
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Spring 7-15-2019

Bryan Thao Worra

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Recommended Citation

De Leon, Pauline. (2019) Bryan Thao Worra.
https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/135

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Interview: Pauline De Leon

Artist: Bryan Thao Worra

Location: Video conference call conducted from Chicago and Hawthorne

Date: May 21, 2019



Photo and bio courtesy of the artist. <http://thaoworra.blogspot.com/>

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200/ AAS 203: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2019 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Artist Bio: An award-winning Laotian American writer, I work actively to support Laotian, Hmong and Southeast Asian American artists. I am recognized by the Loft Literary Center, the Minnesota State Arts Board and the National Endowment for the Arts. I also served as a consulting contractor with the Minnesota History Center, the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans and the Minnesota Humanities Commission. I am an active professional member of the Horror Writer Association and president of the Science Fiction Poetry Association.

Interview Transcript:

Pauline De Leon: Can you tell me about yourself? Tell me about your childhood, your family, and especially coming to America at a young age.

Bryan Thao Worra: My name is Bryan Thao Worra. I was born in Vientiane, Laos in 1973. I came to the United States in 1973. I was the adopted child of an American pilot who was flying in the country through the course of the Vietnam War, after a request of the United States government for an airline known as Royal Air Lao. This was an interesting concept for our family; he had brought his own children from a previous marriage and his wife with him, and the wife couldn't have children and was looking for a child to adopt. They adopted me and I came to the U.S. in July of 1973, and I was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1976 in Missoula, Montana. My years in childhood were spent in upstate such as Alaska, and many of my formative years in Michigan in the 1980's. I went to college in Ohio from approximately 1991 to 1997. I went to work in Washington D.C. with Hmong National Development in 1997 to 1998, before I came to Minnesota, where I spent a better part of the last twenty years working on community development through the non-profit sector with a focus on the arts, and efforts to develop a communications infrastructure for our community.

PDL: How did you start to develop your creative work, especially in writing and creating poems? When did you start writing?

BTW: I think with a writer, you'll always find that they actually have very many different starts in the course of their lives, when eventually it leads to just them just getting down to it and becoming a writer. I suppose this is a point where I should clarify that, in before the five years since the Laos Diaspora began, at the end of the war for Laos in 1975, our community has written fewer than forty books in the words of our church. I've written many of them. The current count depends and varies on what people consider as what qualifies as a book; mind you, approximately eight to ten books are predominantly in poetry.

I have the status as the first Lao American to hold a fellowship in literature from the National Endowment for the Arts. I'm now the 2019 Joyce Fellow, and also have the honor of being the first Lao Minnesotan Poet Laureate. That all came about because I was fortunate growing up to live in a situation where access to books was very common and encouraged; growing up in Montana and Alaska, there wasn't a lot to do except to read. Michigan was also another state where this was really, a very good idea especially during the winter months. I think overtime, it became very apparent that I liked stories, I liked hearing about the places where I had come from.

This was very difficult in the 1980's because you couldn't find a lot of information about Laos. Very often, times you mentioned Laos, people would think you'd be talking about the insect or the parasite, rather than the actual country. It was a very difficult experience for many of us. You can talk about China, you can talk about Japan, you can talk about Korea, and you can even talk about Vietnam since these were places that people were familiar with. But, because of the Secret War for Laos, most people haven't even heard of the country. You might be equipped for a Jeopardy question if you're lucky. I eagerly looked about for any information that I could find.

Maybe a travel guide or an occasional article, but it wasn't very helpful. I think that became apparent to me that we didn't come from nowhere. There was something to find. I laugh about it now; coming into the world through Michigan, in that part of the Midwest, there was an area that was known for a lot of radical ideas. You'd find hippies, you'd find anarchists, you'd find punk rockers, you'd find goth kids- Just so many different ideas running around out there. Not having merely a very large Lao community around me at the time, I found myself drifting to those types of people, people who were very interested in the arts, in these stories. I was fortunate that some of them wanted to help me find out more about who I was and where I come from. I grew up in an area where you had all sorts of items such as zine culture, photography, you make collages to use for photocopies to make your own cheap little booklets. It wasn't necessarily the deepest thing ever. But it was something you created.

I think that still resonates with a lot of the students that I teach under my wing these days: No one can guarantee that you're going to be read in a thousand years from now, maybe not even a hundred years from now, maybe not even ten years from now, let alone even ten days. But, if you don't create, if you don't try to create something, then there won't be anything to be found about your heritage, about the people who raised you; the neighbors, friends, family, all those people who had a part in creating who you were and the world that surrounds you.

PDL: How would you define or categorize yourself?

BTW: The challenge has often been that, the way I was raised and how I grew up in the world, didn't necessarily encourage me to put myself into a box. I think it's always been this interesting tension within the world of Asian American art and matters. We still run into a question that people were very worried about taking on the title, or the designation of an Asian American writer. In the literary community or the publishing industry, it would pigeonhole you and you'd often find well-attentive writers thinking it would be a liability to call themselves an Asian American writer. If you somehow adopted that title, you would be put into a literary ghetto, for lack of a better phrase. They wanted to say, "No, I am writing for the world. My words are meant for everyone." I get that. It's an important thing to remember; the very concept of Asian America and ethnic studies was a radical proposition.

The way I had spoken of it in the early years with some people was that they challenged me, where they would just say, "Bryan, why do you call yourself a Lao American writer and a Lao American poet?" They get very specific about how it'll sell more books, it'll sell more poems I suppose, if you call yourself an Asian American writer. As a poet, that's a dubious proposition. Let's see, poets don't necessarily make J. K. Rowling numbers at this point in history. But I would say that, literature and the arts, if they show us anything, show us that it's okay and it's important to take a gamble on things that people may not necessarily even know that they want. Maybe at the epitome at history; this would have been an exercise of foolishness, but, "the category of Lao American or Asian American arts and literature would hold no meaning for a future generation-" This is a possibility. But, I'd like to think that's not necessarily the key.

I always use in my defense that no one gives anyone static about a poet's confidence as a member in the beat's scene, that they don't give you any static about calling yourself a poet from the romantic tradition. Yet here we are; there's still writers around the world. Shakespeare

certainly would not have any problems with himself being classified as an English writer, nor would Cervantes be troubled by being considered a Spanish writer. And yet, all of them could still also be categorized into many other categories. Sometimes, you'll think about that it's important to classify me as an Asian American writer, sometimes it's more convenient to classify me as a Lao American poet. Sometimes you might look at it as a way to present my work as that of a transracial, transcultural adoptee, or a Midwestern poet. The endpoint here is that, this will become something for scholars to debate and for history to decide. It's just one of many possible convenient categories. That's something that you learn overtime, that the Asian American identity itself is one that learns to become more fluid; learning to accommodate many different experiences. There are so many different ways of being Asian American. There is so many aspects we have to look at and we have to process it. Different ideas come forward.

Some of our colleagues from Central Asia ask, "Well, we all come from the same continent. Can Arab or Iranian writers be considered Asian American?" I think it's a compelling question. Writers from Bhutan, from Nepal, from Sri Lanka, certainly don't have trouble being classified as Asian American. But you know, you always have that question of, "Should people from Micronesia or the Pacific Islands be considered Asian American, or should they form their own cultural network?" These are great questions. I hope we don't shy away from that. I think it's something that keeps me inspired, and also keeps me challenged as a writer, as well. That's something that I see some of our community members struggling with. In this process of how do we use the right terms- and the fact of the matter is, if you look at history you'll see that the terms that we call ourselves today will probably not be used in twenty to thirty years from now.

PDL: Can you tell me when, how, and why did you first get involved with the organization, Legacies of War?

BTW: Ah, great question. I would say that I began getting involved with Legacies of War more formally in 2007 at the International Conference on Lao Studies in Arizona. That was when I met the Executive Director, Channapha Khamvongsa, in person. We were put together on an exhibit for the community during that weekend, but I'm familiar with their work since they had started it in the early 2000's. This was around the same time that the documenting of bombings came out. For the purposes of clarity, it's important to understand that in some ways I suppose, I take it a bit personally; during the course of the Secret War for Laos, the United States government began a secret bombing campaign in order to adapt U.S. secret policy although this was in violation of its legal court, in which they dropped more tons of bombs on Laos throughout the year during World War II. What we know today is that over 30% of those bombs did not actually detonate upon impact. This left 30% of the Laotian countryside contaminated with bombs some forty years after the end of the conflict. We have a third of the victims of these weapons from the Vietnam War which are shown under the age of twelve, and that means often times their parents happen to have been alive when the war ended.

