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Missing Piece Project: Has the war really ended for Cambodians?

Remembering and forgetting is a fine balance. They both happen simultaneously, as we recall one memory, we may lose another. Memory can seem purely personal, in a way where it is something that does not affect others and only ourselves. However, Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016) reminds us that our memories, especially as a collective, hold implications that can largely affect certain groups, and questions the ethics of remembering. In 1965, the U.S. launched the “secret war” onto Cambodia and Laos, where there were more bombs dropped onto Cambodia than Japan in World War II. The order was authorized by President Lyndon Johnson as a way to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh trail. Delving further into the history of American involvement with Cambodia, neither Cambodia nor Laos wanted to be a part of the war. Unlike the Japanese in World War II, Cambodia did not bomb Pearl Harbor, meaning that the U.S. government could not claim that their actions were in the name of defense. It was clear that the U.S. killed innocent lives out of fear for the spread of communism throughout Asia. After news of the “secret war” was released to the public, anti-war movements grew stronger, and there was a significant rise in awareness of the injustice abroad.

Now more than 40 years after the “end” of the war, we no longer see much recognition of US involvement in the war as a whole, let alone acknowledgement that Cambodia was largely affected by it. We see this happening most prevalently in Hollywood films about the war. As one of the soldiers in the documentary *Hearts and Minds* said, “I think we are trying not to remember

[the war]” (Davis, 1974). “We” in this quote originally meant to represent the veterans healing from combat, but it can be argued that the idea has expanded to a nation-wide mindset about the war as a whole. During the 25th anniversary of the war in 2000, there were 25 articles published by the Los Angeles Times, and 16 articles published by the Washington Post about the war. Five years later on the 30th anniversary, Los Angeles Times only published four articles (Le Espiritu, 2006).

For many survivors and their families, the war is not something that can be forgotten. “I feel like it changed everything” said June Yihouy Bo. June is currently a fourth-year Psychology major and Global Studies minor at UCLA. This year, she is the international student ambassador for Cambodia, where she was born and raised prior to college. Her grandparents immigrated from China to Cambodia when they were young adults, making June a third-generation Cambodian. Both her grandparents and parents experienced the Cambodian genocide. When she was younger, her grandmother once told her a story about her cousin that had a female baby during the war. Their family was struggling financially and it was not rare to find people dying of starvations. Her grandmother’s cousin knew that the newborn would not survive for much longer and decided to take matters into her own hands. Without the rest of her family knowing, she killed her baby, and cooked its meat for dinner that night so that they would have more to eat.

The stories of the genocide that June knows were all told to her by her grandmother, as her grandfather rarely ever spoke a word and her father still refuses to answer any of her questions about his experiences. Although June herself never personally went through either, she feels that their everyday lives are clouded with remnants of the war and genocide. After the war officially ended, her grandfather was accused of being a spy and was taken as a Prisoner of War

by the North Vietnamese, where he stayed at a reeducation camp for 8 years. When he was taken, no one knew what happened. June's grandmother thought he was killed and only found out where he was when he escaped 8 years later and came back to them. June's father was 10 years old when his father disappeared and left his ill mother to take care of 3 children. Even after his father came back, everything was different. He never spoke about what happened to him at the reeducation camp and became a different person according to June's grandmother. In addition to that, he developed a fear of being driven and now refuses to let anyone drive him. This sounded harmless at first, but one day he drove his youngest son to the market in Cambodia despite being very tired. They got into an accident and his son did not survive. June's father was deeply affected by everything that happened. Being the eldest, he had to take care of everyone and be the breadwinner after his father's disappearance. When asked, June described her father as someone with "broken courage".

