

White Saviorism & American Imperialism in Vietnam w/ Thanh Pham's Oral History
Curriculum-Thinking "Behind" the Lesson
 Constructed by Rob Holland

Note: This lesson was drafted with thoughtful consideration of these ["curriculum-thinking" prompts](#)

Step 1: Reflect on the role oral histories play in ethnic studies.	
<i>Why should they be utilized and examined in a classroom?</i>	● Part of Ethnic Studies is a focus on multiple ways of knowing. Through stories told from community perspectives, students are introduced to different perspectives, modes, and forms of knowledge production that are not privileged in Western educational systems. ● Hearing personal tales allows students to connect and relate to an experience. ● Oral histories can engage and open discussion in a way that direct instruction cannot.
<i>What makes an oral history an ethnic studies-specific oral history?</i>	● A focus on issues of race or ethnicity ● Depth in an area of focus for the discipline (e.g. community, resistance, movement, transformation) ● A focus on American history or power structures that uphold and sustain whiteness/white supremacy throughout US history.
<i>What is their power?</i>	● To open up students to worlds beyond their own. ● To consider an experience different than one's own. ● To relate or find comfort in an experience similar to one's own ● To find power in an experience similar to one's own ● To inspire
<i>Why is it important to hear the actual voice of the storyteller?</i>	● Storytelling is about the message and the medium. One's voice is a part of the story. ● For above reasons as well (to relate, empathize, inspire, etc.)

Step 2: Write down the relevant characteristics/ assets of the young people you are teaching and the communities from which they derive.

The young people I teach go to a mid-sized high school (~1500 students) in the unincorporated community of Spring Valley, just southeast of San Diego. The majority of students have working class parents, and many have real world work experience, some with parents (generally in industries such as auto mechanics, painting, and construction) and others at entry-level food service positions. Many begin working as soon as they turn 15 ½. A large portion of my students' parents are immigrants from countries including Mexico, Guatemala, the Philippines, Haiti, Syria, and Afghanistan. Many of the SWANA students are immigrants themselves. The school is ~70% Latino/a/x, ~10% Black, ~5% Asian, and ~15% white (including SWANA students). Most have lived in heavily Latino/a/x communities for much of their lives. However, San Diego's modern history is tied closely with the United States' white-centered military-industrial complex. As such, the students in this area are well aware of the United States' imperialist past and present.

How might this be relevant in helping you make oral history selections ?

I would like to choose both oral histories that empower students to recognize their assets and oral histories that expose them to new experiences. I would like to highlight the linkages between US militarism, displacement, and migration that students have personal connections with.

Think about the importance of students connecting with the lesson. (When you go to create the lesson in Step 8, you will come back to this).

Students will not store information long-term unless it sparks something inside them. Learning really only happens when you want to learn. Teaching ethnic studies to 9th graders is an exercise in engaging students to connect with high-level material at a deep level. In my experience, students are primed to feel connected to Ethnic Studies lessons. It is relevant and exciting coursework, and students have shown me their willingness to engage. However, it is also critical work that requires students to consider history and themselves in potentially new ways. This level of thinking requires students to be active participants in their learning. They will only ask questions and critique systems when the questions pop into their head organically. This cannot be done with regurgitation or lecture-style classrooms.

Step 3: Identify Ethnic Studies Oral History Excerpt(s) with which you and your students will work. ([ROHP website](#))

Interviewee: Thanh Pham

EXCERPT #1

Interviewer: Do you have any stories about your adopted siblings that you would want to discuss?

Pham: Oh, there are many. [Laughs] But, I think the most experience and memorable thing was when they came and visit me in the hospital, when I first arrived in the U.S. Before I was adopted into the family.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about that story?

Pham: Well, the two brothers, the two twin brothers, Tom and Steve, they were in high school.

