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by

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**Making Laos in DFW: Laotian Community Building, Mutual Aid, and
Identity Formations**

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my mother, my Laotian family, friends, and community in DFW
I grew up with, and to the 600,000 Laotians displaced by the United States.

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Abstract

Making Laos in DFW: Laotian Community Building, Mutual Aid, and Identity Formations

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Abstract: This thesis examines the history of Laotian migration to Dallas-Fort Worth, how Laotian people established themselves here, and how they negotiated their sense of belonging in the U.S. Drawing from interviews, ethnography, and autoethnography, I argue that mutual aid systems, emerging nonprofits and cultural centers, and reinterpretations of gender in the Laotian community are significant sites that reveal how Laotian refugee experience of displacement and resettlement are not simply experiences of hardship, but also that of creative community building, networks of care, and knowledge production and theorizing. I explore the various ways Laotian refugees have maintained or asserted their ethnic identities and culture and argue that these processes cannot be separated from United States' decimation of Laos nearly half a decade prior and refugee policy. Through this project, I aim to fill a critical gap in Asian American Studies and highlight the important stories, experiences, and histories of Laotian refugees and honor a community that continues to fight against the legacies of U.S. war-making.

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Making Laos in DFW: Laotian Community Building, Mutual Aid, and Identity Formations

INTRODUCTION

There is this infamous television scene that is often circulated online in the Laotian American community due to both its comedy and its relatability. The scene comes from the hit animated series *King of The Hill* (aired 1997 – 2010) that follows the life of propane salesman Hank Hill, his substitute teacher wife Peggy Hill, their aspiring class clown son Bobby, and ditzy niece Luanne in the fictional Texas town of Arland. One of the major side characters is their Laotian next-door neighbors, Kahn and Minh Souphanousinphone, and their daughter Connie. In the episode *Westie Side Story* (S1E07) where they first introduce their new neighbors, Hank, his close friend group and fellow neighbors, and Kahn are sitting and drinking together, getting to know each other. And the scene goes:

Hank: So, are you Chinese or Japanese?

Kahn: I lived in California for the last twenty years, but first come from Laos.

Hank: Huh?

Kahn: Laos. We're Laotian.

Bill: An ocean? What ocean?

Kahn: [with frustration] We are Laotian. From Laos, stupid! It's a landlocked country in Southeast Asia. It's between Vietnam and Thailand, okay? Population 4.7 million.

[Hank and friends stare blankly]

Hank: So, are you Chinese or Japanese?

Laotians Americans are quite familiar with this scene and experience. Despite a growing population of over 200,000 and displacement at the hands of United States militarism and Cold War in Southeast Asia, Laotian Americans continue to experience hyperinvisibility in dominant culture and discourses.¹

Growing up in the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metropolitan area, I found that my community was always around me. Every *Pi Mai*, or Lao New Years, my family and I would drive to Saginaw to celebrate, a small suburban city in the North-West DFW area where there are entire neighborhoods with just Laotian families. Today, DFW has the third highest Laotian population in the United States.² This thesis examines the history of Laotian migration to Dallas, how Laotian people established themselves here, and how they negotiated their sense of belonging in the US. I argue that mutual aid systems, emerging nonprofits and cultural centers, and reinterpretations of gender in the Laotian community are significant sites that reveal how Laotian refugee experience of displacement and resettlement are not simply experiences of hardship, but also that of creative community building, networks of care, and knowledge production and theorizing.

I also explore the various ways Laotians have maintained or asserted their ethnic identities and culture. Cultural establishment and preservation in DFW cannot be separated from the decimation of Laos brought forth by the US Cold War in Laos, also commonly referred to as the “Secret War in Laos,” due to the covert nature of the bombing campaigns; such bombings were no secret to Laotians. As Laotian life, landscape, and culture was uprooted and destroyed, seeking refuge in the United States and reestablishing traditions

¹Colleen Chung, “Using a Southeast Asian Critical Theory (SEACrit) to Examine and Resist Crimmigration,” (Term Paper, City University of New York, 2020), 1, https://www.academia.edu/39888816/Using_a_Southeast_Asian_Critical_Theory_SEACrit_to_Examine_and_Resist_Crimmigration.

² “Top 10 U.S. metropolitan areas by Laotian population, 2015,” Pew Research Center, accessed October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/chart/top-10-u-s-metropolitan-areas-by-laotian-population/>.

and values have larger implications. I am guided by the following questions: In what ways have Laotians in DFW asserted their cultural identities? What are the goals of community cultural centers and organizations? How do they relate to Laotian displacement and migration? How are they distinct or similar to other Asian American groups' approaches in community building?

Lastly, I also interrogate how gender informs the experiences of Laotian refugees in Dallas-Fort Worth. Pulling from scholar Janet Benson's concept of "reinterpreting" gender, I argue that Laotian refugees, especially women, must reinterpret and negotiate understandings of gender when resettling and adjusting to life in the United States. Laotian gender norms operate similarly to those in the U.S. However, Laotian women employment opportunities expanded, revealing how U.S. capitalism and neoliberalism shaped the gendered experiences of Laotians.

This project seeks to fill a gap in Asian American Studies in terms of scholarship on Laotian Americans. Although a relatively small population, the experiences of Laotian Americans and refugees provides critical insight to the impact of the United States' Cold War in Southeast Asia and their refugee and immigration policy. Moreover, these experiences also reveal the strategic and creative ways displaced peoples have built communities and attempt to construct collective identities. At the heart of this project, one that is deeply personal to me, is an attempt record and share these important stories, experiences, and histories and honor a community that continues to fight against the legacies of U.S. war-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been a little over half a century since Asian American Studies was established in 1969 and we now have a rich collection of scholarship and literature about Asian

America. From interrogations of the model minority stereotype, media representations, to historiographies of immigration periods and the impacts of war, Asian American studies has established itself as a significant discipline in understanding and examining the unique and diverse experiences of Asian Americans. Despite this fruitful collection, there is still a lack of scholarship, especially recent scholarship, that specifically explores the experiences of Laotian refugees. It is understandable that a lack of scholarship exists due to Laotian Americans relatively young history in the U.S. compared to other greater established Asian groups such as Chinese or Japanese Americans, as many Laotians arrived to the United States after 1975. However, I think it is about time this changes. As among the first generations of Laotian Americans to attend college and conduct this research, this project is rooted in the desire to build literature on Laotian American experiences. Some of the key literature that frame or inform this project come from other Laotian Americans or Southeast Asians who are currently graduate students, such as Colleen Chung and Davorn Sisavath, who are working on their own theses and dissertations, highlighting the paucity of material available that complexly interrogate or investigate the lived and living experiences of Laotian Americans and other Southeast Asians.

Asian American studies has long reckoned with what citizenship, identity formation, and a sense of belonging means for Asians. Asians have historically been positioned as inassimilable “forever foreigners” and outside the national imaginary.³ Through immigration policy, court cases, media, and in the most extreme cases, deportation, internment, and violence, Asian Americans have been positioned as “definitively not whites,” excluded from full citizenship.⁴ The proliferation of the model

³ Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: the Asian Ethnic Experience Today* New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 19.

⁴ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014; Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015; John Okada. *No-no*

minority during the Cold War further complicated Asian American's racial positioning in the US. The model minority compartmentalized Asians in an "acceptable" social location, asserting Asians' socioeconomic and educational hyper-success due to innate work ethic and cultural values. The model minority strategically emerged as a reaction and attempt to divert outrage and calls for equality in the Civil Rights Movement. The successes of Asian Americans were used to argue that African American's failures were merely personal rather than as a result of systemic exclusion and violence; it is here, as Ellen Wu highlights, how model minority Asian Americans also became "definitively not-black" subjects.⁵

The experiences of Southeast Asian refugees complicate the universalizing model minority myth. Scholarship that interrogate the model minority note that when disaggregating Asian Americans, Laotians, in addition to other Southeast Asian refugees including Hmong, Cambodians, and Vietnamese, experience higher rates of poverty and lower educational attainments as a result of displacement and lack of state support during resettlement that adequately addressed the unique needs of each community. In 1990, 32 percent of Laotians in the United States lived below the poverty line and 20 percent were on public assistance. In 2000, 17 percent of Laotians in the United States lived below the poverty line and 14 percent were on public assistance.⁶

Alternatively, when Laotians and other Southeast Asians are not assumed to be model minorities, they are positioned as cultural deviants alongside low-income Black and

boy: *A Novel*. Japan: C. E. Tuttle Company, 1957; Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart, a Personal History*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946; Yoshiko Uchida, *Desert Exile : the Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984; Erika Lee. *The Making of Asian America: a History* First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015. 317.

⁵ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014, 2.

⁶ Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel. "Trends in Noncitizens' and Citizens' Use of Public Benefits Following Welfare Reform: 1994-97" Last modified March 1999. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/trends-noncitizens-and-citizens-use-public-benefits-following-welfare-reform-1994-97>.

Latinx communities, characterized as “academically inferior, high school dropouts, gang members, welfare sponges, and resistant to assimilation” and excluded from the nation.⁷ Studies have shown that these contradictory scripts for Southeast Asians have led to them to be “policies and practices that render them invisible and not needing of support. As a result, Southeast Asian populations experience an added layer of relative invalidation or feelings of racial and ethnic isolation in the Asian community.”⁸ Being positioned as either model minority or deviant population, the complex experiences of Laotians are flattened and decontextualized.

In analyzing the experiences of Asian Americans, Asian American studies have built upon Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s conceptualization of Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theoretical framework that closely studies how dominant ideologies of race shape and impact the lives of people of color. Samuel Museus extended CRT through the development of Asian Crit Theory (AsianCrit) that focuses on how racism shape the lives of Asian Americans. However, as Colleen Chung argues, AsianCrit does not adequately address the complex experiences of Southeast Asian Americans, such as their double positioning as model minority and deviant minority. Moreover, AsianCrit does not “address the anti-Black ideology running through Southeast Asians’ racialization process that position them as both inferior and alien, across racial groups and within the Asian-American racial group.”⁹

Chung thus offers Southeast Asian Critical Theory (SEACrit) as a framework that more complexly addresses and reflects the experiences of Southeast Asian Americans such

⁷ Varaxy Yi Borromeo, “A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Racialized Experiences of Southeast Asian American Community College Students.” University of Denver, 2018. 64.

⁸ Colleen Chung. “Using a Southeast Asian Critical Theory (SEACrit) to Examine and Resist Crimmigration,” (Term Paper, City University of New York, 2020), 3, https://www.academia.edu/39888816/Using_a_Southeast_Asian_Critical_Theory_SEACrit_to_Examine_and_Resist_Crimmigration.

⁹ Ibid.,2-3.

as their positionings both as model minorities and deviant minorities. Guiding tenets of SEACrit includes understanding the ways U.S. imperialism, militarization, and intervention in Southeast Asia is pertinent in shaping the lives of Southeast Asian refugees, understanding how U.S. immigration and refugee policy influenced resettlement, centering the voices of Southeast Asians in informing theory, and understanding Southeast Asian cultures as having a rich history and legacy of anti-colonial resistance. Informed by histories of Afro-Asian solidarities, SEACrit also advocates for the dismantlement and eradication of racism, sexism, capitalism, and other structures and systems of oppression.¹⁰

SEACrit is one of the recent ways that Asian American studies has begun to move towards better understanding and assessing the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees and communities.

Like SEACrit, the emergence of Southeast Asian critical refugee studies has been a growing subfield aimed to properly assess the particular experiences of Southeast Asian refugees. YẾN Lê Espiritu's article "The "We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose" Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the "Fall of Saigon"(2006)" and her subsequent 2014 book *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* lay ground the foundational work in critical refugee studies. As Espiritu notes, previous scholarship on refugee policy and resettlement "construct the refugees as out-of-place victims and the nation-state as the ultimate provider of human welfare. In these studies, the rooted citizen constitutes both the norm and the ideal, whereas the refugee is described as uprooted, dislocated, and displaced from the national community."¹¹ Espiritu urges for a critical refugee study that conceptualizes "the refugee" as paradigm and social actor whose

¹⁰ Ibid., 3-6.

¹¹ YẾN Lê Espiritu. *Body Counts: the Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* University of California Press, 2014. 10.

lived and living experiences call to and reveal the intimacies of colonization, militarization and war, and global social change.¹²

Searching for literature that assesses the lives of Laotian refugees explicitly in relation to critical refugee studies at the moment remains minimal. Much of the literature on Lao refugees in the United States focus are within the context of health vulnerabilities and trauma of Southeast Asian refugees as a result of the United States' Cold War in Southeast Asia. Multiple psychological studies have reported significant rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other health issues among refugee populations.¹³ Similarly, ethnographic and other social science based studies of Laotians focus closely on the mental and health traumas of the community and the struggles that have emerged from war, displacement, and resettlement. These studies also assess how cultural differences and language shape Laotian experiences in navigating life in the United States. For example, in "Barriers to Health Care among Laotian Americans in Middle Tennessee (2017)," Xai Saenphansiri notes that traditional Laotian herbal medicine and preventative practices in addition to language barriers, unemployment (often as a result of language), and lack of resources to inform Laotian refugees about healthcare in the United States impact their access and motivation to seek out Western practitioners. These circumstances have led to higher mortality rates among Laotian Americans for pre-cancerous conditions and some cancers.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 11.

¹³R. F. Mollica, G. Wyshak, & J. Lavelle (1987). The psychosocial impact of war trauma and torture on Southeast Asian refugees. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 144(12), 1567–1572; Daryl M. Gordon 2011. "Trauma and Second Language Learning Among Laotian Refugees." *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement* 6 (1): 1–15. doi:10.7771/2153-8999.1029; Richard C. Yang and Paul K. Mills. "Proportionate Cancer Incidence in the Laotian Population of California, 1988–2006." *Cancer Causes & Control* 20, no. 6 (2009): 1011-016. Accessed April 23, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40272069>.

¹⁴ Xai Saenphansiri, David K. Wyant, and Linda G. Wofford. "Barriers to Health Care among Laotian Americans in Middle Tennessee." *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved* 28, no. 4 (2017): 1537-1558. doi:10.1353/hpu.2017.0132.

Language support is another significant theme in the literature that exists for Laotian Americans, particularly in second language education. In “Paw's Story: A Laotian Refugee's Lonely Entry into American Literacy (2001),” Jane S. Townsend and Danling Fu provide an ethnographic look into how language barriers and traditional Laotian cultural gender codes shape the educational experiences of young Laotian refugees such as Paw Savang. Despite needing assistance in class, Paw remained quiet due her English being underdeveloped and Laotian cultural expectations on girls to not be bothersome. Moreover, because of her demeanor, her teachers “did not know what to do.” Townsend and Fu use Savang’s experience in school to highlight the lack of second language support for Laotian students in schools. Moreover, English language proficiency provides greater opportunities for refugees to find employment, stability, security, and overall a sense of well-being as a minority in a new society.¹⁵

Literature on the relationships between Laotian refugees and their children, particularly the culture clashes that emerge between the generations, also are available. Bindi Shah’s “Laotian Daughters: Working Toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice” is one that provides a deeply detailed account of Laotian second-generation daughters living in Richmond, California in coming to age through community organizing and resisting negative stereotypes and expectations of race, class, and gender associated with Laotian Americans. This project is one of the most significant and relatively recent scholarship on Laotian Americans as Shah puts care into representing the Laotian girls central to the ethnography.

Finding literature or other ethnographic work that focuses specifically on the Laotian American community in Dallas-Fort Worth remains a challenge. More public-

¹⁵ Gordon, Daryl M. 2011. “Trauma and Second Language Learning Among Laotian Refugees.” *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement* 6 (1): 1–15. doi:10.7771/2153-8999.1029.

facing articles such as “Dallas is a ‘Laotian food destination’” by Rachel Stone and “North Texas Becomes America’s Top Destination for Laotian Food” by Brian Reinhart provide a glimpse into the Laotian population in the area but within the context of cuisine. Ethnographic work on the Laotian population in DFW that deeply explores Laotian community building, identity formation, and how Laotians are situated within larger discourses in Asian American studies is much needed. Through this project, I hope to fill in the gaps in literature on Laotian refugees and share the stories and insights that this community has.

THE UNITED STATES’ COLD WAR IN LAOS AND THE MAKING OF THE LAO REFUGEE

Although this project’s main focus is on exploring and recording the lives of Lao refugees in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan area, it is important to understand and establish why they are in the United States in the first place: Lao migration to the United States is a direct result of the United States’ Cold War in Southeast Asia. Moreover, Lao migration overseas resulted from multiple colonial invasions.

In the late nineteenth century, following the spread of European imperialism throughout Asia, France targeted Southeast Asia, starting with and taking Saigon by 1859. In 1863, France declared Cambodia a French protectorate and in 1893, colonized Laos. Thus, the region became known as French Indochina.

However, World War II destabilized France’s power in the region as by March 1945, Japanese troops occupied the region. Towards the end of the war, France attempted to recolonize the area but Vietnamese nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh resisted such attempts. Ho and other Vietnamese nationalists, also known as Viet Minh, organized around communism as a means to fight for independence. The Viet Minh devastated French

forces through a two-month siege in 1954. As a result, France surrendered its hold in the region through the 1954 Geneva Accords. The Geneva Accords established a divided Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel. Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh government led the North while the United States established a new government in the South led by anticommunist Ngo Dinh Diem. Informed by the logics of Domino Theory, which suggested that if a country fell to communism then surrounding countries would follow in suit, the United States' foreign policy shifted to direct involvement aimed at preventing the spread of communism and establishing regimes rooted in capitalism. Thus, in the 1950s, the United States began covert operations in both Laos and Cambodia, intervening in domestic political affairs and employing various operations in hopes to prevent more dominos from toppling toward communism.¹⁶

In their suppression efforts, the United States overlooked the force of nationalism that was mobilizing many of the Southeast Asian communists. The U.S. had in many ways an unwinnable situation because it did not sufficiently understand the motivations of the people it was trying to influence. Pathet Lao, Laos' communist party, allied itself with the Viet Minh to free both countries from France.¹⁷ After gaining independence in 1954, internal issues quickly emerged as the Pathet Lao and the anticommunist right-wing Royal Lao government fought for national power and rule. Motivated by anticommunism, in 1955 the U.S. sent out military and humanitarian aid programs to Laos, beginning its intervention in order to contain and ultimately dwindle communist rule and influence in Laos as well as the greater region of Southeast Asia.¹⁸

¹⁶ Erika Lee. *The Making of Asian America: a History* First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015. 317.

