Killing Me Softly: Remembering and Reproducing Violence in Southeast Asian Refugees (Two Times)

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This thesis examines the ways in which Southeast Asian refugee narratives have been produced and replicated through institutions for the purpose of supporting legitimizing and justifying U.S. imperialism and war violence. It interrogates the limitations of institutionalized modes of memorialization and seeks to offer new forms of remembering and circumventing narratives of remembering. Furthermore, it seeks to connect different forms of state violence together to yield a greater analysis and understanding of the ways in which violence affects the lives of Southeast Asian refugees through an analysis of cultural productions and narrative practices. This project serves to highlight what is forgotten when refugees and domestic violence survivors remember and the connectedness and intricacy of various forms of U.S. imperialism and state violence.
The thesis of Mary Keovisai is approved.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE:
THE MASK: HIDDEN NARRATIVES 10

CHAPTER TWO:
THE BEAST: TRAUMA OF STATE VIOLENCE 25

CONCLUSION 47

WORKS CITED 48
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INTRODUCTION

I sit across from a total stranger. We sit on stiff couches decorated with mismatched pillows and stray pen marks, likely the work of a bored child. A small coffee table separates us. A box of tissues sits on the coffee table. *This is our counseling room. We’ll have all of our meetings here.* I ask her basic information: full name, date of birth, social security number, income, etc. Ask her to agree to all the rules and policies. Sign all the necessary forms. *Next time we meet, I’m going to ask you to talk more about your background, your history, what brought you here, and about… the abuse. I want to let you know, so you’re prepared.* She does not ask me how someone prepares for a stranger to ask them about trauma that they’ve experienced. She does not know that I already know what brought her here – I read what she told the hotline counselor when she called looking for shelter. She does not remember my name after going through an hour and a half of paperwork. She does not question me, just nods her head. *If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you can ask me to take a break or stop. You don’t have to share anything you don’t want to.* She nods silently. I ask myself if I believe what I just told her – you don’t have to share anything you don’t want to. But it’s my job to have her remember and retell her story of abuse. It’s my job to help her work through those memories.

As a former Advocate at an organization that provides crisis intervention and emergency shelter to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, I had to ask survivors to remember. Remember their past, remember what brought them here, remember what they do not want to recall; when they leave shelter, I ask them to remember what they learned, remember that they are survivors. What happens to the survivors who don’t remember or cannot speak? Where is their story?
The first step of entering a domestic violence shelter is to call the crisis hotline associated with the shelter. Over the hotline, survivors are expected to answer a series of questions and essentially prove that they are a true survivor and need shelter. If they do not meet the criteria, they will not be admitted. Among other things, the survivor will need to show that she is in “immediate crisis” and needs a safe place to go. Proof of “immediate crisis” takes the form of detailing the last incident of abuse so that the hotline counselor can assess whether or not she qualifies and deserves shelter services. If her story does not fit the parameters of a strong survivor narrative, she may be referred to homeless shelters, given a voucher for one night at a motel (with no promises about what happens tomorrow), told to ask her family or friends for assistance, or informed that assistance cannot be provided to her at this time.

And then there are the silent callers. The ones who call the hotline, but cannot speak when that unknown voice answers. The ones trying to flee, but freeze in the moment. The ones whose silence tell the wrong story. I’m sorry, but this is a crisis hotline and we need to keep the phone lines clear. Please feel free to call us back again whenever you are ready. I’m going to hang-up now. Good-bye.

I have been involved with the organization for over three years working with women and children in need of various domestic violence/sexual assault services. I can easily find the number of women I have worked with by pulling-up that information on our database. I cannot, however, know how many women were unable to receive services from the organization or other organizations because they did not want to remember the abuse to receive services. In my reflections as a part of the domestic violence shelter system, I cannot help but think about the unheard stories and unserved survivors. While domestic violence/sexual assault shelters do important work to “break the silence,” they also inadvertently marginalize those who chose to
forget or cannot remember. This project serves to incorporate the forgotten with the remembered by delving into the history of trauma, violence, and memory.

My thesis seeks to address traditional forms of remembering trauma and violence as limiting and marginalizing. Locating trauma and violence within one incident characterizes the violence as solely interpersonal and omits other forms of violence such as those that are institutionalized or structural. This critique of domestic violence organizations has been well documented in INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence’s anthology, Color of Violence.¹ My project serves to further interrogate the framework of domestic violence as an interpersonal issue requiring necessary analysis of institutionalized and structural violence, specific to imperialism, to appropriately understand survivors of trauma and violence. In my thesis, I seek to challenge the institutionalized model of domestic violence which privatizes violence and absolves the state of responsibility in creating and participating in a system of violence. I focus on the subject of the Southeast Asian refugee as a counternarrative where in which it is necessary to address the social factors, history, and implications that surround acts of violence. I argue that the Southeast Asian refugee experience requires an analysis of the dialectic between state violence in different forms.

In chapter one, I begin my analysis of Southeast Asian refugee survivors by examining the ways in which they have been institutionally remembered. I examine how institutions, such as the U.S. nation-state and domestic violence shelters, produce narrative practices through legislation and cultural production that memorializes Southeast Asian refugee survivors. I begin this section by interrogating the naming of the U.S. War in Southeast Asia, the enactment of the

Refugee Act of 1980\(^2\) and the retelling of genocide in Icy Smith’s children’s book, *Half Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of Cambodian Genocide*,\(^3\) as narrative practices for Southeast Asian refugees. I then examine the institution of domestic violence shelters in its creation and perpetuation of the domestic violence survivor narrative. I argue that the state produces these narrative practices to regulate and legitimize itself as a benevolent and kindhearted liberator. As institutions produce narrative practices to legitimize the state’s own narrative, it is necessary to analyze these narrative practices together. That is, the institutionalized narratives of the U.S. War in Southeast Asia, the refugee, domestic violence shelters, and domestic violence survivors are all interconnected and serve to regulate and legitimize a specific narrative of the U.S. nation-state as a savior and safe haven where successfulness is defined through removal of immediate violence, homelessness and statelessness. Therefore, the Southeast Asian refugee survivor experiences multiple forms of state violence from their conception through their resettlement in the U.S., which requires a thorough analysis of their history of state violence to understand the Southeast Asian refugee experience.

In chapter two, I explore the ways that *Refugee Nation*\(^4\), a theatrical performance written and performed by Leilani Chan and Ova Saopeng, presents alternative forms of remembering and forgetting diverting from previously accepted forms of remembering and the institutionalized memorialization of the U.S. War in Southeast Asia. *Refugee Nation* diverts from the popular linear narrative of remembering through retelling and reliving. First, I focus on the story of “Chansamay & the Elder” as a performance of conflicting and circumventing methods of

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\(^4\) *Refugee Nation*. By Leilani Chan & Ova Saopeng. Dir. Alex Torres. LA PEña CULTURAL CENTER, Berkeley. 25 April 2008. Performance. I use the taped performance, provided to me by the creators, as reference in this project.
remembering. Chansamay embodies the narrative of remembering focused on forced retelling to legitimize the memory of the U.S.’s involvement in Laos. The Elder, disrupts this narrative, instead to create a narrative of remembering through culture, forgetting and silence. Chansamay, on the other hand, challenges the Elder’s perception of Laotian identity narrative through her rejection of cultural traditions and participation in cultural groups. Saopeng and Chan provide differentiating Laotian American/refugee narratives through their character development gathered from multiple oral histories. Saopeng and Chan blend oral histories together to create a performance of dueling memories and forgets. Saopeng and Chan question how we remember and forget the U.S. War in Southeast Asia, cultural identity, trauma, and the past and force us to consider how remembering is also a form of retraumatizing. Next, I focus on two pieces in *Refugee Nation*, “Fighter” and “Mom,” in their remembrance and reproduction of violences during wartime life, postwar life in Laos, and life after resettlement in the U.S. I argue that violence suffered by Laotian Americans/refugees from their partners is connected to the violence and trauma experienced from state violence, including war violence, U.S. imperialism, forced relocation, imprisonment, labor exploitation, and the tutelage state. In my analysis of the characters, Father, Son, and Mom, I examine the violence they experience in their respective lives in relation to the previous forms of state violence experienced as a Laotian American/refugee. As the Southeast Asian refugee requires an analysis on the connections of different forms of violence, previously produced narrative practices are insufficient in their reading and memorialization of the Southeast Asian refugee. I argue that *Refugee Nation* presents alternative forms of remembering and reproducing trauma when dominant narratives call for the (re)telling of trauma that renders survivors who forget, either by choice or not, invisible. In examining the production of violence as memory in *Refugee Nation*, I seek to
expand our understanding, and therefore responses, to domestic violence. Especially pertinent is
the subject of the refugee, who has endured multiple incidents of forced relocation leading to
dislocation from their home. The refugee forces a reimagining of domestic violence, as the
refugee has experienced multiple forms of forced relocation and in their history.

