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Missing Piece Project: Broken Stories

The controversy of the Vietnam War created a divide within the nation leaving people with more questions than answers. One of the main problems people continue to struggle with is how should the Vietnam War be remembered? As a result, mainstream media outlets have tried to fill in the gaps utilizing the American narrative, which leaves little room for the Vietnamese to present their thoughts and points of view on the war. This uneven distribution of perspectives demonstrates the attempt to erase the morally questionable, wrong doings of the US military and “strategically forget” the traumatizing events that occurred against the Vietnamese (Espiritu, *Thirty Years AfterWard* xii). In addition, the dominant American narrative creates a false image that tries to uphold the American identity as “rescuers and liberators” who, despite losing the war, “saved” the Vietnamese people from the oppression of communism (Espiritu, *Thirty Years AfterWard* xv). As a result, America is seen as the protectors with strong cultural and political influence, while the Vietnamese are seen as insignificant beings who are considered “collateral damage” in the critical advancements towards spreading democracy (Espiritu, *Thirty Years AfterWard* xv). Due to this flawed interpretation, the Vietnamese people are cast aside and overlooked as they are denied a voice into their past. However, my Missing Piece Project aims to document the stories of the Vietnamese perspective and encourage others to share their experiences from the lasting effects of the Vietnam War.

In order to examine how the legacies of US involvement in the Vietnam War has affected the Vietnamese people, I decided to interview Dan, a Vietnamese immigrant who came to the US when she was 4 years old, and Lan, a second generation Vietnamese American. Surprisingly, both, Dan and Lan, had similar stories in that their parents continue to have difficulty discussing their personal experiences in Vietnam due to the overwhelming and traumatizing memories they have suppressed in their minds. As a result, they have not shared their experiences with their children, which leaves them bewildered with a strong desire to discover what happened. But at the same time, Dan and Lan are fearful of crossing any boundaries or causing more stress by opening old wounds when discussing this sensitive topic. In addition, once their parents came to America, they had to start from the bottom and work low-income jobs in order to survive and provide for the family. But, the parents hinted at the fact that the challenges they faced in America were nothing compared to the traumatic events that occurred in Vietnam.

Though Dan and Lan's stories were very similar, they also had unique and different experiences as well. One of Dan's most captivating stories, emphasized in her short poem, was about the struggle Dan and her mom, a single parent who does not speak any English, endured when they first arrived in America. After a difficult search, Dan's mom found a low-paying job working as a seamstress, since that was all she knew how to do at the time. Working long hours required her to desperately find someone willing to babysit her daughter until she returned home. Luckily, their neighbor, another Vietnamese family in their building, provided childcare and parental guidance while Dan's mother was away at work. The decision to choose a Vietnamese family to watch over her daughter raised a couple questions. For example, due to the war experiences of dealing with untrustworthy Americans, did she only trust Vietnamese people at the time or was it just the most convenient option and she had no other choice? Either way, Dan

was very thankful for everyone who helped take care of her growing up. Around 4:30 am, Dan's mother would carry her to their neighbor's bedroom and tuck her in bed. Next, Dan would wake up and go to school with the neighbor's kids. After, her mom would pay someone to wait for Dan after school and watch her until she came home. Facing adversity as a single Vietnamese mother with no family in the US is unimaginable but they both survived and "made it". Dan understands and appreciates the sacrifices her mother made in order for her to receive a quality education and live a happy life.

Lan is a second generation Vietnamese American and the story I utilized in her short poem centered on her search to find and understand her Vietnamese identity. Her family rarely discussed their experiences in Vietnam and if they did then usually the primary purpose was to serve as a teaching lesson. For example, whenever Lan would not eat all her food or waste food, her parents would bring up the story about how they used to eat grass in Vietnam because they were so poor. In addition, she described how her relatives are currently trying to immigrate to the US. However, filling out the paperwork and processing the citizenship application requires a long waiting period, which is very frustrating. In the end, Lan is hoping that her family members are more willing than her parents to discuss their experiences so she can finally learn more about her family history and narrative.

