#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.
About *Project Yellow Dress*

Project Yellow Dress (PYD) grew out of a desire to create a platform for the Southeast Asian diaspora to have a voice and to build community through our shared heritages and histories. The name is inspired by the yellow dress our main character wears in our future children’s book about the Vietnamese Boat People experience.

Growing up as the children of refugees, we heard only bits and pieces about how our families escaped Vietnam and came to America; it was rarely ever discussed outright at home or at school. While every U.S. and world history class covered the Vietnam War, none of the textbooks ever outlined in detail what it was like for Southeast Asians before, during, and after the war, instead focusing on the experiences of American soldiers and never really addressing what happened after the Fall of Saigon. We think Vietnamese director of *Journey From the Fall*, Ham Tran, explained this discrepancy best when he remarked about how difficult it was to find information to write his film, and in doing so stressed how important any work related to this subject is: “The short chapter in American history books about the Vietnam War ends on April 30, 1975, the day American forces pulled out of Vietnam. Our story begins where the history books end.”

A few years ago, we attended a film screening at the Jewish Community Library in San Francisco. On display outside the lecture hall were several books about the Holocaust, including a children’s book titled, *Benino and the Night of the Broken Glass*. It was at that very moment that we both became inspired to write a children’s book as well, but this one about the often-forgotten and neglected story of Vietnamese Boat People. PYD was created shortly thereafter.

Our goal for PYD is to be a space that highlights the histories, voices, and experiences of the Southeast Asian diaspora. We want people to see how diverse, nuanced, and resilient we are. We want to introduce everyone to incredible SEAA artists and writers, and to spotlight individuals and organizations working to get us a seat at the table. We want to create a safe space for people to talk about issues that affect us, and inspire one another to rise up and effect change. We want to build community by finding commonalities amongst us, but also celebrating what makes us unique. We want being Southeast Asian, children of refugees, and children of immigrants, to be points of pride.

We hope that you will join us in our efforts, be it by sharing your or your family’s story, contributing to our projects, becoming an ally, joining our team, or helping us spread the word. Together, we believe we can accomplish something incredibly meaningful.

**Contact Us**

*Website:* www.projectyellowdress.com  
*Email:* projectyellowdress@gmail.com  
*Twitter:* @projyellowdress  
*Instagram:* @projectyellowdress  
*Facebook:* @projectyellowdress
the girl in the fishing boat
BY CASEY TRAN

i feel you,
restless as the sea.

She has felt them her entire life—lost mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, friends and strangers. They rise from the dead of the sea, seeking home in her. She drowns in them, not knowing where their pain, her pain begins or ends.

They shadow her, wanting her to tell their story.
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she rides waves,
searching for home.

- no one leaves home unless

On a tiny fishing boat in the middle of the ocean and nowhere, she quiets her breath until all she can hear is the rise and fall of salt water. She bends her spine, folds into herself to fit the boat’s crevices. She holds lips together, forces hard truths down her throat.

She seeks refuge in silence.
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i come from the womb
of your silence.

In a sea of fishing boats, a baby girl is born. She is born to a war that has not ended yet, a war that is still felt by living and dead alike.

She opens her mouth in a silent cry.
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silence is survival,
they tell her.

- wisdom rooted in scars

She remembers the tiny fishing boat in the middle of the ocean. Of how her mother stayed silent, watched hunger eat men, men break women, and the waves that swallowed them all. And how she hid her pain in the crevices of the boat.

On the playground, she quiets her breath until all she can hear are the taunts. She bends her spine, folds into herself, disappears into the ground. Pale faces spit untruths; she bites her tongue until she cannot feel voice.

She seeks refuge in silence, hoping it will save her. But it does not.
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you coax out the words,
one by one,
until they become salt water.
flow

She’s afraid that she will disappear into the silence. That the silence will swallow her, like it swallowed lost sailors in tiny fishing boats.

So, she throws an anchor into blank pages, hoping that she won’t be swept away in the margins. She puts pen to paper.

She writes herself into existence.

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home is the feeling of you,
of us.

my people

On a tiny fishing boat in the middle of the Pacific, a girl rises from the crevices. She unfolds her spine, eyes on the horizon. There, she sees another fishing boat and a boy. The boy looks at her.

