Scholarship During the Coronavirus Pandemic

As a junior scholar filled with the anxiety of a fall 2020 tenure review and a first book publication, I found the question, “how has the Covid-19 pandemic changed how I am thinking about my scholarship?” perfectly timed. Finding time to commit to research at a small liberal-arts college focused on teaching is always difficult. But after the coronavirus forced my college into the virtual world of online teaching and my carefully planned and Socratic-method based classes into Zoom-, Slack-, and Yellow Dig-friendly formats, it seemed what little time I had been able to dedicate to scholarship quickly dissipated. The commitment of the online transition and the necessary daily obsession with my computer screen had undermined my grand research plan as I struggled to establish a productive and effective daily work routine while wearing my extremely comfortable sweatpants and aimlessly petting my slightly overweight and incessantly purring cat.

To help address the stress of the moment and the urgent need just to survive the semester and minimize the damage, my colleagues and I sought to support one another by emailing words of encouragement, motivation, and humor. The more disciplined among us sent articles that emphasized self-help, self-care, self-love, and offered sage advice about teaching, leading, and caring for students during a national crisis. All of us worried about the potential for severe mental and emotional strain.¹ Our administration and health professionals also sent statements of support that reiterated the message to just do what it takes to survive and to “Be kind to yourself and your students; everybody is struggling.” These messages gained importance when our roles as educators, mentors, and scholars were devalued on the national stage. Although educators at every level proved critical in maintaining a sense of normalcy for millions of young people across the nation and helping them process the pandemic, we were somehow omitted from the national conversation about “essential” workers. Rather, teachers and college professors faced criticism for subpar virtual classes, and unhappy families lobbed lawsuits at institutions of higher learning for failing to

¹ Mindi Thompson, “Advice for Faculty Members in a Turbulent Time,” Insidehighered.com, March 19, 2020, last accessed May 1, 2020, https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/03/19/how-faculty-members-can-best-cope-stresses-covid-19-opinion; Bryan Alexander, “How the Coronavirus Will Change Faculty Life Forever,” The Chronicle of Higher Education, May 11, 2020, last accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-the-Coronavirus-Will/248750.

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provide the promised “college experience.” Although fortunate to still have jobs and consistent paychecks at a time when the unemployment rate skyrocketed to fourteen percent (almost sixteen percent for African Americans), educators silently shouldered the loss, the burden, and the trauma of the moment for themselves and their families, students, colleagues, and institutions while continuing to teach.

This was the new normal: the world in crisis, the country without promise, and education forsaken for “experience.” As the semester has finally concluded and Americans are struggling to balance the need to feed their families with the desire to keep them safe, I wonder about the importance and relevance of my scholarship. As the world struggles with the realities of life and loss, does my work on race, gender, citizenship, and the Amerasian children of the Vietnam War—the progeny of U.S. servicemen and Vietnamese women—really matter? In the middle of a global pandemic, does it resonate with contemporary issues and is it relevant?

As I write this, over 115,000 Americans have died from the coronavirus, more than were killed in the U.S. wars in Korea and Vietnam, and the September 11th terrorist attacks combined. The demographics of the dead have further exposed the racial and economic disparities in a country that has not yet fulfilled the promises of democracy on so many levels. People of color are dying from Covid-19 at disproportionately higher rates than white Americans. The mortality rate for African Americans currently hovers around 50.3 per 100,000 people, meaning that one in every 1,850 black Americans has died from the disease, while the death rate for white Americans sits at 20.7 or one in every 4,400. The disparities are worse in certain states. In Kansas, where African Americans compose 5.6% of the population, they make up 30% of the coronavirus deaths. Native Americans have faced an equally daunting mortality disparity as they struggle with access to health care and resources. Systemic economic and social inequality defines the racial divides, described by Wichita City Council member Brandon Johnson as “housing, wealth, and health.” Still, some Americans, encouraged by President Donald Trump, have taken to the streets to protest the stay-at-home orders intended to slow the spread of the virus. The most disgruntled have armed themselves and stood on the steps and in the halls of state capitols asserting their democratic right to dissent and demanding their “right” to work, play, and personal liberty.

