

(Re)figurations and Situated Bodies: Gendered Shades, Resistance, and Politics in Cambodia

This article considers women's participation in local mobilizations and national politics in Cambodia. What is the "genderness" of social uprisings, new communities of belonging, and national politics? In particular, the article will deconstruct current discourses by embracing the concept of figurations. According to Rosi Braidotti, there is a noticeable gap between our lived experiences and "how we represent to ourselves this lived existence in theoretical terms and discourses" (2011, 4). In other words, the multiethnic globalized societies that we inhabit—which are characterized by advanced technologies and high-speed telecommunications, allegedly free borders and increased security measures—do not inform how we picture ourselves in this complex world order. Instead, current discourses are marked by "an imaginative poverty" (4).

Here, Braidotti turns to the concept of figurations, arguing that we need to evoke creative possibilities in order to change dominant subject positions. In other words, we need to reinvent ourselves. This can be seen as a transformative project in which we move away from of the standard view of human subjectivities, subject positions, and historically established habits of thought that have dominated until now.

In Cambodia, as elsewhere, stereotypical constructions dominate with regard to men and women. What becomes significant from previous studies, as well as interviews that I have carried out, is that Cambodian women are often described as shy, gentle, and narrow-minded. One oft-cited proverb states that "a woman cannot even go around her own stove." This saying represents women's perceived inability to leave the household sphere, the isolation and the lack of education that "explains" women's "mental weakness" (Lilja 2008, 73). This indicates that we must move beyond local discourses of gender in order to understand the diversity of current politics in Cambodia. This article aims to do so by mapping different Cambodian female figurations such as the migrant woman, the female politician, the

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woman resister, and the NGO worker. The article therefore draws on my interpretation of Braidotti's concept of figurations, which involves abandoning and challenging earlier stereotypes in order to provide a more complex outline of women's subjectivities and subject positions in a Cambodian material and discursive context. By using this approach I attempt to locate female political subjectivities and to display women's participation in national politics, new communities of belonging, and practices used to mobilize or shake the cultural order.

Refigurations: Difference, diversity, and nomadic subjectivity

Before returning to the Cambodian context, I will take a short detour to the concept of figurations. Figurations are not metaphorical or symbolic ways of thinking but rather materialistic mappings of situated—that is, embedded and embodied—social positions.

The concept of figurations is often promoted as a critique of the limited options presented by representations of, for example, women or ethnic minorities. From this perspective, new figurations open up new possibilities, challenges, and relations. To exemplify figurations of alternative feminist subjectivities, Braidotti turns to the womanist, the lesbian, the cyborg, the inappropriate(d) other, and the nomadic feminist, as well as other more historically specific figurations such as the mail-order bride and the illegal prostitute. These figurations, she argues, differ from classical metaphors by accounting for the material conditions that sustain them (Braidotti 2007).

According to Braidotti, the expansion of poststructuralism has contributed to a range of alternative subject positions. These figurations are hybrid, contested, and multilayered—for example, the itinerant worker, the illegal alien, and the cross-border sex worker, which involve notions of displacement, diaspora, and hybridity. Other examples are Donna Haraway's cyborgs and Zygmunt Bauman's tourists and vagabonds. Homelessness and rootlessness are signifiers of our present situation out of which new figurations emerge—figurations that challenge previous stereotypical images (Braidotti 2011).

In Braidotti's assessment, feminists are way ahead when it comes to creating alternative subject positions. Their repertoire already contains powerful political narratives that refigure women in their "great diversity" (Braidotti 2007). For example, Kathy Ferguson has embraced multiplicity by promoting the concept of "mobile subjectivities" that "need irony to survive the manyness of things" (1993, 178). These subjectivities include "hyphenated identities that range along particular axes of definition, such as used-to-be-working-class-now-professional, or divorced-mother-now-lesbian" (161).

In this article, I outline figurations of Cambodian women from an understanding of the subject as situated and culturally differentiated. The locations of the subjects differ, and those differences determine how the subjects emerge. In addition, “axes of differentiation,” like class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and so on, interact in the constitution of subjectivity (Braidotti 2011, 4). Are there simultaneous interactions between two or more of these? And are they used in unpredictable ways?

As I note above, this article aims to display women’s participation in local and national politics in Cambodia through the lens of figurations. There are countless numbers of figurations, but only those that are seen as political are depicted here. Through this framework, I reflect on prevailing political power relations by constructing, pinpointing, and displaying different subject positions, predictable and unpredictable. As figurations, however, these are not only abstract positions; they are embodied by subjects who perform in relation to the figuration. And, as stated previously, figurations must also be understood and related to the social and material conditions necessary for their very existence.

This article will embrace a decentered and multilayered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity that is situated in shifting contexts. The aim of the newly constructed figurations is not to “lock in” a couple of new subject positions but rather to display the power relations that define these diverging positions: they express different socioeconomic and symbolic locations (Braidotti 2011, 4–11). Or, in Braidotti’s terminology, the figurations draw on a cartography of the prevailing material and discursive contexts.