They drift toward each other, drawn by home. The girl clears the cobweb of quiet in her throat. She licks lips parched from truth and speaks.

Together, they join a wave of fishing boats and journey to a golden city on the curve of a coast.

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i am screaming to you in my silence.
listen for me.
what do you hear?

If she listens hard enough, she can hear them in the silence. They are talking to each other, to cousins, and to her. She tries to talk back, but her tongue has forgotten the motherland.

Instead she writes them back.

1. Which part(s) of the piece stood out to you the most and why?
2. What key terms, topics, or themes are reflected in this piece?
3. How does this piece demonstrate how poetry can add a different layer of meaning and complexity to our understanding of the Vietnamese Boat People experience, the Syrian refugee crisis, the Rohingya refugee crisis?
4. What are the different ways silence is portrayed in the poem?
5. How does Casey mirror but also differentiate the first and generation narratives?

Casey Tran is a poet and storyteller in the San Francisco Bay Area. For more of her writing, visit medium.com/@caseytran or follow her on Twitter @tran_casey.
“Under the Same Moon”
BY AN UONG

My mom appears by the bedroom doorway in her cotton pajamas. Her toothless mouth is wide with excitement. When she’s at home, her dentures are put away, and even though she’s only in her early fifties, she made the decision over ten years ago to have all of her teeth pulled out. “They were all rotting away anyway,” she tells me, “who needs them?” On bad days, she complains, “I can't eat anything crunchy. You’re so lucky you have your teeth.”

She’s holding an empty soda can in one hand, and a knife in the other. Her black hair, usually falling just above her shoulders, is pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Outside, the sun is about to meet the horizon’s lip in a blazing Los Angeles sunset. My dad is at his overnight shift at work and in a few moments, the full moon will come out in time for the Mid-Autumn Festival. Though the festival’s roots lie in harvest celebration, my family clings onto it as another tangible piece of our Vietnamese culture. It’s an intimate and quiet tradition, one that often leads to stories from my parents’ childhood in Saigon. Because I was four when my parents brought me with them to America and my brother was born in Los Angeles, we have little understanding and imagery of Vietnam aside from our parents’ tales of their past.

My mom has gathered a few cans, which are still sticky from the sodas they once contained. “This one is the best,” she says as she holds up an Arizona iced tea can. It’s taller than the rest, with a checkered pattern of green and beige. My little brother Kenny and I follow her to our coffee table, where the mirrored surface reflects our faces. Kenny is ten to my sixteen and we are waiting for the moon to rise. “When the moon is up we’ll have the best lanterns on the street,” she says, even though we all know that no one else will be parading around with hand-made lanterns. We live in an Armenian neighborhood in Los Angeles where Vietnamese families are few and far between. Though Armenia and Vietnam are separated by an entire continent, we are connected by the same otherness that we carry with us in America, our bodies existing together in diaspora.

My mom cuts vertical lines into her tall can, and when she has made it all the way around its circumference, she squeezes the two ends together, creating a small lantern as the strips of aluminum jut out in a synchronized dance. She slides a small candle through one of the slits and places it at the can’s center.

“In Vietnam,” she begins, “your grandfather would buy us fancy lanterns with blinking lights. They even played music!” She tells us about her Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations in Vietnam, evenings spent running through the streets with her sisters and brothers. She also recounts the night she shared a lantern with one of her brothers when her own was stolen by a neighborhood bully. Her usually boisterous voice dampens when she shares this, and I imagine a little girl running empty-handed toward her home. She is the only person in her family who lives in America. “I miss them so much,” she says to Kenny and me. In the time that she has been away from Vietnam, she has had to watch from afar as deaths, marriages, and births mark the changes in her siblings’ lives. “At least I know we are under the same moon.”

The quiet passes quickly, as it usually does with my mom, whose sadness dissipates with such swiftness that I am jarred by her chuckle. “Look, mine’s a little crooked!” she says, pointing out a large gap between two aluminum strips. My brother giggles but my eyes linger on her face, waiting to see if her smile will drop. It doesn’t though. Instead, she finishes her lantern with glee by attaching a piece of string to its top then tying it to a chopstick. She sets it down to flutter off into the kitchen, leaving myself and my brother to handle our own knives and cans. I puncture a Pepsi can with my knife. It screeches back and forth as the
blade moves from top to bottom. Kenny is nervous with his knife, so he sets it down to wait for my mom to return.

