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# Telling Our Own Stories: A Study on Hmong-American Women, Identity, and Education

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Telling Our Own Stories:  
A Study on Hmong-American Women, Identity, and Education

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## ABSTRACT

“Assimilation” is used to describe how immigrants adapt and integrate into the culture and society of the new country (Gordon 1964). The literature on assimilation often focuses on how higher education functions as a way to assimilate immigrants into the dominant culture. The literature is primarily about social mobility and not enough attention has been given to the subjective aspect of assimilation. The purpose of my study is to better understand and explore the lived-realities of second-generation Hmong-American women. How do Hmong-American women come to understand their identities? How does higher education influence this process of identity development? Five second-generation Hmong-American women were interviewed for this study. In analyzing their stories I found that the themes of difference and agency were common in their stories. Based on what I found, I would argue that higher education does not completely assimilate Hmong-American women because of their desire to remain connected to their community and the sense of agency they demonstrate in negotiating difference and reconstructing their identities.

Telling Our Stories:  
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The drive I have in pursuing higher education stems from my parents' background as immigrants. My parents are immigrants from Laos who didn't have the opportunity to go to school. Education was a value that was instilled in me by both of my parents. I remember my mother always said to me, "Yws txoj kev kawm zoo li ib yam tus yaum sij." In English this means, "Education is like a key. A key that opens doors." In pursuing my education however, I feel I have become distant from my family. While I've found it to be true that doors are opening for me through my educational opportunities, I feel that by going through these doors, I'm leaving behind my family and the values they believe in. There have been moments where I feel Hmong. Then there are moments where I feel American. These moments have made me question my identity. It's led me to wonder: am I Hmong or am I American? It is my own personal experiences that have led me to conduct research on second-generation Hmong-American women, identity, and education. How do these women come to understand their identities? What do they learn about their identities through their social environments? And how does going through higher education change or influence this process of identity development?

To learn more about this, I conducted in-depth interviews with five second-generation Hmong-American women. From their stories I was able to learn about the relationship between identity, education, and assimilation. I learned that each woman experienced race and gender differently and that each woman negotiated her identity differently. The literature on assimilation often focuses on how higher education functions as a way to assimilate immigrants into the dominant culture. The literature is primarily about social mobility and not enough attention has

been given to the subjective aspect of assimilation. Thus, I wanted to explore how these women lived and experienced assimilation. In analyzing their stories I found that the themes of difference and agency were common in their stories. Based on what I found I would argue that higher education does not completely assimilate Hmong-American women because of their desire to remain connected to their community and the sense of agency they demonstrate in negotiating difference and reconstructing their identities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Hmong Women, Education, and Agency*

The Hmong are an ethnic minority group with a diasporic history. Today, Hmong people are scattered all over the world, with the greatest concentration of Hmong people in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and the United States (Vang 2010). The Hmong's diasporic history is due to their identities as ethnic minorities. Anthropologists have traced the origins of the Hmong to southern China (Yang 2001; Vang 2010). Ethnic persecution by the Han Chinese caused the Hmong to migrate to the northern regions of Laos and Vietnam. The Hmong's participation in the Vietnam conflict in Laos ultimately resulted in a mass exodus of the Hmong to western nations like the United States (Hillmer 2010; Vang 2010).

Hmong refugees in the United States have undergone drastic changes since the arrival of the first refugee group in the late 1970s. It is evident from the literature on Hmong refugee women that America's industrialized and capitalistic society has altered the lifestyle of Hmong women in the United States (Donnelly 1997). One of these changes is the attainment of education for Hmong women. U.S.-born Hmong-American women are attaining degrees in higher education more than before. Traditionally, education was seen as an opportunity reserved

for men (Donnelly 1997; Garrity 2002; Symonds 2003 ). Hmong women were encouraged to stay home and help with domestic chores (Donnelly 1997; Symonds 2003). Recent research on Hmong women and education show there is a change in the attitude of Hmong parents towards education. Due to traditional values, Hmong women were married before the age of 18 and discouraged by their parents to pursue higher education when the Hmong first settled in the United States (Lee 1997). Teen marriages still occur; however, studies indicate that the attitudes towards this practice are shifting. Hmong parents are adapting to the social and economic conditions in the U.S. and now prefer their children to complete their studies first before getting married (Ngo 2006). The attitudes of Hmong girls and women have also shifted. Studies reveal that Hmong women see the value of an education and are delaying marriage or returning to school to get an education (Garrity 2002; Lee 2005; Thao 2008).

There are several reasons why more Hmong women are pursuing higher education. Economic security and desire for independence have been cited as the most common reasons for Hmong women's pursuit of higher education (Lee 1997; Garrity 2002; Thao 2008; Moua 2011), but recent studies show that Hmong women see education as more than a means to an end. For the women interviewed in Thao's (2008) study, education is also an opportunity for self-growth and self-fulfillment.

Lena Moua's (2011) study found that the limited leadership opportunities given to Hmong women in Hmong society inspired the Hmong women Moua interviewed to seek leadership opportunities in the mainstream society. Moua (2011) identified and interviewed nine Hmong women leaders for her study. Among the nine women interviewed were prominent leaders Npauj Vang, Ka Zoua Kong Thao, Kao Kalia Yang, and former senator Mee Moua. Education to these leaders was a form of liberation from their experiences with poverty and from

the sexist Hmong society (Moua 2011). Some women leaders like Kao Kalia Yang expressed that she not only pursued education for herself but for her parents (Moua 2011).

Tabrizi's (2011) study on social and cultural factors enabling the degree completion of Hmong female college students found that four of six participants pursued an education because they did not want to conform to the "traditional Hmong woman stereotype" (p. 127). An example of the traditional Hmong woman stereotype is someone who tends to the needs of her clan. Tabrizi (2011) found that Hmong-American women were less willing to participate in traditional clan activities and wanted instead to focus their efforts on the nuclear family. Even though these same four participants wanted to break from tradition, they also ranked family support as the top factor in their degree completion (Tabrizi 2011). Anthropologist Patricia Symonds (2003) argued that according to Hmong cosmology, Hmong gender roles are constructed to be complementary to one another. Whether complementary gender roles constitute gender equity or not in the Hmong culture is an ongoing scholarly debate (Symonds 2003).

The need for economic security, independence, self-growth, leadership opportunities, and elevation in status are the various reasons why more Hmong-American women are choosing to complete higher education degrees. The findings from these studies are perplexing. While Hmong-American women leaders seek to liberate themselves from what they perceive as the sexist ideologies of the Hmong society, after attaining their degrees they find themselves returning and working for the community. While Hmong-American women desire to break from tradition, they still maintain ties with their families. These studies attest to the complex lives that Hmong-American women live.

One may find it ironic that these women seek to liberate themselves through education, yet they find themselves returning to the community and families. Do they truly become

empowered then? Such questioning may happen perhaps because liberation has been conceptualized through dominant forces of the women's movement in the west as an individual's separation from a group (be it family or society) to pursue her own goals and interest. I find this definition of liberation to be limiting in making sense of Hmong-American women's experiences of education. I'd like to consider the idea that one can become liberated by liberating not only themselves but their community from forces of oppression. Alice Walker (1983) writes that "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (p. xii). Walker (1983) redefines feminism for black women as womanism because black women not only experience oppression racially but sexism as well from both outside and inside the black community. She further writes that a womanist is committed to the survival of all people, both male and female, brown, pink, yellow, white, or black (Walker 1983, p. xi-xii). Womanism recognizes that race, gender, class, and sexuality are all connected and thus, strive for a community of solidarity rather than division. As women of color, Hmong-American women are subject to multiple oppressions too. Racial discrimination teaches them that they are obligated to make their communities stronger. They cannot leave their communities behind. Thus, despite the sexism they have faced within the Hmong community, accomplished Hmong-American women leaders return to develop and improve the Hmong community. This choice is a manifestation of these women finding their way to liberation. It can be empowering for Hmong-American women to play a role in lifting the Hmong community. For Hmong-American women, liberation and empowerment for one's community can mean liberation and empowerment for oneself or vice versa.

It is also important to note the presence of agency here in educated Hmong-American women's decision to return to their communities to work. Collins (1990) has written about black women's collective consciousness and action in resisting their white oppressors. In doing things

that are “not expected,” these women are resisting their white oppressors (Collins 1990, p. 92). This is agency—an action taken by an individual or group to resist domination. In choosing to return to work for the Hmong community, Hmong-American do something that is “unexpected” because they act against forces of assimilation which dictates that after they have become assimilated, they lose ties with their ethnic community (Gordon 1964).

