

To: Members of the Sponsored Research Committee  
From: Eric Stein, Member of the Faculty  
19 October 2010  
Application for Sponsored Research 2011

Dear Colleagues:

I am writing to apply for sponsored research funds for summer 2011. I request five weeks of salary to support research on a project titled "Immigrant Birth Stories: Narrating 'American Rites of Passage.'" The research will be a joint project with Evergreen visiting faculty Laura Citrin, who teaches "Reproduction, Birth, and Power" and has researched and taught extensively on gender and the body. The research enables us to carry out interdisciplinary, collaborative research within a new area of focus on the lives of immigrants in the Pacific Northwest through the lens of medical anthropology, medical history, social psychology, and feminist studies. We aim to carry out ethnographic interviews with immigrant families about their hospital birthing experiences in order to understand how birth might carry additional linguistic, medical, legal, social, economic troubles for them as a result of their immigrant status, but also possibly serve as a place where they enter, most intimately, into American life. The project seeks to build community connections with often marginalized groups in the Pacific Northwest, bringing their voices and stories to scholars, students, and the public.

The blossoming of anthropological and sociological studies on birth over the past two decades has presented a critical literature on how the body and power intersect. The recognition that biomedical rationalities and technologies shape birth experiences in problematic ways, often denying the agency of birthing women, holds especially true for many women of color, whose experience of social exclusion extends to birthing wards. Emily Martin's foundational study *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, found that working class minority women in particular are sometimes met with disapproval by medical personnel and have their agentive behavior more often described as "non-compliance" than white women (1987). Immigrant women—especially illegal immigrants—likely face additional burdens in their encounters with medical authorities, complicated by cultural misunderstandings and language barriers that place trust between doctor and patient in jeopardy. We anticipate that the outcome of such burdens might entail an even further medicalization of immigrant women, resulting in higher rates of epidurals, use of pitocin, and c-sections. We do not assume from the outset, however, that their birth experiences overall will be inherently negative; for some, giving birth "like an American" may be experienced and recounted as a privilege. Robbie Davis-Floyd's book, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage*, offers a potent critique of the rituals surrounding medicalized birth, but its title also suggests that birth experiences serve as potentially formative moments in the making of American identity. In addition to the legal status of citizenship granted to offspring of immigrants, we wonder whether the powerfully intimate experience of giving birth in an American facility might serve both as an acculturating moment and a claim to something shared with other American families.

Because of the intensity of vulnerable, ecstatic, or terrifying moments that accompany birthing experiences, birth memories are often crafted into vibrant narratives and shared with friends and family. We see the work of recording these accessible stories—and sharing our own—as potentially bridging cultural differences, while at the same time bringing to light the particular challenges immigrants face in situations we often take for granted. The minutia of details embedded into birth stories—modes of transportation, networks of family and friends, misunderstandings, accounts of pain and uncertainty—offer a rich cultural text for reading the workings of privilege and power and understanding the immigrant experience more generally. This knowledge will become a part of our scholarly work, our community outreach, and our teaching in the classroom.

**Relationship to Previous Work:** We both have a background in issues related to the study of reproduction and birth. My graduate studies emphasized courses in medical anthropology, medical history, science and technology studies, and public health that each included critical segments on birthing practices. I have published a review article for *Feminist Studies* with Marcia Inhorn entitled “Technologies of Pregnancy and Birth” in 2002 and an article on Indonesian midwives in *Body and Society* in 2007. Through teaching *Imagining the Body* at Evergreen in 2008-2009 I further developed my knowledge and interest in the study of reproduction and birth. Laura is a feminist social psychologist whose dissertation focused on the role of moralizing emotions, such as disgust and shame, in facilitating conformity to gendered bodily practices. She has conducted research on attitudes toward menstruation, and most recently, research with postpartum women who experienced a period of extended bed rest during pregnancy. She has twice taught the TESC program “Reproduction, Birth and Power” to further her research/teaching interests in the social, historical, and psychological influences on reproductive practices, policies, and philosophies in the US.

Since coming to Evergreen, I have steadily shifted my field research to include studies of refugees and immigrants to the Pacific Northwest region. A sponsored research grant in summer 2009 allowed me to complete foundational library research on Southeast Asian immigrants and set the framework for a broader, long-term study of Cambodian Americans. In the past year I have collaborated on student research on the Seattle Ethiopian community and guided a project on Spanish speaking migrant farm workers. I will continue collaborating with students on area immigrant and refugee groups through major research work in my current program, *The Remembrance of Things Past*. The proposed research on immigrants’ birth stories promises to deepen each of these previous experiences and provide Laura with a new emphasis to her own studies.