Early years of their high school. And, one afternoon they came and visit – visit me in the hospital. And I hated them. [Laughs] I hated everybody. It was a terrible time of my life. I don't trust anybody. All that because, you know, the war. U.S. soldiers was destroying Viet Nam. U.S. government was destroying Viet Nam. With their so-called, the Viet Nam War policy. [Light laugh] Yeah. But, you know, after I was adopted – wasn't really adopted, they were my guardianship. I was never officially adopted. So, after they brought me home, I had a rough time accepting their kindness and love, at first. But then...we slowly gained that trust. I gained that trust, from them. And, became the fifth child of the family, and they loved me and took good care of me. Yes.

EXCERPT #2

Interviewer: How would you say the war affected your family and community?

Pham: It affects a lot. War displace people, it brings bad memories to people who lose – lost their family members, and the communities been uprooted. Destroyed. [Pause]. Yea. Friends and families and immediate families and extended families and communities, all displaced [at the time of war?] I was – the village I was living in was many times bombed and attacked, and at times was uprooted and relocated into all those, names that they created, those camps, in order to deprive the enemies of their supporters. Those camps were called strategic hamlets, in the English language. In the Vietnamese it called Ap Tan Sinh or Ap Chien Luoc . Basically it's concentrations of people into – in to barbed wires. Yeah.

Interviewer: What was a – or like, as much as you can describe, what was a daily day like? Like an average day like during that time?

Pham: Up until the time I was wounded, life was like, you know because we were rice farmers, so we spent most of the time in the fields, tending to our animals and our fields. Planting rice, potatoes. Which was later, had a hard time because of the constant raids from the U.S. and their allied forces. And so, food was not...something that was, what they call, abundant, because we couldn't produce that.

(You may want to start with this): Which Ethnic Studies knowledge/concepts will be the focus of this lesson segment and why?

- Cultural assimilation
- US imperialism
- White Savior Complex

I think this excerpt provides an access point for students to consider how US imperialism and an American-centered white savior complex abroad contributes to assimilation domestically. How does US imperialism (both military and cultural) force people to conform to US standards abroad and at home?

How will students connect with the significance of ethnic studies oral histories for the knowledge/concepts of focus?

When students read/listen to oral histories that describe or name something they may have experienced, I believe it will validate student experiences and expand student knowledge about these topics. Many of my students likely have experienced assimilation in some form or another. I believe this excerpt will help them explore that.

Step 4: Analyze the Ethnic Studies Oral history.

- Use this [tool](#) or create your own to capture critical themes, concepts, connections, and reflections.

Of the [4 Is of Oppression](#), which is/are being reflected? How so?

- Most of my thinking around these excerpts can be found [here](#). This tool is where I compiled my thoughts and decided to focus primarily on assimilation in this lesson segment.

PLUS:

- Ideological oppression - The 'white savior complex' assumes that white-centered institutions and practices are inherently better than those of other cultures. [It also forces people to fight for an imperialist power that they may not agree with](#). Pham's story is one where a white family believed he would be better off with them than in Vietnam, even though a white-centered government (the US) is the reason why his life was destroyed in Vietnam in the first place. It also exemplifies his refusal to perform gratitude, which is often required of refugees.
- Institutional oppression - Adoption systems that pull people away from cultures could be institutionally oppressive.

Step 5: Identify people, concepts, events, structures, or systems that you need to learn more about.

- Oftentimes, excerpts will make indirect or direct reference to phenomenon important for understanding the interviewee's context.
- Oral histories can be helpful for connecting personal narratives to historic events and/or larger systems and structures.
- Now is your chance to learn more and connect what you learn to your specific students/ community.

Link any useful sources that may be helpful later (to you or to others).