**Story Telling**

The next section of this introduction addresses the different genres that I analyze in my
thesis. I analyze the Southeast Asian refugee survivor experience through narrative practices
found in various forms of cultural productions. In chapter one, I analyze *Half Spoon of Rice*, a
literary retelling of the Cambodian genocide and Cambodian refugee narrative, and a survivor
story from a domestic violence program website. In chapter two, I focus my analysis on the
theatrical performance of *Refugee Nation*. *Half Spoon of Rice* and *Refugee Nation* are based on
the true stories gathered by the author and creators, respectively. Survivor stories are collected by
domestic violence programs and are either written specifically about one survivor or are written
about multiple survivors to maintain confidentiality. While they are different genres, they all
claim to tell the story of Southeast Asian refugee survivors as they are based on interviews of
Southeast Asian refugee survivors and thus enable narrative and memory. This becomes
problematic, however, when further interrogating what stories and interviews are collected and
for what purpose. My thesis challenges these productions of narrative practice and the enabling
and avowing of narrative through retelling.

**Fu-Gee-La**

I focus my analysis on the subject of the refugee because of their creation through U.S.
imperialism, trauma and violence. The UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of
Refugees adopted the definition of refugee as any person who exhibits:
“Well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owning to such fear is unwilling to return to it.”

The refugee has lost their home and statehood. They are a displaced group that no longer has the support or aid of a sovereign nation. As they lack any governmental protectors, they become more susceptible to control by others and dependent on the assistance of a third party government or state to provide them assistance. While the refugee waits for space to open in a receiving country, they are dependent on the UN refugee camps. After acceptance to a receiving country, they become dependent on that country’s government and assistance. This leads to an unequal power dynamic between the refugee and receiving country.

This project focuses specifically on Southeast Asian refugees and U.S. imperialism’s part in their creation and memorialization. The U.S. became involved in Vietnam through its anticommunist cold war mentality and Laos was a necessary part of that involvement. The U.S.’s stake in stopping the spread of communism was so strong that it was excusable to ignore the 1954 Geneva Accords and 1962 Geneva Agreements that neutralized Laos and prohibited the presence of foreign military personnel in the country. During the U.S. War in Southeast Asia, the U.S. dropped over two million tons of ordnance in Laos, the scene of “the largest CIA paramilitary campaign of the cold war, dwarfing later operations in Afghanistan, Angola, and

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7 Khamvongsa and Russell, 2009
Nicaragua.”

The CIA recruited Laotians and Hmong to fight against the communist Pathet Lao, only to withdraw from the war when defeat looked inevitable. After the U.S.’s disappearance in Laos, the Laotian and Hmong people left in Laos were left to deal with the aftermath where eventually ten percent of the population would leave as refugees in hopes of resettlement in a receiving country, such as, the U.S. 

Before entering into the U.S., the refugee must be able to fit into the U.S.’s narrative to ensure a positive outcome of experiences and services. One of the many obstacles that the refugee had to get through in their journey to America was correctly passing the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) interview during refugee camp life. Understanding the need to pass the screening, refugees were able to negotiate the truths and stories that the INS needed to hear to label them as fit for the U.S. life and narrative. Refugees who successfully cleared the INS screening were moved to transit camps where they would begin preparing for life in the U.S. by going to “language and cultural orientation classes aimed at transforming them into citizen subjects ready for resettlement in their destination country.”

While refugee narratives often end upon their entrance into their resettlement country, their traumas and violences do not end there. In the U.S., they are faced with further state violence, such as the carceral state, labor violence, domestic violence, and epistemological violence. The Southeast Asian refugee experience cannot be analyzed independently of its history in state violence, starting from French colonization to U.S. imperialism and further state violence. However, dominant refugee narratives do not allow for the exploration and connections

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9 Conboy, 1995
of different forms of violence as the state ultimately loses its interest and investment in the refugee when the image of the refugee grows problematic for the U.S.

The refugee is a figure to forget and remember for the U.S. The refugee is simultaneously a reminder of U.S. imperialism and failure in Southeast Asia and symbol of freedom. As the refugee grew to be a greater reminder of the U.S.’s failures in Southeast Asia and the economic recession, the U.S. tried to forget the refugee and its past. The process of forgetting the refugee came through welfare reform and the model-minority myth. Through welfare reform polices that cut public assistance to noncitizens, including refugees, the U.S. removed itself from being accountable for the refugee’s success and livelihood in the U.S. In her tracing and interrogation of the impact of welfare reform on Asian immigrant women and families, Lynn Fujiwara examines shifting policies “as a form of betrayal”12 and traumatization for Southeast Asian refugees in her book, *Mothers Without Citizenship*.13 The model-minority myth served to highlight the success of the Asian/American community in the 1980’s in connection with welfare reform. The model-minority myth has been critiqued by many scholars for its part in homogenizing the Asian/American community and use “to discipline other minority groups seeking social and economic justice through majoritarian means.”14 The model-minority myth and welfare reform seek to render the Southeast Asian refugee invisible, and by extension, U.S. imperialism.

Chapter One:  
The Mask: Hidden Narratives

This chapter examines the ways that memory has been used as a form of legitimization of peoples, events and trauma. This section seeks to question the ways that memory is constructed by institutions to produce narrative practices that aims to regulate perceptions of different forms of state violence. I argue that institutionalized models of remembering serve to protect the state’s memory as liberator, savior, and safe haven. Refugees and domestic violence survivors are only allowed to remember and to be remembered in relation to the state’s memory. Refugees and domestic violence survivors whose memories do not conscribe to the state’s narrative are disposable to the state. I begin by interrogating the naming, and thus remembering, of the U.S. War in Southeast Asia, as a way to remove the U.S. from its involvement and responsibility as an imperialist country. Next, I analyze the subject of the Cambodian genocide survivor and refugee through Icy Smith’s Half Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide and the Refugee Act of 1980 as a form of memory and haunting that the U.S. must deal with. Lastly, I consider the way that domestic violence and its survivors are remembered in the antiviolence against women movement and the domestic violence shelter system. An examination of the ways in which the U.S. chooses to memorialize the War in Southeast Asia and domestic violence survivors, exposes the forgetting of the trauma inflicted on the survivors and does not provide space for them to remember.

Name the Abuser:

There is a large push in the antiviolence against women movement to “name your experience.” The Courage to Heal Workbook is used by many counselors when working with survivors of child sexual abuse. One exercise titled “Name the Abuser” seeks to empower
survivors and aims to help them heal by holding abusers accountable for their abuse.\textsuperscript{15} It is a push to comfort survivors that the abuse was not their fault, but the actions of someone else. This movement serves to address what Carol Adams calls the “absent referent.”

In her book, \textit{The Sexual Politics of Meat}, Adams introduced the concept of the “absent referent” as that which is allowed to disappear within a system. Adams uses the example of the word “meat” in the creation of the animal as the absent referent and thus allowing meat-eaters to disassociate meat from animal.\textsuperscript{16} Yet, even though the animal is removed from the naming, the animal is still present in the meat - “the absent referent is both there and not there.”\textsuperscript{17}

While the anti-violence against women movement has moved away from using the term “battered women” to “survivor” as a way to empower women, it still allows for abusers to remain as the absent referent. As naming the survivor renders the abuser(s) invisible, and thus removed from the equation, the importance of naming the abuser(s) becomes ever more evident. However, this push to name the abuser solely in terms of a survivor’s partner, continues to reproduce the amnesia around the institutional and structural conditions that produce violence within intimate relationship. Furthermore, “the issues of colonial, race, class, and gender oppression cannot be separated”\textsuperscript{18} which requires an analysis and understanding of complex histories and violence in refugees to adequately address their trauma and needs. In terms of the Southeast Asian refugee survivor, the absent referent is then not limited to their partner, but also imperialism, colonialism, militarism, communism, racism, sexism, classism, and the U.S. nation-state.

\textsuperscript{17} Adams, 2010, 67.
While Americans were gathering across the U.S. to protest the Vietnam War, U.S. imperialism was spreading across Southeast Asia. It has been well documented that the memory of the Vietnam War focuses primarily on the American lives lost and affected by the war much more so than the Southeast Asian peoples or land. Yet within the memory of the American bodies during the war lies the forgotten U.S. involvement. As Khatharya Um writes, “the common reference to the war itself as the ‘Vietnam War’ locates it politically and geographically in a specific region and country. The war was promoted as being in, about and for Vietnam.”

The absent reverent then in the “Vietnam War” exists as the U.S., Cambodia and Laos, all countries that were involved during the war, but are not named.

The U.S. dropped more than two million tons of ordnance over Laos during a nine-year bombing campaign between 1964 and 1973. The effects of this caused more than 30 percent of Laotians to be displaced from their homes. Likewise, the mass bombing of Cambodia would displace two million Cambodians. Yet Laos and Cambodia have both been rendered invisible in the memory of the U.S.’s War in Southeast Asia. As new scholarship emerges on the U.S.’s involvement in Laos and Cambodia, the “secret war(s)” and “shadow war(s)” begin to make their presence known. However, these wars were no secret to the people of Laos and Cambodia who are still living with the various aftermaths of war. Simply locating the war within Laos and Cambodia, as well as Vietnam, in the discourse of U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia is not enough to move away from the American-centric memory model. Andrea Smith argues that the anti-violence movement needs to move beyond inclusion of women of color in the anti-violence movement to centering them in the analysis. Smith argues that because the domestic violence model was developed for white, middle class women in mind, it cannot properly address the

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20 Khamvongsa and Russell, 2009
21 Um, 2005
needs of women of color whose histories include gender violence as a “tool for racism and gender violence.”

