

Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma

Zora Uyeda-Hale

Asian American and Asian Diasporic Studies

Professor Harvey C Dong

May 2023

## **Abstract**

Trauma is primarily understood as a personal experience in which an event occurs and leaves long-term psychological distress. However, historical trauma exposes that trauma does not exist in isolation. Historical trauma is defined as “distressing or life-threatening events which members of a group with a shared social identity experience together and pass on to their descendants”.<sup>1</sup> This shift from direct survivor to descendant is very nuanced because it can manifest in genetic and psychological ways.<sup>2</sup> Historical trauma has been studied in Holocaust survivors and Indigenous communities in North America, yet research is lacking Asian American experiences.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I study historical and intergenerational trauma from the Japanese Incarceration Camps and the Khmer Rouge Genocide. This paper does not aim to equate or compare these two dissimilar experiences, but rather, learn from their differing circumstances. In particular, I focus on the interactions between survivors of these traumatic periods and their descendants in the United States, using these two perspectives to explore pathways to intergenerational healing.

To contextualize these experiences, I synthesized several sources regarding the Japanese American and Cambodian American experiences. For the Japanese American experience, I interviewed Evelyn Tanaka (real name omitted for confidentiality), who is a *Yonsei* (fourth-generation) Japanese American woman and social worker in the Bay Area. To capture the Cambodian American experience, I utilized *Afterparties* by Anthony Veasna So, a collection

---

<sup>1</sup> Jieyi Cai and Richard M. Lee. “Intergenerational communication about historical trauma in Asian American families.” *Adversity and Resilience Science* 3, no 3 (2022): 233-245, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42844-022-00064-y>.

<sup>2</sup> Delan Devakumar et al. “The intergenerational effects of war on the health of children” *BMC Medicine* 12 no. 1 (2014): 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1741-7015-12-57>.

<sup>3</sup> Cai and Lee, “Intergenerational communication,” 233-245.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*  
of short stories centering on the children of Cambodian refugees.

By exploring these two ethnicities' nuanced experiences, I seek to investigate how different generations can build compassionate relationships through emotional understanding. I ask, How can the development of emotional literacy between survivors and descendants help communities rediscover their identities and relationships with one another, within and beyond the context of their trauma? How can Asian Americans heal in community with one another?

## **Historical Background**

### *Khmer Rouge Genocide*

The Cambodian auto-genocide lasted between 1975 to 1979. In four years, 1.5 to 3 million people, a quarter of the population, were killed under the rule of the Khmer Rouge, a Communist political group.<sup>4</sup>

The Khmer Rouge, with Pol Pot as the dictator, attempted to orchestrate a classless society. This entailed the forcible displacement of urban-dwelling Cambodians into rural areas, dictated by agrarian labor brigades. As a consequence, the economy collapsed, and huge populations died of starvation and disease.<sup>5</sup>

This massive loss of life was targeted. The Khmer Rouge sought to exterminate anyone who disrupted their idea of a new Communist country. Religious groups, intellectuals, and American sympathizers were all targeted for extermination<sup>6</sup>. In particular, the Cham Muslim group was heavily targeted, with 70% of their population exterminated by the Khmer Rouge.<sup>7</sup> Although the Khmer Rouge regime seemingly fell following the invasion of the Vietnamese army, they discretely held power in rural areas for more than a decade after.<sup>8</sup> From 1975 and 1994, 157,518 Cambodians were granted entry into the United States as either refugees, immigrants, or humanitarian parolees.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> . “Cambodia | Holocaust and Genocide Studies | College of Liberal Arts,” University of Minnesota, accessed May 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company 1989), 468.

<sup>7</sup> University of Minnesota. “Cambodia.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Sucheng Chan, “Cambodians in the United States: Refugees, Immigrants, American Ethnic Minority,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (September 2015): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.317>.

*Japanese Incarceration Camps*

In a statement for the Japanese American Day of Remembrance in 2022, the White House acknowledged Japanese incarceration during World War II as “one of the most shameful chapters in our Nation’s history”.<sup>10</sup> Following Executive Order 9066, more than 120,000 Japanese Americans<sup>11</sup> were incarcerated in ten different “relocation centers” across the mainland U.S.<sup>12</sup> Two-thirds of those imprisoned were American citizens.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. government justified this inhumane and unconstitutional action by claiming that all persons of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast were national security threats. In 1988, due to the dedication of Japanese American organizers, the Office of Redress Administration (ORA) was established. Surviving Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated in the camps were eligible to receive a restitution payment of \$20,000 for the unconstitutional injustices perpetrated by the U.S. government.<sup>14</sup> During this period, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians concluded that there was never a viable threat, and the government had always been aware of that fact.<sup>15</sup>

On my Japanese side, my grandparents’ lives were upended by Executive Order 9066.

---

<sup>10</sup> Joseph R. Biden jr., “Day of Remembrance of Japanese American Incarceration during World War II,” The White House, last modified February 18, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/02/18/day-of-remembrance-of-japanese-american-incarceration-during-world-war-ii/#:~:text=Eighty%20years%20ago%2C%20on%20February, chapters%20in%20our%20Nation%27s%20history.>

<sup>11</sup> History.com Editors. “Japanese Internment Camps: WWII, Life & Conditions,” History Channel, last modified April 17, 2024, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/japanese-american-relocation.>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Donna K. Nagata, Steven J. Trierweiler, and Rebecca Talbot, “Long-term Effects of Internment during Early Childhood on Third-generation Japanese Americans,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 69, no. 1 (1999): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080378.>

<sup>14</sup> “Search the Compensation and Reparations for the Evacuation, Relocation, and Internment Index (Redress Case Files),” National Archives and Records Administration, 2, <https://www.archives.gov/research/aapi/ww2/genealogy.>

<sup>15</sup> Nagata et al. “Long-term effects of internment during early childhood on third-generation Japanese Americans,” 19.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

Shortly after his father's sudden death, my grandfather and his family were incarcerated in Jerome, Arkansas. My grandmother's family elected to relocate to Utah to avoid the incarceration camps. She and her family lived in a train car until the war concluded.

My interviewee, Evelyn, has also been personally impacted by the incarceration camps. All four of her grandparents were incarcerated at either Topaz or Heart Mountain. During our conversation, she talked about the impacts of intergenerational trauma on her family, and how it has impacted her understanding of mental health and identity.

### **Understanding Mental Health**

Examining mental health from a purely individualistic, clinical lens can diminish and erase the interdependent implications of historical trauma.<sup>16</sup> Historical trauma, commonly understood as a clinical condition, can instead be studied as a critical discourse.<sup>17</sup> As a critical discourse, historical trauma is placed in the context of larger systemic issues of imperialism and the delusion of white supremacy.<sup>18</sup> For Asian Americans, looking at how mental health stigma and racial oppression coincide can help illuminate how support services can be shifted. It provides more room to imagine culturally responsive, restorative frameworks that acknowledge the necessity of liberation from systemic oppression.<sup>19</sup> However, in order to reimagine, there must be an understanding of current experiences.

When I asked Evelyn how she learned about mental health growing up, her answer was, "It wasn't really talked about a whole lot." For her, there was an awareness of emotions, but no outright acknowledgment of mental health or well-being. This sentiment is familiar to many

---

<sup>16</sup> Cai and Lee, "Intergenerational communication," 237.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

Asian American communities. According to a study from 2007, only “9% [of Asian Americans] sought any type of mental health services over one year compared with 18% of the general U.S. population”.<sup>20</sup> Some of these barriers to seeking services include the feeling of moral failure or weakness, a lack of knowledge about treatment options, and possible retraumatization.<sup>21</sup>

Evelyn expanded on some of the barriers that kept her from seeking mental health support services. In particular, cultural barriers ingrained in the Japanese American community seemed to impact her decision-making. She brought up Japanese sayings such as “go for broke,” and “*gaman*” (we will endure). Although these sayings can be encouraging, they can also be detrimental depending on how they are interpreted. In our interview, Evelyn admitted often living with anxiety, but lacking the language to describe it. In times when she could have used extra external support, these Japanese cultural messages partly encouraged her to adopt the mindset of, “I’m just gonna keep pushing through this,” or “Everyone has their problems.”

It was not until college that Evelyn explicitly confronted mental health. In her first year at Cal, Evelyn was physically assaulted by a stranger. “[He] punched and kicked and he ran off,” Evelyn said. “That event kind of triggered me to really think about [mental health] because it was impacting my life a lot more.” After this incident, Evelyn tried to move on with life as usual, but she realized the assault had a big impact on her. That was the first time she sought out formal mental health services.

