

Trong Nước:  
A Choreographic Study of Family Trauma  
by  
My-Linh Le

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Becky Dyer, Co-Chair  
Liz Lerman, Co-Chair  
Marianne Kim  
d. Sabela grimes

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## ABSTRACT

Like many other Southeast Asian American (“SEAA”) families who fled from war and genocide around the 1970s and through the 1990s, my family avoided discussing their trauma or addressing any resulting mental health issues. As I came to internalize patterns that stemmed from my parents’ untreated wounds, without any way of ever truly understanding those wounds, I inevitably developed symptoms of my own trauma, including depression and anxiety. Although the topic of intergenerational trauma (“IGT”) has been discussed in a growing body of research within the specific context of Asian American families that have resettled in western countries, the focus has been on the trauma itself: its development and manifestations in the first (parent) generation and its transmission and impact on the second (offspring) generation. Little has been researched or written about healing and recovery from IGT on an individual level. Due to this gap in the literature, and my background as a dancer and artist, I turned to autoethnography and arts-based research methods to explore pathways to understanding and healing from family trauma. Using a combination of movement-based inquiry and narrative inquiry, I examined both of the following questions: (1) What can performed autoethnography that draws on narrative research as well as inquiry led by movement improvisation and choreographic processes, produce in terms of deeper knowledge about one’s traumas and about new ways of expressing oneself or being in the world? (2) How can such a movement- and somatic-centered autoethnographic research methodology also serve as a recovery modality? Although my family strongly believed the arts, and dance in particular, to serve no purpose other than to get in the way of job security and financial stability, the following research contains implications regarding whether and how families similar to mine could benefit from these practices.

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## PREFACE

In 1980, three generations of women in my family—my mother, older sister, and grandmother—found themselves on a sinking boat in the middle of the ocean between Vietnam and Indonesia, where they would, after three days without food or water, wash ashore. The story, as my mother has told it over the years, is that the boat holding over 180 refugees, despite its 60-person capacity, stayed afloat only because an altruistic whale rose from underneath the ocean to meet them, and then proceeded to carry the boat on its back all the way to Indonesia.

As incredible as it sounds, other facts about their escape from Vietnam seemed equally unlikely: that the boat took only three days to find shore, when many other boats had been lost at sea for weeks, some even months; that their boat, being larger than the average fishing boat, somehow managed to evade pirates patrolling the oceans (in 1981 it was reported that 77 percent of the boats which left Vietnam and eventually landed in Thailand were brutally attacked, involving pillaging, rape, torture, and murder); and that every one of my family members, including extended family and family friends, who got on that same boat, survived.

Whenever I review the many astonishing stories I have gathered from Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants who lived through political trauma, warfare, and genocide, I witness a resilience, a will to survive, to confront the impossible, that I could never imagine myself, as the first in my family to be born in the United States, ever having. Growing up in San Jose, California, I witnessed in my parents both an aversion to life and an incredible will to survive—a paradox I have struggled all of my life to make sense of. For example, the same woman who risked everything in leaving the only land she knew, to brave the many horrors on that open sea, is the same woman who is fraught with terror by my decision to pursue a somewhat unpredictable career in the arts.



Throughout my life, my mother took desperate measures to make sure that I was always safe; perhaps in doing so, she has kept me alive, and in another sense, kept me from living. “If you really love us, you’ll stop dancing,” my parents told me one day, when I was already past what they considered the maximum marriageable age.

Of course, my family’s story is not completely unique: From 1975 through the 1990s, millions affected by bombings, political repression, and genocide following the Vietnam War, fled Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam pouring into refugee camps in neighboring countries. Many of these refugees eventually resettled in the United States to start their lives anew but had few resources available to serve their social and mental health needs. Like so many others, my parents dealt with their past by preoccupying themselves, almost exclusively, with the future: namely their children’s educational achievements, career advancements, and financial successes.

In 2017, KQED, a news media outlet based in San Francisco, published a story about my relationship with my family as an example of a phenomenon they referred to as “the intergenerational transference of trauma.” The story highlighted just two examples of the many perplexing outbursts of rage I witnessed in my parents while growing up with them: my mother screaming and kicking a Fisher-Price picnic table violently across the room because I had forgotten to bring my backpack to school one day when I was six years old; another instance in which she threw a glass at the kitchen window because there was one too many dishes in the sink. Even more unsettling than the unpredictable episodes, was that my family would consistently move on from these sudden explosions of rage as if they had never happened.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

By now it is well known the horrors that many of the first generation of Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants who fled to the western world, had witnessed or endured, from the terrors and violence of war, genocide, and communist “reeducation,” to the grueling and dangerous escapes by boat or on foot into refugee camps. This mass trauma along with postmigration stressors, such as language difficulties and cultural conflicts, have deeply affected the emotional health of many Southeast Asian American (“SEAA”) refugees and their children (Yang and Dinh 4). However, due to cultural stigma and a shortage of bilingual social workers and psychologists, many refugees even to this day rarely speak about their trauma or access professional mental health services. “When emotional wounds are left unhealed, the pain carries over to their children and future generations” (Yang and Dinh 4).

This is what we refer to as intergenerational trauma (“IGT”). For example, parents who experience or show trauma-related symptoms, such as recurrent nightmares, trouble sleeping, avoidance or withdrawal, intermittent outbursts of anger, anxiety and depression, can pass these conditions to their children (DePaul 2013). These trauma-related symptoms may also cause parents to have difficulty establishing secure attachments to their children, “resulting in impaired parenting capacities and poor self-image by children in relation to their surroundings” (Yang and Dinh 4). Thus, IGT refers to an experience of trauma located within familial generations: it is a generational construct that utilizes a trauma discourse to link the past with the present, is inherently relational, and intersects with culture and identity (Chou 8-9).

Although this trauma is widespread among the SEAA population in the U.S., it is difficult to treat due to beliefs and attitudes about mental illness that result in a

reluctance to talk about traumatic experiences. The culture of silence<sup>1</sup> and secrecy surrounding family trauma often plays a role in the intergenerational transference of trauma. “Children learn to internalize this silence and respond based on what they imagine occurred to their traumatized parents, even if they do not truly know or understand” (Yang and Dinh 4). This avoidance of talking about traumatic experiences has a negative impact on physical health and is generally harmful to the survivors as it can impede social reintegration and intensify the sense of isolation, mistrust, and loneliness (Chou 23).

At the outset of this research, I had no reason to doubt whether trauma played a large role in my family narrative. Although it was rarely discussed, I was aware of some of the horrifying experiences that my parents and older siblings had survived. Therefore, evidence that my parents’ trauma contributed to the rift between us would unlikely present me with much of any impactful revelations, as such a conclusion would not only be obvious but also superficial. What I became more interested in researching, rather, was whether and how this trauma could have been treated. For example, how would my parents have benefitted from having a greater emotional awareness, and perhaps more importantly, a greater bodily awareness? What if their intolerance of my artistic inclinations, especially those inclinations with movement or dance, was a rejection of what they needed the most: a treatment method using arts therapy and somatic experiencing?

### **Purpose of Research**

Beyond the stories of immigration and displacement, this project dove into the unspoken and unacknowledged trauma that sits at the center of families like mine, from

<sup>1</sup> “Culture of silence” describes the behavior of a group of people that by unspoken consensus does not mention, discuss, or acknowledge a given subject

the perspective of the second generation<sup>2</sup>. As an autoethnographic work, this research drew primarily from my own life experience, and, through artistic collaboration, the experience of others who possess the same or similar “cultural identity,” in the context of the social and cultural institutions that have shaped the world in which we inhabit.

Throughout the past two decades of my journey as a dancer-artist, movement has been a medium for both self-discovery and self-recovery. The purpose of this project, therefore, was not to wallow in past events that have caused pain, but to find closure or reconciliation through a deeper understanding of the relationships and relationship dynamics that have shaped me the most. I believe such reconciliation begins internally rather than externally. The rationale behind this claim is perhaps best explained through the works of Dr. Gabor Maté, who draws a distinction between “traumatic events” and the trauma itself:

“The trauma is not what happens to you. The trauma is what happens inside of you. And, as a result of these traumatic events, what happens ... is you get disconnected from your emotions, and you get disconnected from your body, and you have difficulty being in the present moment. And you develop a negative view of your world and a negative view of yourself and a defensive view of other people. And these perspectives keep showing up in your life in the present ... so, the issue is not just to recognize what happened 10, 15, 30—however many years ago—but to actually recognize their manifestations in the present moment, and to transcend them. And how do you do that? By reconnecting with yourself, by restoring the connection with your body, primarily, and with your emotions that

<sup>2</sup> “Second generation,” as used in this document, refers to the individuals born and raised in the United States who have at least one foreign born parent. Although there is some ambiguity in reference to the definition of second generation Americans and first generation Americans, this definition is cited by major research centers such as the United States Census Bureau and the Pew Research Center.

you lost. And once you do, when you've found these things again, then, you have what we call recovery" (Ferriss 2018).

Using reflexive exploration through writing poetry, mythology, and reflective journaling, along with movement improvisation and choreographic processes, the study sought to understand the trauma that may have manifested in the second generation's day-to-day lives with their parents, in their households. As a member of the second generation, I was interested in investigating the traumas we may have inherited from our parents, and how these traumas show up in our own patterns of behaviors. For instance, what cycles did we see in our parents that we wished to avoid, and in what ways did we try to break out of those cycles, only to find that we had actually fallen into them instead? How did we end up actually breaking through those cycles and healing ourselves and/or our families, if we ever did succeed?

The data used in this research consists of many stories: stories that were buried deep in my memory, stories that happened only moments ago or that are still unfolding as I continue to live in them, stories from my dream world that point at themes held by my subconscious, stories from my imagination that help me process the ones from the past, stories that change as I relive them as a different person with each retelling. Nearly all of these stories implicate my family in one way or another. Part of the purpose of this research was to understand the culture of silence with which I continually engaged throughout this process. The stories that this research has produced are not only for myself, but also for reading communities to find greater clarity and deeper meaning in their own cultural and somatic experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The primary questions that drove this project were: Firstly, *how can narrative-based research and autoethnographic dance-making processes serve as an arts-based*

*research methodology in understanding family trauma?* For example, what can performative autoethnography, that draws from writing, storytelling, improvisation and choreographic processes, produce in terms of deeper knowledge about one's traumas and about new ways of expressing oneself or being in the world? Secondly, *how can a movement- and somatic-centered autoethnographic research methodology serve as a recovery modality?* In addition to these questions were the following secondary questions:

- How does trauma evolve trans-generationally in families?
- How much of a role does, or should, culture play in our understanding of trauma and IGT and modes of recovery?
- In what ways has having a “culture of silence” protected our families, and in what ways has it been a further detriment to our families?

### **Assumptions**

Due to the complexities of IGT and family trauma, this project was designed under the assumption that an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates personal experience and reflexivity, accompanied by textual analysis, is necessary to avoid depicting monolithic versions of the truth. This was also based on the further assumption that there is no “universal truth as a morally or politically neutral translation of reality” (Barone 246). In other words, a story never tells the absolute truth (Barone 246), but neither does any other mode of discourse. This is the strength of narrative inquiry and arts-based research methods: the verisimilitude of such research is automatically questioned; whereas the “authorial baggage” (Barone 246) of more traditional forms of research often goes unacknowledged.