Similarly, the U.S. War in Southeast Asia cannot stop at with the inclusion of Laos and Cambodia, but rather centering the analysis on the Southeast Asian refugee. The rhetoric of the “secret war” aims to educate and hold the U.S. accountable, while inadvertently invalidating the memory of the Laotian and Cambodian peoples and thus reproduces a power structure that holds the U.S.’s memory more valuable and legitimate than that of the Laotian and Cambodian peoples.

The Laotian and Cambodian memory gets forgotten even in victory. Kenneth Conboy describes the history of the CIA’s involvement in Laos in his book, Shadow War. Conboy seeks to unearth the secrets of the war in Laos to bring light not so much Laos, but the CIA’s efforts in preventing a communist take-over in Laos and Laos as a “domino” of Southeast Asia. Conboy concludes, “In the end, the war in Laos had no winners.” Conboy writes that the Pathet Lao ultimately lost control and peace in Laos after the U.S.’s withdraw. For Conboy, the purpose of the war was to ensure peace in Southeast Asia. The Pathet Lao then could not have been the winner of the War, as they did not spread peace in Laos. Conboy, however, does not address the deaths of Laotians in the U.S.’s quest for peace, nor does he address the 78 million unexploded cluster bombs the U.S. left in Laos that continue to threaten Laotian lives today. While Conboy is able to make Laos visible within the shadows of Vietnam, he continues to render the Pathet Lao’s memory invisible.

The U.S. War in Southeast Asia has many names, and many memories. Surviving the war does not end the trauma and chaos experienced by Laotians/refugees. Laotians/refugees continue

23 Conboy, 1995, 422.
24 Khamvongsa and Russell, 2009
to experience trauma in the years following U.S. withdraw from Laos. The War lasts in the unexploded land mines scattered across Laos, in Seminary Camps, in the bodies that did not make it to Thailand, in U.S. prisons, in domestic violence shelters, and in the refugee. Laotian/refugees narratives do not end upon escape and arrival in the U.S., nor does it start there. Laotian Americans/refugees arrive in the U.S. as a result of U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia. The U.S.’s relationship with the Laotian/refugee is a complex one that changes throughout time. The Laotian/refugee narrative is contingent on the U.S.’s involvement in Southeast Asia, before, during and after war. The memory of the U.S. War in Southeast Asia cannot exist without including the U.S., and not solely in terms of American protest and lives lost, but rather the impact that imperialism has on the lives and afterlives of Laotian Americans/refugees. Thus, as Laura Davis writes, “naming the abuser(s) is a powerful act.”

Cultural Production of Memory

In the years following the U.S. War in Southeast Asia, Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese peoples find themselves struggling with each other, and sometimes with themselves, to remember and forget. There are many results from the U.S. War in Southeast Asian, which left lasting effects of Southeast Asian lives. Long after the war is over, and new generations are born, communities are deciding what memories and narratives are necessary to carry-on. More and more, the importance of remembering the traumas of war as a way to hold the attackers and abusers responsible gets unearthed. However, there still exists a lack of interest in the greater implications of the trauma of war and what occurs after resettlement because the trauma of war is only important to the narrative of the U.S. as liberator, while contradictory to the narrative of the U.S. as land of self-reliance.

Icy Smith’s *Half Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide* is an illustrated children’s book about the Khmer Rouge regime. The book tells the story of a nine-year-old Cambodian boy as the Khmer Rouge force him to march into the countryside, where he labors in a rice field for years, before the Vietnamese army defeat the Khmer Rouge. Nat’s story ends with him and his friend, Malis, surviving the labor camps, starvation, landmines and the escape to Thailand where he is happily reunited with his parents.

*Half Spoon of Rice* is based on personal stories of Cambodian refugees that Smith gathered through interviews. It is geared towards educating and remembering the Cambodian genocide in a specific way and with a specific purpose. As Youk Chhang, Director of The Documentation Center of Cambodia, writes about the book:

“Although educating and talking to young children about the Khmer Rouge regime will always remain a difficult talk, this book and its endearing story will help many parents introduce the subject to their children. The heartwarming story and vivid illustrations do their best to balance the horrors of genocide with its rare moments of humanity and kindness. This book is important for both its accessibility to children and its role in facilitating dialogue between the survivor generation and their children and grandchildren.”

While the story is remembered through the eyes of a child, it still conforms to the dominant memory of the Cambodian genocide. The Cambodian genocide is remembered in the Khmer Rouge’s violence and trauma inflicted on the Cambodian people without any historical context.

*Half Spoon of Rice* begins at the Cambodian New Year festival, Nat narrates:

“In the city of Phnom Penh, my family is still celebrating and preparing special dishes. I finish taking a bath and get ready to put on some nice clothes. I hear a loud noise outside, and people yelling. So I walk to the balcony and am surprised to see army trucks with white flags flying rumble by.”

26 Smith, 2010, 5.
Before the Khmer Rouge raids Nat’s life, Smith presents a life of celebration and excitement – “special dishes” are still being eaten and Nat is preparing to continue celebrating in his “nice clothes.” However, his celebration ends as the Khmer Rouge soldiers come in to force him and his family to march into the countryside. The reader does not get the full story of Nat’s life before the soldiers come in. The trauma and violence experienced during the U.S. War in Southeast Asia, the U.S. bombings of Cambodia, the U.S.’s withdrawal from Southeast Asia, the influence and effects of U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia and how the Cambodian genocide is a response to U.S. imperialism are all removed from the way Cambodian genocide is allowed to be remembered.

Furthermore, in the quest to remember Cambodian genocide and the violence enacted by the Khmer Rouge, the lingering affects of trauma from those memories are not valuable to the state supported dominant refugee narrative. *Half Spoon of Rice* ends “after many days of walking and climbing, [when Nat and Malis] finally reach the Thailand border” and entered a refugee camp. Nat and Malis are able to reach the boarder with relative ease, as the only difficulty they faced was to walk and climb for days. The violence that refugees face during escape from their home country, such as danger of getting caught by Thai border patrol or pirates and Vietnamese or Khmer Rouge soldiers, avoiding landmines, and gaining entrance into a refugee camp are also irrelevant to *Half Spoon of Rice*’s intent to memorialize the Cambodian genocide and the Khmer Rogue’s violence. The book ultimately ends with Nat finding his parents at the refugee camp and the family, along with Malis, are “accepted by the United States” Nat’s part as a refugee who experiences persecution from his country becomes legitimized through his acceptance into a refugee camp and then acceptance into the U.S. and the U.S.’s memory of its

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28 Smith, 2010, 35.
30 Smith, 2010, 36.
part in Southeast Asian history. *Half Spoon of Rice* depicts the immediate pre-flight life of a Cambodian refugee, but does not bridge the discourse and traumas of resettlement in the refugee’s narrative. Unfortunately, refugee narratives do not wrap-up so easily. While *Half Spoon of Rice* addresses the Khmer Rouge regime, it fails to go into the repercussions of those traumas and experiences and what occurs to the refugee after they arrive in the U.S. Within this narrative, the U.S.’s acceptance of refugees ends the trauma that they have experienced by their respective homeland and promotes the memory and role of the U.S. as savior.

**Legislative Memory**

In the following section, I analyze the creation of legislation, specifically, the Refugee Act of 1980, as a narrative practice that legally defines what constitutes a refugee. This definition and construction produces a normative narrative that a refugee must follow to gain entry and legitimization in the U.S.

When the U.S. withdrew its involvement from Southeast Asia, ultimately trying to leave the war behind, it left scars that would not be so easy to cover. The memory of the U.S.’s war in Southeast Asia exists in the leftover unexploded ordnances, dead, injured, and living Southeast Asians, and Southeast Asian Americans/refugees. After the U.S. departed Southeast Asia, “the newly empowered military communist regimes engaged in organized campaigns to root out pro-American army personnel and civilians.”  

Forced out of their countries from poverty, starvation, and fear of imprisonment and death, Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotians and Cambodians further risked their lives to make it to the Thailand boarder in an attempt to make it to a refugee camp where they hoped to be able to get sponsored and relocate to Australia, Western European countries, or the U.S.  