With all of my cuts made, I mirror my mom by pushing the top and bottom together to create a lantern. She returns with a cup of tea for each person. The jasmine scent travels quickly to my nostrils and warmth spreads through my lungs when I inhale its steam. After only a sip my mouth is full of flowers.

My mom sets a square, tin box down before us. When she opens the lid, the mooncakes are revealed. There are four of them, thick and cradled by a plastic structure that keeps them safe. The crust is glazed and delicate, with ridges and valleys asking to be felt before they are eaten. My mom takes one, sets it on a plate, and cuts it into halves. The outside crust splits open to reveal a green lotus paste. At its center is the salted yolk of a duck egg, round and golden like a moon against clear sky. The cakes come from Kien Giang, a bakery in nearby Echo Park and one of our usual stops when we go grocery shopping on Sundays.

By the time we each have our own lantern, the bright sky has darkened into a blue streaked with thin clouds. We put on our jackets even though it doesn’t get very cold in Los Angeles and head outside. Outside, my mom lights the candle inside each lantern, setting our cans alight with soft yellow flickers.

We hold our tiny moons as we stare up at the real one in the sky, its roundness hanging above us and touching us with its glow. My mom’s head is tilted and her mouth is ajar as she points upward, her expression similar to the one on my brother’s face. For a moment she could be a child again, wrapped up in amazement as she gently swings her lantern back and forth.

1. Which part(s) of the piece stood out to you the most and why?
2. What key terms, topics, or themes are reflected in this piece?
3. What is the significance of this line, “At least I know we are under the same moon”?
4. What Mid-Autumn Festival traditions did they keep the same and what did they do to make it their own? How does the tradition of making lanterns create a bridge between the mother and her two children?
5. “Though Armenia and Vietnam are separated by an entire continent, we are connected by the same otherness that we carry with us in America, our bodies existing together in diaspora.” What are some examples from this piece or your own experience that illustrate what it means to be of diaspora?

An Uong is a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and a current Creative Nonfiction MFA candidate at Emerson College. She is Editor and Community Liaison at AIR (the Association of Independents in Radio). Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Catapult, Skin Deep Magazine, Roads and Kingdoms, and Wildness Journal. She lives in New England, where she can be found camping, hiking, or rock climbing when she’s not running after a bus or subway. She also has a knack for ill-timed laughter. Find her on Twitter or Instagram: @anuonganuong.
"A Reflection on Intersectionality, Community, Accountability, and Assimilation"
BY TERRA HOY

On May 19th of 2018, Terra Hoy had the privilege to speak at a Southeast Asian graduation celebration in Seattle, WA. The following is her speech edited for Project Yellow Dress.

Thank you all for letting me share my story. It is a privilege to be here today, one of the many privileges my mother and her siblings fought for when she came to America after surviving the genocide. My name is Terra and I will soon obtain a Bachelor’s in Public Health from the University of Washington. It is very bittersweet for me to speak to you all about what this celebration means for me. The Khmer Student Association was where I found community and identity during my first year as an undergraduate, especially as a first generation Cambodian American student. Throughout my first year, I advocated for the Association across campus with so much passion as the Khmer Student Association was so influential in my time at the University of Washington. Then, during the summer of 2014 following my freshman year, I developed severe depression upon realizing I was transgender. I also internalized that because I am transgender, I was undermining the traumas and resilience of my mother, my sister, and the other women in my family. So, I sought support from my community, my Khmer community.

I began to come out as queer and transgender to my peers and officers. I shared with many that I was in the hospital for two weeks due to mental health concerns involving my gender identity. And that I had tried to take my own life multiple times prior. One very influential and respectable leader from the Association reacted in hostility. The hostility resulting from me trying to open up to this peer scarred me, and unfortunately pushed me away from a community I once called family. Other leaders were aware of the situation but did not stand up on my behalf. For the following several years, I felt such detachment from my Khmer identity, like I had to choose between being Khmer and transgender. But I have found solidarity through my mother, my sister, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, my closest friends and coworkers, and my partner.