The design of my research project and choreographic work also rested on the assumption that the topics of trauma, responses to traumatic events, as well as the

possible healing and treatment of affected individuals and communities are inseparable from their cultural constitutions. “Effective treatment of trauma survivors from various Asian backgrounds requires an understanding of the interplay between cultural ideology, family structure and dynamics, and internal experiences of the trauma” (Tummala-Narra 243). Thus, this project also relies on the following assumptions about trauma and IGT: (a) stress and coping cannot be separated from cultural context; (b) cultural values and beliefs influence the interpretation of respective stressors; and (c) stress and coping should be understood from a collectivistic perspective that affirms the systemic and sociocultural context (Chou 67-68).

### **Limitations**

Autoethnography is not only a method by which research is conducted; it is also a representation of the research itself. In other words, it is both product and process. Because product is embedded in the process of writing autoethnography, the scope of my MFA Applied Project does not include the final staged evening-length performance and its reception as the “final product.” Rather, this project focuses primarily on the research and creative processes (from data collection methods to works-in-progress showings), as I work towards producing the final staged performance throughout the year and continue to develop the project, even after my defense is completed.

Furthermore, due to the nature of qualitative research methodologies such as narrative inquiry and autoethnography, both of which use personal stories to understand social patterns, the resources used for my study are limited to my own life experiences as well as the literature review I have done to supplement my research. This limitation was in part due to the “culture of silence” on these topics, which made recruiting participants challenging, and in greater part due to financial hardships resulting in limitations in time and money. These financial hardships required me to complete my

MFA a year early, cutting in half the time I would have otherwise had to develop and produce this project. Constraints in time caused by the coursework I was required to complete before graduating forced me to further limit the scope of my project. As challenging as these limitations may seem, they have greatly helped create clear boundaries around the scope of my project, which in turn has helped guide me in structuring this project.

### **Delimitations**

Because there exists already a strong body of literature and research in the experiences and trauma of Vietnam War veterans and Vietnamese refugees, my research picked up where others had left off, by looking at how trauma in individuals who survived war and genocide in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos has evolved or not evolved, from the perspective of their children, the second generation. Although IGT could be present in any population, this research project focused primarily on the offspring of Vietnamese immigrants because it allowed for an autoethnographic approach in finding answers to the questions I posed. By focusing on a very specific population, I believe the limitation in breadth yielded greater depth in this study of IGT.

### **Ethical Concerns**

Another consideration that guided this inquiry was the question of what rights we, as researchers, have to speak for others. Susan Lieu, the Vietnamese American playwright and performer of a one-woman show, titled “140LBS: How Beauty Killed My Mother,” addressed this very question. Throughout the performance, Susan is conflicted about whether she should share her family’s story as a show. Questions arose about motive: whether she is doing so for fame and attention, and whether by doing so she is really actually making the story about herself. In Vietnamese culture, such personal stories are not discussed. The fear many artists are confronted with is the possibility that



“sharing such an intimate family story and reopening wounds that have never properly healed can inflict more pain and bring shame and embarrassment to your family. Some may even consider it exploitative” (Vo). On the other hand, the silence around trauma in SEAA communities have in many other ways caused greater suffering.

Given the healing properties of storytelling, the question that guided me in determining what information to include or to omit was whether each choreographic or artistic decision had “something of ethical substance worth sharing” (Rosiek 632). Here, I am referring to “ethical” in the sense of how “a need to contribute to human well-being on a personal and global scale” figured into my project design (Rosiek 632). Although I could have sidestepped this issue by presenting only numerical data, the research questions I posed could not be answered by cold facts and numbers communicated without any story to give them meaning. The point of this choreographic work was to reveal the story hidden beneath the surface of facts (Zeller 79). Not only is meaning then imparted upon otherwise abstract data, but also an opening is then created which allows for multiplicities of meaning. Through this choreographic work, I did not seek to reveal any absolute or universal truth, but rather to motivate the audience to engage in the research by reflecting upon, and perhaps even transforming, a subjective truth within themselves

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides an overview of trauma psychology, storytelling in medicine, and potential movement practices and creative practices as healing modalities and research methodologies. These perspectives will be the framework for examining the particular research questions presented in this project.

#### **Trauma and the Body**

Bessel van der Kolk's research has contributed substantially to the area of post-traumatic stress (PTSD) since the 1970s. Pulling from different areas of study, including neuroscience (how mental processes function within the brain), developmental psychopathology (how painful experiences impact the development of mind and brain), and interpersonal neurobiology (how our own behavior affects the psychoemotional and neurobiological states of those close to us), van der Kolk has changed our understanding of the impact and manifestations of trauma, and about the roads to recovery for children and adults affected by trauma. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, van der Kolk investigates "the extreme disconnection from the body" experienced by people with histories of trauma and neglect (van der Kolk 91). The idea that "the body keeps the score" claims that "the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in heartbreaking and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems" and that the "mind/brain/visceral communication is the royal road to emotion regulation" (van der Kolk 88).

Neuroimaging studies of traumatized people showed that when asked to lie in a brain scanner while "thinking about nothing in particular," chronic PTSD patients showed almost no activation of any of the prefrontal (self-sensing) areas of the brain (van der

Kolk 93). They had learned to shut down the brain areas that transmit the visceral feelings and emotions related to terror. But those same areas of the brain are responsible for registering the entire range of emotions and sensations that form our sense of who we are (van der Kolk 94). Extrapolating upon the link between physical sensations and emotions, van der Kolk argues that the core of our self-awareness relies on the physical sensations that convey the inner states of the body. In other words, “our bodily sensing system provides crucial feedback on our moment-to-moment condition” (van der Kolk 96). In order to recover, trauma victims must (re-)develop physical self-awareness: they must become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies—not emotions, such as anger or anxiety, but the physical sensations beneath the emotions, such as pressure, heat, muscular tension, and so on—and become aware of their gestures, movements, and subtle shifts in their bodies (van der Kolk 102-103).

Based on these findings, van der Kolk suggests a number of ways to recover from trauma. One of these is to break the silence: “the path out of [trauma] is paved with words, carefully assembled, piece by piece, until the whole story can be revealed” (234). The story must be assembled “piece-by-piece” because traumatic memories are not stored as a complete narrative with beginning, middle, and end, but as dissociated fragments or isolated sensory imprints (van der Kolk 70). Although van der Kolk’s suggestion that stories are important in the process of healing has been widely supported by many other researchers, he stops short of explaining just how impactful narrative may be. Sanders’s book *Every Patient Tells a Story* provides example after example of the remarkable affect stories can have in the field of medicine, not only for doctors in diagnosing patients (the patient’s story, after all, is our oldest and most reliable diagnostic tool), but also on patients relying on accurate diagnoses in the process of recovery:

“Once the diagnosis is made, the doctor has to once again reshape the story she has created—the story that helped her make the diagnosis—into a story she can then give back to the patient. She has to translate the story back into the language and the context of the patient’s life so that he can understand what has happened to him and then incorporate it into the larger story of his life. Only when a patient understands the disease, its causes, its treatment, its meaning, can he be expected to do what is needed to get well” (Sanders 14).

Stories have the potential to heal patients, not only by providing patients with an understanding of their illness, but also as Sanders suggests, by relieving patients of suffering by giving them a story that *gives meaning* to their illness (Sanders 16). And while van der Kolk acknowledges that storytelling is important in the road to recovery (“without stories, memory becomes frozen; and without memory you cannot imagine how things can be different”), he also warns that telling a story about the event does not guarantee that the traumatic memories will be laid to rest (van der Kolk 221). Thus, the second part of the road to recovery, van der Kolk argues, is engaging the “self-observing body-based self system, which speaks through sensations, tone of voice, and body tensions. Being able to perceive visceral sensations is the very foundation of emotional awareness” (van der Kolk 240). It is by getting in touch with our bodies, that we may regain a sense of who we are, as well as our priorities and values. “Trauma makes people feel like either *some body* else or like *no body*. In order to overcome trauma, you need help to get back in touch with your body, with your Self” (van der Kolk 249).

However, van der Kolk seems to assume that being in touch with one’s “Self” is little more than being attuned to a well-functioning body. His suggestion that yoga can help in the treatment of traumatized individuals is limited to its benefits on physiological regulations, such as heart rate variability, which can, of course, affect one’s emotional

state. But what about the spiritual body? What if one's sense of self is strongly tied to or even defined by one's familial identity? Since ancient times, the concept of filial piety<sup>3</sup> was considered in Vietnamese culture to be the root of humaneness. Unlike in Western cultures which promote individuality, family is the most important aspect of life to Vietnamese people. This is just one of many examples of how culture plays a fundamental role for understanding trauma and IGT theory. In comparing the genocidal legacies of Cambodian Canadian and Jewish Israeli trauma descendants, Kidron explains: "the experience of trauma and the resultant disorder entail culturally constituted meaning systems framing how one interprets and practices the suffering self" (Kidron 725). The lack of cultural perspectives in trauma theory is astounding, given how foundational the former is for understanding the application of the latter in different contexts.

This gap in the literature prompts the following questions: how can van der Kolk's theories, regarding the benefits of yoga and somatic practices in helping traumatized individuals "inhabit their bodies" (which presumes a universal trauma responses), be supplemented? Beyond somatic approaches to treatment, how can we look to our bodies to achieve an understanding of trauma that is informed by history and culture? Furthermore, are the effects of trauma that are transmitted from one generation to another, the same as all other types of trauma? In other words, can IGT in SEAA families affected by war, genocide, immigration and displacement be treated by the same methods van der Kolk suggests? I turn to autoethnographic dance-making (improvisation and choreography) as a research methodology and perhaps as a path towards recovery.

<sup>3</sup> "Filial piety" refers to the respect and devotion that Vietnamese children are expected to show to their parents. Even if it is against their own interests, Vietnamese children are expected to put their parents and family first.

## **Dance-Based Research**

While van der Kolk insists that story is not enough to heal trauma and that the mind-body connection must also be healed, I believe the inverse is also true: that re-inhabiting one's body is not enough by itself for complete recovery; traumatized individuals must also be given or find a story that gives meaning to their trauma. Bill T. Jones's works, "Analogy Trilogy" and "Ambros: The Emigrant," have begun exploration into these topics. Both works are based on oral histories and explore similar ideas: What is the effect of trauma? What role does memory play in it? And how can narrative and movement work together to bring a person, or character, to life? (Kourlas).

Bill T. Jones describes improvisation as a vehicle to experience "the deep truth of the movement" (Goldman 113). But the truth can be complex and infinitely layered; as we uncover one truth, we may find many deeper ones. One example that I have discovered over the years is that a concept, a movement, and who I am within that concept or that movement, can be explored to no end. Thus, in my personal practice, dancing has ceased to be for pleasing (or entertaining) and conforming, and instead, has become a never-ending process for discovery.

