


A person's hands are shown holding a piece of paper with handwritten text over a body of water. The paper is partially submerged, and the water's surface is rippled. The text on the paper is written in a cursive script. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and greens, with the person's skin tone providing a warm contrast.

PHANTOM ROOTS

A FEATURE DOCUMENTARY
BY ERICA NGUYEN



A homesick grandmother's lyrical diary serenades 3 generations of an unfolding family road memoir. A film made by children of Vietnamese refugees, living between coastal & desert diasporas-

LOGLINE

as an experiential response to what happens after American asylum.
And by what means of magic they come home to themselves.

STORY

We open with a reenactment of Grandma Xuan rejecting the fate she was dealt as a young girl. Energized by the poetic words she left behind, the water puppetry stage ripples with song. This art form originated in the rice fields of Nam Dinh, Xuan's birthplace.

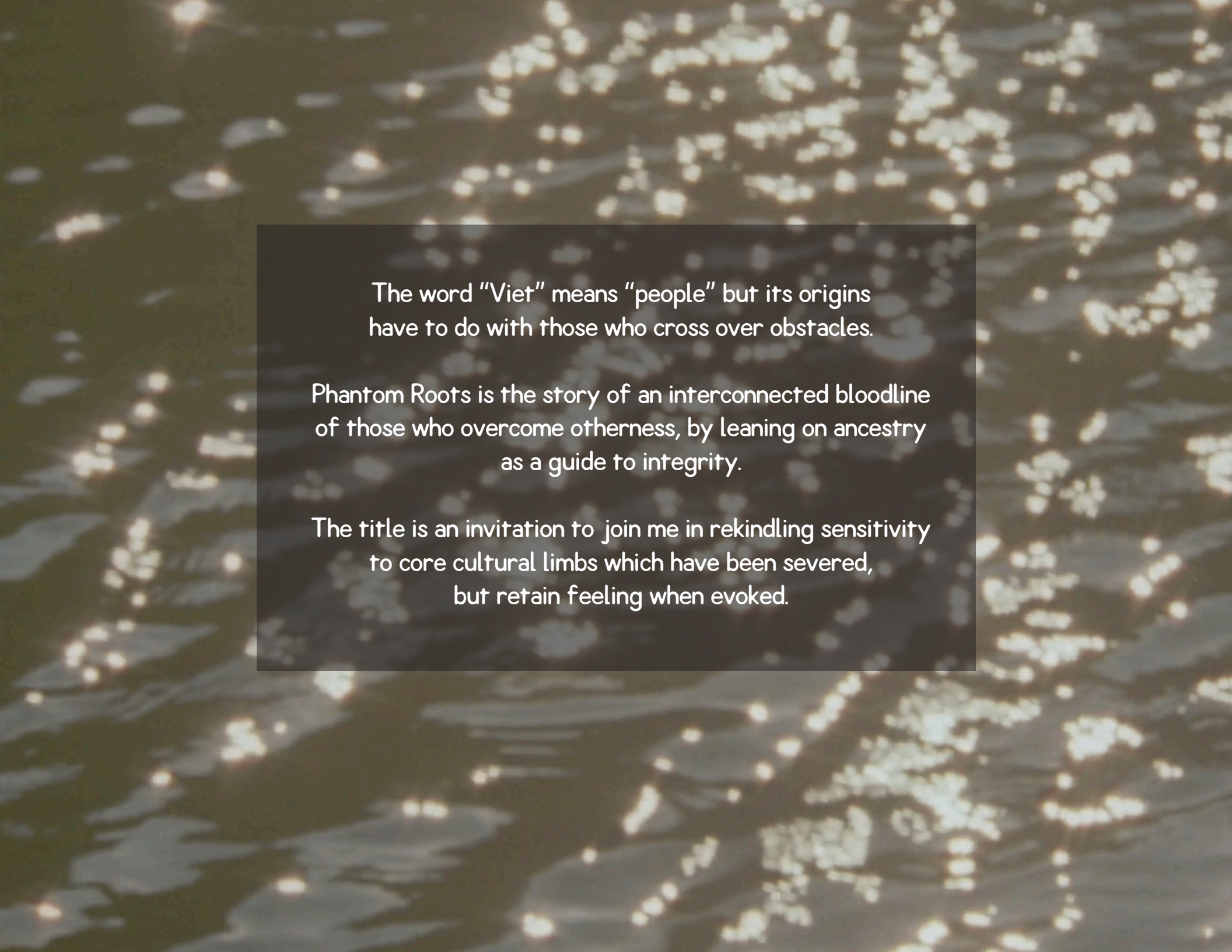
Ritual performances were meant to call the rainy season back for the next harvest to grow strong. The soil is set for future generations to have the courage to liberate themselves from limiting circumstances.

