#ChildofRefugees:
What I Wish My Teachers Knew About My Southeast Asian American Experience

About This Workshop

Our workshop is designed to give educators and community allies a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the histories, experiences, and voices of the Southeast Asian diaspora. We want to not only provide tools for educators to teach about this complex period of war and genocide and its ensuing diaspora, but also to help them empathize with the SEA students and families they serve. We will talk about the need for history curriculums to include material that extends past when the U.S. pulled out of the Vietnam War in 1975, and ones that also better reflect the diverse experiences and communities that make up the Southeast Asian diaspora. We will also introduce attendees to some of the many issues facing the Southeast Asian American community as a whole, such as the migration-school-prison-deportation pipeline, intergenerational trauma and resilience, the lack of mental health awareness and support, the need for educational equity, and more. We want to showcase how educators can also use the wealth of resources from Project Yellow Dress and other platforms to facilitate meaningful conversations about identity, community, allyship, social justice, and storytelling.
My mother doesn’t dwell in the past, so she smiles and shakes her head when I ask about her life during the Khmer Rouge regime. *Mom, what did you do? Did you have to work?* She shrugs. Her eyes are soft, then perplexed by my eagerness to bear witness to her story. *What story? What do you want to know?* In order to live her life and support me and my brother, she explains, it is necessary to move on. Forget the past. Don’t think about it. But I am not like her. I can’t forget the past and I always think about it. Yet, my mother seems to evade my questions on every rare visit home. Sometimes I give up asking. Her silence around her personal history often leaves me with doubts on how to begin telling my own.

I experience fears in my writing; in school, I would withhold certain poems from workshop, afraid that my classmates wouldn’t know how to respond to the history behind my vulnerability, afraid that I would have to explain stories already so marginalized only to discover that my words, after speaking them aloud, didn’t hold space with others.

Once, I cried in class, explaining my historical trauma to a room of mostly white women. Overwhelmed by my responsibility to tell my family’s story, I told my classmates that I had trouble writing about it, that of course I had dreams of a first book but that a first book wasn’t the point. Well meaning and supportive my professor said, “but you should be fearless.” Who can be fearless confronting a history of genocide? The fall semester was almost over. But after trying to explain a very specific trauma to a room of people—aware or unaware of my pain—I had isolated myself in the spring.

My silence is a different shade of fear than that of my Cambodian immigrant parents. Even though their lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, are physically and emotionally distant from the Khmer Rouge regime, I’m not convinced that my parents can be “fearless” when confronting their history. My father loves to tell stories though. But when I look to my mother, she might try to recall something to share, and if too exhausted, she’ll shoo me away and say, “Go ask your father.” For the past fifteen years, my mother has worked at the DART Container factory, inspecting foam cups and plasticware. I find her on the couch with a blanket, watching Khmer-dubbed Thai soap operas. The last thing she wants to do after work is process a horrific era.

Her deferral to my father comes from the underlying gender norms that are so typical in the traditional Cambodian family. Who gets to tell the story? Who doesn’t get to tell the story? Who is heard? Who is not heard? The manners in which my parents enable and disable one another’s voices deeply affects my own writing. Over time, the details in my dad’s stories have changed. The language has been manipulated again—expanding and shrinking at the same time—and this also affects the ways I choose to write, uncertain of any known fact. But I yearn for the stories my mother alone can pass down to me. And it is my mother’s reluctance and silence that influences my craft the most.

*The fact that we are here*

“Don’t tell her those things,” my mom interrupts my dad, standing in the doorway. She waves her finger at him. “That’s not true. That’s not what happened.”

“Thoch…” my dad begins, his voice sinking. “You don’t say that.” Sitting next to my dad, and watching my mom disappear into the hallway, I am suddenly eight years old again when I was not allowed to hear about the past. Disheartened by my mother’s quick remark, my dad does not continue the story. He knows that later I’ll ask him again. *What happened? And then what? And then?*

Now that I live in Brooklyn, I try to visit Lancaster some weekends, with the intention of interviewing my family. I listen for anything from my mother. Anything from my aunts. My mother’s older sister insists on keeping her
experiences locked up. Why say them now? She has spent thirty some years trying to forget them. Years ago, I found my oldest aunt weeping in front of the mirror as she was getting ready for her second shift at the Reeses’ Peanut Butter Cup factory. When I walked in, she told me it was her son’s birthday—Kasaul, a cousin I never knew I had. He would have been in his thirties by now. The persistent trauma that fills my family life, is staved off as work at the factory goes on, and time goes on, and life goes on. But that period of history is not over for me, and I am drawn incredibly and painfully closer to it in our silence.

According to a recent study conducted by the National Institute for Mental Health, about 62% of Cambodians have PTSD and 51% have had serious depression in the past 12 months. These statistics are way above the national average. My community alone suffers this much from trauma.

A while ago, I read “The Science of Suffering” in The New Republic, which claimed PTSD as a genetic inheritance. The article featured a Cambodian family from Lowell, Massachusetts—their trauma grounded in the Khmer Rouge regime, amplified by poverty. But PTSD as a genetic inheritance? This was a new discovery, an entire finding I never thought about regarding my biological make-up and my day-to-day life as a daughter of survivors. I felt some sort of relief, but I still have several questions about what this means for me. I lingered on a few sentences in the article, reading them again, studying them closer: “By far the most remarkable recent finding about this transmogrification of the body is that some proportion of it can be reproduced in the next generation. The children of survivors—a surprising number of them, anyway—may be born less able to metabolize stress. They may be born more susceptible to PTSD, a vulnerability expressed in their molecules, neurons, cells, and genes.”

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Like many Cambodian immigrants, my mother suppresses her memories, but she can be fearless, and not without deep-rooted vulnerability, which means in fact she is not free of fears at all, but rather goes toward that suffering, pain, and remembering that I’ve come to recognize as fearlessness. The words of my professor: You should be fearless. She meant go toward that suffering for your poetry.

But I can’t pretend. I never thought of fearlessness as an option in the context of intergenerational trauma. If fearlessness, in this case, means going toward that trauma then, it means writing about Tuol Sleng, about a country ridden with land mines, about the Khmer Rouge, without letting those same narratives overpower the poetry that must be written. My trauma is that historical trauma, that family trauma, and yes, that biological trauma.

How do you go toward that suffering in your writing when it also leads you and others to trauma? How do fear and trauma work in different ways?

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This is me saying it: I am afraid of the history I have inherited. Trauma resurfaces in my life in all kinds of ways, as it does for all children of Cambodian immigrants. The oppression continues in my community through gang violence, high school drop out rates, poverty, etc. I ask this again. Who can be fearless confronting the history of the genocide? As a poet, I’m afraid of misrepresenting my family’s stories, the general history as well—though I believe the risk of going there is greater than the fear. A big part of me is afraid of perpetuating the brutality through language, and repeating the narrative of a politically oppressive regime instead of subverting it. Draft afterdraft, I cross out my poems, several pages of poems.

Monica Sok is a Cambodian American poet and the daughter of former refugees. She is the author of Year Zero, winner of a Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship. Her work has been recognized with a "Discovery"/Boston Review Poetry Prize. Currently, Sok is a 2018-2020 Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and a Poet-in-Residence at Banteay Srei in Oakland. Her debut poetry collection is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press.
I’m not a very good Hmong person by traditional Hmong standards. I don’t listen to Hmong music. I don’t attend any Hmong events. I don’t practice a lot of Hmong customs. I have no real desire to get married or to have babies. I have absolutely no desire to visit Laos or Vietnam or Thailand. In fact, I only go to the Minnesota Hmong New Year’s celebration for the mini donuts.

Until recently, I’d spent my entire adult life living and working in or around Manhattan, far, far away from any Hmong community; and that was fine by me. When the editor of maivmai asked me to contribute, I struggled with finding a topic. What could I write about? After all, being Hmong wasn’t a primary part of my identity. In fact, it wasn’t even a secondary or tertiary part of grown-up me. I’d buried it down and away somewhere between my dislike of coleslaw and my lukewarm affinity for M&Ms. It just wasn’t important to me. Hmongness and much of what it entails, I take with a grain of salt. This article does not hold much sentimentality and it most likely will trigger intense reactions from many in the Hmong population.

But here it is anyway.

I grew up the oldest daughter of a family of eight kids, which meant that I was more or less a second mom to my siblings, and layered on me were a myriad of responsibilities that no kid would ever really be prepared to take on—certainly not at twelve years old. Yet somehow, I did and so did the thousands of other Hmong girls like me. I looked after my siblings, cooked for them, cleaned for them, and made sure everyone stayed out of trouble. I knew that if anything happened, no matter who did it, the fault would fall on me. But if you are Hmong, you already know this.

