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AAS 171E
12 December 2018

The Vietnam War Through My Mom's Memory

The canvas painting I put together for the "Missing Piece Project" captures my mom's recollections of the trauma from the Vietnam War. Through my interview with her, I decided to depict the most vivid images from the war onto puzzle pieces that make up the experiences and memories of my mother's journey. The dialogue between us came in fragments. I chose to draw representations of the American soldier bursting into my mother's home, my aunts fleeing their home for refuge in a foreign land, a cherished porcelain bowl, and the abundance of beer and bombs. Each of these moments were traceable to a larger, historical context. I engaged my mother in the discussions of what I have learned about the Vietnam War and listened to her explain her understandings of the events. These drawn out moments will never fully capture the impact the war had on my family, but for the first time, they serve as a method of voicing my mother's narrative.

I asked my mother about her recollections of the war. When she didn't divulge much details, I asked if she ever felt threatened or afraid of American military forces. Mom immediately recalled a single instance of sheer terror. An American soldier was paying my family's next door neighbor for the services of a prostitute, but the neighbor was hiding some of the bills given to him. The neighbor kept insisting that he needed more money. The soldier did not realize he had been swindled until later, and he came back looking for their neighbor. Their neighbor did not appear to be home, but my family had accidentally left their front door open. The American soldier burst into their small home and grabbed my mom's aunt by her hair and

beat her in retribution. My mom was in her mid-teens and her siblings were anywhere from five-years-old to their early twenties. They all cowered under a table and watched, unable to communicate or understand the demands of the soldier. Through the American perspective on the Vietnam War, most soldiers viewed their roles as powerful heroes to the South Vietnamese. After the war had ended and the U.S. left Vietnam, veterans began expressing their moral regret in participating in acts of brutality. The mindset and horrors of the war led soldiers to “rape, torture, burn villages, execute, shoot children, throw prisoners out of helicopters, and mutilate bodies” (M.S.S. 3). My mom recalled hearing about some of the heinous actions of American soldiers, but she mainly associated South Vietnamese fears to be towards the North Vietnam forces. In my mom’s recollections, American soldiers were still fighting for the right goal, freeing the South of communism. Some of my family’s understandings of the war are different due to their residence in Saigon, which is removed from the main rural warfare.

I had never completely understood the process of my family’s refugee and immigration process until my mom explained it to me. In 1975, two of my mom’s older sisters were sent on separate fishing boats on a week-long journey to America. They were forced to crouch for the whole trip, relieving themselves in that position next to eight hundred other refugees on a twenty-four-foot boat. They were not allowed to bring any food, water, or belongings. My aunts hid a few, small, dried sugar drops with lemon and gold pieces in their clothing. The refugees travelled along the coasts to camp on the shores every few days. Three years later, another two of my mom’s older sisters were sent to the U.S. on another boat. These sisters were on the same vessel. Many pirates knew people were fleeing Vietnam and demanded gold from refugees. One of my aunts was almost a victim of rape when she could not offer any gold to pirates. After ten

years, my grandpa decided it was time for the rest of the family to immigrate to America. Many of the “boat people” died from “drowning, starvation, thirst, illness, storms, shipwrecks, and violent pirate attacks” (Tran 1). Millions of people fled the communist regime and the aftermath of the destructive war. The lives lost in seeking a new home often went unaccounted for. Families were separated, and many people died from the dangerous conditions. These journeys are often overlooked in the remembrance of the lives lost from the Vietnam War. Although my family was fortunate to not have any members lost or perish in the vast sea, it was a grueling voyage. Many relatives were separated or were lost to the mercy of the vast ocean.

During my interview, my mom was serious and saddened by most of the memories from the war. Her eye lit up and she smiled when she recalled the family’s treasured, pristine bowl. My mom emphasized the poverty her siblings and parents lived in. Mom and her nine siblings could only purchase one meal a day with the money my grandpa provided them. They owned a single bowl that was presentable. When the children would get food, they passed around the bowl. One person would use the bowl to buy food and come back to eat it in another broken bowl in the house while another sibling took the prized bowl out for their meal. They did not want other people to mock the family's lack of basic items. Looking back, my mom recalls this bowl with great humor because it reminds her of a starkly different time that seems a bit strange by the standards of living and lifestyles in the U.S. today. This simple, pristine bowl was a cherished possession to my family. It serves as a reminder for my mom and her siblings of their history and humble upbringings.