I have also found solidarity in my education. At the University, I always advocated for intersectionality, the recognition of discrimination faced by anyone who identifies with multiple social, biological, and cultural groups that are unfavored in a patriarchal, capitalist, globalized white supremacist society. But it is not until my preparations to stand here today that I have truly begun to process that the acts of celebrating my heritage and living authentically do not have to be mutually exclusive.

The scarring experience I have shared with you merely scratches the surface of what transgender women go through every day here and in Southeast Asia. I want you all to leave with the understanding that, while our people find more and more freedom after the genocide, some of us are freer than others. I spent much of my undergraduate career researching the disparities of transgender women in Cambodia. Gender and sexual minorities just like me are subjected to police expand violence, discrimination in healthcare and their communities, poor social mobility, high rates of HIV/AIDS, sexual exploitation and trauma, injection drug use, and so much more. Often, they are socioeconomically pressured into sex work, some even trafficked. What makes them different from me is that I was privileged to be born into a time, place, and family who supports all of me. And because of that, I can be here today. Because of our privileges, we can be here today.

Our dream as Cambodian Americans is to acquire an education in aspirations of a high income to financially support our immigrant parents. And while that is valid and real and a huge accomplishment in itself, I want to give my mother more than that. I want to give her a world where she may freely travel to
different countries, including her home country, where she can witness and experience the growing liberty of our people, all our people.

I refuse to assimilate into the social, political, and economic systems which thrive off the historical traumas placed upon us.
The systems which secret bombings of our country were in the name of American democracy.
The systems which expedited the genocide of our peoples.
The systems which pressure us to remain hushed about the violence of deportations.
The systems which descendants of socioeconomic power benefit from our generations of trauma and lifetimes of labor.

This ceremony is a symbol of how we do not have to be model minorities in these systems.
The systems which secret bombings of our country were in the name of American democracy.
The systems which expedited the genocide of our peoples.
The systems which pressure us to remain hushed about the violence of deportations.
The systems which descendants of socioeconomic power benefit from our generations of trauma and lifetimes of labor.

I want our future generations to look toward their ancestors who paved a foundation for their growing liberation. So, I vow to dedicate my career and life to supporting transgender and nonbinary people of color. I hope each one of you can contribute to my cause - our cause - because as we have learned from history, liberty cannot stem from violence nor the oppressing of each other - it stems from solidarity. Just as we have here, we must continue to come together as a community and fight the intersecting social, political, and economic forces which try to divide and conquer us. As we celebrate today, as we wave our flag in pride, as we keep our culture alive, we must also hold ourselves accountable for gender and sexual minorities of Cambodia, for they are as Khmer and human as each and every one of us.

Thank you.

1. Which part(s) of the piece stood out to you the most and why?
2. What key terms, topics, or themes are reflected in this piece?
3. How did her ethnic identity add an additional layer of complexity to her coming out as queer and transgender?
4. Terra was asked to speak at her school’s Southeast Asian graduation, but upon seeing a draft of her speech, she was asked to censor parts of it (the version here is uncensored). How does she view education as a privilege and as a tool and platform for liberation? How did her (school) community fail her?
5. Trans folks face an incredible amount of discrimination. How can we as educators be better allies to our trans students, and in particular our trans students of color?

Terra Hoy is a a first generation, non-binary Cambodian-American who is passionate about intersectional feminism within public health, public policy and governance, and economics. Her long term career aspirations involve structural reform to promote the wellness of minority populations, including the socially and economically displaced, those LGBTQ+, people of color, and many more mis- or underrepresented. In time, she hopes to be a leader in work that equitably shapes policies and social structures.
Can you please tell us a little bit about yourself?
My name is Nancy Monteiro. I was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. I came to D.C. in 2000 for college, started my career, and am now a resident here.

How did you and your family end up in the United States?
My mom and dad are from Laos. They came to the U.S. in 1980 after during the Vietnam War, after spending time in refugee camps in Thailand. My parents were sponsored by a church in Kansas City, Missouri. My mom was pregnant with me when she came to America, so she was maybe around 19 years old then. My middle name is Jo, after the lady who sponsored my parents.