When Bill T. Jones said, "Dance wasn't only about pointing my feet or making lines in space. It was about how I could solve my problems" (Goldman 114), it was unclear whether he was referring to problems outside of dance, personal or life problems, or whether he was referring to problems within his own dance. Regardless, improvisation has shown me that dance can be a series of opportunities for practicing one's problem-solving skills: sometimes intuition and instinct enable me to flow from one movement or concept to the next. Other times, I have to pause in order to figure out transitions or the next steps, and to navigate through what gave me pause in the first place. It is a gross misconception to think of improvisation as an escape, when in reality,

improvisation allows us to confront the parts of ourselves that we have buried deep, the parts of ourselves that make us “stuck” or uncomfortable for reasons not yet obvious to us.

I have been particularly interested in improvisation as a way to connect to a sense of personal history. As questions about my ancestry, my family’s history, and the world’s history had begun to bubble up in recent years, I wondered how I would ever find the answers. What good would a DNA test do, for example, if I was not so much interested in the concept of “nationality” which I believe is often conflated with “ethnicity”? What stories could Ancestry.com tell me? What of history and culture? I truly believe in Jones’s idea that “form is never neutral and removed from politics,” that our bodies and the way we move through this world, the way we move when we are allowed to be ourselves, tell a truth about who we are that is absolute (Goldman 138). When combined with the concept of intergenerational transmissions, I believe that we can “access layers of history as well as deep levels of meaning that exist within movement” (Goldman 116) and that this is why movement could never be “mere exercises with nothing at stake” (Goldman 138).

While I believe improvisation is one way for a traumatized individual to re-connect to a greater sense of self, I think equally effective in enabling this reconnection is choreography. Through choreography, one can assemble piece-by-piece the fragments of traumatic memories, into a more comprehensible or meaningful narrative. Furthermore, like self-narration, choreographic processes may also involve the four processes of telling, living, retelling, and reliving. Thus, movement which might be derived from the “isolated sensory imprints” of traumatic memories (van der Kolk 70) for instance, may change through the rehearsal process with repetition or time, as the choreographer’s understanding or experience of the movement evolves.

Therefore, it is not necessarily in the final staged performance that the “final product” in which we find finite meaning, is made; the rehearsal process can serve as a generative space for producing meaning as well (Wong 89). “A staged performance is not a symbol of culture but, rather, an enactment of knowledge that is part of a social dialogue that continues in a time and space designated as ‘not the performance itself’” (Wong 91-92). Ethnography in this way is like a “repetition of performances” and the staged performance is a “part, a moment of a process” of the rehearsal-as-repetition, but not the rehearsal itself (Wong 92).

Yutian Wong’s book, *Choreographing Asian America*, investigates “Asian American dance” through performative autoethnography that centers on Club O’Noodles, a Vietnamese American performance ensemble dedicated to articulating a bicultural perspective of living as Vietnamese refugees and immigrants in the United States, using modern and postmodern dance techniques, song, poetry, and spoken dialogue. Wong argues her methodology can be classified as performative autoethnography because it addresses the following: (1) performance as ethnography, whereby the process of generating material for Club O’Noodles’s performances is a form of ethnographic research and its staged productions are performed ethnographic representations; (2) Wong’s participation in the rehearsal and performance processes, as well as how the research she performed in the field (e.g. writing notes, taping rehearsals, interviewing) is translated into a written account; and (3) the question of power within ethnographic writing and “the de-naturalization of the native in native anthropology” (Wong 88). Some of her questions include: What techniques are involved in creating a show about Vietnamese America? And what does it mean for a self-identified Vietnamese American performance ensemble to “rehearse” an identity, if that ensemble’s staged production is indeed a choreography of identity? (Wong 88).



As an “interlude” chapter of the book, Wong provides her own choreographic work, “The Amazing Chinese American Acrobat,” as an example of an ‘Asian American’ performance piece that uses choreography as a research methodology:

“The narrative goes through the paces of trying to work out the micropolitical relationship between form and content, the subject and object, and the self and the community, while simultaneously trying to make decisions about where to stand and what to wear. It is an exercise in working within the parameters of aesthetic and political choices offered by modern/postmodern dance and Asian American critique, as a way to understand where the blind spots are between the doing of (dance) and the representing (Asian American critique)” (Wong 113-14).

Much like the choreographic works of Club O’Noodles and Yutian Wong, I hoped to explore staged performance and the process of making and rehearsing choreography as a method of research. However, the topic I investigated was much more focused than the rather expansive and vague topic of Vietnamese- or Asian American “identity.” Through my proposed project, I explored a more precise part of the Asian American experience that has troubled many second generation immigrants similarly situated, through collecting and analyzing the narratives of my family’s trauma (similar to those narratives of trauma in Vietnamese-, Laos-, and Cambodian American families from the perspective of second generation immigrant children), and the possible roads to resolution and healing.

### **Narrative, Poetry, and Performance Art**

My project was also supported and influenced by the works of several Vietnamese American writers and Cambodian American artists, including poets Ocean Vuong and Cathy Le Che, graphic novelist and illustrator, Thi Bui, and performance and installation artist Anida Yoeu Ali.

Ocean Vuong's *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* is a collection of poems that often blur the lines between traumatic memory and myth, many of which are used to process the challenges Vuong seems to have had with his father, a Vietnam War veteran with PTSD. Cathy Le Che's *Split* in a similar fashion processes her own trauma as a victim of child molestation, as well as the trauma her mother experienced through the Vietnam War, through Che's own collection of evocative poems. The works of both Vuong and Che showed me the power of poetry in the representation of trauma and its potential to heal, through the metaphoric, imaginative, visual, and sensorial aspects of poetry.

Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* is a beautifully illustrated graphic novel memoir that serves as a strong example of narrative-based research. Beyond the stories of immigration and displacement, Bui's story weaves through numerous themes close to my heart, including the strength and resilience of family; the unacknowledged and undiscussed trauma that sits at the center of such families; and the journey of understanding the past and how it unfolded. What I found most remarkable was the amount of research that went into *The Best We Could Do*. Bui not only detailed her parents' stories but also those of her grandparents, contextualizing the family's history within colonial wars (those of the French, Japanese, Chinese, and French redux occupations). The accounts I have read of the history of colonized Vietnam and its colonial wars had always the air of propaganda, and rarely if ever the insight and awareness of the depth of impact these wars had on an interpersonal level and intergenerationally. Bui's research and presentation of these larger events, and connection to family dynamics, were therefore extraordinarily valuable to me. Similar to Bui, I have felt throughout all of my life thus far, the great void between myself and my parents as forces beyond our control had shaped our lives in such a way that placed us worlds apart.

Anida Yoeu Ali is an interdisciplinary artist whose works span performance, installation, new media, public encounters, and political agitation (Ali 2020). Born in Cambodia but raised in Chicago, her work investigates “the artistic, spiritual and political collisions of a hybrid transnational identity,” (Ali 2020) a result of truly living in “that ‘back and forth’ experience” (Ali 2020). Several of her works informed my own, including *The Buddhist Bug, Into the Night (2015)*, in which she dons a 100-foot long caterpillar-like costume, that is somehow reminiscent of a slinky, a Muslim woman, and a Buddhist monk all at the same time. As an autobiographical exploration of identity, Ali wears the giant, bright orange costume (the same shade of orange worn by Buddhist monks) while placing herself amongst school children in a classroom; coiled around a restaurant table in the middle of a busy public eatery; or on top of a traditional fishing boat out on the water. Throughout many of her works, I was most inspired by Ali’s use of the mythical or “myth-suggestive” (Strom 2019) in the exploration of the aforementioned themes.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this arts-based research project was to understand and explore the healing process for the particular traumas affecting the second generation through narrative inquiry and through performative autoethnography. For these research methods, I took the following steps: (1) collecting data and generating field texts, in the form of stories, poetry, movement, and other elements of performance; (2) analyzing and interpreting the data using narrative analysis or narrative mode of analysis; (3) organizing or arranging data elements into a sequence, as a retelling of the data or stories.

#### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that highlights a particular view of experience as phenomena: it is the study of experience as story (Connelly and Clandinin 477). To act as a narrative inquirer is to “think narratively” from the outset, as the study is designed. Every story must be framed by specifics in time, place, and social conditions; therefore, thinking narratively about a phenomenon, entails thinking within the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry: temporality<sup>4</sup>, sociality<sup>5</sup>, and place<sup>6</sup> (Clandinin and Huber 436-437). The specific community on which this research focuses is defined by all three: it is a deep dive into the traumas of a family that immigrated in the 1980s from South Vietnam to San Jose, California. Although the stories from this research were not collected in chronological sequence nor presented in a linear fashion,

<sup>4</sup> Temporality refers to the past, present and future of the people, places, things and events under study.

<sup>5</sup> Sociality refers to the social conditions (e.g. the environment, including the cultural institutions, as well as surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise) that form the participant’s context in which their experiences are unfolding

<sup>6</sup> Place refers to the “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place.”

each of the stories is framed by specific references in time, as well as place. Lastly, all of the data collected in this research is situated in the cultural, social, institutional, and linguistic narratives surrounding the subjects of the stories.

Autobiographical narrative inquiry assumes “life as narrative,” and that the stories we tell about our lives are our autobiographies (Clandinin and Huber 437), which by their nature must be highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences (Bruner 694). For example, the stories I have chosen to tell through the performance and how I have chosen to present these stories are shaped by the cultural conventions of a Vietnamese American immigrant family in the United States, and are further shaped by the audience to whom I am telling these stories. One example of this is the three-minute-long video that begins “Part I” of the performance, as described in further detail in Chapter 4 of this document. The video simply shows Google Translate in action. At the start, the text on the left side of the screen shows the word “nước” while the text on the right side of the screen shows the English translation of the word as “water.” Moments later it is revealed to the audience that the Vietnamese term for “water” is also the term for “country” and that the phrase “trong nước” thus has two meanings: (1) to be in water, which is fluid, constantly shifting and indefinite in its shape, and (2) to be domestic, as in within a particular country.

The process of self-narration is structured by four terms: *telling* (life as lived in the past), *living* (life as it unfolds), *retelling*, and *reliving* (Connelly and Clandinin, 477). “Because narrative inquiry is an ongoing reflexive and reflective methodology, narrative inquirers need to continually inquire into their experiences before, during, and after each inquiry” (Clandinin and Caine 171). As I created field texts, such as through journaling, I used a stream-of-consciousness approach to writing about a personal experience that allowed me to be fully present as I meditated on a specific inquiry. After writing the text, I

engaged in reflective practices that helped me to uncover new layers, as I paid careful attention to the subtleties contained in the text, such as in the particular uses of language that stood out to me. Periodically, I also presented the text to another writer or artist and made notes of what stood out to them. Next, I would engage in internal dialogue regarding the text and my analysis, taking notes of insights or epiphanies that arose as I re-read or re-lived the experiences. Lastly, I would “retell” the story through its usage in the choreographic process of creating the performance.

“Narrative inquirers understand that a person’s lived and told stories are who they are and who they are becoming and that these stories sustain them” (Clandinin and Huber 440). The process of narrative inquiry is thus a recursive one: as I tell my story, change occurs through the practice as I begin to understand the phenomena under study in new ways. A new story and possibly new identities emerge. “Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life” (Bruner 694).

### **Performing Autoethnography**

“Performative ethnography locates performance itself as a form of ethnographic practice” (Wong 5-6), such that a choreographer conducts research through dance-making, “even as ethnography renders the performance in question an object of study” (Wong 5-6). It also incorporates the researcher as part of the construction of the ethnographic subject and investigates not only the ways in which theatrical performances provide information, but also how the information performed is created for (and by) social exchange between ethnographer and everyone she comes in contact with (Wong 6). In conducting and presenting my research, I used performance in two distinct ways: *to communicate* data and *to create* data. To communicate data, I

translated the information I gathered from written accounts and other artifacts (collages, storyboards, photographs) into movement and other performative elements such as video projection, stage design, sound design and music. To create data, I used the movement generated during my rehearsals as a research artifact that I analyzed for better understanding of the experience.

Similar to Wong's arguments (Wong 88), I argue that the methodology I used for this research can be classified as performative ethnography because (1) the creative processes I undertook for generating performance material was part of my autoethnographic research process, and the final performance itself was designed to represent my study findings; (2) the process of rehearsing and performing, as well as the research (writings and textual analyses) I conducted to support the performance materials I produced, were translated into field texts; and lastly (3) the choices I made in research methodologies were in part to challenge traditional ways of doing research and representing others, and to reframe research "as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act" (Ellis et al. 2011). More than accuracy, I was interested in producing analytical, accessible research of social relevance and utility.

To the extent that choreography and dance-making are self-reflexive, I was also interested in choreographic research processes as a study of the self in the cultural context. When researchers do autoethnography, they are not only telling their stories, but also analyzing their experience by comparing and contrasting their personal experience to existing research, interviewing others with similar lived experiences, and using their academic training to interrogate the meaning of these experiences. Thus, my choreographic processes were heavily informed by textual analysis of existing literature and research on IGT and the Vietnamese- and Cambodian American refugee experience, as well as thematic analyses of existing art on these same topics.

## **Converting Field Texts into Research Texts**

I collected data that came in many different forms. I began with pre-existing artifacts, including old journals and letters, newspaper clippings, photographs of the house I grew up in, and interviews I had recorded of my parents from years ago. After conducting a cursory thematic analysis, I made notes of starting points from which I could compose new field texts. These field texts included new journal entries, poems, letters, video recordings of improvised dance movement, as well as hand-written notes and audio recordings of several discussions I had with others about my family's stories or my personal experiences. These field texts referred to both stories of the past and living stories unfolding in the present or ongoing contexts. As I generated and began to analyze these field texts, I remained attentive to the fact that my interpretations of the past were from a present vantage point, and that I was giving shape to the retellings of these stories (Clandinin and Huber 439).

These field texts were thereafter reviewed, interpreted and re-worked into metaphors, myths, poems, choreographed dance sequences, and staged performance pieces that incorporated all of the aforementioned items as well as costumes, props, set designs incorporating interactive art and video projections, music scoring and sound design. The aim was to create research texts that "critically and deeply" represented (Clandinin and Huber 439) my life and experiences, as well as my parents' and siblings' lives and experiences from my memories and perspective. I selected these mediums through which the research texts were created because they allowed enough room for "the complexity and multi-layered storied nature of experience" (Clandinin and Huber 439).



## CHAPTER 4

### CREATIVE PROCESS AS RESEARCH TEXT

This chapter describes in detail the culminating evening-length performance, titled “Trong Nước,” as the final narrative research text, or the analysis and interpretation of the experiences of which the data consisted. In the creation of this performance, I collaborated closely with Barmey Ung, a Cambodian American composer, sound designer, and guitarist based out of Los Angeles. We connected over our common interests in exploring ideas for how to best amplify specific emotions through sound or music such as in film, live performance, and dance; and connected through our similarities in perspectives and backgrounds as SEAA artists. Barmey and I also were open about our battles with depression since our childhoods. The way he described music as “the thing that has saved [him] every day” truly resonated with me as I felt dance has saved my life in the same ways. His attitude and desires to contribute his own music to the world so that it can “be there for others,” was also inspiring to me in my process.

This culminating performance includes five of Barmey’s musical compositions, in addition to his sound designs. It also includes several projection artworks designed by new media artist Jeffrey Yip, co-founder of MACRO WAVES, the Oakland-based creative collective specializing in producing immersive experiences. These projections were a substantial part of the research texts, as they furthered the “retellings” of the stories by allowing the transformation of the space or environment, in which the audience could view the work. The performance also includes several short films and video art pieces, produced under my writing and direction. These works were split between filmmaker Isaac Fowler and videographer Jardy Santiago.

## Prologue



Figure 1. Prototype of Interactive Floor Projection

As the audience first enters the performance space, they are invited to walk around and play with an interactive floor projection designed to cover the entire 20' x 30' stage. As the audience walks around the stage floor, the projection ripples around their feet as if they are walking on the surface of still, black water. The sounds filling the space go in and out of accord with a single, long oceanic hum, designed to augment the immersive experience. A glass fishbowl sits upon a podium resting against the cyc. Through the use of projection mapping, the fishbowl is made to appear as though a sea were storming inside of it. A plaque hanging on the wall next to the fishbowl contains text explaining the story of my family's dangerous journey during the mass exodus from Vietnam by boat, and the whale who saved it from sinking.

After the audience has had enough time to walk around and look at the installation, they are asked to take their seats. The lights come down as the stage is cleared of the fishbowl along with its stand and plaque. The interactive floor projection is

replaced by blue and gold lighting. An original song scored by Barmey Ung fades in, as I slowly walk onto the stage, in each of my hands is a candle nested inside a lotus flower. The song and dance are modernized renditions of several Southeast Asian traditional candle dances, generally performed in celebration or in tribute. The prologue candle dance is my offering to the whale who saved my family, and to our ancestors who continue to watch over us.

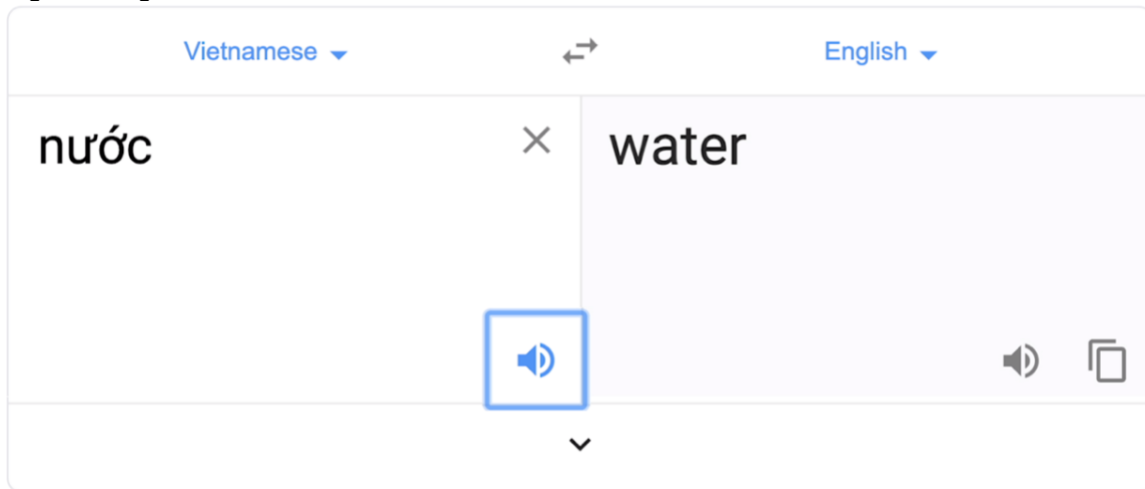


Figure 2. Candle Dance

### **Part I: Trong Nước (In Water, Domestic)**

“Part I” begins in silence and with an empty stage, as a bright white video projection lights up the cyc. It shows a replica of the website interface for Google Translate: on the left side of the translation box is the Vietnamese word “nước.” On the right side of the translation box is the English word “water.” Underneath it, a sound icon lights up as a cold, perfunctory voice reads aloud, *nước*. A short moment later, the same sound icon lights up again as the text-to-speech system repeats the word *nước*—only this time, the text on the right side of the translation box suddenly changes to read, “country.”

Fig. 3. Google Translate



For several minutes, the video continues to translate phrases related to the double-entendre: it shows *trong nước* to mean “in water,” implying that to be *trong nước* is to be in the fluid, formless state of constant change. Moments later, it shows the same phrase to mean “domestic,” as in, to be occurring within a particular country or nation. The fact that the term *domestic* in English can also refer to the affairs within a family or household becomes relevant to the performance later on, as “Part II” is titled, “Ở Nhà,” which means “at home.” The series of translations ends with two possible interpretations of my name. As *Nước Mỹ* refers to America, and the Sino-Vietnamese name for females, Mỹ-Linh, means “beautiful spirit,” showing that the word *Mỹ* could refer to beauty or America, the Google Translate video implies that my name could also technically translate to “American spirit.”

The Google Translate video thus leaves the audience with the hint of the hybridity theme, which is picked up by the succeeding short film humorously depicting a mythological demi-human demi-creature, referred to as “the Mylinh,” which is said to come from “Vietnamese American folklore” (Appendix C). Styled after campy 1980s kung fu documentaries, the film pans slowly across close-up shots of stone statues and

carvings of various deities in Buddhist temples, while a narrator explains the mythology of the Mylinh:

*“With the head and torso of a woman and a long scaly snake-like hind body and tail that fades into infinity, it is believed she was condemned to live in the sky for all eternity to guard the border between the Eastern world and the Western world.”*



Figure 4. “The Mythological Hybrid Creature”

The mockumentary of the mythical Mylinh hybrid creature transitions to a more serious, or at least more contemplative, live dance performance that investigates the liminal space between the East and the West through movement. The constructed notion of “the East” is defined as “all that is not the West,” and “the West” as “all that is not the East,” and yet my family and I are somehow a product of both. The guiding questions for the movement exploration and choreography for this piece, therefore, were: *What lies in between the East and the West, and if it were to be represented by a movement system, what would the dance vocabulary for that system look and feel like?* The resulting choreography was a model hybrid dance form drawing from the

sensibilities of traditional Thai dance, certain qualities and principles of Tai Chi and Wing Chun, the traditions of ballet and modern, and the techniques of waving and animation. The screen dance and preceding mockumentary together treat this liminality and hybridity as the mythological creature itself.

“Part I” concludes with a live monologue, which I perform while sitting in a kneeling position atop a wooden dolly driven by caster wheels. A projection of the surface of an ocean, from a bird’s eye view, covers the entire stage beneath my wooden raft-like prop. While using my hand to paddle myself across and around the floor, I speak to the audience honestly about one of the greatest struggles of my life: the simple act of believing in myself.

*“I was always aware of the strength, resilience, will, and luck it took for my family to reach the shores of the United States. They were near indestructible. And it was from this very same family that I learned to tell myself, ‘You can’t do it. You never would have been able to do it.’”*

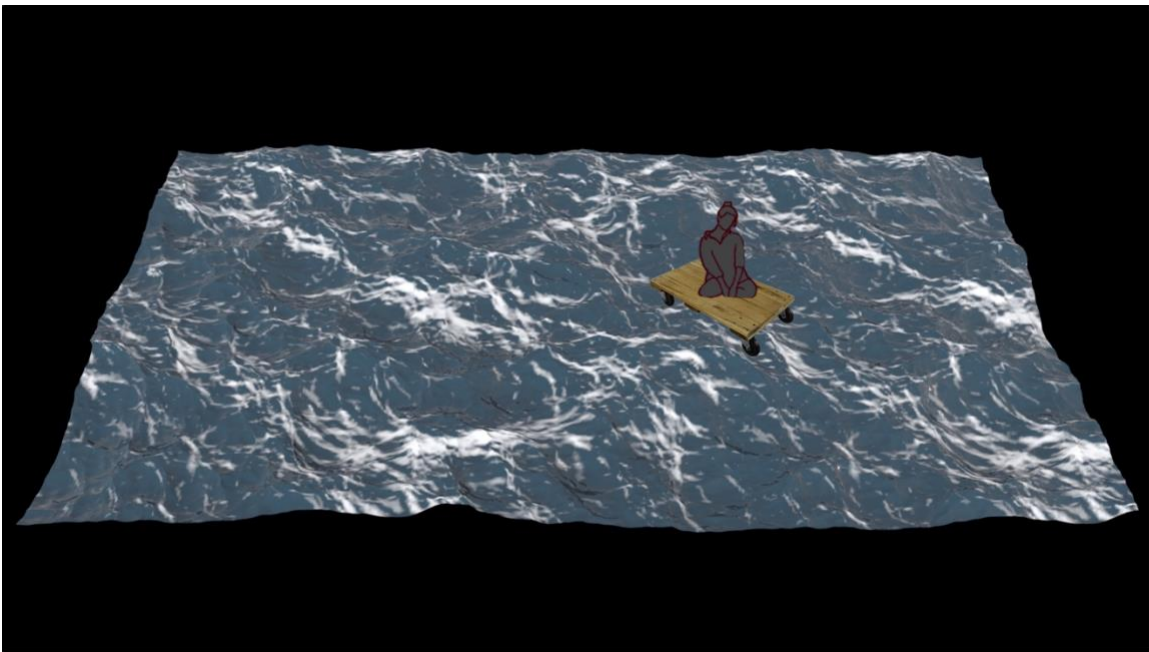


Figure 5. Prototype of “Paddling”

At the end of the monologue, the stage slowly fades to blackout, as I continue to paddle aimlessly in circles on the dolly. Soon I am drowned out by the growing roar of crashing ocean waves that eventually fades to silence after the lights have gone to black out.

## **Part II: Ở Nhà (At Home)**

“Part II” begins with a short film titled, “Me Love You Long Time.” The camera slowly creeps in towards me, as I sit at a kitchen table with my back facing the camera. The camera then slowly makes its way to my front side, revealing my legs sticking out in front of me, straight and stiff like plastic. Both of my arms, bent at the elbows, stick up in the air, every bit as unhuman-like as my legs. I am wearing a body suit designed to look like a naked Barbie doll. As I begin to get up from the chair with the dexterity of a mannequin, the video cuts to text that is stylized after silent movie title cards. The first card reads, “My mom never took a sick day...” As the video comes back to me, I am putting on a purple flowery dress, cut in a fashion that feels like a 1970s housewife. Every movement of my body looks animated and robotic, but my face looks as tired and unhappy as any mom I had ever seen growing up. The text, delivered to the audience through several more title cards, continues throughout the rest of the video:

*“Maybe no one had ever told her body that it was allowed to be sick every now and then. Or maybe her body knew that if it ever came to rest...the pain of everything that had sunken deep, would finally float up to the surface.”*

Right before the video ends, I “flip off” the camera with both hands, again with the same blank expression on my face and mechanical articulation as all of my other movement.

After the video ends, I walk out onto the stage in the same dress and with the same robotic gait as seen in the video. The short “silent film” is replaced with looped video clips of a miniature kitchen. Human hands periodically reach into the frame to



Figure 6. "Me Love You Long Time"



move the dollhouse-sized objects around. The sound design accompanying the video mimics the ambient noises I would hear from my upstairs bedroom when my mom used to work in the kitchen below. For several minutes, the natural pacing of the sounds of chopping, stirring, and pot lids clanging, begin to pick up in speed until the sounds come together to create a fast-paced rhythmic song. While the sounds are still building up, my movements, which are drawn from a pre-choreographed sequence that causes me to revolve around myself, are arbitrary in rhythm and are minimally performed so as to include long pauses in which I hold still in one position. As the sounds build so does the speed, frequency, and force with which I move, as well as the number of repetitions, until a genuine exhaustion ensues. The track abruptly ends with most of the sounds suddenly ceasing and the soft sigh of an exhausted woman. The sigh also triggers an end to the robotic qualities of my movement, allowing me to move like myself again.

The stage light dims as the video projection slowly zooms in on the miniature-sized incense burner sitting on top of the kitchen stove. As I take off the dress, it is revealed that underneath I am wearing a nude leotard covered in the words "ME LOVE



YOU LONG TIME” in red paint. I put aside the dress and begin to change into contemporary “athleisure wear” while telling the audience about my own exhaustion – the exhaustion I have felt since I was only six years old:

*“... And when I wasn’t sick, I pretended to be sick so that I could stay home from school and just watch cartoons all day—I watched so many cartoons that I gave myself a real fever. But eventually the adults caught on. And they returned me to the same pressures they worked under, day in and day out. From early morning to evening. We woke up and thought about everything we needed to get done. We went to bed thinking of everything we needed to get done. And we worked and worked. And we had trouble sleeping...”*

As I finish my monologue, the stage lights fade to black, and the video that was projected behind me moves onto another room of the dollhouse: a miniature version of the *bàn thờ*, the family altar that commonly exists in Vietnamese homes, where incense is burned for ancestors. Our family kept a *bàn thờ* until I was 16 years old, when my mom converted to Christianity and the rest of our family followed suit shortly after. As human hands enter the frame to add offerings to the altar, a prerecording of my voice tells the audience about the myth of *Ông Táo*, a god who resides in the kitchen, specifically in the oven or in the stove, and is regarded in Vietnamese culture to be a sort of ambassador representing the family to the other gods in the heavens. Because he is obligated to report on all of the family’s business, good and bad, offerings are made to *Ông Táo* in the hopes that he will say good things about the family and will advocate for their fortune, blessings, and prayers. The audio recording and video of the miniature *bàn thờ* ends with my own prayer to *Ông Táo*, asking him to make each one of us whole again.

After the video ends, a song consisting only of a đàn bầu instrument starts to play. The traditional sound is accompanied by a dance consisting exclusively of popping techniques such as waving, ticking, animation, and gliding. The dance is a story of my adolescence, when I began to discover myself in secret, the longing I felt in my family, and the longing that I believe everyone in my family felt to some extent. It was a longing that we could never speak honestly about to one another.

As the song and dance come to an end, “Part III” concludes with a poem that I wrote, titled “2-Story, 5-Bedroom House (1991-2014)” (Appendix A), performed live to the audience as spoken word. As each line is uttered, the words echo behind me as visually represented by subtitles projected onto the cyc. Some phrases splatter across the cyc in larger font, as if they are begin shouted, in contrast to my monotone reading of the poem. The poem describes the house in San Jose that I grew up in and the ghosts of my family’s past which seemed to haunt it. Some of the themes that arose in this poem were the trauma of loss and displacement, as well as the trauma of the journey my family took to arrive in their new home, which also never quite felt like a home. It also spoke of the ways in which our family buried that trauma under “our many, money-saving possessions” (Appendix A), a metaphor for the emotional clutter invisible to us. The ghosts I refer to might have been both literal and figurative, in that I often felt a shadowy presence in our house and sensed things that did not seem to be actually there. Whether these ghosts were spirits of the dead, or just the energy created by the culture of silence in our household and repression of trauma, I realized through this writing process how much of an impact these ghosts had on my sense of home and sense of belonging.

### **Part III: Còn Nước, Còn Tát (Proverb)**

The words “Còn nước,” slowly fades into existence over the sounds of a whale breaching the surface. The literal translation, “[As long as] water remains,” follows underneath moments later. The words “còn tát” slowly appear beside the first half of the Vietnamese proverb. The literal translation, “continue to bail it [from the boat]” follows underneath, over the sound of the whale swimming away. The implication of these words is comparable to the American proverb, “While there is life, there is hope”; the intention of both proverbs is to remind us that we must never give up. But the Vietnamese proverb seems to suggest that we might drown or die if we stopped doing the work that needs to be done.

The video transitions to a piece of pottery, slowly revolving in front of a black backdrop. A narrator tells the myth of an emperor who was once visited by a giant bird asking for food and water and promising to bless the emperor with riches and power greater than his enemies’. The camera slowly zooms in on the revolving pottery, showing that the images of the myth are carved into it. The narration continues with the emperor regrettably allowing the giant bird with its voracious appetite to deplete the country of its resources. Afraid of offending the bird, the emperor prays to the sky to get rid of the bird for him, and moments later the sky begins to rain fire. Panicked, the emperor’s people jump into the ocean, but as they begin to drown, instead of dying, they are transformed into flying fish.

As the narrator finishes telling the myth, and the video of the pottery fades to black, a new soundscape begins to fill the space; the sound is an audio recording taken from underneath a swimming pool, designed to simulate the sounds the audience would hear if they were completely submerged under water. The video slowly fades to white, revealing the silhouette of my body in a squatted position with my knees collapsed

Figure 7. "Submersive"



inwards, floating as if I were a marionette puppet dangling from invisible strings, gently undulating as if moved by invisible waves of water. Words start to appear on the screen; the text describes in turn, three separate dreams I have had, each one involving an oceanic body of water and a dwelling-type structure. The text was broken into short phrases that slowly and silently faded in and out, appearing in varying font sizes and in varying placements across the screen. Each line of text was visually designed to “move” with the choreography. The piece ends with the last line of text stating:

*“Maybe I am the water, unmoved, unaroused, unfeeling,  
ready to swallow whole..  
all of the fears and hopes of the entire world.”*

“Part III” concludes with a reprise of the monologue that concluded “Part I.” Kneeling on the same wooden raft-like dolly, I drift back onto the stage. This time the floor is devoid of any projection or references to the ocean, save for the small fishbowl half filled with water that I carry in one arm. The lighting is also flat: a plain white. I use the free hand to paddle across the floor, while speaking honestly to the audience about

one of my greatest fears: having to figure out how to live in this country, how to continue being Vietnamese American, once my parents have left this world and have taken with them my sense of belonging, and my sense of nationality. This is the curse that forever follows those who leave.

### **Epilogue**

Two empty chairs are placed facing each other, seven feet apart on a diagonal in front of a looping video of clouds moving slowly forwards and backwards. A Vietnamese/Cambodian-American man in his mid-30s walks onto the stage and sits in the chair that faces more of the audience, while I take the chair diagonally facing him with mostly my back to the audience. A three-minute long audio recording of myself reading a poem (Appendix B) in broken and poorly-translated Vietnamese begins to play. For the duration of the audio recording, we sit facing one another in silence, our expressions and body language providing the only hints for non-Vietnamese-speaking audience members as to the contents of the letter.

At the end of the reading, the man walks off the stage and back into the audience, while I rearrange the chairs. Once I have settled into these changes in the environment, I begin an approximately five-minute-long dance improvisation, as a continuation and conclusion to the feelings and intent of the poem that was just read aloud moments prior. The improvisation is done to silence. The Google Translate from “Part I” reappears on the cyc, silently translating Vietnamese to English and English to Vietnamese until the end.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND CONTENT

Narrative analysis or narrative mode of analysis is the process by which the researcher synthesizes by organizing the data elements into a “coherent whole” (Polkinghorne 15) while sustaining the metaphoric richness of a story and its nuances of meaning in human affairs, which cannot be expressed in definitions, statements of facts, or abstract propositions (Kim 197). The purpose of the narrative mode of analysis is to help the reader or audience understand why and how things happened in the way they did, and why and how our participants acted in the way they did (Kim 197). The result of a narrative analysis is an explanation that is retrospective and that involves recursive movement from the data to an emerging thematic plot (Polkinghorne 16). The final story must not only fit the data but also bring an order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data themselves (Polkinghorne 16). “Narrative analysis is not merely a transcription of the data, but is a means of showing the significance of the lived experience in the final story” (Kim 197).

Although dance, like any other language, is not necessarily narrative, dance can be a powerful vehicle through which story is communicated to an audience. In her book, *Hiking the Horizontal*, Liz Lerman provides an example of what I mean. In a short anecdote from her early experiences as a schoolteacher, she describes observing from her window a group of children on the dock of a pond, shivering, lying down shaking, getting up and laughing, and then repeating the whole sequence all over again:

“I saw that the kids had caught a fish. The fish was doing what fish do out of water: shaking and flopping around on the dock. The kids were doing what human beings do when they want to understand something. They were putting the experience in their bodies ... [C]horeography is, in part, finding the fish:

giving audiences some clues into the movement they are witnessing and even feeling in their own muscles and bones. These clues and images have their own shimmery edges that let us see what the artist sees or that give us a moment of private reverie into our own experience. I was drawn into a group of children's personal moment by movement I saw from a distance, a very curious and delightfully performed sequence of physical events on a dock. I didn't need the fish to have that encounter. But once I saw the fish, then I got the movement and their story and then my story" (Lerman 67).

On the other hand, in allowing space for nuance, complexity, and multiplicity of meaning, dance can also lead to abstractions (dealing with an idea or a quality, rather than an actual person or event) if the choreographer or performer assumes that the dance can simply speak for itself. Because the outcome of a narrative analysis is the generation of a story, the dance choreography, movement exploration and improvisation, as well as all other aspects of performance and art involved in this project, were used to provide the audience with "clues" (Lerman 67) as to what it was all about. In other words, all of the dances created for this project, whether choreographed or structurally improvised, were "about something" (Lerman 68 and 71).

Throughout the analytic and creative processes of this project, I kept in mind Dollard's seven criteria for judging a life history (Dollard 1935). Therefore, included in this autoethnographic dance-centered performance project are: (1) references to the cultural context in which the storied case study takes place; (2) the embodied nature of the protagonist (myself) including my actual body with all of its dimension, propensities, continuous changes, movements, and temporalities; (3) the significant other people affecting the actions and goals of the protagonist, such as my parents and siblings; (4) the choices and actions of the protagonist along with her inner struggles, emotional

states, values, understandings, vision of the world, plans, purposes, motivations, and interests; (5) the historical continuity of the characters, such as by showing how past experiences manifest themselves in the present as patterns of thought, motor skills and/or body movements; (6) a story, in its presentation of a distinctive individual, in a unique situation, dealing with issues in a personal manner, bounded by a temporal period; and (7) a plausible and understandable outcome that provides a meaningful explanation of the protagonist's responses and actions (Dollard 1935).

As previously described in Chapter 4, the data elements were configured into an evening-length performance that was structured to be experienced as a whole, coherent show, made up of a series of stories or biographic episodes connected through themes. The following is an analysis of these themes that tied these stories together.

### **The Power of Mythology**

I remember myself as a young child when my mother first told me the story of the whale who saved her boat from sinking. Over the years, apart from the inclusion of additional details, my mother has not changed her story, even after she started proclaiming herself a Christian and pressuring my younger sister and I to accept Jesus as "the one and only savior." When the story of the whale cropped up at the beginning of this research, I initially spent a lot of time investigating the plausibility of the story: I wanted to know if any marine biologists had published observations of such altruistic behavior in whales, or whether more recent interviews from boat refugees in the Mediterranean included any such accounts of whales saving rafts. After failing to find anything that could support my mother's claim, I accidentally stumbled upon a field study half a year later that described whale worship in Vietnam and included stories collected from numerous fishermen who claimed to have been helped by whales along the coastal areas of the central part of the country. Although my mother did not seem to be aware of



the existence of any whale worshipping cults, I still felt disappointed in this discovery. It was at that moment that I finally recognized that the purpose mythology serves in our lives, and the reasons for which we carry myths around with us, have nothing to do with their accuracy.

My mother clings to the myth of Jesus for the same reasons that I cling to the myth of this whale. In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell explains that mythology serves a number of functions, through its mystical (opening the world to the dimension of mystery), cosmological (revealing that mystery as manifest through all things), sociological (validating or maintaining a certain society), and pedagogical (teaching us how to live in this world) aspects (Campbell 1988). Although the traditions of research demand that everything be explainable in words, the function of myth is to give us a line to connect ourselves with “that which is beyond even the concept of reality... that which transcends all thought” (Campbell 1988). It is futile, for example, to intellectually dissect the range of feelings or emotions that trigger my own crying whenever I sit alone and listen to the audio recording of my mother describing the moment the whale appeared, the initially panicked reactions of the people on the boat because they thought the whale was going to turn it over, and the fact that the whale carried them through the storm for three days until they reached land.

Myths serve us in our search, not for meaning, but for a way of experiencing the world in which we are living, so that “the life experiences that we have on the purely physical plane will have resonances within those of our own innermost being and reality” (Campbell 1988). Not only do we seek to find some accord with the mystery that underlies and informs all things, but perhaps more importantly, to *find it* “actually in our environment, in our world, to recognize it, to have some kind of instruction that will

enable us to see the divine presence,” so that we can feel the “rapture” of being alive (Campbell 1988).

When I felt in my body the power of myths, I began writing my own as a way of filling in the gaps of understanding of how and why certain events and actions happened the way they did in the told stories. One example of this is the myth I wrote about the emperor’s people who jumped into the ocean and turned into flying fish. In creating this myth, I drew inspiration from the term *Việt Kiều*, which is used to refer to the several millions of Vietnamese people who fled their country before and after the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Literally translated as “Vietnamese sojourner,” the term is used by Vietnamese nationals, rather than by refugees, because of its perceived negative connotation: the term *Việt Kiều* most commonly evokes a person of Vietnamese descent returning to Vietnam some time after the mass exodus to flaunt his/her wealth and success to those who were left to fend on their own in abject poverty after the war.

My parents are the *Việt Kiều*. Researching the meaning of this term brought me to realize that I am not the first “hybrid creature” in my family, despite being the first born in the United States. In leaving Vietnam, my parents became no longer Vietnamese, nor did they ever become completely American; they were something in between. Thus, the myth involving the giant bird was about the war and the people who had no choice but to jump into the ocean because it started raining fire. I imagined that this act of giving up everything and taking one’s chances out on the open sea might have felt like going to meet death. I thought about my parents, and the *Việt Kiều*, being in a state of liminality: although they may visit Vietnam as guests, they would never be able to return to Vietnam as their home. Thus, in the myth, when the emperor’s people jump into the ocean, they did not die, but instead transformed into something else (Appendix D). “[T]hey were transformed into flying fish. And from then on, they could live in the water,

and sometimes in the air like the bird, but they could never return to the land from which they fled” (Appendix D).

The story of the emperor’s people who jumped into the ocean, as well as the story of the mythological hybrid creature, “the Mylinh” from “Part I,” were both inspired by the centuries-old creation myth of the Vietnamese people, which claims that the first Vietnamese ancestors were one hundred sons, hatched from a hundred eggs laid by a mountain fairy named Âu Cơ who fell in love with a water dragon king named Lạc Long Quân. Thus, it is said that Vietnamese people are descendants of a fairy and a dragon. Reflecting on what it meant for my parents to leave Vietnam, and what it is that they have become since leaving, I felt that my parents and the Việt Kiều, as well as the second generation, needed their own creation myths.

### **Google Translate**

Since the beginning of the creative process, I intended to write a myth for the second generation. The myth was supposed to capture the anxiety I felt about the first generation leaving us, their offspring, to fend for ourselves in this strange country that they carried us to. No narrative seemed to encapsulate the issue better than my dependency on Google Translate, which continued to grow through the creative process.

The best example of this is in the poem read during “The Epilogue.” Titled “The Heart is a Fruit,” the poem reads more like a love letter, detailing the hopes I have for a future family. The poem was originally written in English with the intent of translating it thereafter into Vietnamese. The process of translating the poem was a collaborative one, as I consulted with several other second generation Vietnamese Americans who, like myself, could only draw from the vocabulary that was used at home. This vocabulary was shaped by the relationships we had to our parents, and the relationship our parents

had to each other. For example, because my mother and father were never romantic or affectionate with (and hardly even spoke to) each other, I was much more accustomed to the language used between parent and child, rather than the language used between peers. As we attempted to translate the contents of my letter, we discussed the phrases we often heard from our parents when we were children (terms like “nonsense” or “lazy”), and took note of the very American ways of thinking contained in the letter that did not translate well into Vietnamese. In this way, the process of translating was both a retelling and a reliving of our stories, as we attempted to piece together from memory, the fragments of our childhoods and of our culture.

### **Water and Houses**

The structure of the entire five-part performance derived from the dreams described in “Part III.” The title names of Parts I and II, “Trong Nước,” which means in water, and “Ở Nhà,” which means at home, were named after the two motifs recurring in the dream journal I began in the process of data collection. Over the course of three months, whenever I woke up from a dream that I could remember, I immediately recorded the dream in the Notes application on my iPhone. Sometimes this occurred in the middle of the night, but more often it occurred in the mornings. Based on a review of the entries, there were two motifs that stood out in the majority of these dreams: One of these was the appearance of an oceanic body of water. In one dream, for example, this water took the form of a backyard swimming pool that, upon peering down into it, seemed to contain marine life such as coral, fish, dolphins and seaweed; In a different dream, this water appeared as miles of knee-high sloshing water that I had to wade through for hours to get to somewhere else.

The second motif was the presence of a house or dwelling-type structure that in every instance seemed to be empty. In one dream, it was the house I grew up in after

my parents had sold it, so that none of the furniture or my family were in the house. In another, it was an empty medieval-looking castle that was flooded in the basement levels. The flood water again appeared to be an ocean that contained the same types of marine life that I had seen in other dreams. In every instance that a house or dwelling-type structure appeared in my dreams, it always appeared empty.

It was only through the choreographic process that I began to understand what these two motifs might represent. As I reflected on my family's deep history with the sea, the first thoughts that came to mind were of the tragic losses my parents and older siblings sustained. These waters came to signify many things: a place of no return; a metaphor for the life-threatening uncertainties, the constant shifting, and impermanence of life; and a memorial for the sacrifices that had to be made for survival. When they finally made it to the shores of the United States, they would never get back into those waters again. My parents would never take unnecessary risks, nor would they ever allow their children to make the same mistakes they felt they made.

My childhood and adolescence were so stifled by these fears, that as soon as I became of age, I nearly dove head-first into that metaphoric ocean, leaving my family and the tiny country that was the entire Vietnamese American community of San Jose<sup>7</sup>, at the first opportunity with no intention of ever coming back. My first act as a young voyager was becoming a dancer-artist instead of the pharmacist I had promised my parents I would become. To this day, I have not fully reconciled the filial piety deeply engrained in me and my culture with the reality that I could never be the person my parents have always wanted me to be, the person that I could only die trying to be. The attempts to ignore my filial commitments is akin to severing a part of my body; my

<sup>7</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Demographic Profile, San Jose is the city with the most Vietnamese Americans in the United States and outside of Vietnam, with a population greater than 100,000

parents' doubts, like a phantom limb, turned into self-doubt. While pursuing the truth of "who I am" was exactly the type of risk that my family strongly discouraged, it was also necessary for my own survival. Through the creative process, I began to understand that, in our family narrative, the ocean truly represented life, in the sense of the Buddhist teaching that "life is suffering"—not that all of life is spent suffering, but that life cannot be lived without suffering.

The house (and its various forms) that I kept seeing in my dreams became a metaphor for the sense of belonging that has eluded me, on both a national level (having a sense of "national belonging" as a second generation Vietnamese American), and on a more personal level (having a sense of "home" with my own family). In the creative process, I also began to explore through story this same sense of belonging for my parents' generation, the *Việt Kiều*. My attempts to connect my own experience back to theirs helped me see possible explanations for why my parents acted the way they did. Perhaps in obsessing over every detail of our household and every aspect of my life, for example, my parents found a more manageable way of dealing with their many losses to the war, including the loss of close family members, entire villages and communities, an entire country, as well as the comparably "small things" such as the house and possessions they spent many years of their lives working for that had to be left behind.

I have not had a place to call home since I was 17 years old, and now at 33, still no family to call my own. The San Jose Vietnamese American community in which I grew up has dispersed. The house we had lived in for over 25 years, has been sold off to gentrification. Since leaving our house, I have lived in over two dozen different rented houses, apartments, and condominiums, not including the dozen of Airbnbs I went through in a single year when I tried living abroad. The longest I have lasted at any of these homes was a little under three years. My choreographic and writing processes

have helped me uncover the deep longing I have been carrying for the last 17 years, to have a home and a family again.

### **Trauma and Exhaustion**

“I have been exhausted since I was six years old,” I wrote in one of my field texts. It sounds strange, even to me; But this story is one that I continue to live, even as I write this research document, burnt out from an entire school year that entailed taking over 40 credit units, while teaching undergraduate courses as the instructor of record, and working myself tirelessly on this project; All of this, in the midst of several global crises—the worst or most immediate of which is the outbreak of COVID-19. However, this theme arose in several of the field texts, extending back into my early memories of my family working even more tirelessly than I am now.

As much as my mother fussed about our physical health, no one in my family ever seemed to express any awareness of mental health, despite the fact that stress and anxiety affected nearly everyone in my family, in several conspicuous ways. I recall, rather vividly, the moment when my first grade teacher introduced a social worker to our class and asked me to step into another room with the woman, where I was asked a series of questions that seemed to indicate my teacher’s suspicions that I was a victim of domestic abuse. At the time I had no understanding of what was happening or why. In trying to piece together why my teacher may have thought to invite a social worker to class, I remembered that I had a lot of trouble falling asleep, chronic migraines and stomach pains, as well as frequent bouts of anxiety that caused me to sit inside and ask to be held by my teacher instead of running around on the playground during recess. Four years later, when the same teacher had my younger sister in her class, she witnessed all of the same kinds of depressive and anxious behaviors. I remember being

called out of my fifth-grade class on several occasions to console my younger sister when she could not stop crying.

My parents were never physically or violently abusive, although they both had short fuses that frequently resulted in emotional meltdowns or rageful outbursts. Growing up with them, I could not make sense of these arbitrarily explosive reactions to what most others considered minor or innocent mistakes. As I grew older, I began to have my own disproportionate reactions to mistakes and imperfections. I began to understand, from having felt my own rage, the significant role physical exhaustion plays in our mental and emotional states, and its consequent manifestations in our bodies as physical symptoms.

“Me Love You Long Time” and my subsequent “Athleisure-wear Monologue” implies a gendered component to this exhaustion, as I witnessed the bulk of both the domestic work and paid work falling on the shoulders of Vietnamese mothers. My parents worked together six days a week on a food truck, with my mom as the sole cook for crowds as large as 20 to 30 people at a time when there was a lunch rush, while my dad worked the cash register and drove the truck to multiple locations throughout the day. Together they would leave our home by four o’clock in the morning and return around five o’clock in the evening. Although both of my parents were at work for the same number of hours, only my mother would have to be on her feet all day over a hot stove, as my father never bothered to learn how to cook; And then she would continue to stay on her feet once she came home, cooking as many as four different dishes for our family dinner each day. After dinner, she would help me with my schoolwork before going to bed and repeating the next day in the same way. As much as my father sacrificed for our family, they paled in comparison to my mother’s sacrifices. However, such a comparison would be unfair, as she seemed to possess a strength and



endurance that were beyond human. Both of my sisters and I tend to extend ourselves, perhaps not to the same extent my mother did, but for similar motives and to our detriments

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

#### **Processing Trauma through Story**

The journal entries, conversations, and research artifacts that I collected for this project along with the field texts I generated, even when put together, yielded only fragments of stories. As I analyzed and interpreted the texts, I began the process of “retelling” through mythology first. I found that framing particular actions or events within the common patterns of myths allowed the fragments to fit into a plotline that provided a way of understanding the significance of those actions and events, and the complexities of the people involved in them. “Recall that narrative inquiry is a way of understanding human experience through stories that, in turn, help us better understand the human phenomena and human existence” (Kim 190). Myths, in particular, look beyond, and simultaneously, much deeper into personal experience. When we look deep enough into our innermost selves—the “deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage” (Campbell 1988)—what we find are the universal themes that make myths so powerful. Hidden within these myths are clues that help us to find a way to transform by helping us to recover our true natures.

Out of all of the research texts I produced in the creative process, those that used myth as a mode of narrative inquiry, gave way to the most powerful discoveries. What I found through writing these myths and poems were the invisible threads that connected my story and my parents’ stories: threads that I never imagined before, when I had only the fragments of our traumas to look at. Through the myth of the hybrid creature and the myth of the emperor’s people who turned into flying fish, I caught a glimpse for the first time, the breadth of the truth that my own life and experience were echoes of my parents’ lives and experiences. Although healing is likely to be a lifelong

process, this discovery opened a new pathway to healing that feels deeper, more comprehensive, and more hopeful than any pathway I had ever experienced before.

Through this process I was able to find within myself the creative power of the deeper unconscious self. Campbell describes mythology as “the homeland of the Muses, the inspirers of poetry” (Campbell 1988), in that myths allow us to see life as a poem and to see ourselves as participating in a poem. However, in the context of myths, Campbell is not referring to poetry in the form of words or prose, but rather in the form of acts and adventures (Campbell 1988). Although writing poems about particular experiences I have had with my family’s trauma helped to preserve more of the metaphoric richness of these stories, more than mining interview texts for statements of facts ever could, myths lend an even deeper sense of purpose. The power in my mother’s story of the whale, whether it is true or a myth, has been a portal allowing me to enter into a sense of awe, gratitude, and what Campbell describes as “the rapture that is associated with being alive” (Campbell 1988). This has been particularly helpful in those times when I find myself overwhelmed by my anxieties and fears. It is difficult to describe in words the significance of knowing or believing that, in the moment when three generations of women in my family were sitting together in a boat on the open sea in the most terrifying struggle of their lives, a whale came and lifted them up; and because of that, I continue living my life today with many more moments of struggle and many more moments of wonder to come.

### **Processing Trauma in the Body through Movement**

Through the creative process, I found that there were at least two ways that movement could be used to process trauma: movement as a vehicle for storytelling, and movement as a way of re-inhabiting one’s body. In the way that myths allow for a greater richness and depth in presenting field texts, I found the same to be true of dance when

combined with sound, stage or environment design, and costume. While my mother's story of the whale naturally had a mystical quality to it, what helped push it more fully into the realm of myth was the candle dance that I choreographed and performed to pay my respects and gratitude to the whale, and the music composed for this performed veneration. The movement for this piece drew from traditional Cambodian and Thai dance forms, most of which are dances that bridge the spiritual world to ours. For my own research purposes, the entire process from choreographing and rehearsing to performing the dance was another angle from which I explored the themes discussed earlier in this document, pertaining to the sense of belonging that I felt was lost, not only for my generation (the second generation) but also my parents' generation. Also, as it was a dance dedicated to a whale, the implication was that it was also a dance for the sea in which the whale resides. Thus, the flowing quality underlying the entire dance was another way for me to connect, bodily, to my family's story of the sea and to relive those stories on a physical plane.

Besides the dance movement, several other elements contributed to the ceremonial moment and the enactment of the myth. These elements include the use of candles, lotus flowers, and costume, all of which signify the intention of offering and the endeavor to create a space for the sacred and the divine. Of all of the performative elements, perhaps most important was the song composed for this piece. The research that went into the instrumentation and melodies of traditional candle dances of Cambodia and Vietnam, was as extensive as the research that went into the dance. In a written reflection, Barmey wrote:

*“For weeks, My-Linh and I went back and forth, sharing references, books, clips, discussing ideas, listening to music samples. I scoured the internet for sounds from Vietnam and would follow rabbit holes of YouTube videos. That time served*

*for me to build my familiarity with that world, so I could know what to make of it..."*

Along with the process of research, he continued in his writing, were the processes of exploration and growth:

*"[A]nd with that comes emotion, insecurity, inspiration, ambiguity, vulnerability, exhilaration, depression... But these side-effects are necessary. They are byproducts of what we've created, and I believe it takes skill to navigate them, especially since I so often feel like I'm on the verge of drowning in them. But we persevered. We did it. We're doing it, and I'm proud of that. I tried to make Candle Dance strike a convincing balance between psychedelic rock (which was such an important symbol of that time) and traditional folk singing in a very loud, social, ritual, and modern way. It is a song about gratitude and the celebration of life, even in the face of everything life throws at you."*

The dance performance in "Part III," about the recurring dreams I had of water and houses, is one of the examples of how I used movement to engage the "self-observing body-based self system" (van der Kolk 240). What made this piece especially effective was that it combined the use of dreams (the inner conscious or subconscious) with the physical sensations that convey the inner states of the body in its inquiry. "[W]hat dreams are, are manifestations in image form of the energies of the body in conflict with each other," said Campbell in *The Power of Myth*. "And that's all myth is. Myth is a manifestation in symbolic images, metaphorical images, of the energies within us, moved by the organs of the body, in conflict with each other" (Campbell 1988). This conflict between different parts of the self is a recurring theme throughout this research, a substantial portion of which also supports van der Kolk's ideas about trauma residing in the body. The primary conflict of this dance piece is between that which is symbolized

by the recurring theme of water (the necessary journey away from one's home into the great unknown), and the recurring theme of the house (the internal sense of home or belonging and the certainty or stability that comes with that).

The choreographic process of this piece began with a movement exploration into feeling the physical or bodily sensations of the aimless floating that comes from being uprooted and failing to re-root. In the movement itself I discovered a lot of pain, both physical and emotional, and struggle. I found discomfort in parts of my body that held so much tension and anxiety that flexibility and mobility were lost in those areas; parts of my body that could not hold up the rest of myself without exerting a lot of energy; and parts of my body where oxygen could not reach. I also discovered an adventuresome spirit and a lot of room for play and self-discovery. I found a timidity that could be overcome by curiosity. I also found a remarkable amount of strength in certain areas of my body—parts of my body that I had never worked out, that I likely inherited through genetics.

### **Final Reflections**

I recall being young enough that I was still in elementary school when my mother first began telling me about some of her traumatic experiences in leaving Vietnam. She would always remind me never to repeat them to anyone. Looking back, I can only speculate about her reasons for feeling like she could confide in a small child and no one else. I was young enough that I was still practicing reading, when she brought out what appeared to be a small notebook or journal. She had gone through nursing school in the U.S.; For one of her professors, she wrote in pencil a surprisingly detailed story about her escape by boat. It was from this notebook that I first learned of the story of the whale. I also remember being a small child when my father first showed me the newspaper clipping that he kept in a photo album locked away in my parents' room. The

newspaper clipping that covered the story of how my father, who had been living in Southern California at the time, was able to work with the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok to locate and reunite himself with my brother, who was only three old when he nearly drowned during his escape. When his boat sank, the sea took his mother and older brother, fate leaving him at a refugee camp in Thailand for my father to find him eventually.

Although I grew up in one of the largest communities of Vietnamese people outside of Vietnam, many of which survived the same (or very similar) experiences as my parents did, I rarely, if ever, heard any of them speak of these experiences. While my school friends and I could easily bond over how erratically or neurotically our parents behaved, we never considered or exchanged any information about their pasts—only our confusion about the present and our apprehension about the future. I expect the process of healing from my family’s traumas to be a lifelong journey. But it begins with breaking the barriers of silence and taking a deep dive into our memories, the emotions and physical sensations these memories bring up to the surface, and the layers upon layers of realizations that are to be discovered the further down we reach.

For as long as I have been an artist in the field, I have avoided making work about my “bi-cultural identity” or my stereotypical Asian immigrant parents, feeling that I had nothing to say that would be particularly relevant to anyone who could not relate to my experience, nor anything particularly new or insightful to anyone who could relate to my experience. Now that my parents are growing older, and my time with them feels borrowed, I began to realize how important working towards an inner resolution about these traumas became and what a significant portion this “bi-cultural” identity plays in all of it. When I left home, I was so eager to start living that I never noticed the toll it had been taking on my body. As I floated around trying to find my way through life, I

continued carrying with me the burdens of my parents' fears, belief systems and emotional baggage. I could never stay in one place for long, always on the move, keeping myself as busy as possible to the point of extreme fatigue and exhaustion, never realizing that I had been running away from something—from questions, from unresolved traumas. I had always taken for granted what little sense of belonging I could claim, I had taken for granted the fact it was my family to whom I ever belonged.

What prompted this work was the growing anxiety of losing them. When the day comes that my parents move on from this world, they will take with them the sense of “nationality” that I as a Vietnamese American born and raised in San Jose, struggling to speak my parents' native tongue, growing up eating Vietnamese food, would ever know. For the first time in my life, as I began peering deeply into the mysteries of my family's roots, into our collective psyches, I began to confront a part of myself that I had been keeping in the dark. The process of creating and developing this work gave me a much more complete understanding of the trauma that had been passed down to me. Although I cannot say that the result has brought me only peace, it has led me to perhaps a necessary precursor: the beginning of the truth.



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APPENDIX A

POEM #1, RESEARCH TEXTS

## 2-Story, 5-Bedroom House (1991-2014)

Every house in San Jose felt large for its size,  
as though we could never fully live in the whole thing.

Whenever my body occupied one room,  
darkness took the rest of our home,  
like the lack of abundance overtaken by all of our many, money-saving possessions.

The light from outside blocked by the clutter we could never see.  
An entire second family lived in the one downstairs bedroom.

We were humble but not minimal.  
Persistent. Tirelessly driven by  
a demonic force that those Americans

might have mistaken for passion. But we were the opposite of passionate.  
We were barely alive, barely holding on  
each day, selling our souls out of a fear as absolute

as the perverse, grotesque realities that our families flung their bodies into  
an ocean to escape. And there, we remained as lost as those

dinky

little boats that had nothing and everything to lose, sloshing  
against the unimaginable cruelties of fate.

There was nowhere  
in our house that we could  
run from the dark.

There was nowhere that we could  
belong.

APPENDIX B

POEM #2, RESEARCH TEXTS

## The Heart is a Fruit

Em có nhiều điều muốn nói cho anh<sup>8</sup>,  
Mà thực sự khó nói  
tại em nói tiếng Việt không rành,  
Vietnamese  
với tại anh cũng là người lạ<sup>9</sup>.  
new/strange  
Nhưng mà nếu em nói thiệt,  
có thể em sợ hơn  
tại vì em [feel] như anh là  
một người rất thân [and familiar].

Họ nói là mình sẽ tìm tình yêu  
với người giống cha mẹ mình,  
Nhưng em đã cố gắng  
để tránh điều đó, suốt đời em  
Cả hai người cha của mình  
để lại vết sẹo trong trái tim<sup>10</sup>,  
Cả hai người mẹ của mình,  
[even though] mình thương mẹ của mình rất nhiều, as much as we love them  
mã vắng hai người mẹ của mình làm mình đau thêm,  
làm mình chắt nặng

nhưng sao em nghĩ về tương lai  
một ngày nào em có thể được  
xúc cơm cho anh ăn<sup>11</sup>,  
for you  
Quét sàn nhà,  
Trong nhà chung của em và anh.

Khi nhạc mình đang chơi,  
[because that is one thing  
that makes us different  
from our parents, I think]  
nhà mình an toàn,

I have a lot I want to tell you  
But it's really difficult to say it all.  
not only because I can't speak

but also because, you're still

but if I'm honest  
maybe I'm more scared of how close  
and familiar  
you feel

they say we are attracted to  
those who remind us of our parents  
but I've tried really hard  
to escape that, my whole life  
both of our fathers  
left scars in our hearts  
both of our mothers  
hurt us as well

and yet I still dream of a future  
in which one day I may  
scoop rice [into a small bowl]

Sweep the floors  
of a home that is yours and mine

while our music is playing

our home is safe

<sup>8</sup> “Em” and “Anh” are pronouns that reveal the identities of the author (“I”) and the person she is writing to (“you”), as well as the relationship between the two. “Anh” refers to a non-elderly man; a man who’s a little older, like one’s own “big brother” or a man in a heterosexual relationship. “Em” refers to a person who’s a little younger, like one’s own “little sibling” or a woman in a heterosexual relationship. In this case, the relationship as described in the letter is clearly between a man and woman who are lovers.

<sup>9</sup> “Người lạ” could mean stranger or person that is strange or weird.

<sup>10</sup> “Trái tim” means heart, but “trái” means fruit while “tim” means heart, e.g. “trái táo” means “apple.”

<sup>11</sup> In Vietnamese families, scooping rice into a rice bowl is as common as setting one’s table for meals; traditionally the father of the house is always served his bowl of rice first. Rice is such a staple that to ask someone whether they have eaten rice yet, is to ask them if they have eaten at all yet.

khong nhiều đồ đạc, rộng rãi  
nhưng cũng đầy đồ bậy bạ,  
flowers  
like we would trồng cây hoa, khắp nơi, thêm nữa

uncluttered, open space  
yet full, surrounded by  
and other “impractical” things

[but one thing that I don't mind that is the same as our parents]

Anh làm cực khổ quá.  
hard

Is how hard you work, You work so

Anh ơi anh làm nhiều quá  
Anh chưa mệt hã?  
Anh muốn nằm nghỉ chưa.  
Let's take a nap

[that you create your own suffering]  
Aren't you tired yet?  
Do you want to rest?

Mà sao anh cười hoài?  
Làm người ta tuờn anh lười biếng  
believing  
Vì anh bao giờ cũng vui cười.  
always so happy  
Em chưa gặp ai  
vượt qua sự khó khăn của cuộc đời  
Mà tính còn vui vẻ như anh.

But then you also laugh so much  
maybe it confuses everyone into

you're lazy, because you're

I didn't know a person who has been  
through as much as we have been  
through, could smile so much

Nụ cười của anh  
important life  
đã dạy em quan điểm tốt hơn.  
Một bài học không từ sách vở  
mà từ kinh nghiệm.  
face  
Khi em nhìn vô mặt anh,  
obtained  
Em thấy sự vui mừng sau đau khổ.  
heaven  
Em thấy thiên thần trên mặt đất,

I feel like I've learned more

lessons from that smile of yours  
than all of my years at school  
This is why, I love staring into your

I see joy, the kind that could be

Only after enough suffering. I see

[Not the Christian kind]

Em thấy cuộc đời của em  
Em thấy tình yêu của em

I see my life

I see my love.



APPENDIX C

MYTH #1, RESEARCH TEXTS

## The Mythological Hybrid Creature

Vietnamese American folklore holds *the Mylinh* to be a mythological hybrid demi-human demi-creature, possessing supernatural powers. It is said that after gestating in the belly of the sea for one hundred years, the Mylinh hatched from a stone egg. With the head and torso of a woman and a long scaly snake-like hind body and tail that fades into infinity, it is believed she was condemned to live in the sky for all eternity as the border between the Eastern world and the Western world.

APPENDIX D

MYTH #2, RESEARCH TEXTS

## The Emperor Whose People Turned to Flying Fish

Once upon a time, an emperor was visited by a powerful spirit who took the form of a very large and rather awkward-looking bird. Having flown 7 thousand miles from the west, the bird asked the emperor to allow him to eat and drink and rest, and in return he would bless the emperor with riches that even his greatest enemies would envy. The emperor agreed.

But the giant bird ended up eating all of the fish so that the fishermen had nothing to catch, all of the fruit off the trees so that the farmers had nothing to harvest, and drank all of the water from the rivers so that entire villages up and down the country suffered greatly. Afraid of the bird's boundless greed and might, the emperor prayed to the sky god to get rid of the bird for him.

Within minutes the sky began to rain... but instead of water, it rained fire. All of the emperor's people began to flee in panic, jumping right into the ocean. But as they began to drown, they did not die. Instead the people were transformed into flying fish. And from then on, they could live in the water - and sometimes in the air like the bird - but they could never return to the land from which they had fled