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“Gimme Shelter”

My project, largely inspired by the song “Gimme Shelter” by the 1970s rock band The Rolling Stones, symbolizes the war within memory between the contesting narratives concerning the war in Vietnam: the American perspective, the South Vietnamese perspective, and the unique perspective of Thuy Nguyen—a South Vietnamese immigrant in the US. By weaving visual, lyrical, and aural elements together in the construction of my project titled “Gimme Shelter,” I aim to both symbolically portray the three contesting narratives separately, as well as how each interacts with one another within the collective memory recorded by history. As such, the primary aspects of my project lie in the musical arrangement of the melodies and harmonies within the piece and the visual representation and organization of the images, words, and color scheme.

To begin, the project revolves around the experiences and perspective of interviewee Thuy Nguyen, age sixty-four. I interviewed Nguyen on November 25, 2018, during which he shared with me his unique South Vietnamese experience regarding the war as a study abroad scholar in South Carolina, USA. Originally from Saigon, Nguyen was able to avoid the Vietnamese draft into the army by graduating high school early at age seventeen in 1971; in his gap year, he studied abroad at Clemson University. Interestingly, Nguyen was not drawn to the US by the “American Dream” of opportunity and freedom—in fact, most of his friends from

high school and even his younger brother did not have any desire to leave their country. Rather, Nguyen fell in love with the American rock culture, particularly The Rolling Stones, and enjoyed both the idea of traveling to, as well as his time in, the states. However, as the war worsened towards its end and the few Vietnamese study abroad students returned home to be with their families, Nguyen's family permitted him to stay in the US, and the rest of the family followed approximately thirteen years later.

Nguyen faced many struggles while in the states on his own, however I was surprised to find that he did not experience many of the obstacles facing Vietnamese refugees which we learned about in class: discrimination, anti-war resentment, etc. When asked about his difficulties as a Vietnamese student in the US, he recounted how he often went hungry—since his family could no longer send him living expenses, how he worked two part-time jobs in the evenings to provide for himself, how his grades were falling given the mental stress he was under, and how he switched from premed to engineering—an “easier” school. Additionally, he was concerned about his family back in Saigon, whose four-story home had been seized and occupied by the young North Vietnamese troops as a “guarding house” over the city. Although his mother’s letters eased his worries in communicating that in return for room and board, the troops offered a kind of protection for his family, Nguyen knew his mother’s letters were monitored by the troops, as well, and still worried for his family’s well-being.

Still, in his “blessed” circumstances, Nguyen’s experiences and perspective of the war vary greatly from the US Narrative of “We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose” ideology and the South Vietnamese Narrative so readily suppressed and dominated over. In short, as a student Nguyen “never paid attention to politics,” given his preoccupation with his obstacles of hunger and academia. He easily assimilated into the “local” student group—consisting of African American,

Caucasian, and Native American students—and, interestingly, was also treated as someone of “Cherokee heritage” because of his tan skin. If anything, only in his first encounter with individuals would they ask his opinion of US involvement or inquire into the exoticism of Vietnam; afterwards, the subject often never came up again and thus, was not of significant importance to him. In retrospect, though, Nguyen criticizes the politicians who devastated the lives of “the little people” and waged a pointless war resulting in the deaths of so many.

Thus, my project captures Nguyen’s almost indifferent, indirectly-affected experience during the war amidst the “righteous” narrative of American nationalists and the tragic ghost stories of South Vietnamese refugees. The song I chose as the base for my project, “Gimme Shelter” by The Rolling Stones, was a particular favorite of Nguyen’s, reflecting his intrigue with American culture and his involvement with the US; likewise, it was a popular song during the Vietnam War period for American veterans and citizens alike. However, the song’s lyrics and common use of “accidentals” in its melody convey the vague, chaotic, non-discriminatory destruction of war—which resonates with the South Vietnamese experience of the war, as well. The opening verse and chorus, which I included in the project, laments:

Oh, a storm is threatening my very life today. If I don’t get some shelter, I’m gonna fade away. War, children, it’s just a shot away. War, children, it’s just a shot away.

“Gimme Shelter” thus provides an effective medium to convey these three, varying collected-memories subsisting and tamed by American pluralism. Further, it alludes to the universality of the suffering the US falsely portrays as exceptional unto itself.