Until she started studying social work in college, Evelyn’s awareness of mental health was connected to her immediate emotions. She was aware of sadness and anger when it arose,

---

<sup>20</sup> Nina Bai, “Addressing Asian and Pacific Islander mental health in the U.S.,” *Stanford Medicine News Center*, May 31, 2022, <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2022/05/asian-mental-health-panel.html>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

but she didn't necessarily know why she, or the people around her, felt the way they did. Yuhuan Xie, MD, the clinical director of specialty mental health at Asian Health Services, attested to this experience based on her work with patients in Oakland, Chinatown. Her patients often express physical or emotional complaints, but don't make the association with thought patterns or past experiences that may be manifesting in the body. "All they know is 'I cannot sleep well, I have a stomachache, I cannot get up, I was angry with my children'"<sup>22</sup> Evelyn relates her own experience, stating, "There are two pieces: talking about the experience itself, but then also talking about our emotions." Emotional vulnerability can be interpreted as weakness or deficiency in the AAPI community, which stigmatizes the first step of expressing unpleasant feelings.<sup>23</sup>

### **Emotional Socialization**

According to Ranak Trivedi, an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University, "The stigma [around mental health] is so big that people are not able to share even with their most intimate connections that they're having mental health issues".<sup>24</sup> Parents and their children share a unique, close connection because of a disproportionate power dynamic. Familial relationships are the biggest way that historical trauma can lead to intergenerational effects.<sup>25</sup> Due to parents' authority in the relationship, children are socialized by their parents' emotional behavior and regulation.<sup>26</sup> *Afterparties*, Anthony Veasna So's collection

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Cai and Lee. "Intergenerational communication," 237.

<sup>26</sup> Melanie J Zimmer-Gembeck et al, "Parent Emotional Regulation: A Meta-analytic Review of Its Association with Parenting and Child Adjustment," *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 46, no. 1 (2022): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01650254211051086>.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

of stories about the Cambodian American experience, explores the dynamics of emotional modeling and communication.

The first chapter of *Afterparties*, “Three Women of Chuck’s Donuts,” illustrates the daily life of Sothy and her two daughters, Kayley and Tevy. The chapter is set in Chuck’s Donuts, a small shop in Central California. After finding out about her husband’s infidelity, Sothy is left to raise her daughters alone, worrying constantly about the store’s unpaid loan. Then, a mysterious man starts to regularly visit the donut shop. The two girls have an immediate curiosity about the man but eventually discover his abusive tendencies. By the end of the chapter, the three women reflect on the weight they have all been carrying, based on the men who have disappointed and preoccupied them. This chapter demonstrates the influence of emotional modeling and the empowerment that comes with empathy, even through painful realizations.

Both daughters reflect on how their parents’ failed relationship has influenced their perception of the world. So writes, “Tevy wonders if her mother has ever loved someone romantically, if her mother is even capable of reaching beyond the realm of survival if her mother has ever been granted any freedom from worry...”<sup>27</sup> At sixteen years old, Tevy is not only expressing worries for her mother’s emotional well-being, but also for how that might connect to her own future. In conversation with her younger sister, she says, “....Maybe it’s harder for Khmer people to know how to love. Maybe we’re just bad at it—loving, you know...”<sup>28</sup> As a result of her father’s betrayal and her mother’s abandonment, Tevy feels disillusioned about her own capacity for love and connection.

Four years younger than Tevy, Kayley also wonders, “...If her mother misses her father,

---

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021), 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

and, if not, whether this means that Kayley's feelings of gloom, of isolation, or longing, are less valid than she believes"<sup>29</sup>. Her mother has not been open with her emotions, leaving both Kayley and Tevy to make assumptions about her experience. The two ultimately feel disconnected from their parents, anxious about their future relationships, and emotionally invalidated.

So also hints at the biological component of intergenerational trauma and emotional learning. He writes, "[Kayley] wonders if the violent chasm between her parents also exists within her own body, because isn't she just a mix of all those antithetical genes"<sup>30</sup>. From a biological sense, there is evidence for this feeling of violence and antithesis within the body. Maternal stress is linked to an increased risk for mental health disorders for the unborn child.<sup>31</sup> This is believed to be connected to the functions of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis.<sup>32</sup> In the HPA, epigenetic shifts in the glucocorticoid GR gene in utero determine cortisol diffusion for the unborn child, impacting how they respond to stressful events.<sup>33</sup> If a child does not understand the genetic mechanism of intergenerational trauma, they can feel alienated, broken, and confused by their mental health struggles. Although they were not the ones to directly survive the event, they still face consequences which can be hard to reconcile with.