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As the number of Southeast Asian refugees arriving in the U.S. increased in the years following the U.S.’s withdrawal, the U.S. had to face itself when it saw the refugee. Rather than taking responsibility in its part in the refugee’s narrative, though, the U.S. instead sought to utilize the refugee within the U.S.’s narrative to benefit itself. As the U.S. had reasoned that its involvement in Southeast Asia was to stop the spread of communism and for the good of the people in Southeast Asia, the U.S. was now able to utilize the refugee as further support of its grand benevolence. The U.S. would open its doors and set a separate immigration policy for refugees through the Refugee Act of 1980 as a response to growing numbers of refugees entering the country.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy wrote that the Act came through “the United States’ longstanding commitment to human rights and its traditional humanitarian concern for the plight of refugees around the world.”33 The goals of the Act were to set effective procedures for dealing with refugees, including increasing the number of refugee admissions from 17,400 to 50,000 a year and setting up federal programs to assist refugees in the resettlement process.34 In response to critiques about the U.S. providing assistance to foreigners Kennedy writes:

“Of course, it is impossible to put a dollar value on saving the life of a refugee. The humanitarian concern for refugees goes beyond economic statistics or cost-benefit ratios. Those figures are impressive for most refugee groups. But, far more important, refugees and all migrants bring other benefits to the United States – richness in culture and diversity, new economic vitality, and other themes as old as the country’s history. America’s immigrant heritage, more than any other factor, was responsible for successful Congressional action on the refugee bill.”35

The Refugee Act of 1980 was sold as a part of the U.S.’s history in providing assistance to those in need and growing the U.S.’s culture and diversity. According to Kennedy, the U.S.’s aide to

refugees was inevitable because of the U.S.’s kindness. In its enactment, the Refugee Act of 1980 memorializes the U.S.’s role as welcoming safe haven for refugee communities.

However, the focus on assisting refugees through a humanitarian effort, as opposed to an economic one, leads to easily removing the state from financially assisting refugees. This framework, allows for the U.S. to remove itself from assisting refugees after allowing them into the country and removing access to short-term public assistance programs for refugees. In her book on Cambodian refugees experiences, Aihwa Ong writes “as refugees settle down to become long-term residents, they lost their glow as freedom fighters.” 36 Refugee sympathy could be adapted when refugees were in Southeast Asia, but as their visibility started increasing in the U.S. so did the resentment. The refugee, as a memory of the U.S.’s benevolence, suddenly becomes less important when conflicted with the U.S.’s economy. The Refugee Act of 1980 incorporates refugees into the supposed safe haven of the U.S. from being prosecuted in their home countries, while simultaneously producing further violence onto refugees.

**No Woman, No Cry**

In this next section, I interrogate the institutionalized model of the domestic violence shelter system, which focuses on gender violence as an interpersonal, privatized act located within the home and its production of the survivor narrative.

Domestic violence was at one time considered a random act of violence, but with further second wave feminist research is now being treated as systematic violence against women. This analysis shift of domestic violence led to the growth of the antiviolence against women movement and the creation of domestic violence shelter programs. 37 In this movement, we see the push to universalize domestic violence as a crime that can happen to anyone, occurring

36 Ong, 2003, 81.
across all groups regardless of race, class, sexuality, and gender. Domestic violence activist promote it as an issue that affects people one way or another, either directly or indirectly. The antiviolence against women movement take these stances on domestic violence to raise awareness about domestic violence as more than an individual problem, but a greater problem stemming from patriarchy with the purpose of ending gender violence.

Many women of color have critiqued the movement’s limitation based on white heternormativity. In her call for an intersectional approach of race, gender and violence against women, Kimberle Crenshaw critiques the movement’s emphasis on patriarchy as the cause of gender violence.\(^{38}\) The responses to these critiques have come in the form of including women of color in the domestic violence shelter system and acknowledging that domestic violence happens to men, as well. That is, domestic violence shelter programs embrace a multiculturalist approach and start to provide culturally comprehensive services for women of color, such as providing language services and ethnic food.\(^{39}\) Similarly, some shelters are growing to accept women in same-sex relationships into shelters. However, male survivors still find themselves unable to receive as extensive services as female survivors, whether they are in same-sex relationships or heterosexual relationships. That is, there are extremely few shelters across the U.S. who will accept men into their programs. This multiculturalist approach is based on the universality framework seen in the antiviolence against women movement. As the shelter system responds to critiques of exclusivity through selective inclusion, it still fails to assist a large number of survivors in need.

The domestic violence shelter system’s main purpose is to provide immediate safety for female survivors of domestic violence. The majority of funding for domestic violence programs


\(^{39}\) Smith, 2005.
comes through state funding for the specific cause of responding to interpersonal violence and immediate crisis. Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo writes:

“Discourses of violence are situated and produced amid specific political and historical interests and contexts. So it is compelling to note that the state has ushered in what have become dominant narratives on violence against women that do not consider the intersection of state and interpersonal violence.”

An expansion of domestic violence programs to consider the interconnectedness of different forms of violence would require the programs to interrogate violence enacted by the same state that funds them. Instead, domestic violence programs are tied to state funding that structures and reproduces dominant narrative of domestic violence.

As previously stated, domestic violence survivors must remember a specific narrative to gain entrance into a shelter. Once in the shelter, the survivor is expected to continue the narrative into a “success story,” where she gains income independent of her abuser, obtains a restraining order, and “successfully” exits the shelter to independent living. Domestic violence shelters are required to report outcomes, such as number of survivors served and how many survivors increased their income, for funding requirements. Many of the reports will also require survivor stories that highlight milestones or achievements made by survivors while in shelter. Survivor stories also find their way into shelter newsletters, aimed to solicit funding through private donors. The collection and distribution of survivor stories seek to “align with the state’s interpretation of what constitutes as domestic violence, the erasure of past abuse as perpetuated by the state, and the promotion of linear progress” to secure and increase funding support.

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“A Survivor’s Rebirth” tells the story of Joyce, a Cambodian domestic violence survivor. This survivor story can be found on the Center for the Pacific Asian Family’s, a Los Angeles-based domestic violence and sexual assault program, website along with other survivor stories. Joyce’s story begins by locating her story in Cambodia during the time of the Khmer Rouge regime. During the regime:

“She learned that a human’s life was worth less than a cow’s, and that any fluctuating emotional and physical experiences were signs of weakness. The Khmer Rouge taught her that ‘strong’ and ‘good’ people were those who lived meagerly and endured hardship willingly.”

Joyce’s history of violence starts with the Khmer Rouge’s violence through education camps and teachings. The story makes the point that this “other” state was responsible for negatively teaching Joyce and creating a foundation for her future experiences of violence. It shows the Khmer Rouge as a tutelage state forcing “reeducation” on Joyce, while later ignoring the shelter viewing Joyce as a tutelage subject requiring “reeducation” on how to live independently and how to care for her children.

Joyce’s story continues as she marries a Cambodian man at age 17 because the U.S. granted him refugee status and so her marriage to him allows her to escape the violence of the Khmer Rouge to the supposed safety of her husband and the U.S. However, after arriving in the U.S., her husband’s family forces her to work and physically abuses her. The narrative once again focuses on the immediate violence of her husband’s family forcing her into labor exploitation and physical abuse, but does not interrogate the various traumas that Joyce experiences during resettlement that are connected to these abuses, such as the trauma of forced relocation, economic chaos, and conditions of immigration. Instead, the narrative focuses on the

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44 “A Survivor’s Rebirth.”
tangible experiences of abuse that she experienced by the Khmer Rouge, her husbands, and governmental programs like the Department of Child and Family Services (when they remove her children) and the Department of Public and Social Services (when they cut her benefits). As Chun Mei Lam writes in “The Haunting of Power:”

> “Its purpose is to produce sympathy for Joyce – the victim, abhorrence of the perpetrator of violence, recognition of the shelter as a needed intervention, and acceptance of the state as a protector of the weak. Ultimately, the emphasis on physical violence allows Joyce’s fulfillment of the victim image – one who is powerless and defenseless against bodily harm and requires the refuge of the shelter and the benevolence of the state.”

Joyce’s survivor story, along with other stories produced by domestic violence shelters aim to highlight the importance of domestic violence shelter systems and the work that they do for survivors. Joyce’s story ends as she graduates from the emergency shelter, opens her own checking account (showing that she is no longer the victim of economic exploitation), moves on to a transitional shelter to gather further independent living skills, and finally “independently raising her four children [in] their own house.”

Joyce’s survivor story exemplifies an ideal domestic violence narrative. Joyce has experienced multiple forms of abuse before finally going to a domestic violence shelter that is able to provide her skills and education to live independently and self-sufficiently. Domestic violence programs produce survivor stories, like Joyce’s, ultimately for their own purposes of funding and legitimization. Survivor stories are narrative practices that define what constitutes an ideal survivor – one who has experienced domestic violence, is provided assistance through a shelter, and exits the shelter successfully and learns to live independently.

While survivor stories may include a brief update on the survivor’s life after shelter, like Joyce’s, because she is living a particularly “successful” narrative, services and reporting usually

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45 Lam, 2012. 54.
end upon the survivor’s exit from shelter. That is, a survivor’s story may be collected and reported as “successful” to funders, but there is always the possibility of her returning to her abuser days, months or years after exiting. This survivor narrative, along with the narratives of survivors who never enter shelter or who exit shelters “unsuccessfully,” cannot exist in the state and domestic violence shelter system role as liberator(s).