Yet, this is precisely why my research does still matter. Ongoing concerns about race, identity, and inequity in the United States ensures my scholarship remains both timely and relevant. The debate over race and rights, the systemic

2. APM Research Lab Staff, “The Color of the Coronavirus: Covid-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the United States,” May 27, 2020, last accessed May 27, 2020, https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race; Ed Pilkington, “Black Americans Dying of Covid-19 at three times the rate of white people,” The Guardian, May 20, 2020; Chance Swaim, “Kansas has largest racial disparity in COVID-19 death rates, study finds,” The Wichita Eagle, May 13, 2020.
3. Swaim, “Kansas has largest racial disparity.”
inequality, and the anti-government sentiment erupting across the country today are reminiscent of the Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement eras in which my research resides. In fact, similar debates framed the questions of race, gender, and citizenship for the Amerasians of Vietnam, shaping the way that white, black, and Asian Americans perceived the Amerasians through the lenses of race and nation and how they understood themselves in a country still dedicated to difference.

The coronavirus pandemic has not touched every community equally. In fact, it has revealed and exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities especially among immigrant populations and communities of color. I wonder and I worry about the communities I study, both in the United States and Vietnam, whose histories of poverty, racialization, and marginalization make them even more vulnerable and susceptible to disease. The approximately 30,000 Amerasians who immigrated to the United States as refugees after the Vietnam War and who currently live in the United States, some as Americans, are likely victims of the nation’s current racial, social, and economic inequities.4 Amerasians like Jimmy Miller, a well-known Amerasian advocate and activist and the founder of Amerasians Without Borders, have made great strides in the United States. Yet, reports of the challenges Amerasians faced upon arrival and their subsequent assimilation into U.S. society, often stunted by language, education, and cultural barriers, seem to outweigh the stories of success. Problems within the refugee resettlement program exacerbated issues of racial and national identity, mental health, and the physical and sexual abuse some Amerasians experienced during their immigration experience.5 Feelings of abandonment by their American fathers and their Vietnamese families, coupled with their ostracism from Vietnamese society and the denial of U.S. citizenship, further compounded these issues. Historian Allison Varzally notes that although the Amerasians shared some of the same challenges faced by other refugee and immigrant populations, the absence of “cultural and economic resources

4. By 1994, 69,168 Amerasians and their family members had emigrated to the United States as refugees through the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act. Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2004 Immigrants, Immigrants Admitted by Type and Selected Class of Admission, FY 1986–2004, last accessed March 23, 2013, http://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2004-0. Official naturalization statistics for FY 1991–2003 lists only region and country of birth. Assuming that Amerasians counted under the Asian region and the Vietnam country statistics, it is impossible to identify how many Amerasians became naturalized U.S. citizens. Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, FY 1991–2003, last accessed March 23, 2015, www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2003-1.

5. Thomas Bass, Vietname rica: The War Comes Home (New York, 1996); Donald A. Ranard and Douglas F. Gilzow, “The Amerasians,” America Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement, no. 4, June 1989, Folder 1, Box 1, Amerasian Resettlement Reports, 1988–1989, Van le files on Southeast Asian refugees. MS-SEA012, Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, CA (hereafter UCI Special Collections); Chung Hoang Chuong and Le Van, The Amerasians from Vietnam: A California Study (Folsom, CA, 1994), 58.
provided by a common ethnic community” complicated their experience.6 According to Historian Trin Yarborough, the Amerasians have faced the daunting challenge of first surviving the war in Vietnam, and then their lives in America where “they still have never been granted U.S. citizenship, despite the fact that being the child of an American was a requirement of their immigrating.”7 Today the unique Amerasian immigration experience has manifested in the social and economic exclusion that results from minimal rates of education, illiteracy, low-income jobs, and housing.8