At the end of the story, the three women of Chuck's Donuts are forced to confront the mysterious, Chinese-Khmer man that has baffled them throughout the chapter. In a violent confrontation between him and his wife, Sothy steps in, knocking him unconscious with a frying pan. As they drag the man outside to take him to the hospital, the three women share an unspoken empathy and understanding. In one unified voice So writes, "Yes, they think, we know

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Delan Devakumar et al, "The intergenerational effects of war on the health of children," 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

this man. We've carried him our whole lives".<sup>34</sup> As Khmer women, they compassionately understand that this burden is something they have all had to endure; therefore, they are never alone. As they physically share the weight of this stranger's body, metaphorically, the three women reach a collective understanding of the emotional weight they share every day. In this example of a parent-to-child emotional dynamic, this moment of intergenerational compassion has occurred without any verbal communication, demonstrating the different forms that emotional vulnerability can take.

### **Intergenerational Communication**

As demonstrated in "Three Women of Chuck's Donuts," intergenerational communication can transpire in many ways and isn't limited to verbal communication. Nevertheless, intergenerational communication is incredibly challenging because of the dynamic between a direct survivor and a descendant. In order to facilitate empathetic healing spaces that serve everyone, Both the perspectives of survivors and descendants must be understood. In this section, I continue to employ *Afterparties* and Evelyn Tanaka's interview to bring awareness to both sides of this intergenerational dynamic.

#### *The Survivor's Perspective*

In the short story, "Generational Differences", a mother revisits experiencing the 1989 Cleveland School Shooting at which five Southeast Asian elementary school students were killed in Stockton, California. Now, in 2000, she takes her nine-year-old son to her classroom at his request, so he can ensure "it was safe in case of future attacks".<sup>35</sup> While he investigates her

---

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories*, 29.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 244.

classroom, she reflects on the sudden emotions that arise. “A number of times I wanted to yell at you to be quiet, but I stopped myself. I wanted you to have closure. To forget these ugly feelings”.<sup>36</sup> Anger is one of the first emotions that emerge for the mother, but she quickly realizes that it is due to her protective love for her innocent son. She is angry because he is pushing into her past, which contains so much pain. “Why would anyone want to relive *that*,” she asks at the beginning of the story.<sup>37</sup>

For the Japanese American community, Nisei often withhold their memories of the incarceration camps from their children as a protective measure. One Nisei expressed, “I want them to grow up straight and tall and beautiful as they can, without all the sadness, sort of branding them that they are different”.<sup>38</sup> Although an act of love, this lack of transparency can be detrimental for direct descendants of the incarceration camps. They have an obscure understanding of their past, but their offspring still inherit the consequences of low self-esteem, pressure to succeed, and desires to assimilate due to their parent’s experiences.<sup>39</sup> Since cultural humility is not always prioritized in psychiatry and psychology, descendants can feel shame around these struggles because they lack a recognition of its connection to historical contexts.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the survivors don’t share their stories with their children because they can’t even make sense of their pasts. They may lack the vocabulary or emotional literacy to express their experiences, many of which may transcend beyond language. For example, one of Evelyn’s grandparents kept a journal documenting the majority of his life story, yet, out of all the entries he only had a few sentences about the incarceration camps. Cambodian American scholar,

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 237.

<sup>38</sup> Donna K. Nagata et al, “Processing Cultural Trauma: Intergenerational Effects of the Japanese American Incarceration,” *Journal of Social Issues* 71 no. 2 (2015): 362.

<sup>39</sup> Nagata et al. “Long-term Effects,” 20.

<sup>40</sup> Nina Bai, “Addressing Asian and Pacific Islander mental health in the U.S.,” 3.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

Khatharya Um points out, "...if they themselves cannot make meaning of their experiences, they cannot hope that anyone else would fully understand them".<sup>41</sup> Of those of Japanese descent who were incarcerated during the war, two-thirds were American citizens.<sup>42</sup> An experience like this can completely upend conceptions of justice, rights, and humanity. Traumatic incidents like this can be difficult to conceptualize individually, to a degree that feels pointless to attempt to express it to another person who didn't directly experience it. This feeling of powerlessness can lead to generational silence.