### *Assimilation*

“Assimilation” is used to describe how immigrants adapt and integrate into the culture and society of the new country (Gordon 1964). Classical assimilation theory, also known as “straight-line assimilation theory”, asserts that the only way for immigrants to successfully integrate into society is by abandoning their own culture and conforming to the culture of the dominant society (Gordon 1964). The metaphor of the “melting pot” where all cultures melt into one pot is often used to describe this theory (Gordon 1964). Milton Gordon (1964) further contributed to this theory by delineating assimilation stages experienced by immigrants. Scholars who opposed the ethnocentric nature of straight-line assimilation argued that factors like race and ethnicity impede the ability of non-European immigrants to assimilate into white, middle-class mainstream culture (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller 2005). In addition to race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class can also act as a factor in the upward or downward mobility of immigrants. Rumbaut and Portes (2001) after conducting a longitudinal study on children of immigrants established segment assimilation theory. Due to the extensive amount of literature on assimilation theory, this literature review will only focus on segment assimilation and its relevance to second-generation Hmong-American women.

Segment assimilation theory was derived to better explicate the contemporary experiences of immigrants. Instead of conceptualizing assimilation as a singular linear path,

Rumbaut and Portes (2001) argue that the path to assimilation in contemporary U.S. society is segmented. The figure below illustrates their findings.

The Paths of Mobility

<i>Background Determinates</i>	<i>First Generation</i>	<i>Second Generation</i>	<i>Third Generation &amp; Higher</i>
<i>Human Capital</i>	<i>Achievement of middle-class status</i> →	<i>Achievement of higher education credentials; full acculturation</i> →	<i>Complete integration; ethnic identity is optional</i>
<i>Family Structure</i>	<i>Working class status and strong co-ethnic communities</i> →	<i>Selective acculturation. middle class through education</i> →	<i>Full acculturation &amp; entry to mainstream; preservation of ethnic traits</i>
<i>Modes of Incorporation</i>	<i>Working-class status and weak co-ethnic Communities</i> →	<i>Dissonant acculturation failure to attain middle-class occupation</i>	<i>Marginal working class communities;</i> <i>Downward assimilation To native underclass; reactive ethnicity.</i>

Figure 1. Paths of Mobility. This figure illustrates the findings from Rumbaut and Portes’s Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study. Taken from Rumbaut and Portes 2001, p. 283.

In short, Rumbaut and Portes (2001) found that there were three ways in which the children of immigrants adapted into American society. Children whose parents were high in human capital (meaning they came to the United States with financial capital, language skills, and were formally educated) were able to succeed in higher education, maintain their parents’ middle-class status, and completely integrate into American society (Rumbaut and Portes 2001). The integration of immigrant children whose parents lacked human capital (e.g. refugee immigrants) depended on the family and co-ethnic community structure. If these immigrant children had strong relationships with their family and co-ethnic community, they were able to succeed in higher education, attain a middle-class status, and then integrate themselves into

American society (Rumbaut and Portes 2001). Unlike the immigrant children with parents high in human capital, working-class immigrant children still have a sense of ethnic pride because they selectively acculturate, versus middle-class immigrant children whose ethnic identity becomes “optional” (Rumbaut and Portes 2001, p. 285). The last path of mobility consists of working-class immigrant children maintaining their parents’ working-class status or moving downward into a lower socio-economic class status (Rumbaut and Portes 2001). Rumbaut and Portes cite weak relationship with family and co-ethnic community as the reason for this downward movement (Rumbaut and Portes 2001).

Assimilation theorists may differ in what they believe constitutes the integration of immigrants into society but there are two commonalities these theorists share. Overall, assimilation theorists agree that education is the vehicle through which immigrants gain social mobility. Next, assimilation theorists in their research primarily utilize quantitative methodologies such as surveys. These surveys measure variables such as language spoken, level of education, and income. While these surveys are excellent in helping assimilation theorists understand patterns in assimilation, this methodology provides only one dimension of understanding second-generation Americans’ lives. The strength in using quantitative methodologies is its capacity to generate generalizations but this method is still limited in helping us to understand the actual lived-realities of second-generation Americans.

For example, race, class, ethnicity, and gender are factors that affect how second-generation Americans assimilate but are often overlooked. The ethnographic work of Stacy Lee on Hmong-American high school students showcases this. Lee (2005) has focused her work on the subjective experiences of Hmong-American students and her discoveries have proved to be

revealing. One of the most important revelations is that Hmong students undergo a process of racialization in school. Lee (2005) writes:

Their experiences demonstrate, in fact, that the process of racialization is central to the process of becoming American. Hmong American students at University Heights High School are surrounded by hegemonic messages about race...Represented as the norm, whiteness is the standard against which all others are judged (p. 123).

Acknowledging the role of race in assimilation is just one example of how Lee's qualitative methodology enables us to better understand the lived realities of second-generation Hmong-Americans. Lee (2005) further argues that Hmong-American students develop their understanding of what it means to be Hmong in opposition to whiteness, since whiteness is what dominates the education system formally in the curriculum and informally in the social structure (p. 1-2). In other words, everyday millions of children of immigrants go to school and learn that in order to be successful, they have to learn how to act white. Students who do not accept this ideology and resist the dominant white culture are perceived by administrators and teachers as "bad," at-risk students (Lee 2005). Students who comply with the ideology and have respect for authority and academics are seen as the good students (Lee 2005). This is also another important contribution of Lee's study. Lee's (2005) findings allow educators and school administrators to have a new perspective about "bad, at-risk" students. Instead of simply dismissing students for behaving bad, Lee's (2005) findings allows us to understand the reason for these students misbehaving.

*Intersectional Identities*

Identity is complex in so many ways. When an individual is asked about her or his identity, the individual may choose to identify with only one or two aspects of identity such as race or gender. This is overshadowed by the fact that individuals have multiple identities. Up until now, I have been using the word identity, which assumes that one person can have only one identity. Individuals may choose to identify with a certain group, based on race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, or ethnicity, but that does not discount the other identities. For example, when people ask me how I identify, I say I am a Hmong-American woman. I choose to claim three identities: my ethnicity, nationality, and gender. My identity as a second-generation American is just as important to me as these three identities but I bring it up only in certain contexts, for example when I am talking to first-generation college students. The previous discussion on Womanism as expounded by Alice Walker (1983) serves as another relevant example. Black women's identities are shaped by race, gender, and class, yet some may choose to only identify with black. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) writes about this obligation to select only certain identities:

Many women of color feel obliged [to choose] between ethnicity and womanhood: how can they? You never have/are one without the other. The idea of two illusorily separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (or precisely female), partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning and its age-old divide-and-conquer tactics...as if oppression only comes in separate, monolithic forms (p. 105).

Here, Minh-ha (1989) links our way of thinking about identity to the western way of dualistic thinking. Minh-ha (1989) suggests that instead of viewing these identities as separate from one another, one should view them as inter-connected because of how oppression is linked to identity. Collins (1990) adds to this perspective by arguing that there is a system of interlocking oppressions that simultaneously operates to privilege and oppress individuals (p. 222). Individuals, therefore, may be more comfortable with identifying one oppressed group (i.e.

race, social class, religion, etc...) but in actuality oppression does not occur independently of each other. This idea that an individual has multiple identities and experience marginalization differently based on the multiple identities is called intersectionality (Collins 1990).

Intersectionality is an important framework to understand for this research because it stresses that there are a multitude of experiences regarding identity and oppression. Even though individuals may share a common identity, it does not mean they go through the same experience of oppression.

While Collins (1990) offers crucial insights on intersectionality and black women, the work of Lisa Lowe (1996) is helpful for the understanding of intersectionality in the context of Asian-Americans. Asian-Americans are often lumped into one homogenous category by the dominant U.S. culture. This disregards the fact that not all Asian-Americans are the same. Lowe (1996) argues for the heterogeneity and multiplicity within Asian-American culture and identity. Lowe (1996) particularly addresses the narrative about the generation gap that occurs between immigrant parents and American-born children that is popularized through Asian-American literature such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. This narrative of the conflict between older and younger generations does not allow for an alternative understanding of Asian-American experiences. Within the Asian community there are multiple differences regarding nationality, class, and religion. The immigration experience of Asians, for example, is characterized with multiple differences. Lowe (1996) stresses that there are even differences within one group, "The historical context of particular waves of immigration within single groups contrast one another; Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II encountered social and economic barriers quite different from those faced by individuals who arrived from Japan in southern California today" (p.66).