Equally concerning is the effect of the pandemic on the approximately 400 Amerasians still living in Vietnam. Even before the coronavirus, the Trump administration’s rejection of the globalism that has structured the international environment for two hundred years and informed the nation’s approach to domestic problems and processes has had worrisome implications for global communities of color including the Amerasians in Vietnam. While a few Amerasians have been able to rise above their exclusion from Vietnamese society wrought by their race and paternity, by all reports, the majority who remain in Vietnam continue to face economic discrimination, social isolation, and struggle.9 Additionally, I wonder how the thousands of Amerasians deported to Vietnam under the Trump administration as “individuals who pose a threat to national security, public safety and border security,” are faring as a result of the coronavirus.10 Reports detail Vietnam’s incredible success in “crushing” the coronavirus since identifying its first two cases in late January; they contrast that nation’s strict and swift lockdown of major cities, quarantine, and contact tracing and testing with the lackadaisical U.S. response.11 Nonetheless, medical

6. Allison Varzally, *Children of Reunion: Vietnamese Adoptions and the Politics of Family Migrations* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017), 114; also see, Joel P. Rhodes, *The Vietnam War in American Childhood* (Athens, GA, 2019), 202–203.

7. Only thirty-two percent of Amerians arriving in the United States had information about their fathers and ninety-eight percent of those who immigrated were unproductive in their father searches. “Amerasian Families and American Fathers; Considerations for Responses to Tracing Requests,” InterAction Amerasian Resettlement Program, Box 20, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center records, MS-SEA004, UCI Special Collections; Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam War* (Washington, D.C., 2005), 271.

8. Rhodes, *The Vietnam War*, 209.

9. See the websites for Amerasians Without Borders, https://amerasianswithoutborders.us/; and, Father Founded, http://www.fatherfounded.org/plb/wp_8c23ed9.html.

10. As of 2019 the Trump administration had deported approximately 7000 Vietnamese and Amerasians. Simon Denyer, “Thousands of Vietnamese, including children of U.S. troops, could be deported under new policy,” *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2018; Michael Tatarksi, “Why is the U.S. Deporting Protected Vietnamese Immigrants?” *The Diplomat*, June 5, 2018; Shannon Dooling, “40 Years After the Vietnam War, Some Refugees Face Deportation Under Trump,” *National Public Radio*, March 4, 2019, last accessed January 5, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2019/03/04/699177071/40-years-after-the-vietnam-war-some-refugees-face-deportation-under-trump.

11. Chris Humphrey, “Vietnam Crushed the Coronavirus outbreak, But Now Faces Severe Economic Test,” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2020; Anna Jones, “Coronavirus. How ‘Overreaction’ Made Vietnam a Virus Success,” *BBC News*, May 15, 2020; Patrick Winn, “Is Vietnam the Coronavirus-Fighting Champ of the World?,” *PRI*, May 7, 2020.
experts, political actors, and scholars continue to rigorously debate the validity of the country’s coronavirus reports, the methods it has used to suppress the virus, and concerns about its most vulnerable populations including the Amerasians, who, by all accounts, continue to exist in the liminal space between citizenship/nationality and race.

Finally, I ponder what it means to write about the Vietnam War, a conflict that is embedded into the U.S. psyche as a lingering national trauma, during another national trauma? In the first weeks of the state-issued quarantine in response to the coronavirus, I spoke about this question of trauma with a psychologist from the Veteran’s Administration. He likened the national trauma of the coronavirus to the Vietnam War itself and explained how the moment had become a trigger for some war veterans whose memories of war were now informing their responses to the virus. Only days earlier, the Trump administration had militarized the coronavirus, framing it as the “silent enemy,” and the public health crisis of the pandemic as “a battle to be won” by U.S. doctors and frontline health care workers, whom he called “heroes.” I thought about the effect of such rhetoric on our veterans. Militarizing the public health system forces a reconceptualization of what it means in the United States to “serve and sacrifice” and challenges us to consider why even in the face of a humanitarian crisis, it is necessary to militarize our discourse and to rely on the tools of war. Importantly, it also requires a deeper consideration by scholars of the ways in which trauma, its triggers, and consequences, infiltrate our own understanding of historical moments and events.