Revisiting the mother's story in "Generational Differences", she apologizes to her son for her anger. She explains, "I didn't have the words to say those years were never the sole explanation of anything—that I've always considered the genocide to be the sources of all our problems and none of them".<sup>43</sup> Because their sense of humanity has been so radically shaken, survivors can question their basic assumptions about "community, life, and faith, about the orderliness of the universe, and the explicability of things".<sup>44</sup> It's difficult to distinguish between areas of one's life because of trauma's overarching influence. It's overwhelming to express these sentiments in words, especially to a child who they wish to keep safe from a painful past that might envelop them.

Overall, the survivor's choice to guard their story can be understood from a foundation of love and fear for future generations. They may feel a need to protect their children from the pain that they had no choice to endure, or they may not possess the language to fathom their own pain. While choosing to silently endure these memories may seem like moving past them,

---

<sup>41</sup> Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 191.

<sup>42</sup> Nagata et al. "Long-term Effects," 20.

<sup>43</sup> Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories*, 255.

<sup>44</sup> Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows*, 183.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

it can have detrimental impacts on one's children, who are left with emotions, anxieties, and struggles for seemingly no reason.

*The Child's Perspective*

Although parents may not explicitly share their feelings with their children, the child is still present, absorbing subliminal messages and emotions. Stephanie Foo is a Malaysian American radio producer and author, who talks about her journey with complex PTSD stemming from the violent abuse she experienced as a child. Her parents were born during a guerrilla war, the Malayan Emergency. In Foo's book, *What My Bones Know*, she writes, "But even at a young age, without understanding what these things were, we sensed them as we kicked our way through the currents of our day. We could feel it looming somewhere large and dark beneath everything, our parents' pain."<sup>45</sup> Evelyn resonates with sensing her parent's underlying turmoil. She recalls taking a family trip to Topaz, the incarceration camp that imprisoned her grandparents during World War II. What she remembers most from the trip is her dad's palpable anger. "[He told] us we had every right to be angry at this place," Evelyn remarked. Seeing her dad hold this anger without knowing how to navigate it showed Evelyn a glimpse into the long-term impacts of incarceration on emotional well-being. Yet, without the context of his parents' imprisonment, her dad's anger may have appeared random or even targeted at his children. In a paper about intergenerational communication, Cai and Lee assert that without open communication, parents are left to suffer while their children speculate why their parents treat them this way.<sup>46</sup> This causes additional pain and isolation for both generations.

---

<sup>45</sup> Kendall Ciesemier and Stephanie Foo, "The Impact of Intergenerational Immigrant Trauma," May 19, 2022, in *At Liberty Podcast*, produced by Kendall Ciesemier, <https://wp.api.aclu.org/podcast/the-impact-of-intergenerational-immigrant-trauma>.

<sup>46</sup> Cai and Lee. "Intergenerational communication," 234.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

Once children sense their parents' pain, feelings of guilt and pity can overcome them, hindering their ability to explore their own emotional needs. One of the characters in *Afterparties*, Rithy, talks about his strained relationship with his drug-addicted father. Referring to his deceased father, he says, "He'd been through so much, I still feel like I owe him. The guy had endured genocide to get me here. The guy had lost his wife. He deserved a break, even from being my dad".<sup>47</sup> As a survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide, it's undeniable that Rithy's father had endured unspeakable trauma. However, after his dad's funeral, Rithy is left without a mom or a dad and must grapple with his own trauma. Although it's valuable that Rithy humanizes his father, he doesn't make adequate space for his own emotions. Instead of validating his emotions, he is overly apologetic for his dad's actions.

A similar situation comes to light in the chapter, "We Would've Been Princes!". The story takes place in the context of a wedding. The bride's maid of honor, Monica, chastises Marlon, one of the cousins invited to the event. Speaking to Marlon's younger brother, Monica yells, "[Marlon] was making hella money, and then he got anxiety and depressed or whatever, and then he got addicted to drugs." She continues, "It's the money, I swear. Like, do you think our parents had 'anxieties' when they lived through the genocide? No, they worried about fucking surviving".<sup>48</sup> Monica directs her anger towards Marlon despite it being a reflection of her frustrations towards the circumstances that their parents had to endure and her own lack of emotional support.. Monica and Marlon were both raised by survivors of the Khmer genocide, but they have chosen to cope with their emotions in different ways. When Marlon's brother attempts to explain Marlon's mental health struggles and substance addiction, Monica retorts,

