

The Silence is Quiet/Loud and Un/Clear:
Deriving Meaning from Intentional Silence

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To my family and friends
for their unwavering support

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Beginnings.....	4
<i>Uncle Mack</i>	6
My Photograph.....	9
Sid.....	12
Analysis.....	17
Shared Authority.....	18
Acknowledgements.....	20
Bibliography.....	21

1. BEGINNINGS

How do memory and silence inform meaning? How do they affect what is remembered or forgotten? What choices are made in what to share and what to withhold? How do you look beyond what you see or hear? What meaning can we derive from the absence, and how do you tell a story with intentional silences? How does shared authority play a role in relationship dynamics?

Coming into oral history, I knew I wanted to share the Lao experience, specifically because these experiences are not often told or documented. Not many people know about Laos - as a country, a culture, a language, or a people, but the Vietnam War heavily impacted it along with its Southeast Asian neighbors Vietnam and Cambodia.¹ I wanted to interview the generation that was displaced from their home country and became refugees, learn what life was like before the war, and see if the social and political culture of the past has lasting impacts today.

I am a child of that generation, and my Lao cultural identity was ingrained in me at an early age, sometimes conflicting with how much I wanted to be ‘American.’ I arrived in the United States as a baby with my parents, and growing up, you notice and absorb what is around you - pop culture, food, societal norms - and you want to be like everyone else, not different. My Lao culture was ‘different,’ and I didn’t want to be seen

¹ The Vietnam War lasted between November 1, 1955 – April 30, 1975, and impacted Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. It became one of the largest proxy wars that pitted communist countries like the Soviet Union and China against the United States and other western allies. Resulting civil wars grew in Laos and Cambodia. Millions of deaths were the result of equally millions of bombs and chemical agents.

as an ‘other.’ People treated ‘other’ people differently. I did what I could to ‘assimilate,’ to take on the cultural norms of society. Cultural assimilation is defined as “the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society” (Pauls, 2023). I felt that by assimilating, I could truly become ‘American.’ Growing up, I never dismissed who I was. I think I just kept it to the side. Not until I left home for college did I recognize my individuality. Being away from home and amongst hundreds of college students, I missed my family, and I realized I took who I was for granted. It took removing me from a familiar place to make me view things from the outside looking in, for me to see. Taking Asian Studies courses was another lightbulb that made me see that my culture and identity are given as much importance as American society’s dominant culture. I began to embrace my Lao identity and wanted to understand further what that meant to the Lao people.

Lao history is very limited in scholarly study due to a political and tumultuous past that was heightened by the Vietnam War, which lasted between 1955 and 1975, but also in the short time following the so-called end of the war, or when American troops finally left the region. The Communist regimes began taking over, and with that, the environment became controlling, and people began to lose the basic freedom of choice and quality of life. These losses led many to flee the country. My interviews revealed to me that some could secure papers and flights quickly. Others had to know the right people, have financial means or be creative in their stories to avoid suspicion. The trek to cross the border into Thailand varied from walking across and showing your papers to

military security, to days hiding, waiting, and swimming across the turbulent Mekong River.²

Because these stories are personal and unique to the individual, the best way to hear and learn about them is via oral testimony. The experiences are also recent, existing within my parents' and grandparents' lifetimes. Upon learning that an oral history program at Columbia University focused on this type of data collection and giving agency to voices often forgotten, unseen, or swallowed up by louder voices, I believed it was the perfect match.

2. *UNCLE MACK*

In a Spring 2022 class with Nyssa Chow called Multimedia, we studied a few artists, including Deana Lawson. Lawson is a photographer focusing on imagery and portraits of the African-American experience. We were told to look beyond what is presented in the photograph and to look through to find the hidden meanings. We looked at photos such as *Nation*, *Sons of Cush*, and *Afriye*, but the one that stood out to me the most was *Uncle Mack*. *Uncle Mack* is a photograph of a black man, perhaps in his 50s, casually leaning against the corner wall, bare-chested except for a gold cross necklace around his neck and holding a long shotgun. A family photo is on the wall, and the

² The Mekong River measures to approximately 3100 miles long and spans 6 different countries – China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and is the third longest river in Asia. It is rich in biodiversity with more than 20,000 plant species and 850 fish species. Over 52 million people who live along the river rely on it for their livelihood.

window shades are drawn shut. What drew me to this photograph was how much it reminded me of someone I know. I can see a Lao uncle³ casually leaning against the corner wall. Instead of the gold cross necklace, there would be a Buddha necklace. Instead of being bare-chested, he would wear hunting or military fatigues and hold a shotgun. The family photograph would be that of a Lao family or Lao elder, and the rest of the backdrop of the home environment would be the same.

Lawson has been praised for showing the rawness and intimacy in her subjects, and though these are hyper-staged shots, they capture a realness that is particular to the black experience. These are not so dissimilar to the Lao experience. After leaving their home country, the Lao refugee usually enters a lower-middle-class working background with challenges on how to find a job, learn a second language, and adjust to a new country and its customs. When I look ‘beyond’ this photograph, I see Lao fathers, uncles, and grandfathers who had to take up arms to defend a country from communism or to uphold it, often with the freedom of choice not being a choice. The photograph may show just a man holding a gun juxtaposed against an average living room, which the content in and of itself can be jarring, but the irony is the further hidden meaning as to why. Why is a man casually holding a gun inside his living room? Why does this remind me of other Lao men I’ve encountered?

³ The term ‘auntie’ or ‘uncle’ does not have to always mean that someone is a relative. The term is also used to show respect and deference to an elder. In this case, it refers to an older Lao man.



Deana Lawson, *Uncle Mack*, 2016. The photo shows an older black man, bare-chested, holding a long shotgun while leaning against a corner wall of a room. In the background is a family photo and blinds drawn.

3. MY PHOTOGRAPH

The photograph of Uncle Mack that reminded me of a Lao uncle made me remember a picture I took on one of my first trips to Laos in 2016. There was a performance given by some school children, about 16-17 years of age, dancing to what I recall sounding like the Lao national anthem due to its specific patriotic cadence and rhythm. I felt both mesmerized and slightly uncomfortable. It was joyous, and the children were proud. The dance ended with the two national flags flown side by side: the Lao national flag with two red stripes enclosing a larger dark blue stripe with a white circle in the middle and the communist flag with the gold-colored hammer and sickle against a red background.⁴ These two flags seemed to be in such contrast, and this contrasted with my mixed feelings of being proud of my Lao identity but also questioning how others feel about a Communist system of government that has a long negative history. I wanted to photograph these flags side by side, so I asked the two boys to pose and to hold the flags open. This was my version of staging a shot, and I wanted others to see beyond this photograph.

⁴ The Lao flag shows a white circle representing the full moon against the blue stripe which represents the Mekong River and its prosperity. The two red stripes signify the blood that was shed for Lao independence. The flag with the gold-colored hammer and sickle against a red background is an emblem from the Soviet Union that has come to symbolize a communistic government. The hammer represents industrialized workers while the sickle represents farm workers.



Rattana Bounsouaysana, personal photo, 2016. The photo shows two teenage Lao boys in school uniform wearing dark blue shirts and black pants, barefoot, holding the Lao national flag and the hammer and sickle flag of the Communist party.

For the class assignment, I chose to experiment and get the interpretation of others without providing any other context other than what was seen in the photograph.

Alternatively, I knew I wanted to get an interpretation through one of my narrators, who could offer a more lived experience of what the picture meant to him. I did not want to

give too much information in a somewhat untraditional method that goes against oral history's care of preparing the narrator with as much information beforehand. Instead, I tried to capture the raw reaction of my narrator. It was not something I would have asked if I didn't already have an established relationship with this person, so I felt comfortable with my decision. My main questions for him were what the photograph means to him and what it could mean to others. I also wanted to understand the meaning I was projecting as well. If communism has such a long-standing negative history of control and lack of choice, do these schoolchildren know it? Am I unfairly projecting my meaning to this? I recognized three types of association: my narrator's embodied experience, my intersubjectivity, and an outsider who may not have any context or lived experience with any of it.

In the video for the Multimedia class, I weaved my narrator's response interview with scenes from that day with the students. My narrator emphasized that the song playing at the school was not the current Lao national anthem, *Pheng Xat Lao*, but the former nationalist song, *In the Liberated Zone*, of the Pathet Lao⁵. *Pheng Xat Lao* was established in 1945, with the lyrics revised after the Laotian Civil War ended in 1975. He described it as the propaganda song the Pathet Lao forces used to ensure and guarantee loyalty. If that's the case, then why was it played at this Lao school and performed by these students if not for the fact that Laos is still very much a communist country? The interview continued with my narrator describing the brainwashing, the enforced

⁵ The Pathet Lao was a political communist group that formed during the Vietnam war era that fought alongside the North Vietnamese and against the Royal Lao army. They later won and gained control of Laos.

disappearances, and the loss of freedom and voice that communism represents to him. By comparison, I showed the same photograph to my classmates, unsure of how much they knew of the politics but assuming that some must be familiar with the synonymous hammer and sickle symbolism. One comment that I found particularly interesting, and to paraphrase, was something like, “I see nothing wrong in this photo... Yay socialism!” as she made a cheering gesture. I greatly respected and appreciated the honest impression from my classmate, and it was equally eye-opening in that many people don’t understand that there was a system of government that brought a painful history of injustice.

I found my narrator’s story rousing and wondered what could have sparked such an emotional response and narrative. This encouraged me to conduct further interviews with him, which I have edited and condensed for clarity.

4. SID

I conducted a life history interview with Sid to understand his life in Laos. As a child, he fondly recalled catching tree lizards using a makeshift loop out of a fishing line tied to the end of a bamboo stick. If the lizard tried to escape by running up a tree, he would use a slingshot. For ground lizards, he could spot them by the holes they dug in the ground. He would use a small shovel to dig a nearby hole, making the lizard come out on the other side. Other fond memories included how he came across a large tiger footprint in the jungle before his father and uncles began to clear it to use as farmland. I heard how joyful he was in recalling these memories and the ease with which it was told. As we

moved from his childhood into his young adult life, I noticed more of a cautionary tone as he recalled the country changing around him.

The war was still in place, and it was hard to find jobs since businesses stopped hiring, but he left home at around 17-18 years old to try to forge his own path. He began to learn that schools were closing, teachers were no longer working and receiving salaries, and more businesses were being forced to shut down. The choices he had were limited.

“I have to pick, either staying here in Vientiane, do what I can to find a job, or if the other side gonna win, if the Communists are gonna win, I was not gonna plan to wait around until they’re all in town before I make my move, so I thought I was gonna go ahead and join them ...” (excerpt from Sid, oral history interview, 2023).

Imagine at age 17 making such a serious choice. Sid had heard about opportunities given to those who joined, the possibility of getting sent to schools and educated in the Soviet bloc such as Eastern Germany or China. The Soviet Bloc is also known as the Eastern Bloc and was a coalition of communist countries at that time, such as North Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Poland, the Soviet Union, Cuba, and others. In making that choice, he hoped he would have the opportunity to study and become an engineer or pilot. The reality was further from the truth.

He boarded a C-123 plane⁶ that would fly everyone to a shiny new cadet school touted with certain luxuries like running water and electricity. Instead, they were flown to northeastern Laos, where they were dropped in the middle of nowhere in the bitter cold with no building in sight and no water or electricity. The following months had him walking and staying at temporary shelters before moving again, the trucks carrying the supplies, the men made to walk.

He spoke of certain manipulation tests such as this [Sid Writing Exercise](#).

“And uh, they, they have us write down what you want to be in your life. They want to know ALL your background or your parents’ background, all that. You have to write down everything. Two or three months later and they give you another sheet to write. So they want to know if you’re lying, if you tell the same story. Anyway ... um ...”

I noticed a long sigh and breath with him, ending that story with “anyway.” From that small, physical sign, I could tell he was carrying a whole embodied discomfort. He began to understand the magnitude of the situation he was in [Sid Survival](#).

Sid: By waiting to go to school and turn out, after I found out there’s nowhere ... there is no any chance that I would get to go to another country ... So, this is it, this will be the end. So I kind of learned how to blend in and to accept, there’s nothing you can do. You either go hang yourself or go with the flow. So, pretty much.

⁶ C-123 planes were used by the U.S. military for the transport of supplies and men, but was also used in military operations and attacks. Many were either abandoned or lost to the Pathet Lao.

Rattana B: So you went with the flow.

Sid: I went with the flow.

Rattana B: How did you go with the flow?

Sid: Go with the flow that become one of the ... one of them. Even though deep down in my heart, I was not with them. But I had to, I had to, I had to ACT like them. I have to, I had to say that I like their system and to survive.

After telling me this, he gave me an unspoken look and motioned with his hand, telling me to stop the recording. He clarified that what he would say to me next would be off the record. I obeyed and listened intently. In that position, I felt a mixture of giving my full attention to the story while also waiting and wondering when I could turn the recorder back on. He spoke for at least 30 minutes or more, all off the record.

SILENCE

Once the conversation resumed, he spoke of being back in Vientiane, working in a warehouse, and how his sister ‘convinced’ him to cross the border despite wanting to stay to try to make something of himself and because his parents were still in Savannakhet. He jokingly remembers how she tricked him, saying how much their parents wanted him to come. Even though he was quite mad upon learning that she lied, I’m sure he knows she did it out of love. He described a harrowing journey crossing the Mekong River, carrying only a pair of clothes tied inside a plastic bag and using a one-gallon jug to help him float and swim, and he didn’t even know how to swim. The month was September, still the rainy season, so the water was especially rapid and dangerous. Not only did he have to dodge and hide from guards who were monitoring the shorelines, but he recalled sustaining an injury and falling on a wooden post but had to push through the pain.