¹⁷ Ibid., 318.

¹⁸ Martin E. Goldstein, *American Policy Toward Laos* Rutherford N.J: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973.

The first discussion of possible bombing missions in the country was in 1959, a year after the Pathet Lao won the majority of the seats in the 1958 elections.¹⁹ After this victory, the US reconfigured their strategy. The 1962 Geneva Accords established an international agreement on the neutrality, independence, and sovereignty of Laos and required all foreign troops to leave the country. Therefore, the Central Intelligence Agency, a relatively new government agency established in 1947, directed attention to recruiting Hmong soldiers to take on covert actions to support the right-wing government on behalf of the United States.

The Hmong are a minority ethnic group in Laos that reside in the mountainous region and largely involved in farming occupations. Originating from China, the Hmong lived autonomously until the late 1700s and early 1800s when Chinese forces began threatening the ethnic group. Major conflict and uprisings led to the mass exodus of the Hmong to Laos and other areas of Southeast Asia including Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam.²⁰ Due to their knowledge of the Laotian terrain and motivated by their precarious positions as a stateless group and desire to keep their farmland from communist forces, the CIA targeted and recruited the Hmong to fight communist forces. In 1961, the CIA began arming and training special Hmong guerrilla units to attack the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese communists coming through the country. Now connected to the CIA supplied airline Air America, Hmong soldiers carried out espionage, sabotage, propaganda missions, and air strikes.

¹⁹ William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961* Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2012.

²⁰ Minnesota Historical Society, "Hmong Timeline," accessed 22 April 2021, <https://www.mnhs.org/hmong/hmong-timeline>.

Developing a military doctrine of covert-warfare through the use of guerilla units and airfare, the US aimed to keep these operations a secret to avoid another public war. However, as scholar Davorn Sisavath notes:

“In April 1971, when a glimpse of the war was made public during several Senate hearings from 1970 to 1972 on Laos, former Ambassador to Laos William H. Sullivan characterized U.S. activities in Laos as “the other war, which has nothing to do with operations in South Vietnam or Cambodia.”-The “other war” was illogical and illegitimate as opposed to U.S. military operations in South Vietnam and Cambodia that was logical, necessary and just. By naming the war in Laos as the “other war,” Ambassador Sullivan conveys a sanitized narrative of U.S. intervention in Laos: to defend Laos from North Vietnamese aggression. However, this “other war” has resulted in a “scorched earth” policy in Laos.”²¹

By 1964, the first bombing campaigns in Laos began, lasting for nearly a decade. The United States dropped more than 2 million tons of ordnance, making Laos “the most intensely bombarded place on the face of the planet.”²² In instances of bad weather or bringing leftover military waste to neutral bases in Thailand, the US Air Force were instead directed to simply drop them off on Laos.²³ Laos not only served as a pawn for the US’s war against Vietnam and communism, it also served as a wasteland. Considering the people of Laos as “sluggish” and “feeble-minded,” the US military’s decision “to unload their military waste on Laos illustrates not only the devaluing of the lives of the Lao people but also the devaluing of Laos’ land.”²⁴ By 1970, more than 600,000 Lao people had been displaced due to the war, making Laos not only the most bombed country in history, but the country with the most displaced population in the world.²⁵

²¹ Davorn Sisavath, “Wasteland: The Social and Environmental Impact of U.S. Militarism in Laos”. eScholarship, University of California, 2015. 9.

²² Alfred W. McCoy, “America’s Secret War in Laos, 1955–75.” In *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, 283–313. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Company, 2006.

²³ Davorn Sisavath, “Wasteland : The Social and Environmental Impact of U.S. Militarism in Laos”. eScholarship, University of California, 2015. 11.

²⁴ Ibid., 12.

²⁵ Erika Lee. *The Making of Asian America: a History* First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015. 319.

The capture of Saigon by the North Vietnamese military in 1975 marked the “official end” of the Vietnam War. With the removal of troops and funding in Vietnam, Laos, and the greater Southeast Asia region, millions of people were left displaced and uncertain of what their future were to become under the rule of communist government.

An exodus of Laos thus began. In 1975, about 45,000 people fled the country and between 1975 and 1986, about approximately 200,000 “lowland Lao” (the dominant group in Laos) crossed the Mekong River waiting in refugee camps in hopes of resettlement and safety.²⁶ After its long involvement and interference, the U.S. felt obligated to provide sanctuary for the combatants it had involved in Vietnam’s conflict. However, Laotians were not as prioritized as Vietnamese. The passing of the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act allowed for the resettlement of an estimated 130,000 refugees to the United States, with 800 of those being from Laos. The next year, 10,200 more Lao refugees were allowed in. By 1980, nearly 50,000 Lao refugees were in the United States. Those admitted between 1975 and 1980 are considered the first wave of post war refugees, many of those coming from high capital backgrounds. The 1980 Refugee Act expanded the number of refugees admitted into the U.S. each year to 50,000, marking the second wave of refugees from Southeast Asia coming into the U.S., many of which came from less privileged backgrounds compared to those in the first wave.

RESETTLEMENT AND SECONDARY MIGRATION TO DFW

The resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees into the U.S. operated under the heavy guise of “U.S. humanitarianism,” with President Gerald Ford publicly emphasizing

²⁶ Ibid., 329.

the nation's moral obligation to rescue and resettle "helpless" refugees.²⁷ Much of the resettlement of Lao refugees was delegated to various voluntary agencies (also known as "volags"), such as the American Council for Nationalities Services, International Rescue Committee, United States Catholic Conference, and more.²⁸ U.S. officials and voluntary agencies had three main goals that guided their resettlement programs: dispersal, economic sufficiency, and medical attention to those with acute diseases as a result of the war.²⁹

Refugees were dispersed in a scattered manner as a means to avoid the formation of large ethnic enclaves and minimize the impact of large numbers of refugees in one area. In terms of economic sufficiency, US officials and volags hoped to avoid long-term welfare reliance by establishing vocational schools and English learning.³⁰ After a few years, however, many refugees embarked on secondary migrations to be closer to family and friends, with many relocating to California and Texas, the two states with the largest Southeast Asian populations. As Bindi Shah notes, Lao secondary migration aligns with Roger Waldinger's observation of immigration as a "network driven phenomenon" and that "newcomers are attracted to places where family, friends, and community can provide resources to get them started in a new country."³¹ As of 2015, the Dallas-Fort Worth Metropolitan area (DFW), has the third largest Lao population, with an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 Lao people living here.³² Although Laotians are a bit more evenly scattered

²⁷ Ibid., 325.

²⁸ Bindi V. Shah, *Laotian Daughters: Working toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice*. Temple University Press, 2012. 24.

²⁹ Enrique T. Trueba, Elizabeth Kirton, and Lila Jacobs. *Cultural Conflict and Adaptation: The Case of Hmong Children in American Society* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006.

³⁰ Bindi V. Shah, *Laotian Daughters: Working toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice*. Temple University Press, 2012. 24.

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Top 10 U.S. metropolitan areas by Laotian population, 2015," Pew Research Center, accessed October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/chart/top-10-u-s-metropolitan-areas-by-laotian-population/>.

throughout the DFW area today, small ethnic enclaves emerged when Laotians first began settling in the area in the 80s and 90s. Saginaw remains one of the most popular areas for Laotians. As Texas-based journalist Bryan Woolley describes it in his book *Mythic Texas*, a collection of essays examining different life and experiences in Texas, Saginaw is “Laos on the Prairie:”

“Nearly all of them spent months or years in refugee camps in Thailand before they were relocated to Texas. They got jobs, saved money, and bought land. By settling in an unincorporated area, they didn’t have to conform to city building codes or hire contractors and licensed electricians and plumbers. Friends and neighbors pitched in and helped one another build their homes, as earlier Texan settlers did a century and more ago, keeping construction costs low.

When other Laotians—many of them friends or relatives of the first immigrants—followed, they bought more land and built more houses, many of them large because several generations occupy them. Now about three hundred families live in what amounts to a Laotian village on the North Texas prairie.”