What was your experience growing up as a Southeast Asian American?
I grew up in the Midwest, and it was really tough because there were really two groups: Blacks and Whites. We therefore were the minority of the minorities. My town had a population of 1,000, and everyone knew each other. It was all farmland, but a lot of the Asian people there worked in factories because there were not many jobs. People did everything they could in order to support their families. Also, since most people in the Asian community did not really speak English well, I had to take ESL to learn English.

Growing up, I was called a Chink, Bruce Lee’s daughter, and other slurs for Chinese people. And then I would be like, I’m not Chinese though! As I am darker-skinned, I don’t even look Chinese. My family and I stood out, and we could feel people always judging us and staring at us, and because of our race, there weren't many opportunities for us. This experience eventually pushed me to go to the East Coast for college, as I knew there was more diversity and people were more open-minded there. Even now though, it’s still hard to go back home because people still stare - “look at the Chinese person.”

Also, when I was younger, my family never went out to eat at restaurants; we always ate at home, mostly to save money. My dad would say, “Why do you want to eat that? I can make it at home for you!” My dad would then make pizza, but it would not look like pizza at all. “You don’t need that other thing,” he would say, “This is better!” He was hilarious.

In what ways did your parents or culture shape your identity?
My dad had a huge impact on my life. He raised strong daughters and taught us that we could do anything. He did all the “women’s jobs” - he cooked and cleaned and braided my hair when I was a little girl. If I wanted an outfit, he would take out the sewing machine and make the outfit for me. My dad taught me that there are no gender roles; we should do things because we need to get them done.

In terms of language, my parents spoke Laos, and I spoke it while growing up. Nowadays, people think my accent is Americanized. It’s hard because my own people still judge me for my accent and how Americanized I am. You don’t expect to have to deal with prejudices within your own community. I tend to shy away from speaking my own language because of being judged by my own people.

There’s also inequality in regard to the way you look. People say I’m poor because my skin is dark. My mom would tell me that I need to care about appearances, but I told her I don’t care what I look like, that this is me. My dad raised us to not care about these things. I feel like my mom wanted to “save face” because she didn’t want to get judged by her own people, and she was more caught up with our culture’s ideals. Being a woman, she worried about me because I’m a tomboy, and if I have so many male friends, that our community would judge me. My dad was the exact opposite - he said, “you be you.” She would tell
me that I have to value my heritage, my culture, and need to do certain things in a certain way because I am a woman.

I also noticed that in my generation, there are more interracial marriages and therefore more mixed kids, like my own children. It used to be looked down upon in the past, but nowadays, there is more acceptance. In terms of the disparity between Southeast Asians and East Asians, we are looked down as Laotians because we and other Southeast Asian communities are seen as different and more poor.

1. Which part(s) of the piece stood out to you the most and why?
2. What key terms, topics, or themes are reflected in this piece?
3. Nancy refers a bit to her experience with colorism, a form of prejudice or discrimination in which people are treated differently based on the social meanings attached to skin color: “There’s also inequality in regard to the way you look. People say I’m poor because my skin is dark.” What are some examples of colorism in your own life or from the lives of those around you?
4. “Even now though, it’s still hard to go back home because people still stare - ‘look at the Chinese person.’” How is this an example of Othering, viewing or treating (a person or group of people) as intrinsically different from and alien to oneself?
5. How did Nancy’s parents reinforce and challenge gender norms?

Nancy Monteiro (maiden name Mongkhonvilay) was born and raised in Kansas City, MO. She is the oldest of three children. She lived her whole life in the Midwest until she got accepted at Marymount University, where she graduated as a honor student with a B.A. in Psychology. She started her career working for a Fortune 500 company in consulting, and it paid for her Masters in Human Resource Management at University of Maryland University College (UMUC). She is currently a small business owner and a stay-at-home mom to two beautiful children who are half-Laotian and half-Portuguese. She enjoys spending time with her family and friends, volunteering at her children's school, and doing charity work in the community.
Excerpts from our interview with VARAXY YI BORROMEO

Can you please tell us a little bit about yourself?
I am a Khmer-American woman. I was the first child in my family to be born in the United States, and I’m the “first” everything: first-generation college student, first-generation graduate student, and potentially the first Ph.D in my family in the U.S. Education is a very important part of my personal identity. It was first stressed by my refugee family as critical for my success and I also found a home in it. I found it to be a space where I’m learning about myself and where I fit in the world and its systems, and it has been really trying at times, especially as a child who is in between - being the first daughter bound to traditional gender roles while simultaneously living in the U.S. where you’re judged on your individual accomplishments and achievements. I did--do--the best I can.