However, this second wave feminist approach and dependency on domestic violence shelter programs cannot appropriately address the domestic violence experienced by refugee women and other women of color. The antiviolence against women movement needs to expand its focus on gender violence and dependency on domestic violence shelters as a solution to antiviolence. Domestic violence and memory easily become reproduced and if not addressed correctly can only lead to furthering forms of violence. This in no way excuses abusers, but rather is a call to address domestic violence as a macro-social problem rather than an isolated, random act of violence between one individual and another individual. In addressing domestic violence as a macro-social problem, we also need to change the way that domestic violence shelters operate and remember and legitimize survivors. Domestic violence shelters cannot focus on the singular task of providing immediate safety in the aftermath of an explosive incident of violence, but need to expand to address the connecting histories and experiences of different forms of violence as a way to end violence as opposed to responding to incidents of gender violence.

46 An “unsuccessful” client could be one exited for breaking rules, returning to abuser, or leaving shelter before completing program. “Unsuccessful” clients are often seen as those who are difficult to work with and create extra stress for the shelter staff, which continues the labeling and identifying of what constitutes an ideal successful client.
Chapter Two
The Beast: Trauma of State Violence

While the previous chapter interrogates the creation and uses of memory, this chapter examines how *Refugee Nation* and the Southeast Asian refugee circumvent the historical memory of the U.S., trauma and violence. This chapter is an examination of how remembering and forgetting in *Refugee Nation* acts as a counternarrative to the U.S.-legitimized memory of the U.S. War in Southeast Asia. Focusing on Laotian Americans/refugees and *Refugee Nation*, I argue that the trauma experienced through violence and war is always present, whether it is remembered or not, and that the act of forgetting is itself a memory. Remembering is more than retelling; it “is a unique experience for every survivor.” That is, the act of remembering looks different for different people. I begin with an analysis of “Chansamay & the Elder” that performs different methods of remembering in contrast with each other. The next section addresses the memory of violence and trauma through reproduction in terms of domestic violence. I provide an analysis on “Fighters” and “Mom” that highlights the dialectic between state violence in different forms, such as the Laotian socialist state, U.S. imperialism, labor violence, domestic violence, carceral violence, and the tutelage state. From these two pieces we see that violence is not a random act or just about gender violence, but is affected by historical circumstances and previously experienced state violence.

Dueling Memories

The stage is empty, the lights are out, and the crowd quiets. As the lights rise on the stage, two figures appear. And so begins the 90-minute production of *Refugee Nation*. *Refugee Nation* is a performance written and performed by Lelani Chan and Ova Saopen. The performance consists of six short pieces that examine the complexities experienced by Laotian

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47 Davis, 2008, 71.
Americans/refugees affected by the U.S. War in Laos. *Refugee Nation* is about a younger generation of Laotian Americans/refugees struggling to understand their history and the silence of an older generation still healing from the traumas of war. Chan and Saopeng wrote the pieces from interviews that they conducted with Laotian Americans/refugees across the U.S. Using what is said and not said in the interviews, Chan and Saopeng find new ways for Laotian Americans/refugees to remember the U.S. War in Laos. Though one of the goals of *Refugee Nation* is to make Laos and Laotian Americans/refugees visible, the broader is to ensure that the memories of those present during the war are not ignored and forgotten as it has been in the U.S.’s memory of the War. Chan and Saopeng provide “a way in which [Laotian American/refugees] can recover [their] histories which intersect, rather than coincide, with American nationalist history.”\(^48\) *Refugee Nation* started with a vision and ends with a memory.

Previous analysis on the U.S. War in Southeast Asia has centered on the affects of war on American lives or on the U.S.’s anti-communist intentions. In these war memories, the refugee is allowed to exist solely in relation to the U.S.’s place as savior and safe haven from their communist controlled governments. Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong writes:

“The highly complex and contingent history of their people must be forgotten in a historical amnesia, in order so that the success story could be retold. More importantly, the agency of their people as subjects of their own history must be denied. What is retained is the mere symbolic markings of their racialized identities as representatives of particular groups differentiated from the core cultural citizenry of the American nation, so that they could validate the latter’s values as universal.”\(^49\)

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\(^49\) Thu-Huong, 2005, 167.
In the creation of *Refugee Nation*, Chan and Saopeng place Laotian Americans/refugees at the center of analysis and “ultimately be accountable not to those in power, but to the powerless.”

*Refugee Nation* does not remember Laotian Americans/refugees separately from the U.S.’s memory of the War, but within and because of it.

Dominant refugee narratives are broken down to times of pre-war life, flight, and resettlement. The refugee experience in all three phases are difficult and they face multiple traumas throughout the experience. In addition to new traumas that the refugee experiences during different phases of the narrative, they continue to hold the traumas experienced from previous phases. Trauma does not end at survivorship, but lasts and affects the future lives of survivors. The trauma and violence that refugees witness and experience during escape from Southeast Asia have a lasting affect on their lives. Sudden uprooting and migration of a population leads to lingering psychological and social stress that many times are ignored by the refugees themselves as well as health care providers. The stress that comes from trauma can lead to a continuation of stress and mental health issues. When experiences are so difficult the first time around, it is understandable why people would not want to retell and relive the memories afterwards.

*Refugee Nation* seeks to collect memories and continue their reproduction so that the memory of the refugee experience does not get lost. As *Refugee Nation* is based on multiple interviews, it presents multiple narratives of what is remembered. Locating visibility and memory in interviews privileges those who can remember and who choose to retell their story, though. Similar to the domestic violence survivors who cannot speak when they call hotline, the

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50 Smith, 2005, 153.
war survivor who cannot escape or who cannot enter a refugee camp does not get their story told. Furthermore, to enter the U.S. as a refugee requires war survivors to remember and retell their trauma and identify their need for safety in the same way as a domestic violence survivor enters a shelter. For refugees and domestic violence survivors, we see the constant emphasis on remembering, retelling, and essentially reliving previous trauma. For a refugee to get to the place where their story can be collected as part of an oral history project, they would have had to retell their experiences multiple times before. The affects of constant retelling can lead to further traumatization, and to find solace in a place where it is easier to forget. Yet the fact that many people choose not to remember is not lost on Chan and Saopeng. They see that memory of trauma exists in different forms for different survivors. Chan and Saopeng are able to incorporate the forgotten in *Refugee Nation* in the piece “Chansamay & Elder.”

The story of “Chansamay & Elder” contains multiple layers of conflict and memories. Chan, as Chansamay, acts as the uneasy 1.5 generation youth, who comes off as disrespectful to Saopeng’s Elder character because she seemingly does not adhere to traditional Lao culture. Throughout the performance, Chansamay exhibits multiple cultural faux pas, which causes the Elder to question her ethnic background and incites the occasional scolding. On the surface, it appears to be a play on typical intergenerational conflict within an Asian immigrant community. This intergenerational conflict leads to comic relief in what is ultimately a struggle of competing forms of remembering, however. Chan and Saopeng’s characters remember and forget different aspects of their past and culture. What Chansamay want to remember, the Elder wants to forget, and vice versa.

The piece begins with the Elder preparing to sit down for a meal by himself. He sets down his food, before moving over to an imaginary shrine to pray to his ancestors. In its
incorporation of this simple act, *Refugee Nation* shows what is important for the Elder to remember. That is, the Elder’s memory lies in his desire to remember his ancestors, as well as remembering his culture and history by continuing this cultural practice in the U.S. The Elder exhibits his past in his everyday life. His clothes are reminiscent of a Laotian-style, he prays to his ancestors before eating, and he eats on the floor from a *pha khao*.\(^{53}\) His memory of Laos and his history present itself in these tangible customs.

As the Elder is in the middle of his silent prayer, Chansamay arrives with a loud knock at his door to begin the clash of interests. The audience is aware of how important the prayer custom is for the Elder, in spite of or because of his silence for the beginning of the piece. Even after Chansamay’s knocking breaks the silence, he continues his prayer and does not get up to acknowledge her. Instead, Chansamay lets herself in after receiving no greeting at the door. Chansamay then proceeds to sit next to the *pha khao* waiting for the Elder to finish his prayer. When he turns to her, she asks him if he is the father of a friend of hers. Chansamay’s tone is loud and bubbly and she is more animated with her hand gestures. Chansamay’s entrance is in complete opposite of the slow, but deliberate movements and serene silence the audience witnessed in the Elder. The Elder interrupts Chansamay’s questioning of his fatherhood to greet her: “*Sabai dee, luk euh*” he says slowly as he *nops*.\(^{54}\) Chansamay responds by quickly slapping her hands together to return the *nop* and states, “*sabai dee*” in an Americanized accent. The Elder then asks Chansamay in Lao if she is Laotian, to which she responds in English that she is.

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\(^{53}\) A small raised platform woven from rattan. Eating around a *pha khao* is much less common in the Laotian American/refugee community today and is usually saved for use at temples or during traditional marriage or religious ceremonies.