What does it mean to write about Vietnam when it feels like the world is unraveling? I assume that my parents and grandparents who lived through the tumultuous decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s experienced then many of the fears and anxieties I feel today. They, too, likely felt as if the world was falling down around them, and that authoritarian forces both in the United States and around the world threatened their very survival. Popular culture—music, movies, books—reflected the dystopian sentiment that permeated the minds of many Americans across generations reflecting the pain and passion of the period. How did the moment shape the words of those who wrote about Vietnam during Vietnam? Michael Herr’s Dispatches (1968) was eye-opening, invigorating, page turning, and deeply flawed. Critics have argued that Herr’s detailed perspective of the grunt “experience” in Vietnam lacked the objectivity and depth that distance often provides. However, David Halberstam’s The Best and the Brightest (1972) offered a scathing and still relevant critique of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia and the idealistically irresponsible elite policymakers that shaped it. Halberstam’s ability to weave together the domestic and international factors with the lives of powerful policymakers as the war in Vietnam and anti-war activism in the United States unfolded remains a much admired and

12. White House Press Conference, Daily Coronavirus Pandemic Briefing, March 16, 2020.
13. Michael Herr, Dispatches (New York, 1968); Connie Schultz, “What it was Like,” Columbia Journalism Review (September/October 2010).
difficult accomplishment. I wonder how my own positioning within our current national trauma is informing my work and how it could benefit from the distance that time will ultimately provide.

The pandemic has also forced a reconsideration of how the trauma of the moment is reshaping individual memories and thus, retellings, of the war experience. Do U.S. and Vietnamese war veterans and civilians remember the combat, loss, abandonment, victory, and defeat differently now, or are the stories, smells, sounds, and images unaffected? Much of my current book project incorporates the oral histories of Vietnam veterans and activists, U.S. political figures, and community members, as well as contributions from the Amerasians themselves. Early in the writing process I made a deliberate choice to focus on policy and hence on the U.S. and Vietnamese policymakers and U.S. community members and activists. Having carried out a few preliminary interviews with individual Amerasians, I decided that I simply could not shoulder the weight of telling their heart-wrenching stories. I remain indebted to and in admiration of those who could and have. While I expect some criticism for this choice, I hope that readers will appreciate my decision to remain as objective as possible and tell only that part of the story that I could manage responsibly. Still, as the political, racial, and economic division of our nation is laid bare by the coronavirus, and as the Trump administration actively and intentionally frames the pandemic with anti-Asian rhetoric, I wonder whether this choice was a mistake. Does my focus on the U.S. political agenda and policymaking process reinforce the grand narrative that promotes the experiences of the white patriarchal elite that has always silenced the voices and omitted the stories from below? Concerned that through my scholarship, I too, have become part of the “problem,” I anxiously grasped for the classic Amerasian works: Thomas Bass’ *Vietnamerica*, Robert McKelvey’s *The Dust of Life*, Steven DeBonis’ *Children of the Enemy* and Trin Yarborough’s *Surviving Twice*. I revisited the transnational implications of U.S. policy for the Amerasians in Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde’s 1992 article “From Dust to Gold” and Jana K. Lipman’s “The Face is the Roadmap.” I also reviewed some of the newer scholarship including Christina Elizabeth Firpo’s *The Uprooted*, Allison Varzally’s *Children of Reunion*, Joel P. Rhodes’s *The Vietnam War in American Childhood*, and Nicholas Trajano Molnar’s *American Mestizos*.14 As I reread each text, absorbing the words again