Figurations emerge from processes of self-formation and are seen as possible figures of identification. From my interpretation, figurations can therefore be used to reveal processes of self-reflection, targeting dominant subject formations from within. Kelsey Henry, Iveta Jusová, and Joy Westerman (2014) understand “figuration” as both a literary genre and a feminist methodology of self-reflexively narrating one’s encounters with difference. According to the authors, the researcher should not be looking for specific identities but rather should be “mapping emergent subjects” (151). Thus, figurations can be seen as a feminist methodology of self-reflexive narration and mapping. Through this, differences are displayed, and the embrace of figurations constitutes an emancipatory move (Henry, Jusová, and Westerman 2014).

Methodology and data

The material for this article has been collected during back-and-forth trips to Cambodia since 1995. Overall, my research has aimed to understand

new modes of democracy, political participation, and resistance. In particular, I have focused on different facets of citizen resistance and activism with regard to localized discourses of democracy. Thus, my research has mapped various forms of articulated and performed resistance. This research can therefore be said to contribute to the field of resistance studies, which aims to study practices performed by subjects in opposition—sometimes in opposition to a distinct decision maker in a powerful position, at other times in opposition to a discourse or a field in which the power is more diffuse and difficult to locate (Lilja and Baaz 2016; see also Hollander and Einwohner 2004).

In my research, I employed the snowball method to find political practices and resisting subjects. Snowball sampling is a technique in which existing sample members suggest potential new sample members—in this case political agents. Thus, the sample group grows like a rolling snowball (Bernard 1995; Salganik and Heckathorn 2004). In addition to the interviews, I have drawn on secondary material in the form of books and articles that have been both inspirational and informative in helping me to locate information on political action and social change in Cambodia. Altogether this has provided me with rich and differentiated material with competing and contradictory stories, practices, and materialities from which I have constructed the four figurations addressed in this article.

In the analytical section of this article, I cite the interviews I conducted in order to gain an inside perspective on the figurations and how the women consciously reinvent themselves. Among other things, I refer to in-depth interviews I conducted in 2009 and 2010 with representatives of four nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that work against gender-based violence: the Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre, Cambodian Men's Network, Gender and Development for Cambodia, and the Women's Rights Office at the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (Ligue Cambodgienne pour la Promotion et la Defense des Droits de l'Homme, or LICADHO). At all organizations, the director was interviewed (often more than once), as were the male trainers who are involved in various training sessions. At LICADHO I also met with the women's rights supervisor. In addition, I interviewed the director and a former employee of the Centre for Social Development.

The article also builds on forty-one in-depth interviews that I conducted in 1997, 1999, 2002, and 2007 with politically involved women and men from different political parties: the Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant Neutre Pacifique et Coopératif (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia), the Cambodian People's Party, the Human Rights Party, and the Sam Rainsy Party.

The Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party have recently merged to form the Cambodia National Rescue Party. The respondents included a range of public actors, from members of parliament (MPs) and senators to grassroots activists. I also interviewed eleven Cambodian NGO workers who shared their views on issues of women, female leaders, power, and resistance.

Finally, I will refer to twenty-seven interviews conducted in Cambodia in 2013. These interviews were conducted by the Resist Successfully in Social Transformation (RESIST) research group, with women activists, NGO workers, politicians, and people in the media, in order to map civil society-based activities in Cambodia and their impact on the political system. The research group includes Mikael Baaz, Mona Lilja, Michael Schulz, and Stellan Vinthagen, and it centers its research on questions of resistance and change.

All of the interviews mentioned above were open-ended and semi-structured, and they included a number of topics. Respondents were given the opportunity to address questions of relevance to them. This approach, which was designed to capture a more in-depth understanding of gender relations, power relations, resistance practices, and the local democracy, requires that the data be organized after the interviews have been conducted.

By using field data collected in different sites, this article is inspired by the idea of a multisited ethnography, which is used to grasp and conceptualize new connections, concepts, patterns, and communities. Over recent years, multisited ethnography has become a crucial aspect of various social studies and of the ethnological disciplines at large. The concept at its core is simple: it is a call to move away from Malinowskian one-case-based ethnographic research and toward a methodological shift that proposes a set of different sites and the connections between them as a central complex of ethnography (Marcus 2005). Ethnographic research seeks to “examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time space. . . . This mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity” (Marcus 1995, 96). For my research, this has meant interviewing people at different locations in order to map political subjectivities, subject positions, and various forms of resistance.

In line with the methodology of multisited ethnography, the selection of sites has been made gradually and cumulatively, which allows for new insights to develop as opportunities present themselves (Hannerz 2003, 207; Espinoza 2015, 3). The assemblage of material has also been analyzed continuously due to the ongoing nature of the data collection.