Who is your greatest role model or influence in your life?
My mom passed away when I was about ten and my grandmother raised me from that point on, and so she and my aunt are really big role models in my life. It is interesting because when people talk about role models, the ones we are provided are typically white men, and I wasn’t taught to think of family members or the people around me as role models. It wasn’t until the last few years that I realized how the strong women in my life impacted and guided me.

My grandmother experienced so much loss but she was the ultimate survivor. Despite battling so many health issues - a brain tumor, high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney failure - she was the toughest fighter I knew. To make it to the U.S. after all that devastation, to have to deal with illness, and then to have to inherit grandchildren, just surviving these experiences - that’s a big accomplishment. In some ways, it’s a reminder to us that sometimes our biggest heroes are the everyday heroes; she didn’t cure cancer, but despite the odds she continued to survive. So while she was such an incredible part of my life, it wasn’t until recently that I really started giving her the credit she deserved, because when you’re young and growing up, you take the people in your life for granted.

Your resume is so incredible. One of the first things that stood out to me was that you wrote a paper on the Model Minority Myth. Can you discuss the role it has played in your own life, and what pushed you to do research on this topic?
While the MMM has definitely shaped me, my research also looks at the idea of a Deviant Minority Myth. Usually it is attached to people of color, particularly black and brown populations, implying that they don’t care about education, that they don’t try hard enough. Part of my dissertation and my work looks at how [this particular construct] is also attached to Southeast Asians. It is an interesting and impactful dichotomy to experience. One of my earliest memories of experiencing something like this was when I was in junior high in a math and science class and we had a substitute who told me, “Well, you’re smart for a Khmer girl.” And at the time, I thought that was a compliment, but it wasn’t until much later that I realized that that was one of the most backhanded compliments I had ever gotten. It made me sad, and a bit guilty for feeling pride when he was unknowingly demeaning an entire community.

On top of this, my research was fueled by watching my brothers go to school. As siblings, we are all bright and intelligent but I could not understand why there was such disparity within our educational experiences. So I began questioning things: What is it about the school system and the teachers that made it so difficult for them? What messaging is causing people to look at students in deficit ways, as delinquents? What is really pushing students out of school? I began to reject assumptions that the students were the problem and instead start to search for more answers. As a Southeast Asian woman, I learned how to play the game, developing this perception of me as the “good girl,” but because my brothers refused to play the game, they were punished. They attended community college, but it just wasn’t easy for them. Now, instead of
questioning their commitment, I realize that there are so many systemic issues that are at play here, that are pushing them out of school. This is not an anomaly, but rather more of a trend, and I find it troubling. So in short, yes, my life has been impacted by the MMM, but it’s darker side or corollary has created significant issues for my community.

**Can you tell us a little bit about your dissertation: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Racialized Experiences of Southeast Asian American Community College Students?**

My dissertation objective is to explore the racialized experiences of Southeast Asian American community college students. Specifically, I’m interested in the narratives of students of the post-Vietnam War era: Hmong, Vietnamese, Lao, and Khmer students. I came about this topic because I was interested in the dichotomy or binary of characterizations of Southeast Asians under the larger category of “Model Minorities” but also as “deviant minorities.” I wanted to explore that experience and how it impacts students. More specifically, I am interested in highlighting their stories of resilience and resistance.

Also, community college is one of the least researched areas in higher education, but it’s where the majority of students of color go. For whatever reason, it’s where a lot of my community went, and it was a good opportunity to explore what is going on at these community colleges, but also to view it through a critical lens: How does being racialized in specific ways impact your educational experience, and how does it potentially impact whether you can earn your degree and what options you have later on?

