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SEA Us Rise: Feminist Praxis of Intimacy in Southeast Asian American Youth Organizing

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Asian American Studies

by

Sophaline Chuong

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Dorothy Fujita-Rony, Chair  
Professor Judy Wu  
Professor Julia Lee

2019



## **DEDICATION**

To

my mother and family

in recognition of their resilience

and hope for the future.

Saum Arkoun

Thank you

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

SEA Us Rise: Feminist Praxis of Intimacy in Southeast Asian American Youth Organizing

By

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Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2019

Professor Dorothy Fujita-Rony, Chair

The everyday lives of Southeast Asian Americans are filled with the complex connections to the historical trauma in Southeast Asia, absence of memories, and silences in intimate spaces. A new political generation comprised of the 1.5<sup>th</sup> generation and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation are rising to address the issues in the community through a refugee feminist epistemology. Their youth organizing uses strategies of resilience and healing that are both transformative and empowering. This thesis examines the ways in which youth-centered organizations such as Khmer Girls in Action in Long Beach, California and the Southeast Asian Student Association at the University of California, Irvine are crucial for these processes to occur. I emphasize themes of memory, intimacy, and intergenerational transmission in the analysis of the organizations' cultural productions in order for Southeast Asian American youth to make meaning of their lives. Not only are they talking about their families' culture and history, they are creating intimate relationships in these community spaces. In addition, the predominately female leaders and activists in these organizations are performing gendered care, carrying on the responsibility of emotional connection and social reproduction. Hence, this thesis is centered on the resilient spirit of Southeast Asian American youth, with a particular focus on women and girls, who perform

the gendered care of fostering intimacy for Southeast Asian American youth to enable them to connect with their families and communities.



## INTRODUCTION

Every day, Southeast Asian American youth navigate and reconcile the traumas of the refugee generation and of their own.<sup>1</sup> As emerging second-generation leaders within the Southeast Asian American community, the youth are actively seeking possibilities to better the community in the afterlives of war, trauma, and silence. Despite these dire circumstances of public and private ruptures of the everyday, these young leaders create generative strategies of healing to bridge the psychosocial gaps and foster intimacy between community members. Employing activism as a transformative process, the youth are following traces of history and memory and confronting the past in order to move the community forward. Their journey of reflection grapples with questions inherent to refugee life, such as “What does survival mean for displaced communities when the everyday is filled with memories of violence and trauma?” Although their lives are shaped by hardship, the spirit of the Southeast Asian American community is reflected through the passionate and important work done by young leaders. Through examining these complex intergenerational barriers, we can begin to understand how Southeast Asian American youth foster resilience by creating meaning in relation to their families’ refugee histories through the use of memory, intimacy and intergenerational transmission.

The framework of a feminist refugee epistemology illustrates how resistance is being (re)produced as a legacy within Southeast Asian American community. Refugee feminist scholars Y n L  Espiritu and Lan Duong introduce the term “feminist refugee epistemology” as

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term “Southeast Asian Americans” to refer to ethnic communities such as Cambodians, Laotians, Vietnamese, Hmong and other ethnic groups from the former Indochina region who are in the United States. By youth, I mean high school and college age students who commonly are between the ages of 14-22. However, I want to note that this age range is not to suggest that these experiences are limited to this age group of Southeast Asian Americans, but to focus on youth-centered organizations in the context of my case study.

an alternative way of thinking about “war-based displacement as being not only about social disorder and interruption but also about social reproduction and innovation.”<sup>2</sup> Displacement for the Southeast Asian American community is both seen as a subject and site to interrogate how war creates socio-economic and political challenges. This can be seen especially as refugees develop innovative ways to survive in a new place. Thus, I use feminist refugee epistemology to demonstrate how refugees create meaningful connections generationally for both survival and rebirth in order to build community in the United States.

I argue that feminist refugee epistemology provides a generative framework to make visible the community-building activism of second-generation Southeast Asian American youth (particularly those who are women and girls), who were brought up in communities where their parents and families have survived war and violence. Feminist refugee epistemology, which builds upon the field of critical refugee studies, highlights the meaning-making of refugee activism for the Southeast Asian American community. Specifically, feminist refugee epistemology introduces a feminist refugee analysis that touches upon the “intimate politics of the everyday.”<sup>3</sup> In Espiritu and Duong’s essay “Feminist Refugee Epistemology: Reading Displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Art,” they demonstrate how the intimate politics of the everyday is displayed in the artwork of Vietnamese and Syrian refugees who reimagine their refugee lives through mundane objects such as letters.<sup>4</sup> Making the connection between the post-refugee memory of those who survived to those without direct experiences of war and trauma is essential for the future of these communities. Therefore, it is important to

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<sup>2</sup> Espiritu and Duong, 588.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 588.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 590.

examine not just these processes within the refugee generation, but also how resilient strategies are transmitted across generations.

In particular, women and young girls are assigned the responsibility to perform the labor of healing. These gender expectations uniquely position women and young girls in how they think about the past and present in order to envision a better future for their communities. This work is not exclusive to women and may also include men and other people who also engage in feminist praxis (defined below). However, women and young girls usually perform this kind of labor. As a result, the female youth leaders emerging within the community are continuing a gendered tradition of care by fostering intimacy to heal the collective spirit across generations.