**Benefits expected from the activity:**

Maintaining an active program of research is critical to teaching anthropology. In each of my lectures I draw on ethnographic examples to concretize theoretical perspectives and make cross-cultural comparisons. My major anthropological fieldwork, conducted in Indonesia from 2002-2003, continues to be relevant to my teaching; however, having a “living” ethnographic project both keeps me up to date on emerging scholarly literature and promotes the kinds of synthetic thinking in my own teaching that we value as a

focus of learning at Evergreen. In '11-'12 I will teach a program entitled "Equatorial Studies" with Sean Williams and Heather Heying, which will similarly have a local internship and abroad component and could potentially draw on the birth stories as a foundation of student work. In '12-'13 I will teach *America Abroad* with Sam Schrager, Stacey Davis, and Steven Hendricks, which will have a substantial research component that would directly benefit from the immigrant work. Laura has taught twice the highly successful and in-demand program "Reproduction, Birth, and Power" and it would undoubtedly be a benefit to the college if she could teach it again with the addition of new, local research experience that could form the basis of student learning. Opening the project up to students through their own, linked avenues of research will further promote understanding between Evergreen and the many communities of immigrants in the surrounding areas.

**Plans for carrying out the research:** During summer 2011 Laura and I will begin conducting ethnographic interviews with immigrant families in the area. We have established contacts with several Thai families that would serve as a good starting point for the research, in part because I speak Thai and would not require a translator. Given my recent research and my students' research, I am also particularly interested in hearing birth stories from Cambodian immigrants and Spanish speaking migrant workers and will use connections made through student work to establish connections and recruit interviewees. The goal for the award period will be to record, transcribe, and analyze 7-10 unstructured three-part interviews conducted both with birthing women and their husbands. In addition, we will complete a series of scholarly readings on immigrant experiences with biomedicine in the Pacific Northwest, which largely center on mental health and disease prevention efforts, as a way to understand other kinds of medicalization experiences. The aim of the study will be to co-author a research paper for presentation at the 2012 Society for Medical Anthropology conference and for later publication. In addition, we will also share these narratives with our students in the course of our teaching.

We do not yet have other sources of funding for this seed project. I therefore request six weeks of funding for myself to provide support for this work.

Letters of support from Sam Schrager and Toska Olson will arrive under separate cover.

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric A. Stein". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Eric A. Stein

To: John McLain  
From: Eric Stein, Member of the Faculty  
31 December 2009  
Sponsored Research Report

## **Memory, Place, and Displacement: Southeast Asian Americans in the Pacific Northwest**

As inductive researchers, Anthropologists must make tentative stabs in various directions until promising threads of fieldwork emerge. Much of my summer was spent engaging in such weeding out of dead ends and grappling with the challenging ethics of conducting research among marginalized ethnic minority communities with troubled pasts mired in conflict. While my initial plan had been to hit the ground running by launching into oral histories with Vietnamese, Thai, and Cambodian informants, my first several steps revealed a hazardously delicate terrain of memory politics that needed further sorting out.

In July 2009 I began work on the project through library research, compiling a list of existing sources on Southeast Asian immigrants in the Pacific Northwest and in the U.S. more generally. The volume of this literature led me to recognize the unwieldy nature of addressing multiple communities simultaneously; in reading more about each group I narrowed down my focus through process of elimination. The Thai American population, which arrived through steady immigration not linked to refugee status, is both small and relatively disjointed, without claim to a pivotal, shared past experience or much scholarly attention. Although I speak Thai and have established several Thai contacts in the area, some of my core questions related to exile and culture loss do not apply to Thais in the same way as the other two groups.

In contrast, the Vietnamese community in the area is enormous, well-established, and complex. Through my reading of scholarly sources and popular media during the summer, as well as my casual firsthand interactions with Vietnamese Americans in the Olympia area, I sensed a degree of guardedness and concern over representation of Vietnamese history, culture, and identity by non-Vietnamese. Communism, in any form, is completely taboo within the community, not only because many of the older generation of Vietnamese fled the communist state, but also due to the position of Vietnamese as perceived political outsiders within the more general public in the Pacific Northwest. This compromised, guarded position seemed too challenging of a place to start an exploration of identity. In addition, few of my prior studies on the history, language, and culture of Southeast Asia have focused on Vietnam, meaning I would have to put in considerably more time before any serious work could begin.

