from an exhibition entitled *Trees at Sea*, one part of an ambitious multi-media project that is still underway and which Rubenstein calls *Joan's Arc: Vietnam*. In the exhibition *Trees at Sea*, Rubenstein first draws a parallel between centuries-old trees and human survivors of war. Thus the image entitled *Forest* pictures the abbot, abbess, novice and nuns of the Tu Hieu and Dieu Ngheim Pagodas in Vietnam, representing them as firmly rooted individuals together constituting a human forest. Yet this translucent group portrait is laminated between two pieces of glass, and the glass then stands upright in a small wooden dugout canoe – a boat made from the trunk of a tree ('a tree at sea'). So the forest is both rooted and mobile, potentially or actually journeying. And in fact these monks and nuns are part of the monastery from which the influential monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, journeyed out to plant the seeds of Buddhist thought abroad. Sandblasted on to the fragile but luminous glass is a delicate additional image of the veins of the leaves of a Bodhi tree, the kind of tree under which the Buddha was sitting when he first attained enlightenment. Rubenstein is interested in the coexistence of contradictory elements such as power and fragility, rootedness and mobility, tradition and transformation.

This piece is accompanied by a sister work entitled *Volunteers*, which is also constructed as a group portrait sandwiched between pieces of glass, standing in a wooden dugout canoe. 'Volunteer' is a gardener's term referring to a plant that grows in an unexpected place. Eight 'volunteers' stand looking out at the viewer, overlaid with a sandblasted image of wooden boat-hulls. They are male and female, all ages and races, each holding an object of personal value small enough to be taken on a journey. Five



Volunteers, 2000-1
© Meridel Rubenstein
Gallery installation view
13.7" x 48" dye-transfer film laminated between glass
in nineteenth-century dugout 70" x 14" x 10"

of them are Vietnamese-born individuals who were adopted into US families. Two others are a US Vietnam veteran and his Vietnamese wife, the child of Viet Cong parents. The last is Mr Mai Van On, who, although he was fighting on the other side, saved the man who is now US Senator John McCain from drowning when his plane was shot down into a Vietnamese lake. According to the story, which takes on a mythic quality although it is true, he then saved him a second time when his fellow soldiers wanted to shoot him, saying "You can't shoot, I saved him." All of these people have made human alliances across battle lines, have touched the enemy.

For Rubenstein, the ability of people to redefine terms such as 'enemy' represents courage. Her subjects are heroic in their ability to survive, adapt, and cross boundaries. Her metaphors are from nature rather than history. Her interest is less in the specific facts of the Vietnam War than in its mythic dimensions as a disaster that uprooted individuals, forcing them to journey and regenerate.

While much cross-cultural photographic work presents

an exotic spectacle to the curious viewer, neither Pinkel's nor Rubenstein's work invites this kind of voyeurism. Their attempts to bridge cultural boundaries are made in a spirit of reconciliation and human connection. If the people who figure in their work are held up as inspiring examples, they are also represented as humble individuals, characters in larger stories. Both artists portray specific people as the unknowing heroes of myths – myths of passage, of rescue and survival, of heroism and sacrifice. Yet the actual portraits are all the more moving because of their modesty. These heroes do not strike 'heroic' poses, but appear in their everyday guises.

Lopez and Montoya have 'de-mythologised' the Virgin of Guadalupe, making her meaningful in new ways both within and beyond Chicano culture. Pinkel and Rubenstein have, on the other hand, 'mythologised' a group of actual individuals, also articulating their stories for a broader audience. Taken together, the works of all four artists remind us that culture is never static or singular, and that bridging between cultures is a creative act that can take many forms. These works bear important messages about the possibilities for sustaining cultural continuity and also for implementing positive cultural change, if we have the courage.

ENDNOTES

- 1 I use the word 'culture' here to refer to the customs and beliefs defining a group of people, which in turn shape and are shaped by the experiences of race, class and gender.
- 2 Martinez, Ruben, 'The Undocumented Virgin', in Ana Castillo (ed.), *Goddess of the Americas: La Diosa de las Americas* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 101.
- 3 Montoya's recent work includes images of male and female bodies tattooed with the Guadalupe. Using digital technology, she creates the illusion that their skins have been 'peeled' off and exist as free-floating objects.

4 For a full account of Felix Martinez's story, see Montoya's article entitled 'On Photographic Digital Imaging', in *Aztlan* 27, 1, Spring 2002.

5 Cisneros, Sandra, 'Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,' in *Goddess of the Americas*, p. 48.

6 According to legend (recounted in Cherrie Moraga's essay 'El Mito Azteca' in *Goddess of the Americas*), when Coyolxauhqui learns that her mother is about to give birth to Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, she conspires with her siblings to kill her mother. However, Huitzilopochtli is forewarned and, at the moment of birth, he kills and dismembers Coyolxauhqui. Lopez informed me that the carving of her dismembered body was placed by the Aztecs on the ground at the entrance to a temple, so that people would walk on it. By using this carving as the visual design on the cloak of *Our Lady*, she is reviving the memory of this daughter-goddess.