- [Background on Manifest Destiny](#) (to make historical connections to American feelings of superiority) (Smithsonian Institute)
- [White Savior Complex Explanation Video](#) (The Take)
- [A more relatable story on Vietnamese assimilation](#) (LA Times)
- [An example of Native American assimilation](#) (NIH)
- [The Sympathizer](#) (My favorite book about the Vietnam War - Fiction, but includes so much I did not know)

	about the war, and is told from a Vietnamese-American's perspective) • Supreme Court decision to keep Native American children with Native American families (NYT - possible extension question) • Carlisle Indian School Project • Secondary Migration of Vietnamese Immigrants: How the US intentionally dispersed Vietnamese refugees to prevent them from forming ethnic enclaves. (Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies) • Talk by Dr. Yen Le Espiritu on militarized refugees (from book: Body Counts) • Forced gratitude by refugees (A Refugee Critique on Humanitarianism)
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Step 6: Decide what is powerful or significant for students and why.	
Write a series of bullets or a short narrative about what you see as critical/ powerful/ significant for your students in the excerpt(s) you have selected and why. In your explanation consider: • <i>experiences of the interviewee, your connections and connections students might make</i> • <i>historical or present-day events</i> • <i>structures, systems, and processes</i> Identify: • <i>Ethnic Studies concepts/themes you are hoping to illustrate/ develop/ examine with your chosen excerpt(s)</i> • <i>How your students might be challenged in connecting with this oral history.</i>	Connections: • To students' own assimilation • US militarism, displacement, and migration • To the forced assimilation of other groups of people, specifically Native Americans • In other contexts, such as family Events: • Manifest Destiny* • Missions & Boarding Schools for Native Americans* • The Vietnam War • The Cold War more generally *I will be doing this lesson after students have already learned about Manifest Destiny and Boarding Schools for Native Americans. I will use this as an access point for students to understand assimilation. However, it is important that I ask students to COMPARE experiences and not just to ADOPT experiences. After receiving feedback on this lesson, I realized I may have been 'flattening' the Asian-American experience by using one group's experience to illustrate an Asian-American experience. This happens often in US educational systems. This tool (and the feedback that went along with it) helped me edit my lesson plan below to ensure that students are doing the necessary comparisons and not just thinking that Pham's

	experience can be fit into the experiences of Native Americans in boarding schools. Structures, systems, and processes: • Adoption practices and processes • The military industrial complex • Imperialism Concepts/themes: • Cultural assimilation Challenges: • Analyzing this excerpt in relation to cultural assimilation requires a decent amount of historical knowledge. Students should be aware of what assimilation is and how it has manifested itself throughout US history. Background on the Vietnam War will also be necessary. Providing this level of background knowledge may be a challenge.
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Step 7: Consider how the above ideas fit in with your semester or year-long curriculum.	
<i>Which unit of study might best accommodate your ideas? Does a new unit of study need to be created?</i>	I see this playing a role in my "Systems/Structures" unit of study. I think I could broaden this unit to include American policy around the world and how that has affected the experiences of people here. This could be studied alongside say, an experience of a Nicaraguan immigrant who fled violence under a right-wing dictatorship.

Step 8: Construct a lesson segment that incorporates the ethnic studies oral history excerpt(s). THIS IS ALL PRELIMINARY THINKING DONE FAR BEFORE THE LESSON WAS ACTUALLY CONSTRUCTED - FULL LESSON OUTLINE IS BELOW THESE BOXES	
<i>How will you connect students' interests, histories, geographies, experiences, insights, or aspirations to the oral history excerpts and/or the larger lesson(s)?</i>	How do you know what you know?* - Interview with a family member or guardian - Knowledge that is passed down generationally - Examples (e.g. food, traditions, holidays, honoring the dead, language...) - Names (Anglicizing names) *I end up doing all this much earlier on in the semester. I will tie it back in during this lesson.

