

FORCED MIGRATION AND FORGED MEMORIES

Acts of Remembrance and Identity Development Among Southeast Asian American College Students

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It is the early evening of April 30. The sun is just beginning to set, and a group of students dressed in black gather around the fountain in the center of the campus quad. While there is some light chatter as students arrive and get settled, it is generally quiet; the mood is subdued, almost solemn. Linh begins to pass out candles to the students, quickly yet carefully lighting them one by one. She anxiously looks up every few seconds, scanning the quad to see if more students are on their way. Although the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) holds this event every year, Linh, the organization's president, is hoping this year's remembrance of the Fall of Saigon is a more powerful experience for those who attend. Linh and her executive board have coordinated an evening of storytelling through poetry, music, and dance, and she is eager for the event to take place.

The parents and families of Linh and many of her Vietnamese peers were part of the mass and traumatic exodus of refugees out of Vietnam to the United States, which began after the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. For weeks, the executive board of the VSA has been educating their peers about the Fall of Saigon by posting articles and videos on social media, hanging flyers and posters around the student union and the residence halls, and having conversations between classes and in the dining halls. This moment in history was pivotal in shaping the lives of many Vietnamese Americans, and Linh believes it is important for her peers to understand the significance of this event for their Vietnamese identity. After all, where and who would they be otherwise? As night falls on campus and with the glow of candlelight all around, Linh welcomes the dozens of students in attendance, and the event begins.

Many college students who identify as Cambodian, Hmong, Khmer, Lao, and Vietnamese, collectively known as Southeast Asian Americans (SEAs),

are the children and grandchildren of refugees who fled their homelands due to conflict and genocide resulting from the Vietnam War. Although an increasing number of SEAA college students are not refugees themselves, year after year, they continue to perform acts of remembrance on their campuses. These acts of remembrance take a variety of forms, from cultural shows organized by student groups; to course assignments that include the creation of videos, art pieces, or research papers about their family's refugee experiences; to commemoration events like the one described in the opening vignette. These activities raise the following questions, articulated by Espiritu (2006): "How do [SEAA students] create their own memories of a war that took place before they were born? What is their relationship to the forged histories and memories of their families?" (p. 435). To these we add one more: What role do these acts of remembrance play in shaping SEAA students' sense of identity?

Despite not having been refugees themselves, many SEAA students are exposed to stories about war and the refugee experience from parents, extended family, and members of their ethnic community. Collectively, these narratives comprise what Hirsch (1996) called "postmemory" or the experience of remembering past traumatic events one did not live through or witness directly. Postmemory is created and passed down generationally, and while it can offer SEAA students a connection to their history, it can also challenge their sense of identity through "struggles between honoring [their family's] memory and constructing their own relation to this legacy" (Espiritu, 2006, p. 425). A SEAA student's identity is thus borne out of and inextricably linked to the shared history and experience of the broader SEAA community.

Among the ways in which postmemory manifests for SEAA students in a higher education context is through acts of remembrance. As undergraduates, SEAA students have the opportunity to participate and engage in activities designed to not only help them explore their connection to the past but also allow them to discern what it means to be SEAA today. This chapter examines these acts of remembrance to better understand identity development among SEAA students. By focusing on this student population, we also explore how their unique experiences may both challenge and enhance how higher education has traditionally conceptualized and approached college student identity development.

We first begin with a description of the SEAA student population and a brief overview of the forced migration and resettlement of SEAA communities. This is followed by a discussion of how forging collective memories associated with forced migration and performing acts of remembrance

uniquely shape SEAA students' identities. In this discussion, we highlight distinct features of this developmental process that are not widely considered by student affairs practitioners and scholars and have implications for both theory and practice.

Who Are SEAA Students?

Although over 10 countries comprise Southeast Asia, we focus this chapter on students whose families hail from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam due to these countries' similar political and refugee history. Thus, our use of *Southeast Asian American* refers to those who identify as Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese American. Although SEAA students may share common experiences connected to a history of forced migration, resettlement, trauma, and war, it is also important to acknowledge the diversity within the population and the multiple and intersecting identities that SEAA students possess. From numerous ethnic backgrounds and different gender identities to various religious faiths and a range of socioeconomic statuses, these identities can exert distinct influences on how SEAA students come to understand their racial identities. Identity development for this population is therefore a distinct phenomenon, one that warrants specific attention from higher education practitioners.