14. Bass, *Vietnamerica*; Robert McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America’s Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle, WA, 1999); Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*; Steven DeBonis, *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and Their Mothers* (Jefferson, NC, 1995); Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde, “From Dust to Gold: The Vietnamese Amerasian Experience,” in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P.P. Root (Newbury Park, CA, 1992); Jana K. Lipman, “The Face is the Roadmap: Vietnamese Amerasians in U.S. Political and Popular Culture, 1980–1988,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 14, no. 1 (2011): 33–68; Christina Elizabeth Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890–1980* (Honolulu, HI, 2016); Varzally, *Children of Reunion*; Rhodes, *The Vietnam War in American Childhood*; Nicholas Trajano Molnar, *American Mestizo: The Philippines and the Malleability of Race, 1898–1961* (Columbia, MO, 2017).
as if it were my first time seeing them, I considered how each analysis of the Amerasian experience contributed to a collective narrative about paternal abandonment and loss, social exclusion, and the hope promised by immigration to the United States. While there are plenty of ways to challenge these themes, the narrative offers astute and important critiques of the consequences of U.S. militarism in Vietnam, U.S. imperialism, and anti-Asian exclusion and racism, as well as the nation’s dereliction of duty to the abandoned children of U.S. servicemen. Collectively, this scholarship reveals the consequences, both intended and unintended, of legislation created from the emotion of war, and in the case of Vietnam, defeat. It is a reminder that the recent reversion to anti-Asian rhetoric has evolved organically from our nation’s history. Hence, by examining the intersection of policy and people, my work joins this growing body of literature to document the nation’s complicated and problematic history of race, nation, and war.

In addition to the ways the pandemic has caused me to reflect upon and reconsider my research, it has also incited an overwhelming feeling of urgency to see the book published while those whose stories fill its pages are still among the living. I found it difficult to grapple with the possibility that some of the individuals whose lives my book details and who, in some cases, have waited many years to tell their story, may not live to see the final product. Unable to rush the writing process or the publication timetable, I found myself reaching out to those I worried most about: a former Congressman in his seventies with serious health concerns and a ninety-six-year-old community leader whose age is belied by her sharp wit and zest for life. I emailed and called to check-in and to make sure they were okay and feared the unexpected discovery that they had become a victim of the virus. In this respect, the pandemic reminds me that my research is more than just scholarship. When writing the history of the living, the stories are personal.

George Floyd was murdered yesterday. Yet, I sit at my desk in this last week of May, hoping to finish this article about how the coronavirus pandemic is changing the way I think about my scholarship. George Floyd was pleading for his mother. But I can still feel the stress of an impending tenure review and the deep worry that my book project may not be good enough. George Floyd’s execution took 8 minutes and 46 seconds. And I am reminded of the ways that racism and racial inequality penetrate my daily life, minute by minute … second by second … and how they are an unseemly part of the U.S. past, present, and future. George Floyd pleaded for his life as the white police officer that slowly took his breath applied more pressure, ignoring him and the distressed cries of onlookers who watched George Floyd die.

The emotional release of centuries of violence, oppression, and dehumanization exploded in Minneapolis, MN in response to the state-sanctioned murder of George Floyd. The sounds of black anger and frustration overwhelmed social media as ordinary Americans took video and recorded audio with their cell phones, desperately seeking to capture the “key” evidence that would finally
stop the racial injustice. I reflected back to the writings and audio recordings of white suburban Americans after the 1965 Watts “riots” and the “long, hot summer” of 1967. Fifty-three years later, I heard their words mimicked by some white folks describing the protests as “riots” and the protestors as “criminals,” and insisting that African Americans were trying to start a race war. I listened to the President repeat the calls of white middle-class conservatives during the Civil Rights Movement to respond to the cries of injustice and inequality with militarized force and more police violence and to “dominate the protestors.”

I became obsessed with my social media feed. Careful not to offend those who were oblivious to the pain their words cause, I defended again and again and again the protests, the fires, and the rage, working to control my own visceral reactions to the ignorance and the racist rhetoric. I read about the sister movements erupting across Europe, Israel, Australia, and Africa where thousands marched chanting “I can’t breathe.” I watched Chinese officials note, as the Soviet Union often did during the Cold War, that Floyd’s murder was yet another example of the hypocrisy of U.S. democracy, and call on the United States to address the “social ill” of “racial discrimination against minorities.”

I embraced the kind words of friends and colleagues who sent messages of support. And I thought about my response and my responsibility.