Thus, intimacy as a practice and theory is intertwined with the identity of Southeast Asian American youth. Their activism within the refugee community enacts a feminist praxis of intimacy, utilizing deliberate political strategies to produce empowerment. Despite the conflicted realms of their identity as Southeast Asian Americans navigating life in the United States, intimacy allows for these youth to move across barriers of intergenerational silences. Along the way, Southeast Asians Americans are creating meaningful and transformative intergenerational relationships.

I argue that intimacy/healing as a practice, as opposed to simply an episteme or concept, is pivotal to the work of Southeast Asian American youth leaders because of the constant challenge of reconciling of their family members' refugee experiences with their post-refugee identities. Intimacy is important because of the powerful disconnect between people who interact on a daily basis. My framework of intimacy places communal connection at the forefront. Communal intimacy, the ways individuals relate to each other despite the inheritances of war, addresses the gaps between the past and the present, between (grand)parents and children, so that

people can collectively strive for a future beyond surviving. This is particularly crucial as these inheritances of war precisely attempt to disrupt familial and communal intimacies often through effects of ideology, religion, and displacement. Thus, intimacy is necessary to healing and vice versa.

My project expands on the works of Ma Vang, a critical refugee studies scholar, who specifically employs the concept of a feminist praxis of intimacy through care. Vang states that “care for refugees involves more than just survival from violence and displacement. It means attending to the health and well-being of a community in a way that incorporates its knowledge and understanding of self and community.”<sup>5</sup> Care emerges as a crucial intervention for the 1.5<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation who are in close proximity to the refugee generation in order to address the community’s issues. A feminist refugee epistemology shows that intimacy is a necessary process for survival.

In particular, my thesis focuses on second-generation Southeast Asian American youth organizations that have emerged and thrived in the afterlives of war. These organizations showcase how “practices of life making” are “radical acts of social struggle and freedom,” as argued by Yén Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong.<sup>6</sup> Not only are these youth thinking about life for themselves, but they are also thinking about life for their community. These youth are bridging the generational gap through the acts of owning their histories and preserving their families’ stories.

My project will subsequently employ a feminist methodology to focus on the practice of life making, intimate politics, and everyday engagement of youth leaders in creating their own intersectional identities. I utilize themes of memory, intimacy, and intergenerational transmission

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<sup>5</sup> Fujiwara and Roshanravan, 192.

<sup>6</sup> Espiritu and Duong, 588.

to emphasize the distinctive ways in which Southeast Asian American youth engage with the complexity of their generational identity and craft narratives via community organizing to explain their own experiences as well as their communities' histories. In particular, I will focus upon the underlying role of gender and the centrality of women in relation to the activist movement in the Southeast Asian American community. Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang in *Claiming Agency: On the Agency of Hmong Women* write “our objective is not merely to engage in a binary analysis about male versus female. Rather, we move beyond this dichotomy to illustrate how centering women in studies of history, family, society, media, art and sexuality will expand the body of knowledge about a Hmong lived experience while contributing to broader conversations on gender, diaspora, and agency.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, I am able to analyze the impact of feminist refugee epistemology on Southeast Asian American youth organizing, focusing on their generative practices of fostering communal intimacy.

To this end, my project will highlight two different organizations that demonstrate the importance of a feminist refugee epistemology: Khmer Girls in Action (KGA) and the Southeast Asian Student Association (SASA). My focus will be on two communal organizations as they both utilize holistic frameworks of empowerment as a strategy of resistance. First, Khmer Girls in Action (KGA) is a community-based organization in Long Beach, California, that focuses on social justice and activism for predominately Cambodian Americans but includes youth of other ethnic and racial backgrounds. Secondly, the Southeast Asian Student Association (SASA) is a campus organization at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), whose goal is to foster community among Southeast Asian American college students and promote access to higher education. I highlight these organizations as alternative spaces of refugee activism that focuses

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<sup>7</sup> Vang, C. Y., Nibbs, F., and Vang, M, viii.

on youth empowerment. By comparing these two organizations, I will demonstrate how Southeast Asian American youth access cultural connections a) within an ethnic enclave and broader community in Southern California and b) within the political climate of an educational institution. I will argue that youth-centered organizational spaces play a critical role in fostering resilient strategies as interventions of care. The healing and care in the context of these organizations are mutually connected to each other in my analysis of the organizations and the imaginative works of their participants.

These organizations are ideal candidates for examining the effectiveness of how feminist refugee epistemology offers a new way of knowing about war, trauma and silences. Community building and identity development are important practices for Southeast Asian Americans for generating healing possibilities. The feminist praxis of intimacy situates care as the foundation to connect between the past, present, and future. Therefore, youth belonging to these organizations become leaders in addressing silences, using cultural productions to create unique spaces for discussion and healing.

## WAR, TRAUMA, AND SILENCE

The wars and conflicts in Southeast Asia have created multiple forms of silence. Historical narratives and academic studies tend to ignore Southeast Asian Americans as well as the silences within families and communities who have survived these traumas. After all, information published about the Vietnam War and the Cambodian genocide tend to be told from the military and political perspective of the United States and its citizens, rather than the Southeast Asians who were impacted directly in the region. In addition, as Hmong scholar Chia Youyee Vang claims, most of the scholarly studies about Southeast Asian Americans focus on refugee resettlement rather than the generation who come of age post-war.<sup>8</sup> Also, the refugee resettlement studies tend to highlight important issues within the Southeast Asian American community, such as employment and cultural adaptation to the United States; however, this literature primarily measures refugee success in terms of their ability to become self-sufficient.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the field of critical refugee studies points to the continuity of the militarism and refugeeism that haunts the lives of those who survive trauma. In addition, these studies argue for the need to focus on the perspectives and narratives of the survivors. For generations, Southeast Asian American communities have experienced militarism, colonialism, and postcolonialism. Large-scale bombings throughout the region of Southeast Asia and mass atrocities, such as the Khmer Rouge genocide, have left an indelible mark on Southeast Asian and on world history. The fractures caused by these traumas live on in the forms of silences and erasures in published forms of history as well as within the families who survived these traumas. These silences in turn become the source of more fractures in the lives of the subsequent Southeast Asian generations who have resettled in the United States and elsewhere.

