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# Untold Narratives: Refugee Experiences from Laos to Richmond, California

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**UNTOLD NARRATIVES: REFUGEE EXPERIENCES  
FROM LAOS TO RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR THOMAS P. KIM  
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I am constantly reminded that my education and trajectory is built on the shoulders of those who came before me. With that, thank you to all of those who have touched my life, this thesis is because of you and for you.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### *A. The Personal is Political*

My dad reminisced on the past very rarely. When he did, he would tell my siblings and I the story of how he used to climb trees and eat the fruits that were on them. He would laugh at the fading memories of him falling off the trees, but would move on quickly from the subject of his life in Laos. My mother always told me how she would cut rice in the fields and that when she bought her first piece of candy, she could not bear to eat it because of how precious it was. She did not necessarily prize it because of its taste, rather because they did not have the money to spend on such luxuries. They would recount stories of the life they lived in Laos, then skim over briefly the incredibly difficult parts of moving to the United States. My siblings and I were reminded to be grateful and that life was not easy and while we were growing up words such as struggle, hardship, pain, loss, and journey were constantly thrown around the dinner table and my parents reminded us of the incredible lengths it took to get to America. My parents only alluded to the idea that they experienced hardships although there was a constant address of the past. Never did we talk about what those were, or how they were impacted by political circumstances, which would cause them to move from the rural hills of Laos to the bay area without much explanation or warning. “Refugees... moving, moving, moving. Always moving.”<sup>1</sup> The fear that still lingers from their past as well as the precarious conditions they live in now have

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewee 3.

prompted me to look into my own historical trajectory as a second-generation Mien American.

This thesis will use historical reference points, as well as ethnographic interviews to discuss the historical and political circumstances that caused the mass migration of Mien people from China to Laos, and shortly after into other parts of the world. Focusing on the Cold War, Secret War, refugee experience, as well as current living conditions in America, I will address the ways that this historical path is crucial to understanding the Mien experience in contemporary Asian American issues, as well as discuss how Mien Americans now attempt to recreate their identity and build community even in the midst of migration and displacement. Richmond, California, a small city in Northern California will be used as an example of the ways that Southeast Asians, particularly Mien people, have been displaced because of the war and have now settled into some of the most low-income neighborhoods. The living conditions in this city are extremely precarious due to heavy industrialization as well as harsh environmental degradation, which leads to compromised health for the residents of Richmond.

I will discuss the role of the United States as global hegemonic players during the Cold War and argue that their positionality as hegemons greatly impacted the future of Mien refugees. This thesis will rely Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, Cheryl Harris' *Whiteness as Property*, as well as George Lipsitz's *Possessive Investment in Whiteness* to discuss the nature of race in America as a prime system that develops inequality, in this case for Mien refugees in Richmond. There will be an exploration of immigration and the construction of race, as well

as racialization of space in Richmond, California, which has allowed for severe health inequalities as well as intensified environmental degradation. With the existence of major multinational corporations it is becoming increasingly more difficult to advance justice. It is apparent that these predominantly low income neighborhoods are facing the brunt of environmental degradation, in this case with Mien refugees, all which can be attributed to the United States efforts to globalize as well as be comfortable subjecting certain communities to disproportionately negative living conditions.

*B. The Model Minority Myth and the Monolithic Façade of Asian American*

In order to understand why it is important to research Mien history, one must know the origins of the “model minority myth”. Often times, narratives of Asian Americans in the United States are defined by a monolithic assumption based on their “model minority” status. This myth suggests that Asian Americans are successful, and well adapted to American systems and for this reason are the model minority for others to look up to<sup>2</sup>. The *Encyclopedia of Asian American Issues*, has an article written by Hyeyoung Kwon and Wayne Au which discuss the origins of the model minority myth as well as how it came to be such a successful stereotype for Asian Americans. Kwon and Au write,

“It was first used popularly in a January 1966 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* in an article entitled, ‘Success Story: Japanese American Style’. In this article, author William Petersen used the term ‘model minority’ to praise the Japanese American community

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Au and Hyeyoung Kwon. "Model Minority Myth." In *Encyclopedia of Asian American Issues Today: Volume I*, ed. by Edith W. Chen and Grace J. Yoo, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), 221-230.

for what he perceived as its successful assimilation into mainstream American culture.”<sup>3</sup>

The idea that Asian Americans are exemplary and have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps has allowed for the narrowing of Asian American struggles. Due to this supposed acclamation, the stereotype of a model minority has been one that has plagued Asian Americans because it does not address the reality of the range of experiences that Asian Americans face. With this diversity of experiences, it is quite difficult to label and reduce all Asian American experiences into one stereotype of success and privilege. Many Southeast Asians, including the Mien community are actually living in extremely precarious conditions of all sorts. This counters the dominant narrative of a model minority, but these experiences are rarely shared when speaking about Asian American issues. In order to understand the ways that research on Mien refugees is important one must understand the hardships Mien communities have faced and how their past has informed their current living conditions.

Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* argues that there is a monolithic identity of Asian American that does not fully encompass the broad depth of experiences that actually do exist<sup>4</sup>. Lowe wants to argue that problematizing the notion of the Asian American experience is necessary in allowing for real change to be made in developing equity, in this case, for Southeast Asians. Lisa Lowe writes about this need to create heterogeneous Asian American politics in order to combat the ways that Asian American issues have been simplified. The act of creating a more com-

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Lowe. *Immigrant Acts*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

plex story of how Asian Americans face inequalities, for Lowe, will depict faulted systems set up in America in relation to all Asian American identities rather than a narrow framing of Asian American<sup>5</sup>. There is a limited amount of research that exists focused on Mien communities, most of which are anthropological studies that discuss the nature of their traditions, values, and beliefs. However, little research has been conducted that addresses more contemporary issues that Mien communities face, especially after resettlement from refugee camps. One of the main texts that opens up thought on Mien issues is by Jeffery L. Macdonald, *Transnational Aspects of Iu-Mien Refugee Identity*. This text has been crucial to understanding the refugee experience, and how Mien culture has survived even during resettlement. Yet Macdonald's book still leans more towards a historical understanding of resettlement and identity building, and focuses less so on political circumstances and theory that caused the mass migration of Mien refugees from the rural hills of Laos into Thai refugee camps. Due to the lack of research on Mien communities and contemporary issues, this paper will focus on the ways in which Cold War politics and the Secret War have shaped the lives of Mien refugees and their families. In doing so, resettlement has created incredible injustices that have followed Mien refugees into the United States, particularly looking at Richmond, California. The focus of this paper is not simply to realize the political circumstances and inequalities that are created from it, but to see the ways that formulation of identity is in it of itself an attempt to fight back and hold onto

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Mien identity even in the face of what Lisa Lowe calls heterogeneity<sup>6</sup>. In order to explain how the lived experiences of Mien refugees and their children reflect a larger political structure critiquing US involvement in Mien resettlement, arguments in this paper will look at historical events, as well as use political theory to contextualize the realities that many Mien Americans live today.

In addition to the usage of historical research and other related secondary sources, ethnographic interviews will be utilized in hopes of providing primary examples to support the claims made in this paper. The interviewees were asked a series of questions regarding their experience in their homelands, to the experiences they had upon arrival to the United States. The interviewees were also asked about their own understanding of the war as well as their experiences as refugees. Using historical information regarding Cold War politics, the Secret War, as well as the current history of Mien communities in Richmond, California, this paper will attempt to address the ways that there is a narrative of injustice that exists and has followed Mien people from China, to Laos, all the way to Richmond.

## II. POLITICAL HISTORY OF MIEN COMMUNITIES AND THEIR TRAJECTORY

### *A. The Political Circumstances of Mien Communities from China to Laos*

In order to follow the narrative of Mien people, it is necessary to contextualize where they lived originally. The Mien population, also known by the names

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

of Iu-Mien, or Yao was located in Southern China, especially in the provinces of Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan<sup>7</sup>. Political issues erupted causing Mien people to consider relocating as a way to hold onto their culture and values. Hjorleifur Jonsson's *Mien Relations: Mountain People and State Control in Thailand*, discusses the ways that there was a divide between mountain people and lowlanders, which would further replicate systems of rank and social status<sup>8</sup>. Jonsson writes, "For the premodern regionalization of Asia in all its cultural, political, and other diversity, notions of civility and hierarchy were central to the consolidation of lowland society and the mapping of its opposite on the forested mountains"<sup>9</sup>. Many Mien people were forced to move from their homelands in China to cope with the drastic political expectations that were to be adopted by small ethnic minorities. The efforts of Mien communities to hold onto their culture and identity were exemplified through their mass migration to the rural hills of Laos. In the hills of Laos, Mien people were able to practice their religion as well as any other cultural traditions they had without the state intervening. Although the Mien people were seen as backwards because of their practices, they were able to find a place of solitude that would allow for their freedom of choice in practice<sup>10</sup>. This move from China to Laos was a huge step in retaining Mien identity, and this effort to hold onto a Mien identity has continued to be a theme across history.

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<sup>7</sup> Eli Alberts, *A History of Daoism and the Yao People of South China*. (New York: Cambria Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Hjorleifur Jonsson, *Mien Relations: Mountain People and State Control in Thailand* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Yia Lee, "Diaspora and the Predicament of the Origins: Interrogating Hmong Postcolonial History and Identity," *Hmong Studies Journal* 08 (2007), <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~yeulee/History/Diaspora%20and%20the%20Predicament%20of%20Origins.html>. (accessed February 1, 2015).

A large majority of Mien people migrated to the hills of Laos and became farmers as a result. Many Mien people are known for their “slash and burn” agriculture, primarily in the production of rice<sup>11</sup>. This was true in China, but these agricultural skills followed Mien people into the hills of Laos where they also grew rice in the wetlands<sup>12</sup>. Mien communities were structured in clans, and often times followed a system of kinship. During their settlement in Laos, Mien people were able to practice their traditions, which are similarly structured to Chinese Daoism<sup>13</sup>. The religion is centered around an ancestral god who “delivered the head of an enemy to a monarch and was awarded a princess for a wife, and from this union the Mien descended”<sup>14</sup>. Although the Mien community was slowly settling into their new home, this peace was interrupted as global warfare ensued. This struggle faced by the small ethnic minority of Mien people has been a growing trend as they become displaced from their new homeland in Laos into refugee camps as well as to different parts of the world attributed to the Cold War, in particular the Secret War.

#### *B. Cold War Politics and its Role on Mien Communities*

One of the primary reasons Mien people were displaced from their homeland was the role of Cold War politics and the international political agendas of specific countries surrounding communism. The heavy involvement of the United States in this international movement is directly linked to the ways that Mien

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<sup>11</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Mien", accessed February 02, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/651939/Mien>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

communities became involved with the Secret War, and as a result pushed out of their countries to seek refuge in neighboring countries. This was seen through a mass migration of Southeast Asians into refugee camps in neighboring countries. A fair amount of Mien refugees ended up in refugee camps in Thailand. Interviewer 1 stated that living conditions were brutal and there was heavy surveillance of the refugees. Interviewer 1 responded to my question in regards to their experience in the refugee camps, stating, “I was in the refugee camp for 5 years. Uh... 75, and I stayed until 1980. It’s hard, it’s very hard to be there. *Coux thieh*<sup>15</sup>. Uh... it’s just like living in a jail. You cannot go outside of the camp until you get the permission from the security”<sup>16</sup>. This explanation of the refugee camps show that life was not easy even after seeking refuge. Living conditions were described as poor in terms of sanitation, and although refugee camps are presented as a space of safety, the conditions in which the refugee camps were run seemed anything far from safe or comfortable. These interviewers expressed how similar the camps were to jails, and how little they were given to eat. The role of global politics plays such a huge role on even a small ethnic minority living in the hills of Laos. The ways in which a hegemonic superpower can impact these villages says a lot about the role that a hegemon has in reference to its satellites<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> During this interview, the word “coux thieh” stuck out to me as a word that I could not possibly translate. The word expresses a deep sense of struggle and exhaustion. The kind of suffering that lingers within you and takes over your body. The words struggle, or painful just could not explain this term in Mien.

<sup>16</sup> Interview 1

<sup>17</sup> Andre Gunder Frank, “The Development of Underdevelopment,” in *The Political Economy of Development and Underdevelopment*, ed. Kenneth P. Jameson and Charles K. Wilber, (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1991). 105-115.

As for the Cold War, the weakening relationship between the East and West superpowers between 1945-1947 were seen as the precursor to the Cold War<sup>18</sup>. The beginning date of the war is highly contested and many argue that it was between 1947 and 1949 that the war first began, and it ended in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>19</sup>. Due to communist rule in the East, and the push for democratic rule in the West, major superpowers including the Soviet Union and the United States became heavily invested in creating political and economic allies. The roles of the superpowers were rooted in efforts to organize third world countries to follow specific political and economic infrastructures of either communism or democracy. This polarized global fight is incredibly important because the status of superpowers like the Soviet Union and the United States were crucial in influencing the ways that smaller countries would act. The East and Western Bloc were fighting for the allyship, also some authors have argued, the resources of third world countries that were facing decolonization and beginning to create their own political systems. For the United States, being a hegemonic superpower was incredibly important to the deep efforts of the American government to change the minds of third world countries about their moral inconsistencies. The history of slavery and the oppression of its people of color really took a toll in the ways that third world countries saw American democracy as being highly flawed, while also resembling so much of their own colonial history. The Cold War represents the fight over global political control and influence, and this frame of refer-

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<sup>18</sup> J.P.Dunbabin. *The Cold War The Great Powers and their Allies* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1994). 4.

<sup>19</sup> Carole K. Fink. *Cold War: An International History*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014). x-xi.

ence is important in the ways that rural Mien communities became enveloped in the United States' globalization efforts and affairs. The United States took measures to ensure that their image would improve with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, as well as the boasting of sponsorship of refugees into the United States.

Many Southeast Asians were displaced after the plight of the Cold War due to the complicated relations between the Eastern Bloc and Western Bloc in Indochina, primarily Vietnam and Laos<sup>20</sup>. Small ethnic minorities residing in the hills of Laos also became heavily involved in Cold War politics, and as a result have suffered immensely due to the circumstances they now live in. The small ethnic minority, who self identify as the Mien, were just one of the minorities that were highly impacted by United States intervention of the Cold War<sup>21</sup>. The fight between the Eastern and Western superpowers drew in even the smallest ethnic minorities, attempting to sway specific countries onto either side of the Cold War fight. CIA summaries of the Secret War explicitly state,

“Laotian independence suited the policy of the United States, so long as the government remained non-Communist. Laos represented one of the dominos in Southeast Asia that concerned President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Although the country had little intrinsic value, its geographical position placed it in the center of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. If Laos fell to the Communists, Thailand might be next, according to the domino theory. And

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<sup>20</sup> Ang Chen Guan. *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962*. (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> Jeffery L. Macdonald. *Transnational Aspects of Iu-Mien Refugee Identity*. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997).

the collapse of Thailand would lead to Communist domination of Southeast Asia-and perhaps beyond”<sup>22</sup>.

The idea of a domino effect pushed the United States to inject itself into the “neutral Laos”. America wanted democratic independence with countries that would align themselves on the side of the Western Bloc. Their interests in securing resource rich Indochina meant that they were willing to invest in the wins of the Royal Lao Government over the communist Pathet-Lao. One of the ways in which they attempted to secure Laos was through the training of a guerilla warfare team, consisting of ethnic minorities in the hills of Laos to fight against the communists<sup>23</sup>. This would ensure that the United States could keep a relatively low profile in regards to its direct role in the Vietnam War.

Laos was one of the first countries to establish neutrality in the Cold War era. It was given neutrality in the 1954 Geneva Conference. The Secret War was a much more specific war based in Laos, but existed due to the Cold War. The global political atmosphere was ruled by ideas of communism and democracy, and this transferred into Laos as the communist Pathet-Lao formed in opposition to the Royal Lao Government<sup>24</sup>. The Royal Lao leader was supported and backed by the United States, which is one of the reasons why the Pathet-Lao was upset, and which is a factor into the attempted overthrow of the Royal Lao Government<sup>25</sup>.

The CIA summary writes, “For more than 13 years, the Agency directed native

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<sup>22</sup> William M. Leary, “Supporting the Secret War,” *CIA Air Operations in Laos 1955-1974*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art7.html>. (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

forces that fought major North Vietnamese units to a standstill. Although the country eventually fell to the Communists, the CIA remained proud of its accomplishments in Laos”<sup>26</sup>. The role of the United States in the Secret War is one that has impacted a huge number of ethnic minorities in Laos, particularly the Mien Americans. Many Mien refugees were eventually given citizenship in other countries after residing in refugee camps for many years. Many people were forced to flee, Interviewer 2 states, “I’m telling you right now, I am 60 years old and I don’t even know where it was. My birthplace...”<sup>27</sup>. This displacement lingers even after so many years, and hearing these stories help realize the ways that real people are impacted and the ways in which it will shape their lives.

### *C. Neutrality in Laos: The Mien Guerilla Warfare Army*

Specifically speaking, the United States played a huge role in recruiting the Mien people to side with the United States, which resulted in the formation of a guerilla warfare troop of Mien people working alongside the United States<sup>28</sup>. The construction of this Mien guerilla warfare was crucial to the role that Mien communities had in Cold War politics, as well as crucial to the future of Mien refugees after the United States withdrew from the Secret War and the Cold War in Indochina. After the United States decided to withdraw from providing resources to Laos, many soldiers who were a part of the CIA’s Secret War army were in grave danger. For this reason, a large portion of the Mien community was

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>28</sup> Fahm Finh Saetern. “Iu-Mien History from China to the U.S.,” *Iu-Mien Community Services Page*. 2015. [http://unitediumien.org/IuMien\\_History.php](http://unitediumien.org/IuMien_History.php)

faced with the decision of staying at risk of danger because of their supposed betrayal to the communists, or leaving to refugee camps for a chance at survival. Although refugee camps seemed like the safest option, like Interviewee 1, the conditions were harsh and it was not easy to live in the camps. Not only was this transition into refugee camps extremely difficult, Mien communities originating from Laos have been perpetually haunted by Cold War politics as they have to resettle into the United States. This displacement can attribute to severe emotional traumas, and many studies have shown that refugees are one of the most highly impacted in terms of mental health for Asian Americans. The experiences of Mien refugees are quite specific, and although much research has been done surrounding their experiences, it is necessary to revisit the ways that Mien communities faced trauma, and are also living in jarring environments today. Through assumptions of Asians being a model minority, Mien issues are often disregarded as their identity is merged into a monolithic Asian-American identity, their experiences lost in a general stereotype that reduces the experiences of Southeast Asians into one of success and ease. Specifically looking at Mien refugees who moved to Richmond, California it is apparent that their relocation was one filled with difficulty, especially under the pretense that America's racialization of space was crucial to building upon their own systems of inequality.

#### *D. Suburbanization and Urban Sprawl*

After the Great Depression, America was faced with a fairly large economic downturn. As a way to encourage economic growth, Congress and the administration of Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt passed housing

bills<sup>29</sup>. Some of these bills included the Federal Financial Public Housing Program, Federal Home Loan Bank Act, Emergency Relief and Reconstruction Finance Corporation, Federal Housing Plan: including Home Owners Loans (1933), Federal Housing Administration (1933), Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works Administration (1933), and the United States Housing Authority (1937)<sup>30</sup>. The Federal Home Loan Bank Act was designed to increase the amount of capital available to banks, which was a step towards providing housing for all. However the distribution of the funds for these programs were still unfair and informed by race in America. Funds for these programs were given to some, and not to others. Those who identified were often more likely to be approved as compared to those who identified as people of color who were statistically more subjected to denial. Not only were funds denied to certain people, programs that were supposed to encourage urban housing were generally stalled and not supported financially. This means that low-income families did not have the same access to the housing acts. One of the ways in which families develop capital is through home ownership. When this is a form of capital, it is necessary to see the ways that material realities are formed within the framework of racism in America. For example, the Emergency Relief and Reconstruction Finance Corporation was designed to offer loans to different programs for urban housing, although it was unsuccessful because funding was still limited and not much of this urban housing was able to be established due to the lack of funding. This shows the dis-

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<sup>29</sup> Robert S. McElvaine. *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*. Broadway Books, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

crepancy between creating fair housing acts for all, and on the other hand executing fair housing.

Each bill was created to help families move into better homes and help support economic growth, yet despite the stated good intentions of the government, it is apparent that there was a possessive investment in whiteness and the elite<sup>31</sup>. Cheryl Harris describes this phenomenon in her article, *Whiteness is Property*. Harris argues that the ways in which the construction of whiteness, as an identity, has immensely benefited those who perform as white. Harris states, “Whiteness is an aspect of racial identity surely, but it is much more; it remains a concept based on relations of power, a social construct predicated on white dominance and black subordination”<sup>32</sup>. Not only is this the case, but Harris wants to argue that this correlation between whiteness and property have been carefully constructed as racial projects in the efforts to increase the value of whiteness and allow white power elites to benefit from systems of racial domination. Harris’ connection of whiteness as an identity and the ways that tangible properties are interrelated acknowledge how racial projects can certainly create material realities. These material realities have manifested in the policies stated above, which is exemplified in housing programs. With the idea of housing being offered and the development of suburbs, white homeowners decided to leave urban centers because of the lack of desirability to live in heavily industrialized cities, in trade for suburban lifestyles. As this new idea of suburbia was created, all people rushed to

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<sup>31</sup> George Lipsitz. "The possessive investment in whiteness." *White privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism 2* (2005): 67-90.

<sup>32</sup> Cheryl Harris. *Critical Race Theory*. (New York: The New Press, 1995). 287.

obtain loan mortgages from banks to buy new homes on the outskirts of town. Yet, one of the problems that occurred was there was a lack of equal allocation for all of those applying for these mortgages. White families were able to get access to living in “green districts” while other minority groups were strategically placed in the same “red districts”<sup>33</sup>. This was called “red-lining”, the act of rating areas in cities by color, green being the best areas, red being the most dangerous. Based on race, white people had the most access to getting loans for the green areas, while people of color were often denied loans to live in green areas<sup>34</sup>. Although federal laws, policies, and programs are supposed to affect everyone equally, this does not seem to be the case historically. These housing policies have spatially separated communities into “greens and reds”, which is an incredibly important aspect to consider when discussing who will be burdened with the harshest environmental degradation and health pollutions. Factoring in the mass migration of Mien refugees from camps, the only places that they are capable of affording are in urban centers, which are often increasingly more so impacted by health and environmental issues. The city of Richmond is an example of one of these urban centers, which is heavily impacted by industrialization and has a fairly large Mien population.

### *III. CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN ISSUES: A CASE STUDY OF RICHMOND, CA*

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<sup>33</sup> Robert S. McElvaine. *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*. (Broadway Books, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

### *A. The History of Richmond, CA as an Industrial City*

The city of Richmond, California is located in the East Bay of the Bay Area. Richmond, CA is 16 miles Northeast of San Francisco and is located on a peninsula, which allows for it to have access to the shoreline<sup>35</sup>. The city is the third largest shipping port in California, working with “19 million short tons of general, liquid, and dry bulk commodities each year”<sup>36</sup>. There is a population of around 103,701 residents with a median income of \$63,125 in 2010<sup>37</sup>. Interestingly the statistics surrounding education in Richmond shows that most of the residents have not completed high school. With the population ages 25 and older, the number of residents who have bachelors degrees are overwhelmingly small at 14.1%, and graduate degrees at 8.1%<sup>38</sup>. El Cerrito, CA, a city sharing its borders with Richmond shows a 30.3% population of residents over 25 who have bachelors degrees and 25.7% of the population who hold graduate or professional degrees<sup>39</sup>. Although these two cities are right next door to each other, there is a wide gap between income and educational attainment between the two showing the climate of Richmond as a city.

The city has historically been a site of heavy industrialization starting with the transcontinental rail terminal as well as the construction of the Standard Oil

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<sup>35</sup> History of Richmond. <http://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/index.aspx?NID=112> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Bay Area Census Data. <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Richmond.htm> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> El Cerrito Census Data. <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/ElCerrito.htm> (accessed February 1, 2015).

refinery during the late 1890s and early 1900s<sup>40</sup>. Throughout the next few decades, there was an exponential growth in industrial businesses that began opening up shop in Richmond, CA. With this heavy industrialization came a steady incline of laborers who would end up working in these large industrial sectors. Following this expansion of the industrial market in Richmond, CA the turn of WWII helped oversee the development of the Kaiser shipyards along the Richmond shoreline. This series of industrial developments would contribute to the large migration of laborers, who were primarily from the South. Richmond became known for their industrial projects and this is still a primary focus of the city's work. The Richmond website boasts, "Richmond's economy is currently undergoing a major transition from its former heavy industrial character toward more high technology ("high tech") and light industrial companies with new business parks accommodating light industrial and "office/flex" land uses"<sup>41</sup>. Although there is a suggestion that there is a transition to a more technologically advanced economy the industrial sites, such as major refinery Chevron, still exist and continue to function being major contributors to the industrial character of Richmond. Most recently Chevron attempted to pass a policy that would allow for the Richmond Chevron refinery to process more crude oils at a higher capacity even if this could be a

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<sup>40</sup> City of Richmond. <http://www.ci.richmond.ca.us/index.aspx?NID=112> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

dangerous process<sup>42</sup>. Chevron is still a large player in the economy of Richmond, making its existence extremely hard to forget.

*B. The Ways Industrialization Has Contributed to Inequity in Richmond, CA*

The role of industrialization in Richmond is crucial because although there was an abundance of jobs available, it also meant that the history of Richmond would be plagued by the negative impacts of the industrial market. One of the primary contributors to environmental degradation and pollution were Standard Oil refinery, and later the Richmond Chevron refinery<sup>43</sup>. Chevron, being a multi-national corporation has incredible influence over the city of Richmond, using corporate revenues to back specific local candidates. Their input into the community through tax payouts, local community partnerships, and funding of local political partners has played a crucial role in the way that Chevron has impacted the general history and trajectory of Richmond. As a refinery that creates an incredible amount of pollution, there have been strides made by Chevron to make sure to elect government officials that side with them in their current and future projects even while the refinery is functioning under extremely fragile conditions.

One of the parts of Richmond that is most impacted by Chevron's environmental degradation and severe pollution is the unincorporated city of North Richmond. North Richmond is excluded from the Richmond census due to its unincorporation. The population is generally 97% Black, Hispanic, and Asian with a

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<sup>42</sup> "Chevron's Plan to Modernize Richmond Refinery Draws Criticism," accessed February 2, 2015, [http://www.mercurynews.com/ci\\_25590884/residents-express-outcry-over-chevron-richmonds-modernization-project](http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_25590884/residents-express-outcry-over-chevron-richmonds-modernization-project).

<sup>43</sup> History of Richmond.

median income of \$36,875 in 2010 which is significantly lower than Richmond's \$63,125 median income<sup>44</sup>. It is also almost half of the Contra Costa County's median income of \$76,385<sup>45</sup>. This neighborhood lies directly Northeast of the refinery and is the most impacted by the existence of Chevron due to wind conditions that blow most of the particulate towards the Northeast of the refinery. Schools in the neighborhood are reported to have specialized alarms to warn students and teachers of any form of refinery explosion or gas leak<sup>46</sup>. This speaks heavily to the nature of the role that Chevron has on the lives of Richmond residents. Yet this burden is not borne equally. The negative externalities faced by North Richmond residents are much greater than those who live farther from the refinery, but are still included in the city of Richmond and benefiting from Chevron funding.

Chevron produces nearly 240,000 barrels of gas each year, and with this production is a large amount of environmental and health externalities that the surrounding communities are left to cope with<sup>47</sup>. There already has been a long history of pollution in Richmond, and this pollution only continues as the lack of regulation of Chevron persists. Some of the air pollutants that are noted include: benzene, mercury, and other hazardous air pollutants<sup>48</sup>. All of which are linked to cancer, reproductive problems, and neurological effects. Although it may seem that these pollutants would be less likely to affect people while they are indoors,

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<sup>44</sup> Jane Kay, Cheryl Katz, and Environmental Health News, "North Richmond in Shadow of Poverty and Pollution," *SFGate*, accessed February 2, 2015, <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/North-Richmond-in-shadow-of-poverty-and-pollution-3605994.php>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

this is untrue. The pollutants are everywhere and exist in every crevice, indoor or outdoor. In 2010, studies showed that Chevron released around 575,669 pounds of chemicals into the air, water and waste facilities.<sup>49</sup> Chevron is a heavy polluter, that much is for sure, and its lack of care for refinery conditions and safety for its workers and local residents is concerning. In the name of profit, it is apparent that Chevron has avoided the responsibility it must take for the health of the communities surrounding it. Without this accountability, many environmental justice organizations have banded together to protest Chevron and other polluting companies in order to gain justice and freedom, within the bounds of local government and outside of it through protests, rallies, and actions.

It is necessary to understand the ways the process of suburbanization and urban sprawl and how it creates a racialized platform for inequality. In addition, it is important to see the ways that Richmond is a site of urban sprawl and is directly being impacted by the negative externalities such as environmental degradation or heightened health risks for the local community. Although it may seem like there is a disconnect between the trajectory of Mien refugees and the experiences of Richmond residents, these two communities are not separate from each other. A large population of Mien people currently reside in Richmond due to low housing or renting costs. In the face of Cold War politics and their struggles to get to America, they are still facing intensive inequalities not just based solely on the conditions for their displacement, but in the lack of structure in American programs to sponsor refugees. Some of the interviewers expressed how incredibly

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

difficult it was to adjust to life in America without much guidance or support from the government. Interviewee 3 stated, “We worked and the money was little, we don’t get enough money and everything is expensive. Looking for a house, but we can’t always go and find rent. We find a house and we don’t have enough money to pay. Taxes are expensive, insurance is expensive. That is why we were, very very struggle”<sup>50</sup>. The ways that America was able to quickly invest itself into Mien guerilla warfare, also seemed to be as quickly as how they were able to divest from these ethnic minorities. When faced with a series of hardships and struggles, Mien communities attempt to create community and have slowly begun to form their own ways of resistance.

#### *IV. ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND ACTS OF RESISTANCE AGAINST IT*

##### *A. Acts of Resistance*

Environmental degradation has been severe in Richmond. A study done by well-known Professor of Environmental Health Science at University of California Berkeley, Rachel Morello-Frosch, shows the impacts on health from environmental degradation in Richmond<sup>51</sup>. The Northern California Household Exposure Study has labeled the city a “‘hot spot’ in cumulative exposures in California communities”<sup>52</sup>. Morello-Frosch writes about the ways that metals such as vanadium and nickel are usually seen in communities that are highly impacted by

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<sup>50</sup> Interviewee 3.

<sup>51</sup> Rachel Morello-Frosch, “New Methods Detect ‘Hotspots’ of Cumulative Exposures in California Communities,” *The Center for Occupational & Environmental Health*. (2013). <http://coeh.berkeley.edu/bridges/Winter2013/Hotspots.html> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

heavy oil combustions and major shipping, this is a measurement that can depict how much pollution is being put out. Unfortunately, Richmond has a high dosage of these metals. This is indicative of the heavy pollution that exists from refineries and within the context of a heavily industrialized Richmond, it is clear that the community of Richmond is disproportionately impacted in comparison to some of its wealthier counterparts. Morello-Frosch argues,

“Outdoor levels of particulate matter air pollution in Richmond are among the highest in California. The city is a busy hub of truck, rail, and marine transportation and home to Chevron Richmond, one of the major refineries in the United States. Yet it is the cumulative exposure to multiple stressors in this community such as noise, crime, and poverty, and their potential to amplify the health effects of specific exposures like air pollution, that now concerns scientists and policymakers.<sup>53</sup>”

It is necessary for policymakers to consider the role of major polluting companies such as Chevron as they impact residents. It is more disconcerting that low income, predominantly people of color communities are impacted the most and have the least say in controlling these corporations. While changes in public policy need to be made, many grassroots organizations are taking initiative to organize community members, keep city council members accountable, in addition to protesting these major corporations. This form of grassroots organizing can function outside of the boundaries that are offered by public policy and have been extremely successful in making meaningful wins for environmental justice in Richmond. Yet, the battles are not over and corporations such as Chevron are still investing in local city council campaigns as well as promote their expansion product

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

as an attempt to build a safer refinery when in actuality it is to process larger quantities of crude oil<sup>54</sup>.

Mien refugees have taken a stand for environmental justice in Richmond and are showing up to city council meetings to express their concern, even when they need a translator to do so. In addition, you see Mien refugees attending rallies and bringing their children and grandchildren to gain a critical consciousness of injustice in America, and help support the younger generations' interest in equity. The process of displacement that Mien refugees experience is one that is uniquely its own. It is vital for policy makers to recognize these experiences, but also for communities to band together in the shared experience of injustice.

## V. CONCLUSION

### A. *Where do we go from here?*

The usage of stories in Mien tradition has allowed for the passing of information and history. Stories have become a vital way for Mien history and culture to stay alive, and through these stories it is apparent that it has been an incredibly long and difficult journey. Hjørleifur Jonsson writes, "Mien stories are indications of who the Mien people are; it is out of their historical experiences that they construct their narratives"<sup>55</sup>. For this reason, Mien stories have been vital to the dissemination of narratives of struggle. The interviews pertaining to this

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<sup>54</sup> Malcolm Marshall, comment on "Richmond Approves Stalled Modernization Plan At Chevron Refinery," Richmond Pulse, comment posted on July 31, 2014, <http://richmondpulse.org/richmond-approves-stalled-modernization-plan-at-chevron-refinery-2/> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Hjørleifur Jonsson.

thesis was meant to bring together another form of understandings of Mien history that could not be discussed through historical and political research and theory. The untold narratives from Mien communities help to inform the ways that history has shaped real lives of Mien communities even to date. The interviewers expressed their own perceptions of war and resettlement, as well as their own ideas of resistance and resilience in the face of American inequities. The interviews showed that Mien communities are still directly impacted by war and resettlement. On top of that, many Mien refugees are still grappling with the conditions that they are now living in juxtaposed to their life back in Laos. Interviewee 3 discussed working conditions describing that in a work week, “I work 60, sometimes 70 hours per week. Sometimes I work 80 hours per week. I always work a full time job. 27 years... Ever since I work, I never work 40 hours a week. Always”<sup>56</sup>. Regardless of if the interviewer expressed their love for their homeland or for being in America, it is necessary to consider the ways that resettlement programs have left out Mien refugees. The role that the United States played in creating the guerilla warfare troop was crucial to how Mien people were treated in Laos. In addition, the United States created resettlement programs that failed to support Mien refugees in their transition into the United States. For this reason, it is necessary to consider the ways in which Mien refugees have been left out. Gary Kar-Chuen Chow’s *Exiled Once Again: Consequences of the Congressional Expansion of Deportable Offenses on the Southeast Asian Refugee Community* ex-

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<sup>56</sup> Interviewee 3.

presses the ways that many Southeast Asians did not have a choice to move.

Chow writes,

“Southeast Asian refugees are not immigrants who voluntarily enter the U.S., but instead are primarily individuals fleeing political or ethnic persecution in one of the three nations, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, which formerly comprised French Indochina. In the absence of effective institutional support and the means to attain socioeconomic advancement, many Southeast Asian refugees, like Lun, have resorted to criminal activity in order to survive”<sup>57</sup>.

This lack of choice in migration for Mien people is relevant because the struggles that Mien people face need to be inherently tied to the conditions they were faced with in their resettlement. Only when these connections can be made will there be justice for Mien refugees. The struggles that Mien refugees face will ripple throughout generations to come and leave a lasting imprint on Mien Americans. Even without choice, Mien Americans are making decisions to fight for their rights and reclaim a piece of Richmond, California for their own. We see this in the development of the Iu-Mien Association, in the Mien grocery store that sells produce, all the way to Mien elders speaking out against environmental impacts at city council meetings in their own language.

As more research is done in regards to Mien resettlement and their experiences as refugees or even as children of refugees, it will shed light on the deeply embedded scars of the past and how they mold the future. Yet academia is not and should not be the only form of knowledge that is produced within Mien communities. I urge Mien refugees to share their stories, and for family and friends to listen, carefully and with intent. These untold narratives expose a truth about impe-

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<sup>57</sup> Gary Kar-Chuen Chow, *Exiled Once Again: Consequences of the Congressional Expansion of Deportable Offenses on the Southeast Asian Refugee Community*, 12 ASIAN AM. L.J. 103 (2005). Available at: <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/aalj/vol12/iss1/4>. 104-105.

rialism, a truth about war and violence, and a truth about resistance in its purest form. What we take from these stories will add on to the ripples of the legacies we have inherited. Those ripples, I hope, will begin to change the world. They will build communities and coalitions that are stronger than multinational corporations, and hopefully they will nurture opportunities for a movement in justice, regardless of what movement that is in. This is a call to unlearn, and relearn our histories. For me, it is a reminder that my parents struggled, faced hardship, felt pain, experienced loss, and traveled a long journey. They face intense health issues that can be traced to refinery explosions and chemical exposures, yet they are still resilient, still strong, and still standing. Interviewee 1 states, “I’ve lived here for 32 years already. This is the only place we can survive”<sup>58</sup>. Given the context of the interviewer’s expression that this is the only place we can survive, we must do a better job at creating the safest environments and neighborhoods for generations to come, because even throughout war, violence, poverty, there is still hope once a community comes together in solidarity against the oppressions of war. The theme from my interview was that “it was hard”, but “we survived”<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>59</sup> Interviewee 3.

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