Identity Development Models for SEAA Students

Early models of Asian American identity development, such as Kim's (2001) Asian American racial identity development theory and Alvarez's (2002) adaptation of Helms's people of color racial identity model, have become standard references for student affairs professionals seeking to better understand their Asian American student populations. However, these models tend to discuss Asian American students as a monolithic group with a singular shared experience of racial identity, an assumption that more recent scholarship has critiqued (see Accapadi, 2012; Chan, 2017). Using these commonly cited models to understand SEAA students thus has the potential to yield inaccurate and misleading conclusions about their identity development experiences.

This chapter continues the evolution in thinking about Asian American students by offering a unique perspective for understanding SEAA students' experiences with racial identity. We acknowledge, however, that we are not the first to specifically examine the identity development of SEAA college students. Museus et al. (2013), for example, previously described a set of distinct yet interrelated processes through which SEAA students come to

understand their SEAA, Asian American, immigrant and refugee, and racial minority identities. Students develop along these various identity dimensions as they become immersed in their ethnic culture and dominant U.S. culture, as they gain awareness of social and political issues affecting their communities, and as they work to integrate these multiple identities into a holistic sense of self.

Building on the work of Museus et al. (2013), we incorporate the concepts of forced migration and remembrance as critical components of SEAA students' identity development. We believe that how SEAA students come to understand who they are is inextricably linked to the remembrance of their family's experiences of relocation and transition to the U.S., as well as their sense of connection to the collective histories of their families and ethnic communities. It is to these unique experiences that we now turn.

Forced Migration and Resettlement

Although many Asian American groups voluntarily immigrated to the United States, SEAA populations experienced forced migration from their home countries. Experiences from French imperialism and colonization, as well as U.S. militarization and war, were key contributors to the mass exodus of refugees from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s (Chan, 1991; Um, 2015). The fact that SEAA populations arrived in the United States involuntarily and due to circumstances beyond their control has profound implications for the identity development of SEAA college students. We therefore provide a brief overview of the conditions that forced Southeast Asian refugees' migration as necessary background and context for understanding SEAA students' experiences. Because the conditions of migration differed across SEAA ethnic groups, we purposely discuss the experiences of each group separately.

Cambodian Americans

Cambodian refugees were victims of a mass genocide, in which some two million were killed after the Khmer Rouge overthrew the Cambodian government in 1975 (Chan & Kim, 2003). The Khmer Rouge instituted a savagely violent and ruthless campaign to eliminate Cambodians who had supported U.S. military forces in Southeast Asia, as well as those who were deemed educated or professional. Many others perished due to starvation, disease, and strenuous work conditions on Khmer Rouge farms and camps. In total, historians estimate one quarter to one third of the country's population was killed. In order to escape the "killing fields," more

than half a million Cambodians fled by foot across the country into Thai border camps, though only a small percentage were eventually processed for resettlement.

Hmong Americans

During the wars in Southeast Asia, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited members of the Hmong population, an ethnic group that resided in the highlands of North Vietnam and Laos, to fight against North Vietnamese forces (Takaki, 1998). This “secret war” was unknown to the American public at the time, and when Saigon fell, the situation became deadly for the Hmong. Fearing persecution for fighting alongside the CIA, Hmong refugees began their dangerous trek by foot through Laos and into Thailand. Many were killed or captured along the harrowing journey. By 1980, over 150,000 Hmong individuals found their way to refugee camps in Thailand, with hopes of being resettled in other countries (Robinson, 1998).

Lao Americans

Lao refugee migration was a direct result of colonization and war. After gaining independence from the French, Laos was thrust into the Vietnam War conflict as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a resupply line for North Vietnamese forces, ran through the country. Procommunist forces, the Pathet Lao, were supported by the North Vietnamese, while the Royal Lao were recruited by U.S. forces (Takaki, 1998). By 1975, the Pathet Lao had taken power and began a violent repression of those who supported the United States. In order to escape the violence and seek sanctuary, Lao refugees fled across the border to camps in Thailand (Robinson, 1998). During this time of war, Laos became the most bombed country per capita in the world (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009).

Vietnamese Americans

Vietnamese refugee migration began with the Fall of Saigon in 1975 after decades of war, sparking several waves of evacuees hoping to be resettled in a country without persecution. The first wave primarily consisted of those who were in the military and government or who had connections with the United States, and the subsequent and larger waves that fled Vietnam throughout the 1980s were members of the general population. Commonly referred to as *boat people* (Espiritu, 2014), these refugees set out into uncertain seas via small leaky boats, hoping to be rescued by other ships or fishing vessels. It is estimated that anywhere from 10% to 70% perished at sea

(Robinson, 1998), while pirates robbed, raped, and killed many others. Of those rescued, many were first placed in refugee camps throughout Southeast Asia before being processed and resettled in other countries.