Although an interesting decision to akin Laotian refugees with earlier White Texas settlers, Woolley does highlight the ways Laotian refugees were drawn to the area due to its perceived emptiness lack of incorporation with other parts of DFW. Saginaw offered Laotian refugees a space to easier create homes and sense of community with one another outside of U.S. bureaucracy. Three hundred Laotian families lived in Saginaw in the year 2000 at the time of Woolley’s publication. Today nearly five hundred Laotians reside here.³³

The development of Texas highways, international airports, NAFTA, and other international economic agreements since the 1950s, along with the boom in the telecommunications and manufacturing industry, the increasing globalization and urbanization of DFW attracted many residents including Laotian refugees. According to a

³³“Saginaw, Texas Demographics Data,” TownCharts, 2019, <https://www.towncharts.com/Texas/Demographics/Saginaw-city-TX-Demographics-data.html>.

2007 American Community Survey, about 33.6 percent of Laotians working in the US are in manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, wholesale trade, retail trade, or information industries. Outside these sectors, 7.7 percent of Laotians were in construction, 7.2 percent in finance, insurance, real estate, or leasing, and 1.8 percent were involved in agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, or mining.

State-level wise, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) reported with data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the 2011-2015 American Community Survey that 24 percent of Laotians in Texas had less than a high school degree, 54 percent had a high school degree, and that 21 percent had a Bachelor's degree or higher. Per capita income, Laotians in Texas make on average \$21,780 a year faring much lower than the average of \$31,289 for Asian Americans. 13 percent of Laotians in Texas live in poverty and 22 percent are low income. As previously mentioned, language barriers, cultural norms, and lack of greater state level support shape the lives of Laotians in the United States.

The rise of neoliberal reform starting in the 80s and 90s also contribute to the precarious circumstances of Laotians and other Southeast Asian refugees. One of the primary goals in refugee resettlement policy was economic self-sufficiency in order to prevent long term dependence on welfare and financial assistance from the state. With about 80 percent of Laotian refugees coming from rural, agricultural, and manual labor backgrounds, securing stable employment opportunities that allowed them to transfer such skills proved difficult.³⁴ Vocational training and English classes were offered to those who were unable to obtain jobs, but for many Laotian and other Southeast Asian refugees the

³⁴ Bindi V. Shah, *Laotian Daughters: Working toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice*. Temple University Press, 2012. 24.

only jobs attainable with limited English and education were those paying poverty wages and many were forced to go on welfare.³⁵

The Federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), or widely referred to as the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, further impacted the available support for refugee populations. The reform act increased the power states had in configuring their public assistance programs by replacing the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program with block grants under the new program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Under this act, refugees were only eligible for public assistance during their first five to seven years in the United States. The law emerged with the United States' shift towards neoliberalism, an economic and social model that embraces free-market capitalism and competition, particularly through policy aimed at increasing the private sector in the economy and society. This meant “dismantling the main barriers to an unfettered global free market: organized labor, market regulation, environmental protection, and social welfare.”³⁶ In other words, neoliberalism seeks to dismantle collective support and protections in favor for an individualist economy and free-market. As Eric Tang notes, welfare reform also worked in tandem “with the expansion of state apparatuses aimed at managing poverty through penal statutes.”³⁷ In Texas, in anticipation of the federal 1996 Welfare Reform, the legislature passed House Bill 1863, a landmark state welfare reform that established time limits and requirements that welfare recipients work and sign a Personal Responsibility Agreement.³⁸

³⁵ Eric Tang, *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto* Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2015. 99.

³⁶ Ibid., 80.

³⁷ Ibid., 81.

³⁸ Randy Capps, Nancy Pindus, Kathleen Snyder, and Jacob Leos-Urbel “Recent Changes in Texas Welfare and Work, Child Care and Child Welfare Systems” The Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/61146/310182-Recent-Changes-in-Texas-Welfare-and-Work-Child-Care-and-Child-Welfare-Systems.PDF>.

These changes to welfare placed significant emphasis on individual responsibility and work, sentiments also seen in refugee resettlement strategies decades prior that aimed to deter long term reliance on welfare by refugees through hasty job placement. Many have criticized the reforms' focus on personal responsibility rather than addressing the structural and larger roots to poverty and welfare dependence. For Laotian refugees, these changes in welfare only exacerbated the already vulnerable conditions they were in. From finding translations/translators for documents, navigating bureaucracies of public (and private) assistance, finding steady employment, to overall coping with body and psychic traumas of war and displacement, seeking financial and state support was difficult.

In 1990, 32 percent of Laotians in the United States lived below the poverty line and 20 percent were on public assistance. In 2000, 17 percent of Laotians in the United States lived below the poverty line and 14 percent were on public assistance. According to a study that explored the use of public benefits between citizens and noncitizens, between 1994 and 1999, documented immigrants' and refugees' use of public assistance declined sharply by 35 percent.³⁹ Although naturalizations and an increase in wages factor in this decline, scholars have also pointed towards “the chilling effect” of welfare reform where those who are eligible for public assistance do not partake in it as a result of the increasing complexities and variability across states in welfare rules.⁴⁰ Recent data specifically on Laotian Americans' on welfare nationally and in the state of Texas are unavailable.

³⁹ Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel. “Trends in Noncitizens' and Citizens' Use of Public Benefits Following Welfare Reform: 1994-97” Last modified March 1999. <https://aspe.hhs.gov/basic-report/trends-noncitizens-and-citizens-use-public-benefits-following-welfare-reform-1994-97>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORY

I base my project and arguments on research conducted via interviews, ethnography, and autoethnography. The majority of the ethnographic and interview materials for this project comes from research conducted in the winter of 2020 going into 2021. Due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 global pandemic, a majority of the interviews were conducted via video calling technology. I was connected with respondents through their connections with my mother. I chose respondents based on their involvement and occupations in the community along with familial connections. Additionally, I chose respondents from varying socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences in hopes of capturing a more accurate and nuanced representation of the Laotian community. It is important to note here that most of the respondents arrived to the United States during their teens or younger and therefore more integrated and better adapted to life in the U.S. in comparison to Laotian Americans who arrived as adults or elders. A future inquiry into these different experiences may provide greater insight into the experiences of Laotian refugees in the U.S.

Each interview lasted between an hour to two hours long. Interview questions revolved around migration to DFW, experiences in employment opportunities, their relationships with their Laotian identity and community, and general life in the DFW area. Brief sketches of the respondents and myself follow.

My Mother. She arrived to the United States April 10th, 1980 at the age of thirteen with her cousin and uncle. They were sponsored by a First Baptist Church. She attended and graduated from high school in Louisiana and moved to Texas for better work opportunities. Today, she works as a warehouse clerk full time for an electronics manufacturer in DFW. She identifies herself as Lao and is a social butterfly in the community. She is the oldest of seven siblings and was the first to arrive to the United

States. Four of her siblings remain in Laos while the others have come to the U.S. later. She is a mother to four daughters and a grandmother to three grandsons. She is currently 53 years old.

Daniel. He works at the same electronics manufacturing location as my mother. He was born in 1965 and arrived to the United States in 1978. He was sponsored by his eldest brother who was able to arrive in 1975. He attended middle and high school in San Antonio. He was able to attend college in San Antonio but after a semester stopped due to moving with his family to DFW. He is of eight siblings, two of which have passed. Three of siblings and his mother live locally and two other siblings live in California. He and his wife have two children who have graduated college. He is 55 years old. He is deeply involved in the Lao Catholic Association in DFW.

Sam. He arrived to the United States in 1984 at the age of eighteen. He was sponsored by his cousin and came straight to the DFW, having to immediately find work. He has been an electrician for over twenty years. He is married to my aunt, my mother's sister, and is a stepfather to her son. He is currently 55 years old.

Cathy. She was born June 30th, 1970 in Laos and arrived to the U.S. in 1980. She was sponsored by her aunt and uncle who she lived with. She attended elementary, middle, and partially high school in Dallas. She is another of my mother's coworkers at the same electronics manufacturing plant. She works in the shipping department of the warehouse. She is married with four children and is 50 years old.

Kara. She was born December 1971 in Laos and arrived to the U.S. in 1979 at the age of eight. She arrived with her immediate family. She is one of seven siblings. She lived in Richmond, Virginia for about a year before moving to Houston, Texas. She has a Masters in Telecommunications and is one of two siblings with a college degree. She is currently

Director of Small Cells and Business Development for the company she works at. She is married and mother to two older children. She is currently 49 years old.

The Researcher. I am currently a graduate student in the Women's and Gender Studies program at the University of Texas at Austin. I am twenty-two years old. I was born and raised in the DFW area. I am biracial, Laotian and White. I am the second youngest of four children, all girls. I am also aunt to three nephews.

This ethnographic project is rooted feminist practices and approaches to ethnography. As Cheryl Rodriguez states, "feminist ethnography is a method of writing, a method of telling a story, and a perspective that is grounded in a theory of feminist politics and a feminist reality. It is not just about women, of course, it is about gender and the ways in which gender intersects with race, class, experience, human rights, and all kinds of other social realities of our daily lives."⁴¹ Feminist ethnography not only tends to and interrogates multiple relationships of power and how they inform lived and living experiences, it also strives to share stories of those who have been historically neglected in research and knowledge production. A feminist ethnography of Laotian refugees and immigrants means disrupting the pattern of underrepresentation and neglect of this group in Asian American studies and the collective Asian American imagination while also considering the ways the remnants of the US Cold War in Laos and race and gender structures shape Laotian American life.