Similar to what was showcased in the communism video, his viewpoints on the Lao government and the country’s state were still highly charged. Even though things are less hardline now compared to how things were in the 1970s, he believes that they could never really allow Lao people to have freedom of voice. And there will always be a disparity as to whom the system benefits. It benefits those who have gained from the government, whether working for them or profiting from it. It’s unclear what the locals think of how things are. Their experience is their usual everyday lives, which may not be too dissimilar to ours. They attend school, work, listen to the news, and trust that their local and state leaders do what is best for their citizens and country. However, according to Sid, because Laos is a Communist state, its citizens will always lack any freedom of

speech, especially since Laos has state-run media and filters information that can be received and what can be spread.

Despite Sid's views on the country, he waxes nostalgic to visit areas he's never seen or been to in a long while, including the reeducation camp in northeastern Laos. I interviewed other Lao people on their memories of Laos, and many chronicle happy, formidable years, their distinctive journey fleeing Laos, and always a nostalgic yearning for a Laos that once was. They all agree that it is no longer the same and no longer their home. They acknowledge, embrace, and are proud to be where they're from, but they see it as a foregone country that has changed.

5. ANALYSIS

I decided to focus on Sid because of his strong opinions and dig deeper into why he has them. What distinguished him from interviews with others was that he was the only one involved in the communist party. Given his limited opportunities and support, he had very little choice. Interviewing him for the video, he made it very clear that he wished to be anonymous and repeated that request more than once. I understood and acknowledged that this would be used for only that project for class. I've revived it here for my thesis to bring more context and depth to my narrator. From the video and interview, it can be concluded that there are levels of trauma and shame, and this has informed his off-the-record 'silence.' There is an intentional silence that I've marked in his recorded testimonial and transcript that shows when we went off the record. It was

important to me to signify this, to show that despite what is hidden from the audience, it is part of the testimonial. This part could have easily been removed and not acknowledged, but I saw that as an erasure of his experience and agency. There is also a notable gap in the story's timeline. Thus, what meanings can be derived from information you can't see, hear, or access? Having that situated knowledge of being part of the Lao community helps to understand a fuller picture. Still, for someone outside the community who may not have that intersubjectivity, it can be challenging, but utilizing oral history interviews and transcripts can be tools to enhance ongoing research. Having a transcript alongside audio can help to discern meaning, such as the rise and fall in tone, the pauses, and the hesitations, helping to look beyond what is evident for the full embodied experience.

6. SHARED AUTHORITY

Throughout the process of these interviews, my narrator has always expressed degrees of anonymity, only wanting to be known as "Sid." I took the liberty of sharing the communism video, and his life history interview has been edited and condensed for clarity. I also took strides in removing any potential self-identifying markers. Respecting shared authority, I often asked Sid to review the recorded interviews and final product before showcasing or submitting, but he always said he trusted my judgment. Without compromising his identity, I can only share that I've known him for a long time, and we have forged a mutual trust. With Sid restricting and silencing aspects of his identity, I

struggled with how much I could properly share with the public. I also wanted to do what I came into the oral history program to do: inform and educate others on Lao history and the Lao experience. In a sense, I felt I was inadvertently being silenced out of what I could produce, but to emphasize the point of sharing authority, it means that I must be thoughtful and exercise care. Even though Sid is quite vocal and has much to say about his experience, being too vocal and public also has repercussions, such as being blacklisted from the country or, in extreme cases, being forcibly disappeared. Sid has communicated his boundaries to me and given me the responsibility to determine how his interviews would be showcased and used. Thus, the video is restricted to view by my program director and advisor and is not to be shared with others or on any platforms. This methodology paper and Sid's testimonial are okay for some public access.

To conclude, memory and silence help to inform meaning by becoming part of the narrator's embodied experience. What is remembered or forgotten can be selective and be based on the individual's experience and the trauma they may carry. Just because something isn't spoken doesn't necessarily mean it's not being remembered.

There is a story and meaning in that silence. Any meaning derived from that absence is a story that isn't ready to be told, and the choices made as to what to share and withhold are based on the shared authority between the narrator and the oral historian. This shared authority is built on mutual exchange, expectations, ongoing consent, and trust.

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