In the musical arrangement of “Gimme Shelter,” I primarily designated the melody to the middle line, which represents Thuy Nguyen’s experience. The melody best presents

Nguyen's narrative for three main reasons. First, it reflects his affinity to the American rock culture—as well as the American student culture, in general—which played an influential role in his assimilation and comfort within the states. Second, in comparison to the two harmonies above and below it, overall, the melody rests in a register between the two parts—mostly staying within the upper part of a single octave. This demonstrates the compromising of Nguyen's identity as a South Vietnamese citizen caught in the land of US nationalism (and secrecy), which alienated him from genuinely sympathizing with his country's and the US's sufferings and motivations. Third, the designation of the simple melody to Nguyen also reflects the somewhat “shallow,” summarized version of the war he experienced as a preoccupied college student. As such, the three-measure silence and then estrangement from the melody between measures nine and thirteen—which takes place during the beginning of the chorus—alludes to both Nguyen's echoing experience through news and stories of the war and his lack of comprehension of its destruction.

In contrast, the top harmony line in the piece symbolizes the American narrative of the Vietnam War, which I arranged to reflect the US's manipulation of memory that glosses over the refugee experience in attempt to elevate its reputation of righteousness, justice, and liberty (as presented in the Ken Burns “The Vietnam War” documentary). For instance, for the majority of the part, I placed the American harmony higher in pitch than both the melody and the other harmony. Visually, this may convey the hegemonic dominance of the US narrative throughout the world; aurally, this also reveals the US's dominance in remembering the war since higher pitches are easier to notice, demonstrating the US “glossing over” the South Vietnamese suffering by the US's own mistakes. Another aspect of the American harmony that upstages the lower harmony lies in the numerous splits within it, reflecting the complexity and divisiveness

about US involvement in the war within America, itself. However, these splits only occur during the verse of the song—as anti-war sentiments did not question the destruction and suffering of the war that the chorus symbolizes. Last, in measure fifteen, this harmonic part solos on the melody during the lyrics which are echoed afterward “it’s just a shot away.” This solo represents the US’s “We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose” syndrome, by representing the US’s leading, prideful initiative in its involvement for the war, treating collateral damage as necessary to the attainment of universal freedom and democracy.

Last, the bottom harmony line presents the suppressed South Vietnamese narrative wrought with tragedy and chaos during and after the war. Opposite to the top harmony, the South Vietnamese harmony generally rests lower on the staff than the other two parts—conveying the organized forgetting by the “victors” (the North Vietnamese within Vietnam and the US within memory) of the subjected’s underlying ghost stories. By characterizing the harmony with sporadic interval jumps, flexibility, and estrangement from the chorus, I allude to the chaotic, desperate, and tragic history of the South Vietnamese—the 1970s flight of war refugees, political displacements, wrongful imprisonments, re-education camps, blatant discrimination and aggression, and the removal of their identity. In measures seven and eight, I notated the South Vietnamese harmony higher than the top harmony. In notating a high “G” suspended for eight counts over the melody and a simple, descending top harmony, I aimed to mimic a cry of frustration for attention, which correlates to the many academic authors we have studied in class that speak out against the manipulated forgetting of South Vietnamese history—propagated in news, documentaries, media, journals, and more.

To complement, the visual organization of the project aids in understanding the arrangement’s juxtaposition of narratives. For example, an image of helicopters at the top of the

page correspond to the American harmony located on the top staff of the piece. Additionally, helicopters became a symbol of American military involvement—for better and for worse—conveying motifs of grandeur, invincibility, indiscriminate mass-destruction, and ungrounded beliefs. Similarly, I inserted an image of a South Vietnamese cemetery at the bottom of the page to correspond to the South Vietnamese harmony located on the bottom staff, as well as the tragedies that befell them at the mercy of the US and the individuals too indifferent and uneducated to enact change. To the left, I included the lyrics which span over the entire page, in order to emphasize the universality of war the song “Gimme Shelter” conveys. With regard to the color scheme, both images are in black and white to symbolize the incompleteness of each narrative when it stands alone; the faded, ombre red background where the lyrics are depicted means to innocuously allude to the pointless bloodshed of the war.

To conclude, my project “Gimme Shelter” combines the narratives of Thuy Nguyen, the US, and South Vietnam, to both offer a juxtaposition of the dominant contesting collected memories studied in class and emphasize the universal suffering experienced by both sides of the war. Furthermore, it reveals a third perspective of the war briefly examined within class but, more likely than not, was a dominant perspective of the war nonetheless: indifferent, until threatened. In part, Thuy Nguyen’s indifferent, preoccupied experience of the war may also be reflective of US secrecy in its involvement and pursuits during the war. In the last measure of the arrangement, all three parts are on melody, however there is no closure to the song. Through this, my project conveys the continued war in memory between these three narratives that still refuse to synthesize with the entirety of the war’s repercussions—direct and indirect.