In addition to the five interviews I conducted, I also draw material from my own experience as a Laotian American second-generation daughter, growing up with and being in community with Laotian refugees and those I have interviewed. My narratives come from digital journal that I started during the conception of this project two years ago and

⁴¹ Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven. *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities* / by Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 8.

from fieldnotes in my formal ethnographic journal I recorded in during data (re)collection. In her essay exploring the relational affects and effects of historical violence and trauma, specifically the Cambodian Holocaust, Lina Chhun reflects upon the oral histories and conversations of her family of survivors, seeking to center “the fragments and storied afterlives of violence rife in spaces of seeming silence and unspoken narrative” in day-to-day encounters, building upon Lisa Marie Cacho’s (following Ann Cvetkovich) concept of an “archive of feeling.”⁴² Reflecting on her first family reunion in Cambodia on her father’s side and listening to her family recollect and reshare their stories amongst one another, Chhun notes the ways that “second-order witnessing can never stand in as substitute for firsthand experience of violence...Yet understanding the differential meanings produced in these moments of crossing offers us more understanding for the ways in which historical violence might register.”⁴³ Bearing witness to the embodied afterlife of the United States’ war on Laos and the rebuilding of life and community transgenerationally presents a different space to make meaning of these experiences and how historical violence and discourses shape them. More importantly, to deeply witness the everyday of the Laotian refugees in my life and share these experiences is to honor their lived and living experiences and preserve their stories.

Feminist ethnography calls for an interrogation of my role as a researcher and my relationship with my interviewees and the community I am working with; As someone who is an insider of the community, I had epistemological privileges, such as access to people in the community, language, and how much the respondents opened up to me to share their

⁴² Lina Chhun. “Walking with the Ghost: Affective Archives in the Afterlife of the Cambodian Holocaust.” *Frontiers (Boulder)* 40, no. 3 (2019): 24–25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 48.

stories. My insider perspective also allowed me to draw from more informal and candid interactions and memories growing up with the community.

However, I am an insider to an extent. Although I am Laotian American, I am second-generation. As my focus on the project is interviewing and assessing the way Laotian refugees build community, being second-generation and a researcher means I must carefully consider how I represent this community. I am particularly thinking about the ways that ethnographies and scholarship on refugee communities are often fraught with totalizing depictions; refugees become “the refugee,” being simultaneously treated as an object of research and “a subject determined by established teleologies of nationhood and citizenship.”⁴⁴ A *feminist refugee ethnography* therefore must tend to these issues and assert the refugee as “a cultural and social actor whose alternative memories and epistemologies challenge the established public narratives” of war, displacement, and resettlement.⁴⁵ Central to my ethnography is Y  n L   Espiritu and Lan Duong’s concept of *feminist refugee epistemology (FRE)*. Just as a feminist refugee ethnography aims to highlight the agency and multidimensionality of refugees, FRE considers how war-based displacement can be seen as not just “social disorder and interruption but also about social reproduction and innovation.”⁴⁶ FRE recognizes the everyday of refugees and practices of life making as significant sites of knowledge production and inquiry, illuminating upon “refugees’ rich and complicated lives” and “the ways in which they enact their hope, beliefs, and politics, even when their lives are militarized.”⁴⁷ Feminist refugee ethnography

⁴⁴ Nguyen, Marguerite, and Catherine Fung. “2015 Special Issue.” *MELUS: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*. MELUS, 2016. Web. 20 May 2016.

⁴⁵ Y  n L   Espiritu. “Ghosts and Other Unfinished Conversations.” *Melus* 41, no. 3 (2016): 194–195.

⁴⁶ Espiritu, Y  n L  , and Lan Duong. “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 3 (2018): 587–615.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 588.

and FRE calls for an intersectional consideration of the richness and complexities of Laotian refugee life in navigating resettlement and establishing themselves.

“WE DON’T TRUST THE BANK”: COMMUNITY SAVINGS AND SUPPORT

Every weekend or so when I was younger, I would tag along with (or arguably dragged by) my mother to run errands whether it be grocery shop, visit my aunt or family friends, or simply window shop, and we always stopped by our local Lao grocery mart, Overseas Market. Overseas Market is fairly small, stocking a handful of products one could find at a gas station along with signature Laotian products, snacks, and ingredients. It sits along a busy highway, wedged between a sports bar and a Mexican restaurant, which was once a Laotian restaurant at one point. Across the highway is a large Fiesta grocery store. The parking lot is a bit awkward as there are many potholes and shifted concrete. Overseas Market has remained in the small shopping strip longer than any of the other businesses there.

My mother would tell me that she needed to stop by and pay her “bet.” I never knew what she meant by “bet,” as far as I was concerned, a trip to the Lao mart meant I could pick out my favorite snacks and drink and even potentially get a nice Lao meal of *thum maak hoon* or *lad nah* from the owner’s family who also cooked out of the mart. At one point, I was even getting my haircuts here. It was a routine that I enjoyed as my mom paid what she needed to while also socializing and gossiping amongst friends.

Reflecting on this now that I am older, I asked my mom what exactly were these “bets” she was paying, in which she then described to me that she was actually contributing to a community savings arrangement organized by the Lao mart owner. She tells me:

“It’s a bet but it’s like a savings...it’s like a take turn. He picks like maybe um 50 people a week...it’s like a savings...you pitch in every week and if you want money you can bet on it. You have to pay next week whatever extra.”

She then goes into further detail describing a typical pooling cycle:

“Mom: If he has like..50 people one week...\$100...it’s like a five thousand...Okay. If you. He starts the first week, the owner, he keeps the first week. Second week, if you want you can put \$100 each week but you have to put a bet on like \$10. So \$10 if somebody wants [the savings], they put in \$12...whoever bet the highest bid get the money for the next week..

Me: Oh so whoever puts in the most money, gets it?

S: Yes, it starts at \$10 to about \$50. For example, if you put \$12 in and I put \$10. Then you got it. Next week, you get \$5,000 and then the next week, you pay \$112. Every week for 50 weeks...When people don’t need money but want savings, they wait until the last...so each week, always someone bet because they want money. Or if they don’t or if no one wants competition, they just pay \$10...they pay \$110, \$110, \$110 until the rest...it’s like you don’t have to go through a bank. You don’t have to go through other people. In Lao store, you kind of take turn. If you don’t want \$100, \$100, \$100, until the game ends. You don’t have to go through the bank. In Lao store, it’s guarantee...the owner...and the people...They select people that they trust to help them.”

Through this network of trusted friends and acquaintances in the Laotian DFW community, people are able to avoid banks, loan sharks, or the state in times of financial need. Additionally, for those who are unable to consistently pay back what they borrow from this communal savings, the organizer of the system reaches out to them personally to arrange a plan that meets their needs. Despite potential vulnerabilities that come with a savings system that relies heavily on trust between one another, many find it to be easier and more reliable than seeking financial support from official institutions who they feel may take advantage of them. Similar systems of rotating funds have been practiced in other Asian American groups such as *kye* for Korean Americans that have allowed them to set up small businesses.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Nancy Abelmann and John Lie. *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995. 133.

My mother's description of this communal savings rotation represents a form of mutual aid that intervenes in neoliberal logics that proliferated with refugee resettlement policy and the 1995 Welfare Reform Act. Through this system where they "take turn," as my mother repeats, those who participate defy neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility. The rotating savings circle operates outside and against neoliberal financial systems through a prioritization of supporting those in the community who need financial assistance.

This system also allowed for Laotians to network. Coming to pay the "bets" at the Overseas Market provided a meeting location for those in the community to connect with one another. As more and more Laotians began their secondary migrations to DFW, more connections emerged for those seeking employment. Cathy tells me, "It was pretty easy finding a job. I know people. We help each other out." Close friends with my mother, Cathy recalled joining her sometimes to participate in the communal savings and meeting people in the community. The trips to Overseas Market to pay her portion of the savings led her to meeting people who shared various employment opportunities with her. Overseas Market provides a space for collective systems of support to prosper.

My mother tells me she has been involved in the community savings for a couple years in the early 2010s and that the store owner and organizer started the effort about as soon as the Lao market first opened approximately twenty or so years ago – a few years after the Welfare Reform Act. She tells me that the community savings is still ongoing. This self-organizing and participation in this community savings show how Laotians have innovatively and communally supported themselves and one another. Aware of the limitations of the state in providing assistance, along with the complications that arise with borrowing from banks, Laotians in DFW have found a site to reconvene, connect with one another, and easily put in money to support those in the community in times of need. As

DFW became a booming technological manufacturing center with an abundance of jobs available for those at varying background levels, many Laotians moved to the city with mere savings they had from previous low paying jobs alongside growing anti-welfare sentiments and policy. As many secured stable and higher paying jobs, the community savings provides an extra layer of cushion of security for those who need it and for those looking to give back to their community. Developing and practicing such a financial system reveals how Laotians in DFW negotiate and resist neoliberal rationale.