Additionally, I wrote three other short poems based on the documentary "New Year Baby" directed by Socheata Poeuv and the "Body Counts" reading by Yen Le Espiritu. One poem is written from the perspective of Socheata, a Cambodian American, who describes the nightmares she had while dreaming of the "faceless Khmer Rouge" out to kill her (Poeuv). Growing up, her parents would avoid answering any questions related to their past and kept secrets from her about their family history for twenty-five years. These unanswered questions

“created memories of war” that happened in the past before she was born but continued to haunt her for years (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 139). Another poem describes the story of Socheata’s sisters, Mala and Leakhena, and the graphic traumatizing memories they had after surviving the Khmer Rouge labor camps. For example, they remember finding executed dead bodies lying on the floor and will never forget the stench of those decaying bodies. The last poem, from the “Body Count” reading, is from the viewpoint of a young Vietnamese student who rants, “they say we don't know, don't understand, our history and culture but where do we go to learn this? They don't talk about it at home and they certainly don't teach it in school” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 143). Due to the lack of access to their Vietnamese history and culture, Vietnamese students and children of refugee parents are caught in a situation they cannot overcome. Not only do young Vietnamese Americans feel embarrassed for not “understanding” the Vietnam War, they also feel ashamed for their “incomplete knowledge of the war” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 143). Thus, the Vietnamese American youth inevitably are forced to develop a “postmemory” which is “a secondary, mediated, and inherited memory of a lost past in that it does not recall but rather imagines, projects, and creates the past” (Espiritu, *Body Counts* 141). As a result, these recreated, imagined memories of Vietnamese experiences framed by America’s interpretation of the war transforms the real narrative into a falsified, biased narrative instead.

In addition, history classes utilize films, such as the Burns and Novick’s documentary, to educate their students on the Vietnam War, which many Vietnamese Americans disagree with. Though Burns and Novick’s documentary does include commentary from both North and South Vietnamese people, the film is heavily skewed towards the white American voices. As a result, one of the Vietnamese critics, Nguyen, considered having the documentary be subtitled “The Mostly White American Experience” due to the recurring message that “the Americans think of

the war as their experience while the history of Vietnam on it's own doesn't matter" (Nguyen 5). America abuses their power by shaping stories in the way they would like history to be perceived by future generations. Consequently, looking at the Vietnam War through the eyes of an American is so normalized that very few people object to this one-sided view and many fail to recognize other perspectives on the war. Thus, these separate Vietnamese poems serve to represent a larger collective story that Vietnamese experiences do matter and that America is not the only country with stories to tell.

Overall, these "Broken Stories", title of the Missing Piece Project, represent the disjointed Vietnamese narratives that are rarely acknowledged. Each poem, written in first person, is plastered onto a different colored puzzle piece with a different font style symbolizing a personal unique Vietnamese viewpoint. Though these puzzle pieces do not match, in color or font style, they share a common theme of struggle and pain and thus are connected. For now, the young Vietnamese generation is faced with the responsibility of piecing together more of these fragmented, incohesive stories in order to decipher the full Vietnamese narrative and create a diverse colorful art piece of Vietnamese experiences during and after the Vietnam War. Majority of the documentaries, novels, and history lessons in America rarely shed light on the Vietnamese lives and normally don't consider having Vietnamese people as main characters in their tale. In addition, some Vietnamese refugees refuse to examine their past and the tragedies that occurred during the Vietnam War. However, with these missing piece projects, we hope to start a new trend of encouraging other Vietnamese refugees to not be afraid to open lines of communication and display their emotions, as it is better to enlighten others than stay silent. Like Chea mentioned, "we must act" or else everyone's Vietnamese family history will "disappear into the nations melting pot" (Chea 42-43).

Works Cited Page

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