The Cambodian American community in the Pacific Northwest is more accessible for a variety of reasons. Cambodian language, religion, and culture is closer to what I know from Thailand and my studies have delved into Khmer history more thoroughly than into Vietnamese history. Furthermore, unlike the major waves of Vietnamese immigration in the 1970s, Cambodians came to the U.S. in the 1980s; therefore, the population of

Cambodians who experienced the transition are younger and somewhat less well-established, meaning that identity work is more of an ongoing process. Indeed, part of my attraction to the Cambodian community is that many Cambodians are actively attempting to rescue lost Khmer culture from the past, codify it, and pass it along generationally. Cambodians I have spoken with have been interested in sharing their stories, teaching their cultural practices, and describing the process of cultural survival. The Cambodian Cultural Festival, held annually at Millersylvania Park, offers a place to articulate notions of an “essential” Khmer culture. Cambodians sometimes frame these explicit acts of cultural salvage as attempts to reclaim the heritage that was lost during the Khmer Rouge Killings in the 1970s. As an anthropological project, documenting Cambodian cultural practices and historical memory seems concordant with the intentions of members of the community itself.

As with any community, Cambodian Americans by no means hold a homogeneous perspective on the past, on maintaining cultural traditions, or on opening up to the outside. A number of ethnographies and historical accounts, including Sucheng Chan's *Survivors* and May Ebihara's *Cambodian Culture since 1975*, illustrate the internal fragmentation of Cambodian Americans, who face not only profound generational cleavages, but live on with the hidden remnants of past conflict within their communities. Many Khmer Rouge hid their identities and also escaped to Thai refugee camps following the Vietnamese invasion of 1979, some eventually immigrating to the U.S. Memories of the Khmer Rouge are described as traumatic. While some members of the younger generation press their elders to give their account of what happened, many desperately want to forget. Even had I acted in partnership with younger Cambodians through Participatory Action Research, as I had planned, I did not feel comfortable resuscitating the horrors of the past or unintentionally reviving communal tensions. After recognizing these problems more clearly in late summer, I decided to begin the ethnographic portion of the research through the seemingly more innocuous study of Cambodian material culture, which I had planned to begin with students in my fall program *Life of Things*.

This line of inquiry considered how, following displacement from a country of origin, immigrant groups have used “things” as part of a strategy to maintain cultural continuity and identity. It asked, how has access to new kinds of “American” things reshaped perceptions of selves and community? How has the “American Dream” been imagined materially by immigrant groups? What objects from former homelands are the focus of present nostalgia? What sorts of material practices (craft, agriculture) persist and what others are becoming lost? What are the political, economic, and social consequences of culture loss? Of exclusion? What material futures are imagined? These questions focused on the problem of cultural dislocation, yet deflected attention from subjects to objects. Doing so seemed to present a more stable beginning for a long-term project, allowing me to feel out the community with less risk of overstepping boundaries.

Toward the end of the summer I also did some preliminary research on the growing Burmese refugee population in the Seattle area. While fewer than 20 Burmese refugees came to the area in 2007, over 2000 arrived in 2008, creating a new,

dislocated population struggling to find a place within the ethnically diverse housing complexes in the Tukwila area. Many of the Burmese refugees are Karen and Karenni hill tribe minorities, groups that a number of my students have worked with in the past while volunteer teaching in Northwestern Thailand. An additional part of my Fall plan was to have students explore the material needs of these refugee groups, offering a point of comparison with more established Cambodian communities in the region.

I was reluctant to establish research connections with Cambodian or Burmese communities in the area until I was certain that students would adopt and follow through on the project. As it turned out, for better or worse, this reluctance was well-founded, as students in my Pacific Northwest Immigration Research group in *Life of Things* decided to all concentrate on Ethiopian immigrants in Seattle, since one of our students was part of that community. The project appears promising, as students have established strong connections with an Ethiopian community center that is engaged in auto-ethnographic media training and documentation. The students will explore how Ethiopian youth come to visually represent their own cultural traditions, with an emphasis on how the transnational flow of material goods from Ethiopia might serve as a sensual anchor for ethnic identity.

My project on Southeast Asians, therefore, has been temporarily deferred, though by no means forgotten. In Winter 2010 I will have one contract student doing research in Vietnam and another studying Thai language and culture in preparation for his Spring 2010 study abroad. In addition, I have already been planning to include a year-long group project specifically on Cambodians for my 2010-2011 program, *Remembrance of Things Past*. With the work I put in over summer 2009, I will be ready to start up the project with very little advance work.