PROUD TO BE LAOTIAN: EMERGING COMMUNITY CULTURAL CENTERS, SOCIAL SUPPORT, PRESERVATION, AND IDENTITY

In addition to limited governmental support and integration of neoliberal economic policy, wider social support was also limited. A year before the Refugee Act of 1980, a CBS News/New York Times Poll found that 62% of Americans did not favor increasing the quota for refugee admittance, fearing that the same refugees would compete for jobs, housing, and welfare benefits.⁴⁹ As refugee numbers increased, so did anti-immigrant sentiments and “compassion fatigue.”⁵⁰ These attitudes grew concurrently with anti-welfare sentiments in the 80s and 90s. Many Southeast Asian refugees found themselves with little social support after resettlement, and in more extreme cases, experienced physical violence and intimidation.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Drew DeSilver. “U.S. public seldom has welcomed refugees into country” Last modified November 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/19/u-s-public-seldom-has-welcomed-refugees-into-country/>.

⁵⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Final Report of The Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, 469, <https://ia800200.us.archive.org/23/items/finalreportofsel1981unit/finalreportofsel1981unit.pdf>.

⁵¹ *Blue Collar and Buddha*, dir. Taggart Siegel (1986).

Daniel tells me of moments where he was picked on in school and called various anti-Asian slurs. Additionally, he shares that he wished he had more social support, more so than financial support:

“I didn’t really have support like you or my children...like people who can show you to do student aid or student loans. Things of those nature. That was where I was lacking. So uh, yeah, that’s probably my uh, the thing that I really need support with was the parental, the familial, or the social support to show you the ways to things that can accomplish. That was my downfall in terms of higher education. I could’ve kept going in college, but I couldn’t because of finances and spiritually and mentally. That was the biggest thing that I lacked.”

In this quote, we can see the desire for support that went beyond finances. Daniel points towards the need for social support and guidance attentive to the needs of Laotian refugees, such as he points out, applying to student loans or emotional support from family and mentors. Today, community centers and organizations have emerged in the DFW area that address these concerns. Moreover, the emergence of Laotian Buddhist temples such as Wat Lao Thepnimith, provide another space for Laotians to gather for celebrations and socialize. Reflections from my fieldnotes follow:

“As I write this, April is just around corner. It’s almost Pi Mai, or Lao New Year. Going to Saginaw this time of the year was always an interesting time. The drive there was so long, everything in DFW is 40 minutes or an hour away from each other. I remember kind of dreading it at moments – mostly for personal socially anxious reasons, but it is a truly beautiful celebration. Vendor stalls surround Wat Lao Thepnimith, selling a variety of Lao food, clothing, and various celebration items like water guns and snappers (mostly for the kids). Before we make our rounds and socialize, we go into the temple to pray for blessings in the next forth year. It’s always so quiet in the temple compared to outside where music is blasting and everyone is talking and laughing their hearts out. The loudness of the interior makes up for this quietness – beautiful gold hardware and trimming, a variety of color in the floors and walls, and an abundance of fruit and deep orange offering flowers flood the temple. We always try to get here in the early afternoon and usually don’t get home till past sunset. As I follow my mom around like a lost little puppy, I can’t help but be in awe of the amount of Laotians I see in one place. If I am guessing, this celebration attracts thousands of us here. So many of

us in one place it makes me forget all the times I had to tell people what Laotian means or where Laos is.”

My journal entry reflects on the celebration in Saginaw as a significant gathering center. As previously mentioned, Saginaw is home to “Laos on the Prairie,” with nearly five hundred Laotians living there today; Asian Americans make up about three percent of the population in Saginaw.⁵² Saginaw is a smaller suburban city in North-West DFW. Wat Lao Thepnimith is the heart of the Laotian ethnoburb⁵³ in the area. Every year when my family would visit the area, we would walk home to home to see friends. There were not many sidewalks in the area and the streets were bumpy and cracked, reflective of the do-it-yourself attitudes that many Laotian refugees in the area took on when building their homes and life in Saginaw along with where city funding for infrastructure went to. Front doors and garages were left open, and friends and family were free to walk into homes to see one another. All the kids would usually stay outside to play while the adults mingled inside and ate *Khao Poon*, a spicy rice vermicelli soup, or another Lao dish. It wasn’t until my interview with Daniel that I realized how truly large the event was, as he tells me that Laotians out of state make the trek to visit and celebrate in Saginaw. As Daniel tells me in our interview, during Pi Mai

“We have a lot of visitors from out of town visiting. People up north, my wife’s uh, relatives live in Iowa and some of my relatives live in Montreal. Some live in Vancouver, Canada. Some in Toronto. Anytime they wanna come down here. They come check out my house and I take them to enjoy the weekend and take them to the parade and enjoy the festivities during the week. It’s very enjoyable.”

The annual celebration in Saginaw brings together a number of Laotians in the diaspora and even those outside of it. The celebration attracts locals in the area and those in the wider DFW area who are not Laotian, providing a moment for non-Laotians to learn more

⁵² “Saginaw, TX,” Data USA, Last modified 2018, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/saginaw-tx#demographics>.

⁵³ Wei Li, (March 1, 1998). “Anatomy of a New Ethnic Settlement: The Chinese Ethnoburb in Los Angeles.” *Urban Studies* 35, no. 3 (March 1998): 479–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098984871..>

about Laotians and our culture. In addition to celebration and usual festivities, Pi Mai also allows for the community to fundraise for the upkeep of Wat Lao Thepnimith, the temple the celebration occurs at, and any other community programs that are in the books.

Growing up, Pi Mai and Wat Lao Thepnimith was one of the primary ways I witnessed Laotians connecting and contributing to their communities on a larger level. Today, new organizations are developing to address various needs of the community and preserve Laotian culture and traditions. DFW Lao Heritage, founded in 2018 by Peter Southidara, is one rising 501(c)3 non-profit charity organization that works to assist DFW Laotian refugees, individuals, and seniors in accessing specific services such as unemployment benefits, welfare benefits, cell phone service, immigration services, reducing/covering utility bills and more. Headquartered in McKinney, TX (north DFW area), DFW Lao Heritage often hosts events at local temples and popular events centers such as Asian Nights DFW.

Additionally, they are dedicated to preserving Laotian traditions by teaching the next generation of Laotian American youths to be leaders in advocating for the community along with teaching traditional Lao language, dance, music, and more.⁵⁴ They also place significant focus on youth that aspire to pursue art degrees; from a recent interview, Southidara states that “it’s the next generation Laotians will depend upon to tell their story and ensure that Laotian culture lives on for generations to come.”⁵⁵ DFW Lao Heritage also works to help Laotian students with tuition and other higher education expenses – a program that Daniel expressed a need for when he was younger.

⁵⁴ “Social Services Assistance,” DFW Lao Heritage, Accessed April 1, 2021
<https://www.dfwlaoheritage.org/social-services-assistance>.

⁵⁵ Forrest Cook, “Laotian Culture Is Breaking Out Across Dallas-Fort Worth,” Published February 2021,
<https://www.centraltrack.com/laotian-culture-is-breaking-out-across-dallas-fort-worth/>.

A new Lao American Senior Community Center is in the works – the first one in the state of Texas. A sibling organization to DFW Lao Heritage, Lao American Senior Mutual Assistance (LASMA) aims to provide a center for Lao American seniors in the DFW area where they can receive health, social, and education services in addition to having a space they may congregate recreationally and socialize. Finding such services and spaces for Lao seniors have proven difficult due to language and cultural barriers; the center hopes to provide these needs while working alongside DFW Lao Heritage and connecting Laotian youth and the wider DFW community to Lao culture and traditions.⁵⁶ There is no released information on the location of LASMA as the project is still in early fundraising developments.

The Laotian American population has steadily grown in the nearly half century since the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Act. As new generations of Laotian Americans develop, the sites and organizations where Laotians come together have prioritized cultural and traditional preservation and providing material support for Laotian refugees, immigrants, youth, and elders alike. Like many other Asian immigrant groups, Laotians retain strong ties to their homeland. The emergence of cultural centers and organizations demonstrate how Laotians have asserted their distinct identities in their new homes.

As previously mentioned, Laotians, like other Southeast Asian refugees and immigrants, are positioned as both model and deviant minorities. These juxtapositions bring about ambivalent feelings in belonging for Laotians. For those I have interviewed, they both express gratitude and general feelings of American patriotism while also holding criticisms for the state. While they push back against perceptions of Laotians as “others”

⁵⁶ “Lao American Senior Mutual Assistance,” Facebook, Accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/lasmadfw/about/?ref=page_internal.

and inassimilable, they also maintain their cultural difference and identify in ethno-national terms.⁵⁷ As Daniel tells me:

“I consider myself Laotian American... I am a legal U.S. citizen, but I still consider myself Laotian. I’m proud to be a Laotian. I am proud to be an American. So, I continue to be both ways.”