Ngo (2006) agrees with Lowe that it is problematic to generalize the experiences of Asian-Americans. One example is the “model minority” myth. The entrepreneurial success of East Asian immigrants in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s has branded Asian-Americans as the “model minority” because of their achievement of the American dream (Chou and Feagin 2008). Ngo (2006) contests the model minority myth, arguing that because of different immigration histories, Southeast-Asians and some South Asians do not fit the stereotype created about Asians as the “model minority.”

Ngo (2006) believes that one of the reasons why such generalizations occur is because of discourse. Discourses shape identity (Ngo 2010). Ngo (2010) defines discourse as “...a set of historically grounded, yet dynamic statements and images that have the power to legitimate and create knowledge, identities, and realities” (p. 10). In this statement, Ngo is referring to how identity becomes constructed. Lowe (1996) has mentioned how popular novels written by Asian-American writers have formed a narrative familiar to the dominant U.S. society. This is an example of what Ngo (2010) means by discourse. Together these stories written by Asian-American writers become popularized by dominant U.S. society and along with the U.S. media, and U.S. history, form a running story about Asian cultures. This story, then, is taken by people living in dominant U.S. society and generalized for people with Asian identities. Identity, therefore, becomes constructed in two ways where one’s identity is determined by external forces such as the dominant U.S. discourse—which consists of images and narratives displayed by popular culture and U.S. media—and internal forces such as one’s own ethnic community or family. Both Lowe (1996) and Ngo (2010), however, urge us to move beyond this system of ascribing to a simplistic view of Asian-Americans. In attempting to complicate the single

narrative presented to us about Asian-Americans by the U.S. dominant society, we (Asian-Americans) are able to gain new understandings of identity and write a story for ourselves.

## METHODS

Social science researchers have primarily used quantitative methods. In employing quantitative methods such as surveys, researchers gain a limited understanding of the complex lives of second-generation Americans. Therefore, my purpose in doing this research was to utilize a qualitative methodology, such as in-depth interviews, to better understand the lived realities of second-generation Hmong-American women.

In most research processes, the researcher is viewed as the one with power. The researcher is typically the one who gathers the data, interprets them, and communicates them to others. In doing this research, I see myself as a researcher differently. As a Hmong-American woman doing research on Hmong-American women, I recognize the multiplicity in Hmong-American women's life and value each individual's story. Rather than letting myself be the vehicle through which the research is carried, I envision myself and my participants as co-producers of knowledge. I believe that all my participants and I have taught and learned from each other. Reflexivity is an important part of qualitative research. By reflexivity, I mean the practice of being aware of one's experiences influences and how they influence how one views the experiences of others. By being reflexive, I acknowledge my own bias and judgments. Instead of striving to be objective by separating myself from the research, I allow myself to be connected in the process.

The five women who participated in the study because they met the criteria of being second-generation (which means they were born in the U.S. or immigrated here when they were

younger than five-years-old) and had completed a bachelor's degree or higher. These women were personally contacted by me and asked to participate in the study. They were asked to meet me at the local library that was closest to their residence for interviews that lasted one to two hours long. I had a list of interview questions that I had disseminated to the participant before the interview and asked the questions from that list during the interview (see Appendix A).

Participants were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). All the interviews were recorded using an electronic recorder. I then transcribed each interview. In analyzing the stories I gathered, I first examined each individual's story for key events and key concepts that shaped her identity. After analyzing each individual's story, I then selected six questions that were answered by all the participants, coded their responses, and organized what I found into common themes.

## DATA ANALYSIS

These are the stories of five Hmong-American women. First, a brief description will be given about each participant. In this description, I will highlight the key events and key concepts that arose in her interview. I will then proceed to the analysis of each individual's story. After all of the participants stories have been presented, I will discuss the common themes of difference and agency, which were present in all of the women's stories. I would like to note that the names used here are pseudonyms I have given my participants for their safety and confidentiality. I'd also like to express my gratitude to these women for allowing me to learn from their stories. As a way of ensuring that their stories are told from their own voices, I am including extensive quotations from their interviews.

*Iab's Story*

Second-generation Americans, though born in the U.S. and call the U.S. their home, are conscious of another homeland that they belong to (Zhou, 2001). As the children of immigrants, they learn about this homeland through the narratives and memories of their parents and grandparents. To know of this homeland and to be able to return to it can significantly impact an individual. This is Iab's story. Iab is a young Hmong-American woman who is still redefining what being Hmong means to her. She is currently completing the last year of her graduate degree. In her interview, Iab shared with me that her passion is to make a difference in the Hmong community through a profession in education. This passion was sparked by a study abroad trip to Laos and Thailand. Prior to this trip, Iab was still learning about her ethnic identity from her peers and college experience. When I asked Iab how she felt growing up Hmong, Iab began by telling me that she didn't understand her Hmong identity until she moved to the city. It seems Iab was able to better understand her family and identity when Iab was surrounded by more Hmong peers after her parents moved from a small Wisconsin town to the city:

...I grew up in a small town and I knew I was different from everyone. We lived in a town with like 13,000 people population. There was like a really small Hmong community but still very strong. (Clears throat). And then I knew I was different and I didn't speak Hmong at all until I moved to the city, which was kind of funny (pause). Growing up in like the little suburb, I didn't really take into the fact that I was different (pause). When I moved to the cities, that's when I realized what a big difference being Hmong is and that's when I actually spoke Hmong a little bit more 'cause I usually never spoke Hmong. I started understanding the differences between being Hmong, being white, being black, and being Mexican and Hispanic or Vietnamese and (pause) I guess I started understanding the cultural barriers, especially as a Hmong woman growing up.

A key word in this statement is "different." Iab notes that she "knew she was different" but it wasn't until she moved to the city that she "took it into account." It seems it was when she

moved to the city that she began to learn about the differences in identity. What's interesting here is that she does not clarify what "difference" means. Iab mentions, "Hmong, white, black, Mexican and Hispanic or Vietnamese." All of these are distinctions having to do with identity but some are racial identities, ethnic identities, and national identities. It's also important to note how Iab shifts from talking about culture to gender. She says that moving to the city was not only helpful in her learning more about being Hmong but she says, "especially as a Hmong woman." In the following statement, Iab continues to explain how:

...My elementary I really didn't have to worry about anything 'cause I was still young but as I got into my middle school and high school years I started realizing like what Hmong woman is supposed to do because you start hearing the stories (pause). The Hmong girls in middle school, they would tell me stories about their sisters, their cousins, and I would be shocked about it... especially when I went through my period and I didn't understand that until I talked to my Hmong friends. They said when you get your period you're gonna get pregnant. My mom even told me right when I got my period... if I kissed a boy I'd get pregnant... I got really scared. So when it came to sex or anything, we never talked about it. The only time I knew about it was when I talked to friends. They'd tell me stories [of] how they would sneak out after school to go and hangout with their boyfriends... And I never knew that. I was like, 'Oh you can stay after school?' 'Cause I knew that if I went home there was no way for me to go and ask my mom if I could stay after school or go over to my guy friend's house (sigh). (Her face lights up and she sits in her chair). If I could, I would write a book about being a liar! (She laughs). I think I've been a very good liar! 'Cause my mom—she's a very hot headed women. She has really protected us, especially me and my sister on boys...Even if we hugged a guy in front of her she gets really pissed. She gets really mad and will lecture us not to even like get near them. I never understood why until I started understanding all these girls...And I guess for me with my mom scaring me... I started realizing like...I have to be extra careful cause like you know if that was to happen that would be very shameful for my family and I know that I wouldn't be able to like face anybody.