So, this was a matter that came to our attention as being deeply concerning and in the immediate private sense, because our fears to bring the exhibited Legacies of War to Minnesota- That took a lot of effort in building support and understanding within the community. It was complicated in part that, for example, Honeywell is a major manufacturer of the cluster bombs that were used in the Vietnam War. Honeywell had their headquarters in Minnesota, and so you can understand

that very awkward conversation to be had. Mind you, Honeywell will always inform you that they don't make cluster bombs anymore. But, can you imagine that even though Minnesota has the third largest Lao population in the country, and is also home to many of our immediate scholars, activists, educators, and community builders- The whole community has also done very well with the first elected officials coming out of Minnesota. People who have taken the national stage don't have their roots in the Minnesotan experience. This suddenly suggests, "Well you know what, while we're at it, the United Nations didn't seem to process ratifying the United Nations Convention on cost of ammunition," which would bear the manufacture, sale, storage, and even the transfer of cluster ammunition for cluster bombs. This was a pushback that we received from the Legacies of War organization in Minnesota.

I was very interested because in the aftermath of this Secret War, people were deeply conflicted about our relationship for our homeland. There're some people who have given the new government an aid of support in order to remove these bombs. Nowadays it'd be the new government that would be agreeing to help the communists. You have people who would just say, "The war is over. Why are you bringing the past up?" It was very uncomfortable for many people, for many of the veterans that we talked to. One of the troubles that we picked up was the some of the veterans would say that they were responsible because they helped the United States for leaving the homeland with all these bombs. We'd reassured them that, that was not what the conversation is going to be focused on. We wanted to figure out a way to just talk about it and how to solve the problem. At that point it became a very sound project, and it took a lot of community conversation, it took a lot of trial one-on-one meetings. In the end, we only had a small handful of volunteers, maybe ten or twelve people who were there with us in the intermediate art space.

There were people working with TeAda Productions, a small theater company in Los Angeles, who were putting together a play called *Refugee Nation* that also explored these issues, about diaspora, what it meant to search for identity. If I combine both this play and an exhibit, making sure there was this active process where people could come in and respond to it, and whenever they wanted- Once the community saw, they went "Oh, well here's our story." Even if it didn't necessarily agree with all the specifics, it was such a mind-blowing experience for them. To see themselves in a space that never had Southeast Asian presentation like this before. To see themselves in some ways where they thought it was performed only for the artistic elite, or academics, or for people who are so outside of the regular boundaries of many of their experiences. I think that's what our work has continued, since it was also the same year that we convened the National Lao American Writers Summit.

Again, this began as an audacious proposal because often times, when you see these types of events, people were so afraid- "Okay, we raised money to hold an all new event. We better make sure that we make the best use of it." So, we wanted to make it an all arts event. "Well, this has to be just right. We should bring the traditional dancers, we should also bring in the traditional textile artists, we should bring in the traditional music." People really wanted to get out of hand but we wanted to take a better grasp on that and just say no. To do this, we have to act in a way that we're not in a panic, that we can say that we'll be able to fund these events. We're trying to make sure that every art form can have its say, that it can find a space to present itself. But in that year, it was essential to us to say that literary arts can stand on their own. We started off with

about twelve writers from our community, many that were being informed for the very first time in twenty years since the end of the war. In making that gathering, we put people in contact with one another for the first time; to see one writer looking at another writer- They didn't feel like they were crazy. They weren't writing in isolation, that they weren't alone. That made such a difference.

In the aftermath, people don't spread out thinking these stories could have a place, but it spun off; four, maybe five different nonprofit organizations, at least ten books have been written across the country. Some of this resulted because others saw what we were doing. "If they can do it, then I can." I think that was what we had hoped, that it wasn't just a bunch of gatekeepers out there; "If you want this to happen, then you have to go through this one person," right, or something like that. That was never the goal. It was the idea that you simply show up, and that you can have this audacious idea, however ridiculous it may seem to you at the time. You'd be surprised that it doesn't take many people to put something together like this. We worked with fewer than a dozen people to bring together 120 people for that first Writers Summit, and now since then we've grown to a regular of 400 participants. I'm happy about that, that legacy we would create.