And later in the interview:

“There’s a lot of things going on that really turns me off because they [the United States’ government] are not working for the people. They don’t see the blue-collar people or the working people like us that day in and day out have to support their family and put food on the table and pay their bills. They don’t...They don’t really uh, see what’s going on as far as below the poverty line or at the poverty line. Class working people, some people making minimum wage can barely pay their bills. Yeah, and to me, what turns me off is that more than anything else is they don’t see eye to eye with the working-class people.”

Like Daniel, when I asked my other interviewees how they self-identified as, without hesitation they either identified as Lao, Laotian, or Laotian American. The prioritization of ethnicity in their self-identity reveals a desire to assert their specific backgrounds and challenge the inclination in dominant discourses to group all Asian ethnic groups into the racialized category “Asian.” Some of my respondents, similar to Daniel, also followed up their self-identity with being American and emphasizing such. In doing so, also reveals struggles to articulate an identity without being perceived as foreign or un-American. As Bindi Shah importantly notes in her research on first generation Laotian daughters in California, who like my interviewees self-identified in similar manners, “identification with ‘foreign national identities’ is not an indication of ‘less acculturation,’ ...but the active cultural construction of Laotian identity in the United States, a construction that embodies multiple and complex subjectivities.”⁵⁸ Laotian refugees, like their children, assert their

⁵⁷ Bindi V. Shah, *Laotian Daughters: Working toward Community, Belonging, and Environmental Justice*. Temple University Press, 2012. 148.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

ethnic identities in response to their particular experiences and history in the United States that differ from other Asian Americans and even other Southeast Asian refugees.

The recent development of Laotian organizations and plans for a Laotian Senior Community Center, their missions and goals in mutual assistance and cultural preservation, and how Laotian refugees self-identify reveal some of the ways Laotian refugees are navigating their racial positioning and challenging their hyperinvisibility or erasure in dominant discourses. Furthermore, significant emphasis on preserving Laotian traditions in these emerging projects also function to rebuild and keep a collective culture and community that was nearly destroyed in the U.S. bombing campaigns in Laos. In her research on a particular visiting center in Laos, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials states:

“If, as Viet Thanh Nguyen maintains, “All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory,” then the U.S. campaign in Laos—as recollected in the COPE Visitor Centre museum—occupies, in the end, a particularly vexed, unreconciled juridical position. The center’s memory work, which operates outside the normal confines of state-authorized justice and state-supported reparation, provides a critical means of assessing the extent to which U.S. war-making is undeniably ongoing, ostensibly perpetual, and apparently permanent.”

Over 270 million cluster bombs were dropped on Laos and it is estimated that 80 million have not detonated and less than one percent have been cleaned up and destroyed. Meanwhile in the United States, as Laotian refugees endure various social and economic barriers and hyperinvisibility in dominant discourses, preserving Laotian traditions, culture, and knowledge is, in a sense, a battle campaign against ongoing U.S. war-making. Laotians abroad and in the U.S. continue to face the consequences of the U.S.’s not-so secret war in Laos, and as Schlund-Vial argues, such war-making persists especially in memory work. The scene from *King of The Hill* that I open this paper with reflects how little Americans are aware of the U.S. war-making and the countries and peoples directly

impacted by it. Laotians in DFW organizing in various ways to assert a distinct collective identity, preserve the traditions, and directly share the stories of the community is political work.

DOUBLE MINORITY: GENDERED EXPECTATIONS AND ROLES IN LAOTIAN EXPERIENCES AND COMMUNITY WORK

Just as war and racialization inform the experiences of Laotian refugees in the United States, gender plays a significant role in shaping experiences in DFW. Many Laotian refugees have brought traditional perceptions and expectations of gender roles while also expanding upon them. In this section, I highlight how gender impacts Laotian experiences and perceptions of resettlement in DFW, particularly focusing on varying employment opportunities between Laotian men and women along with the feminization of poverty and (collective) care. I am guided by the following questions: How did displacement impact Laotian's perception of gender? How has gender impacted opportunities and experiences of Laotians? How do Laotian women make sense of their identities?

In feminist and gender studies, it is widely understood that gender and notions of masculinity and femininity are not biologically innate but rather socially and culturally constructed, informed by socioeconomic and political contexts and continuously renegotiated by actors within a wider society. Displacement and resettlement are significant events that shape actors' perceptions of gender. Pulling from Janet Benson's work on Southeast Asian refugees and her concept "reinterpreting" gender, I highlight how Laotian refugees in DFW reinterpret, negotiate, and mold previous understandings of and their relationship with gender to adjust to their new environment. Similar to the US, Laotian culture reinforces binaries of man and woman, delegating women to the domestic private

sphere and men to the public working sphere. However, as many of my respondents highlight, resettlement allowed for rethinking and reshaping their relationship to gender. Reading these experiences as “reinterpretation” also illuminates “both cultural continuity and the need for adaption in a new context.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, reinterpretation also honors resettlement as a site and process of innovation and significant knowledge production.

In a majority of my interviews, respondents highlighted the ways resettlement afforded them or the opposite sex greater opportunities and senses of agency that were not available in Laos. As my mother tells me in our conversation:

“Here you can work and do whatever. In Laos, you have to be a wife and do everything. Take care of the kids, take care of your husband, take care of the house, everything...cook and clean and take care of the kids. The husband is working. Whatever you are, you be under him. You cannot talk back. You can’t do anything. You do everything for your husband. ...There, if you are married, no matter what, you going to be stuck with him until [you are]dead. Here, if you are not happy together, you divorce. You can work and take care of yourself. Over there, you cannot. You’re stuck with the one guy. You cannot leave him, because you have the kids and he’s the only one that provides anything and as a woman, you have no opportunities to work.

Me: If a woman tries to leave in Laos, do people look at her badly?

Mom: Yes, that too. If you...In Laos, if you divorce, they always think you’re a bad woman and that’s why you’re divorced.

Me: Is there anything similar between Laos and the US in terms of being a woman? In the US, you said it’s different because you have more freedom. Is there anything similar? Or do you think it’s completely different?

Mom: I think it’s completely different. But also I think it’s always going to be the same that if you’re a woman, you always going to take care of the kids, here or there. You do the best for your kids. We woman always think about no matter how relationships..how marriage works...you are stuck with the children.

⁵⁹ Janet Benson, “Reinterpreting Gender: Southeast Asian Refugees and American Society.” In *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning: Refugee Identity, Gender, and Culture Change*, 75-96. Taylor & Francis, 1994.

Me: Do you think moving to the United States changed your expectations on being a woman?

Mom: Yeah. If I stayed there, I don't know what my life would be. What I would do. Everybody, all my friends, some are gone. I always think of my sister...Some people don't....The jobs are either you make food or sell food or make clothes. That's it. That's the only option you do. Or some people do prostitution. Especially to make a living. Some of them I knew. In the daytime they go to school and at night, they go to work at the clubs..."

For Laotian refugee women like my mother, resettlement allowed her opportunities to enact hope and autonomy independent of men. Resettlement allowed her to decenter men in her life and focus on her own desires outside the domestic sphere. However, as she notes, being a woman in the U.S. compared to Laos is "completely different" but simultaneously "always going to be the same." The contradictions my mother has in her understanding and relationship to gender situate women's roles as caretakers in the private realm and workers in the public. These contradictions reveal how Laotian refugee women like her reinterpret and negotiate gender roles and heteronormative expectations of marriage and family. Women in Laos are situated strictly into the domestic private realm, but in the United States Laotian women must take on what Arlie Hochschild describes as a "second shift" or double burden of working to earn money while also being responsible for domestic labor.

The Laotian men I interviewed also pointed out similar observations and highlighted how resettlement instilled more egalitarian beliefs of gender to them. As Daniel tells me:

"There is nothing differentiated between a man and a woman besides gender. When I uh, look back to my country, being a man in my country means providing for your family and being a woman in my country means to be a housewife and raise children. When looking forward to currently, everything is much different because women is capable. It's very, uh I would say now, there is more opportunity and equity. As far as being a woman, a woman is competent and [as] capable to be an executive as much as a man. That's how I see it. There is no prejudice between me or a woman working in the same place. Women are capable as men to do a job."

Gender equality, in both my mother's and Daniel's point of view, is closely tied with work and employment opportunity. Their reinterpretation of gender and its connection to work may reflect the economic circumstances that Laotian refugees faced, such as finding employment hastily regardless of gender. Both Daniel and my mother also attended school in the United States. Socialization of gender through institutions such as education not only reinforce binaries of man and woman, but also place an emphasis on capitalist ideals of productivity, work, and what kinds of work are available or associated between the genders. Laotian refugees' reinterpretation and negotiation of gender are linked to work.