While research on Southeast Asian student population is increasing, there are so many unheard stories and voices and narratives. I remember the first time I was asked to share my story. I was amazed, “What? Someone wants to listen to my story?” I’m super excited to be able to talk to students who may not have had these opportunities to share, to be asked, what their experiences are. I want them to be heard and seen. On top of that, I want to use my Ph.D and the platform and the spaces that I have access to to elevate Southeast Asian students’ stories and experiences and to make sure that they are visible. This dissertation is my passion project, my culminating activism moment or experience of my Ph.D program. Everyone hopes that their dissertation changes the world and I know that mine won’t necessarily, but if anything, it will contribute to our Southeast Asian community. It’s a personal project for me and I take it very seriously. My sense of responsibility to this project has caused me to go slower than I would like because I want to do it right, to do it justice. I’m not doing this just for the edification of the academic community and for me and my academic career, but for my community. It’s to make sure that there is documentation that we exist.

1. Which part(s) of the piece stood out to you the most and why?
2. What key terms, topics, or themes are reflected in this piece?
3. Varaxy talks about the Deviant Minority Myth in her piece. How does using this construct give insight into both her and her brothers’ education experience and highlight how education is not only racialized but also gendered?
4. Regarding her Ph.D Dissertation, Varaxy states, “I’m not doing this just for the edification of the academic community and for me and my academic career, but for my community. It’s to make sure that there is documentation that we exist.” Why is research like Varaxy’s so significant to the Southeast Asian American community and how does her research underscore the significance of being represented in academia?

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**Varaxy Yi Borromeo:** I am a daughter of Khmer refugees. I have inherited resilience, resistance, and resolve from my family. As a Khmer American emerging scholar, I am inspired to uplift the voices and stories of our Southeast Asian communities in academia. I aspire to use my positionality and platform to ensure that the stories of my family and community are never forgotten. Instead, our stories can empower change in our educational systems for the pursuit of a just and equitable society. We are here to stay and we have much to contribute.
Excerpts from our interview with VI SON TRINH

**Photo collection can be accessed by going to http://www.visontrinh.com > Projects > The Stories We Carry**

Another project that we are absolutely mesmerized by is The Stories We Carry, created by you and your friend Andy Nguyen, a Vietnamese American Nurse Practitioner based in Oakland and born and raised in Portland. This collection almost seems like the perfect cross between At Sea and Free and My Chinatown, a beautiful representation of past meets present. Can you please tell us the inspiration behind it?

When I was younger, I was going through a photo album that my parents had kept when one photo in particular caught my eye. It was an image of my dad when he was around my age in a refugee camp in Indonesia, standing there with his arms crossed in front of a series of paintings that he had done. I had never seen my dad paint; I had seen his sketching here and there, but his main priority in the States had always been working. I realized that I had never really thought about my parents outside of their roles as mom and dad, and that there were parts of them that I didn’t know. This moment and this photo inspired me to start my The Stories We Carry project.

In the process of collecting these family photos, I started thinking about how there must be other people out there who have memorabilia that they identify with a lot, maybe something that tells a story about their lineage or a struggle that they had gone through. The idea of expressing people holding items in their hands is a literal interpretation of the stories we carry. I also have a fascination with hands, probably a result of my parents working in the manicure business, and when I look at my parents’ hands, I can almost see the stories their hands tell.

Another inspiration for The Stories We Carry comes from an earlier idea for a passion project centered on refugee families. There are already a few photo projects that talk about the refugee experience, but not many that focus on the experiences of the second generation. It’s important to acknowledge our heritage and the legacy of the first generation, but we need to keep the momentum going and look to the present and future as well.

I found the other folks featured in The Stories We Carry through family and friends. I started by shooting my friend Sarah, who is half Saudi Arabian and half White, holding a photo of her parents. Her mom had passed away awhile back, and as a public health educator and a dancer, a lot of her dance pieces reflect her own experiences with grief. After talking to Sarah over coffee, I was so moved and inspired by her story and decided to shift my project focus from refugees to the second generation. I then took photos of my sister holding a picture of my grandfather. From there I just started connecting with more and more folks, and so what started with a single photo has now transformed into something that allows me to connect with other people and build community. My friend Andy, who is also a second generation Vietnamese American, and I were also talking about possibly one day doing a podcast around The Stories We Carry where we go back and interview each of the individuals we featured.