\(^{54}\) *Nop* is a traditional Lao greeting practice of placing your hands together and bowing and lowering your head at the same time to show respect. It is done at the same time as saying *sabai dee*, which is a Lao greeting to say “hello” or “how are you.” *Sabai dee, luk euh* means “hello, my child.” The inflection and slowness that the Elder demonstrates takes it to mean that he needs Chansamay to slow down and greet him first.
The Elder proceeds to ask why Chansamay does not speak Lao if she is Laotian and they have the following exchange:

**ELDER:** What happened? You didn’t learn? Did you forget? You forget?

**CHANSAMAY:** Oh… no… I mean… well, yeah, kinda. I mean, I guess. You know, born in Laos, raised in the U.S. You know, tried to speak it. My sister, she’s older than me, she speaks it better than me. I just, I get the tone all wrong. She said I might insult you if I get the tone wrong. It’s just better, you know safer. I don’t speak Lao. It’s not a good thing.

The Elder asks Chansamay if she forgot how to speak Lao, not if she ever learned how to speak it. For the Elder, language is not something that is contingent on place or experiences, but is his history and past and that of the Laotian American/refugee. Saopeng performs the Elder as rich in culture and a specific memory. The Elder remembers through “traditional” customs and language. However, in his use of tradition to deal with and make sense of his context in the present day, that is, as a refugee and a migrant, he changes the function of the “traditional.” The performance interrogates and undermines the sense that “traditions” never change in this sense. While the Elder is himself changing the functions of “traditional” customs, he continues to question Chansamay’s identity and lack of tradition.

The Elder’s memory becomes visible in his perception of Laotian identity and what it means to be a Laotian American/refugee. The piece continues the theme of diverging traditions as the Elder insists that Chansamay sits down to eat with him, as is Lao tradition when someone visits.

**ELDER:** Laotian, you need to eat. I have to give you Lao food. Here, have some seen hang. It’s delicious!

**CHANSAMAY:** Thank you, thank you. But I don’t eat meat. It’s ok, you eat. I don’t eat meat.

**ELDER:** Laotian who doesn’t eat meat?

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55 Italicized are spoken in Lao
56 *Seen Hang* is Lao beef jerky
CHANSAMAY: I am Lao, yes. I’m still Lao, I just don’t eat meat.

Here we see Chansamay still claiming her Lao identity in spite of the Elder’s contention that Lao identity is remembered in a certain way. The Elder’s memory of Laos and Laotian identity exists through language, food, and customs. The Elder is the remembered traditional Laotian in contrast to Chansamay’s “forgotten” Laotian identity. However, Chansamay chooses to remember Laos and her Laotian identity in other ways. As a 1.5 generation Laotian American/refugee, Chansamay is affected by the U.S. imperialism like the Elder, but in a different way. Chansamay’s “forgetting” of Laotian customs is her own way of healing and coping to the affects of U.S. imperialism on her life.

Chansamay comes to the Elder with the purpose of collecting his story as part of an oral history project hoping to ultimately bring the Laotian community together. She wants to promote the remembrance of the U.S. bombing of Laos. Chansamay explains that she wants to hear the Elder’s story because “we know that you know what happened in Laos and the younger generation… we want to put together the Lao history and it’s not in the history books.” However, the Elder is not as receptive to her request as she had hoped he would have been. He responds, “What you talk about bomb? I don’t know what you talk about, OK. I have no story to tell.” and asks her to leave. He dissociates, as is a common effect of trauma. He decides that he does not want to discuss any further about bombs or a past that involves reliving trauma and is more comfortable reliving the past through his tangible customs. As Chansamay explains her goals for coming to the Elder, we see that she is looking for her own form of Laotian memory and identity in a history of complex trauma and violence. Chansamay is seeking to find that memory through the act of retelling and reliving, as has been common in the creation of collective memory.

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*Refugee Nation* shows contrasting forms of remembering in its performance. During “Chanamay and the Elder” we see Chansamay and the Elder getting into disagreements about what it means to be a Laotian American/refugee and what it means to remember and forget. The piece begins with comedic conflict in regards to Laotian identity, but escalates as Chansamay encourages the Elder to tell his story. After Chansamay prods the Elder further, he walks up to the audience and enters into a soliloquy:

> “Why does she want to know about the past? The past is the past. I don’t want to remember, why you want to make me remember? It is horrible, I am refugee, I see many pains. It is horrible. Children dying. I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to remember.”

Simultaneously, while the Elder is in his soliloquy, Chansamay enters her own where she questions why the Elder refuses to share. She says that it is also her past and that it is not fair for him to refuse her past. As the scene comes to an end, both turn to each other and shout simultaneously:

*Chansamay:* I JUST WANT TO KNOW MY PAST.
*Elder:* I JUST WANT TO FORGET MY PAST.

The Elder’s refusal to relive his past is itself a memory. The trauma that he has experienced is so significant that all he can say is that he does not have a voice and wants to forget. For the Elder, his experiences have lost meaning and he wishes to never address it again. If the Elder cannot face his past, he cannot mourn the dead and thus cannot gain empowerment through it.58 The elder says that he cannot remember, but in the piece we hear him verbalize some of his traumatic experiences from living in Laos. He begins to talk about being taken to Seminar Camp and seeing people dying. The memory of war is not completely ingrained in his mind at the time, but after Chansamay’s constant provoking, flashes of memory start to come

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back to him. Yet he still maintains that he does not remember. This lack of remembrance is not a new phenomenon. Having lived through multiple forms of trauma, it is not surprising that he represses the memory of trauma. In fact, the repression is itself a memory that allows causes us to question why it is one does not remember an experience.\footnote{Thu-Huong, 2005} It is not clear if the Elder indeed forgot his trauma and was triggered to remember it, or if he remembered, but chose not to tell it. Regardless, we his silence, forced or not, is not forgetting, but remembering in his own way.

Chansamay and the Elder present different forms of remembering and healing. We see that the Elder chooses to heal by forgetting and not reliving what was painful to him. Chansamay, on the other hand, sees healing through sharing and remembering she says:

“\text{You might not be ready to share your story, and I really want to be responsible, because like, this is scary. But it’s part of the healing process because you know, we talk to mental healthcare workers and, you know, PTSD is very scary. Sharing the story is part of the process. So you know, I really don’t feel comfortable leaving yet because I want to make sure you’re OK. I’m going to give a couple of the counselors a call form the clinic and see if they can help us out here.”}

Chansamay adheres to dominant institutionalized practice of remembering and healing found in mental health systems. Chansamay insists that she cannot leave the Elder in such an agitated state because she fears for him and that she will call counselors to help the situation. Chansamay’s adoption of institutionalized forms of remembering does not allow her to see how the Elder uses forgetting as a coping mechanism or how he remembers differently.

Chansamay and the Elder’s conflict do not come from their different needs, but their different methods of meeting their needs. Chansamay is hoping to collect stories to raise awareness about the unexploded bombs still left over in Laos to “end the war,” as she says, and to share stories to be free of them to heal the storyteller, as well as those who are hearing them.
While Chan performs Chansamay as good-intentioned, we see that the war does not end with the removal of the ordnances in Laos, because it lasts in the minds and lives of Laotians and Laotian Americans/refugees. Chansamay and the Elder remember and forget in their own ways and circumvent the misrecognition inherent to the epistemological practice wielded by the other. That is, the Elder’s refusal to remember and verbalize trauma, and instead remember through Laotian traditional practices of culture and customs is his way of circumventing the institutionalized narratives of mental health and remembering that Chansamay uses. Similarly, Chansamay’s insistence of her Lao identity despite the fact that she doesn’t eat meat or speak Lao is her way of circumventing the ways in which the Elder’s use of language and tradition can also be misrecognized as a static, ahistorical practice that does not mediate histories of U.S. imperialism. Chan and Saopeng’s performance of “Chansamay & the Elder” challenges the institutional and epistemological practices employed by dominant narratives of remembering war and trauma and being Laotian.

In writing and performing this piece in *Refugee Nation*, Chan and Saopeng give space to those who cannot remember or choose not to. Chansamay can be seen as the idealistic character looking to change the world and create space for Laotian Americans/refugees similar to Chan and Saopeng’s intentions in collecting their stories for *Refugee Nation*. Chan and Saopeng are Chansamay. The ones who insist that memory exist in retelling. In this way, *Refugee Nation* is similar to other forms of narrative that exist from the retelling of memory and history. However, *Refugee Nation* moves beyond simply including Laotian Americans/refugees in the U.S. history. What sets *Refugee Nation* a part is Chan and Saopeng’s performance of “Chansamay & the Elder.” Chan and Saopeng see the importance in forgetting as a form of coping and remembering. While it would have been easy for Chan and Saopeng to not include those who
would not talk in *Refugee Nation*, they make the decision to highlight them instead and centralize those most marginalized within an already marginalized group.

**Reproduced Memories**

In her book, *Conquest*, Andrea Smith argues that “sexual violence is a tool by which certain peoples become marked as inherently ‘rapable.’ These peoples then are violated, not only through direct or sexual assault, but through a wide variety of state polices.”\(^{60}\) Smith questions the work within the antiviolence against women movement to focus primarily on patriarchy and power and control in response to gender violence. Using the example of the indigenous woman, Smith examines and connects different forms of violence that have been enacted on the indigenous woman. Smith calls for “the strategies employed to address violence against women of color [to] take into account their particular histories and the complex dynamics of violence.”\(^{61}\) Taking this critique and rearticulating of gender violence into account along with Victor Bascara’s call to “unburden the emergence of U.S. imperialism”\(^{62}\) in *Model Minority Imperialism*, this section locates domestic violence within and through U.S. imperialism and state violence. In this next section, I analyze the ways in which violence gets reproduced in “Fighter” and “Mom” in their depiction of violence and memory.