Being a Laotian and a woman also shapes employment opportunities and experiences. The average median wage for Laotian women in the United States today is \$35,300 compared to the median wage of about \$58,000 for White Non-Hispanic Men.⁶⁰ Data that looked on the wage earnings for Laotian men were unavailable. However, the median annual personal earnings for all Laotian Americans as of 2019 was \$40,000.⁶¹ Data on earnings specifically for Laotians living in DFW were also unavailable. For Laotian women like my mother or Cathy, who had high school level education or less, the jobs available to them in DFW were primarily in manufacturing and warehouse, similar to their male counterparts. When asked about whether opportunities have been commensurate with her employment options as a Laotian woman who held a postsecondary education degree, Kara responds:

"I don't know if it was necessarily being a Laotian or more so being a woman. A female Asian. Well yes, being a minority - a double minority - um, I felt like that

⁶⁰ "Asian American and Pacific Islander Women and the Wage Gap" National Partnership for Women and Families, March 2021, Accessed April 2021, <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/fair-pay/asian-women-and-the-wage-gap.pdf>.

⁶¹ "Economic Characteristics of US Laotian Population, 2019," Pew Research Center, Accessed October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/chart/top-10-u-s-metropolitan-areas-by-laotian-population/>.

the jobs were available, but the pay was not commensurate with my expertise and my experience and knowledge. And only did I, not just...they didn't realize my potential until after they hired me. They saw my work ethic and it's kind of a bummer because you want to be paid top dollar even before you start a job but they, of course, once they saw my potential and work ethic, the pay increased after that. Going in, with my foot in the door, initially I didn't get the pay that I wanted most of the time.

A: Even once you were hired and had your foot in the door, did colleagues look down upon you or didn't take you seriously enough?

K: No, they actually...I was treated a little special and I'll tell you why. Because they think all Asians are smart. And we work hard. And that are the two things that I haven't...everywhere I go and even my current job, "She's Asian and she's smart...She's Asian and she's smart" you know? The work ethics is...I don't know where they got that from, but they think Asian people are very...they work very hard and are diligent and they are smart. So I got that going for me.

A: [laughs] So you used a stereotype for your own good and benefit?

K: [laughs] Yes! But also I mean...I didn't use it, they did! If they want to say I'm smart...I feel like I'm not dumb. I have a MBA and I have a lot of experience and expertise in my field and I have been doing it for 20 years so yes it comes with a premium. But they really valued my input and I never had that before."

Kara highlights the material impact of the model minority as a Laotian woman and the ambivalent feelings of such compartmentalization. Despite holding a master's degree, Kara found that she was being underpaid for the knowledge and expertise she had to offer. However, the dominant belief of Asian Americans as universally hyperintelligent and innately hard workers also unexpectedly gave Kara a conflicting advantage when it came to meetings and adding input. Aware of the ways her gender and racial/ethnic background work in tandem to shape her employment experiences, a "double minority" as she calls it, Kara simultaneously and strategically works with and against it.

Although resettlement opened up opportunities for Laotian women to assert independence and push back against Laotian traditional gender expectations, some beliefs have transferred over and meshed with dominate Anglo-American gender ideologies. As

my mother mentioned earlier in comparing and contrasting her gendered experience in Laos and Daniel's perspective on gender relations, they both still reinforce distinct binaries of man and woman. Despite a new-found sense of independence, many Laotian women are still expected to perform reproductive labor and maintain the home and family. Scholarship on first generation Laotian Americans often highlight the cultural clashes that emerge between Laotian refugee parents and their children, especially Laotian daughters who challenge traditional Laotian expectations of womanhood and femininity. As a Laotian daughter myself, I have also experienced being delegated particular roles by my mother and extended family including serving men of households dinner first, beauty expectations, and carrying myself as a compliant woman.

Laotian women also extend their roles as caregivers and supporters to the larger collective Laotian DFW community. I highlight earlier that some Laotians in DFW participate in community savings and mutual aid as a way to address financial needs outside of the state and of banks. However, a significant detail of such practice is that it is mostly Laotian women who participate in. In a follow up conversation I had with my mother, I asked her what the gender component of the community savings looked like and she half-jokingly exclaimed "It's all women! Women are the only ones who care! Women are the only ones who care about savings. Men just gamble it away!" This exclamation reveals how gender roles also inform who tends to support and participate in mutual aid. Expected to be caretakers at home, Laotian women extend such care work to the wider Laotian community and as my mother implies, out of necessity.

In navigating and negotiating gender and racial lines, Laotian women have cultivated innovative ways to support themselves and the wider local Laotian community. Such practices remind me of the ways women of color have to be inventive to survive. Drawing from Audre Lorde's *A Burst of Light* and Cherrie Moraga's poem *The Welder*,

Sarah Ahmed highlights that those who have the whole world organized on their side, who have privilege on their side, they do not have to be so inventive: “When you are blocked, when your very existence is prohibited or viewed with general suspicion...you have to come up with your own system for getting yourself through. **How inventive.**”⁶² Resettlement not only allowed Laotian refugees to reinterpret gender roles and expectations, it also has pushed Laotian women in particular to innovatively expand their roles and be inventive as a means to support one another.

CONCLUSION, REFLECTION, AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

In imagining and writing this project, countless and heartbreaking events have occurred. From the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans, I’d be remiss to not mention the context that this project is emerging out of. Just a few weeks ago, eight Asian American women and immigrants were murdered in a targeted mass shooting rooted in the United States’ longer history of sexualized violence against Asian women. Since the shooting, I have continued to see more horrendous instances of violence and hate crimes against Asian Americans, in which Asian women and those elderly are disproportionately targeted, circulated online. On a personal level, I now hold anxiety in me that my mother will be harmed. I hold grief and anxiety that the Laotian and wider Asian American community will be harmed. We as a community are resilient and have endured a lot, but I despise that we must be in the first place.

⁶² Sara Ahmed. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 231.

In 2020, the United States government agreed to fund a repatriation program for Laos to accept Laotian and Hmong refugees.⁶³ Under the Trump administration, there was a dramatic increase in deportations of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, enabled by the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act that birthed/contributed to what is now known as the school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline.⁶⁴ Recently for Laotians, deportations have not been as high compared to Vietnamese and Cambodians due to Laos' noncompliance in the repatriation program. As a result, the Trump administration has broadened visa sanctions on Laos, blocking both immigrant and nonimmigrant visas to Laotians wanting to enter the U.S.⁶⁵ The threat of deportation of Laotians, who many have been in the United States longer than Laos, further put Laotians in a precarious situation.

Pulling from interviews with Laotian refugees, along with my own experiences and observations as a first-generation Laotian daughter, I have highlighted the ways Laotian refugees in DFW are not merely victims of war but also theorizers and innovators in their own rights. Through practices of community savings, emerging establishments of community culture centers and organizations, and reinterpretation of gender roles and expectations, Laotian refugees have and continue to reckon with the ongoing legacies of the United States' Cold War in Laos in creative ways, demonstrating how the experience of Laotian refugees is not simply fraught with hardship, but also of accomplishment, knowledge production, and networks of collective care.

⁶³ Agnes Constante "U.S. funding reintegration program in Laos for Laotian and Hmong refugees" NBC News. Accessed April 4, 2021 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/u-s-funding-reintegration-program-laos-laotian-hmong-refugees-n1136356>.

⁶⁴ "Southeast Asian Americans and the School-to-Prison-to-Deportation Pipeline," SEARAC, Accessed April 4, 2021, https://www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SEAA-School-to-Deportation-Pipeline_0.pdf.

⁶⁵ "SEARAC Condemns Trump Administration's Expanded Visa Sanctions on Laos," SEARAC, Accessed April 4, 2021 <https://www.searac.org/immigration/searac-condemns-trump-administrations-expanded-visa-sanctions-on-laos/>.

Through these interviews, this project offers an entry point to further explore the experiences of Laotian refugees in DFW and the greater United States. For future considerations, delving deeper into the relationships Laotian refugees have with reinterpreting gender by seeking perspective or oral histories from those who identify as in the LGBTQ+ community may enrich or complicate our understandings. Although I had sought out such perspective, I was unable to connect with someone who was wanted to be a part of the project due to research constraints in the time of COVID-19. Furthermore, all of my interviewees entered the U.S. at a relatively young age. Seeking out the voices, perspectives, and knowledge of Laotian elders may further complicate and enrich this project. Additionally, with many of the previous literature available about Laotian Americans being revolved around health and trauma, I think it would be particularly generative to explore these experiences through a disability studies and justice lens. As Asian American studies continues to grow, I urge scholars to move past one dimensional representation and positioning of Laotian Americans. Reading through a lens of critical refugee studies and feminist refugee epistemology, the Laotian American experience offers critical insight to the legacies of U.S. militarization and intervention in Southeast Asia in addition to the ways resettlement and community building are significant sites of knowledge production and inquiry.

When I was wrapping up my interview with Daniel, I asked him if he had any last words he wanted to share with me. He then simply stated “if there’s a will there’s a way.” Laotian culture has a rich history of anti-colonial resistance and we carry those legacies with us today. As Laotian Americans continue to navigate our precarious circumstances, we also fight back. Through networks of care and emerging collective spaces, Laotian Americans in DFW are determined to sustain our community.

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