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RIP: Grandfathers, War, and Memory

Memory is multilayered—built on the experiences and stories of those who remember, as well as the agency of those who can forget. The components of memory that remain most salient often result from the moments leading up to and following death. However, death in itself contains complexities and nuances that change its meaning; from the death of a family member to the death of individual narratives, death is deeply embedded in the processes of memory and how memory reincarnates in history and between generations. On April 30, 2019, my family's history will arrive in Washington D.C. as part of the Missing Piece Project, in the form of a long, glass bottle painted with the South Vietnamese flag. The contents and purpose of a message in a bottle inspired what I call "memory in a bottle." The object is steeped in duality and dichotomy, as it carries the photographs of both my grandfathers, two men who felt the effects of the war in very different ways. I will examine fatherhood, anticommunism, and ghost stories to bring historical meaning to the bottle as well as center Nho Đình Trần's (Ông Ngoại) and Phiên Văn Nguyễn's (Ông Nội) stories in Vietnam War history. I seek to show that memory is comprised of several layers: hegemonic influence, intergenerational trauma, and death, all of which are both hyper-visible and concealed.

Heteronormative family structures and patriarchal ideals feed into cultural hegemony, focusing on the dominant narratives of those in power. Since the United States involved itself in Vietnam's affairs after World War II, an American superiority complex has been ingrained in the

ways that Vietnamese people live, especially for those that migrated to the U.S. after 1975. The American hegemony that dominates how Vietnamese families should conduct themselves makes the United States the model patriarch, muddling the standards to which fathers should raise their children. Traditional Confucian values that define Vietnamese culture are overwritten and standards for fatherhood change in order to accommodate Western, capitalist views. During their lives, my grandfathers both attempted to teach my parents values such as education and filial piety, but United States imperialism in Vietnam interrupted their traditional teachings. They often felt indebted to Americans because they backed the South, but at the same time, they resented the “organized and strategic forgetting of a war that ‘went wrong’” (Espiritu xiii). For Ông Nội and Ông Ngoại, the war meant they were no longer just Vietnamese fathers, they were fathers of children that needed to understand the effects of communism, independence, and freedom, in the context of their country, U.S.-backed South Vietnam. The erasure of South Vietnamese perspectives in the war leave my grandfathers’ legacies and lessons partially concealed by broader American cultural hegemony. To symbolize the systems that prevent individual narratives from gaining recognition, the “memory in a bottle” contains two paper photographs that are not fully visible. The glass container represents the windows into the individual stories of Ông Nội and Ông Ngoại, but the remaining barriers that still exist in order to access them.

In attempts to remove some of the barriers to my grandfathers’ stories, I interviewed both my mother, Vương Thảo Trần, and father, Minhchâu Nguyễn, to gain insight to their interpretations of their father’s experiences and intergenerational trauma following war. According to my mother, when Vietnam was split into North and South, Ông Ngoại became an immediate target: educated and Catholic (Trần 11/23/18). He was extra cautious and particularly

intimate with what he taught my mother because he knew their time together was limited. He stayed back in Vietnam due to his deteriorating health while my mother and her siblings escaped the country and gained refugee status in the United States in 1980. Less than two years later, Ông Ngoại died of colon cancer, a direct result of the lack of medical care in Vietnam and his barriers to access due to his South Vietnamese allegiances. During the same time, Ông Nội was in a communist reeducation camp, what my father insists was a disguise for prison (Nguyễn 11/23/18). For his role as a general in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, Ông Nội spent 13 ½ years away from my father and his siblings, even missing my father's wedding in 1990. When he finally rejoined his family in the United States, Ông Nội had already been long silenced. He remained stoic and detached, speaking little of the war through his death in December 2012.

Although the Vietnam War affected the lives and deaths of Ông Ngoại and Ông Nội in drastically different ways, the conflict inflicted wounds and prompted legacies that would be passed on for generations. Hatred for the people that allegedly caused my grandfathers' deaths made anticommunism strongholds in what parts of Vietnamese heritage my parents chose to pass on to my sisters and me. Like Ông Ngoại and Ông Nội taught them, they instilled the symbols and significance of “cờ Việt Nam” in us so that our generation could remember the war as a fight for freedom. The bottle features a hand-painted version of the yellow flag with three red stripes, a token connecting me to the generations before me and reinforcing how “the former South Vietnam flag serves as a means of claiming a representational space for the Vietnamese American community” (Dang 74). Our Vietnamese American family flies cờ Việt Nam high whenever we celebrate the lives of Ông Ngoại and Ông Nội so that their memory is filled with remembrance for our free and fallen country. Although the memories that are captured behind

glass within the bottle require more work to unfold, the bright painted flag emboldens the pride of being South Vietnamese that my grandfathers died holding on to.