*Refugee Nation* is performed in conjuncture with Legacies of War, an organization dedicated:

“To raising awareness about the history of the Vietnam War-era bombing in Laos and advocate for the clearance of unexploded bombs, to provide space for healing the wounds of war, and to create great hope for a future peace.”\(^{63}\)

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60 Smith, 2005, 3.
61 Smith, 2005, 151.
63 Legacies of War Mission Statement accessed through their website.
While Legacies of War does necessary work towards the removal of unexploded ordinances, there are still exists trauma that is unable to be removed. The bombs and scars that were left by the U.S. in Southeast Asia during the wars cannot be forgotten. Even if the unexploded bombs and landmines were removed from the country, the memories or lack of memory of those affected by them will still be intact. Unfortunately, these memories tend to reproduce themselves in other violent ways.

Furthermore, the already marginalized refugee community receives even less attention in the field as it pertains to domestic violence. The experience of refugees is necessary to study because of the various histories of violence that play a part in their lives. These histories of violence affect the ways that domestic violence works in their lives differently from the ways that the dominant white middle class feminist discourse of domestic violence has been historically utilized.

Although there has been a recent movement to increase awareness about the violences that occurred in Southeast Asia during the U.S. War in Southeast Asia, there is still exists a lack of study on violence within the Southeast Asian refugee community. When there is a study on domestic violence in the Southeast Asian refugee community, most of the literature focuses on the response of white female social workers to the needs of these communities. While intervention is an important aspect of domestic violence to study, it is a reactive response rather than a proactive response to the problem. This is why it is necessary to study the different causes and surrounding histories, which lead to domestic violence.

The violence that occurs during war is one that sticks with the refugees during times of flight, uncertainty during refugee camp stays, and after resettlement in the U.S. Even within one refugee family’s immigration to the United States, violence that the family faces can affect

\[^{64}\text{Ong, 2003.}\]
different family members differently. Refugee family dynamics change “as a result of resettlement and adaptation to a new life… they and their families often experience stress related to relocation and a change in social status.” As refugees come from a history of international violence, it is easy to see that domestic violence cases in the community are not and should not be perceived solely as domestic violence. Instead, it is necessary to recognize the residual trauma and violence experienced and remembered by the Laotian American/refugee, which affect their lives during and after resettlement.

**Laos Angeles**

“Fighters” starts off with a video montage of Laotians soldiers in Laos with guns and tanks, the music on the background starts with a *khene* playing and flows into a Laotian raping in English. It is a video representation of how Laotian Americans/refugees arrived in the U.S. and what meets them there. The audience follows as black and white grainy footage is shown of Laotian soldiers hiding in the jungle and bombs drop on villages, then to clear color video of the Los Angeles skyline, people jumping fences, and what appears to be skid row in downtown Los Angeles. The rapping over the *khene* shows the melting of cultures, Laotian Americans/refugees finding their place in the U.S. – the affect of U.S. imperialism on a younger Laotian American/refugee generation. The montage shows the connection between life in Laos and life in Los Angeles after resettlement – from the Laos’s jungle to Los Angeles’s urban jungle.

As the video fades away, the lights turn onto Chan and Saopeng on opposite sides of the stage. Chan is a Laotian American/refugee teenager in an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detention center and Saopeng is a Laotian being held in a Seminar Camp. The two in their respective places of imprisonment, tell their story of how they got to where they are.

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66 Traditional Lao instrument
Saopeng’s character relives the memory of America’s departure from Laos and being taken to the camp by the Pathet Lao:

“Watch out, they will take you, they will take you. They take me, take me away from my family. My wife, my children. I don’t know where I am. Child, wife, where are you? When I see bird flying in the sky, I jealous they have wing.”

Chan, as Son, describes his imprisonment:

“I done the time and the crime, I suppose to get released. But then immigration comes and straight up picks me up, brings me here—motherfucking Arizona? Deportation camp? Ah shit, that fucking crazy.”

The language that Chan and Saopeng choose in these two characters description of imprisonment clearly shows the difference in their lives. While they are both imprisoned, and going through similar experiences, they express and view it differently. Father shows a longing for his family and freedom, whereas Son, while angry, accepts his fate. Even in his imprisonment, Father speaks in a soft, poetic tone. He expresses connection to birds that can freely fly away, while he is confined in a cell. On the other hand, Son speaks in a certain, straightforward manner. Chan, as Son, speaks louder and rougher than Saopeng’s Father character. The juxtaposition of these two characters highlights the affects that U.S. imperialism and resettlement plays in the character’s lives. Life changes for Father after the traumas experienced through the U.S War in Southeast Asia, imprisonment and forced relocation – things are no longer sabai.

*Refugee Nation* begins with the piece, “Ajan Ajan,” opening by greeting each other and speaking to the audience about what *sabai* means. Saopeng says, “*Sabai* means to be relaxed, to be at ease, to be comfortable.” Chan and Saopeng’s Ajan characters continue by discussing how older Laotians will say *sabai* slowly and softly. Chan and Saopeng’s characters say that it is spoken so slowly because “they are very sabai, very at ease, very comfortable, very relaxed.”
Father, even while imprisoned in a Seminar Camp, tries to maintain the sabai feeling. However, Father loses his sabai feelings when discussing the affects of U.S. imperialism. He says:

“They lie. They lie to us. They lie to the people of Laos. When they take over, when the communist take over, they tell us we must go to seminar, seminar. Learn about the new government, the new future. They lie again – seminar is not school. Seminar is labor camp. Prison camp for people like me in the Royal Lao army. I fight with American. Future? There is no future.”

Father’s life in Laos is anything but sabai, as he recounts his previous experiences of violence from being in the Royal Lao army, fighting for the U.S. and being sent to prison camp by the Pathet Lao.

As Father performs his imprisonment, Son continues to describe how he too was imprisoned and briefly explains what his mother told him about how they came to America.

Chan, as Son, describes their escape from Laos:

“People is getting shot, or killed, or drown. By the time we reach the Thailand shoreline, half the folks is missing. Was at the Thai refugee camp for a long time. Took a while to get the documents, you know, to get U.S. sponsorship. Only way we got out was to say that we would, uh, resort to being Christian? Yeah, hell yeah, we’ll be Christian.”

Chan and Saopeng’s writing shows that they, like refugees waiting for resettlement, understand what is necessary to be accepted to a resettlement country. Refugees need to provide a specific story and agree to change their views, in this case religion, to gain resettlement.

Father and Son both describe their history of trauma embedded in them as refugees, while presently experiencing their own forms of state violence as prisoners. “Fighters” portrays two connecting stories in Father and Son’s imprisonment. While Chan and Saopeng perform their characters in their respective presents, the audience can see how Father’s present is Son’s past.
and Son’s present is Father’s future. “Fighters” shows how state violence is not experienced in a linear manner, but is constantly present.

“Mom” is performed by Chan on the stage by herself. She sits peeling apples to make an apple pie for her son as she talks to nobody in particular about her life and family. Once again, we see the memories of war appear in multiple ways during this performance piece. The piece starts with Chan, playing Mom, on the floor sleeping, when sirens begin to blare. She jumps up, frightened, she yells to herself and asks in Lao, “who is it?!” The sirens fade and it takes Mom a bit to compose herself again, but she gets up and tells herself, “it’s O.K.”

“Mom” is performed right after footage of U.S. bombs dropping on Laos. Chan and Saopeng’s inclusion of video footage between pieces acts as a reminder of the U.S. War in Southeast Asia and itself an assertion that the memory of the War is constant in the performance, and in Laotian Americans/refugees. While the audience sees video to remind them of the ever-present affects of U.S. imperialism, the sirens that mom hears bring her back to Laos. For her, loud noises are associated with U.S. bombs dropping on her homeland. After the fright, Mom sits and describes going to see Son in Arizona. She says:

“Cannot touch him, cannot hold him. My son, he tell me not come back because only crying. But cannot help. The soldier, the fence. Oh, make me think of Laos, when the Communist they take my husband to the seminar. I never see him, I think maybe he died that time.”

The character of Mom, now, describes her remembrance of the war and the affect that the war has on Father and Son. Mom can describe the connection of war and state violence in the U.S. that Father and Son experience through her comparison of Father and Son’s respective imprisonments. As previously stated, dominant refugee narratives end during resettlement, as removal of homelessness and statelessness defines successfulness. However, “Fighters” and
“Mom” both show that refugees experience further state violence after resettlement. Mom continues to describe the violence that her family experiences after resettlement:

“But my husband, he so angry. You know, we go to the factory. I young that time, and all the Mexican, I the only one who look like me come to the factory, cannot help. They see me, they say mamacita, mamacita. Cannot help I pretty. Oh, but my husband, he want to fight with the Mexican and he start to drinking, gamble. He come home, he start to fight with me, hit me, hit my son. Ugh. Ugh. (Silence) One time the neighbor, they call the police. The police come, take him, school him, send him back, more worse he hit us. Ugh. So terrible. No good the police. (Silence) My babies, they get bigger. They say, maah, get divorce. Uh? I don’t know what is divorce. They say, maah, you can leave your husband.”