In all, this article discusses the figurations of the migrant women, the female politician, the woman resister, and the NGO worker. Mapping these

figurations has been a piecemeal process engaging the changing social and material circumstances in Cambodia. I have constructed these figurations over time from the respondents' reflections over, and reinventions of, themselves, as well as my interpretations of these reinventions. In this, I embrace the inseparability of the observed object and agencies of observation and the fact that matter (bodies, buildings, etc.), and the meaning assigned to matter, interacts with the bodies and minds of researchers. Rather than taking prevailing stereotypes for granted, we should think of figurations as emergences in the interactions between subjects, practices, matter, and various interpretations and understandings of these interactions. In other words, a figuration is created and re-created in an assemblage of encounters and interrelations.

Cambodian stereotypes and notions of proper gender behaviors

Before moving on to the figurations of the Cambodian context, I will try to paint a picture of the imaginative poverty that in some senses marks the Cambodian society. In order to understand the gender discourses prevailing in contemporary Cambodia, one must consider the *Cbpab* poems, which have helped to shape the historical and contemporary discourses on femininity (Jacobsen 2008, 78). The *Cbpab*, one of several normative codes of conduct for men, women, children, and other categories of individuals, contains guidelines for appropriate behaviors for members of the Cambodian society.

The *Cbpab Srei* (Code of conduct for women) is thought to have been put in writing in the mid-1800s, although its authorship is contested (Jacobsen 2008, 119). Many of the rules in the *Cbpab* apply to the domestic sphere, where men are heads of household and women are advised to speak and move quietly, not to eat until their husband and family members have finished their meal, and never to respond to their husband's anger. In this, the *Cbpab Srei* codifies concepts of power, status, conduct, and "moral principles" that urge women to observe their place in the home by tending to their husbands and children (Brickell 2011b, 438). Or as Judy Ledgerwood writes, "Women are to talk slowly and softly, to be so quiet in their movement that one can hear the sound of their silk skirt rustling. While she is shy and must be protected, before marriage ideally never leaving the company of her relatives, she is also industrious" (1992, 4).

The *Cbpab Srei* also lays down rules for appropriate sexual behaviors for women; these include heterosexuality, chastity before marriage, and fidelity to the husband (Jacobsen 2008, 67, 78). Moreover, women in Cambodia are expected to be economically savvy by caring for their family's wealth (Frieson 2001).

The *Cbpab* guidelines are highly present in Cambodian society; they have been taught to children for centuries, both at home and in school, and are passed down through the generations (Lilja 2008, 2013). One woman I interviewed in 2012 stated that women generally try to follow the rules, only leaving out the ones that are seen as too out of fashion.¹ Likewise, in a study carried out by Aing Sokrouen, thirty-six Cambodian women were interviewed regarding the traditional and contemporary roles of women. When Aing analyzed the data, she concluded that elderly women tend to follow all the codes of the *Cbpab Srei*, while young women ignore some of the rules (Aing 2004, 73).

Thus, the *Cbpab* rules are still influential. Still, it must be acknowledged that the importance of the guidelines is currently contested and challenged because of recent developments in Cambodia, including the increasing participation of women in the labor force, where women's economic activity rate is almost the same as that of men (78.8 vs. 81.6 percent; Brickell 2011a, 1356). This, among other things, has contributed to an ambiguous situation in which women sometimes are depicted as "symbols of progress and modernity" rather than being sheltered (Derks 2008, 13).

Still, the image of the passive woman tends to conceal the multitude of political subjectivities in Cambodia. Below, I try to construct new moving figurations—which are situated in different locations and material realities—in order to bring out the complexity of Cambodian society. These figurations are created from everyday experiences that challenge dominant perceptions about gendered identities.

Cambodian figurations

As I discuss above, this article draws on interviews conducted from 1995 onward in order to discern different Cambodian female figurations. I also give an account of how these images are assumed, performed, negotiated, or "felt" from within. Over and above this, the method of multisited ethnography offers me the possibility to trace different discursive formations (such as the *Cbpab Srei* guidelines) across and within multiple sites in Cambodia (Marcus 1995, 96).

The woman resister

Cambodia has recently seen a rapid privatization of public lands, or a "modernization" of land rights and titling. New and more formalized processes of land titling—governed by statutory, Western-imposed law—are increasingly replacing customary practices. In addition, the government

¹ Interview, NGO worker, Phnom Penh, 2012.

is granting vast logging and land concessions to business associates (mainly from China). Some have even said that “Hun Sen and his ruling Cambodian People’s Party . . . have . . . put the country up for sale” (Levy and Scott-Clark 2008). Overall, Cambodia has a history of land resettlement and forced evictions and has recently seen a rise in land prices due to urbanization and national land politics (Khemro and Payne 2004, 182–83; Kent 2011).

These drastic and often brutal transformations have led to clashes and conflicts. Within these, Alexandra Kent states, Cambodian women are often “the most visible and vocal defenders of their land in these heated and sometimes violent disputes,” even though they generally have a lower level of education, have less access to powerful networks, and are uninformed as to their rights (2011, 407).