While her writing ends with facing the unknown on an empty stomach, I am reminded of our family's phrase: "We are born with empty hands and we will be leaving with empty hands" ...How we make peace with our wholeness is what remains.





Chua Thay pagoda, Hanoi



The word "Viet" means "people" but its origins have to do with those who cross over obstacles.

Phantom Roots is the story of an interconnected bloodline of those who overcome otherness, by leaning on ancestry as a guide to integrity.

The title is an invitation to join me in rekindling sensitivity to core cultural limbs which have been severed, but retain feeling when evoked.

But if I don't have roots, why have my roots made me suffer so?

Trinh T. Minh-ha

As granddaughter & narrator, I weed through the painful erasure of the Vietnamese-American experience to excavate the taproot of joy that persists. Our collective practices become lifelines from solitude.



Nambe, New Mexico (16mm)



ARC

As a teenage refugee our father taught his mother Xuan how to read & write. He became a fisherman, whose fruit tree fortress infuses the California suburbs with homeland.

From my high desert home I reflect on legacies of “mat nuoc” – to be without water or the irretrievable loss of one’s country. The ashes of memory take on technicolor shape as archives reveal the dreams of those that came before.

Fragmentation becomes mosaic.

Bolting a new climbing route, rehearsing martial art forms, tending land, firing pottery, breaking rice with our deceased, we stitch together threads of joy with devotion.

For the first time we return to Vietnam as a family. Guided straight to the source of every missing lineage link, we burn incense at the feet of ancestors who never left our side.

Drifting with the current of the Mekong River, perspective rises as the delta deposits its soil rich waters into the sea. A soft display of our own arrival and interconnection.

GRANDMOTHER
XUAN



GRANDFATHER
CAM

CHARACTER
TREE



FATHER
DUC



BROTHER
BEN



SISTER
HANNAH



FILMMAKER
ERICA

We were born mixed race, from an "uneven pair of chopsticks."

We are the offspring of a kid from war-torn Saigon who dreamed of traveling outerspace.

We are descendents of spirit mediums, whose temple for trance worship neighbored Hollywood.

We surf the opposite shores of where our relatives fled to the open ocean on river boats.

We plant seeds in the arid Southwest, and trust there will be food after transplanting.

We accept the expansiveness of paradox.

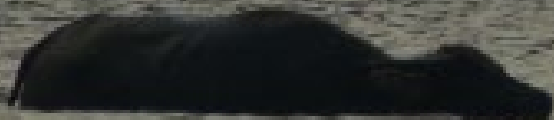


Hungry Ghost festival, Hoi An

DIRECTOR STATEMENT

My place as a filmmaker is blossoming into a body of work that centers the outsider experience. How do we recognize ourselves while moving between spaces authentically?