I grew up in an environment where the women did too much and received too little. At eating events, the women would cook all day and yet not be given an equal seat at the table with the men; and when the men were done eating, they’d sit back and the women would then clean. Women would eat whatever was left in the kitchen, having given all of the best parts to the men. The first generation here in the US was especially rough on Hmong daughters where there was a great deal of friction between the two cultures. It was a struggle between American independence and Hmong obedience.

It wasn’t uncommon to hear about the men in our society beating their women and children regularly. I grew up watching my dad pound on my mom and on me and my siblings. I grew up hearing women told too often to ua siab ntev or to bear with it, to see if there was something she could change in her that brought on his anger as though him beating her bloody was her fault. I’d watch and listen from between the cracks of bedroom doors as clan councils encouraged the woman to go back to her abusive husband.

There were rarely any consequences for the men beyond a few words, but nothing really changed. In a few months, they would be back with the elders, her with fresh black eyes and him with fresh excuses. These women with their skins of steel, returning again and again dented and bent by the meaty hammers of their husbands’ fists—well, it took extreme cases before divorce was granted, and even then, the only victory was walking away with her life.

But how could we not expect men to be monsters when we raise boys to believe that they simply need to exist to be catered to? From the moment a boy slides out of the womb, he is favored beyond any girl that may come before or after him. I grew up watching the boys in our society coddled, becoming spoiled and entitled just like our fathers were, given more attention, money, permissions and goods than daughters would ever be allowed. It was rare to find the opposite, where a daughter was treated better than a son.

Daughters were meant to be obedient, to not talk back, to learn domestic skills and never reach too high or become too lofty. Even from a young age, daughters would be encouraged to become nurses, secretaries, and teachers. For many, there would be no encouragement to become doctors, lawyers, and administrators. Even in our career pursuits, we would play second fiddle to men, taking on roles of support and not leadership. I watched too many
girl cousins married far too young to much older men out of pressure, out of fear, out of duty. But most of all, I watched some of these young girls marry horrible men to escape the cage of their parents’ home, only to find themselves in a brand new cage, and watched as the cycle began again. It was heartbreaking, and it painted a cold, hard picture of living life half in tradition and half in modernity, where the exterior was mostly smoke and mirrors, but the interior was mired in secrets and sorrows. This duality brought about in me a focus that I would not be like them. I would not be a victim of the same atrocities as my mother, my aunts, and my cousins.

We are now in a new era with a new generation, yet so many of these institutionalized behaviors still exist in our culture. In the last year or so alone, there have been at least two Hmong women who were killed by their husbands because the women wanted divorces. I still hear women being told to have patience and to work things out when their husbands abuse and cheat. When a divorce happens, the woman is branded with a scarlet “D”. She carries all the shame and embarrassment as though she’s used and dirty goods. She is often left with their children and very little support from her ex-husband. Meanwhile, the husband goes on and finds some poor, barely legal girl in Thailand and is married again within six months.

Even cheating by the man is acceptable as long as he marries the other woman as well. Marrying a second or third wife by traditional standards is quite par for the course, however what is good for the goose is certainly not good for the gander. Morality and the responsibility for morality within the family unit is heavier on the shoulders of the woman than it is on her husband. The repercussions of her shaming the family carries a heavier stigma than it does for him. It is unthinkable for a woman to consider having two husbands. It’s just not done. She must be pious and obedient and accept the lot her husband places upon her. That is a good traditional Hmong wife.

Despite how much I hate the things that happened around me as I grew up, it taught me invaluable lessons in toughness and resiliency. It taught me how to not bend under pressure, how to dig my way through the dung that was piled on top of me, and it taught me to never give up. It is something that I see my brothers and many other men of my generation are incapable of accomplishing despite all the advantages that they were given.

In time, Hmong girls have shown how strong and resilient they are. Perhaps it is because of our strife and struggle that we try harder than our brothers. We first generation daughters had to trail blaze and pioneer beyond the ropes that bound us to our culture. We had to be fearless—not just for new frontiers, but also against the backlash and talk of our own people. It is because of our marginalization that we pushed against the grain. And though we’ve gained ground, we’re far from the finish line. It is amazing the number of first Hmong women in high positions as it is not only a win for Hmong people, but a win for Hmong girls everywhere. The first elected judge of Hmong descent is a woman. First Hmong senator is a woman. First Hmong VP of a large national bank is a woman. And the list goes on.