	- Brainstorm systems & structures - Attempt to mold mind (home, religion, school, border, etc) - Terms: White Savior Complex, imperialism, the White Man's Burden, assimilation Starting with these home connections will build student understanding and engagement in the topic of assimilation.
<i>Are there other text(s) that complement the oral history and/or provide a different perspective?</i>	I will pair this with the above LA Times article, along with resources from the Carlisle Indian School. These other examples are easier to access and will give students a more rounded idea of assimilation. They will also allow students to compare assimilation stories between and within ethnic groups.
<i>What questions will you pose to your students, or which directions might students generate questions?</i>	Potential Essential Questions include: - How have white-centered policies in the United States forced people to assimilate to the cultural norm throughout history? - For a pluralistic society to function, is there a need to assimilate? - What aspects of your culture do you value most? What is lost through assimilation? - What is the end goal of assimilation? - To what extent does one have to assimilate to belong here and at what cost?
<i>What type(s) of thinking will you expect your students to do?</i>	Reflecting: On own assimilation Identifying connections: Between stories of assimilation Argumentative: On the merits and drawbacks of assimilation
<i>What tools will you use to help students analyze and reflect upon the ethnic studies oral histories?</i>	I will model other examples of assimilation and create a graphic organizer for students to consider the concept in their own life. I will create a format for students to annotate Pham's text using highlighters and summary and analysis statements. I will create discussion norms and sentence starters for a discussion on assimilation in a pluralistic society.
<i>What Ethnic Studies pedagogies (reflective of your intentions) will you use?</i>	Critiquing systems of oppression, relevant and rigorous curriculum
<i>What are ways you will check your students' understanding of the critical/</i>	- Active participation during discussion OR reflection on discussion as an exit ticket

<i>powerful/ significant elements you identified above?</i>	- Annotations to be turned in - Project or writing prompt on assimilation
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Lesson Outline:

Notes on Background Information: This lesson segment works best if students have completed the following lessons:

- 1) A lesson on the Carlisle School that uses [these documents](#). Documents B (by Richard H. Pratt) and C (by Ellis B. Childers) will be referenced in this lesson plan.
- 2) A lesson on the Vietnam War. This does not have to be a full lesson, but students should have some background information on:
 - a) The basic facts of the war (who, what, when, where, why) and the global ideological tensions that led to the war.
 - b) Americans' views of Vietnamese people during the war.

Essential Questions:

- How does the White Savior trope influence our views on freedom and liberation for POC?
- How has US imperialism abroad contributed to the assimilation of Vietnamese-Americans in the United States?
- What aspects of your culture do you value most? What is lost through assimilation?

Learning Targets:

- Students will be able to identify white saviorism and reflect on its dangers as evidenced by an exit ticket and discussion on the topic.
- Students will be able to define assimilation and reflect on their own experiences with it as evidenced by a discussion and written reflection.

Day 1

Engage

- Watch first 2:56 of [The Take's video on White Saviorism](#). Ask students:
 - Questions to check for understanding: What is "White Saviorism," according to the video? What are some issues with it? Etc.
 - Do you recognize any of the movies depicted?
 - Can you think of any movies or TV shows about POC that center around a white hero? What about ones that center around a POC hero?

- Why do you think these white savior stories are appealing to Americans? What is the danger of highlighting these types of stories?
- This can be done as a write/pair/share or incorporated into any entrance ticket or journaling routine that a teacher has.

Explain

- Introduce Thanh Pham & his story
- Review concepts of imperialism and assimilation
- Introduce excerpts and methods of annotating
 - Highlight:
 - People
 - Vocabulary
 - Reasons Pham does not trust his American family
 - Write summary and analysis statements

Explore (Annotations & Questions)

Summary Statements	Interviewer: Do you have any stories about your adopted siblings that you would want to discuss? Pham: Oh, there are many. [Laughs] But, I think the most experience and memorable thing was when they came and visit me in the hospital, when I first arrived in the U.S. Before I was adopted into the family. Interviewer: Can you tell me more about that story? Pham: Well, the two brothers, the two twin brothers, Tom and Steve, they were in high school. Early years of their high school. And, one afternoon they came and visit – visit me in the hospital. And I hated them. [Laughs] I hated everybody. It was a terrible time of my life. I don't trust anybody. All that because, you know, the war. U.S. soldiers was destroying Viet Nam. U.S. government was destroying Viet Nam. With their so-called, the Viet Nam War policy. [Light laugh] Yeah. But, you know, after I was adopted – wasn't really adopted, they were my guardianship. I was never officially adopted. So, after they brought me home, I had a rough time accepting their kindness and love, at first. But	Analysis Statements
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	then...we slowly gained that trust. I gained that trust, from them. And, became the fifth child of the family, and they loved me and took good care of me. Yes.	
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Questions:

- 1) Why does Pham hate his siblings at first?
- 2) Why might it have been hard for Pham to accept the family's kindness?