As an African American woman, I have always struggled with the line between scholarship and activism; and how to balance the need to be fair, objective, and analytical with the urgency to speak up and act out for change. I have convinced myself that I am playing an important and necessary role in holding the United States accountable to its ideals by recording the histories that others ignored and giving voice to the stories otherwise forgotten. I have described myself as being comfortable in the background, acquiescing to the role of studying history, not making it. I have become complacent in the belief that it is enough just to be a black scholar in the academy and to be one of the few voices of color in diplomatic history. I hoped that somehow my mere presence was evidence of progress and could help make change. Since 2016, however, it has become more difficult to be black in the United States, and like many scholars of color in academia, I have poured my energy, my emotion, my rage into my classes, making sure students understand the history of our deep racial divide and the ways it manifests in all of us today. I have been more vigilant in my scholarship exploring the interracial and intraracial tensions and the racism that informed the Amerasian experience, and how perceptions of racial identity

15. “Read: President Trump’s Call with U.S. Governors over Protests,” CNN, June 1, 2020, last accessed June 4, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/01/politics/wh-governors-call-protests/index.html.
16. Sylvie Corbet and Nicolas Garriga, “Thousands Defy Ban in Paris to Protest as George Floyd Outrage Goes Global,” Time, June 2, 2020.
17. John Xie, “Chinese Officials Raise Tensions with US Over George Floyd Protests,” Voice of America, June 2, 2020, last accessed June 4, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/voa-news-china/chinese-officials-raise-tensions-us-over-george-floyd-protests.
dictated and continue to determine nationality. I have tried to further the works of diplomatic historians Carol Anderson, Mary Dudziak, Thomas Borstelmann, Penny Von Eschen, and Brenda Gayle Plummer, who, in 2003 wrote, the “domestic campaign to defuse the destructive power of racism and realize full civil rights for racial minorities can be profoundly and richly understood in the context of competitive international relations.”

The U.S. paradox of race and freedom continues to underscore U.S. domestic and foreign policies. It is evident in the confident disregard with which Officer Derek Chauvin stole George Floyd’s life and in the international response and condemnation. But it is also depicted in one line of George Floyd’s autopsy report, which stated that on April 3, 2020, the forty-six-year-old African American man arrested and killed by police for the “crime” of using a $20 counterfeit bill, tested positive for the coronavirus. Floyd’s diagnosis and his senseless murder reflect the unending daily struggle of African Americans to simply survive in this country. Whether it is access to health care or to breath, the urgency to finally and formally acknowledge that black people are human beings, deserving of human rights is immense. The nation has now entered a new realm of trauma as fears of Covid-19 have given way to the fundamental problem of racism in the United States and the increasing militarization of systems of power that marked as lawful the killings of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and the numerous other victims before George Floyd.

I write this article as the trauma continues to unfold, knowing that by the time of publication so many things will have changed. I hope they will have changed for the better. I am confident, however, that this moment demands more of me. It requires more of my scholarship. As the United States continues to fall short of the promises of its founding ideals and to resist those who struggle to hold it accountable, I am reminded of the importance of my work in further exposing the ties that bind domestic and international forces and my role and responsibility as a black woman to keep these issues alive. In my scholarship, my service, and my classroom, I must continue to elevate our understanding of race and nation for the purpose of effecting change. I hope that someday we will all understand it must be our charge. We must examine these forces of frustration, struggle, and change and document the emotions—the rage, anger, and the hope—with renewed vigor. We must capture the moment at the moment, knowing that the benefit of distance and objectivity will follow.

18. Brenda Gayle Plummer, “Introduction,” in Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1988, ed. Plummer (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 1.

19. Scott Neuman, “Medical Examiner’s Autopsy Reveals George Floyd Had Positive Test for Coronavirus,” National Public Radio, June 4, 2020, last accessed June 4, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/live-updates-protests-for-racial-justice/2020/06/04/869278494/medical-examiners-autopsy-reveals-george-floyd-had-positive-test-for-coronavirus.