---

<sup>47</sup> Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories*, 132.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

“We’re *all* messed up!...But when you have money, you start focusing on every little way you’ve been fucked over. And meanwhile, the rest of us *deal*”.<sup>49</sup> Monica accuses Marlon of purposefully seeking out a harmful lifestyle—she doesn’t see that he is also trying to survive through pain, admittedly in a dissimilar context to his parents. Monica’s mentality of “the rest of us *deal*” is similar to the Japanese sayings that Evelyn mentioned, such as “we will endure”, emphasizing a focus on living with the consequences of trauma versus actively confronting or healing from them. Evidently, these sayings can keep people trapped in cycles of suffering, unsure how to break out and express their pain. “We Would’ve Been Princes!” demonstrates the harms of comparing generational suffering. Depicted through Marlon and Monica’s disconnect, comparison enacts barriers to open, empathetic communication that seeks to understand differences instead of placing them in a hierarchy.

Evelyn has witnessed firsthand the harm of comparing traumas from her social work. This can happen intergenerationally or between different communities. Evelyn explains, “Everyone suffers and it’s important to acknowledge how our suffering, no matter what it is, impacts us.” When children compare their struggles to their parents’ experiences, there can be an immense sense of pressure to live up to a certain expectation. Evelyn resonates with this pressure, expressing that it was learned mainly in unspoken ways. “Once I started going to Day of Remembrances, a lot of the themes tend to be ‘never forget,’” Evelyn recalled. While remembrance can be a powerful tool of healing, it can also perpetuate harmful dynamics in which one generation’s oppression matters more than the other’s. As a child, this comparison can cause debilitating pressure to succeed and break the cycle of harm.

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma  
Pressure and Fear*

This pressure is discussed in the story, “Superking Son Scores Again” which describes the story of a Cambodian badminton team and their struggling coach. Speaking for the players, the narrator says, “...when the birdies zipped by it shattered the force field suffocating us, the one composed of our parents’ unreasonable expectations, their paranoia that our world could crumble at a moment’s notice and send us back to where we started, starving and poor and subject to a genocidal dictator”.<sup>50</sup> The children of these survivors have begun to notice how their parent’s expectations are derived from a fear of reliving the poverty, famine, and insecurity during the auto-genocide. Due to this anxiety, they urge their children to work even harder, so that they will never have to experience those conditions.

Evelyn also reflected on habits informed by the fear of returning to the incarceration camps. In 1942, Executive Order 9066 led to many Japanese Americans losing their properties and businesses, having nothing to return to when the war was over.<sup>51</sup> In Evelyn’s family, this experience has manifested itself in hoarding habits. Experiencing immense, uncontrollable loss during wartime continues to influence the habits of Japanese Americans today.

This pressure and fear can cause descendants of survivors to feel a complete lack of autonomy over how they choose to live their lives. In the Cambodian Buddhist tradition, ancestors’ souls can be reborn into the living as a form of reincarnation. Anthony Veasna So uses this as a metaphor to describe the weight of intergenerational trauma. In his story, “Somaly Serey, Serey Somaly,” the young protagonist, Serey, is believed to be carrying the soul of Somaly, a family member she never met. Somaly had survived the Cambodian genocide, but

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, 365.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

subsequently committed suicide in the United States. Serey ruminates, “I wonder how it’ll feel to be rid of Somaly, to have complete ownership of my life, to move through the world without half my energy drained by memories not even mine, and then I fall asleep”.<sup>52</sup> So uses reincarnation in her book to describe the feeling of being split between two lives while carrying the weight of another person’s trauma. Although Serey did not experience the genocide herself, she feels the emotional turmoil of Somaly’s spirit inside her, illustrating the way in which intergenerational trauma is passed down through biology and memory. Serey is unable to claim full possession of her life until she lets Somaly go.

Many descendants of these traumatic experiences may wish they could rid themselves of their memories, just as Serey wishes to be free of Somaly to gain “...freedom from the dreams of the dead”.<sup>53</sup> However, these experiences cannot simply disappear. Furthermore, erasing their discussion would invalidate decades of struggle, resilience, and memory work. For the Japanese American community, events such as Day of Remembrance demonstrate how memory can be one step in healing. In safe spaces, communities can collectively support one another as they seek to restore autonomy over their lives.