PDL: Can you tell me about your work, *Diasporantics*? What was your process for creating the work, from writing speculative poems, to arranging the visuals?

BTW: *Diasporantics* is a great question, since that was also one that stemmed from a couple ideas that I have been wrestling with for many years now; such as the distinction to be a Lao American writer, to actually have a book that is only published by a small press. The question was that, I wanted to figure out a way to integrate and encourage other Lao writers to create more work. Even as an artist, I am always interested in how we take the new technology and the new opportunities before us, and make something interesting. This is one where, one of our great takeaways from the rise of social media is actually from Zuckerberg. Mark Zuckerberg would always remind his staff that to have a contract working with him is an epitome of the good. The idea is that you should always try to make your work into creations as quick as possible. Absolutely. On top of that, you can't be so fixated on this perfection, for example, you'll never get it out there. This was a challenge I presented to a couple of my students, "Let's try to demonstrate what Laos creates." Not necessarily a poem, but that you can create a number of poems; that you have within thirty, thirty-two of them. Those pages are small size, like a comic book. Most comic books back in the day were thirty-two pages, and that's kinda like this arbitrary number that we came up with.

This is also the time we were looking at the rise of Instagram poetry. My students had to shy away from it, asking when they will be taken seriously. "If we write poems, we could be fit onto a one-by-one square image!" And I just go, "You know what? Let me tell you about a little art form called haiku." You'd be surprised how much depth there is, and how well-read a haiku can get. They can take up a lot of space. This is something I even tried to suggest to some students of mine in New York during a presentation at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. Science fiction, poetry, and all the new technologies in creation, did not necessarily have to be the size of poem books. They only need to be as long as they need to be. I think that was something that many of our poets struggle with, is that they want to tell so much. That's

understandable. But the idea was not what we could write in one single poem, but to trust it in the space that was available, because you'll still be able to write many, many things out there. At the same time, you can take the time to write about the biggest issues in life, but you can also take the time to note of the smaller things in your life, because sometimes we describe what you notice as smaller moments spent. But if you pay attention long enough, they can become to shape you in years down the line. That's just something you discover with time.

So *Diasporantics* came about to this "doing it yourself" culture, of creating your own zines, and not waiting for permission, and I think that's consistent with all my books. They never really waited for permission or for someone to say, "Oh, well hey! This is trending right now, so it looks like this is going to be really hot, this is going to be marketable, this is something you can sell for a million dollars." I think that's the risk I've always had to enjoy. I just like writing. I like that creative process because to me, it's better than Vegas, if that makes sense. In that, you don't know what's going to catch fire, or if you're doing really well, you don't know when the poems turn up next. Sometimes it's in a book. Sometimes it's going to drop from the sky over the Olympics. Sometimes it's written on a wall, sometimes someone gets it as a tattoo of it. Oh, I wish for that one person I'd recommend to have a much longer poem. (Laughter)

Yet at the same time, I've spoken about it a lot over the last couple of years, is that the mention of the arts, especially with Asian Americans, is that we're often so obsessed with the idea of notoriety. I have the privilege of having a bestselling book of the year; it has won awards, has many different award-winning poems inside its pages. But, I'll be the first to admit. My bestselling book has been outsold by a book that came out roughly in the same timeframe, known as *Taken by the T-Rex*. I admit, there are more people who would rather read about impossible sex with a dinosaur, than my bestselling book about the fact that the heartfelt heartbreak of the Lao diaspora is becoming the Secret War, and finding a space for our imaginations as we try to reach for a future people thought was impossible. I admit, after all of this, people are still far more interested in a *Sharknado* movie that has sold thousands of dollars; a movie about sharks in tornados, than a piece about the Lao experience. But that does not absolve us from the responsibility to write, to try to create something for the next generation. When it comes to the Secret War, much of the truth that has happened to us was destroyed deliberately, advocated to which was told to us by the fit of our colonizers, or those who didn't necessarily have our best interests in heart. This is where much of my work has addressed; refugees, the imagination. How do we reconstruct the past, how do we reconstruct our heritage, how do we reconstruct how we make the tales of our roots, who we were and who we want to be?

