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Missing Piece Project: *Living*

The war that we today know as the Vietnam War consists of a plurality of stories that are often found missing from mainstream narratives and descriptions of the war. The country of Vietnam itself has become singly associated with a war, leaving Vietnamese culture, stories, and history to become missing pieces in time. Because of phenomena like the “good refugee,” “we-win-even-when-we-lose syndrome,” and the overall western dominated chronicle of the Vietnam war, the Vietnam refugee experience is often lost or diminished one-dimensionally. In reality, however, there are millions of unique and powerful Vietnamese refugee stories that have not been told.

In order to contribute to the Missing Piece Project, I used photography to capture the image of my friend Vivi Le. I interviewed Vivi about her mother’s story of being a Vietnam War refugee and immigrating to the United States. Vivi is half Vietnamese on her mother’s side and half Thai on her father’s side. Her mother’s family’s story provides insight to the complex journey and experience of fleeing Vietnam as a refugee. Her mother’s story touches on the importance of gender in the refugee experience, the qualities of Vietnam before and after the war, and the power of a collective experience of the Vietnam war that is passed down through the generations. The photograph represents a remembrance of the diversity of refugee stories that are left untold or underexplored

and reminds us that these stories are being carried among so many people around us, even if they aren't being told by the mainstream narratives of American history.

Vivi's mother immigrated to the United States in the early 1990s after living through a troubling period of poverty stricken fallen Saigon. Her mother lived in Saigon and was in her teens during the war. The older generations of her family were originally from North Vietnam until the famine and Japanese occupation forced them to move to the south. The story of imperialism in Vietnam is not something isolated to war or French occupation, but instead can be illustrated as being interlocked with Vietnam's history with long-term effects. Vivi's family definitely identifies as South Vietnamese, but Vivi's mothers argues that their ability to remain alive after the war slightly owed to the fact that they kept quiet and complied with the new communist regime as best that they could.

Vivi's mother's complicated refugee experience involved traveling to Malaysia on a boat, staying for nine months as a refugee, and then interviewing with Americans and receiving passage to the United States through the help of family members already present there. The most common narratives of the Vietnam War stress importance of the violence and conflict during the war, but often ignore the stories of Vietnam before the war, after the war, and even during the war from a civilian's perspective. Vivi's mother lived in Saigon, and during the war-time was never really affected until the end. For the most of it, she went to school like normal and no one really felt unsafe in everyday life. Only during rare moments when school was cancelled because of bombings did she feel like the war had an impact on her daily routine. Vivi's mother notes how important it is to acknowledge that her experience was much safer and different than other Vietnamese

experiences because Saigon was the hub of South Vietnam and had much more resources and protection. In comparison to the mainstream narratives and films on the war, we forgot about the livelihood and simple everyday routines of the Vietnamese people.

Vivi's mother was not able to immigrate until several years after the war ended, which is another moment for the emergence of an underrepresented story. Oftentimes, mainstream narratives start with the war and then jump to the refugee presence in America. As explained by Yen Le Espiritu, the problematic "good refugee" and "we-win-even-even-we-lose" syndromes result in erasure of the the Vietnamese prior too and on the refugee journey (Espiritu, 2006). For Vivi's mother, the struggle after the Fall of Saigon lasted several years and she attempted to survive in poor and wrecked conditions. The path of being a refugee was never a guaranteed one, nor was it an easy path to forge. Even after leaving Vietnam on a boat, her experience in Malaysia was a long and lonely wait. The U.S. finally accepted her a refugee, but this action should not be seen as an act of responsibility or a way to make up for the tragedies of the war. When the "we-win-even-even-we-lose" syndrome is employed, it works to reinforce an image of American Heroism, ignoring the long struggle that refugees had to take on themselves before reaching the U.S.

For Vivi's mother, the journey to Malaysia was one of the hardest obstacles of making it to the United States. Factors like gender played a large role in her mother's experiences throughout her whole life, but especially during this stage of the war. Vivi's mother's family had very little male figures present during war-time as many actually walked out on her family. Many females including her grandmother and aunts dealt with

the war alone. Vivi's mother ended up migrating with a younger female cousin, just as two women. They described the experience in the boat to Malaysia as scary; it was dark, cramped, they could not move, and they were in constant fear of being raped and robbed by Thai pirates, which was a common occurrence for boat refugees. Gender was not greatly acknowledged in many texts or films, but is strong thematically in *Miss Saigon*. The narrative in *Miss Saigon* surrounded the "damsel in distress" forced to rely on men as the only escape to the United States. Vivi's mother poses a different perspective as men were almost completely out of the picture. The complicated, humanized, and frightful experience of fleeing as a refugee is often so simplified by the "good refugee" narrative, diminishing unique and intersecting refugee experiences and focusing instead on U.S. "benevolence." Only after years in fallen Saigon, nine months in a Malaysian refugee camp, and many letters to family in the United States could Vivi's mother and her cousin start their journey.

Throughout the interview, I was reminded of the collective experience that arises from the transfer of memories and stories through generations. I talked to Vivi about her experiences being mixed-race and learned that she often forgets that she is "only half" Vietnamese, because the collective shared experience of the Vietnam War passed down to her from her mother does not feel any less hers. She often forgets that other Vietnamese-Americans live through the experience of two parents, which exhibits the great diversity in stories that are not being told. As stated by Viet Thanh Nguyen in "Just Memory," the ethics of remembering must involve the most inclusive telling of history, and a total all-seeing memory is impossible to achieve (Nguyen, 2016). However, through greater

sharing of Vietnamese-Americans' unique experiences and collective memories, a better understanding of the Vietnam War can be brought to the mainstream grasp of the war.

The photograph of Vivi serves as a reminder that the collective memory of the Vietnam War is living and present throughout the lives of many Southeast Asian in the United States. These stories are infinite, experienced through so many Americans, and cannot be grouped into one experience or media interpretation. Vivi's mother and family's experience continue to exist through Vivi, as well as through the diversity of Los Angeles. The Vietnam War is often painted as a historical event, displaced and distant from us learning about it; but in reality, it did not take place very long ago. For so many people, the Vietnam War is not just a historical event, but a life-altering event that is not given justice through one-dimensional popular retellings.

Works Cited

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