7 Lopez uses the Viceroy butterfly as a symbol: the Viceroy's wing patterns mimic those of the Monarch butterfly, which migrates annually back and forth across the US/Mexican border. The Viceroy benefits from this mimicry because the Monarch is poisonous to predators while it is not. Lopez uses this imagery to symbolise the actual vulnerability of Chicanos in the US.

8 For a detailed record of the controversy, including emails Lopez received both attacking and defending *Our Lady*, see her website at www.almalopez.net.

APPENDIX A

Text from 'Remember Cambodia: Survivors', by Sheila Pinkel.

Peter Gyalley Pap graduated from the University of Massachusetts with a PhD in theology. He did his dissertation on the history of Cambodian spiritual practice. From 1975-8 spiritual leaders, temples and texts were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. Thus, young Buddhist novitiates at Site 2, a Cambodian refugee camp at the Thai/Cambodian border, had no books or elders to teach them about the history of Cambodian Buddhism. Peter showed them his dissertation video tapes and taught them about the practice. In this way he was able to fill a crucial gap in their knowledge, which allowed the next generation of monks at Site 2 to be educated.

Venerable Vinayathavo Phanoem moved from temple to temple while fleeing from aerial bombing prior to 1975. He finally escaped to Thailand and spent ten years learning Thai and translating the original Buddhist Dharma by hand into Khmer. He emigrated to the United

States in the mid-1980s and continued work on the book. In 1995 he published a printed version of the Dharma, which he took to Cambodia and distributed to temples throughout the country to rebuild spiritual practice, which had been weakened by the war.

Margot Grant went to Site 2 from Australia to help refugees get housing and healthcare. She helped them find protection from abduction, bombings and thieves. She made sure that hospital patients had adequate medical care and nutrition. Her son, Tim, started the Landmine Awareness Program at Site 2. Margot and Tim were captured, and subsequently released, by the Khmer Rouge when they ventured into Cambodia.

The Venerable Monychendo understood the important place which the temple has in the lives of village people in Cambodia. He was also concerned about the weakening of the memory of Buddhist practice because of the destruction of the spiritual community in Cambodia. He set up a school which gave young men training in Buddhist practice at Site 2. In 1992 he returned to Cambodia to set up a temple near an area controlled by the Khmer Rouge.

Mme Ung Yok Khoan was the president of the Khmer Women's Association at Site 2. From 1975-8 she worked as a farmer, pretending that she was illiterate so that she would not be killed. At Site 2 she encouraged women to get an education, take financial charge of their households and be more assertive with their husbands. She also started courses for women in human rights so that they would learn to honour themselves and one another. Her dream was to return to Cambodia and set up interconnected women's groups around the country which would facilitate women's self-determination.

Hong Setha was the son of two mathematics professors. From 1975-8 he worked in a child labour camp and, thus, was never able to finish high school. In 1979, he fled to Site 2 where he found his brother, his only surviving relative. He got married and had two children while in the camp. When he returned to Cambodia in 1992, he stayed with his father-in-law in the country. However, soldiers came to his house threatening to kill his family if they did not reveal the whereabouts of his brother. He immediately relocated his family to Phnom Penh.

Mme Man lived in Phnom Penh before 1975. From 1975-8 she was forced to work as a farmer. A Khmer Rouge soldier wanted to marry her daughter and when Mme Man protested that the girl was too young, several soldiers prepared to kill her. She finally allowed the marriage to save her own life. After the war, forced marriages were annulled. She and her family fled to Site 2. There, Mme Man established a psychiatric centre for traditional herbal and Western healing. Her daughter was a mute

recluse living in this centre. The last time I saw her daughter she was being smuggled out of Site 2 to return to Phnom Penh to enter a nunnery.

Doug Hulcher, a teacher and photographer, realised that many Cambodian children became orphans when their families emigrated from the camps. From 1980-92 he devoted his life, without pay, to doing the paperwork and legal research which allowed Laotian and Cambodian refugee children to find their families abroad. During this period, due to his efforts, over 1,100 children were united with their families.

APPENDIX B

Meridel Rubenstein: Volunteers, 2000-1

My T. Pham, age 34, adopted to Minnesota family from Saigon for polio operations, father killed for helping her to escape.

Michael Dreyer, age 26, born Gia Dinh, S. Vietnam, adopted to Holland, Michigan, lives in Tempe, Arizona.

Heather Kim Degenhardt, age 28, born Saigon, adopted as infant to Maine, lives in NYC.

Sierra Barron, age 4, adopted to Phoenix, Arizona, from S. Vietnam.

Phuong Cunningham, married Danny late 1980s, from S. Vietnam near Camau and a Viet Cong family.

Khiem Van Hoang Royden Nagy, age 9, adopted Tariffville, Connecticut, from Hue, Vietnam.

Danny Cunningham, US Vietnam Veteran, from Taos, NM, returned to Vietnam to live and marry.

Mr Mai Van On, Hanoi, the soldier who saved Senator John McCain from drowning in West lake in 1967, and then protected him from comrades' bullets.

Forest 2000-1

Abbot, Abbess, novice and nuns from Tu Hieu and Dieu Ngheim Pagodas, Hue City with bodhi leaf, the root monastery of peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh