Refugees With or Without Papers

Stories of Persecution, Flight, & Resettlement of Two Bilingual Educators

Donald F. Hones, Mayra Pasayes, & Txerthoj Vang

Introduction

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!
—Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus"

We're rounding them up in a very humane way, in a very nice way. And they're going to be happy because they want to be legalized. I know it doesn't sound nice. But not everything is nice.
—presidential candidate Donald Trump on his plan to deport millions of undocumented immigrants from the United States

Currently, the United States, like countries in Europe and elsewhere, continues to grapple with the arrival of children and adults seeking refuge from violence in their countries of origin. Under the presidency of Donald Trump, the U.S. has sought to limit the number of refugees who will be admitted, as well as their countries of origin (Davis & Jordan, 2017).

The U.S. has also rapidly increased the number of deportations of undocumented residents (Rubin, 2017). Perhaps more than previous administrations, the current U.S. administration tends to blur the line between refugee and undocumented immigrant, considering each group to contain undesirables.

Contrast this to the Obama administration: In the aftermath of the Paris bombings, President Obama stood by his pledge to welcome thousands of refugees from war-torn Syria despite strong opposition in Congress and public opinion polls (Beinart, 2015). Yet, in contrast to his support of the Syrians, Obama approved Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids aimed at deporting hundreds of undocumented families who had fled the upsurge in violence in El Salvador and elsewhere in Central America (Markon & Nakamura, 2015).

Obama made a distinction between refugees, deemed worthy of asylum, and undocumented immigrants, deemed worthy of deportation. Yet, are the stories of danger, persecution, and exile so very different for Central Americans and Syrians, especially from the perspective of human rights and human dignity?

The 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations defines a *refugee* as a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (Convention and Protocol Related to the Status of Refugees, 1951, 3).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) differentiates between economic migrants, who choose to move to better their economic situation, and refugees, who move to save their lives and their freedom. The UNHCR has explained further the situation of refugees:

They have no protection from their own state—indeed it is often their own government that is threatening to persecute them. If other countries do not let them in, and do not help them once they are in, then they may be condemning them to death—or to an intolerable life in the shadows, without sustenance and without rights. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015)

If people are fleeing their homelands because of persecution, because they have no protection from their own state or, indeed, are persecuted by their own government, such people fall under the preceding definition of *refugee*. Yet, the U.S. government has not defined refugees in this way, for asylum the U.S. is granted most frequently to persons fleeing from a country that is unfriendly to the U.S.

During the Cold War, this usually meant fleeing communist regimes in the Soviet Union, Cuba, Vietnam, and elsewhere (Newland, 1995). After the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, the interpretation of who could be a refugee broadened somewhat yet remained governed by political, not humanitarian, considerations: "Admissions . . . shall be allocated among refugees of special humanitarian concern to the U.S. in accordance with a determination made by the President after appropriate consultation" (Refugee Act of 1980).

For persons fleeing countries that are supported by the U.S., often with weapons and advisors, refugee status has not been an option. Such persons, if they are able to make it to the U.S., are labeled "illegal aliens" and, if not deported, are condemned, in the language of the UNHCR, "to an intolerable life in the shadows, without sustenance and without rights."

In the 1980s, after the passage of the Refugee Act, more than 1 million Central

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Americans from Guatemala and El Salvador fled violent civil wars in their countries and came north to the U.S., seeking asylum as refugees. The Reagan administration, however, denied the human rights violations being perpetrated by the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala and deemed persons fleeing those homelands as "economic migrants" (Gzesh, 2006).

Thirty years later, according to the American Immigration Council, tens of thousands of children and adults fleeing an upsurge of violence in Central America and Mexico continue to be denied asylum because of an ever-narrowing definition of what constitutes credible fear of persecution:

> Despite reports of horrific violence, most Mexican and Central American claims continue to be rejected. Some Mexican journalists and human rights activists have been granted asylum, as have family members of law enforcement and union activists and Central American family members of murdered or tortured persons. But many claims asserted by Central Americans are based on forced gang recruitment, and many claims presented by Mexicans are based on violence, including torture and murder, resulting from resistance to extortion or kidnapping by cartels, military, government officials, and sometimes by a combination of all three. Those claims do not fit neatly within the ever-narrowing definitions established by the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) through its decisions, of political opinion or membership in a particular social group. (American Immigration Council, 2014)

In this article, two co-authors share their immigrant stories of persecution and flight to the U.S. Txerthoj Vang is a refugee from Laos who supported the U.S. as part of the Hmong secret army during the Vietnam era. Mayra Pasayes is an immigrant from El Salvador who fled that country's civil war during the 1980s. Though they each faced a high level of violence in their home country, Txerthoj was granted official refugee status, while Mayra was not and only later obtained residency.

The granting, or denial, of asylum to each would have major impacts on their lives and their perspectives. They each continue to support refugees with or without papers in their work as educators in public schools. Their individual stories mirror those of hundreds of thousands of others who fled Laos and El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s, running from crisis and war, taking arduous journeys, and resettling, with or without official status, in the U.S.

Narrative Inquiry of the Immigration Experience

Txerthoj Vang, a Hmong refugee, and Mayra Pasayes, a Salvadoran immigrant, have come together to share their stories of civil war in their homelands, dangerous journeys into exile, and adjustment to life and work in the U.S. A questionnaire developed and administered by co-author Donald Hones was sent to Vang and Pasayes by email. Although both co-authors addressed the same general questions, questions were made specific to the country of origin as well as some of the life experiences of the coauthors of which Hones was already aware.

Examples of questions asked include the following (the complete questionnaire can be found in the appendix):

> What are some of your earliest memories of growing up? What was the name of your town? How big was it? Is that the only town you lived in your country?
>
> Tell me about your family: your mom, dad, brother, extended family. What are some memories of family that you have from growing up?
>
> When did you first become aware of the war in your community? How did it affect your family and community?

Following email responses to these questions, audiotaped interviews with Vang and Pasayes were conducted to explore issues in more depth. From the written responses to the questionnaire and from the audiotaped interview transcripts, narrative portraits of each of these coauthors have been constructed.

It was important that Vang and Pasayes help in the editing of their portraits to final form. In this process of narrative inquiry, fidelity to their own words has been the goal of the research (Benei, 2010; Clandinin, Davies, Whelan, Huber, & Rose, 2001; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010; Hones, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995), wherein stories of individuals, groups, and communities are central to the interpretation. Through a process of interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 1994) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), important themes are examined that emerge from the portraits of these coauthors.

Leaving Laos: Txerthoj Vang

> I tell you this is the last word for this war.
> This little side war we were the center of.
> —Bryan Thao Worra, "The Last War Poem"

At the local high school in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, 18 students sit around a horseshoe-shaped table. Six are from the Congo, four are from Myanmar, four are from Iraq, and four are from South Korea. Most are refugees who have lived in the United States for at most two years or as little as one month. Some struggle to ask questions in survival English, yet they are pushed to adapt to a highly academic curriculum. Yet this is the English learner (EL) room, their safe space.

American-born teachers work to help them make the transition from lives on the move or in refugee camps to life in an American school. Their greatest ally, however, and the one who pushes them the most, is a fellow refugee. After almost 30 years in the U.S., his hair is now turning from black to gray, but his eyes are clear, and he stands straight as a soldier. He knows exactly what these newcomers are going through.

My name is Txerthoj Vang. My nationality is Hmong. My birth name was Her Vang. I was born on September 15, 1956, in a small house at a small valley called Hav Fijkas, Ban Haithey, Mueang Samnuea, Houaphan Province in Laos. My family members were farmers, and life was very peaceful in the green mountains of our home.

Altogether there were 13 people in my family, but my dad and my adopted mom passed away five years after I had to part from my family. My father had four wives. His first wife was a Lor, and she died childless. His second wife died childless as well. Next, my dad married his third wife,

Txerthoj Vang

Poshoua Lee, my adopted mother. She had no son, but she had five daughters, two who passed away and three who married (two died in Laos and one in the U.S.). She then adopted her first son, Txhiajcawv.

Last, my dad married my mother, Mai Xiong, his fourth wife. When my mother gave birth to me, she gave me to my adopted mother, so I am the second adopted son. My mother had 10 children, three sons and seven daughters. My oldest sister (Vah) and my oldest brother (Char) passed away before I was born. My three younger sisters from my mother died during the Vietnam War because we kept moving a lot and there was no medical treatment. Two younger sisters are married and still living in Laos.

My older sister Yee married Captain Zakhue Lor, and they had seven children. Captain Zakhue served the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the secret war in Laos. He died from chemicals sprayed from the air by the communist Lao government in 1979 in Mueng Phoon Hong, Vientiane Province, Laos.

Next, my sister took her children and moved to Paksan Province and lived there for a short time. Then she escaped across the Mekong to Thailand in November 1982. After that, she took her family to the U.S. Yee became my co-sponsor to come to this country. Now my two older sisters and my older brother are here. They all are on disability, except me. My two younger sisters are living in Laos, and they are married. Eight family members are deceased.

Joining the Secret Army

Shortly after I was born, my family moved to Ban Hoy-An, Hoychian, Louangprabung Province. In 1965, I attended my first school and I learned to read and write the Hmong *pahawh*.[1] The next year the war came to our village of Xam Pak Kham, and my adopted mother, my sister Der, my older brother Chuetong, and I fled to Shee Nyao for a short time. In 1967, we moved from Hoy-An to Ban Phou Chan, and in 1968, we moved to Phou Koom. The war was all around us, and there were few places of safety in those years.

Early in 1969, at the age of 13, I was ordered to serve in the CIA secret army. That same year, my brother Txhiajcawv died in battle. The next year, my brother Xiacher was killed in the battle at Phou Koom. In September 1971, I left my parents at Phou Koom and flew to Long Chieng, General Vang Pao's headquarters, for Laotian schooling (second grade) and also army training. I was 15 years old when I left my parents behind.

Later that year, the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army attacked Long Chieng for the second time, and I fled to Phakay village with my sister's family. In September 1972, I moved from Phakay to Phouhey to continue my schooling there while still carrying out my duties as a soldier. I graduated from Hongnon High School in 1975.I joined the army with the rank of sergeant. After military training at Long Chieng, I earned the rank of sergeant major, and after the operation at Phou Hey, I achieved my final rank of warrant officer.

I served in the U.S. Special Forces under General Vang Pao, Colonel James William (Bill) Lair, and CIA agent Jerry Daniels in Laos during the Vietnam War for six years, from 1969 to 1975, and for three additional years of resistance fighting after the U.S. withdrew from Laos. My oldest brother and my wife's oldest brother were killed in a battle fought in my village. My older brother and I got shot and wounded.

In 1973, a peace agreement between the Royal Lao and the Communist Lao was signed in Paris to provide for a cease-fire in Laos. American troops and Vietnamese troops would withdraw from Laos and let the Royal Lao and Communist Lao get together to form their own government, but the Pathet Lao communists and North Vietnamese violated the cease-fire agreement by seizing power in 1975.

When the Pathet Lao came to power in Laos, it led to persecution and execution of the Hmong who served the Americans during the war in Laos. May 8 to 14, 1975, were the days that tears fell, foretelling shadows of dread and fear for the Hmong. All things came to a disappointed and hopeless end. At noon on May 14, 1975, General Vang left in the last C-130 airplane with other Hmong leaders and some of their people and departed Long Chieng airport, bound for Thailand. A Pathet Lao battalion arrived the following day to take control of Long Chieng.

A few weeks later, Pathet Lao soldiers came over to my village, Phou Hey, and started to investigate the Hmong people who worked alongside the CIA and who should go to the "seminar" camp. This caused us to leave our homes, farms, and animals and flee into the jungle. Thousands of Hmong people were moving from one village to the next, seeking shelter.

When I got to another village, the people in that village said, "Oh, no! All these people will come to share our food." When we got there, I said, "We are starving! Our kids have had no food for many days and they will die, can you share with us just a little and we will pay you? Please." "No," they responded, "we just have enough for us, you can go to another village." "I don't think you take your rice with you when you leave your village!" I said.

"We are running away like you guys!" they said. Then we moved forward to another village. When we got there, I asked the same thing, and they were so nice to share their food with us. "We are sure that we may follow you and we will share our food equally with you and then we can go together," they said. Three days later, the Pathet Lao came to shoot the people in the first village and some were killed, and the rest escaped and followed us without any food.

Refugee

In 1978, the Lao government used airborne chemicals to spray Hmong people in their villages. My sister's husband died from chemical poisoning. We ran out of weapons, supplies, food, clothing, and medicine, so my brother, his wife, and I decided to seek refuge in Thailand. Finally, my brother Chuetong, his wife, and I decided to leave my sister Yee Vang's family at Mueang Ow and join a huge group that would try to make it to Thailand.

We took nine days walking and guided by my compass through the jungle to the Mekong River. On the first day, we caught up with my cousin Nyia Vah's family and three other families at Nam Sang. Nyia Vah asked us to take his older son Porze with us to Thailand. On the second day, we caught up to my wife's group at Phou Nasai. On the third day, I met my wife, and on day four, we rested at Nam Lerk with my wife's family.

On the fifth day, we got lost for a while and separated from my wife's group. On the sixth day, we slept in a cave because of the danger of wild elephants. On the seventh day, we came across Chao Xiong's group of about 50 people, we slept in the rain, and I ate termite-flies for food. On the eighth day, we slept close to a Lao temple, and we cut bamboo to make bundles to help us swim across the Mekong River. On the ninth day, we went into the water in the evening and swam across the Mekong River to Thailand.

I had already met my future wife, Kia. In 1977, we left each other in different areas because we were not married yet, so we each had to go with our own families. Eleven months later, we came across each other again for only four days in the jungle. I had decided to go to Thailand with my brother, but Kia had to stay with her family. The night before I left her, I said, "Kia!

I know you cannot go with me because we are not married, but I hope one day you might follow me to Thailand." Kia said, "I don't know, but please remember me."

In Hmong culture, if we are not married, we cannot hold hands or talk face-to-face, so when I left her, I looked in her eyes and I said in my heart "we will never see each other again." I left her in the jungle and I was on my way to Thailand. Fortunately, about two months later, Kia showed up at Nong Khai Camp where I was living. That made me so happy.

After five months in Nong Khai Camp, we moved into Camp Ban Vinai. We were to live there for nine years. After our first year at Ban Vinai, Kia and I decided to get married in May 1979. Our eldest daughter Hlee and our sons Chan and Leng were born in the camp. For four years I was a team leader on an effort to find out about American soldiers missing in action (MIA). I interviewed arriving refugees who might have information about American MIAs in Laos.

Arrival in the U.S.

For nine years we lived within the barbed wire of Ban Vinai. I knew that we would never have a chance to go back to meet with my parents again. Therefore, on March 13, 1987, I decided to take my family and we were transferred to Phanat Nikom for American culture orientation. We were there five months, then at Chonburi transit center for two days. I was chosen to be the group leader and led my group from Chonburi to Don Mueang International Airport, Bangkok, on August 27, 1987, and after 1 day at the airport, we flew to Tokyo, Japan, and then to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on August 29, 1987.

When we got to Seattle, my group scattered, and I didn't know where they were. Fortunately, a Hmong refugee staff took my family to stay overnight in a hotel in Seattle. The next day, we flew to O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, and finally we flew to our destination, Whitman Airport in Oshkosh. Our sponsors Dorothy and Mike Stratz, my sister Yee with her family, my sister Der and her husband, Nhiavang Lor with her family, plus many other relatives came to welcome our family. This was the end of my refugee journey.

I was apart from my family in Laos from the age of 14 until the age of 49. I very much regret that I never had a chance to say good-bye to my dad, my adopted mom, and my younger sister who passed away in Laos.

I am proud to have served on the side of the U.S. I am fortunate to be here and begin a new life where there is freedom and opportunity for me to grow and use my abilities to better myself and contribute to the life of our communities. I continue living in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I have worked with refugee and immigrant students in the public schools since 1997. I am vice president of the Wisconsin Lao Veterans of America. I also teach Hmong language and literacy at the university. I have seven people in my immediate family, including my wife, two daughters, three sons, and myself. We all are American citizens now.

In today's society, teenagers like to be alone and forget about their culture. Some of their parents may not know how to teach them to respect family and culture, and these young people may feel lost. Therefore, in our family, we get together with the kids and talk with them at least once a month about our culture, our future, what we have done, and what we want for the future and how we will catch up in this technological society.

I want to be a Hmong language teacher and Hmong culture specialist so that I can help Hmong people and others to understand what it means to be Hmong. I will encourage Hmong not to live in isolation but to cooperate with others, to be flexible, and be good citizens for the country in which we are living.

Out of El Salvador: Mayra Pasayes

> And then comes the killing of the tribes. This is how they died: when there was just one person out walking, or just two out walking, it wasn't obvious when they took them away . . ." "A jaguar has been eating," was all that was said, because the tracks were like a jaguar's tracks when they did their deed. They did not reveal themselves. Many people were abducted.
>
> —*The Popol Vuh*

I met Mayra Pasayes at a fund-raiser for Latino students headed for college and got to know her in her work as a counselor and liaison between Latino students, the Appleton high schools, and the technical college. When I first came back from doing humanitarian relief on the Arizona border with Mexico, Mayra invited me to speak to a few students about it.

More than 40 showed up, in the middle of a school day, and their questions and comments made it clear to me that many had entered the U.S. on foot through the Sonora Desert. She has spoken passionately to my classes about the military and gang violence in her home country of El Salvador, yet her joy of life and her big smile came shining through.

I am from a small town or *colonia* called Solorzano. The population was very small, perhaps 500 people or fewer. Everyone knew everyone else; if someone was sick or if a person was doing something bad, the *colonia* would also know about it. I remember that when we moved there in 1980, my dad was very happy that he had purchased a lot to build his family a home.

We had moved three times since I was born. This was the first time that my dad saw the possibility to create a home for us, the way he had always envisioned. After work, he would work on building his masterpiece (our home), and Mom used to take us to visit. In the beginning, the place was full of coffee plants, an avocado, lime, and mango tree.

Five years earlier, my grandparents had purchased a similar lot closer to the main road but in the same block. So while dad worked at the house, my mom would bring us to Grandma's house. Their home was a huge room made of lamina material, no electricity at first, but very airy so we did not need fans. There were no divisions among rooms; everything was in one room together. There was a living room made of concrete material, but the rest of the place looked more like a big barn. There was just a dirt floor.

Every morning, my cousins swept the place and put water to keep the dust on the

Mayra Pasayes

floor down. Then outside the house, they had a dining room table for 10, and a huge table made of cement, sand, and hay to do the cooking. This would hold the big pots and the *comal* where my grandma made the tortillas. There was also a *lavadero* where my grandma washed clothes for the army; a small space attached was designed to take showers and another to do the dishes. The backyard was filled with coffee plants, guava, avocado, lime, *pepeto*, and mango trees, but also peppers all kinds, squash, and other vegetables.

I loved to visit their home as it was full of the country life that I enjoy. The house did not have electricity at that time, so there was no refrigerator or TV until later days. My grandpa made these hanging containers so grandma could preserve food by hanging it from the ceiling. Sometimes the food was so high that we had to climb on the table (when no one was looking) to take food, sometimes a piece of meat or chicken that was left over. The family did not have access to beef that often, but when it was available, it was definitely a feast.

The environment inside of the house was very peaceful. Grandpa turned on the radio as soon he got up in the morning to get ready to go to work. Then, the radio would stay on all day. I remember listening to the radio, but it was usually Christian music. Once in a while when Grandma was gone, my cousins used to flip to the regular music stations.

As a kid, our life was about playing outside and getting dirty, as my cousins and I would go and play with the rest of the kids from the *colonia*. If our grandparents would give us permission, we used to go to the only place that had a television and we would watch it for 30 minutes only, because the television used to overheat very quickly. We loved to climb the *jocote* trees, even if there was no fruit. The leaves of the tree were kind of sour, and we used to cut, wash, and mix them with lime juice and salt and drink it. Sometimes we would add ice when it was available.

My mom loved the house that Dad was building. The only problem was that there was a vacant lot next to us that people used to use as a shortcut to another street, and she was not used to having people coming and going right outside. She was always afraid at night because there were nights that my dad had to work late or do an overnight shift and we stayed alone.

My dad had three jobs as far as I remember, but he also used to do side jobs at home. He drove a city truck early in the morning picking up trash from different communities, and then he used to come home, take a shower, and get dressed to go to his second job as an ambulance driver for the local private hospital. Then he volunteered at the Red Cross, also driving an ambulance. He was certified as a mountain rescuer and a lifeguard. At night, when he was home, after we went to bed, he did accounting for a small business and/ or did small appliance repairs for the neighbors.

My dad was what the locals call *siete oficios catorce necesidades*, "seven jobs for 14 needs." One time, Dad came home talking about a new job as a lifeguard at the beach every Saturday. I was so happy because I love the beach and now we would go with him to work. The best memories of spending time with Dad were the ones when we took this trip every weekend to the beach. Since he drove a truck, he used to pack all the kids from the *colonia* plus my cousins, Mom, and us. Mom would pack a lunch while he packed the truck; the kids from the neighborhood got ready with their parents to come along, too.

My dad's truck was small, but since in our country everyone travels standing up in the back of the pickup, there was lots of room for anyone wanting to come. We would leave around 6:00 A.M. and come home at dawn. I learned to have a respect for the ocean. My dad used to take us to the *reventazon de olas*, the place where the waves break, and he used to tell us either you jump them or swim under. I always preferred to jump them, since there was always one after another. In one of those lessons, he used to tell us that the ocean was very dangerous and that every time we go in, we have to be aware of what is happening around. He said not to go in drunk, because many people had died in that way.

Civil War

In 1979, I started to notice that Dad was spending less time at home. Mom told us that he was saving lives because there were many people hurt. I remember the first time that I felt the pressure of the war. We went to visit my dad's father in our neighborhood. Dad told Mom to go inside of Grandpa's house because there was trouble. Very close by, there was an army station, and that day, it was being taken by the guerrillas. There were shootings everywhere, people running to find shelter, some running to find their children, calling them by name. Ambulance sirens were all around. People were screaming, dying, and going insane when they could not find their children or because they would find them dead. Grandpa got us inside his house.

I did not want my dad to go, but his duty was to help with the ambulance. We could not leave the town because it was being taken by the army: Roads were closed, so the only way out was if you were taken by ambulance, hurt or dead. We were so scared, and we wanted to go home, so Dad hid us inside the ambulance and took us off like there was someone hurt inside.

I was so happy when we got home, but Dad had to go back to help people. I remember that night so vividly. I slept in my mom's arms next to my little brother. Things got worse after that. The military would come to the schools to recruit students. They did not ask for permission to take you. They would select a group of boys, grab them, and take them to the military station. Days later, we would see them with guns patrolling the streets. There was not parent consent, no questions asked, just pure evil. On occasion, the guerrillas would also come to school to do the same thing, pick boys to fight. We would go home, tell their families that their son was taken by someone but we could not know which side it was because they always came in army clothes.

One day in the middle of April, we got a visitor, a cousin from the U.S., who came to get his legal documentation in order. Dad was supposed to take him to the immigration center the following week. So on April 29, 1981, my dad started his daily routine. He got up early, cut some avocados from the tree, took a shower, said good-bye to my mom, and gave us a kiss because we were still sleeping. He went to work to pick up his check and buy some stuff that he needed for a trip that we were taking that day. For the first time in a while, he had taken time off from work during the week to help his nephew with the documentation required to obtain his residency in the U.S.

Dad never came home. Around 9:00 in the morning, some officials from the Red Cross came to tell mom that she was needed to identify his body, which was lying in the middle of a main road. I could not believe the impact that it caused to hear the news. I begged my mom to take me with her, so I could see for myself that my dad was really dead. My mom did not want to take me, but I grabbed her arm so hard that she didn't have a choice.

We arrived at the scene and I remember my mom recognized his shirt. She did not want to get close, so she moved her head admitting that yes, indeed, that was her husband lying in the middle of a lagoon of blood. She knew it because she was the

one who advised him to wear the clothes that he was wearing; my mom always said that my dad could not combine his clothes, so she took it upon herself to arrange his clothing so that he matched. So that morning, while Dad was in the shower, she had taken the outfit out and laid it on the bed with his socks, shoes, and belt.

I did not have the same reaction, I had to see the body to believe, so I got close and there he was, my hero, dead. Inside his truck, there was another passenger, a woman. The next day the newspaper said that she was his lover and that it was a love triangle. The woman's husband was in the military, so they assumed that he sent out people to kill my dad. She was a nurse at the hospital where he worked.

There were reports by people that said that they had seen when he was killed. The woman hid in the truck but she was shot there, while my dad was left dying on the street. His body was picked up right after that and taken to the Red Cross where he was going to be shown. Mom did not want to do it, she was in shock; but the arrangements had to be made since the funeral was going to take place that night.

That night was the worse night of my life. My mom was trying to be strong, but she was lost somehow. People kept asking questions, but she only moved her head yes or no. She did not know what to say or do. Everything was slipping away. Family was calling from the U.S. wanting to know what had happened. I remember that I kept looking at the casket, and seeing my dad there was very painful. He had a bullet that had entered through his left side of the face by his chin, but I know that the one that killed him was the one to his heart.

He used to carry many forms of identification in his left shirt pocket, and when the Red Cross gave Mom his belongings, the ones that he carried in his left pocket had a bullet mark on them. The next day, 20 ambulances were at the front of his funeral procession, sirens wailing all the way to the cemetery. Mom could not handle it, and she fainted. Someone took care of my brother, and one of my cousins was with me because I wanted to go with Dad. I did not want to let him go. I remember that I attempted to throw myself into the ground where the casket was being buried. Mom was taken in an ambulance so she did not get to pay her last respects to Dad.

Something else happened on the day of the funeral. There were two other girls there saying that he was their dad, too. So I was not the only girl or the oldest in the family. The oldest one of my sisters was 10 years older than me. I was so angry to find that out, but it was more painful to know that I had lived all this time without knowing about them.

After the funeral, we came back to an empty house. Everything was happening too fast. I became very depressed, and all I wanted to do was sleep. I used to pray to God to let me talk to my dad in my sleep, but he never came. He used to come to play with my brother at night; he was only four, and he would laugh and laugh and say, "No, Daddy, that tickles. Stop it, stop it!" I was always angry because his spirit could play with my brother but did not want anything to do with me.

Since Mom was a homemaker, and we did not have an income now, Mom had to find a job. The only thing that she knew was how to run a store, so with the little money that the insurance gave mom, she purchased some counters, and she started to sell stuff at home. It was a very small store. The customers were people who came to purchase an egg, a piece of cheese, 10 cents of gas to start a fire, a small bag of laundry detergent, or a pencil. However, with this small amount of money, Mom served us food every day.

I continued to go to school, but the toll of dead people kept growing. While walking, I would encounter dead bodies, and sometimes parts of a body: a leg, an arm, a head. There were times that you would find entire families dead in their homes. Every night, my family used to sleep between four walls just in case there was a shooting. During the night we would hear people screaming, being chopped alive or killed on the spot. Some people used to help when it was known that there was a dead body or family in need. We had made some cans for people to donate money so the bodies could be buried.

Mom always said that I was very smart, and every year since I started school, I received a prize for having some of the highest grades in the classroom. However, when Dad died, my studies went to hell. I had just started sixth grade and things were not going well at all. All year I struggled with school. Mom was willing to tell the teachers that I should stay behind due to the grades, but my teacher was so confident that I could pull it through. My teacher passed me to seventh grade because she knew that I was capable of doing the work but, because of the tragedy, it was going to take a while to get back on track.

Before I started seventh grade, my mom took me to a friend who is a psychologist to do some testing. Mom wanted to know if I was going to be OK starting seventh grade or if I should go back to sixth. Testing came back normal, and I enrolled in seventh grade. It was a nightmare! I did not want to go back to school, but I also did not want to stay home. Mom told me to try my best, and that was what I did.

There were days that the streets were closed, that the schools were also closed or taken by the guerrillas or the army, and buses burned or destroyed by the opposing sides. Mom spoke with one of my aunts in California to see if she could sponsor me to attend private school. Mom's intention was for me to continue my education since she only went to school for four or five years.

At that time, my brother was doing really well at school too, so the pressure was on me to do better since he was the one getting the rewards for being the best in the class. My brother started to learn how to make shoes at the age of eight. Mom asked a couple of friends to take him under their wing so that they could teach him things that Mom could not. He was really good about learning new things and always wanting to learn more.

Many times, my girlfriends would come and spend time at home with me. Some of those times they slept over, and we used to do homework together or study for a test. There were times that we needed to drop them back at their homes, but since we did not have a car, a group of my mom's friends used to walk them back safe to their homes. One particular night, one of them came to drop off some stuff that I needed for school the next day. She stayed for dinner and then asked if we could drop her off. I asked Mom, and she told me to ask her friends if they would be able to go with us. Some of them were not home yet and some of them were really busy. So my mom and I decided to walk her home ourselves.

The walk was approximately 20 minutes along some dark paths, but it was the only way to be connected to the main road. I remember Mom asked what time it was because she wanted to be back in time for her soap opera. I told her that it was 7:20 P.M. So she said, "Let's go so we are not out too late at night." We dropped my friend off at her house, and on the way back, we decided to take a shortcut because it was getting dark.

There was a small path through a coffee farm that the same community had made so people did not have to walk far. Mom told me, "Look, there is a guy walking the path, maybe if we hurry up we can catch up with him, so we do not have to walk it alone." We followed the guy, but

it turned out that he lived in one of the houses right at the beginning of the path. I asked, "What are we going to do now?" She said, "We are already here, let's pray to God to protect us so we can be home soon."

We started to walk together—we were holding each other close—and then we heard a noise, like someone had slipped down to the ground between the trees. We got really scared when a man appeared, took out a gun, and said, "I was waiting for you." He put the gun to my forehead. My mom told me to just listen and do what he told us to do. He threw my mom on the ground and he told her to stay there for now, then he told me to tie her to the tree facing north. Later he did the same to me facing south.

He told us that he had a series of questions that we needed to answer the same way. If we disagreed, he was going to kill us right there. Sometime later, he told us to wait for a signal. If he heard a whistle, we were to continue, but if we heard a shot, then he was going to kill us. We started to walk. Mom told me to go ahead of her so that the gun was pointed to her. She said, "Keep praying, God was protecting us and that it was not going to be the end for us, He had better plans for us."

With that in my head, we continued to walk. He told us to sit again, and Mom told him that she was thirsty and tired. His answer was that if she wanted, he could put her out her misery. He began to hit her really bad, and I could not do anything about it. I started to cry silently, asking for forgiveness because I thought that it was going to be the end for us.

After he finished with my mom, he came to me, placed his gun between my legs, and started to touch me. I did not want him to touch me, so he hit me really hard with his gun, and I did not know what happened next. He told us to keep walking; that my mom was hurt, but we were OK. I was in a lot of pain mainly because I was raped by him at gunpoint.

Finally, he let us go. Mom could hardly walk, but she was happy that we would make it home. He told us that if we mentioned anything to anyone about what had happened, he knew exactly where we slept and next time he was not going to have any compassion. He also told us that it was better for my brother not to mention anything to anyone either.

We got home around four or five in the morning. Grandpa was waiting for us. I remember throwing myself in bed crying, but Grandpa made me stand up to pray thanking God that we had made it home. A couple of days later, my friend came to visit me asking why I had not been to school and that I was to bring the homework the next day. I could not tell anyone what had happened that night, but Mom and I had nightmares. I was so scared, but Mom made me do my daily routine, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. The only thing that she did that same night was to call my aunt in California to ask for help to get me to the U.S. because I was in danger. We could not say too much because we did not know if the lines were tapped.

Journey to the U.S.

My mom and I celebrated when I got my next period, as she was worried that I was going to be pregnant. My relatives in California collected money to help pay for my trip and sent it to my mom. Five months later, it was my turn to leave my country and my family. I would never forget the day that I left. My mom was still at home taking care of a customer in the store. I told her that I was going to be back. I gave her the biggest hug that I could at that time. I wanted to cry and not to let go, but I had to leave.

I was told how to dress, what to bring, and what house to meet at for the journey. There were 21 people in the group. I was acquainted with one woman who was traveling with her child. We made our first payment to the coyotes, and they gave some of it back to us in *quetzales* for Guatemala, *pesos* for Mexico, and dollars for the U.S. We left by bus, crossed Guatemala as if we were tourists, and then arrived at the Mexican border. We were taken to a hotel in Mexico and held there while the coyotes "negotiated" with the local authorities. We were told to pool together all of our remaining money so that our group would be allowed to continue. Everyone reached into his or her socks, shoes, and all of the hiding places, and we made a pile of money. The Mexican official looked at it and said it was enough.

From there, our bus went to Mexico City, and we were kept in a hotel near Plaza Garibaldi for 15 days while the coyotes contacted our families to ask for more money. Here we were joined by many more people traveling north. We would go out at times to explore the plaza in small groups and listen to the mariachi music. The coyotes had arranged for a commercial flight to take us to Tijuana, but I was one of the few who did not make it on.

Instead, I traveled overland to Tijuana. Fortunately, one of my aunts from California met me there, as her husband's family had some relatives living there. I stayed in Tijuana for one month. I watched as the group I was traveling with was loaded into the back of a semi trailer, sitting with legs open, one person in front of another. I think that they made it across, but I also remember the trucks full of bodies that have been found abandoned in the desert.

I was able to walk across the border, pretending to be the daughter of another family. I was taught how to talk like a Mexican and the local geography I should know when they asked me for my address. The lady I was crossing with said, "Do what I do. If they stop you, pretend you don't know me. I will come back for you." When I got to the customs official, he asked me where I was going. I looked across into San Ysidrio and saw a restaurant.

"I am going to the Burger King," I replied. "What are you going to get there?" "A cheeseburger." "With fries?" "Yes." He smiled, waved me through, and said, "Bring me back a medium order of fries, too."

I arrived in California in May 1989, after being on the road for a few months. I missed my mom so much, and I cried every time I talked to her. The phone calls kept getting longer and longer. I wanted to go home, but knowing how bad it was at home, I kept telling myself that it was going to get better.

I lived with relatives in the Los Angeles area for a while, moving around because the places were small. Sometimes I slept in the bathtub, sometimes on the floor. When it was time to enroll in high school, I moved in with an uncle in North Hollywood, away from the gangs in other schools. While I finished school, I also had an active asylum application, but while that was being processed, I would report every six months to extend my temporary visa. We had to carry our documents all of the time because the INS could stop us in the street and demand to see them.

I moved to Phoenix, Arizona, after high school and stayed with a friend for a while, then on my own. I barely had money for a small apartment and little for food. I was able to eat popcorn at my job at a gas station. I met my ex-husband and eventually agreed to go out with him. When his grandmother got sick, he wanted to return to Wisconsin to help take care of her and asked me if I would like to come with him. I agreed, we were married, and I soon landed in Appleton, Wisconsin. His grandmother helped sponsor me, and I became a permanent resident.

I got a job as a bank teller, and soon

long lines of Spanish speakers were waiting for me to cash their checks. Soon, they were asking for help in other areas. I realized that I wanted to do more than cash checks. I was ready to help the community. After a job as a bilingual interpreter for the Green Bay schools, a job opened up as liaison to the Latino community, working half-time at the Appleton high schools and half-time at Fox Valley Technical College

My boss recently asked me what I like best about my job. I told him that it was seeing young people walk across that stage and get their diplomas and degrees. I have struggled very hard to get to where I am today, and I encourage the students I meet to never give up, to keep their dreams alive. I did it. So can they. I still have nightmares, posttraumatic stress, and anxieties. It is hard to go back and remember those times I have lived through. But I take each day as it comes, with gratitude.

Themes in the Narratives

There are many similarities in the exile experiences of Txerthoj Vang and Mayra Pasayes. Each remembers fondly the beautiful countryside and the connection to family and community in his or her homeland of Laos and El Salvador. For Txerthoj, this was a farming community in the steep hills of Laos, his many siblings, and the role played by not just his mother but his adopted mother, both of whom were married to his father. For Mayra, this was a *colonia* on the edge of the capital, a place where everyone knew each other and where, at her grandparents' house, "the backyard was filled with coffee plants, guava, avocado, lime, *pepeto*, and mango trees, but also peppers all kinds, squash, and other vegetables."

War entered the lives of Txerthoj and Mayra while they were still young. Txerthoj writes of a constant moving from village to village, seeking refuge, and losing family members along the way because "we kept moving a lot and there was no medical treatment." His older brothers fought, and some died, as soldiers in a secret army raised by the American CIA, and at the age of 13, Txerthoj was asked to become a soldier himself.

Mayra remembers how her father was always working as an ambulance driver as the civil war escalated in El Salvador, the bodies in the streets, and how the army would arrive at school, "select a group of boys, grab them, and take them to the military station. Days later, we would see them with guns patrolling the streets." Like the Hmong secret army, the Salvadoran military, trained by the U.S., had the habit of recruiting child soldiers.

Violence perpetrated by both individuals and governments led Txerthoj and Mayra to leave behind their loved ones and make a journey that would eventually lead them to the U.S. Txerthoj describes the desperation of Hmong communities when the Americans and the Hmong military leadership headed by Vang Pao left Laos and the purges carried out by the Pathet Lao regime against America's Hmong allies: "Thousands of Hmong people were moving from one village to the next, seeking shelter."

Within a few years, the Hmong people still resisting in the mountains were being bombarded by yellow rain, chemicals dropped by government planes on their villages, and Txerthoj decided to make the journey through the forests and across the river into Thailand. Mayra witnessed the bombings and shootings at night, saw the corpses in the street and her classmates forcibly recruited. At a very personal level, she experienced the murder of her father, an ambulance driver, and the sexual assault on herself and her mother as they were walking home one night. The perpetrator "told us that if we mentioned anything to anyone about what had happened, he knew exactly where we slept and next time he was not going to have any compassion."

Where the stories of Txerthoj and Mayra differ the most is in their route to the U.S. Txerthoj reached a refugee camp in Thailand, continued to work to support the Americans shot down and MIA, and eventually gained asylum in the U.S. with his family. Like many fellow Salvadorans, Mayra made a long, overland journey by bus and on foot to reach the U.S. without official asylum. Yet, as can be seen by her account, her life was in danger, as were the lives of hundreds of thousands of other Salvadorans, from their own government that was supported by the U.S., yet a long effort was required to get her asylum application considered.

Refugees With or Without Papers

If our era had a name, it could be the "Time of the Refugee." Millions of men, women, and children are displaced in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Despite opposition in Congress, Barack Obama as U.S. president at least recognized the reality and desperation of the millions fleeing civil wars in the Congo, Iraq, Syria, Burma, and elsewhere.

What has not been officially recognized is the right to asylum for the hundreds of thousands fleeing the organized violence of drug cartels and criminal gangs in Latin America. This is particularly troublesome in that the roots of the gangs, such as the Mara Salvatruchas in El Salvador, can be traced back to the streets of Los Angeles and other U.S. cities.

A previous generation of Central Americans arrived, traumatized by civil war, hungry and desperate, and some of their children took to gang life. Unwanted in either country, these gangs have flourished, developed, and soon began to hold sway over schools and neighborhoods in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Arana (2005) has reported how this has shaken the lives of citizens in these countries:

> With the U.S. preoccupied elsewhere, the gangs have grown in power and numbers; today, local officials estimate their size at 70,000–100,000 members. The *marabuntas*, or *maras*, as they are known (after a deadly species of local ants), now pose the most serious challenge to peace in the region since the end of Central America's civil wars.

Now it is the children from schools, neighborhoods, and communities controlled by gangs who are fleeing north, seeking asylum from organized violence (Nazario, 2014).The U.S. trained the soldiers who committed some of the worst atrocities in the Central American civil wars of the 1980s. Many of our urban neighborhoods have proven as dangerous for immigrants as the countries that they have left behind.

Rather than dealing with gangs here, we have often exported the problems back to the very countries in which we have previously supported dictators and their death squads. The tragic irony for Central Americans fleeing violence is all too apparent: Just as in Laos, in Syria, and elsewhere, we have had a hand in creating a refugee crisis.

It is time that we take responsibility, grant asylum to those who have fled to our land for shelter from the storm, and seek ways to integrate traumatized children and adults more fully into our society.

Note

[1] The *pahawh* was a Hmong written language developed by Shong Lue, whom some considered a prophet. He attracted many followers in Vietnam and Laos, was persecuted by

both sides in the war, and was murdered. His followers continued to spread the *pahawh* and other beliefs and led the Chao Fa resistance after the departure of the Americans in 1975 (Quincy, 2000; Vang, Yang, & Smalley, 1990).

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Appendix:
Questionnaires for Mayra Pasayes and Txerthoj Vang

For Mayra Pasayes

What are some of your earliest memories of growing up in El Salvador? What was the name of your town? How big was it? Is that the only town you lived in in El Salvador?

Tell me about your family: your mom, dad, brother, extended family. What are some memories of family that you have from growing up?

When did you first become aware of the civil war in El Salvador? How did it affect your family and community?

Why did you decide to leave El Salvador? Can you explain?

Appendix:
Questionnaires for Mayra Pasayes and Txerthoj Vang
(continued)

How did you leave El Salvador? Can you explain?

What was your status when you arrived in the United States (visa?)? What was it like for you when you first came? What surprised you the most? What was most difficult for you? Did you come directly to Wisconsin?

What was the process for you to become a citizen in the United States? How long did it take?

Can you describe your work in the public schools and at Fox Valley Tech? What draws you to this work with immigrant young people? How has this work impacted your life?

In thinking about having official status in a country, how has the lack of documentation (e.g., legal residency) shaped the lives of the students and community members that you have known?

What changes would you recommend for U.S. immigration policy, especially for people coming from Latin America?

For Txerthoj Vang

What are some of your earliest memories of growing up in Laos? What was the name of your village? How big was it? Is that the only place you lived in in Laos?

Tell me about your family: your mom, dad, brothers, sisters, extended family. What are some memories of family that you have from growing up?

When did you first become aware of the “secret” war inside Laos? How did it affect your family and community?

How did you first become a soldier in the secret army? How old were you? How were you trained? What were your duties?

What were the most difficult moments for you as a soldier?

What happened in Laos after the Americans left the war (after 1975)? Why did you continue to fight? Can you tell something of your time with the resistance (Chao Fa?)?

Why did you decide to leave Laos? Can you explain?

How did you leave Laos? Can you explain?

Can you describe your time in the refugee camp? Why did you stay there so long? At what point did you decide to go to the United States?

What was your status when you arrived in the United States (visa?)? What support did you receive as a refugee? What was it like for you when you first came? What surprised you the most? What was most difficult for you?

What was the process for you to become a citizen in the United States? How long did it take?

Can you describe your work in the public schools of Oshkosh? What draws you to this work with immigrant young people? How has this work impacted your life?

In thinking about having official status in a country, how has refugee status and U.S. residency shaped the lives of the students and community members that you have known?

What changes would you recommend for U.S. immigration policy, especially for all people who are fleeing war and persecution? Should the United States accept more refugees?