Beside the South Vietnamese pride and anticommunist sentiments that connected me to my ancestors, I was unsure of how to proceed with the fragile stories of my late grandfathers without tainting them. I drew inspiration from Yen Le Espiritu's question in *Body Counts*, "How do young Vietnamese Americans, born and/or raised in the United States, create memories of a war that preceded the birth of their consciousness?" (Espiritu 139), while generating the ideas behind the "memory in a bottle." I knew that I had a responsibility to honor the deaths of Ông Ngoại and Ông Nội, even though I did not share their wartime traumas in Vietnam. I wanted to create an object that paralleled the Vietnamese traditions surrounding life after death. Ông Ngoại died when my mother was my age, and Ông Nội passed before I had a grasp on adolescence. Because I could not remember them through firsthand memories, I needed to participate in the process of forming memory while mourning the dead. I took Nguyen-Vo's assertion that "we mourn to let the dead live on in us, speak in us, because they no longer can exist outside of us, because they would otherwise be wholly silent" (Nguyen-Vo 170) to heart, attempting to formulate memories of a war and of a people that preceded my life.

I remember the yearly giỗ rituals, traditional death ceremonies, for Ông Ngoại growing up. As I lit incense to burn at his altar, I would reimagine what he was like in life, what kind of a father he was and what kind of a grandfather he would have been. During Ông Nội's funeral, I did the same thing, wishing I could hear his stories, wondering what it was like to see combat in Vietnam. Now that I have grown, I understand that I cannot recount their narratives exactly, but I can use their legacies that have been passed on to me. I am now a teller of ghost stories, what Espiritu highlights as a space in which I can "bring into being what is neglected or made

invisible or thought dead” (Espiritu 1702). Through the “memory in a bottle,” I utilize what I know about the lives of my grandfathers to fill in spaces in Vietnam War history. According to Vietnamese tradition, the spirits of Ông Nội and Ông Ngoại live on after material death, therefore, their ghost stories are far from dead. Memorializing the deceased patriarchs of my family represent the lasting influence that their deaths have on how my parents, my sisters, and I form war memories.

In January 2018, I visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial with my mother on one arm and my father on the other. As we approached the names ingrained in the black marble, my parents did not utter a word about either one of their fathers. They decided it was best to keep their memories to themselves, in fear that speaking out to share those ghost stories would take away from remembering the deaths of the American veterans listed on the walls of the memorial. Even when I interviewed my parents for the Missing Piece Project and presented the bottle to them, they were unsure of how to engage in commemorating those that might not have been lost in combat during the Vietnam War, but lost due its longstanding effects. The experience highlights the motivations and inspirations behind the “memory in a bottle.” It was difficult to piece together intergenerational trauma with death of important and loved patriarchs, but the object symbolizes an opening of space to talk about difficult and layered memories of war. The photographs of my grandfathers and the artistic components of the piece, gave us an opportunity to remember Vietnam as not only a place of war, but a place of heritage.

After completing this project, I wanted to utilize one last theme that exemplified my own connection to my people and to my culture. When I bring back new knowledge from Asian American Studies that helps me better understand Vietnam, my parents tell me, “con có nước trong tâm hồn,” you have water in your soul. They remind me that my desire to remember

Vietnam is reminiscent of the water element. Thus, I wanted to connect the theme of water, of nước, to this missing piece, because water continues to flow through time and space. It connects us to our ancestors, it flows between generations and reminds us that we are all from the same people, the same nước. It fills in the gaps that we cannot fully understand. Water begs history to include the stories that had been forgotten or previously washed away. A message in a bottle traditionally floats in a body of water until someone finds it, opens it and reads what is inside. Once recovered, the message within is up to the interpretation of the reader, and although the message is laced with meanings unknown to them, it is the beginning of the learning of stories and legacies embedded in it. The “memory in a bottle” holds in it the messages and the lives of Ông Ngoại—Nho Đình Trần, and Ông Nội—Phiên Văn Nguyễn, and will continue to hold the importance of centering South Vietnamese stories in Vietnam War history.

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