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<sup>8</sup> Yoo et al., 11.

<sup>9</sup> Yoo et al., 11.

To better understand these processes of violence, we must understand the impact of United States imperial politics and military activities in Southeast Asia which has resulted in a mass refugee resettlement across the globe. Espiritu argues that “military colonialism” and “(neo)colonial dependence” have transformed places like the Philippines and Guam. They served as military-based camps during the U.S. War in Southeast Asia and became transformed afterwards into refugee camps that housed and received thousands of refugees.<sup>10</sup> These refugee camps, created for the purpose of aiding the refugees, showcased the United States benevolence, thereby erasing U.S. culpability in enacting the violence that created refugees who needed to be saved.

The United States War in Southeast Asia also ignited additional forms of trauma. During the Khmer Rouge reign (1975-1979) in Cambodia, a byproduct of the political destabilization in that region, almost a third of the country’s population was wiped out due to “hard labor, disease, starvation, execution, and ‘disappearances,’” resulting in mostly women and children as the survivors.<sup>11</sup> These historical circumstances shaped the diasporic experience for those uprooted from their homeland. This is reflected in what scholar Cathy Schlund-Vials calls the “Cambodian Syndrome—which marries incomplete frames of forgetting to schemes of strategic remembering—[and] is articulated through politicized back-and-forths in the United States and Cambodia.”<sup>12</sup> Violence is not only physical but also psychosocial for refugees. Hence, trauma serves as a window to understand the refugee experience, especially for communities who have survived collective forms of death.

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<sup>10</sup> Espiritu, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Um, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Schlund-Vials, 14.



Ironically, in the process, the United States discourse characterizes Vietnam War refugees as “good refugees” to foster a positive image of the United States. This selective representation reinforces the image of the United States as the savior, despite its actions instigating the war in the first place. Furthermore, many refugees contend with larger societal tensions in the United States as they face hostilities during their resettlement process.

For the Southeast Asian community, the impact of historical trauma cannot be overstated. During the extended conflicts in Southeast Asia, for example, the Khmer genocide erased not only lives but also the memories for the Cambodian American community. Thus, memory and silence are significant dimensions of the Southeast Asian experience. As a consequence, many cultural and political tensions exist between the refugee generation and their post-Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge-era children living in the United States. In the article “Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Diaspora,” Khatharya Um discusses the complexity of the Southeast Asian American community: “No longer just a geographical location, the Southeast Asia in America, both in its tragedies and in its valiance, becomes a signifier for the living legacies of war, genocide, forced severance, and, not the least, the indomitable human capacity for resilience.”<sup>13</sup> Despite the fragments of trauma passed on to the post-generation, resilience enables survival. Consequently, I emphasize the strategies of resistance that the post-generation are creating to challenge these ruptures of memory and the overwhelming silence within their communities as well as the broader United States’ society.

In contrast to studies that depict the refugee as separated from war, the field of critical refugee studies instead exposes the refugee as a site of militarization and neo-imperial effects.

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<sup>13</sup> Um, 832.

Through this analysis, Southeast Asian Americans embody the effects of war, with critics such as Y en L  Espiritu defining them as “militarized refugee(es) rather than immigrants,” a distinction which demonstrates that the impact and trauma of war are not bounded.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Espiritu argues that critical refugee studies sees refugees as “intentionalized beings;” refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have taken it upon themselves to escape their war-driven conditions and to build new lives in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Hence, it is important for their often invisible narratives to be recognized and validated in history both in the academy and within their communities. History focused on the persons who experienced these events calls attention to how these larger historical moments bleeds into everyday lives, impacting how they see themselves and their way of knowing.

The forced diasporic movement and present conditions of Southeast Asian Americans reveal how the past continues to shape community formation. Many Southeast Asian refugees have survived war only to face further challenges and hardships in the United States. In *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*, scholar Eric Tang discusses the community formation of Cambodian Americans in the hyperghettos of New York City, where these refugees face continued violence and uncertainty for their survival.<sup>16</sup> In fact, housing communities, such as Valentine Avenue in the hyperghetto, remind refugees of the Thai camp life that the “Cambodian tenants had created.”<sup>17</sup> Communal intimacy was spatially fostered as the residents moved freely in the neighborhood and between homes. Cambodian Americans would keep their apartment doors open, converting “adjacent units...into communal space, and hallways, lobbies, and the stoop, neither public or private.” They developed these strategies to

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<sup>14</sup> Espiritu, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>16</sup> Tang, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 74.

respond to the violence within their communities that resulted partly from their presence. For example, “gang-related shootings between Latinos and Asians gangs proliferated in the 1990s, attributed to perhaps the sharp increase of the Cambodian community and the socio-economic displacement of the other existing ethnic groups such as Latinos and African Americans.”<sup>18</sup>

These conditions of violence, ethnic/racial competition and a feeling of being unsettled similarly exist in Southern California. However, in the midst of these hardships, community leaders seek to address these challenges and create alternatives to survive.

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<sup>18</sup> Huo et al., 151.

## MEMORY AND SILENCES

My study foregrounds the 1.5<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation to understand how they develop strategies to mend the ruptures and silences within their communities. The different kinds of silences have profound impact on individual, familial, and communal memory. Silences are not just an absence of telling; silence can communicate history through intimate intergenerational transmission. Even as older members of the refugee generation decide to not talk about the pain and violence from the past, their sense of loss and trauma can still be conveyed to the younger generation. In the Southeast Asian American community, silences work in contradictory and complex ways.

What does it mean to remember a history filled with silences, pain, and trauma and to pass it on to the next generation? In “Exiled Memory,” Um outlines the tensions of remembering and existing in silence, stating that

the struggle to remember for many of history’s battered subjects is therefore also a struggle for relevance. The consuming preoccupation with loss and extinction is not new for many Southeast Asian communities, but it is rendered acute by the circular, seemingly repetitious spirals of historical experiences in which trauma stands out as an undeniable feature of the countries’ pre- and postcolonial political landscape.<sup>19</sup>

The normalizing of silence is significant to the Southeast Asian American community, if members only understand the silences as trauma-filled. As this quote indicates, memory is deeply intertwined to the Southeast Asian American identity and continues to shape their experiences. Um argues that for the diaspora it is crucial to discuss memory, for “the source that connotes the solace of belonging and the security of sameness also evokes the memory of death and deprivation, signifying both an indelible connection and, simultaneously, a rupture.”<sup>20</sup> Thus,

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<sup>19</sup> Um, “Exiled Memory,” 834.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 833.

how can the younger generation feel connected to a community that they do not know and that they associate with genocide?

The process of cultivating intergenerational memory thus comes with layers of complexity, yet despite the silences and traumas in the community, other things can be communicated. Resilience can also be communicated across generations and has the power to shape the future. For the Southeast Asian community, storytelling creates alternative memories that break silences and simultaneously creates intimacy as a force of resilience. The history of one's community is what lives on in intergenerational memory. As a result, engaging in one's ethnic culture and doing memory work can lead to liberation and empowerment. Therefore, the act of finding one's voice creates meaningful connections across time and space. Even more importantly, this practice of opening up about the trauma and talking about the silences leads to healing. Generative strategies can occur through this process of resilience and strength.

Although Southeast Asian American youth may not themselves have witnessed or undergone the tragedy of war and genocide, as the children of refugees, they still remain deeply connected to the history from their ancestors' homeland. Often, the transmission of these memories are not explicit within the intimate space of family. This intergenerational connection might be filled with tension but nevertheless allows a sense of belonging to a broader community. Thinking through intergenerational memory becomes a productive way to address lingering effects of the past in order to carry forward memories for the future. Furthermore, the engagement of intergenerational memory is instrumental to the preservation of the Southeast Asian culture and identity.

Given the trauma and ruptures faced by these communities, community organizations provide alternative spaces for connections, healing and intimacy. Therefore, these spaces foster

connections as an important healing strategy and offer an alternative reproductive space. The social organizational space cultivate a sense of community, allow for intimate connections, and taps into the voice of Southeast Asian American youth to reveal their resilient power.

## **YOUTH-CENTERED ORGANIZATIONS AS SPACES OF REFUGEE ACTIVISM**

Youth-centered organizations such as KGA and SASA prioritize engaging with members within their community, especially the 1.5th and 2nd generation, to advocate for their needs. Focusing on youth, particularly by fostering cultural understanding, healing, and resilience, enables the Southeast Asian American community to reproduce in more healthy ways. For example, KGA as an organization focuses on the most pressing concerns, such as wellness and political voice, within their neighborhoods of Long Beach. In their organization's work with the youth, KGA focuses on community issues of social injustices while cultivating leadership capabilities. In addition, the range of activities SASA offers for college and high school youth builds a pathway to obtain higher education degrees while fostering community among those who might experience disconnection from their family. In advocating for higher education to local youth members, SASA offers an intimate mentorship opportunity to create a supportive environment for high school students. Overall, these spaces serve to connect students to the past while addressing the present and simultaneously looking forward to the future.

I focus on KGA and SASA to argue that they represent important spaces that exemplify feminist refugee epistemology and strategies of community empowerment. Specifically, I argue how organizations such as KGA and SASA offer transformative spaces to rethink healing. Both organizations illuminate resiliency in their values and their service to empower youth. They focus on meaning-making to create new spaces for healing and connection, for survival and resistance. Finally, they utilize these spaces to confront challenges and offer validation for the Southeast Asian American youth in their individual communities. These organizations highlight "belonging" as a critical ingredient in shaping the identity of Southeast Asian American youth.

The two organizations emphasize addressing the questions: “Where do I belong?” and “Who am I?” The answers to these queries are closely tied to the history, current experiences, and the future of the Southeast Asian American community.

Both KGA and SASA demonstrate that gendered forms of affective labor create the foundation for Southeast Asian American youth organizing. The importance of women’s and girls’ labor is showcased in both organizations, as demonstrated in their cultural and memory work. Additionally, both organizations offer gendered care to empower the youth with whom they work. For example, KGA make visible the issues facing young Khmer women, such as sexual harassment. SASA also organizes gendered care through their mentorship activities, since caring for others and preparing them for leadership are feminized forms of labor.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the organizations do not simply listen to the voices of Southeast Asian American youth but proactively equips them with the skills and tools to be leaders. Given these points, gender is intertwined into the practices of healing and social reproduction.