There is an old folklore that said Hmong women used to have wings, but that our wings were cut so that we could no longer fly away. Maybe it is time for us to grow new ones. Maybe it is time for us to redefine what it means to be a good Hmong, and in particular, a good Hmong woman. As the decades have passed, I’ve watched from afar as certain aspects of the Hmong culture died away—our language, our clothing, our ceremonies and our crafts—but one thing has remained too long. The toxic masculinity, the lack of support for our own sisters and mothers when they cry for help, the shame and blame that is showered on women for the failure of relationships, the second class citizenship of our daughters. These things need to be left in the past. And though these things are not just indicative of our culture alone, it is within our own culture that we are empowered to change things. I may never feel the desire to learn how to do needle work, or to visit the old country, or to sit quietly in the kitchen while the men act important in the next room. I may never care if Hmong men think I’m too opinionated or find me too difficult to relate to. I may never compromise my self worth to be seen as a good Hmong daughter, but I know this much. I may not be a good Hmong for the traditionalists, but I am a necessary Hmong to help pave the path to the future. To be Hmong is to be free, and it is high time that we set our sisters free.

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maivmai is an online publication and press for voices from the hmong diaspora. You can find more incredible pieces on their website: https://medium.com/maivmai
Excerpts from the “Introduction” for The Displaced
BY VIET THANH NGUYEN

I was once a refugee, although no one would mistake me for being a refugee now. Because of this, I insist on being called a refugee, since the temptation to pretend that I am not a refugee is strong. It would be so much easier to call myself an immigrant, to pass myself off as belonging to a category of migratory humanity that is less controversial, less demanding, and less threatening than the refugee.

I was born a citizen and a human being. At four years of age I became something less than human, at least in the eyes of those who do not think of refugees as being human. The month was March, the year 1975, when the northern communist army captured my hometown of Ban Me Thuot in its final invasion of the Republic of Vietnam, a country that no longer exists except in the imagination of its global refugee diaspora of several million people, a country that most of the world remembers as South Vietnam.

Looking back, I remember nothing of the experience that turned me into a refugee. It begins with my mother making a life-and-death decision on her own. My father was in Saigon, and the lines of communication were cut. I do not remember my mother seeing our hometown with my ten-year-old brother and me, leaving behind our sixteen-year-old adopted sister to guard the family property. I do not remember my sister, who my parents would not see again for nearly twenty years, who I would not see again for nearly thirty years.

My brother remembers dead paratroopers hanging from the trees on our route, although I do not. I also do not remember whether I walked the entire one hundred eighty-four kilometers to Nha Trang, or whether my mother carried me, or whether we might have managed to get a ride on the cars, trucks, carts, motorbikes, and bicycles crowding the road. Perhaps she does remember but I never asked about the exodus, or about the tens of thousands of civilian refugees and seeing soldiers, or the desperate scramble to get on a boat in Nha Trang, or some of the soldiers shooting some of the civilians to clear their way to boats, as I would read later in accounts of this time. I do not remember finding my father in Saigon, or how we waited for another month until the communist army came to the city’s borders, or how we tried to get into the airport, and then into the American embassy, and then finally somehow fought our way through the crowds at the docks to reach a boat, or how my father became separated from us but decided to get on a boat by himself anyway, and how my mother decided the same thing, or how we eventually were reunited on a larger ship. I do remember that we were incredibly fortunate, finding our way out of the country, as so many millions did not, and not losing anyone, as so many thousands did. No one, except my sister.

For most of my life, I did remember soldiers on our boat firing onto a smaller boat full of refugees that was trying to approach. But when I mentioned it to my older brother many years later, he said the shooting never happened. I do not remember many things, and for all those things I do not remember, I am grateful, because the things I do remember hurt me enough. My memory begins after our stops at a chain of American military bases in the Philippines, Guam, and finally Pennsylvania. To leave the refugee camp in Pennsylvania, the Vietnamese refugees needed American sponsors. One sponsor took my parents, another took my brother, a third took me. For most of my life, I tried not to remember this moment except to note it in a factual way, as something that happened to us but left no damage, but that is not true. As a writer and a father of a son who is four years old, the same age I was when I became a refugee, I have to remember, or sometimes imagine, not just what happened, but what was felt. I have to imagine what it was like for a father and a mother to have their children taken away from them. I have to imagine what it was that I experienced, although I do remember being taken by my sponsor to visit my parents and howling at being taken back.