Both Katherine Brickell’s and Alexandra Kent’s research displays how Cambodian women tend to practice resistance to a greater extent than men. One example of this is the Boeung Kak Lake conflict. This community has become a high-profile case of collective, and often gendered, resistance to forced eviction and has gained both national and international attention (Brickell 2014). Surya Subedi, UN special rapporteur for human rights in Cambodia between 2009 and 2015, notes: “The case is emblematic of the desperation that communities throughout Cambodia feel in resolving their land disputes, and the ensuing civil unrest” (in Di Certo and Channyda 2012).

In 2013 we (the RESIST research group) decided to interview these women whose resistance can be seen at least in part as a response to the land politics of the ruling government. During the interviews, the women mentioned several reasons for their local activism; for example, women tend to lose the most during evictions (Kent 2011). The women also revealed that as they organized to oppose severe human rights abuses, they were worried that involving men would only encourage violence: “turning men into goldfish clashing with each other” (Brickell 2013). In other words, the women resisters argued that Cambodian masculinity leads men to practice traditional, violent, and less effective forms of resistance. The women also believe that the authorities are less likely to arrest or beat women. In this, they have clearly developed a resistance approach that departs from their understandings of the dominant perspectives on gender. For example, one female resister expressed the following thought to the RESIST research group:

When we started to organize the groups we choose mainly women. There are some men too, but primarily we choose women. The reason is that we want a peaceful organization. We want the government to not use violence against women. For example, when there is a man

who participated in one protest the government, the authorities, threatened to arrest him. . . . As another example from a male demonstrator, . . . when he went to the demonstrations the authorities beat him, and beat him not just as a threat but wanted to kill him. . . . So from that example, we believe that if we have male demonstrators the problem will be serious, they will be jailed or killed. . . . Because we want peaceful demonstrations, so first we choose females to be in the front; even the children participated.²

Overall, the women decided to use their positions as wives and mothers to co-opt the assumptions of the riot police by singing songs of suffering and exposing their bare breasts outside the Cambodian Parliament to demonstrate their pain. In addition to more traditional protest, they used innovative new forms of activism:

I will give you an example of creative [resistance]. We put the bird's nest on the top of our hands and some eggs of the birds. The message is that even birds need a nest. So, we have also worn traditional Khmer ladies clothes, and usually these kinds of clothes represent how Khmer women are very polite and they only stay at home. But this time, because of the injustices, the Khmer women can no longer stay at home but we need to go out to find justice. Even sometimes Khmer women from Borei Keila and Boeung Kak Lake, we take off our clothes. The message is that we want to express our suffering, and also in Khmer culture it is called "a hundred times of dying" if you take off your clothes. So, we already died because of the violations. We do not know how to express our suffering so we take off our clothes. Because taking off clothes in our culture, it is a shame. So another message is that the Khmer culture gives value to boys so [we are telling] the government: "Please value ladies and give justice to the people."³

This quotation demonstrates how the intimate resistance practice of undressing and showing bare breasts emanates from the women's socio-economic and symbolic locations and from their reflections on themselves in relation to these locations. In this, matter matters. The loss of private places and rooms in the face of evictions and demolitions becomes the very engine for resistance. The quotation above also reveals how the women

² Interview, female activist, Phnom Penh, 2013.

³ *Ibid.*

negotiate the meaning attached to traditional women's clothing and how their resistance is parasitic on traditional discourses. They reveal the corporality of their bodies and the materiality of life and death in order to expose their suffering.

I would argue that the women's resistance practices rupture dominant discourses in Cambodia. Or, as Brickell writes in relation to the women's revealing of their bare bodies:

In a conservative Buddhist society in which women's modest comportment is venerated, this was a bold act. . . . 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 [Boeung Kak Lake] women will transgress traditional gender ideals, including modesty, timidity, and shyness, to make their voices heard and exert agency over their lives. [Boeung Kak Lake] 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. (Brickell 2014, 1265)

In my interpretation, the fear of losing one's home, a very material and intimate setting, makes the women perform an unexpected figuration, "on a slant." In many ways, this figuration deconstructs the current discourses of gender and the image of Cambodian women as slow, soft, quiet, shy, and in need of protection. It is a figuration that reveals the diversity of the female other.

In some senses, the women activists do what Braidotti suggests: they reset the stage to disrupt current relations of power, and they (re)imagine possible futures. From an outside perspective, class, gender, and local power relations interact in constituting the female resister. The woman resister is an emerging subject position, one that is in the process of becoming. It is a dynamic and changing entity that changes when global and local discourses entangle. Forced mobility, homelessness, and rootlessness are signifiers of these women's situations.

The woman resister is not only a position; it is sustained by repeated actions and performances by individual subjects who reflect on their actions in a process of self-making. These reflections must be understood and related to the social and material conditions necessary for their very existence. One woman, for example, dwelled on the punishments women receive for performing various resistance practices. She stated that women

resisters are increasingly exposed to domestic violence, since the figuration has transmuted over time. As women perform the figuration of resister over a period of six to seven years, they become professional activists, which implies that their understandings of their performances, and the understandings of those around them, have changed over time. I understand this through Gilles Deleuze (1994), who reminds us that repetitions introduce a change or difference into the mind that contemplates them. Not only do the repetitions of certain patterns make us expect that pattern, but the meanings assigned to a repeated rhythm, sign, or performance change as the phenomenon appears over and over again (see also Lilja and Lilja 2011; Lilja 2013). For example, if we look again and again at the same picture, the semantics are gradually emptied and the image's meaning is changed. Or, as the figuration of the woman resister is repeatedly performed, the understanding of it is transformed over time. While people are at first surprised by the practices of resisting wives, the women are now increasingly viewed, and view themselves, as professionalized resisters.