Impact of Resettlement

Just as forced migration patterns have varied among SEAA populations, so have their patterns of resettlement to the United States. Because refugee relocation programs depended on the presence of sponsoring individuals and organizations or existing infrastructure and resources to support refugee communities (Hein, 1995), SEAA refugees were scattered across different parts of the United States. For example, SEAA communities emerged in places as geographically distant and demographically different as Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota; New Orleans, Louisiana; Lowell, Massachusetts; and San Jose, California. In addition, many SEAA refugee populations were initially relocated to lower-income, urban, and working-class neighborhoods. This exposed them to challenges commonly present in these areas: poverty, overcrowding, school attrition, gang activity, and crime (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Lee, 1997; Um, 2003). Yet, the prevailing societal stereotypes of Asian Americans as model minorities rendered those challenges and hardships invisible (Ngo & Lee, 2007).

As a result of these experiences, many SEAA students may grow up with few opportunities to cultivate a strong SEAA identity that accounts for their unique collective backgrounds. The college environment may therefore be one of the first places where identity exploration becomes salient for SEAA students. A promising way for SEAA students to engage in this identity exploration process is through forged memories and acts of remembrance.

Forged Memories and Acts of Remembrance

Initially conceived as a way of understanding the experiences of second-generation Holocaust survivors, the concept of postmemory similarly applies to SEAA students who also “grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth . . . [and whose experiences are] shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor recreated” (Hirsch, 1996, p. 662). For SEAA students, these traumatic experiences encompass not only the episodes of war, genocide, and forced migration from which their parents and families escaped and survived but also the struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health challenges from which their family members have suffered as a result (Field et al., 2011).

The lingering effects of such trauma can have a profound impact on how memories are passed down intergenerationally. Whereas some parents and family may openly share stories of the refugee experience with their children, others may deliberately choose not to, resulting in a silence on the subject that SEAA youth may struggle to interpret. As such, many SEAA students are keenly aware of the refugee experience, even if their relationship to it is only indirect or abstract. Acts of remembrance performed on campus represent attempts to establish a connection to a history SEAA students did not directly experience but which has implications for their sense of identity, both individually and collectively.

On college campuses, SEAA students may demonstrate acts of remembrance through cultural shows and productions, their organizing and activism within student organizations, or the materials that they produce as part of class assignments and coursework. These efforts enable them to forge a collective memory of the SEAA experience and a shared understanding of SEAA identity. Together, the forced migration experiences of earlier generations and the forged memories of the current generation contribute uniquely to the identity development of SEAA college students.

Rethinking Identity Development: Acts of Remembrance

As SEAA students learn about and retell the history of their families and communities, they internalize these stories and memories as part of a cohesive narrative about who they are.

By retelling and reenacting these narratives through acts of remembrance on campus, students are thus simultaneously constructing an individual and a collective sense of themselves as SEAA individuals. Developing one's identity in this way runs counter to how student affairs professionals and scholars typically understand this process and forces us to rethink key features of such development. We highlight two key features associated with SEAA identity development that deserve greater attention in how we theorize and approach college student development.

Rethinking Scale: Individual and Collective Dimensions of Identity

By participating in acts of remembrance, SEAA students explore the question of not only "Who am I as a SEAA person?" but also "Who are we as a SEAA community?" By embracing notions of community, acts of remembrance extend the scale of association beyond the people within students' immediate environment to include SEAA's around the country, past and present. Notably, this larger-scale identification with both existing and historical

communities transcends space and time, which parallels the experience of other diasporic populations (see Prashad, 2001). The process by which students actively forge a shared, collective understanding of SEAA identity thus occurs at multiple scales, constructed through a combination of memories of their own, their families', their ethnic communities', and the larger SEAA communities' experiences.

By performing acts of remembrance, SEAA students are learning about and developing a sense of racial identity through the dynamic interaction between individual and collective dimensions of identity. The individual dimension encompasses a student's relationship to their ethnic identity, their SEAA identity, and their identity as a refugee or the child of refugees (Museus et al., 2013). The collective dimension encompasses the degree to which a student feels a sense of connection to the broader ethnic, SEAA, and refugee communities, resulting from their relationship with immediate and extended family members, as well as their familiarity with the SEAA community's history of forced migration and resettlement.

The individual and collective dimensions, while distinct, are also intertwined. For example, as students learn more about the history of their families and their community, they construct narratives and forge memories that help them not only better understand where they fit within the larger narrative of the SEAA experience but also discover what it means for them to identify as a SEAA individual. Recognizing that identity development can operate at these multiple scales can enhance understanding of not only the SEAA student population but also college student development in general.

