

Victoria Tonascia

Professor Kim Nguyen Tran

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### Missing Piece Project: Generational Scars

Nguyen is the most common Vietnamese last name, and I think that although my friend's story is unique, many Vietnamese migrant stories echo this narrative. I made a very close group of friends this summer and one of those people was Ms. Nguyen, a daughter of Vietnamese immigrants. In our time together, we all shared about our lives and what helped to shape the people we are today. She had briefly mentioned a personal story about a scar she has on her ear from a visit to Vietnam when she was a child. Each scar is unique and has a story behind its origin. Everyone has them. Some scars are more visible than others. The past becomes a part of you forever and scars are marks of reminders. For many individuals, scars cut deep within and will never heal properly. With the Missing Piece Project, I make a connection between the visible and invisible scars the war left on all sides. The scars of the second gen are different than those of the first generation. Through interviewing my friend, I have been exposed to visible consequences and real-life outcomes faced by the first generation and the less visible and equally real outcomes of the second. I also connect this to a broader scope of hyper-visibility of the war in American culture that turns a blind-eye to the victims of the war. In a war where America makes more effort to remember their own fallen soldiers at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, I hope to bring this piece of the grand war narrative to the wall.

My object is a photo series because I wanted to visually display how layered, how multifaceted, and how complex the memory of the war is. I took three photos of Ms. Nguyen's

face at the conclusion of our interview. I layered the photos on top of one another and then—wanting to highlight the scar on her left ear—I cropped the photo, made four transparent copies of that image, and superimposed the scar on top of her face. I made four versions, and all extend beyond the traditional four-edged border of a photograph. Within the second generation, I see how she not only has her own perception of the war and how it has affected her life, but she also carries her father's story, and has seen a glimpse of the generation before him, as well. Each of the three faces represent a generation's worth of experiences and the four scars are the invisible scars left on those generations including one for the future generations to come. In the last image, I overlapped the four scars on top of one another to create the effect of one scar reaching across her cheek from her eye to her chin. I see this as a tear streaming down her face and as a representation of what the scar of the war might look like if it were visible. I am bringing visibility to the wall with my missing piece.

When Ms. Nguyen was in Vietnam at the age of about 8, she was at a crowded public area when a man came up behind her, grabbed the earrings she was wearing, and ripped one off of her ear then ran. Ms. Nguyen was left bleeding and in pain, but the event turned out to be more traumatic for her parents than herself. It was devastating for her father to know that the country that caused him so much pain was now hurting his own children. The earrings made of gold held sentimental value, as they were given to her by her father's mother and were also valuable monetarily. Due to the economic hardship Vietnam experienced after the war, she and her siblings were easy targets and she did not understand why. Ms. Nguyen talks about being called the term *viet kieu* while visiting Vietnam and its meaning of "foreigner" or someone who does not belong because they are not culturally Vietnamese although they are of Vietnamese descent.

I interviewed Ms. Nguyen in November 2018 for the “Missing Piece Project” and was truly humbled to be able to listen to her tell her father’s story and hear her share about her own life as a second generation Vietnamese American. Ms. Nguyen’s narrative is precisely what Le Espiritu outlines in *Body Counts*,

as children implicitly know not to ask their parents about painful topics about their background and migration history; instead they string together bits and pieces of their own memories and overheard stories to create a bearable and repeatable version of the family’s war and refugee experiences—one that emphasizes academic and economic gains, which invariably, though not always intentionally, validates the myth of the United States as the land of opportunity.

“He doesn’t talk about it,” she says. My friend’s dad grew up near Hanoi and—from what she knows—at the age of 15 he joined the army. As the first-born son in a long line of first born sons, Ms. Nguyen’s dad was important to the family. His own father died while he was in the army and his mother wanted him to be safe, therefore she and the rest of their family collected money to send him to the United States, away from the war entirely because being home he would still be recruited by being of age. Ms. Nguyen’s dad went with his own nephew, who was about five years younger than him, on a boat which ended up sinking but luckily, they were rescued by another boat. After entering the US in New York, they were flown to Texas for assimilation. They spend three months there learning English and the laws and American customs. They moved to Garden Grove, CA, and rented the back room of a house for several years. Her dad liked working with his hands and building airplane parts and found an engineering job that he held for forty years before retiring. Ms. Nguyen believes her parents had an arranged marriage since my friend’s mom had been staying with his family during his time in the US; then he was able to afford to bring her to the US, get married, and have a family. They built their network in their community in Garden Grove.

She talks about how her grandmother missed out on a lot of her father's life. He left when he was a teenager and she never saw the birth of his children. She says, "We don't ask because it hurts. It hurts for the older generation to talk about that stuff." By the time they did all start going to Vietnam as a family she was already old and senile. As a family they would go to Vietnam for a month during the summers. The last time Ms. Nguyen went when she was about fifteen, her grandma did not recognize her father and he started crying. It was very upsetting for him and since then, he has only returned to Vietnam alone. "It was hard for him to show her as this amazing person to his kids who don't understand because there is this big cultural and generational gap that we don't see," she says. "He talks about how important family is...I know that deep down he regrets being forced to leave. He always told us he would rather have stayed in the war to stay with his family because his entire side of the family is in Vietnam right now." Yet, her father still has family he has not spoken to since the war because they were on the other side of the conflict. She calls attention to the animosity between the north and the south and how they blame each other instead of the Americans. This bias affected her own life when she would bring friends to the house and her dad would ask them, "Where are you from?" She says, "He holds so much hatred in his heart," and she does not feel like it is her place to tell him to let it go.