PDL: Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American?

BTW: Part of the interesting process that has emerged since at least 2003 was the question of, "Where do we fit in Asian America and also Lao America?" So, I can give you an exhibit such as the Emerging Voices meeting with visual artists, or an exhibit that was held in Minneapolis. This was an interesting exhibit because the space was being turned into a community art gallery, and they were looking for new possible exhibits to be on display there. We made the audacious proposal to do a Lao show out there. You should've seen the eyebrows that got raised because

people would say, “Well, no one’s ever really tried doing that. Don’t you want to try, maybe, just doing a general Asian American exhibit?”

So many Asian American communities are in Minneapolis and St. Paul. And I’d get that, but we still think it’s a point for us to push ourselves. Can we figure out how to carry out those spaces? Can we fill it out ourselves? I always appreciate the people who reach out to us and give kudos in our affairs, but it’s like going to a Pan-Asian festival in the 2000’s- You go through all this trouble to make your way out there, you only get fifteen minutes on stage to show off, and then you make way for all the other organizations, because everyone’s acting like, “Wow, there’s no way to take time and appreciate just this one culture, this one community.” Every time we do an exhibit, there’s always gotta be the same binary east meets west, old country, new country. If I knew what it was going to be like back then, we could take a couple of picks to challenge that notion, to try and propose that our community could actually organize exhibits and presentations that would be thoroughly Lao centered or thoroughly Lao-Hmong centered. They wouldn’t be on identity, but they would explore and intrigue ideas.

PDL: What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

BTW: Well, I don’t know. That’s a big question. What is an opportunity? The challenge that I look back on, nearly thirty years in particular, is really being involved in creating writing and working as an artist. I am fortunate now that I hold a spot in the community, I talk about it with my fellow Lao American writers. I am pointing out that it is interesting after all these years, while we have the poetry tradition for example, the names of our writers weren’t well known. There may have been two or three in our culture that got to have names recorded and saved for prosperity. The rest are these poems that sure, maybe your parents or grandparents know by heart, but they couldn’t tell you who wrote them. That wasn’t something out cultural tradition set, it wasn’t important to have your personal identity have this great meaning- You, yourself would be erased over time. I don’t know. I think that’s something I think about to a great deal.

No, to be part of this great tradition where you do have a chance to know the names of the people who are creating these words holds meaning. The case for me that I’ve always been able to keep a level head about is, understanding that this is a poet’s path and this is a writer’s path. You have these uncertainties but you don’t get paralyzed by it. You appreciate it no matter which distinctions you get. I understand that some writers give up hope and get found or discovered. What counts is persistence and doing your best for yourself to get your work out there. You could pick up the basics by reading a good book on writing for three hours or so. But what you need to do as a writer, as an artist, is to figure out the skills that will help you go forward and keep at that persistence, that trust in the cosmos, and not to give up.

PDL: What are you currently working on?

BTW: I am currently working on a new collection of poetry called *Before, We Remember We Dream*. It’s interesting because at the time it emerged as this challenge that’d say, “Oh Bryan, can’t you write a memoir? Or can’t you write a book of poetry about all this science fictional element to it?” And I said, “Oh sure, I’ll take you up on that challenge.” I pieced that together

and lasted all five pages before we actually went back into this hybrid model of a previous text. It essentially pushes the boundaries of what we call graphopoetics. For which there are graphic novels then, what are graphic poems? How do you create a work where poetry and the imagery work together? Part of what we're doing within that then, is coming out in 2019. And so, I'm doing this mix of what does it mean for refugees to have these memories, and what does it mean for refugees to have an imagination. I stress the question of how do we use these together. That's coming out a little bit later, and as you can see, it's a big project.

Another work as well is my *Laomagination* exhibit, which is basically taking a world of the last twenty years in particular and also figuring out how to prepare this idea of engaging our imagination with the 45th anniversary of Southeast Asian diaspora in the year 2020. How do Southeast Asian poets and artists in particular get their work out meaningfully into the community? Because let me tell you something- It may shock you! But we don't make a lot of money with a poetry book. To me, that is no reason at all to give up. Try anything. Time will tell.

End.