## **Healing As Communities**

The healing journey is not linear<sup>54</sup>, especially when pursued in the community, instead of individually. As a social worker, Evelyn has studied how to remediate trauma extensively. To end the interview, we talked about how to create safe, intergenerational spaces for healing. While

---

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Veasna So, *Afterparties: Stories*, 226.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 238.

<sup>54</sup> Adele M. Hayes et al., “Change Is Not Always Linear: The Study of Nonlinear and Discontinuous Patterns of Change in Psychotherapy,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 27 no. 6 (2007): 716, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2007.01.008>.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

strategies such as intentional prompting and supportive reactions were effective, Evelyn points out that the most important element she has continually returned to is having a reliable community. She remarks, “I think that the biggest way to heal from trauma is to promise to be in community and to be connected to others.”

As previously observed in parent-to-child relationships, opening up about emotions and traumatic experiences can be very difficult, and requires a high level of safety and patience. This includes emotional, financial, and physical safety. Stephanie Foo reflects, “...If they don’t have support, if they don’t have resources and they’re still struggling financially and with health and all of this from like our broken racist systems, how are they ever supposed to heal and thrive and feel safe?” She adds. “In order to heal this mental wound, we need to care for each other better as a society, as a country”.<sup>55</sup> It’s important to note that these material needs must be met before marginalized populations can even consider emotional well-being, which may otherwise be viewed as a privilege.

This is prioritized in organizations like the Radical Healing Collective. In this framework, healing is achieved not by individual means, but through “collective moments for justice”.<sup>56</sup> In this space, the link between justice and wellness is revealed, and healing becomes “moving beyond the goal of merely surviving within an oppressive society to thriving”.<sup>57</sup> When the goal is shifted from individualistic survival to collective flourishing, it eliminates any need to compare oppression because everyone is taken care of. Reflecting back on “We Would’ve Been Princes!”, under a radical healing framework, Monica would see that her liberation is

---

<sup>55</sup> Ciesemier, Kendall, and Stephanie Foo, “The Impact of Intergenerational Immigrant Trauma.” 16:34-17:06.

<sup>56</sup> Cai and Lee. “Intergenerational communication,” 240.

<sup>57</sup> Bryana French et al., “Toward a Psychological Framework of Radical Healing in Communities of Color,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 47, no. 6 (2019): 19.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma* inseparably tied to both her parents' and Marlon's relief from cycles of trauma.

Another aspect of safety is the recognition of individual needs and pace. Exploring the perspectives of both survivors and descendants recognizes the individual consideration needed to thrive in collectivity. Evelyn shares, "Growing up for me, and even probably currently now, sometimes when I express[ed] emotions to certain people in my family, it [was] not always received in a way that's supportive. Normally, it results in more yelling or turning it around." In that sense, safe spaces should be ready to accept people's experiences without dismissing or invalidating them. For parents or direct survivors, this can look like resisting the urge to compare oppression and, instead, approaching their child's emotional experience with curiosity. For children, this can mean attempting to understand the triggering experiences when a parent's negative emotions arise, while also holding them accountable for impact. This type of work happens at an individual's own pace. Evelyn emphasized, "The person doesn't have to answer if they don't want to. That's part of the safety aspect."

When people are ready to process together, Evelyn lays out several options to share experiences, such as writing them down, openly verbally sharing, or being a listening ear for someone else. She makes it clear that verbally sharing trauma is not the only way to heal. Being together—while spending time outside, making art, or volunteering—can be life-changing.<sup>58</sup> This type of self-love helps people remember that their trauma does not define who they are.

Ultimately, Evelyn Tanaka's oral history and Anthony Veasna So's *Afterparties*, demonstrate the importance of empathetic understanding of the mechanisms of historical, intergenerational trauma and emotional socialization, especially in parent-to-child dynamics. Through the real-life experiences Evelyn shared as a *Yonsei* Japanese American and So's

---

<sup>58</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, 35.

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*

fictionalized accounts of the Cambodian American diaspora, lessons are illuminated from the perspective of survivors and their descendants. These experiences frame a potential path towards compassionate intergenerational communication and radical healing within the Asian American community, and for other marginalized populations who have endured systemic oppression. Intergenerational communication facilitated in safe, intentional spaces has the potential to deconstruct stigma around mental health and identity for the Asian American community. To end with some wise words from Evelyn's presentation, "We are healers".<sup>59</sup> Just as trauma does not exist in isolation, healing is an interdependent process as well.

---

<sup>59</sup> Evelyn Tanaka, "Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma," interview by Zora Uyeda-Hale, 2024.

