

Understanding how intergenerational trauma creates a memory that has created a different viewing for me as a Vietnamese American towards the Vietnam War Memorial

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Research paper draft

A memorial is an object that allows people to focus on a memory in a physical form. At least that's what I thought, but understanding memory is what is more complex. When visiting the the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL, my initial thoughts were to have a greater understanding of enslavement of black people and lynching history. My first reaction to hearing about this is a very strange reaction of confusion because I wondered "why would they create a memorial out of lynchings?" This curiosity sparked my interest in searching in memorials for their innate goal of representing history. This paper deals with memory and identification so it will include my biographical recollection as well.

My initial sight of seeing the memorial was not the actual memorial itself, but the pristine cut green lawn. It made me pause and try to understand that this memorial that is remembering the history of suffrage needs a nice cut lawn. When then getting closer you can see the rows and rows of rustic brown blocks that stood up straight. At this moment I was curious of how I would react to this visual representation of violence. I was not sure of what to do or how to feel. When stepping foot on the memorial, I was greeted by a Martin Luther King Jr. quote that gave a foundation for the meaning of this memorial. You then start to go down step, yet can keep your eyes off of the large monument on the hill. While you are walking on this path you have a massive wall with information, while there is a statue of people chained with terror in their eyes. The one statue that stood out to me was the one of the mother holding her child while she reached out to another man. I did not know how to react to these, everyone on the trip was silent as we walked along the path, yet there was so much "noise" I felt from these statues. You would look around and see the other students taking pictures. I personally did not take any pictures. I felt as if I was the observer, that I was conscious of my every action, as if I was analyzing it.

There have been many times where I feel as if there's a gap between me and the memorial, but there are also some that I have felt a deep connection to. A memorial that I have felt a personal connection, even to a point of obligation, was the Vietnam War memorial in New York. Both of my grandfathers served in the Vietnam War, which led my family to the US. Right when you take a step on the path way, at the edge of the V, everyone is silent, yet all you can is the occasional police car and traffic. I felt trapped in a way it seemed as if there was a pressure on my chest as you can see the downwards slope of the path. Seeing all of these names back to back, and close together, all I could see were my grandfathers. After a few feet of walking as the wall raised my vision seemed to sharpen as if I could only focus on the names. In the moment it felt as if I was the only person there, as nobody was around me, my body was naturally choreographed. Comparatively to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, I did not notice my peers. I felt as if there was an innate connection between memorial and how me as a Vietnamese American have in common.

These encounters of memorials have allowed me to realize that memorials have a focused audience. For me understanding the audience is one thing but understanding the meanings of

how Asian Americans experience these memorials is another. Today's current second generation Asian American students experience the Vietnam War Memorial from a different lense comparatively to their immigrant ancestors and even other Americans. This paper analyzes how cultural upbringing from an asian immigrant family distinguishes the memories that exist.

The Vietnam War has many perspectives of how it was remembered. Rather from an American protesting for anti-war, or a young soldier in jungles not known if he will live to see the next day. The parents' generation of Southern Vietnamese immigrants were the ones who escaped on boat to seek freedom away from communism. Many other scholars have experienced similar stories, which for them defines their memory of the Vietnam War. In the book *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* in the Chapter A Journey Called Freedom, we learn about a story of a girl who left Saigon with her family on April 28, 1975. She was evacuated by a U.S. Cargo plane at seven years old. Something very similar about the author's story and my parents was that they both came from rural origins, as both families were farmers. The author speaks on times when she was younger and how their family struggled with financial income during the time of the war, "with an income of only thirty dollars a month, my father was exasperated and felt restricted"<sup>1</sup> A common trend of many Vietnamese Americans of the older generation will talk to you about the hardship of how the war completely changed their life. This idea of retelling of stories in itself is a unique form of memory. Also understanding a sweeping common story of Vietnamese escaping their homes.

We survived on the leftover pizza for our dinner. We survived on the leftover pizza because we did not have enough money to buy all the food we needed. My mother, too, worked two shifts, one in the daytime and one at night, in order to provide their children with a decent life in America.

This interesting story that is brought up is shared throughout many Vietnamese Americans, it is the struggle of coming to a country with zero money for a better future for your children. It is the mindset that has allowed them to come to acceptance with being ripped from their homes. This generation's understanding of memory is through suffrage and pushing through adversity. Tieu-Khe Le talks about in his thesis how as a curious child he would ask his parents about life in Vietnam during the war before they came to America. His father was a photographer for the Associated Press, which meant that he would have to capture many images of dead soldiers and destroyed villages. His father was reluctant to answer his son's questions even to a point where his mother would ask him why he wanted to know.<sup>2</sup> This underlying state of constant suffering has created a world of storytelling for the generation that had to physically endure the war at a young age. Interestingly enough the transition period for many of these Vietnamese Americans endured ridicule of culture, such as making fun of how these families lived, ate, and socialized. This transition period makes it very hard for this older generation to identify as Asian American. With memories of bullying and harassment, they had no feeling of belonging. We are told of this transition in the chapter How it Feels to Be an Asian American in *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, when a teacher thought she was deaf or mute due to her inability to understand English. "I thought the teacher must be right, so I considered myself inferior to my classmates. I

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constantly feared that if I talked, people were going to mock me”<sup>3</sup> This is very much so a form of trauma in itself, which then loops back to Tieu-Khe Le’s story of how his parents struggled to tell him all of the stories. Understanding these first hand experiences from this generation and my parents, I started to question my understanding of the Vietnam War.