I remember being reunited with my parents after a few months and the snow and the cold and my mother disappearing from our lives for a period of time I cannot recall and for reasons I could not understand, and knowing vaguely that it had something to do with the trauma of losing her country, her family, her property, her security, maybe herself. In remembering this, I know that I am also foreshadowing the worst of what the future would hold, of what would happen to her in the decades to come. Despite her short absence, or maybe her long one, I remember enjoying life in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, because children can enjoy things that adults cannot so long as they can
I remember a sofa sitting in our backyard and neighborhood children stealing our Halloween candy and my enraged brother taking me home before venturing out by himself to recover what had been taken from us. I remember moving to San Jose, California, in 1978 and my parents opening the second Vietnamese grocery store in the city and I remember the phone call on Christmas Eve that my brother took, informing him that my parents had been shot in an armed robbery, and I remember that it was not that bad, just flesh wounds, they were back at work not long after, and I remember that the only people who wanted to open businesses in depressed downtown San Jose were the Vietnamese refugees, and I remember walking down the street from my parents’ store and seeing a sign in a store window that said Another American driven out of business by the Vietnamese, and I remember the gunman who followed us to our home and knocked on our door and pointed a gun in all our faces and how my mother saved us by running past him and out onto the sidewalk, but I do not remember the two policemen shot to death in front of my parents’ store because I had gone away to college by that time and my parents did not want to call me and worry me.

I remember all these things because if I did not remember them and write them down then perhaps they would all disappear, as all those Vietnamese businesses have vanished, because after they had helped to revitalize the downtown that no one else cared to invest in, the city of San Jose realized that downtown could be so much better than what it was and forced all those businesses to sell their property and if you visit downtown San Jose today you will see a massive, gleaming, new city hall that symbolizes the wealth of a Silicon Valley that had barely begun to exist in 1978 but you will not see my parents’ store, which was across the street from the new city hall. What you will see instead is a parking lot with a few cars in it because the city thought that the view of an empty parking lot from the windows and foyer of city hall was more attractive than the view of a mom-and-pop Vietnamese grocery store catering to refugees.

As refugees, not just once but twice, having fled from north to south in 1954 when their country was divided, my parents experienced the usual dilemma of anyone classified as an other. The other exists in contradiction, or perhaps in paradox, being either invisible or hypervisible, but rarely just visible. Most of the time we do not see the other or see right through them, whoever the other may be to us, since each of us — even if we are seen as others by some — have our own others. When we do see the other, the other is not truly human to us, by very definition of being an other, but is instead a stereotype, a joke, or a horror. In the case of the Vietnamese refugees in America, we embodied the specter of the Asian come to either serve or to threaten.

Invisible and hypervisible, refugees are ignored and forgotten by those who are not refugees until they turn into a menace. Refugees, like all others, are unseen until they are seen everywhere, threatening to overwhelm our borders, invade our cultures, rape our women, threaten our children, destroy our economies. We who do the ignoring and forgetting oftentimes do not perceive it to be violence, because we do not know we do it. But sometimes we deliberately ignore and forget others. When we do, we are surely aware we are in inciting violence, whether that is on the schoolyard as children or at the level of the nation. When those others fight back by demanding to be seen and heard — as refugees sometimes do — they can appear to us like threatening ghosts whose fates we ourselves have caused and denied. No wonder we do not wish to see them.

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“Where #ImFrom: A secret war”  
BY HAYLEE THIKEO

You ask me, “Where are you from?” and begin guessing with China and Korea. After going through a list of Asian countries, you somehow end up at Hawaii. In a desperate attempt, you tell me I look Hawaiian to try to prove you know me.

But you don’t know me. You don’t know my history. I’m not here to accept what you think is a compliment about my “exotic features” when you’re really trying to otherize me.

I am a product of a secret war. A time when the United States decided to use Laos as a pawn during the Vietnam War and dropped over 200 million cluster bombs over my parents’ homeland. Over the course of 10 years, cluster bombs rained every day, making Laos the most heavily bombed nation per capita in history. But no one talks about it. Except for the people who were there. You know of Korea, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Japan. But when will you know Laos?