Bibliography

- Bai, Nina. "Addressing Asian and Pacific Islander mental health in the U.S." *Stanford Medicine News Center*, May 31, 2022, <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2022/05/asian-mental-health-panel.html>.
- Cai, Jing, and Richard M. Lee. "Intergenerational Communication about Historical Trauma in Asian American Families." *Adversity and Resilience Science* 3, no. 3 (2022): 233–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42844-022-00064-y>.
- Ciesemier, Kendall, and Stephanie Foo. "The Impact of Intergenerational Immigrant." May 29, 2022, in *At Liberty Podcast*, produced by Kendall Ciesemier. <https://www.aclu.org/podcast/the-impact-of-intergenerational-immigrant-trauma>.
- Devakumar, Delan, Marion Birch, David Osrin, Egbert Sondorp, and Jonathan C. K. Wells. "The Intergenerational Effects of War on the Health of Children." *BMC Medicine* 12 (2014): 57. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1741-7015-12-57>.
- French, Bryana, Jioni Lewis, Della Mosley, Hector Adames, Nayeli Chavez-Dueñas, Grace Chen, and Helen Neville. "Toward a Psychological Framework of Radical Healing in Communities of Color." *The Counseling Psychologist* 48 no. 1 (2019): 14-46. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0011000019843506>.
- Hayes, Adele M., Jean-Philippe Laurenceau, Greg Feldman, Jennifer L. Strauss, and LeeAnn Cardaciotto. "Change Is Not Always Linear: The Study of Nonlinear and Discontinuous Patterns of Change in Psychotherapy." *Clinical Psychology Review* 27, no. 6 (2007): 715–723. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2007.01.008>.
- History.com Editors. "Japanese Internment Camps: WWII, Life & Conditions." History Channel. Last modified April 17, 2024. <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/japanese-american-relocation>.
- Jr, Joseph Biden. "Day of Remembrance of Japanese American Incarceration during World War II." The White House. Last modified February 18, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/02/18/day-of-remembrance-of-japanese-american-incarceration-during-world-war-ii/#:~:text=Eighty%20years%20ago%2C%20on%20February,chapters%20in%20our%20Nation%27s%20history.>
- Nagata, Donna K., Steven J. Trierweiler, and Rebecca Talbot. "Long-term effects of internment during early childhood on third-generation Japanese Americans." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 69 no. 1 (1999): 19-29. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080378>
- Nagata, Donna K., Kim, J.H.J. and Nguyen, T.U. 2015. *Processing Cultural Trauma:*

*Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma*  
*Intergenerational Effects of the Japanese American Incarceration. Journal of*  
*Social Issues*, 71: 356-370. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12115>

“Search the Compensation and Reparations for the Evacuation, Relocation, and Internment Index (Redress Case Files).” National Archives and Records Administration.  
[https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/redress#:~:text=The%20Office%20of%20Redress%20Administration%20\(ORA\)%20was%20established%20in%201988,in%20ternment%20during%20World%20War%20II.](https://www.archives.gov/research/japanese-americans/redress#:~:text=The%20Office%20of%20Redress%20Administration%20(ORA)%20was%20established%20in%201988,in%20ternment%20during%20World%20War%20II.)

So, Anthony Veasna. *Afterparties: Stories*. New York: HarperCollins, 2021.

Sucheng Chan, “Cambodians in the United States: Refugees, Immigrants, American Ethnic Minority,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (September 3, 2015), <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-317>.

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989.

Tanaka, Evelyn. “Breaking the Generational Silence: Collective Healing from Historical Trauma.” Interview by Zora Uyeda-Hale, 2024.  
<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1odEDlvM21hiYWJGv5Tvo3v9Y3ZqyhFHOJe7-R0zSjds/edit?usp=sharing>.

Um, Khatharya. *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora*. New York, USA: New York University Press, 2015.  
<https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479804733.001.0001>.

University of Minnesota. “Cambodia | Holocaust and Genocide Studies | College of Liberal Arts.” College of Liberal Arts,  
<https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/cambodia>.

Zimmer-Gembeck, Melanie J., Jennifer Rudolph, Jessica Kerin, and Galit Bohadana-Brown. “Parent Emotional Regulation: A Meta-analytic Review of Its Association with Parenting and Child Adjustment.” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 46, no. 1 (2022): 63-82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01650254211051086>.