

BRYAN THAO WORRA

## “So are you Chinese or Japanese?”

THAT WAS THE QUESTION the protagonists of the cartoon show *King of the Hill* asked the Lao character Kahn Souphanousinphone when he debuted on March 2, 1997—even after he’d explained where he and his family were from in elaborate detail. Twenty years later, that question continues to encapsulate Lao American refugees’ enduring frustration when explaining our journey of rebuilding to others.

It can often feel as if there’s a significant culture of nonexpectation for Lao American poets. But today we can easily demonstrate there is opportunity for the Lao American imagination and perspective to contribute meaningfully to the global world of arts and letters.

Like many Lao Americans, my personal journey into literature was complicated. Our diaspora is usually said to have begun after the end of the Laotian Civil War in 1975, often referred to as “The Secret War.” I came to the United States earlier than most, arriving in July 1973. The adopted child of an American civilian, in the United States I was raised in places as different from the tropics as you could imagine, including Montana, Alaska, Michigan, and Milwaukee. For my generation growing up in the 1970s and 80s, there were nearly no books about our experience. Four decades later, there are still fewer than forty books in our own words.

One of the challenging barriers for my growth as a writer was a stunning lack of public familiarity with the way the Lao story was intertwined with the American story. My perspective and experience didn’t fit comfortably with “Model Minority” narratives, and even many venues for Asian American literature didn’t know what to do with my writing. There were years of struggle as publishers informed me there was no market for Lao American writing. To the surprise of many, I ultimately found my literary footing as a poet in international speculative literature, which involves writing informed by science fiction, fantasy, horror, and other imaginative genres.

When I’d first begun writing, people knew who the Vietnamese

were. Who the Cambodians were. But they didn't know who the Lao were. Few knew the story of the Hmong who came with us during the escape and had their own distinctive culture, language, and traditions. Despite over one hundred sixty ethnicities identified in Laos, we've only just begun to hear from many such as the Khmu, Tai Dam, Lue, and Lu Mien who are also here today in America. Surely 492,000 of us tracing our roots back to Laos is not an insignificant number, especially when so many had been allied with the United States as part of a covert CIA army during the Southeast Asian conflicts. It should be a matter of tremendous concern almost nine in ten of us lack college degrees, and many live below the federal poverty line with untreated challenges of PTSD, depression, and other war traumas.

The 1990s were when I began to add my voice to the great tapestry of words, images, and ideas. Over time, I also learned that I was not alone. Others, such as the members of the SatJaDham Lao Literary Project, began their journey as writers around 1995. The rise of the Internet and technologies such as email and IRC made reconnecting across great distances, even entire continents, easier than previously imagined. They convened seven national conferences of Laotian writers from around the world and produced six grassroots anthologies of Lao American writings up until 2002. This was remarkable, and I hope our next generation never forgets that the success of these early efforts was never a given.

While the network is not currently active, many continued to build community through their art, education, civic service, and volunteering, including organizations such as the Lao Heritage Foundation, the Pom Foundation, Sahtu Press, the Center for Lao Studies, and the Laotian American National Alliance. They produced some of our first works of Lao American voices, bypassing many of the traditional institutions, gatekeepers, and publishing models. Because of challenges for Lao to successfully pursue higher education, many writers followed autodidactic paths. For the foreseeable future, Lao American poets with MFAs will be literary unicorns. But that does not mean we are without accomplishment.

Today we can celebrate the award-winning work of our young poets such as scholar and activist Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay, spoken-word artist Catzie Vilayphonh, and Phayvanh Luekhamhan, the first Lao American Kunidman fellow. Oscar-nominated Emmy-winner Thavisouk Phrasavath has been sharing his touching poetry

with the world, as have elders like Xaysouvanh Phengphong, a former pilot who'd been writing poetry since he was fifteen. I was honored to represent Laos during the 2012 London Summer Games Poetry Parnassus and was the first Lao to receive an NEA Fellowship in Literature, among twenty other awards for my writing and civic leadership. In Canada, Souvankham Thammavongsa's poetry has been turned into films, and she recently won the prestigious Trillium Award. Krysada Panusith Phounsiri has become an internationally published poet, an astrophysics major, and champion B-boy. He recently chaired the third National Lao American Writers Summit in San Diego in 2016, continuing the tradition of the SatJaDham conferences.

In 2016, the Hmong poet Mai Der Vang won the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets. The debut memoir of the Hmong writer Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latecomer*, was selected by the NEA as one of its Big Reads. Considering that the Hmong, who trace their roots to predynastic China, did not have a written language until the 1950s, this was a tremendous milestone in such a short period of time.

But we can't take such progress for granted, and we must constantly seek new voices in our journey.

We remain in a clear struggle to recover and reclaim our history. During the fourth Lao American Writers Summit convened in Seattle in June 2017, our community learned that from 1987 until 2000, Khaythong Loungamath had written under her pen names Bakka Thong, Dok Boua Thong, Dong Seit Thy, and occasionally her real name, contributing poetry, news, interviews, and short stories to *Sieng Khaen Magazine*, one of the first Lao American publications in San Diego. However, it is difficult to find many copies of that magazine today. Our best archives across the United States have few resources readily indexed to support a fuller understanding of our postwar literary history.

But what next? The conception and expression of a Lao American identity cannot be a binary "yes/no," "pure/impure" proposition but must reflect a continuum of approaches: some days we'll do things in a very "traditional" style, but another time, our traditions will serve as a starting compass by which we might determine our next path in otherwise uncharted territory.

Lao stories are complex. We appreciate that ours is NOT the only story, but it is still one with meaning, with lessons for this generation

and the next, both for our people and beyond. Over the last decade, a principle we sought to express through our gatherings across the country was that there are many ways to be Lao. Otherwise, we'll find far too many ways to exclude one another, undermining any effort to articulate a meaningful future for ourselves.

We need our poets to have the courage to give our children a future they can see themselves in. Let's remember that when we all began writing, this was not a perfect process. No one is born an expert in the arts or community building. There were mistakes, missed lessons and opportunities, but it was still something. It was a very real seed of hope.

For 600+ years we had many opportunities to not "be Lao." We faced civil war, occupation, Lao flung to the farthest corners of the world, yet time and time again, we chose to remain a people. Often, however, a pernicious and toxic mindset can take hold among refugee families conditioned to think their stories aren't of value. That their English isn't good enough, or they don't speak Lao well enough, or understand all of the Lao traditions.

We must reject that thinking and the idea that somehow, we can't attempt to tell our own stories if we don't have "perfect" English or an encyclopedic knowledge of Lao culture. We need to see the importance of trying, of daring to risk, to create something, anything.

Contrary to what many of us were told by our teachers, if we demand only perfection we will lose far too many voices in exchange for the few "perfect" pieces that come forward from such a mindset. Over the years, many of us were artistically bullied, insulted, dismissed, criticized, and ignored. But we still wrote. We still created, even when others suggested we would end up in a literary ghetto, and no one would ever be interested in the Lao American story. Some told us our time as a people with anything to say was done. Tragically, some who told us this were our fellow Lao Americans.

I assure you, they were wrong. As we rebuild, we need a culture that dares to risk, to give voice to our true opinions, wild and outrageous as they may be. We need a generation with the courage to dare to say that our memories, our dreams, too, matter.