Looking through the lens of my generation, our memory is through our parents’ lens. Understand that these lenses are all different, some may be translucent and some may be magnified. My generation, the second generation of Vietnamese Americans, had a completely different memory of the war. We grew up with stories from our parents and grandparents about the war. From being in the living room hearing them sing about the misery of the war time. I remember growing up only knowing Vietnamese and learning about all of the war stories my grandfather had in the air force, and how my mother lived on a farm. That’s what I grew up with, until I got to middle school when we learned about the Vietnam War. Growing up only knowing the Vietnam War from my parents’ view, I did not know about other perspectives. I didn't even know about anti-war protests. When being educated in the classroom, it seemed as if it was a different perspective every time. The American view of the Vietnam War seemed very closed off and fearful. It then brought up another point of the filter textbooks and teachings have on students. Understandably with all of the controversy of the Vietnam War for Americans it is hard to teach. I realized that most classrooms avoided trauma and personal stories. It seemed to only be numbers. Sanda C. Taylor in her book *The History Teacher*, has a chapter called Teaching the Vietnam War, where she talks about how historians avoid teaching contemporary history because it is “too emotional, too controversial”.<sup>4</sup> She then goes on to elaborate how textbooks treat the Vietnam War. One of the textbooks that she explores is “The Vietnam Era: A Guide to Teaching Resources” which is a book designed for high school teachers, that consists of a brief collection of materials ranging from geography and history to G.I experiences, media kits, and the anti-war movement. Taylor believes that even though the education system has these books they are not comprehensive, and finds lack of information. She even discusses how even though they have the anti-war movement they do not discuss the “lessons of Vietnam” which is the discussion of what was right or wrong, moral or immoral. I find it intriguing that there are manuals of how teachers should teach the Vietnam War. It seems as if the education system does not want to ba\oth with trauma. Especially today with the US being filled with Vietnamese Americans I feel as it is quite disrespectful that it hasn't changed. As a Vietnamese American I had the ability to question these things because of my parents telling me about their past.

Interestingly enough this “fear” of personal stories being taught, I felt slightly confused and as I got older I felt frustrated. I felt as if everything that my parents and grandparents went through were just pointless. As a Vietnamese American I felt an obligation to react. I found that the US education system has allowed me to recognize the lack of trauma that is shown to their students which then has me conclude that it affects students to feel a connection with memorials.

I also then understood that slavery and lynchings where taught in the same way. With the fear of Trauma. From what I remember learning was

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Sandra C. "Teaching the Vietnam War." *The History Teacher* 15, no. 1 (1981): 57-66. Accessed May 4, 2020. doi:10.2307/493777.

Understanding that the trauma my parents experienced is a direct connection to how I react to the Vietnam War Memorial made me realize that I see this memorial much differently than the US public. In Kelly Y. Pham's Dissertation, "Trauma Transmission Between First-Generation and Second-Generation Vietnamese Refugees and Immigrants in the United States: A Study of Mother and Daughter" she writes on specifically how the immigration of Vietnamese intergenerational trauma is a secondary form of trauma that is a result of the transfer of the impact of traumatic experiences from parent to child.

how you are thinking of the identity of the second generation Vietnamese American youth through your own experience of viewing various memorials.

Where do I stand with my experience of viewing various memorials.

How growing up the teaching of trauma compares from the Vietnam War to lynchings

Ethical obligation

Notes for later:

Trauma is a form of memory.

Competing with trauma

*Now what has intrigued me even more are memorials that have no distinct correlations, but somehow have a direct connection. The first time I visited the 9/11 memorial I was intranced. My experience with the 9/11 Memorial was unique in the sense that I felt as if I had no direct or personal connection, yet somehow am impacted on a personal level similarly to the Vietnam War Memorial.*

Similarities of these memorials is that they all remember traumatic times. The Vietnam War memorial was the first noncelebratory war memorial.

<https://academic-oup-com.ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/ia/article/94/3/695/4992424?searchresult=1>

How do Asian Americans view memorials differently than other Americans

How does memory affect immigrants

How do Asian Americans experience pop culture

## How I process things

For my first paragraph I'll talk

Research question: Why do I feel different

Start with describe how I felt during the memorial, First glance

Second part

Talk about how my parent's memory became my foundation for understanding the Vietnam War  
Parent's experience is my memory

Third part

US education system, something is missing because my foundation is different  
Storytelling builds my foundation

Fourth part

US education system Lynchings

Fifth part

The US education system limits what they teach, but what makes us feel the way we do is  
the intergenerational trauma that makes us feel.

SO what?

Works Cited: