

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Phetmixay Means Fighter, A Documentary Film

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2qr1t93c>

Author

Phetmixay, Rita P.

Publication Date

2016

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Phetmixay Means Fighter, A Documentary Film

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

by

Rita Phetmixay

2016

© Copyright by

Rita Phetmixay

2016

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Phetmixay Means Fighter, A Documentary Film

by

Rita Phetmixay

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Renee Tajima-Peña, Chair

ABSTRACT:

Phetmixay Means Fighter is a short documentary film that seeks to explore Lao American refugee resiliency narratives through the life of my father, Phoutone Phetmixay. As the central character, Phoutone's poetic remembrances of his commitment to the Lao Royal army, displacement from Laos, and resettlement in the United States all serve to consider the complex history of Lao Americans in the geopolitical context of U.S. invention and the socialist Lao government. The film is invested in creating a space to validate a part of my own family's history by way of mourning, healing, and building community amongst other Lao American refugee families.

The thesis of Rita Phetmixay is approved.

Thu-Huong Nguyễn-Vo

Valerie Matsumoto

Renee Tajima-Peña, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

Table of Contents

I.	Project Summary.....	1
II.	Project Need/Rationale.....	2
	a. <i>Pushing Boundaries of Critical Immigration and Refugee Scholarship</i>	4
III.	Synopsis	12
IV.	Treatment/Creative Approach	13
	a. Story and Characters.....	13
	b. Style, Location, and Voice.....	15
	c. Structure.....	18
V.	Audience, Impact, Dissemination.....	20
	a. Audience and Impact.....	20
	b. Dissemination.....	22
VI.	References	23

Acknowledgements

This project could not have been completed without the unconditional love and unwavering support of many. To those who I may not name, please know that you have also made an endearing imprint on my journey to the finish line.

I would like to first acknowledge the individuals involved with Ronald E. McNair Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for introducing me to the wonderful world of research that led me to apply to the M.A. Asian American Studies Program here at UCLA. I am forever thankful for the relationships I was able to build from the McNair Program and for the instrumental spaces I was privileged to be in so that I could begin the conversation of self-identity and self-validation. Shout out to my fellow McNair cohort members and especially to Amarachi Anakaraonye, who has been across the country supporting me in this journey from the very beginning.

Since the beginning of my UCLA journey, I would like to thank my student affairs officer, Anne Bautista, for providing me with the tools and support I needed in order to successfully navigate graduate school life and especially the Asian American Studies Department. Your dedication and warmth truly showed me your passion towards making my life run smoothly as possibly during this entire process. I would also like to thank Meg Thorton from the Asian American Studies Center for all the resources you have shared with me in order to make sure that I had access to valuable experiences at UCLA. Throughout the chaos of work and school, you both have provided me a space to talk about any personal/professional challenges and even worked them out with me.

I would like to thank my gracious committee members—Professor Renee Tajima-Peña, Professor Thu-Huong Nguyễn-Vo, and Professor Valerie Matsumoto for all the patience,

guidance, and time you have dedicated to me as a young, scholar activist. I started my documentary film in 2014 while taking EthnoCommunications and can remember the late nights Renee would sit with me to edit the initial cuts because she believed in my film. I remember coming to UCLA for the first time and being accompanied by Thu-Huong and Professor Victor Bascara for lunch. They both were so eager to get to know my interests and passion for the overall Southeast Asian American community. I remember sitting in Valerie's class and crying when it was my turn to facilitate discussion about the Loung Ung's *Lucky Child*. This was my first encounter with academic reading material that hit home for me in regards to my ability to relate to other similar Southeast Asian refugee narratives. You all have made an incredible impact on me in so many different ways! I feel so honored to have been able to work with such pioneering, brilliant Asian American womxn and I can only hope that I continue to grow as a scholar activist from here on out. I am also appreciative for the guidance of Professors Purnima Mankekar and Grace Hong. You both have introduced me to critical frameworks and theories that validated my lived experiences and have empowered me to create social change.

I would love to continue giving many thanks to my amazing, talented, and fierce Asian American Studies cohort! My entire experience of AAS would have been completely different if it was not for Stephanie Chang, Michelle Chang, Tk Le, Marcie Lee, Melissa Jamero, and Katie Wang. Thank you for pushing me to think more critically of not only Asian American issues at the forefront, but for providing me with the greatest sisterhood of all time. I have never had the privilege of being able to talk about API womxn issues at such a critical level since before my arrival at UCLA. It has been a humbling experience to know each of you and to also know that you all are going to impact the world in so many different and exciting ways. I want to give a special shout out to Stephanie, who is also my current apartment-mate. The amount of

encouragement and support you have given me since we have started living together is priceless. Thank you so much for being my rock when I needed you the most. I am forever indebted to you because of this.

I cannot forget the amazing souls in my other cohort in the Social Welfare Department. My first support system when I began my MSW journey: Lisa Duong, Paulina Celaya, Stephanie Nguyen, and Gonji Lee. You all have a special place in my heart for always believing in me even when you may not have fully understood the challenges I faced in Asian American Studies. Thank you for listening to me and giving me the chance to also teach you about my story.

I want to give another special shout out to my “little big sis,” Wanda Pathomrit who was a part of the older cohorts of both AAS and MSW. Without you, my entire journey in AAS and MSW would have been completely 180. You have been one of my greatest mentors, teachers, and inspirations! You have been able to teach me about compassion and radical self-love. You have graciously given yourself to me during my toughest times in graduate school. There is no other way to describe the type of feeling that you bring to me but peace, for which I am forever grateful. I also want to thank Jennifer Xyooj for also taking on the role of being an older sister to me. It has been an amazing roller coaster journey since taking EthnoCommunications together, and keeping each other company while we edited away in the library! You have helped me surpass the most challenging odds in more ways than you know. Thank you always for sharing with me so many wonderful public health resources, and for reminding me of how much I am loved and cherished.

To the AAS cohort before me and the cohort(s) after me collectively, thank you for being such a force to be reckon with. It has been a pleasure to organize with such passionate, radical Asian American scholar activists. It has been a revolutionary experience to have with you all.

I would like to give a warm thank you to all my mentees out there as well. Although I was here to guide you, you all have taught me so much about myself. Thank you for trusting me with your story and for being so vulnerable. It is truly an honor to hear you out and all the amazing visions you have for the future of this society.

Last but not least, thank you to my family and especially my father. It has been an honor to have your blessing to come to UCLA and pursue Asian American Studies and Social Welfare. You have taught me how to live fiercely and to always pay respects to my roots. This film is dedicated to you and our entire family. This is just the beginning of another amazing chapter in our future book. Thank you, mother, for your unconditional support. You never cease to meet my needs at any time. Thank you to my brothers, David and Joseph. Although you may not understand all of what I do, you continue to believe in it and fight alongside with me. Thank you to my half-sister in Laos, Philavanh. You have been an integral part of this journey of mine and I cannot wait for you to reunite with our father.

These words serve as only a fraction of the amount of gratitude I have felt during this entire journey. To those named and unnamed, thank you for being the source of motivation I needed in order to complete this project in full. I will forever remember you.

Phetmixay Means Fighter

Logline: *Through the lens of his daughter, Rita Phetmixay, Phoutone Phetmixay reflects on his life journey to the United States from Laos that entails resiliency, self-reflection, and determination. Phoutone ultimately pursues his calling in life through his timeless commitment to the Royal Lao Airborne military.*

I. Project Summary

Phetmixay Means Fighter is a short documentary film that addresses the central topic of Lao American refugee resiliency, captured through the life of my father: 63-year-old Phoutone “Peter” Phetmixay. Phoutone identifies as a Lao American refugee who escaped the communist regime in Laos, met his wife (my mother, Vilavanh) in Thailand, and then fled to the United States to eventually settle in North Carolina. In the beginning of the film, Phoutone’s escape from Laos to neighboring Thailand is illustrated through a vivid imagery of heavy rains and the dive into the Mekong River that would change his life forever.

Throughout the rest of the film, the themes of trauma, war violence, refugeedom¹, displacement, resettlement, family, and liberation are addressed through Phoutone’s countless confrontations with past memories. Each memory Phoutone is able to unfold represents significant experiences in his life that have impacted him to this day. First, he recounts his dream of becoming a part of the Royal Lao Army to serve and protect Laos. This dream was later crushed as a result of communist takeover and Phoutone was soon forced into reeducation camps. Then, the film takes its audiences to North Carolina where Phoutone and his wife, Vilavanh, both recount how they met each other in Thailand before coming to the United States. As both were the only ones from their families to escape war violence in their respective countries of Laos and Thailand, both also faced more struggles as newcomers in a land foreign to

¹ I use “refugeedom” here as it pertains to Yen Lê Espiritu’s discussion of “refugee” in “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 410-33. Espiritu situates Vietnamese refugees within a global and sociopolitical framework of U.S. empire (p. 423). I use “refugeedom” in the same way to illustrate Phoutone’s overall experience of escape to the United States.

them. Finally, Phoutone recalls the time he prepared to escape Laos and the necessity for him to ask for his parents' permission to go to the United States before he left for the last time.

Overall, this film essentially illustrates a spiritual journey for Phoutone as the countless trials and tribulations he endures mark the fighter quality of his being. Through the short visual representation of his life, *Phetmixay Means Fighter* seeks to interrogate mainstream views of Southeast Asian refugees as victims, spark dialogue about trauma-informed resiliency narratives, and gain critical awareness about an underrepresented identity group within Asian American Studies discourse. The complete project will be submitted for future Asian American film festivals, international film festivals, and will also be available for screening at community events.

It should finally be noted that the making of the film itself is through my lens, as the daughter of Phoutone Phetmixay. I have lived, witnessed, and grown to appreciate the nuanced complexities and constant negotiation of struggle my family has encountered and continues to encounter in the present day. Nevertheless, this film serves as the beginning of a larger life-long project that seeks to unite other Lao American voices on a continuum.

II. Project Need/Rationale

Phetmixay Means Fighter is a film that holds significant value for several reasons. For one, there are rarely any films that feature Lao American refugee stories. Many highly acclaimed films featuring the vast experiences of overall Southeast Asian refugees predominantly focus on other ethnic groups such as Vietnamese, Khmer, and Hmong. Very few films currently exist that speak to the Lao American refugee experience, furthering their marginalization in the broader Asian American discourse. Current refugee stories in mainstream media expertly focus on the forced displacement of refugee bodies; however, Lao refugees, especially Lao rebel refugees, are rarely seen even though they have made substantial contributions to U.S. history.

It has been over forty years since Lao refugees have resettled in the United States as a result of the clash in political ideology that fueled a civil war between the Royal Lao monarchy and the Pathet Lao regime.² This ongoing political warfare in Laos, in addition to the U.S.'s intervention, were both major factors in displacing thousands of Lao refugees all over the globe post-1975. Particularly in the United States, large communities of Lao refugees have rebuilt their lives in California, Texas, and Minnesota while smaller communities settled in other states. North Carolina, for example, is where the central storyline of *Phetmixay Means Fighter* takes place.

As compared to the conditions of Laos in 1975, the United States was relatively safer in terms of reduced physical violence and danger. Yet, there still remains chronic war trauma, intergenerational trauma, and a longing for a place to call "home." Mainstream media mostly portrayed U.S. veterans as the "heroes" and "saviors" of Southeast Asian refugees from communists, wiping out the narratives of the other side of the story. Similarly, this tool used by media outlets also shifted the entire blame against communists and concealed U.S. accountability. In sum, Lao American refugee experiences and voices have been marginalized, reduced, and essentially erased within mainstream discourses. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that many U.S. citizens are unaware of the unique presence of Lao American refugee communities, much less their continuing struggles.

The importance of *Phetmixay Means Fighter* is also critical when we consider the current refugee crises in places such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan, where at least 600,000 people have been displaced since the conclusion of 2013.³ Again, dominant narratives about

² *The Betrayal*. Directed by Thavisouk Phrasavath and Ellen Kuras. Performed by Thavisouk Phrasavath. USA, 2009. Film.

³ "World Refugee Day: Global Forced Displacement Tops 50 Million for First Time in Post-World War II Era." UNHCR News. June 20, 2014. Accessed December 20, 2015. <http://www.unhcr.org/53a155bc6.html>.

refugees never fail to represent them as helpless, passive victims subjected to the U.S. paternalistic savior complex. Other narratives of Muslim refugees from these same places across the globe may also represent them as “dangerous terrorists,” which has also silenced their emotional trauma from being forcibly removed from their native lands. Altogether, these refugees ultimately suffer from these negative mainstream views when their own voices are ignored and deemed invalid. *Phetmixay Means Fighter* disrupts these false stereotypes of refugees by instilling a counternarrative that privileges Phoutone’s voice and life story. It principally aims to highlight the circumstances that informed Phoutone to actively engage in the decisions he made, despite the inevitable forces of wartime marginalization. Phoutone’s creation of his last name was a decision he made for himself that gave him the strength he needed to survive. This was an active choice that illustrates his resistance against opposing forces.

Finally, *Phetmixay Means Fighter* is vital for involving audience members in an overall dialogue about the politics of freedom, personal agency, belonging, and the plight of refugee communities. Specifically for Lao audience members, it aims to promote community and intergenerational healing through the validation of a Lao American history film. For non-Lao audiences, it intends to promote more awareness of Lao American refugee narratives and challenges them to include these voices in the larger, complex spectrum of Southeast Asian refugee experiences.

Pushing Boundaries of Critical Immigration and Refugee Scholarship

Current critical immigration and refugee scholarship focuses on critiques of the nation-state in order to position Southeast Asian refugees in the context of globalist, military, and imperial structures.⁴ These appraisals allow scholars to shift towards a critical consciousness of

⁴ "UCSD Center for the Humanities." Critical Immigration and Refugee Studies. Accessed December 15, 2015. <http://humctr.ucsd.edu/critical-immigration/>.

relationships and mechanisms that produce, control, and administer the movement of refugee and immigrant bodies across state borders. In addition to these analyses, critical refugee studies also support refugee remembrance that promotes personal counternarratives of resistance and agency through the scholarly lens of Thu-Huong Nguyễn-Vo, Yen Lê Espiritu, and Khatharya Um.

Thu-Huong Nguyễn-Vo captures the essence of Vietnamese refugee community remembrance in her article “Forking Paths: How Should We Remember the Dead?” She states, “Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners because no one else mourns us” and emphasizes how refugee communities must mourn in order to remember their own trauma and history.⁵ Nguyễn-Vo additionally instills the idea of “mourning the dead” as a way of denouncing the present Vietnamese government who influenced the displacement of refugee bodies. This very enactment of mourning, hence, is also a deliberate performance of refugee agency and resistance.

Likewise, Yen Lê Espiritu further examines refugee remembrance through the discussion of her own family’s experiences in the “Refugee Remembering—and Remembrance” chapter of *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*.⁶ Lê Espiritu writes about how she randomly encountered her uncle’s picture on the Internet when searching for South Vietnamese soldiers. While this picture showed only a headshot of him, fully clothed in military attire, she stated she had no recollection of him dressed in this manner when she left Vietnam in April 1975 to go to the United States. Lê Espiritu juxtaposes this private loss with the intersection of an online public memorial that has permitted her to revisit the meaning behind “Vietnamese refugee commemoration practices in the United States as critical disruptions to the hegemonic American

⁵ Nguyễn-Vo, Thu-Huong. "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): 157-75. <http://uclajournals.org/doi/pdf/10.17953/amer.31.2.g232251372h12k78>.

⁶ Lê Espiritu, Yen. "Refugee Remembering--and Remembrance." In *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, 105-38. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014.

discourse on the war and its refugees.”⁷ This personal analysis ultimately brings Lê Espiritu to counteract an elimination of South Vietnam’s history while also reproving the U.S. abandonment of its former allies.⁸ Essentially, her critique of mourning practices sheds light on the nuances and the complexity of refugee remembrances of their own dead that cannot fit into a single category.

Khatharya Um also adds to this critical refugee studies discourse and offers her own discussion of refugee trauma and violence through the experiences of Khmer, Vietnamese, and Lao refugees. In her essay, “Our Journeys, Our Communities: Southeast Asians in American History,” Um reviews the implications of war for Southeast Asian bodies and particularly emphasizes how the end of the Vietnam War produced even more violence.⁹ She states, “Under the socialist regimes, many Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotians suffered from economic hardship and political persecution. A large number of Vietnamese and Laotian civilian and military elites were sent to reeducation camps, sometimes euphemistically referred to as ‘seminars.’ Similar to the Soviet ‘gulags,’ these were essentially political prisons where detainees, some confined for decades, were subjected to hard labor, harsh punitive treatment, and food deprivation.”¹⁰ Um proceeds to give examples of personal testimonies of Southeast Asian prisoners of war to further elucidate its ramifications. One Vietnamese prisoner recounted a miserable time that he and other prisoners found fishes swimming in the same water they

⁷ Lê Espiritu, Yen. "Refugee Remembering--and Remembrance." In *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, 105-38. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. p. 137.

⁸ Lê Espiritu, Yen. "Refugee Remembering--and Remembrance." In *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, 105-38. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. p. 137.

⁹ Um, Khatharya. "Our Journeys, Our Communities: Southeast Asians In American History." 2006. 1-17. Accessed December 15, 2015. http://explore.museumca.org/wgolessons/pdf/lesson3/OMCA_WGO_Lesson3_KUessay.pdf.

¹⁰ Um, Khatharya. "Our Journeys, Our Communities: Southeast Asians In American History." 2006. 7.

consumed.¹¹ Um also points out that these types of cruel conditions also existed in Laos, where over 40,000 people were sent to reeducation camps only to be tortured. These historical accounts of struggle and hardship did not end in Southeast Asia, as Um extended her analysis to the United States. She maintained that historical traumas of Southeast Asian refugees prior to migration “are often compounded by the challenges of resettlement.”¹² Finally, she asserts that Southeast Asians were oftentimes subjugated into low-income communities, already inundated by high unemployment, pervasive poverty, crime, and substance abuse.¹³ These risk factors were unhealthily catalyzed by the lack of access to educational and economic resources, halting any chance of social advancement.

Through the critical refugee studies works of Nguyễn-Vo, Lê Espiritu, and Um, audiences bear witness to the unimaginable amount of violence instilled into Southeast Asian refugee bodies by U.S. colonial conquest. These narratives tell the stories and the lived experiences of refugees who portray the acts of their own agency and resistance. Even the act of existing can illustrate resistance within the context of U.S. subordination of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the personal accounts of war trauma and memory shed light on a larger and more nuanced framework of resiliency. Um provides examples of this in the “Fragments” chapter of *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, highlighting how both acts of being silent about one’s violent past and recounting it through memory are both respective forms of resistance.¹⁴ She writes, “...for some, silence is refuge and

¹¹ Um, Khatharya. "Our Journeys, Our Communities: Southeast Asians In American History." 2006. 8.

¹² Um, Khatharya. "Our Journeys, Our Communities: Southeast Asians In American History." 2006. 12.

¹³ Um, Khatharya. "Our Journeys, Our Communities: Southeast Asians In American History." 2006. 12.

¹⁴ Um, Khatharya. "Fragments." In *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, 181-215. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

resistance”¹⁵ while quoting Marianne Hirsch who argues, “For survivors who have been separated and exiled from a ravaged world, memory is necessarily an act not only of recall, but also of mourning, a mourning often inflected by anger, rage, and despair.”¹⁶ Essentially, the enactment of one’s mourning as emphasized by Um, Nguyễn-Vo, and Lê Espiritu in their respective works nuance various capacities of war trauma to shape memory as a form of resistance and resiliency.

Adding to this body of critical refugee studies, *Phetmixay Means Fighter* further expands this nuanced depiction of memory and resiliency through a Lao American refugee perspective. Specifically, this short documentary film sheds light on the diverse memories Phoutone Phetmixay is able to recall of escape from war violence and communist takeover of Laos. This enactment of Phoutone sharing intimate stories of loss, separation from family, and rebuilding a new life in the United States depict a part of his own resistance against U.S. “savior” discourses. Even through Phoutone’s being, he embodies a symbol of relentless war memory that dispositions him from the victim role and places him within the context of his own self-determination.

In a separate interview that is not included in the film, Phoutone shares a more intimate part of his spiritual journey to create the last name that would make a deep impact on his children:¹⁷

They used to call me “Keo Muong Luang”... do you understand why? Muong Luang is a nickname they call Luang Prabang the province...and I was named Keo Muong Luang—meaning the “Diamond of Luang Prabang.” It was a very patriotic name because I was a rebel and I was responsible for protecting my village...and my people in that province.

¹⁵ Um, Khatharya. "Fragments." In *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, 199. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

¹⁶ Hirsch, Marianne. 1996. “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile”. *Poetics Today* 17 (4). [Duke University Press, Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics]: 661. doi:10.2307/1773218.

¹⁷ Phoutone Phetmixay, telephone interview with author, December 13th, 2015.

The only time they would call me that was when I would return home to Luang Prabang from a warzone in the jungle...and they would say things like: “Keo Muong Luang is back! Watch out everybody! Keo Muong Luang is back!” and they would be scared of me too...because I have seen death and could have been killed many times, but I survived each time...surprisingly. I knew that after I survived countless times, I was meant to live...because if I was supposed to be killed, I would have died a long time ago. “Keo” directly translates to glass, but it can also mean diamond...so if I ever go back to fight again...I could still use it to my advantage.... But when I left Luang Prabang, I called myself Phoutone Phetmixay, which is what I go by today...and Phetmixay is a sacred last name that means nobody can destroy...strong...powerful...and wins all the time...I chose my last name after I escaped Laos in 1981...and it was the only thing that saved me and allowed me to have my children today.... It is fit for my family.¹⁸

Phoutone’s history of creating a last name “fit” for himself and his eventual family exemplifies a point on the Lao American refugee spectrum where resiliency meets struggle, and wins.

Specifically, Phoutone’s interview emphasizes how resiliency cannot exist without struggle through the formation of *Phetmixay*. This moniker produces a lived experience for Phoutone, in which he breathes and acts upon the very notion of *Phetmixay* meaning *fighter*. To be a fighter, therefore, one must encounter struggle time after time and still come out resilient in the end.

Moreover, Phoutone’s use of the word, “sacred,” and the phrase, “it was the only thing that saved me...” demonstrates his will to seek spiritual meaning and heal from the wounds of war. Through proclaiming himself as a *Phetmixay*, Phoutone leverages protection from all forces of evil. For example, he discloses how he escaped bullet-free from one location to another throughout Laos and Thailand. From Laos, Phoutone fled reeducation camps and crossed the Mekong River to Thailand where he was subsequently captured by Thai border patrols and imprisoned for four months and nineteen days. During his incarceration, he used “Phoutone Phetmixay” as a way to disguise himself from his birth name, “Bounyung.” Phoutone described how creating this alias was necessary to create to guarantee his safety, as his enemies previously knew him as having a “rebel-like” persona that instilled fear in others. If caught with his birth

¹⁸ Phoutone Phetmixay, telephone interview with author, December 13th, 2015.

name, “Bounyung,” his chances of survival would have decreased significantly. Phoutone chose not to take any risks at that time and eventually survived to tell his story. Through this miraculous survival, Phoutone has found a purpose and meaning for adhering to *Phetmixay* that demonstrates a relentless spiritual revelation for him.

Phoutone’s final escape from war-torn Laos to Thailand and refuge in the United States did not cap the life challenges he further faced with my mother, Vilavanh. Instead, the constant struggle to survive was further placed within the lives the entire family including my brothers and I as we all inherited *Phetmixay* as our family name. Phoutone’s own description of *Phetmixay* as being “fit for my family,” reveals that *Phetmixay* is no longer only about him, but also about a new spiritual and fighter legacy for our entire family.

Vilavanh, for instance, struggled alongside Phoutone when they first arrived in California. They were forced to learn new sets of cultures, languages, and systems foreign to them.¹⁹ Their lives were further complicated for they were the only individuals from their respective families in Laos and Thailand to seek refuge in the United States. Alone in their journey together, they endured incessant hardships through which they emerged more resilient. Unforeseen obstacles such as the pathway to U.S. citizenship were adversely compounded by limited English proficiency and the 1996 welfare reform.²⁰ Nevertheless, Phoutone’s multifaceted remembrances of persistence during wartime were fundamental in helping the rest of our family navigate the multifaceted U.S. system.

As the storyline in *Phetmixay Means Fighter* develops, it unravels some of the most intense and emotional memories that impacted Phoutone during his resettlement in the United States. Although Phoutone ultimately celebrates his successes in the United States as a way of

¹⁹ Vilavanh Phetmixay, telephone interview with author, August 21st, 2015.

²⁰ Fujiwara, Lynn. "Mothers Without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant Families and the Consequences of Welfare Reform." 2008.

accepting the struggles of his past, it is important to acknowledge the context in which he performs it. Phoutone's homeland politics essentially ignores the violent power of American imperial structures in Southeast Asia. For example, it should not be forgotten that over forty years ago, the United States dropped an estimated 2 million tons of ordnance in Laos in order to halt the "spread of communism."²¹ This mission equated to approximately 600,000 bombing missions from 1964 to 1973, making Laos the most heavily bombed country in the world per capita.²² Instead of recognizing this violence instilled by the U.S. government against Lao bodies, Phoutone's homeland politics is more critical of the communist Pathet Lao government from which he has personally experienced higher intensities of oppression. The types of communist oppressions he mentioned in the film include being forced into reeducation/concentration camps and displacement from Laos. Suffering from the negative impacts of this regime while ignoring the U.S.'s violent conquest in Southeast Asia create spaces in which Lao refugees like him problematically adhere to the paternalistic nature of U.S. colonialism.

Nevertheless, Phoutone's homeland politics also serves to disrupt the assimilationist discourses that cast immigrants as "good American citizens" and predominantly portrays them through the context of obedience.²³ Near the end of the film, Phoutone is serving as color guard for the Royal Lao Airborne²⁴ Reunion in Atlanta, Georgia. Phoutone's commitment to the Royal Lao government is illustrated here as he performs a type of nationalistic, militarist tribute. He

²¹ Khamvongsa, Channapha, and Elaine Russell. "Legacies Of War." *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2009): 281-306. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672710902809401>.

²² Khamvongsa, Channapha, and Elaine Russell. "Legacies Of War." *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2009): 281-306. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672710902809401>.

²³ McGinnis, Theresa Ann. "'A Good Citizen Is What You'll Be': Educating Khmer Youth for Citizenship in a United States Migrant Education Program." *Journal of Social Science Education* 14, no. 3 (2015): 66-74.

²⁴ The Royal Lao Airborne claims to be a non-political entity established on September 3rd, 2001, and whose missions are to "preserve the fame and glory of the Royal Lao Airborne" and "provide military training assistance to the U.S. Armed Forces."

cannot therefore follow the model of a “good American citizen” since his politics are still heavily ingrained and dedicated to his country of origin and not the United States. These juxtapositions of Phoutone’s politics of Laos and the United States in the film reinforces Lisa Lowe’s argument in *Immigrant Acts*, which she claims that “the operations of power and hegemony produce opportunities in which it self-destructs.”²⁵ Lowe essentially argues that the United States’ motive of instilling hegemony only “undoes” itself by creating new counternarratives of the voices it meant to destruct. Overall, it should be noted that although Phoutone’s own homeland politics may be problematic given in the aforementioned context, it is still a part of his own resistance and counternarrative against U.S. power and hegemony.

III. Synopsis

Phetmixay Means Fighter considers the globalized, imperial frameworks that have forced inevitable migration patterns for Southeast Asian bodies within and across nation-state borders through the experiences of Phoutone Phetmixay, a Lao American refugee whose conceptions of survival and adaptation to a new society were shaped by his spiritual journey in becoming his last name. This film is fundamentally structured around the experiences that have been key to informing Phoutone’s critical consciousness. Despite having lived almost half his life in the United States with a supportive family, Phoutone longs for his birth country of Laos. This is illustrated throughout various points in the film, and particularly in the beginning where Phoutone vulnerably states, “I cried, cried, cried...because I don’t want to miss my own country...that’s what I thought at the time...I cried, cried...and I cannot say bye either....”

Phoutone effortlessly shares these past experiences of emotional trauma and even finds it comforting for others to listen to him speak about the history of Laos and his journey to the United States. He accepts his past and begins to talk about one of his first experiences when he

²⁵ Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

directly felt the impact of the Civil War in Laos. He states how the Pathet Lao Communist Party²⁶ took over Laos in 1975 and prevented him from the graduation he would have had in 1976 from Laos's prestigious military academy. His dream of becoming a military officer shattered and he was later forced into harsh reeducation camps also known as "seminars."²⁷ In these seminars, he was forced to move rocks and boulders with little food and water for long periods of time. Phoutone did not know if he was going to survive until he managed to escape five years later to begin his ultimate trek to the United States. In Thailand, he met his wife, Vilavanh, and brought her to the United States with him to start a new life together. They both encountered new obstacles, such as facing financial hardships without a familial support system. Nevertheless, Phoutone led the way, as his own resiliency to succeed was strongly influenced by his asking his parents for permission to go to the United States and the becoming of his last name that gave him spiritual strength.

This film is the continuation of the first film I completed in the UCLA EthnoCommunications course during the 2013-2014 academic year. Although the main storyline remains the same, this version incorporates more of my mother's (Vilavanh) voice in addition to my father's (Phoutone) experience of surviving reeducation camps in Laos. In doing so, I hope to give it a more holistic approach to understanding Lao American refugee resiliency as it relates to familial support networks and constant struggle. *Phetmixay Means Fighter* also critically deconstructs mainstream media portrayals of overall Southeast Asian American refugees as having been disenfranchised, furthering the narrative to integrate the exercise of personal agency. While it focuses on Phoutone as the center for Lao American refugee resiliency stories, it is

²⁶ Phoutone Phetmixay, telephone interview with author, December 13th, 2015.

²⁷ Phoutone Phetmixay, telephone interview with author, December 13th, 2015.

important to acknowledge his story on a point of a larger continuum that encompasses other multidimensional renegotiations of space forced upon refugee communities.

IV. Treatment/Creative Approach

Story and Characters

Phetmixay Means Fighter is structured around my father, Phoutone Phetmixay, who is intermittently accompanied by my mother (Vilavanh) and my brothers in different parts of the film. Although Phoutone predominantly narrates the storyline of the film, it should be noted that this documentary's cut is from my viewpoint as his daughter. Together, it brings about both subjective and objective filmmaking experiences that intertwine Phoutone's poetic speeches of past memories and my own specific choosing of his various recollections.

Phoutone Phetmixay is a 63-year old Lao American refugee residing in North Carolina. A husband and father, he is the epitome of an intelligent and strong-willed *fighter*, as indicated in the film's title. Even though he has reached the age of retirement, he continues to work diligently to support his family. Life has never been easy for Phoutone, and it continues to challenge him to the present day. From growing up in an impoverished environment in Laos, Phoutone understands what it feels like to earn everything he has ever wanted.

His background story of his own family structure in Laos is critical for informing how he is as a person today. It begins with Phoutone positioned as the eldest son of nine children. This role has major implications for how he views others and navigates different environments. As the eldest son, he was forced to shoulder the role of being a second father to the rest of his siblings. This entailed many more responsibilities that added pressure in Phoutone's life to mature faster than most children. Although these details of Phoutone's life were not included in the film due to time limitations, the film hints at these character details through the depiction of Phoutone's will

to escape Laos by himself. The film also follows Phoutone's life in North Carolina as he reports intimate details of his own survival of war trauma and how he endured countless setbacks only to come out stronger and even more fearless.

As discussed by Phoutone himself, he described how one of his first obstructions happened when the Royal Lao government fell to the Pathet Lao communist regime in 1975.²⁸ At the time, he was training at Laos's well-respected military academy to serve the Royal Lao side; more significantly, he would have graduated as an officer in 1976. Later when communism took over, Phoutone was forced to attend Lao reeducation camps also known as "seminars."²⁹ He endured long, harsh labor conditions while transporting boulders with little food and water. Phoutone's second major setback [shown in the film] was when he and Vilavanh came to the United States with only twenty baht (equating to fifty American cents) and the clothes on their backs. Although this was another depressing moment, Phoutone and Vilavanh both persevered to overcome all obstacles and adhered to the spiritual essence of *Phetmixay* as their last name.

Style, Location, and Voice

The film opens and the screen is black with only the text caption of Phoutone's voice made visible every time he speaks. Upon describing his escape from Laos under the heavy monsoon season, thunder and lightning sound along with visuals of mountainous hills and flooded rivers. Then, another image appears to be Phoutone's feet straddling the ground and tide as if he was preparing to jump into the water. A big splash is heard to visualize Phoutone diving into the Mekong River; subsequently, the video camera is angled in a way that helps audiences view the film through the eyes of Phoutone, as he swims endlessly with no intent to return home. In a subtle yet aestheticized approach, the title of the film, *Phetmixay Means Fighter*, floats on

²⁸ Phoutone Phetmixay, telephone interview with author, December 13th, 2015.

²⁹ Phoutone Phetmixay, telephone interview with author, December 13th, 2015.

top of the water with the cue of music before the camera view is finally placed onto Phoutone sitting at home reminiscing about his past and taking pictures of old family photos. While the camera is placed on Phoutone as he is viewing these memories, his voice cues in the background to him introducing Laos and giving a short description of the country before it cuts to an old public service announcement from former President John F. Kennedy telling viewers that “all we want in Laos is peace—not war.” Then, the old media clip is cut to one informing general audiences about communist invasion of Laos and how Laos has “the most displaced national population in the world” with several of its natives “being refugees more than once.” The screen fades to black and returns to Phoutone’s interview with me as his daughter.

Phetmixay Means Fighter is constructed in a poetic style that juxtaposes Phoutone’s lived experiences in North Carolina with visual imagery of his past memories operationalized through different wartime clips and old military photos. These contradictory temporal sections are interwoven together in order to demonstrate Phoutone’s longing for Laos and other internal feelings of obligation to his birth country while still living in the United States. These complex experiences of Phoutone will be closely monitored through the film’s stylistic grasp of intersecting intimate visuals with music flows/cues. While the film already engages in a poetic style through Phoutone’s unique storytelling delivery, it will be balanced with traditional black and white wartime archival footage of intense battle and fleeing that standardize its approach as a documentary. These visuals help the audience imagine what military life was like in Laos during the Lao Civil War period that caused the vast displacement of Lao bodies across the globe.³⁰

The approach to conducting interviews with Phoutone as the film’s main character takes more of a conversational approach, which requires Phoutone to use first-person narrative when speaking to me, as his daughter and filmmaker. Vilavanh’s short interview also incorporates the

³⁰ *The Betrayal*. Directed by Thavisouk Phrasavath and Ellen Kuras. Performed by Thavisouk Phrasavath. USA, 2009. Film.

conversational approach, but in a less structured environment than Phoutone's. Open-ended questions are asked to prompt organic dialogue and revisit old memories. The overall purpose of instilling these specific stylistic methodologies is to set a tone from which audience members can read this documentary as a form of visual auto-ethnography.³¹ This film is essentially useful as a visual/audio tool to unearth a unique part of Asian American history that is oftentimes swept under mainstream discourses and then forgotten. As a daughter of refugees, I cannot forget the trauma and violence my parents withstood. These are the very elements that have created my existence and continue to impact how I perform in my daily life. For these aspects, *Phetmixay Means Fighter* is a testament to my resistance against the violent erasure of Lao Americans.

My cinematic approach to *Phetmixay Means Fighter* was influenced by Vinh Nguyen's "Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance," which speaks similarly of his own process of recollecting family history through the embodiment of the term "me-search."³² Nguyen eloquently states:

In my writing, I seek to make sense of my painful and complicated past, of how that past is entangled in a much larger story of war, displacement, and diaspora, and how it might provide an opening, a life-line of sorts, towards a less violent, decolonized future. It is a desire to see myself and those like me represented in history, to be reflected in narratives that push us outside their frames.³³

Nguyen discusses how the nature of his work is not only an empowering journey towards self-discovery, but also one that can instill some form of decoloniality for future generations of

³¹ The limitation of making a visual auto-ethnographic film is the challenge of critically distancing myself from the main subject of the film, my father. Since I have lived and breathed the dinner table stories he would tell, it is challenging to deconstruct the problematic structures that exist in his stories of the war and to make them objective as possible. Another limitation of an auto-ethnographic film is bringing the critical view of U.S. intervention into the film. However, it should be noted that I have attempted to add this subtext through historical archival footage.

³² Nguyen, Vinh. "Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance." *Life Writing* 12, no. 4 (2014): 1-11.

³³ Nguyen, Vinh. "Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance." *Life Writing* 12, no. 4 (2014): 3.

Vietnamese Americans. The frameworks of “mẹ-search”³⁴ are powerful for their potential to uplift fellow community members from the violence that separated them from family, physical territory, and the individual self. Nevertheless, *Phetmixay Means Fighter* is also a form of “mẹ-search” and a methodological instrument to re-center my own narrative through the intimate spaces of my family’s testimonies that have been problematically displaced by war trauma. Essentially, it is a technological tool to honor the struggles my family has endured throughout the various colonial experiences of enforcement into a reeducation camp by way of communism or obligatory socialization into the American empire, both of which have displaced them from the places they once called “home.”

I created *Phetmixay Means Fighter* as a way of contextualizing and understanding my own past. Rather than viewing my own family history in the way mainstream discourses have constructed it to be as agentless victims of either communism or American imperialism, I have come to understand it more along the lines of critical refugee studies. The works of critical refugee studies scholars Nguyễn-Vo, Lê Espiritu, and Um have provided me a methodological lens from which to approach my own personal life story as a form of political resistance. Moreover, their works have helped broaden my scope of understanding the diverse array of political structures that ignite oppression and displace countless Southeast Asian bodies across nation-state borders. For example, I have come to understand that both the communist regime in Laos and the American imperial structures produce feelings of terror and unsettlement within Lao bodies. It is my own journey through the making of this film to therefore “come home,” and find my own sense of settlement and liberation. It is through the visual displaying of my family’s history on screen that I can finally validate my own experiences of intergenerational trauma and heal from the wounds of my family’s past. Essentially, I have decided to create *Phetmixay*

³⁴ Vinh Nguyen notes, “In Vietnamese, ‘mẹ’ is the word for ‘mother’” (p. 10).

Means Fighter for these reasons of regaining self-validation and self-consciousness that will hopefully continue to exist as an example of Vinh Nguyen's mention of a "less violent, decolonized future."³⁵

Structure

The entire structure of the film is invested in following a nonlinear, non-chronological storyline that contests traditional notions of temporality. In its attempt to garner the attention of a larger audience and tell a story, it strategically sentimentalizes Phoutone's entire journey from Laos and Thailand to the United States. Although the project was successful upon completion, there is much opportunity for expanding the storyline to add in more elements of Phoutone's multifaceted past and current life.

Gena Hamamoto's *Beyond the Sea: Filipinos in the U.S. Navy* and Chuck Diep's *A Salon Story* inspired me, as they used different media clips to bring viewers to another era that temporarily escapes the present moment. Purposefully, these works do not follow any chronological sense and only focus on piecing together significant stories at various times in the main character's life. I also appreciated their use of music to elicit and reinforce intimate emotional and sensory impact. Their multiple modes of illustrating these structural techniques were especially useful in understanding how they could be potentially applied in *Phetmixay Means Fighter*. Nevertheless, these documentary examples only guided me to a certain point. I experienced different challenges regarding the visuals of the film, as I relied heavily on previously made media clips. Accessibility of B-roll was also limited by the distance of my father being across the nation in North Carolina.

The film's stylistic approach moves through a poetic structure to elicit a constant state of being moved among audience members. This "state of being moved" termed as "affect" is

³⁵ Nguyen, Vinh. "Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance." *Life Writing* 12, no. 4 (2014): 3.

examined in Purnima Mankekar's *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*. Mankekar further explores this form of unsettlement through Indian diasporic communities in both New Delhi and the San Francisco Bay Area, asserting that "another trope conjoined with diaspora is that of loss—loss of homeland, of 'tradition,' of roots, of authenticity—such that diasporic affect is frequently represented in terms of mourning this loss."³⁶ The structure of *Phetmixay Means Fighter* attends to the meaning behind Mankekar's diasporic affect. Essentially, this film carefully integrates the rhythm of Phoutone's voice, the sounds of the melodic tunes, and the graphic visuals of old-timed family photographs/old military footage and photos, and family-bonding footage into one cohesive storyline. The scene where Phoutone speaks about his aspirations to graduate from the military in Laos is a perfect example of how the linking of the sounds and visual components elicit an affective state of being moved for audience members. In this scene, I show old military footage of the Royal Lao military academy training and pair it with Phoutone's voiceover, in which he described how he wanted "to serve and protect" Laos but failed as a result of communist takeover in 1975. This scene is later visualized with dramatic wartime music and continual old military footage depicting the violent firing of ammunition. These components of the film are edited and intertwined to displace audience members into a liminal space where they not only feel, but also believe to have shared some form of compassion and intimacy with Phoutone whose dreams were instantly shattered. Overall, this stylistic approach to engender empathy among audience members is purposefully used to generate the ultimate affective state of being moved, contesting temporal and dichotomous notions of wartime violence only existing in the past. Audience members are subsequently more likely to welcome the content of Phoutone's poetic speech in a way that relocates them from their seats and finally into my viewpoint as the filmmaker and as his daughter.

³⁶ Mankekar, Purnima. *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*. Duke University Press, 2015.

V. Audience/Impact/Dissemination

Audience and Impact

As most documentaries are fundamentally designed to impact larger audiences through a visual learning sphere and bring about conversations at an intimate level, *Phetmixay Means Fighter* does just that. Specifically, it targets an audience of immigrant and (Lao) refugee communities, Lao American youth, students, former prisoners of war, military personnel, and the general public who may not understand the multiplicity of Southeast Asian refugee memoirs that erupted from the broader context of the Vietnam War era.³⁷ This film aspires to spark dialogue among these various groups about the untold stories of Lao refugees who were also impacted by U.S. imperialism, yet whose narratives continue to be negated.

Through Phoutone's story, the film hopes to evoke various empathic responses from the audience to a level from which they can relate to the pain of forced removal and the strength it takes to rebuild one's life in a new land. Similarly, the film hopes also to foster a sense of healing among Lao audience members from multiple generations. As I am the filmmaker and the daughter of Phoutone, *Phetmixay Means Fighter* fundamentally embodies a form of healing that is possible among Lao American refugee families. Storytelling in *Phetmixay Means Fighter* has been a critical feature of the film that illustrates an approach towards lessening intergenerational conflicts and opening spaces to empower one another.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the fact that very few documentaries and books have been made that present the lived experiences of Southeast Asian refugees and their American-born children, much less for the Lao community. Even within Asian American Studies discourse, there is a major lack of Lao American representation. This erasure prolongs violence among community members, as their histories remain untold and are lost with every death of an

³⁷ Um, Khatharya. "Our Journeys, Our Communities: Southeast Asians In American History." 2006. 12.

elder. Similarly to Um's objective to "move Cambodia from the 'sideshow' of U.S. history and Cambodians from the periphery of American public and intellectual life,"³⁸ *Phetmixay Means Fighter* is meant to move Lao American refugee narratives from the margins and into the core of U.S. history.

Dissemination

Dissemination will principally take place through a digital, online platform such as Vimeo, YouTube, or Google Drive. Through these mediums, it is more probable that the film will reach larger audiences and can also be accessible to those living outside the United States. It also has the potential to be screened at various Asian American film festivals, classroom settings, Lao American gatherings/festivities, and other organizational meetings. It will also be accessible to the Asian American Studies Department, the Asian American Studies Center, and the Center for EthnoCommunications at the University of California, Los Angeles.

³⁸ Um, Khatharya. "Introduction." In *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, 16. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

References

- "About Us." Royal Lao Airborne. Accessed February 28, 2016.
<http://www.royallaoairborne.com/about-us/>.
- The Betrayal*. Directed by Thavisouk Phrasavath and Ellen Kuras. Performed by Thavisouk Phrasavath. USA, 2009. Film.
- Fujiwara, Lynn. "Mothers Without Citizenship: Asian Immigrant Families and the Consequences of Welfare Reform." 2008.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 1996. "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile". *Poetics Today* 17 (4). [Duke University Press, Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics]: 659–86.
doi:10.2307/1773218.
- Khamvongsa, Channapha, and Elaine Russell. "Legacies Of War." *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2009): 281-306. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14672710902809401>.
- Lê Espiritu, Yen. "Refugee Remembering--and Remembrance." In *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*, 105-38. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014.
- Lê Espiritu, Yen. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014.
- Lê Espiritu, Yen. "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 410-33.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Mankekar, Purnima. *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*. Duke University Press, 2015.
- McGinnis, Theresa Ann. "'A Good Citizen Is What You'll Be': Educating Khmer Youth for Citizenship in a United States Migrant Education Program." *Journal of Social Science*

Education 14, no. 3 (2015): 66-74.

Nguyen, Vinh. "Me-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance." *Life Writing* 12, no. 4 (2014): 1-11.

Nguyễn-Vo, Thu-Huong. "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): 157-75. <http://uclajournals.org/doi/pdf/10.17953/amer.31.2.g232251372h12k78>.

"UCSD Center for the Humanities." Critical Immigration and Refugee Studies. Accessed December 15, 2015. <http://humctr.ucsd.edu/critical-immigration/>.

Um, Khatharya. "Fragments." In *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, 199. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Um, Khatharya. "Fragments." In *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*, 199. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Um, Khatharya. "Our Journeys, Our Communities: Southeast Asians In American History." 2006. 1-17. Accessed December 15, 2015. http://explore.museumca.org/wgolessons/pdf/lesson3/OMCA_WGO_Lesson3_KUessay.pdf.

"World Refugee Day: Global Forced Displacement Tops 50 Million for First Time in Post-World War II Era." UNHCR News. June 20, 2014. Accessed December 20, 2015.

<http://www.unhcr.org/53a155bc6.html>.

Interviews

Phoutone Phetmixay. Telephone interview with author. December 13th, 2015.

Vilavanh Phetmixay. Telephone interview with author. August 21st, 2015.