"Broken courage", or *Baksbat*, is a common phrase used to describe distress experienced specifically by Cambodians that are still trying to recover from the war, with symptoms like a lack of trust in others, submissiveness, feeling fearful, dissociation, and being "mute and deaf" (Agger, 2015). It is similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in America, but it is more specific to the shared experiences of Cambodians and how they experience mental suffering (Chimm, 2013). Studies have shown that common mental disorders are especially common in countries that survived armed conflict (de Jong, Komproe, & Ommeren, 2003). The psychological impact of the war on survivors are ignored. When people measure success of refugees in America, the rhetoric typically used to measure success is through physical accomplishments like high-paying jobs and college degrees (Le Espiritu, 2006). People see the good and choose not to look beyond that.

The struggles that Cambodians face are not only individual, for those still living in Cambodia, they still have to live with members of the Khmer Rouge ruling their country. After the Vietnamese overthrew Pol Pot and placed an end to the Cambodian genocide, the United Nations (UN) had tried to find ways to bring members of the Khmer Rouge to justice for the millions of lives they took (Chigas, 2000). However, as the years went on, no concrete actions were taken, mainly because the Khmer Rouge had a representative during negotiations. This idea was brought forward to the UN by American representatives because they still saw Vietnam as their enemy, and since the Khmer Rouge were also enemies of the Vietnamese, they worked together (Chigas, 2000). In 1997, the Hun Sen government was formed and a handful of Khmer Rouge commanders were tried. Despite this, only three men have been convicted so far (Mydans, 2017). This is not surprising as Hun Sen, the current prime minister of Cambodia was also once a commander of the regime, and since he has been in power, he proceeded to merge Khmer Rouge forces into the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (Chigas, 2000). Now that the Cambodian government has former Khmer Rouge members holding high positions of power, which has shown to create large barriers and biases in trials (Mydans, 2017; Wallace, 2017). If the Cambodian government does not convict those responsible for 2 million lives lost, is it possible for citizens to heal?

Bringing the conversation back to the United States, Cambodian refugees are not treated much better. Statistics show that Hmong, Cambodians and Laotian refugees were one of the largest receivers of welfare system as well as the highest rates of poverty (Quintiliani, 2014). When refugees are featured in the news, it is typically of good refugees with success stories of first generation college students or a family that achieved the American dream. In these articles,

the good refugees express how grateful and lucky they are to be in America. These narratives, although may be true experiences of Cambodian Americans, only serve to encourage the “Cambodian syndrome” (Schlund-Vials, 2012). The Cambodian syndrome is a term given to the narrative that erases America’s responsibility and part in the Cambodian genocide, and places America as a savior (Schlund-Vials, 2012). Yet, what is rarely spoken about during this conversation are the Cambodians struggling to get by after non-citizens were disqualified from receiving Supplement Security Income (SSI) and federal food stamp programs (Quintiliani, 2014). Another struggle of Cambodian Americans that are left out of the dominant discourse is the deportation of Cambodian refugees that have little to no familial connection to Cambodia. Even though Cambodian government originally opposed the deportation and requested that the agreement be reviewed again due to its inhumane nature, the US embassy in Cambodia pressured the government by not issuing visas to foreign ministry officials and their families until Cambodia ultimately gave in.

The artifact that I want to contribute is a traditional red checkered scarf known as “Kroma”. It is known by outsiders as the scarf that is worn by the Khmer Rouge. Before that, it was common wear among Cambodians, and is now symbolic of the Cambodian post-war experience. It resembles simultaneous healing, as if to say that Cambodians, Khmer Rouge or not, are not divided as they are all healing from their own wounds. “The younger [generation] wear it as a way to remember and stay connected to their Cambodian culture. It always means something a little different for everyone, but ultimately [the Kroma] represents that we are not divided, we are all in this together.” June says when asked what the scarf symbolizes. This paper has gone over various different struggles that are faced by many Cambodians, no matter if they are in America or Cambodia. Despite all of this struggle, Cambodians continue to be extremely

resilient and we see the younger generation of Cambodian Americans start to use their own mediums to not only educate others about their experiences, but demand change.

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