It’s the land of a million elephants, a rich history derived from the beautiful Kingdom of Lan Xang. Laos is magical, full of culture, buddhist traditions, art and life. Her beauty has been taken for granted so many times, first by the hands of colonial imperialists and then by American warlords. Today, her scars are the 80 million unexploded bombs and remnants of war buried in her soil. She’s hurting, and parts of her can never heal. If the U.S. took more than 20 years to finally begin cleaning up the dangerous remnants, how can you possibly know where I’m from in the 20 seconds it takes to ask me that dreaded question?

Is it because you had the privilege to backpack through it? You got to drink your way on a floating tube down the river from Vang Vieng. You got to sit on an elephant and take selfies with the buddhist monks in Luang Prabang during a traditional Thuk Bhaat ceremony. Do these activities mean you know me? You can turn my parents’ country into a playground, but you can’t play me.

You don’t know that where your tour boat glides through the Mekong River is also where my dad lost his youngest brother as the cops shot at him and his family for escaping the re-education camp.

You don’t know that in markets of Pakse, where you tried to haggle a few pennies from the locals, my mother stayed for 12-hour days, trying to sell vegetables. She had dropped out of school during 7th grade to help her mother and grandmother make ends meet.

You don’t know that across the river is Thailand, which today is a party destination for you, but for my parents, refuge. Many people lost their lives trying to swim to the refugee camps in Thailand.

You can’t know that I grew up in a city where my safety depended on telling gangs apart by color, avoiding certain clothes on certain streets and not looking too long at someone. A city where street smarts meant survival and book smarts meant privilege.

You can’t know that I grew up watching my parents eat eggs and rice for dinner because they wanted my brother and me to have the American Happy Meal from the symbolic golden arches. They wanted us to eat like Americans and taste the American dream.

You can’t know that I grew up responsible not only for my parents’ hopes and dreams, but the dreams they carried of those left behind in the homeland. If it wasn’t for my friends, helping me through some pretty dark thoughts, I wouldn’t be here right now sharing my story with you.

Haylee Thikeo is a Lao American womxn passionate about vulnerable storytelling. She is a marketing communications manager by day, writer and community organizer by night: https://www.hayleethikeo.com.
“It’s been two weeks since the largest deportation of Khmer refugees in U.S. history”

BY MELANIE KIM FOR ASIAN AMERICANS ADVANCING JUSTICE – ASIAN LAW CAUCUS

At 4:45 pm on April 3, 2018, the single largest deportation flight of Khmer Americans departed from El Paso, Texas. Most of the 43 Khmer Americans on the flight had already been separated from their loved ones since October 2017, when ICE conducted mass raids on Cambodian refugee communities all over the country.

I started working as an immigrant rights staff attorney at Asian Americans Advancing Justice—Asian Law Caucus in May 2017—five months before the raids began. I had heard from more experienced attorneys at the Caucus that ICE annually raided Khmer refugee communities. In the past, the raids were concentrated in certain parts of the country. Many Khmer refugees picked up in raids were eventually released because Cambodia has been reluctant to accept large groups of deportees. Still, since 2002, the U.S. has deported close to 500 refugees to Cambodia. In October 2017, ICE unleashed its plan to deport an unprecedented number of Khmer refugees. ICE agents arrested approximately 100 refugees all over the country and booked them in immigration prisons. Phone calls for legal help flooded into our offices. The Caucus received calls from all over the country, including California, Washington, Wisconsin, North Carolina and Florida. I began making weekly, sometimes bi-weekly, trips to Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center (RCCC), a county jail outside of Sacramento where ICE was detaining Khmer refugees from California’s Central Valley.

I met Pisith during my first trip to RCCC. He is a single father of two children and the caretaker of his elderly father. He has lived in Stockton for over 30 years. Pisith has a light-hearted way of talking, even when sharing about really difficult experiences. In our first conversation, he told me that his family fled the Khmer Rouge when he was a baby. In the midst of the chaos of war and genocide, Pisith’s family was forced to leave one of his sisters in Cambodia. The rest of the family stayed at a refugee camp in Thailand until they were approved to enter the U.S. as refugees. Pisith and his family settled in Stockton, California when he was five years old. He has no memories of Cambodia or Thailand, but he has seen baby pictures of himself from the refugee camp. In the pictures, his belly is bulging from malnutrition.

