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Negotiating (In)Visibility in the Cham American Diaspora

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

By

Asiroh Cham

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Negotiating (In)Visibility in the Cham American Diaspora

By

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Master of Arts in Asian American Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Thu-huong Nguyen-vo, Chair

ABSTRACT:

The United States is home to the largest Cham population outside of Asia. The Cham's complex heritage is often overlooked in both Southeast Asian and Asian American Studies despite a 2,000-year documented presence in Southeast Asia and over thirty years of Cham war refugees living in the United States. This thesis investigates questions of recognition in the Cham diaspora in America and the methods by which the Cham choose to narrate and negotiate their identities within social spheres, public institutions, and their own families; as an indigenous ethnic minority most of the world has never heard of. Through an ethnographic approach of in-depth oral history interviews with Cham Americans in California, this case-study demonstrates the dynamic ways that Cham people employ tactics of visibility/recognition in pragmatic ways to ensure survival. This study also reveals how Cham American experiences complicate the liberal model as Cham identity is not so easily recognizable given the history of genocide, erasures, and discourses that have marked the Cham as 'extinct.' Moreover, Cham Americans are not necessarily engaging in forms of political or official state recognition as an identifiable group despite being nearly invisible across various institutional levels in the United States.

The thesis of Asiroh Cham is approved.

Victor Bascara
Keith L. Camacho
Thu-huong Nguyen-vo, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2012

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“To get knowledge of the culture and history back, attempts to resist and reverse this impression that we’re not extinct, we’re so marginal or invisible that we couldn’t possibly matter to anyone, anywhere, even to ourselves.” ~S.F.¹

“We’re just not known. No one knows who we are. You’re confused as a child. You want to be known. I say you’ve never heard of me because of genocide. We are survivors like our parents and we always find a way to keep living.” ~B.G.²

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is often rather wearing on my nerves...You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re part of all that sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you.” ~ Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man³

The first two excerpts above are expressed by two Cham individuals who articulate the effects of being unknown. This underscores how the Cham, as a people, have negotiated visibility as a people for centuries through multiple borders, places, and spaces; as an indigenous ethnic minority dispossessed from the ancestral homeland (modern central Vietnam). The aforementioned interview selections are from two second generation Cham Americans. As part of the Cham community, I too, have had to confront the inheritances of these legacies of mass violence and genocide, which places at the forefront questions of our legibility and visibility as a people here in the United States and the larger diaspora. This project situates visibility as a category which is flexible; visibility depends on legibility within certain discourses which can render Cham people (in)visible.⁴ Growing up, I never read or saw any books on the Cham until

¹ S.F., interview by author, Northern CA, January, 2011.

² B.G., interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, January, 2012.

³ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2nd ed, (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 3-4.

⁴ I use the term (in)visible and (in)visibility in this thesis to situate the Cham diaspora’s assumed invisible status but the (in)

1996 when I read Ben Kiernan's *Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge*. There is a general recognition among the Cham that the community has endured multiple genocides and attempted erasures at various historical junctures in both Vietnam and Cambodia. This history is transmitted in the Cham community through ruptured retellings or understandings of these stories as circulated through family structures across generations.

The Cham are an indigenous minority with historical ties to the Champa Kingdom that occupied present-day Vietnam for over 1,000 years before conquest by the Vietnamese, Champa's northern neighbor in 1471. This moment signified the beginning of a cycle of violence that would permeate this disputed territory for centuries. The Cham became minorities in their own homeland and had to negotiate their position as a marginalized ethnic minority within the settler colonial state of Vietnam and later on when it became a French Indochina colony. Many Chams fled Vietnamese persecution to neighboring Cambodia, living rather peacefully there until the Khmer Rouge genocide from 1975-1979; when visibility as a distinct minority became dangerous and resulted in the deaths of up to 500,000 Cham Muslims.⁵ Thousands of Cham people fled Cambodia including my mother due to these atrocities. In neighboring Vietnam, the war waged on until the Fall of Saigon in April of 1975, which led to a mass exodus of people from Vietnam. The Chams were also part of this population who were forced to migrate, like my father who fought for the South Vietnamese army (ARVN) and could not remain in Vietnam due to fear of persecution and threats of being imprisoned in the Communist 're-education camps.' It

designates that it not a fixed, static situation but rather that to be visible or invisible is through a process of negotiation as I will expand on later in the introduction.

⁵ Ysa Osman, *Oukoubah: Justice for the Cham Muslims Under the Democratic Kampuchea Regime* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2002), 3.

is estimated that between 1975 and 1990, over 2 million refugees left Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.⁶ The Chams who fled destruction of their homelands due to the conflicts in Southeast Asia would end up dispersed in various parts of the globe including Thailand, Malaysia, France, Australia, and the United States. The United States is home to the largest Cham population outside of Asia.

This thesis investigates questions of recognition in the Cham diaspora in the United States and the methods by which the Cham choose to narrate and negotiate their identities within these conditions of (in)visibility, as an indigenous ethnic minority that most of the world has never heard of. Cham invisibility and illegibility in the United States is symptomatic of this history of genocide by the nation state of Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge. These genocides attribute to making the Cham unrecognizable here in the United States as a people without an identifiable nation-state. This project also explores the multiple dimensions of Cham invisibility in America and the contemporary ways that Chams in California are traversing the complexities of recognition and visibility. Drawing inspiration from Ellison's Invisible Man detailing the everyday effects of a hyper-visibility and invisibility as chronicled by an unnamed African American narrator, I seek to explore the lived effects of Cham Americans' negotiation, confrontation, and understanding of (in)visibility through engagements within the social sphere, institutions, and their own families.

I employ oral history methodology through interviews with Cham Americans who live in Northern and Southern California. I analyze the various ways that Cham people themselves

⁶ Jeremy Hein, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: a Refugee Experience in the United States*. (New York: Twayne, 1995), 1.

choose to narrate their own histories, identities, and stories. I acknowledge oral histories' mediated nature and I am less interested in the authenticity or truth of stories but rather the ways that Cham people may remember, deploy, and re-tell (or not tell) stories of erasures, genocide, resettlement, and other motifs which inform the Cham American experience. I am attentive to how Cham Americans make visible their own stories and histories and the means through which these stories circulate in the population, between and across generations. In this connotation, I consider visibility and invisibility as processes, not as a permanent status or marker, through my examination of the ways that Chams engage in these processes in mainstream American society.

I refer to the Cham American community as a diaspora but given the dispossession of Cham people beginning with colonization by the Vietnamese state, the term “indigenous” also helps to better situate the specificities of the Cham experience. David Maybury-Lewis acknowledges a broader definition of “indigenous” by moving beyond the paradigm of who was there “first” – the often employed, autochthonous argument. He asserts that this definition works well for places like America and Australia but in places like Africa and Eurasia, it does not hold up as effectively given that the borders and territories were less clear. He proposes that the term *indigenous peoples* should also be inclusive of peoples who have been, “conquered by invaders who are racially, ethnically, or culturally different from themselves.”⁷ James Clifford employs the term “indigenous diaspora” which combines the indigenous condition and migratory circumstances that often accompany the indigenous experiences. Clifford states, “Diasporic

⁷ David Maybury-Lewis, “Genocide against Indigenous Peoples,” in Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide ed. By Alexander Hinton (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 43.

ruptures and connections – lost homelands, partial returns, relational identities, and world-spanning networks – are fundamental components of indigenous experience today.”⁸

The indigenous experience has often been characterized as one located in a rooted, landed sense, confined by the boundaries of the ancestral territories. With the rise of globalization and mass displacement due to wars and global conflicts, the reality is countless indigenous peoples have been uprooted or have migrated beyond the ancestral lands and have re-established themselves as indigenous diasporas in various parts of the world. With the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples in 2007, we are witnessing a critical moment in indigenous movements and networks spread all over the globe. In the case of the Cham, there is a strong connection with the ancestral territory in what was known as the Champa Kingdom, a ‘homeland.’ Despite the contentiousness of using the term “indigenous,” I adopt the use of indigenous, as a people “defined by long attachment to a locale and by violent histories of occupation, expropriation, and marginalization.”⁹ The Cham attachment to a locale is not solely centered just on the connection with the land but also through the memories of the place as circulated through community narratives. By employing the term “indigenous diasporas,” I intend to make visible the history of forced migration of the Cham people across multiple borders and spaces throughout different moments in history. Utilizing the term “indigenous” on its own can imply a fixity and rootedness which can render invisible the complex processes of migration which inform the Cham experience in the contemporary period given the recent Cold

⁸ James Clifford, “Varieties of Indigenous Experience: Diasporas, Homelands, Sovereignities,” in *Indigenous Experience Today*, ed. in Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn. (Oxford, NY: Berg, 2007), 217.

⁹ *Ibid*, 198

War conflicts in Southeast Asia which has led to Cham resettlement in the United States and other places of asylum.

Recognition/Visibility

David Goldberg in his discussion of visibility states that it “carries with it connotations that tend to be appealing – access, opportunity, ability – in short, power; and invisibility has tended to connote absence, lack, incapacity – in short, powerlessness.”¹⁰ It is comfortable to have positive associations with the idea of visibility and recognition; particularly in our multiculturalist society and the promise that recognition and visibility can bring to specific communities particularly through identity politics and the politics of recognition.

Recuperating Cham American History from a Double Dispossession

In order for Cham people to be visible as a group, they must first recover their history. However, it is complicated to make visible Cham history due to the historical dispossessions that have eclipsed the Cham. In James Booth’s reading of Ralph Ellison’s landmark novel Invisible Man, he argues that the novel plots dispossession as a kind of forgetful invisibility and makes evident, “the losses of a homeland, language, and religion are only the initial forms of the ongoing dispossession of the African American past.”¹¹ Applying Booth’s analysis of dispossession in the Cham American case, I contend that Chams have to confront a double dispossession in terms of historical memory to be able to situate (and make visible) their experiences in the dominant American society.

¹⁰ David Theo Goldberg, “In/Visibility and Super/Vision Fanon on Race, Veils, and Discourses of Resistance,” in *Fanon: a Critical Reader*, ed. by Gordon, Lewis R., T. Denean. Sharpley-Whiting, and Rene T. White, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 179.

¹¹ James Booth, “The Color of Memory: reading Race with Ralph Ellison,” *Political Theory* 36: 683 (2008), 692-694.

The first dispossession is the Vietnamese state's conquest of Champa which began in 1471; a history that is barely legible and footnoted as simply "absorption." As Mary Heidhues writes, "Its manpower [the Vietnamese state Dai Viet] was an asset in the rivalry with Champa, and eventually led to the latter's disappearance, or rather absorption."¹² But this process of absorption which began with the attack of Champa's capital, Vijaya, in the fifteenth century was brutal and devastating for the Cham population. The records show that the Vietnamese massacred 60,000 Cham and took another 30,000 Chams as prisoners.¹³ Ben Kiernan notes that in 1470, Dai Viet's emperor announced he was ready to "annihilate" the Chams and in 1471 destroyed the Cham capital and slaughtered 60,000 Chams. He explains Dai Viet's policies of banning all Vietnamese from marrying Cham women, forcing Chams to follow Vietnamese customs, and its systematic captures of additional Cham people as prisoners. Kiernan documents that the Vietnamese King eventually ordered all captured Cham people to be massacred: in 1509, all Chams in captive by the Vietnamese were executed.¹⁴ Kiernan writes, "While intermittently pursuing genocidal policies against Chams...Dai Viet had vastly expanded its territories."¹⁵ Kiernan is one of the only scholars to refer to the Vietnamese conquest as a 'genocidal project' in a published text. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam continues to disavow this dark era and deploys national narratives of victimization as having always been the colonized; never as the colonizer or settler-colonial regime. Similarly, the Khmer Rouge genocide is another

¹² Mary Somers Heidhues, *Southeast Asia: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2000), 92.

¹³ Georges Maspero, *The Champa Kingdom: The History of an Extinct Vietnamese Culture* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press, 1928), 118.

¹⁴ Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 111-112.

¹⁵ *ibid*

dispossession and erasure of the Cham communities in Cambodia prior to migration to the United States. Both of these genocides make less visible the presence of Cham people; the Vietnamese conquest of Champa erased the Kingdom of Champa and the genocide in Cambodia devastated the population as the majority of the Cham population perished during this period (up to 80%).¹⁶

The second layer of historical dispossession occurred once Chams were emplaced in the American nation-state after migration from Southeast Asia. Chams are not legible as a distinct people at multiple junctures. First, Chams are racialized in the United States as part of the larger Asian American category (much like other Southeast Asians), which is informed by the larger civil rights discourses and Asian American activist movements in the 1960s. This movement brings to light the history of Asian Americans being rooted here, entering the country as laborers since the nineteenth century. However, populations like the Cham (and other ‘Indochinese refugee’ populations), initially came to the United States, not because of logic of employment/labor, but rather the result of U.S. imperialism and the legacies of war. Cham Americans like other Southeast Asians are not able to use the rhetoric that we have a longer history here as Asian Americans but the discourse we articulate is something equivalent to, “we are here, because you were there [homeland].” On the topic of home, David Eng articulates, “diaspora in Asian American Studies works to undermine and to dislodge any smooth alignment of home and nation-state.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Ysa Osman, *Oukoubah: Justice for the Cham Muslims Under the Democratic Kampuchea Regime*, 3.

¹⁷ David Eng, “Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies,” in *Social Text*, *Queer Transxions of Race, Nation, and Gender* (Autumn - Winter, 1997), 31.

The United States' culpability in Southeast Asia brings about a nuanced negotiation for Cham Americans and Southeast Asian Americans in light of this recent history of imperialism. Cham Americans are subsumed in the broader Vietnam War refugee category that elicits an unsavory connection to a war that the United States lost. Yen Le Espiritu highlights that Vietnamese bodies both during and after the Vietnam War have not been given the same dignity as American bodies as exemplified by the Vietnam War memorial in Washington D.C.¹⁸ She cites the narrative of the "good refugee" which is "deployed by the larger U.S. society and by Vietnamese Americans themselves, has been key in enabling the United States to turn the Vietnam War into a good war...Vietnamese refugees become most visible and intelligible to Americans as successful, assimilated, and anti-communist newcomers."¹⁹ She further elaborates that this justifies the Vietnam War as a necessary war which she calls the "we-win-even-when-we-lose" syndrome.²⁰ David Palumbo-Liu writes that, "These forced migrants were made visible in American space against the backdrop of America's failure in Vietnam and general political economy of race in America."²¹ Hence the dominant image of Southeast Asian refugees is a different image than what society may have about Chinese Americans, for example, as a group associated with war (and as a singular group). Schein and Thoj write that, "The collective effort to forget the many culpabilities of the United States in the Southeast Asian Wars meant that Vietnam, Cambodia, and especially Laos became almost anathema as identity signifiers."²² The

¹⁸ Yen Le Espiritu, "Thirty Years AfterWARD: The Endings That Are Not Over," *Amerasia*, 31: 2 (2005), xiv.

¹⁹ *ibid*, xv

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999), 33.

²² Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj, "Violence, Hmong American Visibility, and the Precariousness of Asian Race," *PMLA*, 123:5 (2008), 1756.

conflation of refugees as singular group is illustrated in 2004, when Chai Vang, a Hmong man who fatally shot six hunters in Wisconsin became a national headline. In a photograph outside the courthouse, a white resident in army fatigues held up a sign that read, “Killer Vang, send back to Vietnam.”²³

The Cham must navigate being part of the American empire which is obscured by the first dispossession, the Vietnamese state formation that erased the Champa Kingdom and the Khmer Rouge genocide. If the American empire does not even recognize the Southeast population settling in the United States is here due to imperial legacies, then Cham Americans would have to go a step further to explicate their position. Chams would have to make the case they were also part of South Vietnam or Cambodia, but yet are not able to point to a nation-state on a map, like their Cambodian or Vietnamese counterparts can. Chams indicating that they are part of the nation-states of Vietnam or Cambodia reveals traces of their initial dispossessions before coming to America. Chams are invisible here partly because of these preceding erasures in Asia. This is made even more complex for Cham Americans who fled from multiple nation-states because of entanglements during the Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge genocide which mirrors my own family roots. In order to make visible the Cham population, Chams would have to recuperate Vietnamese colonization first. This first erasure made invisible the Chams’ two thousand year history in the region. Implicit in this first erasure, is a claim to indigeneity as it highlights the historic Cham presence in a territory before Vietnamese conquest. These historical

²³ Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj, “Occult Racism: The Masking of Race in the Hmong Hunter Incident – A Dialogue between Anthropologist Louisa Schein and Filmmaker/Activist Va Megn Thoj,” *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 13:3 (2010), 1091.

dispossessions can be thought of as peeling an onion in reverse to make visible the layers of history in order to re-claim it.

To have a visible and recognizable history as a people, Chams have to first establish a distinct history as a separate people. Cham historical narratives cannot exist without first recovering these erased histories. Cham Americans must re-negotiate their place in American society through two detours; first that the Cham are not Vietnamese or Cambodian by making the first erasure (Vietnamese conquest and Khmer Rouge genocide) visible and only then can the Cham make visible their dispossession after the conflicts in Southeast Asia after 1975. An example of Cham Americans exercising visibility as a strategy to recuperate Cham history is the active decision by multiple Cham families to change their last names to “Cham” in the Thai refugee camps before coming to the United States.²⁴

Circulating Narratives of Genocide – A Strategy of Visibility

As elucidated by one of the opening excerpts from a B.G. who referenced genocide when discussing Cham invisibility and erasures, she chose to deploy claims of genocide in order to make visible Cham histories that have been eclipsed. She used genocide to explain why no one has heard of the Chams here in the United States. What is the functionality of claiming genocide for the Cham population? What is made visible by the Chams’ invocation of the memory of genocide, as a people with indigenous roots to the territory of what is now modern central Vietnam? How does the Cham claim to genocide as perpetrated by the Vietnamese, a non-

²⁴ The practice of Chams changing their last names to Cham as opposed to keeping their more traditional Muslim names before migrating to the United States is a prevalent one among those who emigrated post-war. My family along with other Cham families in the refugee camps made an effort to change our last names to Cham right before coming to America in order to find each other in case we got scattered in America.

European people, complicate the story of settler-colonial violence? As Dirk Moses points out, “the extermination of so-called native or indigenous peoples continues to be overshadowed by the nationalistic and totalitarian ‘cleansing’ programmes of the twentieth century, particularly the Holocaust.”²⁵ He theorizes that genocidal discourses have privileged the Holocaust in genocidal studies over indigenous genocidal studies due to favoring of the nation-states paradigm founded by the West. Moses claims that the West, “owe their existence to their projects of settlement” and that the “genocides of indigenous people by colonial powers and settlers...pose thorny questions today regarding the dark past or provenance of these societies.” Although Moses does not complicate the colonial/settler genocide as he portrays it as an exclusive project of the West, his work is valuable in theorizing the link between indigeneity and genocide. He argues that the hierarchy of suffering (Holocaust versus genocides against indigenous peoples) can limit different groups’ who have been through genocides, to claim their suffering. Cham people maintaining the assertion of genocide by the Vietnamese also makes visible that settler colonial violence is not only a European or Western phenomenon.

My thesis explores this circulation of the history and memory of genocide, as transmitted through family stories in the Cham American community and what the consequences are, if any, for visibility in the community. I investigate how genocide is remembered or articulated by community members including the reference of the early Vietnamese genocide (1471) but also memories as expressed by those who survived the recent Khmer Rouge genocide (mostly first generation immigrants). I also turn my attention to the circulation of these eclipsing histories

²⁵ Dirk Moses, “Conceptual blockages and definitional dilemmas in the ‘racial century’: genocide of indigenous peoples and the Holocaust,” in Dirk Moses and Dan Stone, ed., Colonialism and Genocide (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 150.

among the Cham populations across generations. Since there are few publications about the Cham, I contend that most of the second generations initially learn about the genocides through their family circuits; even if those histories are learned fragmentally. I explore the inheritances of trauma and the concept of “postmemory” as developed by Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch explores the traumatic effects of genocide and states, “the bodily, psychic, and affective impact of trauma and its aftermath the ways in which one trauma can recall, or reactivate the effects of another exceed the boundaries of traditional historical archives and methodologies.”²⁶ Central to her thesis of postmemory, is the concept that postmemory is not an identity position but rather a generational structure of transmission of memory. Hirsch underscores the ways that descendants of survivors (of genocide and other traumas) connect deeply to the previous generation’s “remembrances of the past that they need to call that connection memory...memory can be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event.”²⁷

I analyze the processes of postmemory and the transmission (verbal and through silences) of genocide narratives inter-generationally and transgenerationally in Chapter 2. In the chapter, I undertake how the second generation narrates Cham identity and the historical ruptures that complicate this understanding. What are the stakes of avowing genocide in the Cham community and what are the stakes of disavowal? Do Cham people have the choice to disavow this history and if so, how does it impact visibility as a community in the United States? How does it help to forge a collective identity as a people? How does it enforce historical trauma? Do narratives of Cham identity as inseparable from genocide add to the tropes of invisibility given

²⁶ Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today*, 29:1 (2008), 104.

²⁷ *ibid*, 106

the emphases on erasure and death? Does the hypervisibility of genocide in the Cham community actually make Chams less or more visible as a people?

This thesis also seeks to understand my informants' negotiation of their lives after direct trauma or the memory or trace of it (second generation); which centers the theme of survival both on an individual/familial and larger community level. For the first generation Cham Americans or the parents of the second generation; there was a real threat of physical elimination. Narratives also emerge about cultural survival or preservation of the Cham in the United States in this project. Derrida's concept of living on, *sur vie*, is a useful analytic when considering the narratives that have emerged where my informants discuss survival beyond their immediate needs for individual survival. He discusses a commitment or responsibility which carries forward beyond the living, current, or temporal moment. Derrida writes:

To whom, finally, would an obligation of justice ever entail a commitment, one will say, and even be it beyond law and beyond the norm, to whom and to what if not the life of a living being? Is there ever any justice, commitment of justice, or responsibility in general which has to answer for itself (for the living self) before anything other, in the last resort, than the life of a living being, whether one means by that natural life or the life of the spirit? Indeed. The objection seems irrefutable. But the irrefutable itself supposes that this justice carries life beyond present life or its actual being-there, its empirical or ontological actuality: not toward death but toward a *living-on* [sur-vie], namely, a trace of which life and death would be themselves but traces and traces of traces, a survival whose possibility in advance comes to disjoin or dis-adjust the identity to itself of the living present as well as of any effectivity.²⁸

I employ the concept of *sur vie* as a major theoretical framework which explains Cham attempts to survive beyond individual death and erasure as a people.

²⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx: State of Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*. (New York : Routledge, 1994), xx.

Cham American Invisibility - Institutional Level

In this section, I focus on what factors may contribute to Cham American invisibility on a macro or institutional level as well the general implications of invisibility (imposed or voluntary). The Cham's complex heritage is often overlooked in both Southeast Asian and Asian American Studies despite a 2,000-year documented presence in Southeast Asia and over thirty years of Cham war refugees living in the United States. Cham Americans have been present in the United States as long as their Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong counterparts but cannot point to a body of scholarship about the community. Although there have been three newspaper articles on the Cham American population published as of this date, there is no published literature or scholarship on the Cham American population in academia. This is a reflection of the larger pattern of limited scholarship in general on Cham history, culture, or identity. This absence of Cham scholarship fits the overall pattern of Cham historiography, which in general, is quite limited as few scholars specialize in Cham history. These omissions on the Cham appear to be an indicator of overall Cham invisibility and absence in academia. It reflects the trends in contemporary knowledge production located in America and other imperial or national locations (France, Vietnam, Cambodia, etc.) which render the Cham as an invisible subject.

In addition to limitations on Cham scholarship; a second issue arises from the actual scholarship published, as the theoretical framework often highlights the disappearance of the Cham. There's a spectral quality in the idea of 'disappearance' and 'absorption.' French scholar, Georges Maspero wrote, "Hidden in the mountains or exiled on foreign soil – in Cambodia –

they have in common only the name “Cham,” which appears doomed soon to disappear from the memory of humankind.”²⁹ Although the Cham have been portrayed as a dying or disappearing peoples by the Vietnamese government and in Western scholarship; the Cham communities living in Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Australia, and the United States would surely refute this assertion of supposed extinction. The circulation of these discourses of disappearance emphasizes that the Cham community does not exist, even though the communities do exist across multiple locations around the world.

Along this similar trajectory of Cham omission, the Cham do not appear as a racial/ethnic category in the census like other Southeast Asians such as Cambodian and Hmong as of the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau. There is no clear estimate of the Cham population in the United States based on census data but I did find a report, “Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over for the United States: 2006-2008” which noted that there were 891 Cham speakers in the United States.³⁰ This indicates Cham Americans are being tracked on some level of the census, at least as speakers of a certain language, but no clear numbers of the Cham American population as a whole can be found. I have heard estimates from 3,000-10,000. Cham Americans at this time continue to be one of the least documented ethnicities in the United States.

Even in the literature on Southeast Asian refugees and migration to the United States after the Vietnam War and Cambodian Genocide, there is little if any mention of the Cham at all.

²⁹ Georges Maspero, *The Champa Kingdom: The History of an Extinct Vietnamese Culture*, 118.

³⁰ "U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008 American Community Survey - Languages Spoken." *Census Bureau Home Page*. Web. Accessed 11 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.census.gov/>>.

In Jeremy Hein's extensively researched book, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: a Refugee Experience in the United States*, he includes data on Cambodians, Hmong, Laotians, Vietnamese, and even Amerasians. He even takes into account of the various ethnic groups in the Laotian migrant population including the Mien, Tai Dam, and Lao-theung.³¹ On first read, I figured maybe the author had not heard of the Cham until I found an appendix entitled "Historical, Demographic, and Cultural Characteristics of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia" and noticed on the chart of Vietnam ethnic groups and breakdown, the Cham are missing despite the fact that this was the ancestral Cham homeland. I did find the Cham (Muslims) in the column on the Cambodia ethnic breakdown³² which is evidence that the author was aware of Cham existence. This was the only reference in his entire book on the Cham and there was no explanation or further elaboration. Nonetheless, for unclear reasons, Hein chose to exclude the Cham from being part of his examination of the refugee population from Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia post-1975. My research and examination of scholarship on this population underscores Hein's singular reference to the Cham peripherally, is still the only reference I have found to date in the literature on Southeast Asian American refugees.

Nation-State & Statelessness – Conflation of Ethnicity with Nation

One explanation of the lack of Cham visibility in the United States is the statelessness. The nation-state paradigm comes with the notion that a person's ethnicity should match their nation-state, despite the existence of diasporas throughout the world. There is a general belief that all ethnicities come from a country, a homeland, made legible through recognized nation-

³¹ Jeremy Hein, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: a Refugee Experience in the United States*, 47.

³² *Ibid*, 155.

states. For example, if you are Chinese, then your home nation-state is China. Like the many Native American nations that are denied federal recognition by the United States and other indigenous people around the world, there's a lack of recognition as a legitimate group without having the sovereignty of a nation-state. I would like to deconstruct the idea of the Cham as a "stateless" people. Lisa Malkki addresses statelessness and considers a stateless person as one who is not considered by any state to possess its nationality.³³ I analyze statelessness by treating it as a temporal (rather than static) category, for example, after the Vietnam War for example, many refugees in Southeast Asia became stateless overnight. Some refugees no longer had the protection from their former nation or government. Using these temporal indicators, Cham Americans who migrated (forced or not) became stateless after the Vietnam War and Khmer Rouge atrocities. They lived as stateless people in refugee camps. Once the Cham migrated to the United States and gained legal status as permanent residents or when they became naturalized citizens, the statelessness is less of an issue from a legal standpoint in the United States. The category of permanent resident does not fully afford legal protection as highlighted by the recent Cambodian American deportations among other ethnic groups.

Legal citizenship does not always guarantee all forms of citizenship including the cultural, social, or political spheres. Lisa Lowe illuminates Asian Americans' fraught relationship with citizenship as an alienated historical subject and states that it, "situates the Asian American political subject in critical apposition to the category of citizen, as well as the

³³ Lisa Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review Anthropology* 24(1995), 501.

political sphere of representative democracy that the concept of citizen subtends.”³⁴ I do not intend to downplay the plight of Cham refugee families rather I seek to interrogate the label of ‘stateless’ when used as a permanent condition, as attributed to groups like the Cham and the Hmong. I explore these complexities of negotiating across and within nation-states through my Cham American oral history research to understand how these factors inform engagements with recognition and visibility.

Invisibility as a Strategy/Site of Resistance

While invisibility may have a negative connotation as absence often denotes adversity, I want to address how invisibility can be used as strategy, empowerment, or as a site of resistance. James Scott’s recently published book The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia makes the case that the peoples in the Zomia region (diverse range of indigenous ethnic minorities) have deliberately avoided being absorbed into a nation-state to flee the oppression of state-making projects.³⁵ He argues the upland ethnic groups employed multiple strategies in order to deliberately remain stateless, invisible or less detectable to the state by retreating to the higher altitudes, engaging in mobile swidden agriculture, and swapping their written languages for orality. In chapter 7, he discusses the concept of ethnogenesis in relation to upland groups who choose to remain stateless and undetected. This is relevant to the Cham community’s adaptability to their various environments across borders and through interactions with other ethnic groups (although historically, the Cham are considered a lowland

³⁴ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, (Durham Duke University Press, 1996), 12.

³⁵ James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: an Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia.*, (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2011), viii.

people). Scott discusses language as a cultural marker and notes that groups like the Miao (Hmong) would often be functional in at least three major languages in order to pass between various identities without much conflict.³⁶ He further emphasizes the importance of flexible identities in stateless communities which “suggests the strategic value of having a range of identities at one’s disposal.”³⁷

Scott’s framework places emphasis on the advantages of statelessness as a mode to avoid cooptation by the state. His framework is useful for this project since the Cham diaspora has utilized these strategies of invisibility to blend in and to stay undetected. The idea of flexibility particularly when it comes to visibility is a key aspect in Cham identity that I will highlight in the oral histories section of my thesis. The Cham are multi-lingual and have shifted to a more oral based culture (whether purposeful or not, is undetermined). While orality is the main method of transmitting Cham history according to my interviewees, the Cham language is still written by certain segments of the population. The original Cham language is Sanskrit based but at an unknown point, Cham people in Vietnam and Cambodia (after the adoption of Islam), began writing the Cham language in Arabic.

Dialectics of Recognition & the Tension between Visibility and Invisibility

The relationship between recognition/visibility and invisibility is dialectical as illustrated by Frantz Fanon in his highly influential work, Black Skin, White Masks. Fanon addresses black identity in colonial Algeria and re-works the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. Fanon explicates

³⁶ Ibid, 240-241

³⁷ Ibid, 256

Hegel's passage on self-consciousness and the other by stating, "Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man to be recognized...his human worth and reality depend on this other and on his recognition by the other...one day the white master recognized without a struggle the black slave...the former slave wants to have himself recognized."³⁸ (Emphasis, mine) This is Fanon interpretation of the putative reciprocity of the Hegelian dialectic. Fanon modifies the relations between Hegel's master and slave which he says the Hegelian view emphasizes a reciprocity; in the colonial situation according to Fanon, "the master scorns the consciousness of the slave...what he wants from the slave is not recognition but work...the black slave wants to be like his master...less independent than the Hegelian slave."³⁹

What follows Fanon's interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic as noted by David Goldberg is that, "Visibility and invisibility are not simply states or conditions of being...rather they characterize, express, reflect. Or they are effects of strategic relations."⁴⁰ Understanding visibility and invisibility as dynamic processes or strategic relations informs my thesis trajectory as I aim to trace the everyday lived negotiations of (in) visibility. Further, Goldberg, reminds me to interrogate the tensions between visibility and invisibility as it, "is indexed intricately to and mediated by the intersection of multiple subject positions and identity formations, among which the complex mix of ethno-racial, gendered and class situations, definitions, and expressions

³⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove, 1967), 191.

³⁹ Ibid, 195

⁴⁰ David Theo Goldberg, "In/Visibility and Super/Vision Fanon on Race, Veils, and Discourses of Resistance," 181.

mostly dominates.”⁴¹ My reading of this is to not treat (in)visibility as monolithic states of being but rather as conditions that are informed by the individual and specific contexts.

Perils of (Hyper)Visibility

Although visibility and recognition has its benefits; to be recognized as a people could mean access to resources, yet there are also pitfalls that come with being visible and marked as an identifiable group. As Ellison’s invisible man reminds us, hypervisibility can be a mode to render an individual, group, invisible like a caricature. Yen Le Espiritu brings attention to the fact that there has been a hyper visibility of the Vietnam War in the public domain, which in turns makes invisible and “conceals the war’s costs borne by the Vietnamese...bodies, both during and after the war, have not been accorded the same humanity and dignity given to American bodies.”⁴² If you become a category that has been defined or boxed in by the dominant society, you run the risk of becoming invisible as discourses are deployed beyond your control. Another example of power of visibility/recognition to betray a community as mentioned earlier is the Hmong hunter shooting incident in 2004. The Hmong community feared that their entire community “would be framed as bloodthirsty murders because it is the first time many Americans have even heard of the Hmong.”⁴³ Further, “like thorns in the sides of Hmong Americans who crave sober recognition in the United States public sphere who instead are intermittently sensationalized for a criminal or cultural excess.”⁴⁴ This excess would be handled

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² Yen Le Espiritu, “Thirty Years AfterWARD: The Endings That Are Not Over,” xiv.

⁴³ Schein & Thoj, “Violence, Hmong American Visibility, and the Precariousness of Asian Race,” 1753

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 1754

by a white hunter, Nichols, a few years later in 2007, who shot and stabbed to death a Hmong hunter leaving evidence of a stick in his throat. Nichols told the “authorities Hmong people are bad, mean and kill everything and that they go for anything that moves.”⁴⁵

The dialectic of visibility/recognition as illustrated by the aforementioned authors, scholars, and occurrences expose the complicated processes and consequences of recognition and visibility for communities. This project traces these strategies of visibility or invisibility within the dialectics of recognition using a Cham American case study. In acknowledgement of this dialectical relationship, I acknowledge that while visibility may promise potential resources and political representation, visibility can also lead to persecution. Invisibility of Cham Americans could equate to a lack of access to resources and lingering psychological affects affiliated with not being legible as articulated by Ellison’s unnamed “Invisible Man.” This project is informed by Cham stories of survival as a group often absent in discourses and in categories but yet are still present; Chams must survive in light of these conditions of erasures and elisions – at times this meant making themselves invisible and at other times visible.

Methodology

For this thesis project which investigates Cham negotiations of recognition, I conducted ethnographic primary field research on Cham Americans in California (Southern and Northern), two locations which have established Cham communities in the United States. Given the dearth in scholarship on the community and the fact that there is not yet any primary research publications to date on the population; the method of personal interviews is

⁴⁵“Wisconsin Hunter Gets 69 Years in Slaying.” *USA Today*. Web. Accessed 5, Dec. 2011. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-11-28-wisconsin-hunter-sentenced_N.htm

useful. I used an oral life history format for my interviews allowing my respondents to narrate their lives⁴⁶ I chose people from various locations in California as multiple locations provides a more diverse understanding of Cham American experiences. The multi-sited nature of this study allows me to compare and contrast whether certain demographic factors or institutions in each locale contribute to specific nuances in Cham identity, culture, and negotiations of visibility. I do not treat geographic location as a static condition. The flexible nature of location and space is a reflection of the movement that the diaspora has been forced to grapple with from the initial migration phase to the United States to later relocations in search of family, community, and employment.⁴⁷

From January 2011 to February 2012 in California, I conducted in-depth interviews with eight people who self-identified as Cham: three first-generation men, one first-generation woman, three second-generation women, and one second-generation man. The interviews ranged from one hour to four in length; mostly captured in one session but occasionally required multiple sessions and follow-ups. Since this is a multi-generational case study, my respondents' ages ranged from twenty-five to seventy-one. I concentrate mainly on four individuals for the bulk of the written portion of this thesis. Although I do not cite or employ all of the interviews

⁴⁶ Oral history methodology as an interview process is helpful for my research particularly on first generation Cham Americans. Oral history uses a loose chronological approach of an informant's life so that I am able to ask about the subject's life before their migration to the United States in addition to eliciting information about how they initially navigated life in the United States.

⁴⁷ Multiple Cham respondents note having to move multiple times throughout their lives even once their families were in America. The initial refugee re-settlement location was determined by the government and determined by the sponsoring organization or people who served as sponsors. My family initially settled in Seattle because our sponsors lived there. Then we moved to Orange County in California to be near family friends from my father's home village in Vietnam and later, we moved to the Central Valley to be closer to my uncle's family. My family sponsored my uncle to America and he lived with us initially in Orange County but then decided to move to the Central Valley to work as a migrant farm worker; which prompted my family's move.

directly in my thesis, I want to emphasize the importance of all of my interviews and conversations I had with my respondents were invaluable to me. The insights I gained were absolutely critical to my understanding of Cham experiences (both pre and post-migration) and allowed me to appropriately structure my thesis project from a clearer vantage point.

Finally, I must also acknowledge my own positionality as both a member of the Cham diasporic community and as a scholar engaging in research about the community of which I am a part. While my identity as a Cham American informs my perspective, this project represents my understanding of the case study I researched and is not representative of the Cham community at large. I am not attempting to speak on behalf of the entire Cham community nor am I attempting to represent the community as a whole. The Cham community is extremely multi-faceted and diverse. Occasionally, I do speak about my experiences in dialogue with my informants and in this sense, this thesis is also semi-autobiographical.

Outline of Chapters

In Chapter 2, I draw on oral life histories of three self-identified Cham individuals who live in California (second-generation, American born). Their stories reveal the traces and fragments of a history of erasures; indicating a continuing presence as an excess to that history. The chapter examines Cham experiences of living with these inherited legacies of historical trauma and erasures through their familial relationships. In Chapter 3, I center my informants' negotiations with (in)visibility and recognition as a way to survive, *sur vie*, to live on. It reveals that existing nation-states and institutions re-inscribe earlier historical erasures which occurred

prior to emplacement in the United States. In Chapter 4, I illustrate Cham attempts to make visible traces as a people, and therein live on. This chapter also further problematizes recognition through an examination of the Chams' negotiations of the dialectic of visibility.

Chapter 2: Generational Reckonings: Negotiations of Fragmented Histories, Dislocations, and Erasures

The Cham diaspora must confront extreme kinds of historical ruptures compounded by over five hundred years of colonization by the Vietnamese and the contemporary Khmer Rouge carnage which resulted in genocide, dispersal, and multiple forms of annihilation. The Cham cannot point to a nation-state that is recognizable as the Cham homeland and the Champa Kingdom has disappeared from contemporary world maps. This chapter draws on the oral life histories of three self-identified Cham individuals who live in California. Their stories reveal the traces and fragments of a history of erasures; indicating a continuing presence as an excess to history. I propose that despite Cham occlusion and exile in history which has rendered Cham people invisible and absent; nevertheless, Cham people are present and in this sense, an excess to history.

Given the overwhelming historical elisions (as noted in the introduction), this chapter examines how these second generation Cham Americans attempt to negotiate and recuperate their identities; as an excess to history. First, I will introduce my respondents. I then examine their negotiations with the paradoxical situation of being present and yet not present through their engagement with the gaps in knowledge about the Cham as a people. These examinations provide insight into the Cham experience of living with these inherited legacies of historical trauma and erasures. I further examine how traces of these fragmented histories emerge through their familial relationships by means of intergenerational transmissions and their attempts to *survie* in spite of written histories that label the Cham as a ‘disappeared’ people.

Biographies

S.F. was born in, Missouri to a Cham-French mother who fled after the Fall of Saigon. She is mixed-race and grew up in the Midwest of the United States. She did not grow up around many Cham people since there was not a large concentration of Cham communities. She resides in Northern California and does work on Cham history and legacies of war, genocide, and political conflict in Southeast Asia. *S.F.* is also a visual artist who engages in photography and film work.

N.S. is a twenty-seven year old woman; born in Santa Ana, California. Her parents fled Vietnam after the war and her family came to the United States in 1981. *N.S.* is the fourth oldest child among her siblings (nine total). She grew up in Fullerton and Buena Park and lived in a Cham community enclave of about thirty families. *N.S.* is currently a stay-at-home mom who is married with three children and currently resides in the Central Valley of California.

L.H. is a twenty-nine year old male. He was born in Santa Ana, California. His parents immigrated to the United States from Cambodia in 1980 after the Khmer Rouge genocide. He comes from a working class family and he has three other siblings. *L.H.* grew up in Santa Ana and was part of the large Cham community there. He currently lives in Orange County and works as a software engineer. He is also an aspiring writer and game software developer.

Confronting Gaps in Knowledge & Living as Excess to History

My informants' narratives illustrate that identities are socially, culturally, and historically situated. In the Cham case, the history part of identity construction proved a difficult topic to fully locate and explicate. This subject triggered complex answers for my respondents during

their oral history interviews. They indicated gaps of knowledge when it came to Cham history.

L.H. stated:

“And you wanna...you kind of want to identify with something, right? And my parents...they told me that Champa got taken over by Vietnam. And that’s all I knew, um for the most part, up to high school years. Um, that was the only knowledge I had of Cham history. I wanted to, like, figure out who I was. My parents couldn’t tell me much, just that, you know, Vietnam used to be Champa, and that was all.”⁴⁸

L.H. illustrated the gaps of understanding in Cham history and in turn; his own ethnic and cultural roots. He expressed a desire to know more about his history and the fact that his parents shared very little other than the fact that Champa was conquered by Vietnam. Similarly, S.F. narrated a comparable experience with her mother who mentions the Vietnamese conquest of Cham territories but notes that there were major fissures in the history. S.F. illustrated this and said, “And, my mom, would say things like, you know, they took everything from us. And, um, but she didn’t know how we’d gotten there. She didn’t know the history of the people.”⁴⁹

These gaps in knowledge expressed by the second generation Cham can partially be elucidated as a consequence of the legacies of conquest, genocide, displacement, dispersal, and dispossession of the population. After Vietnamese conquest of Cham territories, there was large scale Cham migration to the neighboring territories of Cambodia as the population fled Vietnamese incursions and violence. The Cham also escaped to places like Hainan Island, Malaysia, and other locations. The Cham diaspora in Cambodia is the largest in the world; living in relative peace until the Khmer Rouge takeover of the country. Kiernan writes of this era, that

⁴⁸ L.H., interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, January 11, 2012.

⁴⁹ S.F., interview by author, Northern CA, January, 2011.

the Chams “were living omens of a looming Cambodian future, one the CPK [Communist Party of Kampuchea] set out to erase from History’s agenda... Cambodia would never disappear the way Champa allegedly did.” Kiernan clarifies that the Chams were considered an old enemy of Vietnam and as a reminder of the Khmers’ glorious kindred past. Kiernan observes that the only official statement about the Cham from the CPK was, “The Cham race was exterminated by the Vietnamese.”⁵⁰

These notions of erasures and fragmentations complicate the Cham experience as narrated by S.F.:

“And so I’d go to school, this was my elementary school in Texas, and I’d look up in the Encyclopedia Britannica, you know the Cham and I’d read, you know, *‘an Austronesian-speaking people who have been extinct since the fifteenth century.* And I’d think, oh no, I, I just didn’t have the language as an eight year old, to possibly know how to bring home the news of our extinction to my mother who was convinced that the Vietnamese had tried to wipe us out but didn’t know the books were complicit with that erasure. And that they had agreed that we had been completely wiped out even though quite evidently we’re still here.”⁵¹

S.F. illustrated this paradoxical discovery with passion and animation. Despite the fact, that she knows she is indeed alive, she stumbled on a passage that renders her as part of an “extinct people” given her Cham heritage. Her discomfort is indicated by the fact she did not know how to deliver this kind of message to her mother. There is an indication of a fragility and trauma as experienced by her mother when she stated that she did not have the language as a child to bring home this news; that it would be too much to bear in culmination with the traumatic history of genocidal violence. S.F. shared with me that her mother did not know English well when she was

⁵⁰ Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 257

⁵¹ S.F., interview by author, Northern CA, January, 2011.

growing up and how she acted as a translator for her mother. S.F. also revealed that her mother would encourage her to research various topics that she was curious about and would send her off to school or the library. At the end of the day, she would return home and would report back to her mother on what she learned that day. S.F. had a tone of surprise in her voice when she noted that while the Vietnamese had attempted to eliminate the Cham through genocidal policies; they were not aware before this moment that the books would betray them; the books had aligned themselves with this narrative of erasure.

S.F.'s story expresses multiple ironies and paradoxes. The first irony is S.F. reading a document that literally tells her that she is not alive. The second one is that while the Vietnamese had attempted to erase the Cham completely; they ended up ultimately failing (she and other Chams are living proof of this), yet the book seemed to be carrying out this trajectory of Cham "extinction." S.F.'s encounter illustrates this negotiation of presence and absence; a visibility yet invisibility. While there was this looming history of genocide and the books told her that she is non-existent; she is still here. This demonstrates a condition of living as excess to history. Cham people are forced to interrogate this 'history,' this same history that has disowned and disavowed their existence as individuals and as a people. This paradoxical experience provides insights into the everyday realities when you are one of the living people who were not absorbed or killed off by perpetrators; in spite of the fact that the history is written to uphold that you should not exist.

Familial Transmissions – Traces of Cham History

While I acknowledge the gaps in history articulated by my respondents could be a consequence of severe forms of cultural and physical annihilation of the Cham people through

multiple genocides by the Vietnamese state and the Khmer Rouge regime; it is also critical to highlight the intergenerational and familial dimensions which emerged from my oral history interviews. I discussed the paradoxical existence of being told your people are dead when you still exist. Moreover, my informants also reveal that the attempts to trace their history through their families left them feeling incomplete. S.F. articulated:

“And it, it felt like a contradictory experience because sometimes, she would inform me of things like you know, when I was a kid, I went to pray at the temple of Po Nagar. And I’d ask her, “Mom, tell me about the temple of Po Nagar and tell me more about Po Nagar.” And she’d be like, “You think it’s so easy to learn this stuff in the middle of war and you had to struggle to survive?” And I’d be like, “but that’s all I know, it’s what you told me.”⁵²

This story S.F. conveyed of her exchange with her mother regarding the Cham temple of Po Nagar; reveals a distinctive aspect of explaining the gap in knowledge. While S.F., a second generation Cham American removed from the direct experiences of the Vietnam War, presses for more information about the Cham temple; her mother snaps back that survival trumps the ability to know Cham history. S.F.’s mother reminded her that to learn about cultural history is not a top priority in the middle of war; to learn is a luxury that she could not afford as she was escaping her homeland after the Communist takeover in 1975.

Correspondingly, N.S. revealed the difficulty of not knowing the full history of where she came from. She told me that her parents and the older generation did not say much about their experiences in Vietnam and she tried to learn and ask questions of her parents, relatives, and other community members but this was challenging. N.S. expressed:

⁵² ibid

“It’s hard to explain because I don’t know everything. I still don’t know everything. Just the basics for it. I still need to know more about myself. No one taught us...it’s difficult trying to ask them or they didn’t have the time for it. Everyone’s working and doing their own thing. Taking care of their kids. Some of them were even on welfare, but they were still working because it was not enough for their families...big families.”⁵³

She narrated that her relatives did not teach her about her history because of financial obligations and family priorities. N.S. was born in the early 1980s; a pivotal period when many Southeast Asian refugees were resettling and rebuilding their lives in a new country. N.S. noted that Cham families received public assistance but that it was still not enough for the families to survive; as the parents were often working on top of public assistance to make ends meet especially those with larger families. Her family experience provides insights on the real class struggles that impacted Cham refugee families and that the lack of knowledge about family history or Cham history at large may have been eclipsed by the material conditions that confronted her family and community post-war.

Intergenerational, Transgenerational, and Historical Trauma

Given the devastating histories and erasures that forced Cham migration to the United States, another factor emerges in the oral histories that illuminates on the issue of fragmentations in family histories which is trauma. Grace Cho articulates, “Transgenerational haunting demonstrates how...trauma can become a dynamic force, one that produces ‘countermemory,’ disruptions, articulations, visibilities, assemblages, and new configurations of kinship.”⁵⁴ L.H. expounded the realities of intergenerational inheritances of trauma:

⁵³ N.S. , interview by author, Northern CA, January 5, 2012.

⁵⁴ Grace Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Press), 2008, 33.

“When I went to Cambodia, she showed me her...where she used to live. Like every time I go there...I cry. I...I can't help it, I go there and I...mom's like, oh I used to sit here. And look there's a can, the can is still there.' And I'm like, oh my god, the can is still there. I sit there and I just start crying. I don't know why...it's just [pause]... yeah. Every time I go to the area. I cannot stop crying. I don't know why.”⁵⁵

His pauses indicated a discomfort of not being able to articulate what causes him to be upset when in Cambodia. Employing Hirsch's work on post-memory who relies mainly on the Holocaust as a point of reference, she uses the term to describe the, “relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.”⁵⁶ In L.H.'s case, the image of the can is a powerful medium of inherited memory that connects him with a past experienced by his mother who survived the Pol Pot regime. Hirsch discusses the photograph as a medium of memory transference. The can serves as a trigger that connects L.H. with the memories of his mother; which he has in turn inherited as his own. This transfer of memory through a gendered structure of kinship affirms the bond between mother and son. Although L.H. did not live during the Khmer Rouge era; he is nonetheless deeply moved by the memory and understanding of this experience which was directly experienced by his parents.

While L.H. indicated this deep connection to the trauma his mother experienced in Cambodia, S.F. discussed trauma inherited inter-generationally but also expands her understanding of trauma to a larger collective historical trauma. S.F. articulated:

We have been fighting to stay alive and everywhere we've gone, we had to stay alive. Here, it's more culturally and to not be folded into a larger narrative that doesn't recognize our difference. But in Vietnam and Cambodia, it's been a very literal fight to stay alive. And I think that there's been intergenerational

⁵⁵ L.H., interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, January 11, 2012.

⁵⁶ Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today*, 29:1 (2008), 103.

inheritances of trauma, um, and grief and also not knowing your own history because you were denied the ability to retell it or retain it in an open way is extremely destructive for any community.⁵⁷

S.F. took into account the larger history of the Cham across territorial boundaries of the nation-state. On the Cham population in the United States, she expresses concerns of the Cham being subsumed into a broader cultural umbrella, which could be in reference to the larger category of Asian Americans, one that does not recognize that the Cham are different among many other diverse ethnic groups within the category of ‘Asian American.’ S.F. also underscored inter-generational trauma, as a consequence of these histories of war, genocide, and displacement. She considered the inability to openly tell Cham history is *in and of itself*, a form of trauma. This trauma is enacted through absences and not knowing her people’s history (both on an individual and/or collective level) in the Cham case. It is a form of ‘transgenerational haunting’⁵⁸ among the second generation diaspora who are one level removed from the experiences of their parents. Cho writes of the second generation Korean Americans, “having grown up in the United States with neither parents’ storytelling nor a public discourse about the Korean War, told a collective oral history in which they felt affected by some inarticulate presence that had left its imprint on what seemed to be their normal everyday lives.”⁵⁹ S.F. also recognized the complications in attempting to reclaim Cham history especially in light of these elisions.

Silence and Traces as Sur Vie

⁵⁷S.F., interview by author, Northern CA, January, 2011.

⁵⁸ Grace Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, 33.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 11

Is the reservation to share family history from the first generation to the next generation a choice in the case of these Cham experiences? Did those who experienced massive traumas preceding their migration to the United States choose to not convey family histories or Cham history to the next generation? Are the stories fragmented because of a lack of knowledge or can it be alternatively interpreted as a way of reckoning with these heavy histories? Some insights can be drawn from Ing-Britt Trankell's research on the Cham community in Cambodia. She highlights silence as a prevalent reaction in the community when asked about the Khmer Rouge era. She notes that their silence, "is self-imposed rather than the result of political pressure or domination from above."⁶⁰

The concept of survival emerged as a critical point of narration in the oral histories. The silences and gaps in history reveal the parents' attempts to ensure individual and family survival. S.F.'s mother did not have time to learn about Cham history (already elusive due to five hundred years of colonization) as she was literally dodging fire bombs in the middle of the Vietnam War. N.S.' parents, similarly, were forced to work multiple jobs in order to make sure the children were taken care of. In these instances, the parents had to make the executive decision to ensure immediate family survival; a physical survival. It meant that cultural survival, at least shared through more blatant oral transmissions; were secondary to the need to survive in the present moment. It may also speak to the fact that it is traumatic to talk about the horrors of war as it risks traumatizing yourself and your children. Cham parents may choose to withhold this information (deliberately or not) from their children as a way to protect them from this trauma. This need to protect is informed by historical trauma and recent memories of the first generation

⁶⁰ Ing-Britt Trankell, "Songs of Our Spirits: Possession and Historical Imagination among the Cham in Cambodia," in *Asian Ethnicity*, 4:1, (Routledge, 2003), 44.

who understand all too well the perils of being marked as ‘Cham.’ Yet the reticence to share the histories, contribute to inherited traumas read through fragments and silences which indicates to the children that there’s an unarticulated impending history that has deeply affected their parents.

In addition to the immediate need of the parents to survive and to protect their children; I argue that these silences from the first generation is a way to enact *sur vie*; a living on beyond the temporary moment. The parents need to survive and have their children survive to ensure survival beyond death and erasure as a people. In order for your culture to live on; then you must also ensure that you survive so that your children survive. And while the Cham culture and history was not so readily shared verbally; the second generation, still learned ways of being Cham through other emissions and actions inspired through their childhood experiences. N.S. talked about learning how to be Cham through her everyday family interactions such as learning how to cook during weddings with her female relatives or how Cham women should dress and behave during downtime in between her mother’s sewing sessions. For S.F. she mentioned that she was inspired to learn more about Cham history and engages in her current work because her mother sowed those earlier seeds of curiosity with her stories about the goddess Po Nagar. In this sense, the second generation can ensure cultural survival as a people through their own reckonings with the traces, silences, and nuances of being Cham.

Chapter 3: Negotiating Recognition in Everyday Lives

In this chapter, I center my informants' negotiations with (in)visibility and recognition as a way to survive, *sur vie*, to live on. Last chapter, I discussed *sur vie* was a way to live on as a people who have been rendered excess to history. In this chapter, I examine my informants' negotiations of everyday interactions in the social sphere as well as their interactions and engagement with institutions. My informants reveal that existing nation-states and institutions inscribe Cham people within their borders in certain categories legible to the state while simultaneously reproducing Cham as a category of excess to history. The institutions re-inscribe earlier historical erasures which occurred prior to emplacement in the United States. This chapter centers on Cham navigations of these erasures and invisibility and show that Cham negotiations with institutions are tailored towards the goal of survival (as individual and as a Cham collective).

Social Negotiations of (In)visibility

“A few occasions where I’ll be like, oh I’m Malay or Indonesian. It’s just easier...and people will say, oh ok, I know that. ‘Cause if you say Cham, they’d be like huh? What is that? Uh...um, we used to be part of South Vietnam...oh so you’re Vietnamese? No...um so what are you? Where do your parents come from then? They were born in Cambodia. You Cambodian then? No...um, how do I explain that? They were born there but they’re not Cambodian. You know, and I would use the reference that I was born here.”⁷⁷

My informants shared that Cham identity as a category is illegible in terms of their everyday social interactions. While most of my informants revealed that they usually told people they were Cham; this was not always the case depending on the context and who they were speaking with. There is an acknowledgement that there are other identities or ethnic identities

⁷⁷ L.H., interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, January 11, 2012.

that they could borrow that would be more recognizable. As L.H. mentioned, he would occasionally indicate to others that he was Malay or Indonesian because he thought it would be simpler. His explication of when he does indicate that he is in fact Cham; reveals multiple layers of the complexities of being Cham. As mentioned in the introduction; Chams need to recuperate Cham identity from the layers of dispossession beginning with the erasure of the Champa Kingdom. First, L.H. said that the Cham come from what *used to be* South Vietnam which then leads to the assumption that he is ethnically Vietnamese. He then denied that he is Vietnamese and would then explain that his parents are from Cambodia which leads to the assumption that he is Cambodian. L.H. then clarified his parents are not Cambodian but they were born there and that he was born here. This illustrates that this could be a longer dialogue than usual for Cham Americans; it usually takes longer to explain ethnic roots as opposed to being something more recognizable. The lack of a nation-state is a factor that obscures Cham identity and there is also a conflation of nation and ethnicity prevalent in these social interactions as indicated by L.H..as Chams appear to disrupt the “national order” of things.

N.S. also noted that her Cham friends would also engage in this practice of saying that they were something else other than Cham because it was a way to be more legible:

“Not a lot of people know who we are and...my friends and relatives that I did hang out with in high school, they all claim they’re Malaysian, Vietnamese, or Cambodian. I was like, that’s not what you are. Yeah, we may have like similarities to them, but we’re not them, we’re Cham...a lot of them said they were tired of explaining what it is...maybe they felt like they wanted to be something that was more noticeable to the U.S., being in America you know, they don’t know what we are.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ N.S., interview by author, Northern CA, January 5, 2012.

She thought it was important for Cham people to not “hide” behind other people’s cultures. At the same time, she also concedes to the frustration of having to explain frequently to others what is Cham. When she was younger, she was confused about why Cham was not recognized as an ethnic category like other ethnicities. She explained:

When I was younger I expect people to know what Cham is. You can’t check the box, Cham – they only have Chinese, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and stuff. I always asked my brother and sister, why don’t we have a Cham slot? We always had to write *other*. Just having to explain all the time because no one knew what it was...eventually I got used to it; this is who I am. When I was younger, I was frustrated because no one knew who you were. Cham – what is Cham?

S.F.’s experience growing up as a mixed-race Cham American in the Midwest spoke of the challenges and social isolation during her interviews. Her mother is Cham-French so she expressed that her identity was very blurred; as a child of a mixed-race Cham person. S.F. did not know any Cham people in her early childhood other than her family. When she was asked about her ethnicity, she acknowledged that she did not say she was Cham because it was too confusing so she would label herself as French-Vietnamese. She shared that even then; the category was still too obscure and that one time, a lady in Oklahoma reacted with skepticism by saying, “I ain’t ever heard of no French-Vietnam.”⁷⁹ S.F. explained this suspicion as a consequence of a general unfamiliarity about the legacies of colonialism in Vietnam American discourses. She stated, “Without that awareness of the colonial history, what does France have anything to do with Vietnam...the kind of cultural ignorance around history...pretty much kept

⁷⁹ S.F., interview by author, Northern CA, January, 2011.

me in a place where no one could really get how I could be the mix that I was.”⁸⁰ In her case, being mixed-race added another complex layer of feeling illegible.

Negotiations with Public Institutions

F.P., who spent most of his childhood in Vietnam, did not arrive in the United States until he was twenty-one. He took a pragmatic approach in dealing with institutions. F.P. is a first generation Cham American. He was born in Vietnam. His father was well educated and served in South Vietnam’s administration in the 1950-1960s and during the Vietnam War. After the Fall of Saigon, his father was forced to flee due to his connections with the southern government and the threat of being put in a re-education camp by the Communist government. F.P. decided to escape with his father; a journey which took him from Vietnam, to Cambodia, to the refugee camps in Thailand and to the Philippines. He finally ended up in Iowa upon arrival to the United States. He is currently married and has three children.

When F.P. arrived in the United States, he was put in the high school system because Iowa allowed students in the high school system through age twenty-three. He acknowledged too that it takes time to explain his ethnicity and his tactic was to focus first on completing his education:

You need to go through this process quickly so that you can do school and get education so that you can move on with life first. So you don’t bother explaining where you from. You just jump on the bandwagon with the rest of the people. And then after that [laughing], we explain, you know? That’s how we do...we study English and try and survive first. And then later on in the course of study and then we will have more time, when we speak English better, then we explain to them who we are. And most of them

⁸⁰ *ibid*

say, oh such an interesting story, you know...such a small, community and stuff like that. But no one knows you are. Nobody knows.⁸¹

F.P. took a pragmatic approach and was not focused on explaining where he came from initially. He also alludes to the struggle of trying to learn English and it was not until his English improved and until progressed further in his program; did he attempt to explain who he was. He still ended by affirming the lack of being known as Cham.

When I asked my informants about their dealing with other social institutions particularly, there was a tendency to shy away from talking about them in relation to their direct experiences. N.S. talked tangentially about other families being on welfare. I was particularly struck by the first generation responses about the early years in the United States. I interviewed three first generation men ranging in age from 50-70 and a first generation woman who is 32. I conducted a full life history interview of each of them and while they were all very detailed in their experiences before migration (Vietnam, Cambodia, etc.) , I learned very little about their initial experiences in the United States particularly that period of early resettlement in the United States. The literature on Southeast Asian refugees describes this period, in general, as a very difficult one due to immense poverty and major cultural issues of starting a new life in the United States. Some did share that they were sponsored to the United States by other family and that they had to live with other families in the same household; L.H., a second generation Cham American fills in some of these gaps as he talked about his family living in a two bedroom house with his cousin's family – a total of twelve people.

⁸¹ F.P., interview by author, Orange County, CA, January 22, 2012.

F.P. talked about living in Iowa with his Uncle's family which he described as large because his Uncle's wife also had kids from a previous marriage and that he lived there along with his father. This is what he disclosed about his first experience in America:

“Um, the first experience, with like, you know America must be a heaven [laughing]. America is a heaven where you see tall buildings, you see nice dressing, streets are neat and nice. It's almost like a heaven. You go to the mall and everything is so readily available. Fruits, abundant, you know. Wow, this must be heaven. And then, uh, we stay there for a few months and we start to feel the culture shock. Because of our culture, we interact every day. We are a communal society and here it's an individual society. It's totally the opposite end of each other. So it's quite a shock for us.”⁸²

F.P. had a harrowing experience when trying to escape Vietnam. He ended up stranded in Cambodia for months before he and his father made it to the Thailand where the refugee camps were. So when he describes America at the beginning; he says it was heaven. His laughter also signaled to me that there is an irony behind using the word heaven. Later on, he talked about “culture shock” and America as a society that is individual based and not communal; which characterized his own experiences in Vietnam as he grew up in a Cham village. After this F.P., talks about his experiences with school and moves on to later parts of his life. Out of all the first generation interviews; he is the only one to briefly touch on his early resettlement years. I interpret the first generation informants' silences about their early years in the United States as a resistance to be marked or recognized in a socially stigmatizing ways. In the same way the first generation did not necessarily open up to talk about the traumas in Vietnam and Cambodia; the early refugee experiences in the United States were likely extremely challenging. Refugees in general faced extreme poverty and were racialized. The category of refugee is a political category and a highly racialized subject. The U.S. government made sure to disperse refugees all

⁸² ibid

over the country in order to make sure that the refugees would not strain the resources in any one area.⁸³

N.S. recalled that as a child, she often helped her parents navigate social institutions. She thinks that being Cham lengthened processes when dealing with institutions like the state. She recalled an incident when her mother applied for U.S. citizenship. N.S. confronted the agent who erroneously labeled her mother's nationality and ethnicity on the paperwork:

They [her parents] told them were Cham but yet they marked Cambodian to make it faster. My mom's citizenship...I told them, why is this marked Cambodian? My mom is not Cambodian. They said what is she? I said she is Cham. What is Cham? I'm like, that's what she is! Yeah, she came from Vietnam, but she is really Cham, you know what I mean. She asked me ok where is it at? I'm like uh [long sigh], it's in Vietnam. So she marked Vietnam 'cause there's no Champa anymore. It got changed from Cambodia to Vietnam.⁸⁴

N.S. got very animated during this story. She sighed very deeply when she recounted the immigration agent had asked her where her mother came from because she would have to explain Champa; which would be confusing since it technically does not exist on maps. It seemed to be the case that the agent when hearing Cham; assumed it was Cambodian so initially marked that her mother was from Cambodia. When N.S. explained that it used to be in what is now Vietnam, the agent marked her mother's nationality as Vietnam and ethnicity as Vietnamese. N.S. was dissatisfied with the end result which was that nowhere in the application was there any retention that her mother was Cham. This speaks to the oppressive structure of the nation-state paradigm; it coerces ethnic minorities to acquiesce to ethnic categories they are uncomfortable with; particularly if labeled as an ethnicity historically associated as violent

⁸³ Jeremy Hein, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: a Refugee Experience in the United States*, 50-52.

⁸⁴ N.S. , interview by author, Northern CA, January 5, 2012.

oppressors and colonizers. N.S.'s case illustrates her resistance to have her mother be categorized as Vietnamese or Cambodian – something that she did not consider herself ethnically to be. This story is an example of how earlier history makes invisible the Cham in the U.S. The nation-state continues to re-inscribe earlier Cham erasures by the settler-colonial state of Vietnam and by doing so, disavows the violence enacted towards the Cham.

F.P.'s narrations mirror this complicated relationship with the nation-state as a paradigm in his interactions with the United Nations refugee camp system set up in Thailand after the Vietnam War. He first laid out that Champa was erased from the map since 1832 and further relayed:

So those of us born in Vietnam, we, we kind of like, Cham Vietnamese. Or Cham Cambodia, they call it Khmer Islam, you know? So that's how we identify ourselves. But still, from the, the organizational point of view, they don't care much about a little tiny minority. They only care who is from which country. Even though we say, we are Cham – they say, who? Who, you know? So it doesn't make sense to them. Yeah, so we say we are Cham ethnic from Vietnam or Cham ethnic from Cambodia, something like that. If we don't say that, we don't say it out, nobody would know.⁸⁵

F.P. indicated his refusal to just accept the label of Vietnamese in the camps and that he and other Cham people in the camps would insist on referring themselves as Cham from Vietnam or Cham from Cambodia. F.P. undermined the nation-state's attempts to classify him for purposes of government. He acknowledged that the organization (U.N.) did not concern itself with particular ethnicities but rather what nation, the refugees came from. Cham itself was an unknown category that did not register in what Liisa Malkki calls the "national order of things."

⁸⁶ In response to F.P. insisting on saying that he was Cham despite the lack solicitation from the

⁸⁵ F.P., interview by author, Orange County, CA, January 22, 2012.

⁸⁶ Lisa Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things, 495-523.

organization for this information, I asked to what advantage was it to say that he was Cham. He responded that there was no advantage to do so, that in reality, the refugee camp is about survival and stated, “You want to survive first. And survival, is when you...identify with something that can make your life easy. So, identify yourself with your root, it doesn’t bring any benefit...as far as interactions with the outside world.”⁸⁷

F.P.’s explanation of expressing being Cham appeared initially to be a paradox. Why would a group of people claim to be an ethnicity which could compromise or complicate their position in the refugee camp system where everyone was competing for space and resources? If the goal was to survive and it could be a disadvantage to maintain being Cham in this competitive environment; then what was the purpose? He continued:

But in terms of daily life, everybody look like everybody but it doesn’t make any difference. But in term of culture-wise, we want to protect our culture. Um, I guess we want to feel like we belong to some group of people. We want to feel at home, you know. We want to hear our mother tongue, you know. And so, we identify ourselves as Cham. But in terms of survival, it’s not as necessary to identity yourself as Cham.⁸⁸

F.P. asserted that the purpose of identifying as Cham is to protect the culture; this is a move which appears to be quasi-contradictory to the immediate needs of survival. F.P.’s efforts can be interpreted as a responsibility he carries to ensure the survival of the Cham culture beyond the moment; his life in the camps. F.P. wanted to ensure that the Cham culture stands a chance to survive beyond; a living-on, *sur vie*. F.P. is highly concerned about cultural preservation of the Cham so much that when he arrived in the United States, he changed his middle name from Cong to Champa because he said the Vietnamese government had forced Cham people to change

⁸⁷ F.P., interview by author, Orange County, CA, January 22, 2012.

⁸⁸ *ibid*

their names to Vietnamese ones. One of his first encounters with social institutions in the U.S. (social security administration) was an act of agency as he avowed, “why do I subject myself to the past when I can freely choose who I am?”⁸⁹ He used an institution of the state to reveal how nation states eclipse history of violence against groups. It is through these traces made visible (changing his name) that F.P. and the Cham as an ethnic group can survive as a culture; beyond this immediate lifetime.

For L.H. and N.S.; who grew up in Orange County where there were small Cham communities; they were able to engage in activities and spaces that allowed them to be visible as Cham people; at least in these exclusive circles. While they generally felt invisible to the larger population in terms of their own ethnicity as Cham people; they made the choice to participate in organizations where they could be in a space that understood being Cham. For L.H., he talked about going to school with about thirty other Cham students. He and other Cham students formed their own club called MYSA, the Muslim Youth of Santa Ana. It is interesting to note that the club did not have the label of Cham but rather it was a Muslim club; even though all members were Cham. This could be interpreted as another means to be legible; the school administrators may not know what a Cham club is but they would understand more clearly, what is a Muslim organization. L.H. mentioned that in elementary school; none of his teachers knew that he was Cham and that they assumed he was Filipino. He also participated in a Cham/Muslim school over the weekend in Santa Ana which was mainly religious education where his teachers would be Indonesian or other Cham people.

⁸⁹ ibid

Likewise, N.S. who grew up in Fullerton talked about going to Muslim school on the weekends which was a gathering of the Cham children at the local mosque (an apartment the community pooled funds to rent) to learn about Islam. The teacher was usually an older Cham person. N.S. also talked about being part of an organization of Cham youth in the area. Religion played a huge role in both N.S. and L.H.'s life. N.S. discussed the role of the mosque in Fullerton as a place the community gathered in order to pray, break fast during Ramadan, make food, and socialize. The formation of the local mosques in Orange County provided the space for both L.H. and N.S. to be with other Cham people and to engage in community. These Cham institutions and spaces are attempts to trace and make visible the category of Cham as a people to ensure survival. On an individual basis, they received comfort and companionship through their participation in the community organizations. On a group level, participation in these organizations and the maintenance of these institutions would support long term cultural preservation. Both mosques have demonstrated longevity as institutions as they have existed since the early mid-1980s and are still centers of the Cham community in their respective locations today.

Chapter 4: Dialectics of Recognition as Strategies of Survival

This chapter begins by foregrounding forms of recognition and visibility as constructed by my informants. It illustrates Cham attempts to make visible traces as a distinct people, and therein live on. This chapter also further complicates this living on in traces, *sur vie*, in instances when visibility reproduces the dangers from history and the dangers of the nation-states as they try to co-opt you after rendering you excess to history. Although visibility is presumed be a positive attribute; this chapter problematizes recognition. If Chams are engaging in recognition and making themselves visible through traces; then what are the limitations and what are the costs of being recognized? Invisibility as a strategy reveals the dialectics of absence and presence in traces.

Forms of Recognition – Visible Traces to Survive

And I think there's a way that when you are a people that survived colonialism, conquest, genocide, you have to define for yourself how you matter because the world has told you that you don't matter. And you have you create that meaning for yourself that you do deserve to be alive.⁹⁰

S.F.'s statement provides a backdrop to understand what has motivated her to engage in the forms of recognition that she does. She centers the histories of colonialism, conquest, and genocide and implies that there's been a forced internalization of being dismissed as a colonized subject. While the past can be perceived as oppressive, S.F. like F.P. chooses a proactive approach in the present to counteract these legacies of eradication. Frantz Fanon writes in his conclusion of Black Skins, White Masks on the complicated relationship the colonized and has

⁹⁰ S.F., interview by author, Northern CA, January, 2011.

with the past and states, “But I can also revise my past, prize it, or condemn it, depending on what I choose.”⁹¹ Further, he declares:

I am not a prisoner of History. I must not look for the meaning of my destiny in that direction. I must constantly remind myself that the real leap consists of introducing invention into life. In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself.⁹²

For S.F., she chooses to express herself through multiple art forms including writing, photography, film, and other forms of scholarship. Her work is very conscious of the theme of (in)visibility and the putative “extinction” of Cham people given her efforts to visually document experiences of Cham people across multiple borders in Vietnam, Cambodia, and the United States. On the medium of visual representation, she asserted, “There’s a humanizing element that we cannot get when we just read something about somebody...I don’t know how to explain it, I think that we’re reaching across a gap of what could be linguistic separation, geographical separation, whatever, to just look at another person and see them as a human being.”⁹³ S.F.’s commitment to the tool of visibility to produce cultural production on the Cham, works to reverse the hegemony of the past’s oppression; making room for her to produce her own visions and history about the modern Cham condition. She has exhibited her photography all over the United States and is also working on two in-progress documentary films; one about her family and another about Cham survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide. S.F.’s work attempts to make visible traces of the Cham as a people, and therein live on.

⁹¹ Fanon, Black Skins, White Masks, 202

⁹² Ibid, 204

⁹³ S.F., interview by author, Northern CA, January, 2011.

Relatedly L.H. also expressed desires for recognition by creating stories about the Cham illustrated visually through film and video games. He said, “I think a movie would be more, um, accessible to everyone because game is specific to a certain group of people.”⁹⁴ L.H. is a twenty-nine year old, male software engineer who aspired to design video games, so it is fitting that video game is a mode of production that resonates with him. However, he also acknowledges that a movie would reach a broader audience citing that gaming only appeals to a certain segment of the population. It is well known that video games appeal to the younger male demographic. L.H. referenced Mel Gibson’s “Apocalypto” as a movie that inspired him to create his own fictional movie because the movie is told from a native perspective and is not subtitled; the dialogue is in what is supposed to be the Mayan language. “Apocalypto” is Gibson’s portrayal of the fall of the Mayan civilization. L.H. said that he was motivated to pursue creative film in order to share who the Chams are to the rest of the world. I asked him why it was important to him for the Cham to be known in relation to his movie aspirations to which he responded:

For one thing, I love history. And another thing is, like, I am so in love with the Cham culture...but I can’t picture it. I can’t see what we were like say 1400. The 15th century, what we did, our everyday life.

To have people be aware of our existence...to have people understand we had a country and that we’re not just some group that appeared out of nowhere...we had an important place in history. We were kind of like the middle... between, you know the whole trade between India and China...the silk world of the sea. And...we actually were one of the first to spread Hinduism and religion to the mainland of Southeast Asia so I think it’s important to, you know, let people know – hey this what we did.⁹⁵

The first part of L.H.’s answer speaks to the fact that there is not enough out there in terms of visual documentation of Cham people from a historical perspective that he has trouble imagining

⁹⁴ L.H., interview by author, January 11, 2012.

⁹⁵ *ibid*

what the culture looked like in the past. The second part indicates L.H.'s ambitions to share Cham history to a larger audience. He demonstrated extensive knowledge of Cham history and culture but he is not satisfied with just keeping this knowledge to himself. L.H. thinks it is important that the Chams are recognized as having a sovereign country and that Chams were critical in early trade of the "silk world of the sea" given the Champa Kingdom's geographical positioning. He is motivated to have the larger society recognize Cham existence in the world; by documenting and making visible this history to ensure cultural survival beyond his lifetime.

While L.H. and S.F., two second generation Cham Americans, are motivated through their efforts to make cultural production as a way to gain Cham recognition from the broader society, F.P. who is a first generation Cham who experienced first-hand the direct effects of the Vietnam War and the process of migration to the United States has a different engagement with recognition. He indicated that it was important for him to be known as a teacher and guide to the youth. He explained from the perspective of being part of the first generation his thoughts on guidance:

Because we are influenced by Cham community in the past, we only know how to *ghong* [raise] but not to *pa* [guide]. We raised them...we feed them...we clothe them, we make sure they have food to eat, but they don't know how to guide them. So the misguidance is the one that cover your ability, cover your talent, you know, and unable to unveil your talents. So that is a key thing to unveil someone's talent through guidance. And we don't have a guidance in our community. The kind of guidance that we have is purely religious guidance...the progress that we need to elevate our people from... feeling inferiority.⁹⁶

F.P. emphasized that there was a lack of guidance in the Cham community for the younger generation beyond religion. He uses the word "unveil" to imply that there is talent that must be

⁹⁶ F.P., interview by author, Orange County, CA, January 22, 2012.

excavated in order for Cham people to not feel inferior. He said it is crucial young people go out and explore the world but that in order to do so, they need knowledge. F.P. honed in on the lack of knowledge as a contributor of making people feel weakened and inferior. He gave an example about education:

Imagine you go to school and you don't do your homework and the teacher they call you. But if you do homework properly and you excel in homework, you feel proud, you know, you want to be called. Likewise, for the Cham younger generation, if they want to kick that inferior complex, first and foremost, you have a good education, to be known.⁹⁷

He cited knowledge as a key to empowerment and as a way to curb inferiority complexes. His metaphor of the veil is very fitting giving the issues of Cham invisibility in the larger diaspora. F.P. indicated a belief in passing on knowledge through a generational structure and by successfully guiding the youth and encouraging them to gain knowledge through education and other means; can Cham people stand a chance to be known in the future. F.P.'s interpretation of passing on knowledge of Cham culture is very dynamic:

The pollen, the wind separate the pollen from the... flower and ...the wind carry that pollen across the ocean so there's a death, a death moment when the circulation takes place. There's a death moment but death is about opportunity of that pollen that carries across the ocean and become alive. So, the death of our culture is the birth of the new culture. And the new culture, our children has the opportunity to create it. So it's not as sad as we may think because everything is expressed in terms of art, you know. And that art at home, when we decorate at home, we decorate something from the past that fit our taste, the Cham taste, you know. And it showed and the children will...take that art and when he has children and grandchildren, they will...decorate the way we decorate and that's how it lives on.⁹⁸

F.P.'s narration makes evident his perspective of the Cham need to *sur vie* and live beyond, even while your people have been marked as an excess to history.

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ F.P., interview by author, Orange County, CA, January 22, 2012.

Limits and Perils of Visibility

As revealed in the last section, S.F. creates space for herself through cultural production about Cham communities. While she stressed the importance of being able to create meaning for as an individual, in light of the colonial and genocidal legacies by documenting Cham history and the Cham experience through visual mediums and scholarship; S.F. acknowledged a critical issue of visibility for ethnic groups who have ongoing tensions with the settler-colonial nation-state which are historically situated. She articulated it is impossible to take the war and genocide equation or impact out of the history and culture of the Cham. But in constructing and recuperating this elided history, S.F. related that it becomes a reciprocal threat to both the person producing that knowledge but also to the Vietnamese state:

It's actually an act that's threatening to the government in Vietnam. They don't want us to know anything about the conquest of Champa. They don't want us to know anything about our power as a people because they don't want us to get the clever idea that we can resist this situation that we're in now as a colonized people. And some of that has to do with...the things that happened during the Vietnam War, when the indigenous people in Vietnam tried to consolidate to resist.

So the fact of recovering Cham history still and articulating how war and genocide and how conquest have affected us is so threatening; it is a revolutionary act and it's very difficult to actually do especially in Vietnam. I could never walk into the archives in Vietnam and say; give me what you have on the conquest of Champa without ending up in a very, very, frightened and frightening place because they don't want us to know. And if we're asking then we're up to no good. And somehow I have to navigate this while I am doing my work and I'm not really sure how to do it. I've been doing it as best as I can but it's very difficult to do.⁹⁹

S.F. alludes to the fact that there are still high stakes for visibility even in the contemporary moment; since the Vietnamese government enacts policies of surveillance and censorship particularly with ethnic minorities who have had contentious relations with the state.

⁹⁹ S.F., interview by author, Northern CA, January, 2011.

Human Rights Watch's 2011 report on Vietnam reveals that the Vietnamese government has tightened their "controls on freedom of expression during 2010, harassing, arresting, and jailing dozens of writers, political activists, and other peaceful critics... police routinely tortured suspects in custody."¹⁰⁰ Attempts to make recognizable Cham history in a public manner can be curbed by the state and therefore has limits.

This fear of production of knowledge about the contentious parts of Cham history has no doubt influenced the lack of studies on the Cham which openly acknowledges the existence of Vietnam as settler nation-state. This history continues to be disavowed today and also serves to help explain the gaps in Cham history. In multiple interviews, my informants expressed concerns about traveling back and forth to Vietnam given the political situation. I was warned by some of the first generation respondents that I should be cautious with the way I approach my work, so I can relate to S.F.'s challenges of navigating this process of documenting Cham history.

F.P. expressed this need to uncover Cham identity in light of this long history of oppression as a unique opportunity:

First of all, from... this is a gift that's given to us, blessed upon us, you know. So when we fulfill that...if you put in a religious context, you bring that gift, the creator blessed in you to serve the humanity. Second thing, since you are the minority...that makes the gift unique...the majority may have all the opportunity they want to do and they can uncover it easy, but for the minority, like us, the Cham, to uncover that gift, that people have been piling trash on us, all these years, all this time, all this history, to throw all that away – that gift has to be unique and special. And the only time they see themselves as special like that, then they will excel. And if they don't see that, they will continue to cover

¹⁰⁰ *Human Rights Watch Vietnam World Report 2011* (accessed 3/11/11), available from <http://www.hrw.org/en/world-report-2011/world-report-2011-vietnam>

themselves and sleep and that is such a waste of their talent. So, it's important to be known.¹⁰¹

I interpret F.P.'s metaphor of piling trash as the layers of historical trauma and dispossession that the Cham have had to endure throughout history and across borders; as a people. The choice of the word of *uncovering* is poignant given the issues of visibility and recognition (or lack thereof). F.P. does not accept the layers of trash and insists that the Cham can recuperate their own identities and find their own paths – to break free from the confines of historical trauma.

Despite this optimism to be known that F.P. reiterated; he also expressed an acute awareness of the dialectical nature of recognition. He explained an inherited sense of trauma that informs Cham communities:

First of all, we are the product of our history. And our history show us that we are always being persecuted for no reason whatsoever so we keep running...away. So that fear always linger in our psyche, you know. And that fear, come with us through our ancestors, through our parents and grandparents. And you notice that the way we choose to live, we always live in a very beat-down area, we want to be left alone, don't bother us because of all this history has been piling up against us. So we choose a place that's quiet, so we can rest, you know. And we don't want to be known because to be known is dangerous.¹⁰²

F.P. elucidated on the Cham need to remain under the radar. He contended that Cham people prefer to be undetected because of the history by modifying his earlier metaphor of the piling of trash to history. I interpret his label of history as the Cham's historical memory which is informed by the consciousness of a brutal history of conquest and genocide. F.P. ended his statement with the recognition that to be known is in fact dangerous. Again, Cham historical memory, functions to remind the population of being marked for persecution. Yet there's an

¹⁰¹ F.P., interview by author, Orange County, CA, January 22, 2012.

¹⁰² *ibid*

emphasis of agency and choice that emerges from F.P.'s narration. Invisibility and ability to be unknown can be understood as an act of resistance; a way to avoid oppression. James Scott argues that the Zomia upland ethnic groups employed multiple strategies in order to deliberately remain stateless, invisible or less detectable to the state by retreating to the higher altitudes and other geographic locations which gave them an advantage; mainly to be unseen. Building off Scott's argument, I interpret F.P.'s descriptions of the Cham retreating to beat-down, quiet areas, as an urban form of invisibility and retreat. F.P. used the description of beat-down; which has connotations of poverty; an allusion to a lack of resources from the state in these areas (Cham enclaves in Santa Ana come to mind particularly during the 1980s given the high rates of poverty in the early resettlement phase). To be known then opens up communities to cooptation and oppression from the state and other groups; but to be unknown could mean a lack of resources and feelings of inferiority. F.P.'s narrations in culmination with the other Cham informants' perspectives, problematizes the issue of recognition and visibility.

These negotiations with invisibility and recognition are not without agency and choice according to my informants. N.S. discussed the Cham *choice* to be unknown. In our discussion, we had a conversation about why Cham people are unknown, at least in the context of the United States. N.S. insisted that the main factor which contributes to the Cham being unknown in America is controlled by Cham people's choices. She theorized:

We let ourselves being unknown. A lot of people are letting themselves be unknown. Being more American, you know. They're purposefully doing that. They just want to live as American. And yeah, you should still know who you are...a lot of people are hiding who they are. They have the choice...we're unknown only because a lot of people don't know us because we don't represent who they are. Cham people don't say it.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ N.S. , interview by author, Northern CA, January 5, 2012.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

While I initially sought out to prove some sort of the Cham invisibility at the beginning of this project because there is little if any work that concentrates on the Cham diaspora here in the United States, the trajectory of the project changed. The more I investigated the question of recognition in the Cham diaspora, the more complicated it became to come to the terms with the processes of recognition. As demonstrated by the dynamic ways that my informants have negotiated recognition in their everyday lives; visibility is not a static position but a rather engaged process by the individuals, informed by their own positionalities. Depending on the situation, Chams can choose to be more or less visible – even something as simple as choosing whether or not you want to say you are a Cham or some more identifiable group/category, is a purposeful action, one of agency.

The stories that emerged from my interviewees complicate the liberal model of recognition. The second generation Cham American narratives illustrate the gaps of understanding in Cham history and in turn; their own ethnic and cultural identities. They express the experience of knowing very little about Cham history/culture through their parents. While speaking about knowledge of Cham identity and history; my respondents acknowledge major fissures and silences. If the liberal model says, in order to represent yourself, you need to first be able to make your community visible and then stand up and be counted. How can you stand up and be counted as a community or distinct ethnic group, if you are unable to articulate what it means to be Cham in the first place? How do you become recognized when history has disavowed your existence as a people? The very question of Cham identity and history is not so

easily made recognizable or visible given these various erasures and disintegrations particularly in the context of the nation-state paradigm. My informants' stories reveal the traces and fragments of the past of erasures; indicating a continuing presence as an excess to history.

This study reveals Cham experiences of living with these inherited legacies of historical trauma and erasures. It further demonstrates how Cham people negotiate recognition but not necessarily through legal recognition or forms. Since the Cham are not recognized through these official state apparatuses; one would assume that the members of this population would make it a goal to be recognized through these means (via the census or as an official group in the United States). This case study demonstrates that Chams continue to negotiate recognition in their own terms, regardless of not having a country to call their own, legal recognition, or land rights in their ancestral homeland as an indigenous diaspora. Indigenous people all over the world have been disenfranchised and their ancestral and cultural rights to lands and their practices continue to be denied in certain locales. My research confirms that despite these obstacles, Chams choose to negotiate their lives in nuanced ways without having these forms of official or state recognition (although not always without complications in their dealings with these institutions). It is no surprise that Cham people avoid official state or political recognition here in the United States given the contentious historical relationship Chams have had with multiple nation-states. Cham people acknowledge the ways that nation-states and its institutions re-inscribe earlier historical erasures which disavows the preceding episodes of mass violence and genocide.

Finally, this study centers the dialectics of recognition and visibility. There is awareness among my respondents that the dialectic of visibility is a thorny process to negotiate. This cognizance is undoubtedly informed by the historical memory of war/genocide throughout Cham

history. Cham people have come to know that to be recognized or marked as Cham in the past caused persecution in forms of physical and cultural destruction both in the early moments of conquest and in the contemporary period with the Khmer Rouge. Cham people must survive the nation state in which they have occupied; which in this case study includes Vietnam, Cambodia, and the United States (and the liminal zones of the refugee camps). Cham people must survive but as a group that is in excess to the history of state formation in Vietnam and Cambodia where excess must be suppressed or erased through genocidal means. They must also survive in the face of governance, here in the United States this governance takes the form of multicultural and racialized forms to incorporate Chams as subjects precisely in their set racial categories as defined by what is legible to the state (Vietnamese, Khmer, Asian American, etc.). This thesis demonstrates how Chams survive and live on in this state of presence/absence and (in) visibility; by negotiating and maneuvering these dialectics to the ultimate task of surviving; surviving in a way that gives meaning in their lives. These survival tactics at times appear in visible traces through historical and family memory or actions to make obvious and detail Cham existence whether or it be through changing their names or through cultural production (film or photography). At other times, Chams enact strategies of absence and invisibility in order to avoid cooptation and oppression for the sake of survival not only as individuals but to ensure survival as a community for the currently existing generations but also for the many to come. As B.G. expressed in my opening, “We are survivors like our parents and we always find a way to keep living.”

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