As for the nature of American soldiers, my mom repeatedly described them as “mess.” She elaborated that the soldiers would always be drinking beer, looking for prostitutes, and

fighting with each other. However, my mom shared the general sentiment of believing American soldiers were fighting for the right side in the conflict. In addition, my mom recalled little personal experiences and information on Agent Orange and bombings, saying that most of the deadly warfare occurred in the rural areas of Vietnam. She further stated that the majority of “cunning” and ruthless mass killings were done by the North Vietnamese on civilians. When I mentioned that many U.S. could not distinguish between villagers and the Viet Cong, my mom admitted the American forces ailed on the safer side by killing the Vietnamese people they encountered. This aligns with the retellings in Hollywood media, films, and plays which integrate the possibility of “communist infiltrators [hiding] among the villagers” (Woodman 4). Adding to the benevolent and just American narrative, these retellings erase the lived experiences and suffering of the Vietnamese villagers whose homes were burned down. Vietnamese were slain, abused sexually, and were ultimately controlled at the mercy of American soldiers, even though the U.S. entered the war to aid the South. Although there is a deeper array of history and trauma to the military strategies, I chose the beer and bomb as representations of my mom’s initial descriptions of American impacts made on the people of Vietnam.

Giving voice to my mom’s memories and experiences sheds light on the individual narratives of the Vietnam War that are often lost in the American mainstream portrayals. Vietnamese refugees are considered “lucky” or even indebted to the freedom granted in becoming citizens in the U.S. My mom’s sisters’ journey on the fishing boats is not the typically imagined and glorified aspect of refugee experience. Although my mom and her siblings expressed gratitude to escape communism in Vietnam, they each worked two to three jobs and

shared a single home in San Diego. The decades of strenuous labor clashes with the idealization of the American Dream. Vietnamese refugees did not assimilate into a “melting pot” in the U.S. Rather, they are real, individuals with histories and trauma from the war. The U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War served their self-interested security and democratic agendas. Losing the war, encapsulates more than the loss of American lives, families ripped apart, and PTSD. The South Vietnamese are abandoned to seek refuge among the very people who destroyed their villages and murdered innocent civilians. My mom was not fully aware of the power behind her recollections in disrupting the common history told from the American perspective, but I hope to slowly explain it to her.

The interview opened up the relationship between my mom and me to discuss hardships and appreciation of the past. My mom was not as forthcoming about the violence of the Vietnam War, but I kept inquiring about aspects we learned in class, such as Agent Orange, American soldiers slaughtering civilians, and the fishing boats. I had always struggled to understand how I did not know the full story of my family's immigration and refugee status. Our Chinese ethnicity and Vietnam War experience was also confusing to explain to others who asked if I was Vietnamese. I have always felt uncomfortable and uncertain about my roots as a Chinese American, but I was curious. After the prodding interview and some tears shed from hearing the poverty and fear my family lived through, I asked my mom why she did tell me all this before. My mom thinks of all these memories as in the past and not necessarily connected to her identity or relevant to her life today. In contrast, studies have found a sense of not belonging to be rooted in not knowing much about their Southeast Asian identity, leading to a crisis for many second generation Asians in America (Le Espiritu, 143). Through Asian American Studies courses, I

have been able to explore my ethnic identity, but it is starkly different from being able to connect to familial experiences. I attempted to explain to my mom how important it is for memories, like hers, to be shared and spoken within the younger generations. We need to know the realities about our ancestry and lives of those before us. Keeping these histories alive can anchor identities and open up dialogue between generations' knowledge and reflections. These lived experiences are not gone; they are integrated in the lives of Vietnamese refugees, immigrants, and those who have experienced the war firsthand.

There are many details that are not captured in this collage of pieces from my mom's memories of the Vietnam War. This is the beginning to a conversation that needs to be opened up among family members, students, and historical scholars. The Vietnam War impacted the lives of many refugees and immigrants in the United States, as well as abroad in Vietnam. The voices and memories need to be uplifted to start the process of healing. I chose to interview my mom and to create this puzzle of her story because these recollections are all parts to my mother's journey. I want to acknowledge that and encourage others to look past the pain seen at the surface of the Vietnam War. The villagers, "boat people," people unaccounted for, victims of bombings, Agent Orange, PTSD, and sexual assault are all victims of this war. The Vietnam Memorial was designed for the lives of American soldiers lost or missing from the war, but this main form of remembering omits many of the individuals affected. Opening critical discussions about the consequences and motives behind different perspectives helps bring a community full of hurt, resentment, and loss closer to closure. My interview with my mom will be the first of many difficult and raw conversations about my family. There is so much left to learn about the Vietnam War.

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