This statement reveals two important points. One, it reveals that for Iab, peers served as another source of knowledge. The expectations Iab's mother expected her to adhere to definitely taught Iab about her identify as a Hmong woman but it was her peers who helped her to

understand the reasons behind those expectations. Most importantly, this statement shows how ethnic and gender identity are intertwined for Iab. For Iab, speaking Hmong is not the only way she shows she's Hmong. She is also Hmong in the way that she performs her role as a woman: she must not stay after school; she must not have contact with boys; and, she must not shame her family. Iab points out how sexuality is a taboo topic in the Hmong culture. Her mother restricted her from being with boys because of the fear that she'd shame her family if she were to get pregnant before marriage. Lee (2005) found dating and sexuality to be the biggest source of conflict between Hmong parents and girls. In many Asian cultures, family reputation is often linked with sexual purity (Lee 2005). Promiscuity is frowned upon because sexual activity before marriage not only brings dishonor to the family but it reduces a Hmong girl's chances of a good marriage (Lee 2005). The ideas of Hmong girls in the U.S. are influenced by U.S. media. They focus on "romance, individual choice, and dreams of dating and falling in love" (Lee 2005, p. 108). These ideas are problematic for Hmong parents because in addition to family reputation, they feel they are losing control of their children to American society so they become stricter in the process (Lee 2005). "Telling lies" is Iab's way of negotiating her identity as a Hmong-American woman. She is breaking the rules in doing so but she is careful not to go too far and bring shame to her family.

As Iab went on to college, she continued to explore her identity. She shared that her Hmong peers continued to teach her about her Hmong identities, but it was the history courses she took that motivated her to dig deeper and learn about her own history. She also had the opportunity to return to Southeast Asia on a study abroad trip, which ultimately inspired her to pursue a graduate education and work for the community. Iab says:

Well I went to Laos and Thailand [and] saw my dad's side of the family...my dad was the only person that came [to the U.S.] from his family. So I went over there and I met my dad's brothers for the first time and my dad's parents. That was such an impact 'cause they treat you as god but you really are nothing when you come here [to the U.S.]. To them you're like this scholar from their family...you had no clue that they existed until you went over there. I had like over 20 people who came and waited for me and my sister... It was a great moment...it really impacts you cause it's like look at what they have and look at what I have...Your parents came all the way here and you know you're not taking advantage of it cause when I went back there and saw that it taught me that they really look up to me. To them I am like a dream. It's just nice 'cause you don't see that in yourself when you come here but when you go there you see that.

The idea of difference surfaces again in this statement. Iab notes that there is this difference between “here” (United States) and “over there” (Laos/Thailand). Iab seems to be referring to the difference between living in the U.S. and Southeast Asia. The U.S. is often thought of as a land of freedom and opportunity. By visiting her relatives in Laos and Thailand, the stories about poverty and hardship materialized for Iab. She experienced how her relatives objectified her American identity. Iab states that they looked up to her and treated her like “god.” It is particularly interesting how Iab’s relatives would assume that Iab was better off because she was living in the U.S. Iab’s relative’s objectification of Hmong-Americans as “better off” made a significant impact on Iab. She ends this part of her interview by saying their assumption did allow her to see how much freedom and access to opportunity she had in the U.S. and upon returning, she wanted to take advantage of the opportunities she had and use them to make a difference.

While her travel to Southeast Asia brought her closer to her parents’ homeland, it also expanded her understanding of her national identity. Iab’s story is a good example of heterogeneity in Asian-American cultures. Heterogeneity is defined by Lowe (1996) as the pluralism within the group of Asian Americans (p.63). Lowe (1996) argues that Asian cultures

often get homogenized as one. The fact that there are many differences between the cultures and even within a specific Asian culture (in this case, Hmong) is often over-looked because Asian-American culture has been essentialized by the intergenerational-difference conflict. We recognize the intergenerational conflict in Iab's story when she is talking about her mother's restrictions about boys. Her experience abroad, however, helps one to see that Asian-American lives and stories move beyond the clash of two cultures.

### *Paj's Story*

Paj is a professional working in research and public policy. She is married and has one child. Race was a key concept in Paj's story. Like Iab, Paj had to relocate and moving to a suburb with no Hmong students taught Paj to be cognizant of how people would treat her based on her race. She shared in the interview how it wasn't only white students in high school who ostracized her but how in college, Hmong students called her out for acting "too white." Paj begins her interview by describing the sense of camaraderie she felt growing up in an all-Hmong neighborhood:

...there was a lot of people who were similar to me. We had similar experiences. We went to the same school. We were all on welfare and so it was like (she starts to chuckle)--so we had like camaraderie. When it really changed for me was when (she clears throat) this one or two year I had to go live in the suburb (pause). Because there were some life changes for me when I was younger and so it was in ninth grade—well part of eighth grade then part of ninth grade—I went to live there. When my identity really came out or became an issue was that time because there were not a lot of minority students. It was just mostly white students and I felt like I was singled out (her tone softens and rises). Like a turning point for me you know and then...I came back to Harding high school and there like you turn every single corner and there's like a Hmong student, you know. It wasn't even like a question. You didn't even question your identity. It was like you just fit in and you were part of the group like learning just became more natural and you didn't have to worry about all these white kids like trying to bully you or saying 'Go back

to your own country' or things like that. So it was like a turning point for me, in terms of me understanding my identity as a Hmong person. When I got back it was comfortable. Learning became more natural...not that learning wasn't before...I was always a good student to begin with but it was just (she starts speaking in a raspy voice, her tone softens and she looks worried) like you always had to watch your back like when you're in the suburbs at that time. (Her voice returns to normal and she pauses). I hear stories of some other Hmong students who are in the suburbs who experience similar experiences too and so I'm sure it still happens...

During the interview, I took note of Paj's tone and body language. When she was speaking about going to school in the suburbs, she started speaking so softly it was hard to hear her. It was as if she was taking precautions not to speak too loud in case the white students heard her. Once she returned to the cities with other Hmong students, she felt safe again. Paj mentions how the treatment she felt impacted her learning. Paj said once she came back to Harding, "learning became more natural," meaning that it got easier because she did not have to be defensive all the time. There are two things to be noted from Paj's story. First, the idea of a collective identity is apparent here. Camaraderie is a significant word here. It perfectly describes the social cohesion within the community Paj grew up in and conveys the sense of belonging she felt. Paj also mentions that she knows of other Hmong students who have experienced the same treatment from white students in the suburbs. This statement shows that Paj's sense of identity was formed out of similarities (what she had in common with other Hmong people), unlike Iab who formed her cultural identity out of difference. Difference, however, is still present in Paj's story. Difference here is represented by the hostility she faced for being a person of color. White students saw that she was different and sought out to make sure she knew it. It's important to note here how racial difference can lead to psychological violence, as reflected in Paj's story through her tone and

body language. To further demonstrate how this event shaped her identity, here is how Paj talks about her experiences with race in college:

I think I kind of talked a little bit about high school but in higher education it was more of my own people.... Asians [that] were like, 'Whoah. Paj is so white.' ...they didn't really say that in my face but I heard it from other people. 'Paj is so white because she can get along with other white people.' Pretty much I could navigate the white system... a lot of the struggle came from my own people saying, 'Hey. How come Paj has these benefits and we're not getting it.' So it was like they were almost jealous of me. They were still my friends though...

In college, Paj was very active and became the president of the student government. She also received a Fulbright Scholarship during her undergraduate years to study in Southeast Asia. Her outgoing personality and ability to socialize outside of the Hmong group earned her a reputation for being "white washed." Paj's experience in high school had taught her to be racially conscious and now in college, race continued to play a role in her life. She saw that there were divisions within the Hmong student group. Those who were not acting "Hmong enough" were labeled as white. I speculate that Paj's experiences in the suburb taught her how to behave "white." Through this experience she had learned "to be white" and, therefore, understood how to use this knowledge to navigate college. Paj demonstrates this consciousness of how knowing how to act white plays a role in the education system:

...But there's a certain system that was set up for people to become successful in America... if you choose to follow it but then you also know that because you are a minority, you don't have privilege--white privilege. But then there's that system that you have to overcome or navigate. Some people...[are]...better at navigating the white privilege system... I think that is why some Hmong students get lost and feel like they don't want to go to college. They just look at the people who are successful in college and all they appear to be is white. And that's where some of the discouragement comes from because a lot of the Hmong people or Hmong kids don't know how to navigate that system ...At the same time though, there's this other system where if you go to school, get your high school degree, go to college, get another degree there's a job waiting for you...that's why it's my passion to

mentor Hmong students through college. Some of them just don't know how to get through this system because they don't have access to the knowledge...

Paj's critique of the education system and its relation to whiteness resonates with the findings of Stacy Lee (2005). Paj says successful students are seen as white. Lee (2005) writes that the Hmong students she studies embody values that were from both the Hmong culture and hegemonic dominant American culture, but that the students who were seen as "good" students by the school were often the ones who were more associated with white students (p. 115-116).