Rethinking Time: Individual and Generational Timelines

Another central and related feature of remembrance concerns the concept of time. Many racial identity development theories describe moments of dissonance in which students encounter situations that force them to critically reflect on or question their racial identity (Renn, 2012), with these episodes of dissonance occurring at various points throughout a student's life. Remembrance, however, does not share the notion of time as bounded by one's own life experiences. Although SEAA students may not have actually experienced the trauma of forced migration and resettlement, the community's collective memories of that experience can be passed down intergenerationally (Maffini & Pham, 2016) and still profoundly shape SEAA students' sense of identity.

Acts of remembrance therefore force us to rethink developmental timelines in ways that are not bounded by a student's own experiences but also include collective experiences across generations. While one's life experiences

and memories are certainly important, forged memories drawn from the lives and memories of past generations may be just as compelling for how students develop their identities. If so, this suggests that both the past and present have and will continue to play important roles in shaping students' identities. This idea has implications for supporting and serving SEAA and other undergraduate students.

Implications for Higher Education Practice

The unique features of SEAA students' experiences with racial identity described in this chapter raise a number of implications for higher education and student affairs, particularly in supporting SEAA students. First, it uncovers conceptual and practical considerations for effectively serving SEAA students. For example, the history of forced migration and refugee settlement in the United States, combined with the current social and political issues facing refugee communities, can together influence SEAA students' identity development in ways that are not necessarily shared by other undergraduate populations. Likewise, these defining experiences for SEAA students do not universally apply to Asian American students of other ethnic backgrounds. Thus, a firm understanding of the distinct histories and experiences of SEAs is critical for working successfully with students from different SEAA backgrounds.

Second, our discussion also points to the value that acts of remembrance hold in the identity development of SEAA students. Examples of such activities include those sponsored by SEAA student groups, including cultural shows, commemorations, and celebrations, as well as those sponsored by their institutions, including course offerings, ceremonial events, and high-profile guest speakers. Other opportunities for institutions to facilitate acts of remembrance include connecting students with the larger SEAA community by inviting SEAA authors, filmmakers, musicians, and other artists to campus and by developing partnerships with local community organizations, museums, and libraries to broaden educational outreach about the SEAA experience. Recognizing that these acts of remembrance are central to forging memories and constructing identities, faculty and staff may consider creating structured dialogue spaces during and after these activities for students to reflect upon and process questions related to their SEAA identities.

Last, the benefits associated with performing acts of remembrance may also apply to other college student populations. This is especially the case for those with shared refugee and intergenerational trauma experiences, such as students whose families were forced to escape places like Burma, Iraq,

Somalia, Bosnia, and Syria (Sangalang & Vang, 2017). Acts of remembrance may also be central to students from Native American, Indigenous, and other nonrefugee communities who have also endured intergenerational trauma (Bombay et al., 2009); the efforts of Native American and Indigenous students to recognize the tribal lands on which their institutions are built or host pow-wows and other cultural celebrations are just a few examples. Similarly, Black students who carry the traumatic postmemory of slavery and Jim Crow can benefit from institutional support of their acts of remembrance, which may range from Black History Month programming and Juneteenth commemorations to confronting their institution's history with racism and slavery.

Acts of remembrance are performed regularly by different groups of students on campus and may hold even more significance and value than we realize. It is thus imperative for higher education practitioners to make new meaning of these programs and events, many of which may appear to be merely educational, cultural, or social in nature, and reframe them as critical venues for identity development—and in doing so, also elevate the necessity to fund, support, and sustain these activities. Otherwise, students may well find themselves disconnected from their campuses, forcing them to seek other ways of connecting with a history that may be elusive or lost to them.

Conclusion

This chapter extends the current understanding of student affairs theory and practice by examining the roles that acts of remembrance based on forged memories play in the identity development of SEAA college students. Through acts of remembrance, SEAA students establish a connection to their roots by forging memories associated with a history of colonialism, genocide, and war that invariably resulted in distinct experiences of forced migration and resettlement in the United States. The intergenerational trauma passed down to SEAA students by their parents, families, and communities, which is central to defining the contemporary SEAA student experience, makes those distinct memories especially powerful in shaping their understanding of themselves and their bond to a larger community.

By illuminating how performing acts of remembrance facilitates the identity development of SEAA college students, we also uncover limitations with how student development is both theorized and practiced among student affairs scholars and practitioners. Key features associated with acts of remembrance and their contributions to the development of SEAA students challenge conventional notions of scale and time held by traditional

student identity development theories. Rethinking our understanding of and approach to both scale and time when considering students' development has promising potential for developing alternative perspectives that can better serve not only SEAA students but also the larger college student population.

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