This monologue that Chan performs, as Mom, shows the complexities and multiple layers of violence that Laotian American/refugees can experience upon resettlement. Using the previously discussed dominant white feminist narrative of domestic violence within an interpersonal framework, it would be argued that Father’s abuse stems from his jealousy and drinking and that the police intervention to assist Mom by taking Father away was the right thing to do. However, Mom’s narrative is more complex and requires further analysis into the various forms of violence she recounts in her monologue.

A further analysis of state violence in Mom’s monologue highlights Mom and the family’s experience in labor exploitation, carceral violence, and the tutelage state. As Mom and Father arrive in the U.S. with refugee status, they are seen as “cheap labor for America’s postindustrial economy.”67 Mom and Father’s work in the factory illustrates the labor segmentation that Laotian refugees experience upon arrival in the U.S. As Aihwa Ong writes:

“The perception that new immigrants are good enough only for poorly paid labor-intensive, and often unpleasant jobs also helps to shape them as laboring subjects who, despite their best efforts, are highly vulnerable to the shifting tides of dead-end jobs.”68

67 Ong, 2003, 229.
Mom and Father are shunted into sectors of labor primarily occupied by Mexican immigrants, where they are racially exceptional and where Mom is thus marked as different and “pretty” in an exoticized way. Thus, the domestic violence is affected by the U.S.’s labor market’s labeling of Mom and Father, and refugees, as cheap labor.

As Chan’s character of Mom continues describing the domestic violence, she says that when the police intervened, it only made things worse for her, because Father abused her more after being released. The police, and state, which are supposed to protect its citizens, end up causing more violence. The carceral violence that Father experienced in Laos and the U.S. ultimately lead to further violence in the U.S. Mom’s monologue details domestic violence more complexly than simply through patriarchy and power and control. That is, the domestic violence is not just patriarchal possessiveness on the part of Father, but informed by the labor exploitation and segmentation experienced when working in the factory and through police brutality and surveillance. Mom’s experience highlights the importance of analysis of the dialectic between state violence in different forms.

Within Mom’s monologue, we also see that her children adopt the domestic violence survivor narrative to leave Father. They tell her that she can get a divorce and leave him and the trauma will be over. As argued earlier, a successful domestic violence survivor is one who leaves the relationship and is able to live independently. Mom states that she does eventually leave Father, but we also see that her trauma does not end after leaving father. Son is arrested, while Mom has to deal with the constant affect of state violence. Mom shows that the legal and state remedies to violence, such as divorce and incarceration, do not work, as she still experiences trauma and further violence from the state. As Mom’s domestic violence is connected to and created through multiple forms of state violence, the response to it requires an analysis of state violence.
violence and not simply of removing her from the situation, as is the common response within domestic violence shelters.

Furthermore, *Refugee Nation* refuses to narrate refugee life in the teleological narrative of war and violence-flight-resettlement and resolution by explicitly connecting violence experienced in Laos with violence experienced in the U.S. When Chan’s Mom character describes going to see her son in Arizona, she compares it to when the communist took her husband away. Similarly, in Mom’s recounting of the domestic violence, she explains how Father is once again taken by the police state. As Father explained, in “Fighters,” he was taken to seminar camp or a “reeducation” camp. As he says, “Seminar is not school. It is labor camp.” In the U.S., the police take Father where they “school him.” The refugee is imagined by their home governments and U.S. state powers as tutelary subjects – that is, naïve people to be taught.69 Saopeng, as Father, says in “Fighters,” “they keep us working, they don’t want us to think.” The communist in Laos and state powers in the U.S. decide what is learned and for what purpose. After the war, Father needs to be “reeducated,” the family is educated on American ways of life and Christianity in the refugee camp, and Father is “schooled” on domestic violence by the police. This constant reeducation and schooling highlights the impact that state powers have on the refugee and the perception that they are flexible subjects to be molded to fit the state’s narrative practices.

“Mom” and “Fighters” connect the violence from the family’s past to that of their present and future. In “Fighters,” Chan’s character of Son, describes how Father abused him. Son says:

“I thought to myself, being with my drunk-ass pops. Forcing me to learn muay thai, you know the hard way.”

69 Thu-Huong, 2005.
As Chan’s character is speaking, the audience sees Saopeng’s character’s arms being raised above his head as if he they were tied together. When Chan’s character speaks the above passage, Saopeng’s character lowers his arms and makes a threatening motion, while Chan’s character covers his head in defense. Father and Son proceed to fight their separate, yet connecting battles. Father replays his fighting in the war and Son is shown fighting against another gang in Los Angeles. They stand on stage together fighting, in different countries and years apart, but eternally connected.

The violence and trauma that the characters of Father, Mom, and Son experience do not end after he leaves the refugee camp. Although Father longs for his wife and children while in the camp, we learn later that his experience there is too difficult to wash away when they get on the raft to cross the Mekong River to Thailand. After camp, he reunites with his family and instead of worrying about what could happen again, they sought another life, perhaps one free of the violence of war. However, as we see, the violence of war is never completely erased because the memory stays with him and his family for years to come.

“Mom” and “Fighters” show the connectedness of history, trauma, state violence and how they affect the present and future. Chan and Saopeng’s performance of *Refugee Nation* shows the importance of furthering the analysis of interpersonal acts of violence to include institutional and structural violence. Furthermore, *Refugee Nation* provides a counternarrative to theological narratives of refugee life and domestic violence that end through removal of immediate violence and crisis.

**I’m Lao, and I’m Proud**

Refugee Nation does not simply address Laotian problems, but does extend to a greater refugee community. Chan and Saopeng started off as performers and eventually became a space
to promote cultural memory. Cultural memory is memory “that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning.”70 Refugee Nation is not simply a performance; it is a form of remembrance. It is where those who give their oral histories can remember by telling their story and a place where those in the audience can watch and remember experiences they did not know or perhaps chose to forget. It is also a place where identity can be strengthened. Memory connects us to each other, which then connects us to a shared identity. Shared memory leads to shared identity.

In “Ranter,” Saopeng plays a man who is being given awards for being ethnicities that are everything but Lao. He then segues into a rant about being Laotian and how he does not appreciate being thought of as some other group. He does not like that most people can name all of Laos’ surrounding countries, but not the country itself. The piece ends with him shouting, “I’m Lao, and I’m proud.” As he repeatedly shouts, he then encourages the audience to shout along, too. We hear people shouting with him, and then he tells the audience that even if they’re not Lao, they should shout along. After two rounds where everyone in the room is shouts, “I’m Lao, and I’m proud,” the lights fade, Saopeng stands on the stage with his arms raised silently. A movie starts to play behind him. It shows vast amounts of bright green Lao hills while the audience starts to clap as they believe the piece is over. Then suddenly U.S. bombs drop on the audience silences. Saopeng, with his arms still raised, looks back at the screen and pauses for a second. As he watches the bombs dropping on the Lao countryside, he proceeds to drop his arms. It appears as if the air has been sucked from the room.

*Refugee Nation* use of video between acts provides more than time for the performers to prepare for the next act. Chan and Saopeng deliberately choose footage that draws the audience

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in and reminds the audience of what it means to be Lao. It means to come from a land torn a part by bombs, a land still filled with unexploded ordinances, and a land rich in the affects of U.S. imperialism. As everyone shouts about being Lao and proud, *Refugee Nation* reminds them that being Lao and proud also means being aware of the mass U.S. bombing of their country and that that history and trauma cannot be erased. It also shows the contrast of what it means to be Laotian and *sabai* and asks the question: how can you be *sabai* while embedded in a history of complex trauma and violence? *Refugee Nation* is a collection of stories and oral histories that tell the story not of one person, but of a community of refugees. *Refugee Nation* provides space for a group who had to leave their nation behind. But while left behind, the memories of and from that time still remain.
Conclusion

I stop before entering the gate into the emergency shelter. I take a deep breath, a moment to myself. What stories will I hear today? What memories will I hold? What memories will I never know? Will I continue the cycle of legitimizing memories while closing the door for other survivors? This project grew from the domestic violence movement’s call to “break the silence.” As part of that movement, I found myself questioning its limitations and divisiveness. Who gets to “break the silence” and under what conditions? How can we capture the story of silence? That is, I sought to question how to “break the silence” without forgetting it.

Furthermore, this project is a reimagining of domestic violence through the lens of the Southeast Asian refugee. The Southeast Asian refugee complicates the historically accepted domestic violence survivor narrative as the refugee is a figure of international and imperial violence who cannot be analyzed independent of its creation through U.S. imperialism. U.S. imperialism has marked the Southeast Asian refugee as violable and requiring protection. Using the phrase “domestic violence” absolves the state of any responsibility in creating a system that allows and encourages violence against women.
WORKS CITED