Lee states:

While most Hmong boys only socialize with Hmong or Southeast Asian youth, Kao associates primarily with white students he knows through participating in school-sponsored sports or other extracurricular activities...Kao's decision to distance himself from other Hmong youth was based on his desire to learn about the dominant American culture and to improve his future life chances. He views the adoption of certain aspects of white masculinity as being imperative for success (p. 115-116).

This quotation relates to my speculation that Paj was able to successfully navigate a non-Hmong setting because she was exposed to a predominantly white environment during high school. Kao (in Lee 2005) made the assumption that he could learn about the dominant culture by associating with non-Hmong students. It is significant to note here how non-white students are aware that there is a set of unspoken knowledge that is not available to them because of their non-white identities. Depending on their exposure, Hmong students may come to acquire this knowledge. Paj for example was exposed to it when she moved to the suburbs and though difficult, this experience taught her how to relate to non-Hmong students. This helped her to socialize outside of the Hmong student group, enlarge her network, and access bigger opportunities. Unlike Kao, however, who internalized racism and severed his ties from his Hmong peers, Paj demonstrated racial consciousness. She offers in her statement a powerful

critique of the education system and says she is determined to mentor Hmong students through the process. This demonstrates a strong sense of agency because while Paj sees herself as someone who has successfully navigated this system of privilege, she wants to pass on the knowledge she has gained to benefit the entire community she identifies with.

### *Npib's Story*

Racial differences also shaped Npib's understanding of her identity. Today, Npib is an advocate for social justice and facilitates workshops on racial equity. She is married and has two biracial children. Npib's story is the story of a woman who is retracing her roots. Growing up Npib says she didn't want to be Hmong:

...I didn't want to be Hmong. Everything around me— media, school, church, everything around me... nothing looked like me. ...I remember in elementary school they were reading the All American Girls book, Nancy Drew books and I don't--I was not a reader because of that. I could not relate to these people. These stories, these characters, and these people. My life does not reflect that and ...the message was very clear that I was (a) not wanted [and] (b) that it was the wrong thing to live life... Therefore, there was always this message of that's now what it means to be white. That I needed to turn away from being Hmong and I struggled with that. It was a huge conflict...I would fantasize about being white...I always thought if I was a white girl I would have friends over for sleep over or I would be able to go for sleepover. I thought that if I were a white girl I would be able to have my own car, my own room. I would know what the word vacation means. I would go vacation with my family. I would be able to go shopping whenever I felt like and buy whatever I would like. I also thought I'd be able to go to school, get my master's, my Ph.D. I would be able to do all that. And my family would have a house with the two cars, dog, and white picket fence. That was the end goal. To be like that. 'Cause I thought that was what was better. 'Cause I saw that was what was better. You know. I believed being white was being better...

Like the character in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, Npib had internalized racism. If she had just been white, her life would have drastically improved. The specific

examples she noted had to do with wealth (buy anything, go on vacation, have a house and two cars). Npib's examples about how she didn't want to read because the books she was reading did not reflect her experience is an example of how race is structured into the educational curriculum. Up until now, the women in this project had talked about the racism they felt from individuals, but Npib here gives examples of how whiteness is strategically structured into a classroom. It's also important to note how Npib conflated wealth with whiteness, showing how race and class can be intertwined identities. Npib's observations about her family's poverty and other Hmong people's poverty in contrast to her white peers, who had more resources, led her to believe that being white also meant being rich. The media, which often portrays white Americans as middle-class, could have also impacted Npib's childhood observations.

Both Paj and Npib experienced racial discrimination prior to college, but the difference is that Paj was able to resist internalizing the racism due to the strong sense of belonging she felt with the community she had grown up in. As Npib shares about her early life, she recounts how she internalized the racism. She says she "**would fantasize**" about being white and believed being white was better. Npib demonstrates a heightened sense of reflexivity in her interview, almost conducting an analysis of how race molded her identity. The fact that she uses past tense shows her heightened level of consciousness. This consciousness demonstrates a sense of agency, but where Npib shows the strongest sense of agency is how she is raising her daughters. She states:

While in college I had a child out of wedlock...having my daughter taught me a lot. I would say that is what made me really look at myself...It taught me to appreciate the Hmong culture so much more than I ever thought. It took me back to my original roots... it forces me to look at my own internalized racism and deal with the hurt and start healing. Now I have children who are biracial and I feel that is up to me to teach them about the Hmong culture. I don't need to teach them to be white because that's all around them. It's what is dominant. I send them to a

Hmong charter school where they learn to read and write Hmong. I'm so proud of them. They speak better Hmong than me.

Agency is defined here as an action, regardless of whether it is small or extraordinary to resist domination. Her earlier experiences had conditioned her to reject her Hmong identity but Npib's self-analysis demonstrates she has moved beyond the fantasy of being white. She has gained a sense of agency from being critical of whiteness and this sense of agency empowers her as a parent of two biracial daughters. In deciding to teach her daughters Hmong values, Npib is actively reclaiming her identity. Lee (2005) and Ngo (2010) argue that race matters in shaping the identities of Hmong and Laotian students. Npib's story is an example of how the hierarchy of race impacts the identity development of non-white students. While these racialized experiences can leave one feeling powerless, one can develop ways to resist, and regain a sense of agency.

### *Npliaj's Story*

Npliaj is married to a white man but she is still connected with the Hmong community. In fact, she is well-known for the work she does in the community around gender equity, abuse, and marital relationships. Npliaj describes herself as a Hmong woman of the "third world." She says that growing up she bifurcated her world into two. There was the Hmong world and American world and she knew how she had to behave in each world. She says she now does not belong to either one, but to a third world where she can combine what she likes from both. To Npliaj, her identity as a Christian is more important than her ethnic identity. It is her faith and the values she has as a Christian that guides her Hmong-ness. She states:

You know when people ask you "what are you?" I always say Hmong because I know that's what they are asking. I want to say American but then they usually ask a second question, "No, where are you originally from?" So I just say Hmong and that my family is from Laos. You know I identify first as a Christian, then

second as a woman, and third as a Hmong because my Christianity, my faith, my beliefs and my values impact who I am as a woman and as someone who is Hmong. It impacts how I live my Hmong-ness so it is truly in that order and I put woman second because how my Hmong-ness gets played out is highly dependent on my gender...

It is interesting what Npliaj shares about her past experiences with non-Hmong people inquiring about her identity. She notes that she has learned to just say Hmong because the real answer would be too complicated. Once again, race emerges in this story. Based on her skin color, Npliaj is assumed to be the “other.” Asian-Americans have occupied a particular part in American history. The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and Japanese internment camps have created the notion that Asians are foreigners and will never belong to U.S. land (Wu 2002). Therefore, despite many generations of being in the U.S., most Asian-Americans still experience what Npliaj has encountered here.

When asked to elaborate on how her faith guides her Hmong-ness, Npliaj provided this example:

Take for example the value of hospitality. In the Hmong culture there is a rule about hospitality. If you have guests who come to your house, you are not supposed to go and hide in your room. You have to give them water and welcome them. As a Christian, my faith says it is important to be loving, to treat others with kindness. So out of my Christian faith, I follow the value of hospitality because it is my faith—that I should love and treat other with kindness—that inspires me to be hospitable towards others...

Npliaj’s response about identity connects with Lowe’s (1996) argument that differences exist within the Asian community. Asian cultures often become essentialized in the dominant culture, but culture is not something that is static and unchanging (Lowe 1996). Npliaj may be Hmong but she can relate to the dominant society through her Christian faith. What is more interesting here is how she is able to find commonality between Christianity and the Hmong

culture, creating her “third world.” In the following quote, Npliaj talks more about creating this third world:

...when I grew up I bifurcated my world. There was a very distinct Hmong world that I interact in and there was also a very distinct American world that I interact in. My identity as a young child growing up is much more defined by my Hmong-ness than the American-ness but I grew up actually feeling like I didn't belong in either world... that there should be this third world where people can talk about ‘hey this is my value and it's from this culture’ and I'm sort of a conglomeration of these things. And it would be okay and safe to be different.