I am grateful for the support of the college and very much hope to be considered for a sponsored research grant in the future. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Eric Stein



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evergreen  
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TO: Sponsored Research Committee  
FROM: Sam Schrager, Member of the Faculty (American Studies and Folklore) SSr  
RE: Eric Stein's application  
DATE: 22 October 2010

I write in very strong support of Eric Stein's proposal to undertake a research project on the birth stories of immigrant families. With his extensive academic background in medical anthropology, medical history, public health, birthing practices and ethnographic interviewing, Eric is exceptionally well prepared to carry out this study. Doing so with his partner Laura Citrin, who studies and teaches about reproduction, birth and power from psychological and feminist perspectives, makes for an exciting interdisciplinary collaboration. This research has terrific potential for Eric's scholarship, teaching, and community work, and for students' research, too.

When I taught with Eric in 2007-8, his first year at Evergreen, I saw that he was extremely well grounded in cultural anthropology, remarkably broad in his intellectual outlook, and highly attuned to students' interests and needs. Eric decided after that year to shift his long-term research focus from Indonesia and Southeast Asia to immigrant communities in the Pacific Northwest, so he will be able to engage in fresh, ongoing research in places—and on topics—that will be accessible to him and to students. This proposal represents an important step in Eric's developing research agenda: to use "the powerfully intimate experience of giving birth in an American facility" as a way to better understand the complex realities of immigrants' lives.

I find Eric's project compelling for many reasons. It is situated in thorough knowledge of recent anthropological and sociological literature "on how the body and power intersect," with specific focus on marginalized groups. It offers genuinely open research questions, such as: Do added burdens that immigrant women face lead to increased medicalization in their treatment? Are birth experiences "potentially formative moments in the making of American identity"? The project's critical stance is not a negative view of these birth experiences; rather, there is an assertion of the primacy of the immigrants' own voices and stories, the ethical responsibility of research to bring their views to the public, and the hope of building connections with their communities. The interviews have unusual promise because the researchers, a couple, will work with narrators who are couples; sharing birth stories with each other entails "bridging cultural differences, while at the same time bringing to light the particular challenges immigrants face in situations we often take for granted." Eric's ability to speak Thai will increase the ease of conversing with Thai families. The plan for research during the five week period of funding is realistic and should create a strong platform for further work.

Eric is quite adept at integrating his research into his classroom teaching, and I am sure that this research will become a significant point of reference for him on a range of topics of high interest to students and the college. It will be of great practical value as an example and resource for students who pursue ethnographic studies, showing them how to approach the challenges and opportunities of dialogue with members of immigrant and other often marginalized groups.



October 22, 2010

Dear Sponsored Research Committee Members,

This is a letter of support for Eric Stein's Sponsored Research Proposal for Summer 2011 to work on a collaborative ethnographic research project titled "Immigrant Birth Stories."

Eric is engaging in exciting interdisciplinary work at the intersection of medical anthropology, social psychology, and immigration studies. His research will offer insight into the intriguing question of whether birthing the "American way" may enhance immigrant women's feelings of power and their identification as Americans. It is important to note the intellectual integrity that is at the foundation of this research. Eric enters this project with an open mind, interested in studying the ways in which immigrants' birthing experiences may be complicated by their marginalized status, and also curious to discover how an immigrant's parturition in our country may be a positive and significant moment in the development of an American identity.

The focus of "Immigrant Birth Stories" on community connections fits Evergreen's philosophy perfectly. Through this project, Eric will build relationships with members of groups that are frequently marginalized in our society. As Eric brings their stories to his students and involves them in similar projects, he will be helping students learn across significant differences, link theory with practical applications, and promote community action that may improve the experiences of immigrants in the Pacific Northwest.

Eric's research and expanding expertise will be attractive to a wide variety of Evergreen students, including those interested in midwifery, anthropology, immigration, and gender studies. In addition, continuing his interdisciplinary research will enhance Eric's effectiveness as an Evergreen teacher. I have experienced firsthand the impact Eric's teaching has on awakening students' anthropological imagination when he incorporated ethnographic research into his lectures in "Imagining the Body." I am certain that the intimate birthing stories that Eric uncovers in his research will have a profound effect on his future students' learning as well. Eric's approach can only enrich the educational environment for his students and teaching partners.

I strongly encourage you to support Eric's research. This work will make important contributions to his own professional development, to the Evergreen curriculum, and to the community at large. If I can offer any additional information, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Toska Olson