Summary Statements	Interviewer: How would you say the war affected your family and community? Pham: It affects a lot. War displace people, it brings bad memories to people who lose – lost their family members, and the communities been uprooted. Destroyed. [Pause]. Yea. Friends and families and immediate families and extended families and communities, all displaced [at the time of war?] I was – the village I was living in was many times bombed and attacked, and at times was uprooted and relocated into all those, names that they created, those camps, in order to deprive the enemies of their supporters. Those camps were called strategic hamlets, in the English language. In the Vietnamese it called Ap Tan Sinh or Ap Chien Luoc . Basically it's concentrations of people into – in to barbed wires. Yeah. Interviewer: What was a – or like, as much as you can describe, what was a daily day like? Like an average day like during that time? Pham: Up until the time I was wounded, life was like, you know because we were rice farmers, so we spent most of the time in the fields, tending to our animals and our fields. Planting rice, potatoes. Which was later, had a hard time because of the constant raids from the U.S. and their allied forces. And so, food was not...something that was, what they call, abundant, because we couldn't produce that.	Analysis Statements
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Questions:

- 1) What caused Pham's life in Vietnam to be disrupted? Who caused the devastation?
- 2) How may this have played a role in Pham's distrust of his American family?

Extend

Discussion:

- Why do you think the American family extended guardianship toward Pham?
- How may this relate to the narratives in the opening clip?
- How did Richard H. Pratt describe Native Americans in his address? Did it seem like he believed he was a "good guy?" Compare and contrast his description of Native Americans in the 1890's to a US-centric view of Vietnamese people in the 1970's.

Exit Ticket:

What is The White Savior Trope? How is it evident in Pham's oral history? (Use evidence from the text to support your answer.) What is a danger of the White Savior Trope?

Day 2

Engage

Students discuss this quote from Pham's oral history:

- "But then...we slowly gained that trust. I gained that trust, from them. And, became the fifth child of the family, and they loved me and took good care of me. Yes."

Questions:

- In the end, how does Pham feel about being adopted?
- Think back to Ellis B. Childers' account of the Carlisle School. How does Childers' account affect your reading of this quote by Pham? Compare and contrast Childers' account with Pham's oral history.

Explore

- Revisit the term 'assimilation.'
- Revisit the topic of "How we know what we know."
 - Stories/folklore/family traditions
 - School
 - Books/Media
 - What is lost when the generational stories and folklore are lost?
- Have students read [this LA Times article](#) ([linked here in plain text](#)) describing the

experience of a Vietnamese-American student gaining knowledge in English and losing it in Vietnamese. This can be done using any annotation style, as a class/individually, etc.

Explain

Discussion

- How does this author feel about assimilating in American culture by learning English?
- What aspects of your culture do you value most?
- What is lost through assimilation?

Extend

OPTIONS

- 1) Write-up: Students identify one aspect of their culture that they value dearly and explain why they would not like to give it up/why it would be difficult for them to assimilate and lose this aspect of their culture if forced. They identify one aspect of their culture or identity that they may have already given up in the name of assimilation. Teacher models this first. (I believe even students with dominant backgrounds could do this. For example, I could think of many things that maybe aren't "cool" that students would be into but step away from as they try to fit in in high school.)
- 2) Project: Students create/bring in a representation of an aspect of their culture that they value deeply and explain why it should not be lost to assimilation.

Post-Lesson Reflection

Step 9: Reflect upon the lesson and evidence of students' understanding and evaluate the lessons' impact.

- Make notes about what you would retain and why and what you would change for the future.
- Use this chart to keep track of your thinking.

	Lesson Elements	Why?	Adjustments Needed
What Worked			

What Didn't Work			