Struggling to live between two worlds is a common story shared by contemporary immigrant children. Zhou and Bankston (1999) attribute the bicultural conflict experienced by the second-generation to the generation gap. Refugee/immigrant parents operate with a “dual frame of reference” where they physically live in America but live by the values of their native country (Zhou 2001, p. 206). Second-generation Americans, despite having no recollection of their parents’ homeland, are forever shaped by this history and do feel the need to obey their parents yet fit into the American culture (Zhou, 2001). Lowe (1996) has critiqued the intergenerational conflict and wishes for us to move beyond this. The emphasis in Asian-American literature and films on the generation gap often leaves us feeling helpless. We are left to believe the individual is stuck between two worlds. Npliaj’s statement about her multiple identities as a Christian, woman, and Hmong reveals the multiplicity Lowe urges for, and it is a testament that second-generation Americans don’t have to be stuck between two worlds.

Growing up, Bifurcating her world was how Npliaj dealt with her identity as a second-generation American. As she matures and grows older she has constructed a space for herself. Npliaj did not feel she belonged to the Hmong world or American world but a third world. She states, “I’m sort of a conglomeration of these things.” Npliaj’s creation of this third world

demonstrates a strong sense of agency. She has recreated for herself what her culture means to her. When I compare Npliaj's interview to the other women I interviewed, I felt that Npliaj was the most critical of the Hmong culture. While Iab and Paj said they were still trying to understand the Hmong culture and deciding for themselves what was right, Npliaj clearly said she was a woman of the third world and says this world is made up of what is good from both worlds. She then proceeded to give me her critique of what she does not agree with:

One thing I see in the Hmong community is that the women are scared to speak up and lead in public. I see this in the Hmong church that I attend...It was explicit in the sense that they teach women to remain quiet in meetings, in gatherings and this is the place where the Hmong church continued to live out the Hmong values. When you look at leadership there are no women in leadership. In the meetings if a women voiced something people would roll their eyes or you know try to put her in her place. So the message was loud and clear that women are not valued for what they can contribute as far as anything beyond cooking, cleaning, and bearing children. I don't think they thought women could contribute beyond that. My Christian faith teaches me differently. It teaches regard for both genders, that woman and men are equals. I'd like to see a different type of leadership. One that is honest and loving. One that allows women to participate.

As shown in her interview, leadership is something Hmong women are traditionally discouraged from. It is unclear how her faith teaches her equality about both gender because not all Christians believe in gender equality. I speculate that Npliaj's regard for genders equality could stem from the influence of American culture and higher education. Several of the studies on Hmong women and higher education have found that Hmong-American women pursue higher education as way to liberate themselves from sexist ideologies in the Hmong community (Lee 1997; Moua 2011; Tabrizi 2011). By attaining a degree in higher education, Hmong women can elevate their status in the Hmong community. They are also able to become more independent and autonomous. Lee (2005) also found that the media was a major influence on Hmong youth,

“Most Hmong American girls, however, assume that American culture offers greater gender equality for girls and women than Hmong culture” (p. 121).

Npliaj continues talking about how she challenges the silence:

I always try to challenge the norm and speak up... when we're at meetings and the women are quiet, I'll speak up and give my opinion. I do this in both worlds—both Hmong and American. At work you hardly see Asian people in decision making positions. It's usually assumed that if you're Asian you are quiet. So I speak up as well and challenge that norm.

The fact that Npliaj says she speaks up not only in the Hmong world but the American world as well, further demonstrates her agency as an individual in determining her own identity. Perhaps Npliaj is an example of an individual who has been able to reconcile the different values of the two cultures she has been in. Often, second-generation Americans get stuck in the differences between American and Hmong culture but Npliaj's story shows us that there is a way to exist in both and not either/or. By being critical of the aspects she disagrees with, focusing on the commonalities between these two cultures, and bringing together what she likes, she brings together her bifurcated worlds.

### *Npauj's Story*

Npauj, who believes she is the total opposite of a traditional Hmong woman, is also someone who is very critical of the gender practices in the Hmong culture. Npauj works in the area of public policy and has been questioned by her relatives for doing a “man's job.” Npauj finds this ironic because it is exactly her family legacy and values that motivates her to do the work that she does. Npauj describes herself as someone who is patriotic, who would fight for her people and die for her country. She shares in the following statement how her sense of identity is strongly influenced by her family's legacy:

My mother comes from a very strong, very powerful family and so I grew up in the shadow of a great family legacy. The things that my parents stressed all the time honor, duty to family, pride, and dignity... so all of those concepts or values were really conveyed to all the children in the family in the form of stories. My maternal grandfather was a great political and military leader. To serve one's country. It sounds like it's very military like and a good portion of that value and belief is you know...was derived based on the fact that my father and grandfathers were in the military. But you know duty to one's country is really about doing what's right. Demonstrating respect for what's given to you as a citizen of a place and time...If you understand and value what you have, you give back to ensure that that reciprocity continues. That's one of the values that I was taught.

In adhering to her family values and carrying on her family legacy, Npauj says she has been questioned by her family and ridiculed by her relatives. She recalls meeting her grandmother for the first time:

My father's mother came to America a few years ago. She came after a long process of my parents trying to bring her to America. I remember the day she arrived in St. Paul. I was finishing up school, my senior year in college, and I was very excited to go home. I went to the store to pick up a bouquet of roses and went home to see her. As soon as I walked into my parents' house, my grandmother was sitting in the kitchen and as soon as I introduced myself, she said to me, 'So you're the daughter who's trying to survive in a man's world.' She had heard about me and heard that I was studying politics and in her head, politics were a man's arena. That was the first comment she made. It wasn't even in a kind tone at all. I mean, I was hurt at the age of 21. This is a grandmother that I have never seen in my life but still I owe her a ton of respect because she's my father's mother...

What's interesting here is that Npauj was able to contextualize her grandmother's response. Npauj says, "In her head, politics were a man's arena." Npauj knew, then at the age of 21 and now, that gender ideologies were different within the Hmong culture. She understood that in Laos, women seldom held political positions. Although Npauj was hurt, she says she respected

her grandmother. This is another example of how Npauj, a second-generation American, negotiates bicultural conflict. She disagrees with her grandmother but still adheres to the values of respecting family and obeying the elders.

Gender seemed to be a strong theme for Npauj. It seemed the treatment she received from her family led Npauj to become very critical of gender ideologies within the Hmong culture.

Here Npauj talks about son preference:

My sisters are the pillars of my life. They're very much like me. We are all strong because we grew up in a family where my parents wanted sons. My parents had the four of us first and they very much wanted a son. They were calling all sorts of spirits and resorting to herbal remedies so they could give birth to a son. They definitely love the sons more, especially my mother...so my sense of identity as a Hmong woman is that she may be seen as not as valuable as her brothers but she's also like the person who bears the honor of her family, right?

Her critique of gender continues:

My parents want someone who is sweet, docile, and hardworking—hardworking in the sense that they do everything for the elders, relatives, and husband. Growing up, I learned that a good Hmong woman is someone who doesn't talk back, marries early, and has babies, especially sons. I was the silently rebellious daughter. I made sure not to do any of those things. I'm very stubborn and sometimes come off as aggressive because of the environment I've grown up in...As much as I say I'm Hmong-American, in my parents' eyes, I will always be first and foremost their Hmong daughter so I strive to be that kind of daughter...but I understood that I couldn't be the perfect Hmong daughter and at the same time be successful because in America, the landscape requires a different set of skills. I can't be 15, married, have 5 kids and be top notch in my class. The greatest expectation I had for myself is that I give back to my community, whether that is the Hmong community or the community at large...I purposely set out to acquire the knowledge that would allow me to go back to the community...I understand the sacrifices. I understand you dodged bullets to survive Laos to get to America in order to raise your children in a land where non-Hmong Americans look at you and say you look like the general welfare recipient. I want to pull my community up from where it has fallen but I can't be the Hmong daughter they want me to be.

It's interesting how Npauj initially begins with her critique of what she views as a traditional Hmong woman or a "good Hmong woman," but then she ends up talking about the value of community that her parents instilled in her. From this statement, it is understood that Npauj's disagreement with traditional gender norms is not due to Americanization. Really, it is much deeper than that. Npauj understood early on that to be able to help her family and community, she had to be "aggressive" and study politics. In this way, she has redefined for herself what being a Hmong woman is to her, yet she is still fulfilling the duty she has to her family and community.

