The Khmer Rouge seizure of power in Cambodia on April 17, 1975 marked the beginning of the country’s spiraling descent into one of the most extreme historical moments of the 20th century. What emerged in the aftermath of the regime’s collapse in 1979 was a nation fractured by genocidal death and dispersal; a half a million Cambodians fled their ancestral homeland, with over one hundred thousand finding refuge in America. With the world’s attention once again fixed on a global refugee crisis, Professor Khatharya Um will discuss her recently published book From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora and the critical links between state violence, refugees, and the history of wars and colonization in Southeast Asia. The talk will also reflect on the enduring legacies of war and genocide as they register in refugee families, as well as on the struggle of Cambodian diasporas to make meaning of, live with, and transcend this historical trauma in the aftermath. It will address the tension inherent to both remembering and forgetting, and the challenges that this entails for sharing and transmission across generations. It will also interrogate the notions of justice, reconciliation and healing in the pursuit of accountability.

Professor Khatharya Um is Associate Professor of Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies, and Chair of Peace and Conflict Studies at UC Berkeley. She is also Faculty Academic Director of Berkeley Study Abroad, affiliated faculty of the UC Berkeley Center for Southeast Asian Studies and the Center for Race and Gender, Faculty Adviser for the Berkeley Human Rights Center, and member of the UC system-wide Faculty Advisory Board on Southeast Asia. She was a Chancellor Public Scholar. In addition to her academic work, Professor Um is also actively involved in community advocacy, principally on issues of refugee integration and of educational access for linguistically and culturally diverse students.