She says, "My dad was taught 'when you got here strip everything you know and learn everything again' and for him that's how he raised us." The "win-even-when-we-lose" mentality is evident as Ms. Nguyen's father wanted his kids to be American just like everyone else in order to succeed. Growing up, my friend and her sister, who is one year older than her, were exposed to more Vietnamese culture than their two younger brothers. She and her sister went to Saturday school to learn Vietnamese until their parents heard that not everyone did that and pulled them out so that their daughters could be like everyone else. The girls grew up speaking Vietnamese at

home with their parents, but her brothers did not because by that time the girls were using English in school and their parents were speaking English at work. It is interesting to see the intra-generational gap of the second gen, as well. She and her sister learned about their family history, but, she says, “My dad gave up on telling stories after me and after that it’s just like done. My youngest brother Henry doesn’t know anything about my dad’s life.” She says, “I feel like not only being in America did we not get that cultural exposure, but [my parents] lost theirs.” She talks about her parents having to be Americanized to survive here and how hard it is “to go outside and be culturally Vietnamese when people are so like ‘No, put it back.’” When she mentions having to fit a keyhole to be American it reminds me of the clip in *Hearts and Minds* when the war hero comes to talk to elementary school children. All of the kids were white Americans and that image of a homogenous population does not reflect the real diversity of America’s past and present.

“I read this quote somewhere that there’s this big generational gap between immigrants and their children. For immigrants, life is about survival and for their children life is about satisfaction and happiness,” she says. She talked about how her parents put everything in the perspective of privilege and that is how she looks at life. She says, “Growing up as a child of an immigrant you understand what privilege is because your parents are constantly telling you that you are privileged because it’s true...I think like for me and a lot of immigrant children it’s hard to accept yourself because a lot of the times you feel like you’re privileged even when you might not be. But everything is relative.” A lot of pressure has been put on her to succeed because of the sacrifices her parents had to make. From her parents’ perspective, she had the privilege of going to school and not having to be in a war and therefore she should be succeeding, but school was hard and making friends was hard. She recognizes that she feels guilty that it is a lot of

pressure being where she is now, a student at UCLA, and she is grateful to have this type of pressure compared to her parents'. It is not about survival for the second generation in terms of basic needs, but by listening to my friend, I can see the psychological scars left by the war penetrate into every aspect of her life. Yen Le Espiritu also states in *Body Counts*, "there is no way to close off new understandings of the Vietnam War, even for the postwar generation(s), and that it is precisely through the domains of everyday that people remember, forge, and transform a past that has been long suppressed" (170).

Scars are a form of healing; therefore, these traces of war are not always negative. "It just makes me be more considerate and more thoughtful of the people around me when I'm speaking and what I strive to," she says. Ms. Nguyen's past has influenced her future. Ms. Nguyen was not raised in an empathetic environment because her father was not, but she will for her own children. And, she says following an anecdote about being a resource for her brothers, "That's probably why I want to be a lawyer providing resources to people who think they don't have it. And for me growing up, my family...didn't know anything...we were always scared. I want to change that. I just want everything in America to be more accessible, to be more for people who don't speak English." She plans on including more voices into the narrative of the United States, as well.

The hypervisibility of the war comes from movies and the industrial war complex that does not give credit to the other non-dominant side of the narrative. Hollywood actually scripts out the narratives of the war America, and subsequently, the rest of the world consumes. Lan Cao sees the war as an American metaphor. In this way, America decides the roles of the characters and countries and attributes meaning deliberately. I am honored to have been able to participate in this Missing Piece Project in order to give meaning back to those who are

under/misrepresented in this narrative. At first, I wondered if I could make the missing piece digital and leave it on a flash drive for people to use their technology to access it. But that renders the object invisible since one will not be able to see it without searching for it or because of a lack of resources. I realized the impact seeing a face has. "Looking for and calling attention to the lost and missing subjects of history are critical to any political project," Yen Le Espiritu says in "About Ghost Stories: The Vietnam War and 'Rememoration.'" "We need to *see* and then do something with *the endings that are not over*." The Missing Piece Project does exactly that as we search for stories, listen, and create objects in order to recognize, remember, and make a space for conversation surrounding a just memory.

#### Works Cited

- Yen Le Espiritu. 2008. "About Ghost Stories: The Vietnam War and 'Rememoration.'" PMLA. 123:5 "Special Topic: Comparative Racialization" (1700-1702)
- Yen Le Espiritu. 2014. "Refugee Postmemories: The 'Generations After'" from *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. Oakland: University of California Press. (139-170).

Unedited transcription of the interview here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1d3U-6ZLjyfDJpgywO9vgbUjjvzsM3Lt7af9fqabtneU/edit?usp=sharing>