## DISCUSSION OF MAJOR THEMES

### *Difference*

Difference and agency are two consistent themes in these women's stories. These women speak of difference as primarily having to do with their experiences related to race and gender. Paj, Npib, and Npliaj share in their interviews about their experiences with race. In this section, we look more closely at their experiences and see how it was similar and different. The experiences of these women can be understood in two parts. The first part has to do with race with relations to skin color. All these women have been marked as the "other" based on their appearance. The most apparent examples are Paj and Npliaj's experiences. Paj said she grew up in a place where everyone looked like each other and had the same experiences. Once she moved to the suburbs where there were few minority students, her body looked out of a place in a predominantly white student body. When she came back to Harding High School, she notes that Hmong students were at "every corner." Her body no longer looks out of place and as she says, "you just blend in." The example Npliaj gives us about when "people" (assumed here as white

people) ask her “What are you?” and how she anticipates the second question, “No. Where are you originally from” if she were to answer with “American” demonstrates how based on her skin color, she is marked as the “other.”

The second part about racial difference has to do with culture and behavior. These women’s discomfort of being the “other” is not only marked by their skin color but it is also tied to different cultural norms and behaviors. Npliaj says she “bifurcated” her Hmong world from her American world because she knew she had to act differently in each world. She does not elaborate on how she had to act in each world but she knew that she had to alter her behavior because of cultural differences. Npib in her fantasies of being white shows the difference in culture and behavior between Hmong families and white-American families. Npib has a list of things that she believes white people do: they owned possessions like a house, cars, and pets; they would go on vocation; they attained advanced degrees; and had more freedom because their parents allowed them to have sleepovers. The Hmong as their own ethnic group have their own cultural norms and values. When these women are placed in settings where the dominant cultural norms don’t match the ones they have learned from home, there is discomfort. Also, the fact that the dominant culture does not accommodate the norms of these women validate the discomfort they feel and justify they are the “other.” Paj’s story adds another dimension to this idea of racial difference and behavior. In college, Paj strategically adopts certain behavior so that she can succeed in college. She does well in classes, socializes with non-Hmong groups, and gets involved with student organizations. Paj is accused by her Asian peers as being “white” because they see the behavior she has adopted associated with whiteness. It is important to note here that sometimes non-white students prefer sticking to groups they can relate with because of the discomfort they feel in predominantly white spaces. Just because Paj could negotiate being in

white-dominated spaces, her behavior was seen as “acting white.” The experiences of these women with race and school settings resonate with the findings in Lee (2005) and Ngo (2010), who argue that race shapes immigrant students’ understanding of meanings and identity.

Gender difference also emerges within the narratives of these women. Both Npliaj and Npauj have observed that Hmong women are treated differently within the Hmong culture. Npauj speaks about her profession in the area of public policy is seen as a “man’s job” to her family and relatives. This relates to Npliaj’s critique of the Hmong community discouraging Hmong women from public leadership. Npliaj says she believes Hmong women are capable of leading but they must do so silently. In public they are told to be quiet. The differences the two women are discussing here perhaps have to do with the difference in gender ideologies and gender roles between Hmong culture and white American culture. Both cultures are patriarchal, it is just that these two women view there to be more freedom and equality in the white American culture based on their own experiences with the white American culture. In Laos, the role of Hmong women was often tied to her work in the household (Donnelly 1997) and these gender ideologies may still be present with the Hmong people even after resettling in America. However, gender ideologies are ongoing and changing in the Hmong community. White American women were once discouraged from taking part in public leadership and limited to the private/domestic sphere. However, with the women’s movement, there are more public leadership opportunities today in American society. What’s important to notice in these women’s experiences is that they do not let the gender ideologies on women and public leadership limit their abilities. Npauj continues to politically organize and Npliaj speaks up at community meetings. This, then leads us into the discussion of agency.

*Agency*

Agency is a term used within the literature of sociology and women's studies to describe how individuals are able to resist and subvert oppression. Recall earlier, Collins' (1990) theory that there is a "system of inter-locking oppression" that simultaneously works to marginalize groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexuality, religion, etc...The construction of agency has previously been defined as the capacity of an individual to act outside of structures of power (Mahmood 2005). Mahmood (2005) argues for a more open definition of agency, one that "emerge[s] from 'within semantics and institutional networks' ...[and] delink [it] from progressive politics..." (p. 34). With this open definition, agency can be seen in individual small acts of resistance in an individual's daily life. Agency does not require massive acts of resistance such as organizing protests or movements.

Agency is present in these women's stories in many forms and level. The presence of agency can be seen in their consciousness, in the way that they negotiate their identities, and in their desire to maintain connection to their communities.

One form of agency is consciousness as demonstrated by Paj and Npib. Both Paj and Npib share experiences of racial discrimination. Both mention in their interviews how attending predominantly white schools hindered their learning. Paj felt so uncomfortable in her environment, she felt it was harder to learn while Npib felt discouraged to learn because the books in her class did not reflect her experience. Their experiences as the "other" did not lead them to feeling helpless or powerless. This is captured in the way that they tell their stories. As noted, Npib uses all past tense in her interview while Paj uses critical terms such as "white privilege" to describe her experience.

The way these women negotiate their identities also is a form of agency. Npauj, Npib, and Npliaj negotiate their identities in different ways. For Npauj, agency is present in how she redefines her ethnic and gender identity. She shares in her interview the impact of her family's legacy on her ethnic identity. To Npauj, it is important to carry out the values of fighting for one's people, serving one's country, and doing good for one's community. However, she is challenged by the gender ideologies within her family. She negotiates her ethnic and gender identity by continuing to adhere to the values of duty and honor to family, people, and country but she chooses to not adhere to the expectations of a "good" Hmong girl who marries at early age, has children, and takes care of the home. In this way, she still maintains her ties to her family but is able to be herself.

Npib has a different way of negotiating her identity. She exerts her agency in the way that she chooses to raise her children. She grew up hating her Hmong heritage and now enrolls her children in a Hmong charter school. She accepts that she does not speak Hmong as well as her children, but still believes it is important for them to know about their own heritage. We could look at this as Npib has accepted that her experiences with internalized racism have conditioned her to believe her heritage was inferior but now, she is reclaiming it through her daughters. Npib's story shows us that agency is not something that is lost but can also be regained.

Agency is present in Npliaj's story in two forms. We first notice it when she talks about non-Hmong people asking her about her identity. She is conscious of the fact that what they really want to know is her place of origin. People who pose this question totally dismisses the fact that Npliaj could be born in the United States and be a U.S. citizen. Based on her past experiences Npliaj already anticipates the follow-up questions and therefore just decides to answer, "Hmong." Choosing to identify as the "other" in this case is not submitting to the

dominant power structure. Rather, Npliaj has adopted a strategy of acquiesce, as a way of subverting her oppressor. Another way Npliaj exerts agency is in her construction of a “third-world.” It is extremely powerful how she negotiates her identities by constructing this space for herself. She integrates and keeps values that are important to her and at the same time, critiques practices that she finds disagreeable.

The strategies employed by these women in negotiating their racial, gender, and ethnic identities and the forms of consciousness they exhibit are powerful demonstration of resistive acts. What is even more profound is their collective action in wanting to maintain and empower their communities. The word “community” appeared over and over again in each individual’s story. Each woman concluded her story by talking about the importance of connecting with and advancing the community. Iab is in the midst of completing her master’s degree in education so that she can help make education accessible to Hmong students and parents. The lessons Paj has learned about white privilege and higher education inspired her to be a mentor to Hmong college students. Npib not only enrolls her children in a Hmong charter school but is the board chair of the charter school. Npauj continues to organize in the St. Paul area, which is predominantly Hmong, to ensure that policies are fair and enhance the wellbeing of the community. And Npliaj, despite her critique of gender ideologies, believes in a better vision for the Hmong community and speaks at community events on gender equity and also facilitates her own workshops on healthy marital relationships. These women not only want to better themselves but want to use the skills and knowledge they gained from a college education to advance their communities.