This professionalization has meant that the stories of the women resisters contain various experiences lived over time. One woman said:

Before the conflict, I was a good housewife. I did the cooking and took care of my daughter and did everything properly. But when I started campaigning I stopped doing most of that work so he [my husband] left the family and stopped supporting me and my daughter financially and we had a really hard time. There was violence too and he destroyed property in the house. . . . He said that if I didn't change my mind and I continued with my activism one day he might murder me so it'd be better for him to leave me. . . . Our tradition says we should listen to our husbands. I decided to choose the community and continue with my activism and he was hurt by that.

I am now reconciled with my husband. He came back around a month ago. His friend who works in social work tried to convince him that it's good to have a strong, activist wife and he tried to reconcile us. So now my husband says it's okay to do campaigning just as long as it's not political.

Before I started campaigning I was in a dark place. I knew nothing about society and its problems. But now I'm in a light place because I know about so much and I got training on the law and advocacy from lots of organizations. So I have more knowledge, and that makes me really happy because I know a lot more about society's problems. I have no regrets about my activism. Instead, I am happy because I helped society and other communities to make them strong and share

knowledge so we can stand up together and I feel that I have contributed to society. The government will be afraid because all the people are united and we all help each other. (Woman activist quoted in LICADHO 2014, 3)

In other words, this woman is reflecting on the tension associated with changing gendered norms. In this, she reveals the expectations connected to her position as wife and mother and how these clash with her desire to be an activist and participate in the socioeconomic struggles connected to land rights. In all, this quotation implies “a form of subjectivity where, by virtue of the contradictions and disturbances in and among subject-positions, the possibility of resistance to the ideological (that is, discursive) pressure is allowed for” (Dissanayake 1996, x).

The migrant woman

During my first visits to Cambodia, women moving in public areas were generally dressed in “proper” clothes, not showing too much skin. When riding on the *moto dup* (motorbike taxi), women sat “traditionally,” with their legs on the same side. However, the landscape had changed when I returned to Cambodia in 2002. Women were no longer homogeneously dressed, and new representations of women crowded public places. Among these, one figuration I observed was the Khmer woman on the move. As Kent (2011) notes, today’s global economy shapes womanhood in new ways; it frames women as a cheap, flexible labor force informed by notions of domesticity and sexuality. The wave of female labor migration that began in the early 1990s, when women were leaving rural areas to find new employment opportunities in Phnom Penh, reflects Cambodia’s integration into the global political economy. It is mainly young women who leave their villages and work in Phnom Penh in the sex industry, as factory laborers, or as market vendors. These women are not generally seen as subjects upholding political positions. Still, their appearance has turned out to be highly political as they challenge and shake the current social order and traditional gender ideals. By pursuing their needs and their desire to make sense of their own subject positions, the women who migrate from the rural areas of Cambodia to urban Phnom Penh bridge and blur the boundaries between the rural and the urban and the distinction between the traditional and the modern. Therefore, they are important agents in any analysis of power and resistance (Derks 2008).

Annuska Derks’s work includes extended quotations from a young woman who identifies with the image of the migrant women. Like many young women, Sopea has moved between jobs, places, and styles. Sopea’s

parents were killed during the Khmer Rouge era, and she grew up in the household of her oldest brother. Together with three friends, she moved to Phnom Penh to take on different kinds of work: as a domestic servant and a factory worker. She found her work in the factory to be hard and unfair, and she finally ended up taking a position as a beer promotion girl: “I spent the money that I’d earned before . . . and I didn’t want to go back to my native village. I didn’t know what to do, so I decided to sell beer” (in Derks 2008, 3).

As a beer promotion girl, Sopea had to wear a short, tight dress and learn how to talk and drink with men in an intimate way. For this, and for spending time with men outside work, her roommate and others accused her of being “too modern”—of behaving in a way that is not proper for Khmer women. In fact, the women who hold positions as garment workers, beer girls, karaoke singers, and waitresses are often regarded as sexually available and not respectable; they are *srey kalip* (modern women) who do not adhere to the *Chbab Srei* (Derks 2008).

Sopea also realized her distance from the rural population: “When I compare myself now with women of my age in my native village who have one or two children, I am very different: I have my own money to buy rice” (in Derks 2008, 4). While she embraced the possibilities in the city, the autonomy, the chance to earn money and go out for fun (*dae leeng*), Sopea also tried to cover her dress with a long black skirt while going to work, and she modified her speech, clothing, and behavior in line with the expectations of the workplace and the village. In regard to the latter, she attempted to keep up an image of an acceptable modernity.