By using organizational archival materials to examine cultural productions sponsored by KGA and SASA, I explore the variety of ways Southeast Asian American youth talk about gender and simultaneously promote cultural understanding within their communities. These interventions help Southeast Asian American youth create memories and offer new interpretations of existing memories. These cultural engagements are essential to the process of creating a new generation of social justice leaders.

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<sup>21</sup> Eddy, Pamela Lynn, et al., 220.



## **KHMER GIRLS IN ACTION**

Khmer Girls in Action started in 1997 under the original project name HOPE for Girls in Long Beach, California, home to the largest Cambodian American population in the United States. The project was part of a larger organization called Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health that went on to create a reproductive freedom tour to educate and mobilize the community. The organization worked with Asian American ethnic minorities located in relatively dense and growing neighborhoods, such as the Southeast Asian American community in Oakland, California. During this time period, gang violence was prevalent in these urban settings, including Long Beach, as “gangs provided refuge and a community for the many Cambodian youths” facing academic and familial difficulties.<sup>22</sup> I highlight this context to unpack how KGA transformed and created an organization to focus on the unique challenges facing Cambodian Americans.

KGA recognized the need for services and support for young Cambodian women, thereby facilitating their activism. From a pilot program of 14 girls to an organizing agency, KGA continues to engage members in youth-related activities. The organization empowers Khmer girls and women to engage with issues relating to their identities, including leadership development and community organizing. Eventually, the mission of the organization expanded to conduct outreach at local high schools, developing programs such as “Invest in Youth,” a campaign seeking to build political and civic engagement while advocating for an equitable distribution of city resources.<sup>23</sup> These activities demonstrate KGA’s focus on mobilizing Cambodian youth for social justice issues.

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<sup>22</sup> Hou, 152.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://kgalb.org/what-we-do/action-research/> (accessed May 03, 2019).

The organization's mission is "to contribute to the movement for social, economic and political justice by building a strong, progressive, and sustainable community institution led by Southeast Asian women and girls."<sup>24</sup> To further accomplish the mission of KGA, professional staff members were needed. The staff is predominately female, with many leadership positions filled by Khmer women. The first Khmer American Executive Director hired was Suely Ngouy in 2006. Historically, Khmer women performed and were pressured to take the role of being the homemakers. These expectation shaped gender roles in both the community and in familial spaces. The KGA organizers challenge these traditional roles yet also reclaimed transformed notions of them to perform radical acts of care. They are building a generation to heal both the past wounds and make a better future.

To accomplish the organization's goals, the KGA staff conducted research on the Cambodian American community, particularly the challenges facing their youth. The 2011 report "Stepping into Long Beach: Exposing how Cambodian American Youth are Under Resourced, Over Policed and Fighting Back for their Wellness" demonstrates the organization's emphasis on focusing on youth issues and developing youth leaders.<sup>25</sup> To publicize their programs, KGA published newsletters and even created their own publishing press called Banana Tree Press.

KGA also provided creative outlets for expressing the identity of Southeast Asian American youth. The organization's cultural productions are the result of a feminist refugee epistemology developed through creativity and imagination. By introducing the opportunity to write poetry and conduct oral histories, the organization offers Cambodian youth ways of knowing and reflecting about their families and communities. KGA empowers the youth to

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<sup>24</sup> See KGA's annual newsletter for 2014-2015 (accessed May 03, 2019).

<http://kgalb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Newsletter-2014-2015-Know-History-Know-Self.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> See [http://kgalb.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/KGA\\_LongBeach\\_report\\_web.pdf](http://kgalb.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/KGA_LongBeach_report_web.pdf) (accessed May, 5 2019).

utilize their voice. In addition, the peer leaders work together to uplift each other through their gender-specific mentorship programs, such as the Young Women's Empowerment Program.<sup>26</sup> The young girls participating in the mentorship program often return back to KGA as youth leaders. In other words, KGA represents an alternative space for cultural memory work and creates a legacy of change by socially reproducing female leaders who own their stories.

As one example of cultural memory work, KGA uses oral history as a generative strategy to help youth rethink the experiences of the Southeast Asian American community. Oral histories create opportunities for young women to interview older women, thereby fostering an understanding of how everyday people shape history. The intimate practice of an oral history between familial members often highlights the importance of women's roles across generations. For example, the oral histories in *Her Turn to Talk: Poetry & Oral Histories by and About Young Khmer Women* (2003) are created by young Khmer women. Rotha Dom's oral history of her aunt Hout Dom, who is about to turn sixty and the eldest among her siblings, shows how these intergenerational dialogues can foster intimacy and connection. In the introduction to the oral history, Rotha's provides insights into the relationship dynamics between her and her aunt:

I saw my aunts' eyes about to close, as she lay on the family room sofa. As I tried to tiptoe away, I heard her shaky voice call me. She asked if I was hungry, but I replied that I could eat at another time. She called me over, and I told her I needed to interview her for homework. She sat straight up, with her gray-white hair, ready to talk.<sup>27</sup>

Rotha as a young teenager is conscious of the generation gap and respects her aunt as demonstrated by Rotha trying to be quiet and to leave the room, when Hout wants to rest. In turn, Hout expresses concern for Rotha, asking if her niece is hungry. Their intimate interactions give insight to their shared sense of intergenerational responsibility.

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<sup>26</sup> See <http://kgalb.org/what-we-do/programs/> (accessed May 5, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> *Her Turn to Talk*, 48.

Interestingly, Rotha chose to describe the interview as homework to facilitate a sense of purpose for conducting her aunt's oral history. Often, homework or an association to education provides justification for members of the community to participate in the difficult experience of recalling or speaking about past trauma. Thus, Rotha navigates the gap between the refugee and post-refugee generations by justifying the educational value of oral history. Hout's immediate willingness to participate in the interview likely stems from a survivor mentality that emphasizes that refugees must assimilate and acculturate to the current society. The 1.5 and second generation Southeast Asian youth like Rotha must navigate the reluctance to speak about the past while also acknowledging and respecting those who seek silence.

One way to combat these silences is through storytelling, a feminist praxis of intimacy. When Southeast Asian American youth are the solicitors and listeners of the past, oral history can constitute a healing practice. In *War, Genocide and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work*, Cathy Schlund-Vials examines the strategic use of oral history in the memory work of Cambodian artists as ways of resistance to reimagine "alternative sites of justice, healing and reclamation."<sup>28</sup> The connection between justice, healing and reclamation makes transnational and intergenerational story particularly meaningful.

In addition to facilitating oral history practices, KGA also encourages exploration of different art forms. For example, Yellow Lounge is a program series that features Cambodian youth performing spoken word. Another realm of creative expression is writing poetry. The KGA collection *Her Turn to Talk* includes poetry by young Khmer women, such as Rotha Dom's poem entitled "I Hated." Organized into two stanzas, the first list of aspects of Rotha's

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<sup>28</sup> Cathy Schlund-Vials, 17.

life and identity that she “hated.” Interestingly, the same items that she listed then appears in the second section of the poem, which is centered on those that she “missed.”

I hated...

Wearing long dangling earrings  
Buying shoes that lighted up in the dark  
Putting on bright pink dresses for family gatherings  
My father holding my hand, when we crossed the street  
Sharing room with my younger brother  
Taking pictures in a row of oldest to youngest  
Being asked if I was Chinese or Japanese

The physical items and familial relationships in this stanza relate to what Espiritu and Duong foreground in their discussion of feminist refugee epistemology, the everydayness of refugee life. Lines two through four focus on clothing and adornments that the narrator hates, the “long dangling earrings” and “bright pink dresses,” items that connote femininity. The poem implies that the gendered costuming expectation impacted the narrator’s life negatively. Then, the lines five through seven of the poem dwells on the social hierarchy experienced by a young Khmer woman. The narrator’s father’s action of holding her hand illustrates the feeling of being restricted as a daughter, someone who must be supervised when crossing a street. Furthermore, she is expected to share space with her younger male sibling, an act that grooms her for the gendered role of familial care. The age hierarchy within the family is clearly demonstrated by the order in which they line up for the group photograph. Finally, line eight points out the illegibility and invisibility of being Khmer, as the narrator is only given the ethnic options of being Chinese or Japanese.

Interesting, the narrator of the poem revisits her “hates” and reinterprets them as objects and experiences that she also “missed.”

I missed...

Wearing the earrings my mother gave me on my 7<sup>th</sup> birthday  
Playing hide-and-go seek in the dark, with my shoes lighting up  
Putting on pretty colored dresses to play match up with my sisters  
My father holding my hand tight, when he guided me across the street  
My brother telling me stories about how he had fallen off the swings  
Making goofy faces at the camera, when we were supposed to act mature  
Saying No, I am Cambodian<sup>29</sup>

The feeling of “missed” can connote either emotional loss or a lack of realization. When read as a conversation, lines ten through twelve frames the value of the clothing items in terms of their emotional valence, most notably through memories connected with social interactions that the author had with her family members and friends. The earrings are a birthday present from her mother, and the frilly dresses match her sisters’ clothing. In addition, the father is depicted as a protector rather than a disciplinarian. The change from “crossing” to “guiding” reflects a generational responsibility of care. The feelings of holding tight conveys strong emotion as well. In addition, the narrator views her brother as someone with whom she shares stories and builds a connection, rather than as the recipient of the narrator’s resentment for intruding into her privacy. In line fifteen, the memories of taking family photographs evoke humor rather than hierarchy. And, the last line, “Saying No, I am Cambodian,” could be read in two ways. The narrator may have not spoken these words, thereby missing the opportunity proclaim her ethnic identity. Or, the narrator may have repeatedly used the phrase. By doing so, she validated the acceptance of herself, her culture, and her history.

Overall, the poem conveys the sense of how identity shifted over time. The narrator, who once hated aspects of her Cambodian identity, grew to long for these same details and memories. The author communicates a transformative process of care that allowed her to understand her relationship to her family in a new light. This practice of intimate reflection can help create

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<sup>29</sup> *Her Turn to Talk*, 42

leaders in the community, individuals who utilize and share strategies to heal their past and grow towards a future that they envision.

Focusing on the feminist praxis of intimacy reveals what might be invisible in these interactions. The cultural memory work of both the poem and oral history reveals the importance of intergenerational intimacy. The oral history offers the opportunity for direct and indirect communication. Rotha Dom, when interviewing her aunt, both seeks to preserve her family's story yet also respect the desire for silence. In contrast, Rotha's poetry offers a meditation of her story and life that also serves as reflection on intergenerational relationships. In the poem, the dialogue is not between Rotha and her aunt but rather between Rotha's present and past selves. By doing this reflection and reaching a new understanding, both the poem and oral histories highlight the power of intergenerational care.