Also, interestingly enough, recently I have been using a film camera, a Nikon F2 and a Nikon F3. The Nikon F series was used in the Vietnam War by American soldiers to document their experiences. So for me, my choice to use these particular cameras is my own little way of protesting, resisting. It’s a simple camera to use, and it’s rugged -- it can survive apocalyptic conditions, which explains why it was used in the War.
What is the impact you hope your project has and the conversations it will start?
In terms of the impact I hope my project has, sometimes the artist in me just wants to do projects for the aesthetic and not have to think about the weight of it. But back in 2016, I saw the pictures of the Syrian refugees fleeing in boats and those images immediately reminded me of the Vietnamese Boat People experiences. That moment was a catalyst for me because I realized that I needed to create something that went beyond myself. Especially considering the political climate we have right now, I hope that as this project continues to grow, people from different backgrounds will see it and recognize that there are so many things that connect us all together as human beings.

1. Which part(s) of the piece stood out to you the most and why?
2. What key terms, topics, or themes are reflected in this piece?
3. Vi writes, “The idea of expressing people holding items in their hands is a literal interpretation of the stories we carry.” Looking closely at the photos, what do you think each item is and the story it might carry?
4. How does visual media invoke feelings or understanding in a different way compared to the written word?
5. A lot of Vi’s work is inspired by his individual experiences, but grounded in a search for universality. How do projects like Vi’s demonstrate the possibility and the need for allyship and coalition building?

Vi Son Trinh is a documentarian and a nursing student based in Portland, OR. He spends his downtime over coffee, a good book, or chasing stray cats on the streets. You can see more of his work at http://www.visontrinh.com and on Instagram @visontrinh.
As a Hmong-American, shedding light on Hmong history is extremely important to me. Very few Americans are aware of the existence of Hmong people and the Secret War. After interviewing my grandparents about their experiences growing up in Laos, surviving during the war, escaping death, and eventually finding refuge in the United States, I decided to take my first step toward creating art about my people. This is for past me, the little girl that was ashamed of being Hmong, and present me, the woman who feels the strength of her ancestors flowing through her veins everyday. This is for my grandparents, who trekked through the jungle and crossed the Mekong River, who have loved and supported me since I was a baby. This is for all Hmong people, all my fellow survivors. Our story deserves to be known. It's been almost a year since I made this. I was hesitant to post it because I feel like it's not done yet, but I eventually realized that it's just that my exploration into this subject isn't done; I don't think it ever will be, and that's okay. This is only the beginning. *Peb muaj sia nyob.* We have life to live.

1. Which part(s) of the piece stood out to you the most and why?
2. What key terms, topics, or themes are reflected in this piece?
3. Jessi’s short film packs a lot of information in two minutes. What did you know about the Hmong experience before watching the film? What was new to you?
4. Despite heavy and devastating U.S. involvement in Laos, the Secret War and particularly the role of the Hmong people and the effects on them are often limited or excluded in history books. Jessi’s video then becomes not only a tool for education, but an act of resistance. How can art, like “Refuge,” be catalysts for social change?
5. For many who identify as children of refugees or immigrants, Jessi’s quote, “This is for past me, the little girl that was ashamed of being Hmong, and present me, the woman who feels the strength of her ancestors flowing through her veins everyday” is incredibly relatable. When was a (or a few) moments in your life when you felt either ashamed or incredibly proud of your ethnic identity?

**Jessi Xiong** is a queer Hmong American artist creating Southeast Asian representation through animation. She has served as a co-leader for MassArt's Artists of Color Union, creating a safe space for artists of color to educate each other, connect, and collaborate on projects. Over the years she has progressed from rejecting her Hmong heritage, to treasuring it. Her favorite aspects about creating art are bringing characters and places to life, as well as leading her audience on an emotional journey. You can see more of her work at https://www.jeiyex.com or her Instagram @jeiyex.