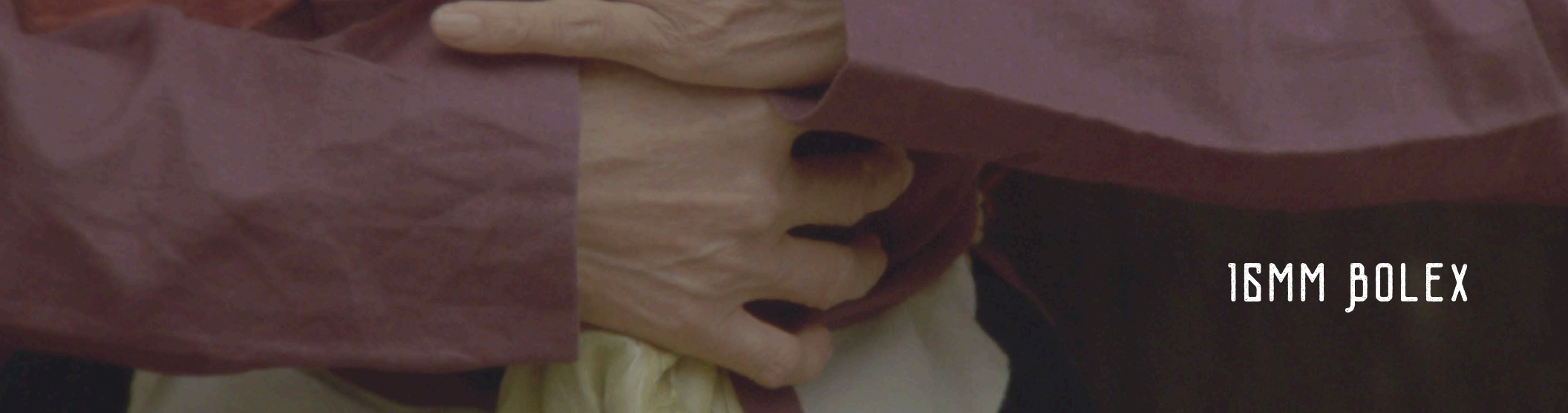
Phantom Roots is a deeply personal envisioning of memory and magical realism. The texture of the film is true to the nature of being cast to winds of diaspora. Its experimental form imitates patchwork, or the mending of worn clothes, by interlocking 16mm, VHS, and digital 4K footage. Not to conceal the holes, but rather reinforce the human connections needed to endure.





STYLE

4K DIGITAL



16MM BOLEX



ARCHIVAL VHS

THEMES

HOMECOMING

On a pilgrimage to Vietnam, only a star fruit tree was left of the Nguyen family home. Neighbors claim it has been cut down many times but continues to spring back, even bearing fruit. This sour variety happens to be medicinal.



TRANSFORMATION

The alchemy of incorporating historical trauma through acts of ceremony is how we as people can fully step into the future. Being witness to cycles of rebirth is how we learn to hold our past with tenderness. Seasonal markers punctuate transformations along the way.



EVERYDAY MAGIC

The karaoke dance halls of Little Saigon are alive with old guard refugees expressing their passion. In the quiet of our daily lives there are sparks of magic that feel essential to the Vietnamese spirit. Fearlessness cannot be displaced.

LITTLE SAIGON



SAIGON



LOCATIONS

NORTHERN CA



NINH BINH



NEW MEXICO



HANOI



IMPACT CAMPAIGN

Bridging healing modalities alongside regenerative storytelling is the next step. A key distribution initiative is to combine film screenings with somatic programming for global Vietnamese diaspora communities. A targeted impact campaign would involve water puppets to facilitate narrative therapies like psycho-drama, Internal Family Systems and Constellation group role play.





Chua Thay pagoda, Hanoi

CREATIVES

DIRECTOR
ERICA NGUYEN

As a Vietnamese-American grassroots documentary filmmaker I am motivated to collaborate through mutual self study. Interdisciplinary modalities are integral to my work, and I trust process-based practices to decipher how estrangement from our origins manifests in our bodies. My growth as a storyteller has been enriched by serving indigenous communities across New Mexico in the field of therapeutic adventure.

This is my second indie feature. With support from: Woodstock Film Festival's story incubator, UNDO's summer lab, Ghetto Film School's Mythical Creators grant, NMDIG and NMFF.



ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
DUK NGUYEN

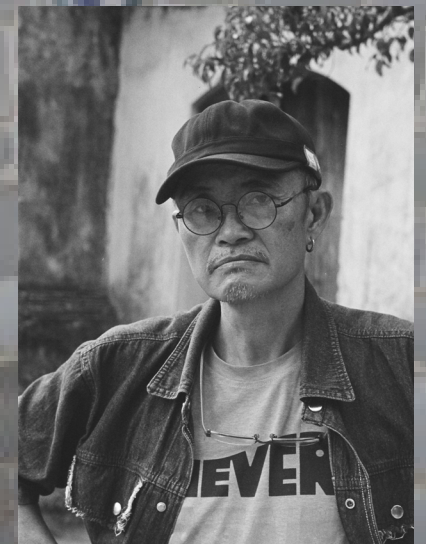


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THANK YOU



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