## **SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENT ASSOCIATION**

SASA utilizes similar strategies as KGA in utilizing a feminist praxis of care to foster youth leadership. I chose to focus on SASA because of my own experience as a student and a leader in the organization. The challenges facing Southeast Asian American students on university campuses are connected to the history of the community. According to the Southeast Asia Resource Center, the average degree attainment rates for a bachelor's degrees for Southeast Asian Americans ranges from 14% to 27% compared to the 54% for Asian Americans overall. The statistics reveal the limited educational capital within the community which may lead to social isolation on university campuses. However, having cultural connections in higher education settings can affect Southeast Asian American students' likelihood of success.<sup>30</sup>

To address the need for community and mentorship, SASA was established in 2012 at University of California, Irvine. The organization serves as a network for Southeast Asian American students, promotes cultural awareness on campus, and very importantly creates a community for these students. The executive board of SASA is composed of student leaders with diverse ethnic backgrounds who want to empower the Southeast Asian community and inspire future leaders. They recognize the need for a coalitional effort to uplift a community that has undergone violence and trauma. SASA differs from KGA, then, as it brings together multiple nationalities and ethnicities to create one community with the underlying connection to histories of war and genocide in the former Indochina. While not all of the SASA leaders identify as Southeast Asian Americans so much as to their specific ethnicities, such as Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, or Laotian, there is shared commitment to addressing common challenges in the Southeast Asian American community.

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<sup>30</sup> Museus et al., 499.



Even as an organization focused on college students, SASA tries to foster intergenerational forms of intimacy by utilizing healing strategies of care. Most of the programming work done by the executive board is centered on retaining Southeast Asian American college students within the university and connecting with those outside of the campus through outreach. As the organization's goal is to build and strengthen the Southeast Asian community, they foster spaces to share stories and address challenges facing college students. Thus, the student-initiated and student-led programs organized by SASA are ways to unite and empower Southeast Asian American youth, both on the university campus and beyond.

For example, since 2013, the SEA Success Annual Youth Conference introduced high school youth to higher education through college workshops, dialogues, and other peer-bonding activities. High school students in the local community are invited to participate in the conference along with educators and community members. Since its inception, SEA Success has served over 400 students. One participant at SEA Success 2014 describes her experience of "learning more in depth of" her culture and history; after learning the history of the Southeast Asian community and discussing how stereotypes can impact her, she declared, "I understand myself now."<sup>31</sup> The conference workshops for the high school students creates a space for them to discuss their identity. The intimate connection between identity and history is conveyed through the response of the 2014 participant.

The SEA Success conference is part of the long-term mentorship program, called Southeast Asian Leaders (SEAL), which seeks to motivate high school students to reach their full educational and leadership potential. The curriculum of SEAL aims to empower Southeast Asian American youth through education, cultural awareness, community consciousness, and

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<sup>31</sup> See <https://youtu.be/1REwVcfMibY> (06:42) (accessed April 29, 2019).

academic support. To accomplish this, SASA works closely with Garden Grove Unified School District, which has a strong representation of diasporic Vietnamese Americans. The educators and community-based organizations in the district collaborate with UCI students to reach underrepresented and underserved students in the local community.

Another SASA program, the Southeast Asian Retention through Creating History (SEARCH), is a mentorship program for incoming first-year students and transfer students. As Southeast Asian American history is not commonly discussed in primary education, SEARCH provides the space to engage with the students' cultural history. To accomplish this, the program holds seminars that explore Southeast Asian history, culture, gender roles, education, and politics, which provide a unique foundation for students to embrace their identity. SEARCH establishes a safe space for students to find ongoing support and guidance, as well as to address transitional issues of becoming college students at UCI. The program seeks to cultivate young Southeast Asian leaders through training in leadership, public speaking, community building, and personal growth, so that they can apply their newfound knowledge to the Southeast Asian community and beyond.

Like KGA, SASA seeks creative ways to foreground the importance of memory and intimacy. These are foundational to the projects SASA creates and cultivates in their participants. For example, SEARCH created a collaborative spoken word video project to give voice to the Southeast Asian American youth experience, entitled "Where I'm From." Overall, this spoken word media project showcases student stories about reclaiming their Southeast Asian American culture. The project explains:

The video explores the Southeast Asian Archives, to begin the process of decolonizing the mind. A person with a decolonized mind accepts their past refugee and immigrant experience, love[s] their present and creates their future. The

storytellers challenge you to redefine and reclaim "hxstory" that is lost in educational spaces. Open a book, decolonize your mind.<sup>32</sup>

The concept of “decolonizing the mind” challenges the silences and ruptures that Southeast Asian American youth tend to experience. Thus, the video project opens with a male student opening a book, which the beginning of a journey of discovery. The memories of both the refugee and American-born generation are presented. The Southeast Asian American youth not only talks about ethnic culture such as “classical music on [the artist from Cambodia] Sisamouth,” but also American culture such as “scrunchies,” a hair accessory. This part of the spoken word piece shows the complex identity these youth constantly navigate as they are said right after another. Both “classical music on Sisamouth” and “scrunchies” are symbols of popular culture significant to time and culture with one representing Southeast Asian culture and the other representing the United States. The order of these cultural objects also gestures to the speaker’s Cambodian American identity, placing his identification with Cambodian culture first and then American culture second. This is an example of a feminist praxis of intimacy as the speaker makes meaningful connections between his own identity to his family’s culture. In doing so, youth like this student show the complex bridging of cultures for the emerging leaders of the second generation seeking to build community connections.