Their collective action is astounding and takes the meaning of agency to a new level. Agency has typically been constructed in terms of the individual’s capacity to act. The individual looks inward for sources of strength, liberates herself from her oppression, and pursues her own

personal interests. The Hmong women in this study's source of strength seem to be connected to a collective source. This collective source could be a community of Hmong women, as Npau has mentioned in her interview how her sisters are her source of support and strength. Npliaj's comment about Hmong women being the "backbone" of the family and clan is also insightful here. As a Hmong-American woman, myself, who comes from a family of strong women, I would agree. Hmong women are survivors of war and migration. There are bounds of strength in each generation and this strength is passed on from mothers to daughters. When I reflect on my journey to feminism, I often recall the moment when my mother said to me, "Take hold of your education and do really well in school. Focus on your studies and not boys because education is the key to a successful future. You are going to be independent. Do not wait for a man to help you get things done. You do it yourself." She gets the credit for why I became a feminist, yet it's ironic that she accuses me of being too "Americanized" when I refuse to abide by certain cultural traditions such as letting men eat first at family gatherings. Or perhaps, the collective source is the Hmong community itself. Collectivism is a strong value within the Hmong culture. It is structured in the clan structure and for most of these women, growing up within a clan allowed them to develop a strong sense of belonging. Perhaps, it is their desire to continue to protect the value of collectivism within the Hmong community. These women's choosing to remain connected with their community is an example of collective agency because they are collectively resisting assimilation and therefore, resisting the dominant white, hegemonic norm.

## CONCLUSION

Based on what I have learned from these women's experiences, higher education does not completely assimilate second-generation Hmong-American women. It is important to note that

these women were all able to successfully graduate from college. Thus, in some ways their formal education could advance them in life but that was not the sole focus of this research. The purpose of this study was to understand and explore the lived-realities of second-generation Hmong-American women. How do they come to understand their identities, and how does higher education influence their process of identity development?

From these women's stories, it seems formal education is not the only source through which they learn about their identities. They have shared in their narratives what their family, peers, and community also taught them. Their sense of identities thus, arises out of their interactions with these groups or individuals. They seem to gain different values from these various interactions and go through a reconciliation process to decide for themselves what is valuable to keep and what is not valuable to discard.

Higher education does influence their identity development, not in the way that it assimilates them but by becoming a resource for these women to use in their forming their identities. Through their stories, we can see how these women take away various skills such as critical thinking. Being able to critically think is necessary for these women's formation of identity because it is what enables them to critique what values they don't agree with and determine what values they do agree with. We see in their language how they are conscious in their interviews when they are reflecting about their past and current experiences. These women have also used their educational experiences as a space to question their identity. What Iab says about her history classes and her study abroad experience comes to mind here. The classroom becomes a safe space for Iab to learn about Hmong history and to question her life in America. Through their educational experiences, these women have also learned about useful concepts that help these women to further explore their identities. For example, concepts like racism and

sexism. This is tied with the skill to critically think as well. From what they learn, they are able to acquire language that allows them to articulate their experiences. Paj's story comes to mind. She uses particular words like "white privilege" in her critique of higher education. This is what she has taken away from her classes on racism and social justice. Perhaps the most important take-away for these women in acquiring a college education is that the knowledge and skills they gain function as tools for them to empower themselves and their community. We see through their stories how passionate they are about keeping connected to their communities. To these women, getting an education doesn't mean going away from the community and integrating themselves completely into the middle-class American culture. Rather, it is about using their knowledge to make their communities stronger and better.

Identity is complex in many ways. Through this research I have learned that it is not about being Hmong versus being American. This is the old paradigm that I use to abide by. By attempting to complicate identity and not seeing it as Hmong in opposition to American, I am able to see how these women embody being both and more in their stories.

These are the stories of five Hmong-American women. Their stories have enable us to gain a better understanding of how second-generation Hmong-American women experience assimilation, higher education, and how these processes influence their development of identity. It is important to note however, that these are the stories of only five individuals. Their experiences, while powerful, belong to them and cannot be generalized for all Hmong-American women living in the United States. Even though they may not represent all Hmong-American women, these stories show us what is possible for Hmong-American women living in the U.S. in terms of identity, agency and liberation. By telling their stories, they have taught me the importance of writing my own story. We, Hmong-American women, in choosing to tell our own

stories, engage in an act of resistance against the dominant U.S. discourse. In defining for ourselves our values and identities, we empower others to do the same.

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## Appendix A. Interview Protocol

Mysee Chang  
Hmong Women, Identity & Education Study  
Interview Protocol

### Questions on Ethnic Identity

1. Do you identify as Hmong? American? Or Hmong-American? Please tell me why.
2. What was your family's attitude towards the Hmong culture? For example did they emphasize learning about Hmong culture or were they discouraging of you learning about it?
  - a. What religion did your family practice and how did it impact your identity as a Hmong person?
3. Growing up, how did you feel about being Hmong?
  - a. I define a value as a strong belief that one uses to guide one's life. What were some core values you learned about being Hmong from your family?
  - b. What were some core values you learned about being Hmong from society?
4. How did you feel about being American?
  - a. What did college teach you about being American?
  - b. What were some core values you learned about being American from your family?
  - c. What were some core values you learned about being American from society?
5. How has your experience in higher education affected your relationship with the Hmong community?

### Questions on Gender Identity

1. Growing up, what did you learn about being a Hmong woman?
  - a. What were some expectations you had to meet?
2. How has pursuing or attaining a degree in higher education impacted the expectations you had for yourself?
  - a. How has pursuing or attaining a degree in higher education impacted the expectations you had for your family
3. How do you define yourself as a Hmong woman?
  - a. How do you define "traditional"?
  - b. How do you define "Americanized"?
  - c. How did your education mold or shape this definition?
  - d. How do you think your views of being a Hmong woman compare to the views of other women in your life?
  - e. How is what you think different from what your grandma or mom thinks?

### Educational Experiences & Challenges

1. What were some struggles you experienced as a woman pursuing higher education? Please explain with examples.
  - a. How did you overcome these struggles?

2. What were some struggles you experienced as a Hmong person pursuing higher education? Please explain with examples.
  - a. How did you overcome these struggles?
3. How did you relate to non-Hmong people in college? How did non-Hmong people treat you?
4. How has becoming educated improved your life?
5. How has pursuing or attaining a degree in higher education impacted how the Hmong community sees you?
6. As an educated Hmong-American, how are you perceived outside of the Hmong community?

#### Acculturation Questions

1. In your opinion, what Hmong values, traditions, practices should be kept?
  - a. How will you continue to keep them in your life?
2. What values, traditions, or practices should be reformed? Please provide specific examples and also explain why.
3. What are some American values that are important to you? Why are they significant?
  - a. How have you adapted them into your life?
4. Can you think of a person who you think has done a good job at balancing being Hmong and American? (Please do not have to give her name)
  - a. Can you describe her? How does she conduct herself?
  - b. How has she successfully been able to manage both worlds?
5. Now can you think of a person who you think has not done a good job at balancing being Hmong-American?
  - a. Can you describe her? How does she conduct herself?
  - b. What were some struggles she had?
6. How do you think you're doing in balancing being both Hmong and American?
  - a. What did you find helpful in your journey?
7. What advice would you give to young Hmong American women today who are growing up and having to navigate a bicultural world?

### Appendix B. Demographic Questionnaire

#### Demographic Survey

Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

Year your parents settled in the U.S. \_\_\_\_\_

Parental Class Status(please check):

- Low Income       Working Class       Lower Middle Class  
 Middle Class       Upper Middle Class       Upper Class

How did you select the category of your parents' class status? (please check)

- Parental Income only       Parental education only       Parental occupation only  
 Combination of parental income, education and occupation

Educational Attainment (please check): Please list name of institution and field of study:

- Associates (A.A.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Bachelors (B.A. or B.S.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Masters (M.A. or M.S.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 Doc. of Phil. Ph.D. \_\_\_\_\_  
 MD/JD: Specify \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Family Information (please check)

- Your Marital Status:                      # of children you have: \_\_\_\_\_                      # of siblings in your family:  
 Single    \_\_\_\_\_ sisters  
 Married    \_\_\_\_\_ brothers  
 Divorced  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's Level of Education:

- |  |   |                      |
|--|---|----------------------|
| Mother:  | Father:   | Mother's Occupation: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> none                        | <input type="checkbox"/> none                     | _____                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ESL school (language class) | <input type="checkbox"/> ESL school               |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> GED/High school             | <input type="checkbox"/> GED/High school          |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Associates (A.A.)           | <input type="checkbox"/> Associates (A.A.)        | Father's Occupation: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelors (B.A. or B.S.)    | <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelors (B.A. or B.S.) | _____                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Masters (M.A. or M.S.)      | <input type="checkbox"/> Masters (M.A. or M.S.)   |                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Doc. of Phil (Ph.D.)        | <input type="checkbox"/> Doc. of Phil (Ph.D.)     |                      |

Your occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