This indicates how migrant women negotiate gender ideals in relation to the notions of the *Chbab Srei*. The American artist and writer Anne Elizabeth Moore, who spent about four months living and working with young Cambodian women who had just moved to Phnom Penh, recalled: “I was lucky to be living in a dormitory with 32 young women who had just moved to Phnom Penh for the first time. . . . [For] the most part, the majority of the 32 young women who I was living with were from the provinces, and they all had known about *Chbab Srei*. They all had copies of it on their desks. And they all were really, really well aware that this document existed, which sort of outlined a set of social rules for girls” (Moore 2015).

Sopea and other girls in her situation thus acknowledge, use, change, and accommodate gendered ideals while exploring the options available to them. Sopea’s life, in some senses, gives us an insight into the constraints, contradictions, mobility, and creativity that the figuration of the migrant women offers us: a figuration formed in the interplay between localities

and global economic (and gendered) structures (Derks 2008, 198–99). In addition, Sopea’s self-reflexivity and the self-disciplinary practices she performs in relation to different norms display the figuration from within and how figurations are an integral part of subject formation (Braidotti 2011, 11–12).

Female migrants, then, embrace mobility, multiple identities, and new material conditions. The figuration is made possible in the dualism between unequal structures of power within the global economy and the localities and daily lives of young women who are taking part in the global workforce. The figuration of the female migrant is multilayered in the sense that it includes different spaces (rural areas, urban areas, and transport) and symbolic meanings, expectations, values, and ideals. Mobility, therefore, is not just “an expression of the ways in which labor regimes operate, but also of young women’s creativity in dealing with the tensions among cultural constructions, objective determinants, ‘modern’ imaginations and lived experiences” (Derks 2008, 204). Homelessness and rootlessness are also signifiers of migrant women’s situation and of the new figuration that emerges from it, a figuration that challenges previous stereotypical images of women in Cambodia and elsewhere (Braidotti 2011).

The figuration of the migrant woman, and the women who have sutured this position, challenges previous gender stereotypes and has given rise to a discourse of “too-modern” girls, who are often seen as “loose” or “broken.” These notions are far from harmless. For example, Penny Edwards (2008) notes how the methods used to punish “deviant” women can be both horrendous and painful. Throwing acid on bare skin is one such method, which has occasionally been used to contain the moral danger these women are believed to embody.

The degrading discourses about female migrants, however, are marked by ambiguity, as migrant women, with their hard work and family support, both fulfill and forsake financial and moral obligations (Derks 2008, 201). One respondent revealed both this ambivalence and its consequences: “Some women who work in the textile industry continue to do so even though they are old enough to get married. Their families accept this, as the women contribute substantially to the families’ economies. However, it is a high price to pay because some women get too old to get married and never get a family of their own.”⁴

In addition, the figuration of the migrant women has come to represent progress and modernity in a positive sense. Especially through the media

⁴ Interview, female NGO worker, Phnom Penh, 2014.

and advertisements, images of women representing modernity reach villages and contribute to the attraction of city life. For the women themselves, it is often a challenge to find a proper balance between the “too traditional” of the villages and the “too modern” of the city, which results in hybrid and contested subject positions (Derks 2008, 13).

Overall, I would argue that the migrant woman creates a new construction among other entangled female figurations. The above is an account of a multilayered subject, a changing entity that is situated in a specific but still shifting context. In this, the figuration outlined embraces different material conditions, which in fact sustain this subject position. The figuration also addresses “axes of differentiations,” as class, location, gender, and age interact with one another to constitute this subjectivity (Braidotti 2011, 25).

The female politician

As I note above, I have used snowball sampling to try to distinguish political subjectivities in a Cambodian context. The question of who is political has changed dramatically since 1993, when Cambodia was subjected to a UN-implemented liberal democracy. In 1997, I found that the political legitimacy of some female politicians had been underpinned by the village relations that provided the base for their career in national politics (Lilja 2013). Overall, when reviewing my interviews with women politicians, they emerge as an alternative feminist subjectivity, or “an inappropriate(d) other,” which has itself emerged as a response to the changing political situation (Braidotti 2011, 11). This figuration exposes a constant process of becoming in relation to different cartographies of power in Cambodia.

As a figuration, women politicians display the ways in which multiple norms and hierarchies contribute to the creation of new subject positions that exceed previous ones. As I argue below, these women’s self-reflections have become the basis for disciplinary processes. Disciplinary power is corrective and aims to determine, reform, or rehabilitate the abnormal, and thus strives to normalize all into conformity with the same ideal model (Johnston 1991, 149–69). This pattern seems to be invoked in the identification process of some Cambodian female politicians, who argue that women must cease to perform a female identity (including characteristics such as quietness and gentleness) and adapt themselves to the outspoken norm of a politician. One female member of the National Assembly said, “Women must change themselves to fit in the National Assembly. Women are too shy and timid. That is why they have lower status than men have.