One portion of the video features the students physically visiting the Southeast Asian Archive at the UCI Libraries and seeing artwork collections from refugee camps during the post-Vietnam War resettlement process. In the video, the Southeast Asian American youth in SEARCH engage with the memories portrayed by the artists in order to talk about their own familial stories. One Southeast Asian American narrator shares that “I am from a widowed father who fought during the Secret War and who is still fighting to just reclaim our untold history of

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<sup>32</sup> See <https://youtu.be/rudh23GBqBE> (accessed April 28, 2019).

who the Hmong people are.”<sup>33</sup> The line reveals the intimate connections between daughter and father and their shared responsibility for telling the history of the Hmong people. The narrator as a daughter thinks about how her father continues to fight to reclaim an untold story and that she has inherited this legacy of struggle. Instead of remaining as trauma, memories of untold and hence unheard history become a source of strength, as other narrators discuss their feelings of resiliency and responsibility to preserve these collective memories. Also the role of gender is illustrated in the narrator’s statement. The daughter must navigate the burden of her father’s inheritance. The public retelling of private familial and personal memories allows Southeast Asian American youth to move through space and time; they learn to understand their family and community history, thereby nurturing the love of their present self and creating possibilities for their future.

Another program organized by SASA is the Southeast Asian Graduation (Southeast Asian Grad), a celebratory event for students to recognize their educational achievements. Family, friends, and community members are invited to the ceremony to experience this moment with the graduates. The event acknowledges the importance of both individual recognition, given the socio-economic instability inherent to the refugee experience, as well as the need for a strong sense of community in order to unite and inspire others as leaders for the future. However, one difference with this program and the larger commencement ceremony is the opportunity to feature the voice of the graduates. After receiving their certificate, the graduates are invited to address the audience directly. The open forum is an example of how the program fosters intergenerational communication by providing a space for the younger generation to talk to their parents, grandparents, as well as siblings. The graduates are able to share a little about

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<sup>33</sup> See <https://youtu.be/rudh23GBqBE> (02:36) (accessed April 28, 2019)

themselves in a public yet also intimate space. Even more important, SASA celebrates Southeast Asian graduates for their accomplishments in front of their support systems. Parents are able to listen to their children, standing and speaking on stage. Almost all of the graduates express their thanks to the people who have raised and supported their educational journeys toward graduation.

SASA offers a holistic set of programs to support potential, entering, and graduating students. These activities grant the possibility for Southeast Asian American youth to discover and articulate their stories, a vital practice given the silences within Southeast Asian American communities. The student leaders are creating spaces for their peers to reflect on their family's history and culture as a form of resistance. The organization represents an alternative familial space for these college students, many of whom are separated from their biological families while they are navigating college life. SASA's programming offers generative strategies to make meaning of the past and present in order to move the community forward. The focus on mentorship, intergenerational understanding and communication, as well as social reproduction of leadership collectively constitute a feminist refugee praxis of intimacy.

## CONCLUSION

Both KGA and SASA serve as alternative spaces for youth empowerment. While the organizations offer similar political projects, there are key differences in their approaches. The context of the organizations are different, in that KGA serves a working class community and SASA operates at an elite university. This class difference shapes the funding of the organizations. Local grants and city funding help to support KGA. In contrast, SASA receives grants from different resources on the UCI campus. In addition, KGA operates as a grassroots organization, located in and directly addressing the needs of the Cambodian American community. Interestingly, SASA has organizational mobility and flexibility, situated as an organization with access to UCI as well as surrounding communities and with a revolving leadership due to the turnover of college students. In contrast, KGA is able to sustain its mission and programs through the hiring of professional staff and the cultivation of youth leaders who tend to emerge from their programming activities. The two organizations illuminate the diverse forms of youth organizing in the Southeast Asian American community at this pivotal time.

A new generation of Southeast Asian American youth has begun to address the legacies of their families and communities. Their way of being and knowing about the conditions of war as well as the trauma and silences surrounding their parents' experiences profoundly shape their activism. Interpreting their activism through feminist refugee epistemology reveals the importance that they place on fostering intergenerational intimacy and socially reproducing community leadership. The combined focus on the activism of Southeast Asian American youth leaders and their practices of intimate care constitute a strategic response to the political and socio-economic forces which silence the voices of their community.

Intimacy is a deliberate political strategy and a form of resistance. Meaningful intergenerational connections are essential for the survival of the Southeast Asian American community, as members removed from direct experiences with war and genocide continue to confront the afterlives of trauma. However, it is difficult to navigate the historical conditions and face the unique challenges for generations who moved at young ages or were born in the United States. Despite these conditions, youth leaders are creating and enacting a feminist praxis of intimacy and care which demonstrate the transformative process of healing. Southeast Asian American youth are addressing the silences and gaps in their families and communities, allowing them to move across time and generation.

Youth-centered organizations are alternative spaces that illustrate the care and empowerment needed so that Southeast Asian American youth can connect with their community. That is why organizations such as KGA and SASA cultivate creative ways for youth to practice validation of their culture and history. The owning of one's stories creates an understanding of self and the complexity of identity. Poetry, spoken word, oral histories, and community events facilitate intimate connection. These social organizations continuously access the resilient strength of their elders to cultivate younger leaders who are moving forward and sustaining the community. While there are multiple and different kinds of spaces to address the range of community mobilization and the possibilities for empowering one another, activism as a form of care is central to building them. Therefore, their activism shows how a feminist praxis of intimacy is essential for Southeast Asian American youth organizing.

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