U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War caused a huge wave of migration from Southeast Asia. During the war, the United States dropped nearly 3 million tons of bombs on Cambodia in the largest bombing campaign conducted by the U.S. military at the time. The instability caused by U.S. bombs paved the way for the Khmer Rouge, known for murdering more than 1 million Cambodians and disposing their bodies in mass graves. Cambodians fled to camps in surrounding countries before entering the United States as refugees. In the U.S., Southeast Asian refugees were placed in poor neighborhoods with no culturally-competent resources.

Pisith, like almost all Cambodian refugee children, grew up in the U.S during the 1990s—a decade marked by a proliferation of local and national “tough on crime” policies, including mandatory minimum sentences, the “war on drugs” and sentencing children as adults in criminal proceedings. In 1996, Congress passed an immigration bill that severely limited immigration relief for non-U.S. citizens with criminal convictions—including refugees and green card holders. By the time Pisith was a teenager, the school to prison to deportation pipeline was in full effect. Growing up as a refugee in Stockton wasn’t easy. Pisith’s parents struggled to support their four children while living with the trauma of war and immeasurable loss. Pisith felt out of place, and never felt safe in his neighborhood. When he was young, Pisith made mistakes, which led to criminal convictions, and eventually, an order of deportation in 2010. Following his deportation order, Pisith was held in immigration prison for a few months while the U.S. attempted to deport him to Cambodia. Cambodia refused to take him back, and Pisith was released from ICE custody later that year. He returned to his life in Stockton of being a father, working hard to support his children.

On October 19, 2017, without warning, ICE came to Pisith’s home, arrested him, and booked him at RCCC. We received phone calls, e-mails and text messages from Pisith’s sister, daughter and girlfriend, asking us to look into his case. His family members were right, and Pisith did have a legal claim to reverse his deportation order. In
the process of filing Pisith’s claim for relief, his daughter told me that she will be the first to graduate from college in her family because of her father’s support. His sister shared with me that she, her parents, and siblings live minutes away from each other in Stockton, and have always been a close-knit family. They gathered letters of support, necessary legal documents, and made themselves available to talk to me at all hours of the day, to get Pisith’s claim filed. They were determined to keep their loved one in this country.

In January 2018, Pisith’s deportation order was reversed, and he was released from ICE prison. Pisith has, once again, returned to his loved ones and community in Stockton.

After the October raids, the U.S. placed significant pressure on Cambodia to rapidly repatriate more refugees than ever before. Cambodia eventually agreed, and a deportation flight was slated to depart a week before Christmas. Four days before the flight, a federal judge paused all deportations to Cambodia for two months to give people time to fight their deportation orders in court. Many people who could, fought their cases and won, requiring ICE to return them to their communities. Some are continuing to fight through the court system. On February 6th, the pause on deportations ended, and the U.S. made arrangements for the next flight.

The deportation flight carrying 43 Khmer Americans landed in Phnom Penh on April 5th at 8:00 am. Pisith was not on that flight because his family relentlessly fought for him, and because he qualified for one of the very few forms of immigration relief available to people with convictions.

Refugees on that flight either didn’t have access to an immigration attorney or, unlike Pisith, didn’t have a claim for immigration relief. Their stories are present in my mind, too. Their stories reveal a shameful history this country would rather forget. They remind me that the struggle to survive did not stop when they entered the U.S. because the cards continued to be stacked against them. Their stories include partners, daughters and sisters who fought to keep them here, but faced a legal system that was never designed to help them and never stopped punishing their loved ones. Their stories remind me that more Khmer women than ever before will bear the immense emotional and financial burdens caused by permanent separation from their loved ones.

For months, my phone had rung constantly with calls from people in detention and their partners, sisters, and mothers. I had gotten used to talking to them everyday. As the plane took off, my phone went eerily quiet. I couldn’t help but feel overwhelming sadness and despair for all the voices that had just been silenced. What has let me keep hoping is the resilience of the Khmer community. They endured U.S. bombs, the loss of their country and escaped genocide only to be followed by violence in America. Despite all this, I witnessed them respond with unrelenting courage, love and solidarity over the past six months. I know that they will keep hoping and fighting and so will I.

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Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus is the nation’s first legal and civil rights organization serving the low-income Asian Pacific American communities. Founded in 1972, Advancing Justice – ALC focuses on housing rights, immigration and immigrants’ rights, labor and employment issues, student advocacy (ASPIRE), civil rights and hate violence, national security, and criminal justice reform. As a founding affiliate of Asian Americans Advancing Justice, the organization also helps to set national policies in affirmative action, voting rights, Census and language rights.