Women must be stronger and more outspoken.”⁵ Yet another female MP stated: “I think to be successful within the men’s area, you know, because men dominate women a lot here in Cambodia, so if we are not outspoken, we are not seen, we are just ignored.”⁶

These quotations display how some women politicians downplay the ideals of the *Cbpab* poems by arguing that women must abandon what are regarded as common female behaviors and perform their political actions in more assertive and extroverted ways. This mirrors Michel Foucault’s “refusal of becoming”: perhaps the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are (in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 212).

The quotations above imply that the political image, which many women politicians try to adopt, is an image of a politician “into which various characteristics of dominant masculinities (for example rationalism and individualism) are smuggled” (Monro 2005, 169; Lilja 2008). However, as I argue below, female MPs who adapt to the (male) standard behaviors of the political sphere will most likely fail to completely overlap with the norm of a political actor. Performing in accordance with what they understand as the image of a political actor, female politicians no longer corresponded to the image of the female gender. Their differing from the political *and* the female norm seems to provoke respect, confusion, and some skepticism from their male colleagues. One women politician described how outspoken and strong women in the National Assembly were perceived to be: “Sometimes, when you do like this [gesture of speaking], everyone looks at you: ‘So brave, so intelligent, but not so nice to be around. . . . Are you single too? No one will ask you to marry. Oh I’m scared of a woman like that.’”⁷

According to this politician, the “masculine” (articulate, intelligent, vocal) female body fills male politicians with aversion as well as admiration; these are contradictory feelings that indicate ambivalence over how to respond to a woman who acts like a man. The body of the female politician becomes, as Braidotti (2003, 44) expresses it, “an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces, it is a surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc.) are inscribed: it’s a cultural construction that capitalizes on the energies of a heterogeneous, discontinuous and unconscious nature.”

Women politicians “acting like men” display how women are able to use various identity positions and conflicting discourses in order to do politics.

⁵ Interview, female politician, Phnom Penh, 1997.

⁶ Interview, female politician, Phnom Penh, 1999.

⁷ Ibid.

One female politician, for example, performed the image of a male politician in order to raise women's status: "As leaders women have also some difficulty. But somehow not all people know what women can do; they always think that men can do better than women. But, through my work as a minister, I tried to explain these issues. To be a leader I did not like to say, 'I am a woman.' But as a leader I had to do the job as a leader and not connect being a female with the job."⁸

In order to show the complexity, contradictions, and movability of the ideals and performances of female politicians, I would like to display how women struggle with the (male) image of a politician. Not all of the women politicians I interviewed promoted the strategy of adjustment to a masculine norm. Other female politicians argued that women must stay feminine within the political space. One female MP said: "Women can be successful as politicians if they remain gentle, soft, quiet and, in addition, as intelligent as men are."⁹

It is in the tension between different images that individuals come up with emancipating solutions to the discursive system that keeps women in inequitable positions. The gendered norms of the society are thus both conservative and emancipatory: the gendered order is maintained while simultaneously becoming the source of creative interpretations and new practices (Lilja 2008). All this illustrates how female politicians reiterate, resist, or recast gendered norms. Their ambivalent performances are probably due not only to indecisiveness between existing images but also to the lack of another image, an alternative identity position that describes what it is to be a female politician. There is no category in which to place such an individual. There are no fixed images, no discourses, no ideas about what a female politician might be, how she might behave, and so on. This in some sense opens up a space for new figurations. For example, one woman argued that a combination of masculine and feminine traits would make for the perfect politician: "A good female politician must be strong but flexible. But she must also act as a Cambodian woman: being gentle and so on. . . . She must keep her word. She must be brave and have competence."¹⁰

The quotations above display a figuration that is in the process of becoming. By using a discursive materialistic approach that is grounded in situations, my analysis reveals the complexity of the figuration, which challenges dominant and simplified images of gender. The quotations reveal ambivalence, mobility between images of identity, entanglements of power

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Interview, female politician, Phnom Penh, 1997.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and resistance, self-reflections, negotiations from within, and all the processes and practices that contribute to the unique figuration of the Cambodian women politician. This figuration, with all its complexity, might also be used to deconstruct dominant perceptions of femininity.

The NGO worker

In 1993, the United Nations took the lead in seeking to transform Cambodia into a liberal democracy. At this time, there was a full restoration of development aid and an upspring of NGOs, which began to work on a broad range of issues such as democracy, women's political rights, the creation of a permanent tribunal for crimes against humanity, as well as other concerns related to development. I would argue that the material, political, and ethical conditions of the NGO sphere made it possible for women to (re)invent another subjectivity: the NGO worker. This figuration is created in the meeting between the global and the local in a transnational setting. Many of the organizations I have interviewed have mainly local staff, but they depend on support from (often Western) donors such as the Asia Foundation, Sida, Diakonia, and Oxfam. This indicates that local NGOs in Cambodia are ideologically and economically influenced by international organizations. And, as revealed in the interviews, the transnational politics of the donors translates into multiple, hybrid forms of resistance and into development strategies rooted in the particular Cambodian context. Thus, local NGOs can be viewed as transnational developmental networks, as organizations involved in lobbying, sharing, or disseminating information and in capacity building in the nexus between the international and the local. As such, NGOs compose strategic responses to the opportunities facilitated by globalization. Their employees can be viewed as agents of change who have created a range of relationships, including partnerships, alliances, and networks that facilitate the diffusion of norms between the transnational and the local. In addition, women NGO employees appear to alter their own performances and self-image in light of the international aid discourse. Many seem to struggle with an identification that is caught between the "universal" subject positions promoted and forwarded by international organizations and particular local subject positions informed by local discourses. For example, one female NGO worker told the RESIST research group about the transformations and negotiations of "proper" gender behaviors within different local organizations:

Cambodian women who work at different NGOs and get in contact with foreign NGO workers develop alternative role models. Often

these women do not want to get married and get children, but they would rather stick to their work, which they think is so interesting. Older women at the NGOs try to discipline the young ones. They say only “bad” women do not get married and have children. This also goes for men. At my organization unmarried women and men have organized a network for men and women who do not want to get married. They play football and do other activities in order to not get isolated. Because they know that in Cambodia most social activities are connected to the family.¹¹

In contrast to the figurations discussed above, the material and symbolic patterns surrounding the NGO worker seem to create a new masculinity too. Male NGO workers also reflect on the “universal” subject positions promoted and forwarded by international organizations in relation to local gender stereotypes (Lilja 2012, 2013). One NGO employee, for example, narrated his personal understandings and the difficulties he experienced as he tried to move beyond Cambodian gender roles and make sense of a non-Cambodian masculinity: “I too am gender-blind! When the children wake up during the nighttime I am too tired. I let my wife get up. Sex too . . . what are her feelings and needs? . . . In Cambodia Cambodian women must offer themselves for their man. Women must have sex even if they are sick. . . . I asked my wife to tell me when she wants to have sex. She refused at first. Cambodian women do not show lust, she said.”¹²

Thus, both female and male NGO workers reflect on local discourses of gender in relation to the international aid discourse, thereby constructing new subjectivities. The figuration of the NGO worker, which is located in the middle of the transnational and the local, inhabits a space where norms are gathered, entangled, clashing, and in between various individuals, organizations, and arenas.

Although many NGOs are run as firms and are dependent on income from international agencies, the women inhabiting these organizations still view themselves as political. One woman said: “You know, if you are NGO they say we do not do politics. So I say: ‘I agree. You cannot support any individual party but if you do it for everybody and go to every political party, you do politics! You talk to people to support your goal, what you want to do. That is politics! You go out and you tell people this is your idea and you need support: that is politics!’”¹³ I would argue that this

¹¹ Interview, female NGO worker, Phnom Penh, 2014.

¹² Interview, male NGO worker, Phnom Penh, 2009.

¹³ Interview, female NGO worker, former politician, Phnom Penh, 1997.

woman offers us a new figuration, one that allows us to tell new stories about contemporary Cambodia. She (and others) tries to widen the concept of politics by outlining different practices that might be labeled as political. Overall, these women tend to see their work as highly political and as a form of resistance. And, while reflecting on different gender roles, they (re)invent themselves, thereby contributing to the figuration of the NGO worker.

Summary and conclusion

Embracing different sites, this article is inspired by the idea of multisited ethnography and its call to move away from one-case-based ethnographic research. I have employed the snowball method to find political practices and performances and resisting subjects. Secondary material has added to these rich and differentiated data, which I have used to map the four figurations explored here. Overall, the figurations have been constructed from the respondents' reflections and reinventions of themselves, as well as my interpretations of these reinventions. In this sense, I have used the concept of the figuration as a feminist methodology of self-reflexivity.

The figurations, as Braidotti avers, are "not parasitic upon a process of metaphorization of 'others'" (2011, 11). Instead they are new, complex, moving, and temporary constructions that challenge previous images of gender. Still, it must be acknowledged that these sliding figurations might also, ironically, provide individuals with what they experience as stable social identity positions (Bloom 2013).

The Cambodian figurations outlined above display positions of overlapping identities, situated in material and discursive contexts, which inform the very boundaries of the figurations. By displaying different figurations, this article hopes to move beyond and deconstruct prevailing stereotypes by showing the diversity of the other rather than creating new stereotypes. Thus, the aim is to pinpoint the figurations above as emerging, ambivalent, temporary, moving, fragmented, and hybrid constructions, not as a new set of fixed positions. According to Braidotti, being able to tell the difference between different forms of nonunitary, multilayered, or diasporic subjectivities must be seen as a key ethical issue (2011, 11). Thus, this text is to be seen as an ethical statement that deconstructs prevailing stereotypes globally as well as locally within Cambodia.

I have tried to represent the figurations from within to display self-reflexivity, which prevails as the basis for these women's performances, suturing, and maintenance of the figurations. Overall, these women have assumed contested, hybrid, and multilayered figurations, challenging the

dominant images of gender, often in a direct and deliberate way. Thus, the figurations above (there are many more to be constructed in the Cambodian context) provide a key to the political life of contemporary Cambodian women: how and where do women shake the cultural order and do politics?

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